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## Abstract

This interdisciplinary article draws upon human geography to bring fresh new perspectives to the relationship between two commonly conflated concepts: 'childhood' and 'nature'. Childhood studies scholars have gone a long way towards retheorizing childhood beyond the 'natural' and the 'universal' by pointing to its historical and cultural construction. However, as yet, not enough attention has been paid to childhood's key collateral term, nature. This article seeks to redress this gap by drawing upon interesting retheorizings of nature that have taken place within human geography in order to suggest new ways of reconceptualizing childhood.

## Keywords

childhood, human geography, nature, reconceptualization, Rousseau

When contemplating the 'true nature' of childhood, many of us might be tempted to rehearse the Peter Pan trick of invoking Neverlands, that idealized and timeless childhood place of perfect harmony as imagined by JM Barrie (1911) in *Peter and Wendy* and later popularized as a tropical island natural paradise in Disney film animations (Budd and Cook, 2002; Geronimi et al., 1953). 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. JM Barrie'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, Aitken, 2001; Cannella and Kincheloe, 2002; James and Prout, 1990; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 2005 [1996]; Kehily, 2009; Steedman, 1995). 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 JM Barrie's Peter Pan as a

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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 JM Barrie, I am not setting out to locate the 'true nature' of childhood within an imaginary of some idealized 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 that sets out to interrogate and denaturalize the concept of childhood (Cannella, 2002). Within this field there is a degree of difference in critique, emphasis and approach. Interrogations range from ones that point to the tensions between the realities of chronological age differences and the different kinds of interpretations that are attributed to these differences (Lee, 2001) to interrogations that refute all realist assumptions about childhood as a 'natural' life stage, by stressing its discursive construction (Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001).

Representing the latter position, Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001: 9) 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.' This controversial statement, which seemingly discounts any biological reality basis to childhood and arguably over-emphasizes the role of human meaning-making in its construction (see Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005), nevertheless refutes the exclusive location of childhood within the 'real world' of nature. For my purposes, the claim that 'There is no natural or evolutionary child' is significant because it explicitly challenges the assumption that there is an a priori 'special relationship' between childhood and nature. My contribution to the body of work that sets out to denaturalize childhood is to interrogate the often essentialized and valorized 'special relationship' between children and nature. This involves not only interrogating the essentialized nature of childhood but also the essentialized 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 naturalization and universalization of western discourses of childhood (Cannella and Kincheloe, 2002; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001; Kehily, 2009; Prout, 2005), the discourse of nature itself remains relatively under-theorized within the childhood studies field. In order to redress this under-theorization, I turn to human geography for additional critical perspectives on the relationship between people and nature, and detailed theoretical commentaries on the essentialization of nature (Castree, 2005; Castree and Braun, 2001; Soper, 1995).

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. First, I want to strengthen an understanding of the entangled trajectories of these discourses in modern western societies. Second, I want to demonstrate that despite the inherently contradictory ways that these terms have been taken up, both singly and as a couple, ultimately they have been mutually constituting and mutually validating. 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 essentializing discourses of nature authenticate and morally justify essentializing 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.

## Rousseau's legacy

The 18th-century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau is an important figure for scholars of childhood as well as for geographers who study nature (Anderson, 2007; Jenks, 2005 [1996]; Lee, 2001). This is because Rousseau's thinking marks the pivotal moment at which concepts of nature and of childhood emerge from the shadows of 'civilization', 'culture' and 'rational man' to become the locus of essential goodness. Rousseau's utopian regard for 'Nature' and childhood are conflated in *Emile* (1762), his famous fictionalized philosophical treatise about the ideal natural education of a young boy in the countryside. Rousseau clearly elides childhood with external and internal forms of nature: comparing children to plants (Rousseau, 2003 [1762]: 2–4), while also referring to nature as 'primitive dispositions' (Rousseau, 2003 [1762]: 5). '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. 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. 'Everything is good as it comes from the hands of the Author of Nature; but everything degenerates in the hands of man' (Rousseau, 2003 [1762]: 1).

In valorizing nature by simultaneously denigrating culture (or society), Rousseau himself was drawing upon the logic of dualisms: a way of thinking that took hold during the Enlightenment period in which he lived. According to Jacques Derrida, a key deconstructive critic of western philosophy's dualisms, it is important to understand the history of this nature/culture opposition in order to recognize the limits of these concepts and to challenge the 'truth value attributed to them' (Derrida, 2005 [1978]: 358). Even though Derrida draws attention to the inherent contradictions and paradoxes within Rousseau's own writings about 'Nature' (Derrida, 1976: 146), he urges us to continue to use these flawed concepts as 'tools' to deconstruct the binary meaning systems that they support (Derrida, 2005 [1978]: 358). As he points out, this requires that we are able to separate 'method' from 'truth' (Derrida, 2005 [1978]: 359). It is in this spirit of approaching the concept of nature as a tool, rather than a self-evident truth, that I continue to chart the formative but problematic nature/culture dualism within discourses of childhood from Rousseau's time to the present.

The nature/culture dualism that Rousseau 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 18th century was also the era of European Empire, associated colonialist notions of primitivism and savagery were pitted against the valorized 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 (in 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' (Latour, 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 18th century Romantic era to the present. In her study of representations of childhood in European art, Higonnet (1998, cited in Prout, 2005) argues that popular (Rousseau-inspired) representations of children in natural settings, such as those by the Romantic 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 dualism to reaffirm the desirable separation of children's worlds from adults' worlds.

Within the contemporary western cultural vernacular, representations that remove children from social contexts and conflate them with an idealized form of 'pure nature' still proliferate and hold popular currency. As mentioned earlier in relation to JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, many Rousseau-inspired utopian narratives have been recycled and popularized by the Disney and Dreamworld Studio children's mass media empires, with characteristic engaging sentimentality (Whitley, 2008: 2–4). Rudyard Kipling's late 19th-century classic *Jungle Book*, which was Disneyfied as an animated film in 1967, is another notable example. Mowgli the jungle boy is the archetype of Rousseau's Nature child, living apart from adult human society in communion with non-human animals. More recently, this ever-popular archetype has been reincarnated in the form of *Bindi, the Jungle Girl* (ABC Kids, 2007) Australia's 21st-century, tree-house dwelling, celebrity child 'wildlife warrior'.

More in the Disney tradition of popular sentimentality, one of today's most commercially successful child/nature enterprises is that of photographer Anne Geddes. Geddes has built a multi-million dollar industry on reproducing countless images of nature babies. A visit to her online gallery (Geddes, 2010), subtitled 'Protect, nurture, love',

reveals a selection of her voluminous 25-year portfolio of photographs of infants, who are predominantly posed among 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 evoke the old Romantic formula of pure infancy, located in some idealized and unsullied natural space outside 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. These artifices of pure nature are consistent with Rousseau's efforts to 'reconstitute Nature's edifice in the most natural way possible' (Derrida, 1976: 145). Geddes appears to be as blind to the duplicity of this project as Derrida has observed Rousseau to be. Paradoxically, the vast majority of her 21st-century visual representations are composed to explicitly portray infants as belonging to an unpeopled world of pure nature.

The enormous popularity of Geddes' nature babies testifies to the enduring legacy of Rousseau's romantic conflation of originary childhood and nature and to the persistent, persuasive power of nature appropriations. In spite of its blatantly and ironic contrivance, the conflation of childhood with nature is by now so ubiquitous that it seems unremarkable. As children's geographer Stuart Aitken (2001: 36) notes: '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.'

## What do geographies of nature have to offer childhood studies?

To assist in thinking through the ways in which the nature/childhood conflation has been so successfully naturalized, 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 edited collection *Social Nature*, Castree and Braun (2001: xi) surmise that there has been a 'veritable explosion of geographical research that seeks to denaturalise 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?' Concurrent with the poststructural move within childhood studies to denaturalize childhood through emphasizing its social construction (also referred to as the new sociologies of childhood or postmodern reconceptualizations of childhood [Cannella, 2002]), this parallel shift within human geography is also indicative of the fact that most human geographers now approach nature as a social construct.

Moreover, as earlier indicated in relation to childhood studies, within human geography there are also different schools of constructivist thinking. Castree and MacMillan (2001: 209) differentiate between these different approaches. They outline the approach of the cultural geographers (a subdisciplinary field of human geography) that contends we can only know nature culturally, 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 the actual non-human physical world and our representations of it. Moreover, they emphasize that we cannot step outside the cultural context in which we know it or represent it. The cultural geographers' approach to nature bears clear similarities to the approach that Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001) take to childhood. 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' (Castree and MacMillan, 2001: 209). From both these perspectives, nature, as Neil Smith expressed it over 20 years ago now, 'is nothing if it is not social' (cited in Castree and MacMillan, 2001: 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 the tide of conventional wisdom, and in a similar vein to the academic critiques of childhood, human geographers argue that nature is not just self-evidently real, that it cannot be located outside 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 "socio-nature".'

Within human geography, there is growing awareness of the limits of those constructivist approaches which do not attempt to address nature beyond a set of human imaginings. Similar concerns have also been expressed by Lee (2001: 2) about the risk of over-determining childhood as an exclusive product of the human imagination and Prout (2005: 84), who warns that childhood constructivists risk substituting a 'reverse discourse' to counter the discourse of natural childhood. However, with the subject of nature as its core business, human geographers have significantly elaborated upon these concerns and taken action to redress them. Castree (2001: 17) argues that in its refutation of essentialized 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 reinstate the nature/society dualism, but rather to destabilize it through more complex theorizing, many human geographers now are acting upon calls to reconceptualize human/nature relations in ways that move understandings about nature beyond the purely representational (Thrift, 2007). Responding to Bruno Latour's (1998, 2004, 2005) calls to recast nature within a new multinatural collective politics and Donna Haraway's (1994, 2008) project to queer what counts as nature, these geographers promote a (non-dualistic) relational understanding of nature and culture. Within human

geography, examples of this new relational theorizing includes (but is not restricted to) queering nature/culture boundaries within ‘situated’ natures (Instone, 2004); charting ‘hybrid geographies’ (Whatmore, 2002); recasting the ontological categories of society and nature as a hybrid ‘socionature’ (Castree, 2001, 2005; Castree and Braun, 2001; Castree and MacMillan, 2001); ‘remaking nature’ within a new ‘politics of nature’ (Braun and Castree, 1998); and revisioning geography as ‘entanglements of nature and culture’ (Harrison et al., 2004). What they share is an understanding of the interdependencies of the human and the more-than-human worlds and from this basis they approach nature as a collective – a network, an assemblage or an imbroglio – of all living and inert things, including human and non-human animals, objects and discursive practices.

The relational perspective of these human geographers opens up new grounds for reconceptualizing childhood as one of nature’s key collateral terms. For as Braun and Castree (1998: xii) point out, ‘the remaking of nature . . . impinges on virtually all aspects of social reality’. In highlighting the limits and unintended consequences of delivering hyper-constructivist accounts of nature, these new geographies of nature can be drawn upon to reassess constructivist accounts of childhood within childhood studies. More importantly, these relational revisionings of nature gesture towards ways in which childhood scholars might reconceptualize the ‘nature’ of childhood without recourse to reinscribing the nature/culture divide.

## Denaturalizing pure nature

Having broadly outlined some of the ways in which contested geographies of nature might be relevant to the task of reconceptualizing childhood, I now focus in some detail upon the wilderness debate – a highly contentious denaturalizing nature debate within human geography and cognate disciplines. Widely regarded as a sanctified space of pure nature, the highly essentialized concept of wilderness represents the biggest challenge to those geographers who are trying to denaturalize nature. This is because, as Castree (2005: 137) notes ‘the reason that wilderness is such a beguiling idea is that *it appears not to be an idea at all*’.

The highly protectionist and essentialized notion of pure nature that is so central to the wilderness debate still holds great traction within contemporary environmental politics and it also resonates strongly with the passionately defended popular imaginary of pure and innocent childhood, as exemplified in so many Disney productions (Whitely, 2008). Picking up on William Cronon’s (1998 [1995]) contributions to the wilderness debate (Callicott and Nelson, 1998), I spend some time identifying the key wilderness narrative tropes. These tropes shed more light upon the compelling appeal of pure nature and upon the ways in which naturalizing discourses secure their authority.

Tropes within contemporary wilderness narratives all draw upon the romantic sublime, which comes to us via Rousseau’s latter-day exponents such as Thoreau (1992 [1862]) and Muir (1912). Inspired by Ansel Adams’ famous shots of Yosemite National Park (see Ansel Adams Gallery, 2010), contemporary wilderness photography produces powerful and highly aestheticized visual images that foreground the grandeur and the sheer beauty of pristine wild places. Such images, which are quite familiar to the majority of urban western dwellers, reinforce a valorized and highly externalized notion of



un-peopled nature. Not only are the images themselves devoid of people, but most of us are much more likely to witness the romantic sublime of wilderness on posters, calendars and in diaries, than to actually visit these places. This, in turn, reinforces the trope of wilderness as pure and distant nature, which only exists 'out there', separated from human presence and untainted by human activity. It is through such images, which are constitutive of the wilderness narrative, that we internalize a sense of the powerful integrity of such places.

Reinforced by the romantic sublime, this sense of integrity also endows wilderness with a spiritual status. It is often sanctified and revered as a perfectly intact, virginal space. This resonates with Rousseau's premise of Nature's uncontaminated child and Barrie's subsequent Neverland fantasy. Just as the narrative of Neverland as a pure and natural paradise is secured by the prohibition of corrupting adults, the sacrosanctity of contemporary wilderness discourse is predicated upon the absence of humans. In observing the religious underpinnings of wilderness discourses and of the environment movement's particularly reverential attitudes to wild places, Cronon (1998 [1995]: 484) argues that wilderness has become 'the ultimate landscape of authenticity' and thereby of moral authority. Again, in his words: 'Much 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' (Cronon, 1996: 26). In other words, as the most radically pure and separate form of externalized nature, consecrated wilderness becomes the moral compass against which human actions can be judged. From the wilderness example it is easy to see how the moral authority of essentialized nature can and has been deployed to naturalize particular social and cultural understandings of childhood, such as the western discourse of childhood innocence. As Daston and Vidal (2004: 3) note: 'Naturalization imparts universality, firmness, even necessity – in short, authority – to the social.' Nature comes to be seen as 'an allegedly neutral judge and experts as allegedly disinterested interpreters of nature's verdicts' (Daston and Vidal, 2004: 8).

By deconstructing the concept of wilderness in order to better understand its iron grip in contemporary western environmental discourses, Cronon is, of course, also drawing attention to the paradox of its construction. 'Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity', he says, wilderness 'is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history' (Cronon, 1998 [1995]: 471). Posing a similar provocation to the Hultqvist and Dahlberg (2001) statement – 'There is no such thing as childhood' – Cronon's assertion is very controversial and is still being debated in human geography and 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, Cronon has nevertheless been criticized for over-stating the significance of human meaning-making about these remote wild places (Callicott and Nelson, 1998). In other words, in constructing such a forceful argument about the culture of wilderness, Cronon may have over-determined the constitutive effect of human representational practices at the expense of acknowledging the actancy and effect of actual 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 (Plumwood, 2003; Spence, 1999). Indigenous Australian scholar Marcia Langton (1996), for example, has forcefully argued that the land has never been un-peopled. This idea, she suggests, is nothing more than a neo-colonialist fantasy of *terra nullius*, the legal fiction of an empty land that justified British colonization of her people's country. According to Langton, this same country that white environmentalists now refer to as un-peopled pristine wilderness, has an ancient cultural history. It is not possible to separate the mutually constitutive relationship between Indigenous people and country.

## Endangerment and protection

The valorization of wilderness through its radical separation from the human/social world has another effect. The perception of wilderness as the pinnacle of pure nature also renders it vulnerable. 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 (1998 [1995]: 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 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 *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1982) exemplifies the belief that childhood, as we once 'knew it', is under threat from adult culture. 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' (1982: 4), and by the end, we are told that this is because of the (unnatural) merging of children and adults' interests and values (1982: 131) via the electronic media. Childhood, according to Postman, had by the early 1980s been tainted by their 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, 2000; Jenks, 2005 [1996]; Stainton-Rogers and Stainton-Rogers, 1992; Valentine, 1996). Interestingly, in one of the most recent articulations of endangered childhood, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv (2008) diagnoses North American children as suffering from 'nature-deficit disorder'. He decries the increasingly virtual postmodern world for alienating children from nature (2008: 3). In the tradition of Thoreau's (1992 [1862]) redemptive wilderness vision, Louv argues that salvation lies in reuniting children with the 'restorative environment' (2008: 102) and reconfering nature with the role of 'moral teacher' (2008: 189). This particular endangerment discourse also reiterates the need to reinstitute boundaries – in this case between nature and technology – and like so many others, marshals nature's moral authority to intervene in order to preserve and protect.

As well as their common endangerment themes, both childhood innocence and wilderness feed 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 essentially bad) and other things are seen as self-evidently ‘natural’ (or essentially good). The parallels between these moral discourses point to the mutually constituting relationship between childhood innocence and pure nature, but they also shed light on the ways in which highly essentialized discourses of nature authenticate and morally justify essentializing discourses of childhood. In other words, the moral authority of nature lends enormous weight to the truth claims of childhood innocence. Cronon’s analysis of the wilderness discourse as one of heightened ‘moral and aesthetic naturalism’ helps us to understand the ways in which the cultural valuing of nature is obfuscated through its very essentialization as inherently good. For as he points out, one of the most significant effects of ‘moral and aesthetic naturalism’ is that it ‘denies that values are socially and culturally created’. It rests on the truism that ‘nature knows best’ (Castree, 2005: 138).

With the potent effects 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’ (1984: 54).

Of course, this is the exact formula that JM Barrie 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. Barrie 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 hence more morally authentic (Steedman, 1995).

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 real children do not also become contaminated and hence ‘lost’. Loss, danger, purity, contamination, protection 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.

## **Reconceptualizing childhood as a hybrid politics of nature/culture**

In this article, I have offered an interdisciplinary critique to unpick some of the connecting threads that stitch together exemplar discourses of essentially good nature and essentially good childhood. My intention has been to illustrate how romanticized and idealized

conceptualizations of nature and childhood (thanks to Rousseau) are intertwined and mutually constituting, and to draw attention to the powerful naturalizing effects that essentialist nature discourses have had upon western understandings of childhood. In accordance with Derrida's (2005 [1978]: 359) method, I have foregrounded the ways in which naturalized and purist notions of childhood are articulated through the highly problematic and dualistic notion of nature, as opposed to culture. I have employed deconstruction methods to directly challenge the 'truth value' attributed to nature (Derrida, 2005 [1978]: 358) and hence by association to childhood, and to expose the nostalgic appeal of 'moral and aesthetic naturalism' (Castree, 2005) that characterizes protectionist conceptualizations of childhood, in particular the discourse of childhood innocence.

In addition to deconstructing the co-implicated historical trajectories of nature and childhood within the nature/culture dualism, I have also indicated that there is a now a significant body of relational retheorizations of nature within human geography (Braun and Castree, 1998; Castree, 2005; Castree and Braun, 2001; Castree and MacMillan, 2001; Harrison et al., 2004; Instone, 2004; Thrift, 2007; Whatmore, 2002), that might assist childhood scholars to reconceptualize childhood beyond the nature/culture divide. For as a number of childhood scholars have pointed out (Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Walkerdine, 2009; Wyness, 2000), the dominant psychological and sociological disciplinary perspectives are still predominantly polarized around understandings of childhood as biological and hence natural, or as a social construct and hence cultural. If not totally committed to one camp or the other, ontological accounts of childhood keep 'zig-zagging between the poles of culture and nature' (Wyness, 2000: 22). This zigzagging is most clearly illustrated in the popular nature/nurture debate, which is concerned not with questioning the categories of nature and nurture themselves, but in commentating upon their interactions and/or in ascertaining the relative proportions of culture's influence upon childhood and nature's determination of it.

As I noted at the beginning of this article, my reconceptualization of the 'nature' of childhood is a contribution to the body of work which denaturalizes childhood. My intervention within the field of childhood studies is inspired by the work of those human geographers who step outside the nature/culture dualism. Such an endeavour is relatively new within the field of childhood studies, but it does have its champions. Most notably, in *The Future of Childhood*, Prout (2005) forcefully argues that it time for childhood studies to fully engage in an interdisciplinary conversation that will allow it to reconceptualize the ontology of childhood as: 'neither "nature" nor "culture" but as a multiplicity of "nature-cultures" . . . a variety of complex hybrids constituted from heterogeneous materials and emergent through time' (2005: 144). Drawing upon the philosophies of Latour and Deleuze and Guattari, Prout's reconsiderations of the relations between children and everyday objects, information and communication technologies, reproductive technologies and psychopharmaceuticals (2005: 116–41), model the ways in which we might reconceptualize contemporary childhoods as complex heterogeneous nature/culture assemblages (see also Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

In Braun and Castree's (1998: xii) terms (as mentioned earlier), Prout's pioneering work within childhood studies is an example of the far-reaching and productive implications of nature/culture hybridity. The hybrid analytic produces a new form of politics (Braun and Castree, 1998: 169–268) in which nature and culture are always more than

two separate and/or interactive entities. In fact, it is the refusal to debate the ontological status of these terms as categories – separately or in interaction with each other – that characterizes a hybrid politics. In a move to decentre exclusively human notions of agency – as either the script writers/producers of nature discourses or the scientific discoverers of natural truths – hybrid politics traces agency as an effect of the imbroglio of human/non-human relations.

In encouraging childhood scholars to engage with geography's hybrid nature/culture analytic, I am not seeking to provide an answer to the 'nature' of childhood but to open it up to a new form of political enquiry which attends to the interconnectedness of the human and more-than-human world. I do so with gratitude to those scholars and activists who have not only critiqued the limits of western dualistic notions of pure nature as something separated off from the human, but have shown how much there is to learn by attending to our 'kinship' with more-than-human others (Haraway, 2008) and by focusing upon the *presence* of these human/more-than-human communities (Plumwood, 1998). Following their example can help us radically reconceptualize childhood. 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 – human and more-than-human. Ironically, it would seem that such a move to re-presence might at the same time reintegrate that 'lost child' back into the imperfect, real and messy world of fascinating 'socio-natures' that we all embody and coinhabit.

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