

SUMMER CAMP'S COLOR LINE: RACIALIZED LANDSCAPES
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR INTEGRATION, 1890-1950

By

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the subjects and creators of *An American Ascent*, the documentary film that prompted my initial research question.

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ABSTRACT

Though seldom discussed in the larger struggle for African American equality, the ideological and physical exclusion of people of color from outdoor spaces reveals the pervasive, and insidiously widespread nature of white supremacy in the United States. The common historical narrative of the American outdoors focuses on prominent white male figures, such as John Muir or Theodore Roosevelt. This study interrogates the largely unexamined intersections of race and outdoor recreation during the first half of the twentieth century through examining the archival records of three integration-focused summer camps: the Union Settlement Association, the Wiltwyck School for Boys, and Camp Atwater. Analysis of these archives complicates the historiographical concept of “outdoor recreation” by revealing its connection with white supremacist mentalities and demonstrating the ways in which some people resisted the black-white, urban-nature binary that emerged during this era. The stories of these camps illuminate more diverse perspectives about the outdoors, and add to an underdeveloped body of research on non-white perspectives about recreating in “natural” environments. By centering these marginalized voices, this scholarship will contribute to future research about similar topics.

INTRODUCTION

Jim Giorgi never forgot the “sharp blast of a whistle” that jolted him out of bed each morning at Camp Nathan Hale. For Giorgi, all his summers spent at the camp, which he attended off and on from 1933 to 1941, were memorable. Writing about his experiences decades later as an adult, Giorgi could still recall his childhood memories in meticulous detail, including the chores cabin mates completed together (scrubbing latrines and tables), proper swimming protocol (the Red Cross “buddy” system), popular evening activities (hunting the elusive “snipe”), and even the method hikers employed to carry food on overnight trips (rolling cans of pork and beans into their sleeping bags for easier toting). As an Italian-American boy living in the crowded, multicultural tenements of East Harlem, Giorgi relished his summers spent outdoors in Palisade Interstate Park, to the extent that he struggled to return home to the city. “One cannot imagine the shock and the adjustment necessary to resume city life,” Giorgi explained. “After fresh air, trees, water, and happy company you get off the bus and step on the hot pavement, glimpse drab buildings, hear the noise of traffic and vendors and breathe the close air.”¹

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, reservations about city living reverberated across the United States. However, these larger cultural concerns surpassed Giorgi’s environmental preference for wilderness spaces. As the nation industrialized, the

¹ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

population of urban centers began to overtake rural areas.² This shift troubled many Americans, whose notions of national identity and Jeffersonian republican virtue coalesced with ideas about the moral merits of toiling land.³ In conjunction with a sharp rise in immigration between 1880 and 1920, many white Americans grew anxious over the future demographics of the country. In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt even admonished white couples to procreate to prevent “race suicide.”⁴ Additionally, to escape the hostility of Jim Crow and find better employment opportunities, African Americans began moving from the rural South to the urban North in huge numbers at the outset of the twentieth century.⁵ These new migrant populations—both Eastern European and African American—settled primarily in urban areas and worked in factories. White unease over the interrelated issues of immigration, industrialization, and urbanization intensified. As cities became diverse, densely populated spaces, they seemingly challenged the ideas of white superiority, and the dominant white culture began to perceive the multicultural metropolis as a threat. In contrast, the notion of “wilderness” emerged as a pristine white reprieve, seemingly untouched by the social changes wrought by modernity.

During the late nineteenth century, a new phenomenon emerged out of these concerns. In 1885, one of the United States’ first summer camps opened in Orange, New

² Hillary Hallett, *Go West Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 3.

³ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 67.

⁴ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 97.

⁵ Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*, (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2010), 153.

York.⁶ Shortly thereafter, camps began springing up across the Northeast, usually near cities, as youthful escapes from the maladies of urban life.⁷ Many adults viewed the formative years of childhood as the ideal time to teach good citizenship and character in a more bucolic setting. Middle-class women frequently placed themselves at the fore of this reform movement, because they often “saw nature, or at least a rural environment, as an antidote to the pervasive evil and filth of the city,” an idea that prompted them to advocate for “the development of parks and retreats.”⁸ Simultaneously, the culture began to more readily embrace leisure for children due to new Progressive laws that outlawed child labor.⁹ This transformed the idea of childhood into a separate period set aside for playful innocence—a sentiment that bolstered the burgeoning summer camp industry.

The seemingly apolitical venue of summer camps, however, also assumed the racist overtones of the dominant culture. As historian Leslie Paris observes, most summer camps “aspired to create privatized public spaces” that could be “far more socially exclusive than was urban leisure.”¹⁰ Although late nineteenth and early-twentieth century cities were segmented into ethnic and class-based areas, public urban spaces “were almost always marked by some degree of overlap and mixing across lines of difference.”¹¹ In contrast, summer camps offered white parents the opportunity to send their offspring, if only for a season, to an exclusively white space. These camps typically

⁶ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 41.

⁷ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 8.

⁸ Elizabeth D. Blum, “Women, Environmental Rationale, and Activism During the Progressive Era” *To Love the Wind and Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 83.

⁹ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 109.

¹⁰ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 7.

¹¹ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 7.

reinforced white supremacy through derogatory play, such as mimicking Indians and donning blackface to teach campers what whiteness did *not* include.¹² As racial and ethnic divisions hardened in response to an increasingly multicultural nation, outdoor recreation also began to reflect the fragile anxieties of white Americans, resulting in the ideological and physical exclusion of people of color from nature spaces.

However, this outdoor exclusion prompted resistance among many reformers interested in a more equitable society. While these reformers advocated for equal access to the outdoors for all races, they also believed that summer camps could foster interracial harmony in society at large. Three organizations—the Union Settlement Association, Camp Atwater, and the Wiltwyck School for Boys—separately operated summer camps to advance equality and develop harmonious relationships between different races. Each organization utilized similar, albeit distinctive tactics to develop certain attributes in young summer campers of color. Camp leaders optimistically hoped that their influence would improve the children’s standing in society.

Although each organization used summer camp as a venue for equality, they also strategically targeted America’s multi-faceted racism in different ways. The Union Settlement Association (comprised of Camp Nathan Hale, Camp Gaylord White, and Camp Ellen Marvin) worked to foster friendships across the color line to alleviate racial antagonisms among the working-class youth of East Harlem. Camp Atwater, however, emerged as an emblem of the “politics of respectability:” a place of pride, dignity, and safety for affluent black children to recreate during the summer free from the threat of

¹² Paris, *Children’s Nature*, 211.

racism. Meanwhile, the founders of the Wiltwyck School for Boys created their facility to address institutional racism in New York City's Children's Courts, hoping to limit the growing numbers of African American boys defined as "delinquents." Despite their unique approaches, these camps all worked to produce racially integrated spaces in their private outdoor enclaves. In doing so, each camp aspired to reclaim wilderness spaces for diversity rather than exclusion, and to ultimately cultivate harmonious interracial reactions in everyday life when campers returned home.

As the forces of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration reshaped the United States, Progressive reformers reacted with concern, hoping to influence the trajectory of American culture. Summer camps in the United States originated as a panacea to solve these social quandaries for anxious whites. Because reformers viewed children in particular as impressionable figures whom they could mold to fit middle class values, a supervised escape from the city into the wilderness had the potential to instruct children against the "vices" of diverse urban life. Significantly, these reformers' efforts and activities often exclusively benefitted whites by actively ostracizing people of color. The wilderness in particular became a space of exclusion, in which whites physically restricted access to people of color to maintain the illusion of a homogenous, white, pre-modern landscape. Civil rights activists resisted this exclusion by forging summer camps as spaces of inclusion to defy the segregation of outdoor spaces. Yet, the historical intersections of race and outdoor recreation remain largely unexamined. Geographer Carolyn Finney explains how "dominant environmental narratives rarely reflect the different human and environment constructions that African Americans encounter, based

on the historical context of their collective experience within the United States.”¹³ This thesis seeks to correct this oversight, exploring how, since the early twentieth century, the demarcations of the color line have stretched across the American landscape, cementing lines of exclusion in seemingly trivial places like summer camps.

Additionally, this thesis outlines an untold history of resistance by revealing how the Union Settlement Association, Camp Atwater, and the Wiltwyck School for Boys worked as microcosms of subversion against wilderness segregation by providing outdoor recreation facilities for children of all races. Historian Marcia Chatelain argues that while integration activism in education has been well documented, “the parallel fight to bring recreational activities to children has not been as well captured.” Chatelain elaborates that “camping activism involved many of the same aspects of parent protest for integrated schools,” and should thus be more fully historicized as an important component of desegregation struggles.¹⁴ Though seldom discussed in the larger struggle for African American equality, the ideological and physical exclusion of people of color from outdoor spaces reveals the pervasive, and insidiously widespread nature of white supremacy in the United States. While overnight hiking excursions, afternoons spent swimming, and meals shared among ravenous children in a mess hall may have seemed inconsequential even to some of the campers, the conscious activism of these racially integrated summer camps defiantly resisted America’s status quo of segregation, in the

¹³ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 54.

¹⁴ Marcia Chatelain, *South Side Girls: Growing Up in the Great Migration*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 145.

wilderness and elsewhere.

The first chapter of this thesis, entitled “Whitening Cities, Darkening Wilderness,” outlines the rise of American outdoor recreation (with emphasis on summer camps) and its connection to white supremacist ideologies. Further, the chapter illuminates the various strategies used by each camp, describing how their unique activities (whether “playing Indian” or teaching ballet) and physical structures (dwelling in tepees or “modern” cabins) reflected their specific activism philosophies. The second chapter, “Naturalizing Integration,” elaborates on how, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the roots of racism in outdoor recreation widened into a larger cultural fissure—a dualism that eventually equated the “inner-city” with black criminality and “wilderness” with whiteness and virtue. To combat this, each of these summer camps worked to reclaim the outdoor narrative by refashioning it as a place of harmonious integration. Lastly, the third and final chapter, “From Happy Campers to Noir Criminals,” examines the work of African American photographer Gordon Parks, who, during the 1940s, documented both the Union Settlement Association’s integrated summer camps with children from East Harlem, as well as Harlem gangs composed of black youth. The continued obscurity of Parks’ summer camp photographs, coupled with the massive recognition of his “Harlem Gang Leader” photo essay, reveals the culture’s willingness to consume narratives of “criminal” African Americans, and unwillingness to consume narratives of racial equality. This visual culture reflected how landscapes became racially coded during the twentieth century, inscribed with the racist delineations of segregation in the same manner that towns and cities were.

When Giorgi laced up his shoes in anticipation of another day filled with activities at camp, he may not have contemplated his participation in a concerted effort to make the United States a more equitable nation. For Giorgi, camp was primarily about fun: a novel retreat from the monotony of everyday city life. The outdoor venue also offered a space for quiet contemplation. Giorgi recalled one overnight hike, in which “the silence of the night and the clarity with which you could see the stars was overpowering”—a nighttime view that he shared with boys of various races and ethnicities.¹⁵ Though Giorgi may not have understood it as a child, the act of white, brown, and black bodies recreating together in the wilderness—sharing the same meals over campfires, sleeping in the same tents, and swimming in the same spaces—was radical during the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the persistent, decades-long efforts of camps like Nathan Hale, American culture became more entrenched in segregation until the mass protest of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Still, for a time, these camps forged spaces of diverse defiance, where children experienced an ideology of inclusion in the increasingly whitewashed terrain of American wilderness.

¹⁵ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

CHAPTER ONE

DARKENING CITIES, WHITENING WILDERNESS

The young summer campers chanted an incantation in unison underneath a dark, star-speckled sky. Nestled in a wooded area just beyond their tepees, they prayed aloud to “the great Wakonda,” a seasonal, wilderness-centric version of the Judeo-Christian God who valued harmonious relations between humans. In search of Wakonda’s approval, campers of various races and ethnicities began “invoking a prayer like speech” together that celebrated the interconnectivity and dependence “of each living creature on each other.” Significantly, prayers to Wakonda affirmed “brotherhood and tolerance between the human inhabitants of the planet...above all cementing the bonds of friendship between campers that should last a lifetime.” To conclude, campers asked Wakonda to demonstrate his approval of their ceremonial invocation by mystically lighting a fire at the center of the Council Ring. To their delight, Wakonda responded (seemingly without assistance from the counselors), causing the campfire ring to erupt in a burst of flames resulting in “the glow of wonderment and surprise that emanated from the children’s faces [which]...almost eclipsed the rapidly increasing brilliance of the fire.”¹⁶

For those who have attended summer camp in the United States between this evening in 1941 and the present day, this event may seem familiar. But this instance in 1941 was exceptional, as was Camp Nathan Hale itself. Located in Palisades Interstate

¹⁶ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

Park in New York, Camp Nathan Hale was one of several camps in New York operated by the Union Settlement Association, an organization that operated a Settlement House in East Harlem.¹⁷ While many summer camps of the era offered children recreational experiences and encouraged certain values, the Union Settlement Association camp directors' worked for a more idealistic goal to create a racially integrated microcosm within their camps that would meaningfully foster peaceful integration in New York City (where the campers lived) and even the wider world. Unlike Camp Nathan Hale, many white adults in the first half of the twentieth century posited that summer camps offered impressionable children a reprieve from the perceived maladies of an increasingly diverse, urban nation.¹⁸

To counter this segregated outdoor ideology, three Northeastern organizations—the Union Settlement Association, Camp Atwater, and the Wiltwyck School for Boys—employed the subtle and quintessentially American tactic of running summer camps, but specifically with the added goal of promoting racial civil rights. These groups used similar, albeit distinctive approaches to advance equality: from promoting peaceful integration, to demonstrating accurately the capacity of African Americans, to quelling the spread of juvenile delinquency among youth of color. Despite their different approaches, these organizations all responded to a growing number of white Americans'

¹⁷ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

¹⁸ Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 8.

mounting anxieties about the expansion of urbanization and diversity with the unique tactic of summer camps. By refashioning the wilderness as a space of inclusivity instead of an exclusively white escape, the Union Settlement Association, Camp Atwater, and Wiltwyck created integrated microcosms of racial parity that they hoped would reverberate outward to society at large.



In 1885, Sumner Francis Dudley founded what he laughingly dubbed Camp Bald Head, named for the way his eight young campers tightly cropped their hair before their eight-day excursion nearby Orange Lake in New York. A muscular white man with a prominent mustache, Dudley's stout form was an image of late nineteenth-century physical masculinity. In leading this expedition, Dudley organized one of the first summer camps in the United States. He considered Camp Bald Head a winning achievement, enthusiastically writing that "hearty, manly, fun" abounded, and "good nature—largely developed."¹⁹ For summer camp leaders like Dudley, outdoor outings offered much more than frivolous leisure. Instead, the creation of summer camps signaled a response to many social changes that deeply unnerved many American adults.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration intensified, profoundly transforming the economic, geographic, and demographic fibers of the United States.²⁰ These changes did not come easily for a nation with an identity rooted in mythic ideas about white yeomen farmers' closeness to the land

¹⁹ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 41.

²⁰ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 97.

as the source of their Republican virtue.²¹ With the mounting influence of the metropolis, historian Leslie Paris argues, many white Americans developed an identity crisis, fearing “that something vital had been lost in the transition: a familiarity with the natural world, a slower pace, a rootedness in the land.”²² Additionally, due to an increase of Asian immigrants, European immigrants (not yet considered ethnically white), and the Great Migration’s influx of African Americans, urban spaces not only grew in numbers, but in diversity—a change that made many white Americans anxious about their position as the dominant race.²³ The idea of a “true” America that existed exclusively in rural white spaces seemed under direct threat.

Further, many whites feared that the new sedentary, smog-filled lifestyles characteristic of city living threatened the virility of white males. To counteract fears of flaccid white masculinity, a cultural phenomenon now known as “muscular Christianity” emerged. This ideology espoused habitual physical activity as a way to maintain ample white manliness, and, by extension, the preponderance of the white race.²⁴ With its glorification of regular exercise and sports that cultivated teamwork, the YMCA (or, the Young Men’s Christian Association) illustrates the zenith of muscular Christianity. Informed by similar trends developing in the social sciences, urban reformers in the late nineteenth century began to conceptualize childhood as a ripe opportunity to influence

²¹ Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 67.

²² Paris, *Children’s Nature*, 8.

²³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 97.

²⁴ Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

certain, generally middle class, values and reform society.²⁵ Hull House reformer Jane Addams, for example, encouraged capitalizing on children's innate proclivity for play to teach "proper" behavior.²⁶ As a result, leisure transformed into a productive venue to properly socialize children (especially boys), causing supervised facilities such as playgrounds, gymnasiums, and public parks to proliferate across the American landscape.²⁷

Summer camps proved no exception. Historian Paul Mischler articulates how "summer camps arose in response to a combination of fears...in the cities that prompted the creation of spaces exclusively made for young adult White men (boys) to learn about spirituality and recreation."²⁸ It is no coincidence, then, that, led by Dudley, the YMCA opened one of the first American summer camps within a day trip's distance of New York City—the pinnacle of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Summer camps in the United States originated as a panacea to solve these social quandaries for concerned whites. Leslie Paris elaborates that summer camps proved doubly appealing for their capacity to create isolated, homogenous enclaves far from diverse cities.²⁹ The outdoors, then, became an ideologically white space, a retreat from the multicultural landscape of cities where whiteness could thrive. However, Wiltwyck, Camp Atwater,

²⁵ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 28.

²⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), xiv.

²⁷ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, xiv.

²⁸ Paul Mischler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 6. (Girls were also introduced to outdoor recreation, but never with the same fervency as white boys, whom many reformers fixated on because of "race suicide" fears.)

²⁹ Paris, *Children's Summer*, 8.

and the Union Settlement Association all worked to stymie the racial exclusivity of the wilderness by refashioning summer camps as microcosms of integration that would advance equality in the outdoors and elsewhere.



In 1893, East Harlem did not resemble the developed streets of Manhattan. Gazing at a location on the Upper East Side between 95th and 110th Streets, two Columbia University seminary students, William Brown and Gaylord White, decided it would provide the perfect location for a settlement house. In their view, precarious-looking wooden structures inhabited by newly arrived Italians peppered the rocky, rolling landscape. Trodden dirt trails seemed to weave haphazardly about, demarcated by wooden fences claiming private property. Here and there, solid concrete factories emerged amid the nascent neighborhood. Brown recalled that “the region was more sparsely settled and was at that time entirely destitute of any civic center. It seemed to us that, as early settlers, we had a chance to grow up with the community and affect its development.”³⁰ Brown and White would name the establishment the Union Settlement Association for its connection with Columbia’s Union Theological Seminary. At the settlement house, the men had lofty ambitions of “Americanizing” the newly arrived immigrants and of improving the living conditions of East Harlem residents.³¹

In the 1890s, settlement houses became a popular reform tool for Progressive

³⁰ Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

³¹ Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

members of the middle class who sympathized with the challenges faced by members of the urban working class. As historian Michael McGerr notes, Progressives worried that “if the poor could not save themselves...then it was up to compassionate outsiders to remake the working class.”³² Instead of blaming the poor’s predicament on individual shortcomings, Progressives began to focus on how certain urban environments disadvantaged groups of people. As a result, settlement houses offered living quarters and activities that counteracted these obstacles, such as “lectures, classes, plays, pageants, kindergarten, and childcare”—activities that placed particular emphasis on the healthy development of children.³³ Union Settlement functioned precisely this way, choosing Reverend William E. McCord as the first Headworker, a man known as “a representative of muscular Christianity.”³⁴

Progressives also worried that rigid class divisions exacerbated the plight of the working poor. As a remedy, settlement organizations built structures in working-class neighborhood where people from a variety of ethnic, socio-economic backgrounds could coexist. In 1911, White reminisced on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Union Settlement Association, writing, “so many influences in our modern life are making for division into social groups and tending only to accentuate class consciousness. The

³² McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 100.

³³ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 100.

³⁴ Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

settlement stands primarily for those influences that unite.”³⁵ White also articulated

Union Settlement’s goal to cultivate unity, explaining that,

Race, religion, social conditions, and class feeling need present no barriers to friendly intercourse between people who live on the same block. And the settlement resident is not satisfied to let such barriers exist between himself and his neighbors. He meets the people among whom he lives not on a professional basis but on the basis of neighborliness—on the broad basis of common humanity.

White elaborated that a settlement house is only successful to the extent that it bridges connections between every type of individual in a neighborhood, regardless of class, religion, political affiliation, or race. In short, the Union Settlement Association founders aspired to produce a more equitable, harmonious, and multicultural society.

But settlement workers realized that their work was not limited to healing cultural divides. The crowded tenement environments inhabited by the poor (and largely neglected by local governments) needed physical alterations, as well. For example, Progressive reformer Simon Patten expressed that “unwholesome food, bad air, debilitating climate, and other preventable conditions rob men of vigor and forethought.”³⁶ This encouraged Progressives to advocate for more outdoor leisure spaces like public parks and swimming pools.³⁷ The Union Settlement Association thus opened three summer camps—one for boys, one for girls, and one for mothers and young children—to allow East Harlem residents to escape “crowded tenements and littered streets” for a portion of the summer, and allow them to feel revived by nature in both

³⁵ Administration, Box 3, Folder 3-4, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

³⁶ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 100.

³⁷ McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 100.

body and soul.³⁸ The Settlement Association viewed summer camps as an extension of their year-round work to forge neighborhood kinship across identity fissures.

During the early twentieth century, the demographics of East Harlem fluctuated. In 1924, the Immigration Restriction Act halted the tremendous influx of Europeans and Asians. Ethnic enclaves dissipated in East Harlem (with the exception of Italian Americans), and Puerto Ricans and African Americans began to move in to the neighborhood, particularly after the Second World War.³⁹ Indeed, during the twentieth century, African Americans flocked to the urban north in search of better employment opportunities and to escape the vitriolic racism of the Jim Crow South.⁴⁰ Racial tension among Italians, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans escalated. Union Settlement consequently refocused its camping efforts not just on escaping the city streets, but also on easing these tensions. A 1944 fundraising brochure for Union Settlement camps proudly stated that “THE AMERICAN WAY—means equal opportunity for everyone regardless of race, creed or color.” The brochure characterizes East Harlem as the poorest and most crowded neighborhood in New York with a serious “race problem” nearly

³⁸ Brochures and Promotional Material, 1950s-90s, Box 1, Folder 7, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

³⁹ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁴⁰ Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*, (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2010),

unrivaled across the country, often exacerbated by the uncomfortable summer heat.⁴¹

However, the tone of the brochure remains optimistic, stating that,

“Whether Tony or Arabella comes from an Italian or Puerto Rican or Negro family makes no difference at Union Settlement. The common joy of music, pottery, drawing, painting or living and eating together at camp—or just playing together for fun—leaves no room for race feeling.”⁴²

Settlement workers posited that operating peacefully integrated campgrounds outside the city would foster bonding between various racial and ethnic groups that might assuage animosity when campers returned home.

A two-hour bus ride from New York City, Camp Nathan Hale was located on the shore of Lake Skenonoto in Palisades Interstate Park. In the summer, lush green forests encircled the lake. Large boulders jutted out of the earth, creating a dynamic terrain for young campers to playfully traverse. For the cost of thirteen dollars, approximately 400 campers (divided almost equally between boys and girls) could spend a two-week holiday at camp.⁴³ Jim Giorgi, a camper who attended Camp Nathan Hale from 1934 to 1941 (with only a few absences), remembered his experiences with great fondness. As Giorgi grew older, he developed deep connections with the camp directors and was promoted from camper to a counselor’s assistant. In 1940, Giorgi noticed a new development in camp culture. He described a shift from purely providing “organized recreational

⁴¹ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁴² Camp Promotionals, Box 41, Folder 1, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁴³ Anniversaries, Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 1, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

activities in a rustic scene,” to “an attempt to expose campers to Indian lore and culture.” New physical structures complemented this innovation. Campers slept in cabins and tipis named after specific tribes: Blackfeet, Pawnee, Sioux, Iroquois, Mohawk, and Apache. (See Figure 1)

These imagined group identities fostered kinship among integrated campers who, in Harlem, saw themselves as intrinsically different because of America’s rigid racial ideologies. The “remote” location and rustic structures (as evident in Figure 1) impressed the campers. They could swim, boat, and hike with “the Lake to themselves;” summer camp truly felt like an isolated excursion into the wild where conventional social mores did not apply.⁴⁴ For the camp directors, this was precisely the idea. In one advertisement, Camp Nathan Hale promised young people the opportunity to “emulate the life of the Indians.”⁴⁵ Giorgi seemed to agree, calling sleeping in a tepee, complete with a campfire ring, canvas siding, and wooden poles, “a real experience.” As Leslie Paris reveals, “in an age of steel, camp leaders housed campers in purposefully rustic surroundings made of canvas, wood, and stone.” Early camp founders envisioned summer camps as “an important test case for the promise and perils of modernity.”⁴⁶ The social divisions wrought from a modern society rigid with distinctions of class and race could be healed,

⁴⁴ Jim Giorgi, Summer Camp Memoir, Box 3, Folder 8, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Libraries.

⁴⁵ Anniversaries, Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 1, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁴⁶ Paris, *Children’s Summer*, 8.

at least somewhat, by a summer holiday at camp, where each child was subsumed by his or her new “Indian” identity.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the trend of “playing Indian” became a mainstay of summer camp. The common “Noble Savage” stereotype depicted Native Americans as primitive, premodern, and spiritually attuned with nature. Additionally, Indians were depicted as the original Americans, which elevated them to a mythical status (despite the actual oppression of real native peoples, who, largely forced onto far-away Western reservations, were falsely imagined as relics of the past).⁴⁷ In a culture grappling with the effects of modernity, as Leslie Paris, notes, “no other ‘primitive’ group could so satisfyingly meld American experience and nostalgia for a lost world.”⁴⁸

White Americans have long drawn condescending connections between Indians and children, “the two being paired rhetorically,” historian Philip Deloria explains, “as natural, simple, naive, preliterate, and devoid of self-consciousness.”⁴⁹ Coupled with popular child psychology theories that echoed Social Darwinism, adult reformers encouraged white youth to work out their supposedly innate “savagery” through play. Accordingly, a majority of summer camps embraced Native American appropriation with gusto.⁵⁰ For white-only camps, this racial play also served the purpose of teaching white children their superiority, allowing them to “contain the threat of racial difference” by controlling and imitating nonwhites, and demonstrating how a European-American

⁴⁷ Paris, *Children’s Summer*, 211.

⁴⁸ Paris, *Children’s Summer*, 210.

⁴⁹ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 106.

⁵⁰ Deloria. *Playing Indian*, 106.

should *not* behave.⁵¹ Racially integrated summer camps like Camp Nathan Hale and Camp Gaylord White also incorporated Indian mimicry as a means “to claim modern American identities, to explore a bygone American past, and to participate in a mainstay of camp culture.”⁵² The prolificness of Indian play at summer camp made the act of participation a claim on full “Americanness” for children of color, an identity that nonwhite Americans were adamantly denied by the dominant culture.

By providing this paragon of childhood experience for the youth of East Harlem, Union Settlement workers believed they were grafting these marginalized children into the American fold. At Union Settlement, a place with “no room for race feeling,” the work of unification was ironically accomplished by appropriating condescending, fictional tribal identities that reimagined campers’ identities and eroded the cultural reality of race. By flipping the narrative of wilderness from a space of exclusion to inclusion, the camp leaders constructed a method of Americanization. Camp directors ambitiously hoped that this process, though laden with tans and tepees, would nonetheless translate back to the concrete streets of the city.



Roughly three hours north of Camp Nathan Hale in Brookfield, Massachusetts, a pristine and polished set of buildings provided a backdrop for hundreds of energetic young campers each summer. On the bank of Lake Lashaway, Camp Atwater had a focused goal: to advance black equality. Founded by Dr. William DeBerry and the Springfield Urban League in 1920, the preacher at St. John’s Church in Springfield,

⁵¹ Paris, *Children’s Summer*, 192.

⁵² Paris, *Children’s Summer*, 210.

Massachusetts—an African American church known for its civil rights activism—Camp Atwater was originally created to properly socialize newly arrived rural black transplants from the South. As the years progressed, Atwater developed into an elite vacation spot for the children of affluent, and often, culturally influential, African Americans.⁵³

In 1948, Alexander B. Mapp, the Executive Director of Camp Atwater, articulated the importance of Camp Atwater to the problem of race in America. In *Atwater Echoes*, a publication given to campers at the end of the season, Mapp published a farewell characterized by “sincerity and solemnity” despite the “fun and joy” of the preceding five weeks. Webb explained that he wanted campers to understand the “deeper feeling” behind “the Spirit of ATWATER,” which he described as “a vital part of our growth and development” wherein campers became “part of a dream materializing. The dream of a man who has left a challenge to Negro America,” attaining social equality.⁵⁴ The prominent black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois’ daughter, famous jazz musician Cab Calloway’s niece, and a bevy of other high achieving, typically wealthy African American children comprised the ranks of Atwater’s attendees.⁵⁵ Like the Union Settlement camps, directors at Atwater believed that their summer camp would improve black Americans’ present and future.

⁵³ Clifton R. Wharton, Jr., *Privilege and Prejudice: The Life of a Black Pioneer*, (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015), 35.

⁵⁴ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

⁵⁵ The Black Women Oral History Project. Volume 6. From The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College. Edited by Ruth Edmonds Hill. Meckler: Westport, London. 1991.
Du Bois, Nina. Letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 30, 1921. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Camp Atwater adopted a different approach than did Camp Hale, one that emphasized “the politics of respectability,” a civil rights tactic prevalent during the early twentieth century (and dating back to the Revolutionary Era). The politics of respectability proposed that if African Americans displayed “proper” behavior, the white majority would have a greater likelihood to support black equality. However, this perspective was not simply deferential. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham asserts, given the prevalence of “crude stereotypes of blacks” as savages, all perpetuated by “scientific” racism among many professional scholars, “African Americans’ claims to respectability invariably held subversive implications.”⁵⁶

Camp Atwater sat on a fifty-acre plot that formerly functioned as a vacation spot for the Atwaters, a wealthy white family. In 1920, Mary Atwater donated the estate to the Springfield Urban League, asking only that it be named in her father’s memory. The original vacation structures remained, with the headmaster occupying the former living quarters. As a result, Camp Atwater’s architecture defies the expectation of rustic structures frequently found at summer camps. (See Figure 2) Perfectly manicured sculptural bushes lined the road to Beebe Recreational hall. The White Cottage and West Annex, facilities used for recreation activities, were outlined by similarly well-kempt shrubbery. Campers slept in one of nine “dormitory huts”—essentially, small cottages with screened windows, board and batten siding, and bright white panels to cheerfully accentuate windows and railing. As a 1939 Camp Atwater brochure boasted, “the equipment of the buildings is modern including running water, electric lights, shower

⁵⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist church, 1880-1920*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 188.

baths and indoor toilets.”⁵⁷ The camp valued its polished facilities and persona, but not merely for cosmetic reasons. In the 1930s, only ten percent of rural Americans had electricity. By 1939, that percentage had risen to twenty-five percent, but only due to the intervention of the New Deal’s Rural Electrification Act of 1936.⁵⁸ Compared to the living conditions of rural black sharecroppers, and even many white farmers, Atwater stood out as an exceptional facility. Equipping the typically bucolic venue of a summer camp with such modern facilities spoke to how Camp Atwater’s founders wanted to refashion African American representation.

Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans endured a deluge of racist and stereotypical representations in popular culture. Historian Melanie Shellenbarger elucidates the specific burden of representation placed on black people who wished to participate in outdoor activities, outlining how “a conceptual conflation of African Americans *with* nature had long justified their exploitation and exclusion from the construction of American national identity.”⁵⁹ Because European-American culture had long depicted black people as “part of the natural world” that was subject to white domination, “the magnificent wilderness landscapes so highly prized as a nexus of American identity were as racially segregated as the more prosaic drinking fountains and toilets of cityscapes.”⁶⁰ By presenting themselves as cosmopolitan while simultaneously

⁵⁷ Camp Atwater for boys and girls, C Ser.-L .C26745 46564-41, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library. New York City, New York.

⁵⁸ “TVA: Electricity for All,” accessed 19 February, 2017, <http://newdeal.feri.org/tva/tva10.htm>

⁵⁹ Melanie Shellenbarger, *High Country Summers: The Early Second Homes of Colorado, 1880–1940*, (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2012).

⁶⁰ Shellenbarger, *High Country Summers*, 23.

participating in outdoor recreation, Atwater's black founders consciously reclaimed the wilderness as a venue to portray their equality and capabilities. In the aforementioned brochure from 1939, Atwater leaders professed, "the Camp is now quite generally regarded as the best equipped as well as the best managed Negro camp in the country."⁶¹

Unlike the Union Settlement Association camps, Camp Atwater chose not to construct "savage" tepees and minimally rustic facilities that ran the risk of confirming stereotypes of a "natural" state of black inferiority emphasized by the dominant Jim Crow culture. Though Atwater engaged in some "Indian Play," they limited the activities to boat races where campers could handle their craft "like the Indians who first used Lake Lashaway so long ago," and a campfire activity called "the Indian Council Fire," where an adult "told of Indian life in this region."⁶² More often, the activities offered to campers also reflected Atwater's desire to foster and display what prominent black intellectual and activist W.E.B. Du Bois defined as "the Best of the race."⁶³ In 1903, Du Bois articulated his belief that African Americans could best attain equality through consciously cultivating extraordinary representations of their race to serve as role models. His "talented tenth" philosophy included intellectual capacity, prim appearance, and adhering to middle class norms.

One Atwater brochure detailed a typical day for a camper, which reflected this perspective. The document made clear that "the purpose of camp is to promote the moral,

⁶¹ Shellenbarger, *High Country Summers*, 23.

⁶² Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

⁶³ Robert Chrisman, "Black Studies, the Talented Tenth, and the Organic Intellectual," *The Black Scholar* 35, no. 2, (2005): 5.

physical, and mental development of those who share in its life.” To cultivate mature campers, Atwater’s leaders combined “work with play,” creating an expectation that children would complete supervised assignments each day (“except Sunday”) in addition to playing. To further emphasize the point, the brochure listed this expectation first, before listing the available recreational activities. In the morning, campers could choose to receive instruction in “crafts, manual arts, nature lore, dramatics and music.” Then, in the afternoon, children partook in more “supervised recreation and entertainment,” many of them games of the elite, like “tennis, archery, riflery, croquet, swimming, volley ball, baseball, folk dancing, and other games.” For an additional fee, campers could also receive equitation instruction from “an expert riding master” from the nearby Turgeon Riding School.⁶⁴ In one photograph taken in the summer of 1940, a group of slender teenage girls in ballet apparel line up for a picture, hands clasped together and raised elegantly overhead. (See Figure 3) Their adult instructor grasps the hand of one camper and observers the dancers, her own toe pointed for her pupils to emulate proper form.⁶⁵ Activities like croquet, equitation, and ballet stand out as deliberately bourgeois hobbies, which risked no conflation between affluent black people, and those with crude, low-class sensibilities.

But for black parents sending their children to camp, as well as for the campers themselves, attending Atwater was not simply an attempt to make a political statement. It

⁶⁴Camp Atwater for boys and girls, C Ser. -L .C26745 46564-41, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library. New York City, New York.

⁶⁵ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

was also an opportunity to relish in the outdoors free from the rampant apartheid of American society. Shellenbarger highlights how “African Americans eagerly sought recreation in nature as health-giving [and] restorative,” but were frequently denied access to urban parks, beaches, playgrounds, and pools. Camp Atwater provided an isolated location where campers could temporarily “escape racial injustices” through repose in the wilderness. Traveling to most public outdoor attractions likewise proved logistically impossible for many African Americans, who faced “the constant threat of disagreeable situations that could occur without warning.” By constructing a private, secluded space in the safety of other black adults and children, campers and their parents could relax knowing they were secure at Camp Atwater’s facilities.⁶⁶ In this way, Atwater provided black children the opportunity to temporarily engage in the type of leisure that most public recreation areas excluded them from.

In 1944, the Urban League of Columbus and Franklin County openly expressed a similar sentiment about Brush Lake Summer Center, a recreation facility in Ohio that, like Atwater, was run exclusively for and by blacks. The Urban League chapter published a pamphlet that read as follows: “Brush Lake provides the only place in the Midwest where families and individual Negroes may enjoy a beautiful natural setting for rests, retreats, chautauquas, conventions, and camping.” The brochure poignantly adds, “here also is an excellent summer camp where boys and girls, whose parents can afford a moderate fee, can have a normal camping experience.”⁶⁷ Clearly, attempting to provide

⁶⁶ Shellenbarger, *High Country Summers*, 24.

⁶⁷ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

one's children with a "normal," mostly white outdoor recreation experience challenged most African American parents. Like Brush Lake, Atwater provided the rare opportunity for children of color to have what was culturally considered a typical American childhood. The fact that Atwater attracted campers from across the country--from Alabama, to Illinois, to Iowa and Vermont--speaks to the scarcity of outdoor facilities available to black children.⁶⁸



In the 1920s, Eleanor Roosevelt began hosting private, informal gatherings of friends and political associates at a modest cottage in Hyde Park, New York. The densely wooded landscape offered a secluded retreat for both Eleanor and Franklin as their fame grew. Eventually, the unassuming cottage known as Val-Kill became a "nucleus" of political activities for the powerful couple, with frequent visits from the Roosevelts' web of friends and political associates.⁶⁹ Among their impressive company, Eleanor in particular cherished one unlikely bunch of visitors. From the 1940s through the 1960s, Eleanor invited an integrated group of "delinquent" children from the Wiltwyck School for Boys to her cottage annually for a summer picnic.

In a bevy of images taken at the 1948 Val-Kill picnic by *Life* magazine photographer Martha Holmes, the largely African American group of Wiltwyck students are pictured in various scenarios—seated inside the home, receiving food served by Eleanor Roosevelt and her white grandchildren, socializing on the lawn while petting

⁶⁸Camp Atwater for boys and girls, C Ser. -L .C26745 46564-41, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library. New York City, New York.

⁶⁹ "History and Culture," *National Park Service*, Accessed April 14, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/elro/learn/historyculture/index.htm>.

Roosevelt's pair of Scottish terriers, playing tug-of-war along the banks of a pond, and finally, simply chatting with Roosevelt as she and the students enjoyed the idyllic natural scenery. (Figure 2) In America's profoundly segregated society, such instances were exceptional--especially given that most of the boys had been dubbed "delinquents." Witnessing a former first lady and her grandchildren serving African American youth and recreating with them in nature was far from commonplace in the deeply segregated society. Yet this scenario was characteristic of Wiltwyck's integration approach, which worked to humanize young African American males whom dominant society increasingly viewed as endemically degenerate.

The Wiltwyck School for Boys specifically worked to rehabilitate young, mostly African American boys classified as delinquents by New York City's Children Courts or diagnosed as "mentally disturbed" by psychiatrists. The belief that these children were victims of systemic inequalities--rather than personally culpable for their circumstances--was central to Wiltwyck's educational philosophy. The school described their main goal as supporting "the right for children such as ours...the emotionally disturbed everywhere, to live in society as full members, no matter what the nature of their problems."

Wiltwyck administrators asserted that "this is not only therapeutic for us and our clients in a tremendous way, but therapeutic for the entire social order."⁷⁰ Wiltwyck paid particular attention to African American youth, because New York City's court system frequently denied placement to the black population due to an almost complete lack of

⁷⁰ Series I: Board of Directors, Box 10, Folder 141, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, 1942-1981(New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

equitable facilities.

In 1901, a white female sociologist named Frances Kellor conducted a study called “The Criminal Negro,” wherein she refuted the prominent sociological theory that African Americans had biological traits linked to criminality. Instead, Kellor refocused on what she considered a “corrupt, vindictive, and racist criminal justice system” that heavily preferenced whites. Additionally, Kellor noted that while whites were sent to reformatories, “the black man ‘has been left to look out for himself’” in contrast to the ample “cost and attention often required to save one [white] child in the North!”⁷¹ This institutional neglect continued over the decades, contributing to a growing conflation of blackness and urban criminality. When Jane Bolin, the first African American woman to graduate from Yale Law School, conducted research on racial discrimination in New York City’s children’s courts in the 1930s, she found that “ongoing denial of court services weighed heavily on the black population.” As a result, crime rates for black youth increased by over 200 percent from 1920 to 1934. However, the courts continued to deny services to black youth.⁷² Because of this, Bolin advocated for the importance of Wiltwyck in 1942 when it nearly closed due to inadequate funding. To save the school from closure, a group of wealthy philanthropists (including Eleanor Roosevelt) bought the facilities from the New York Protestant Episcopal Mission Society and transitioned it into a year-round boarding school.

⁷¹ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 89.

⁷² Geoff K. Ward, *The Black Child-Savers: Racial Democracy and Juvenile Justice*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 191.

To this end, Wiltwyck--which was originally founded as an experimental summer camp for delinquent African American boys--provided its students with academic courses tailored to their individual capabilities, social workers, psychiatric care, art and music lessons, and recreational activities. The school's leaders hoped that by rehabilitating students, the dominant white culture would more readily embrace them, rather than dismiss them as inherent criminals. In an effort to humanize their students for the largely white public, Wiltwyck's leaders featured imagery of the boys recreating in nature to counteract the stereotype of urban delinquents and convey a wholesome vision of innocent American childhood.

In both image and practice, Wiltwyck's leaders hoped that nature would have a refining influence on the students. From its founding, Wiltwyck's educators attempted to utilize their students prolonged absence from "the streets" to reinforce certain behaviors. Five miles from Val-Kill, Wiltwyck was situated between a dense forest on one side and a rural road on the other. In their free time, the boys could cross the road to Black Creek, a babbling brook where they occasionally fished. Because administrators wanted to avoid a punitive environment, they gave students the autonomy to roam about the unfenced property at will—much to the chagrin of many white Esopus residents.⁷³ Wiltwyck's property, which a wealthy individual donated to the Episcopal Society in 1936, included a U-shaped group of stone houses originally constructed as servants' quarters that the

⁷³ "Wiltwyck School for Boys records, 1942-1981 [Bulk dates 1964-1982]," accessed March 13, 2017, http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/archival/collections/ldpd_6262245/.

school refashioned into student dormitories.⁷⁴ Outside the dormitory and dining hall, a spacious green lawn provided room for outdoor play. Wiltwyck enlisted an “environmental treatment,” which prioritized not only academic lessons, but activities such as hiking, gardening, and nature study, as well.⁷⁵

Roosevelt’s annual picnic at Val-Kill speaks to the type of environment and activities Wiltwyck’s leaders developed. “On that occasion,” Roosevelt recalled, her grandchildren would “wait on the guests and organize outdoor games. We feed the boys plenty and then they usually lie on the grass for a while and I read them a story such as Kipling’s ‘Rikki-tikki-tavi’ or ‘How the Elephant Got His Trunk.’”⁷⁶ One photograph (Figure 4) depicts a pastoral scene of a gaggle of Wiltwyck students fishing, playing in the grass, and observing the lake as Roosevelt stands in the background conversing with the other adults. Val-Kill provided a photographic opportunity to portray Wiltwyck students in a softer manner, in contrast to their reputation as urban “bad boys.”⁷⁷ Separated from “the streets”—an increasingly stigmatized space—and ensconced in nonthreatening nature, the childlike innocence of Wiltwyck students could be emphasized.

In 1948, the Wiltwyck administrators collaborated with filmmakers to produce a

⁷⁴ “Wiltwyck History”, Board of Directors & Committees, 1942-1981, Box 3, Folder 51, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁷⁵ Matter of Wiltwyck School v. Hill, 1962 11 N.Y.2d, Accessed March 13, 2016, <https://casetext.com/case/matter-of-wiltwyck-school-v-hill-1>

⁷⁶ “Reading 1: Eleanor Roosevelt at Val-Kill,” National Register of Historic Places, accessed February 19, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/nr/twhp/curriculumkit/lessons/roosevelt/6facts1.htm>.

⁷⁷ Matter of Wiltwyck School v. Hill, 1962 11 N.Y.2d, Accessed March 13, 2016, <https://casetext.com/case/matter-of-wiltwyck-school-v-hill-1>

documentary called *The Quiet One*: a film about a fictional Wiltwyck student named Donald. While contemporary documentary films usually purport to only convey factual representations, the genre, still new in the 1940s, melded truth and fiction to illustrate a particular perspective. The film introduces Donald as a damaged African American child defined by loneliness, poverty, and familial neglect. He is so tormented by his upbringing that he barely speaks, and often lashes out in anger or runs away to attract counselors' attention. However, the filmmakers portray Donald as a wholly sympathetic figure, marred only by his unfortunate circumstances, not personal shortcomings. In the film's opening scene, text appears on the screen that describes Wiltwyck as a school for New York City boys "who have reacted with grave disturbance of personality" to their urban living environments that are conducive to neglect. The narration continues, explaining that "for various reasons of age, religion, race or special maladjustment," Wiltwyck students "are not cared for by other agencies," illustrating the segregation endemic to the criminal justice system that Wiltwyck sought to redress.⁷⁸

The Quiet One's narrative builds by contrasting Donald's urban upbringing in Harlem to his rehabilitation in rural Wiltwyck. The film's narrator does not demonize Harlem outright, even stating that "the streets of the city can be a wonderful school." However, the narrator adds that, "if you're as lonely as Donald is, freedom is more loneliness. And Donald's kind of freedom is solitary confinement." The film's soundtrack amplifies a sense of urban unease, with Harlem scenes accompanied by

⁷⁸ Meyers, Sidney. "The Quiet One." Filmed 1948. Archive.org video, Duration 1:03:56. https://archive.org/details/the_quiet_one

tumultuous and frenetic music that portrays the city as a place of chaotic frustration. Conversely, the lush wilderness scenes of Wiltwyck receive a backdrop of flute trills and cheerful melodies. Further, the shots of Wiltwyck portray an idealized version of outdoor recreation with playful montages of young boys chasing butterflies with billowing nets, and lazing on sturdy tree branches. One scene depicts a monarch butterfly landing on a young boy's hands, flapping its wings slowly as he looks on in fascination. "Perhaps one day," Clarence speculates later in the film, "Donald will catch a butterfly of his own." This gentle representation offered a stark contrast to increasingly commonplace depictions of black males as intimidating urban villains. By portraying the Wiltwyck students as being at ease in nature--to the extent that a student handles and admires a fragile butterfly--the film's creators attempted to endear them to the audience as innocent children rather than hardened street criminals.⁷⁹

In keeping with their goal to fully integrate their students into society, Wiltwyck's educators hoped to leave rural Esopus and construct a new campus in Yorktown, closer to the city. Administrators agreed that the school's rustic facilities were better suited for seasonal summer camps than full-time educational facilities. When remembering Wiltwyck's Esopus facilities in 1966, one school chairman commented that "the physical resources available to Wiltwyck in Esopus, the buildings and equipment, were inadequate for the task," and "the location of the school was poor, limiting the work that could be done." However, Wiltwyck faced more obstacles than dilapidated buildings. In 1945, the

⁷⁹ Meyers, Sidney. "The Quiet One." Filmed 1948. Archive.org video, Duration 1:03:56. https://archive.org/details/the_quiet_one

school's directors described the relationship between the school and white citizens of Esopus as "difficult," but optimistically added that they perceived a change in the neighbors' "attitude."⁸⁰ Still, despite their consistent efforts to integrate their students peacefully into society, Wiltwyck's leaders struggled to foster sympathy for their students among surrounding white residents, who continued to see the children as a threat. When Wiltwyck attempted to construct the campus in Yorktown, locals met them with outright opposition and a lawsuit to prevent them from building, suggesting that the "bad boys" of Wiltwyck could damage their neighborhood. Finally, in 1962, Wiltwyck acquired the permission, funding, and property to build a campus in Yorktown.⁸¹ Even still, the tension never fully dissipated among the city's white residents.

Wiltwyck's efforts to fully humanize and reintegrate their students into society proved precarious. The increasing cultural villainization of black masculinity swallowed Wiltwyck's efforts to depict its young students as victims of institutional racism. Ideologies of personal responsibility and fears of black deviance overshadowed ideas about systemic reform, regardless of Wiltwyck's leaders attempts to associate their students with positive pastoral imagery. While Camp Atwater and Union Settlement chose the outdoors for a cleansing utopian reprieve from society, Wiltwyck and its students remained actively excluded from society, marginalized in the wilderness and ostracized from the dream of a new social order that its leaders envisioned.

⁸⁰ Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Series I: Board of Directors & Committees, 1942-1981, Box 3, Folder 51, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁸¹ Matter of Wiltwyck School v. Hill, 1962 11 N.Y.2d, Accessed March 13, 2016, <https://casetext.com/case/matter-of-wiltwyck-school-v-hill-1>



As cityscapes expanded, so did white angst over the future of the United States. While urban populations teemed with increasingly diverse peoples, the cultural imagination concocted ideas about the outdoors as a temporary withdrawal from modern life. However, as the whitening of wilderness culture advanced, racial activists defied outdoor homogenization by constructing pockets of resistance in integrated summer camps. The Union Settlement Association camps, Camp Atwater, and the Wiltwyck School all adopted unique tactics to combat segregation from different angles. The Union Settlement Association leaders recognized the interrelated burdens of poverty, inadequate environmental conditions, and racial animosity. As a result, they hoped that “playing Indian” at camp could form kinship ties across disparate racial identities. Meanwhile, Camp Atwater focused on crafting a space for middle-class African Americans to subvert stereotypical representations and enjoy outdoor leisure free from discrimination. Atwater also utilized the politics of respectability to demonstrate the falsity of stereotypes that depicted African Americans as less civilized than whites. Finally, Wiltwyck tackled the disproportionate rise of juvenile delinquency among African American boys. By providing a rehabilitation center in the woods of Esopus, Wiltwyck’s administrators falsely hoped they could counteract the rising criminalization of black youth by using a backdrop of nature to present their students as gentle, nonthreatening members of society.

In both architecture and activities, each summer camp facility revealed the complexity of the United States’ institutional racism by underscoring the multifaceted scope of oppression. Beginning during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and

continuing well into the first half of the twentieth century, America's "race problem" intersected with the entangled webs of working-class environments and social conflict; class and representation in popular culture; and finally, the racially biased criminal justice system. This messy amalgam shaped outdoor recreation culture in the United States in complicated ways. Rather than confront the myriad issues of race, white Americans committed more fully to systems of segregation that freed them from multicultural interactions. The wilderness became an idealized, imaginative space: an escape from modern society and all its supposed ills. As national imagination about the wilderness-as-retreat grew, so did the cultural and physical chasm between "black spaces" and "white spaces" in American society. As this chasm continued to expand, these summer camps looked for different ways to change the wilderness narrative and make integration, not exclusion, seem natural.



Figure 1. A group of multi-ethnic campers pose in a teepee at Camp Nathan Hale, a summer camp run by the Union Settlement Association camp. The association brought campers living in East Harlem to a site in Palisades Interstate Park each year as a way to quell “race antagonisms” between various ethnic groups. Photographer Gordon Parks took this image in August 1943.⁸²

⁸² Gordon Parks, photographer. *Southfields, New York. Interracial activities at Camp Nathan Hale, where children are aided by the Methodist Camp Service. Tent Mates.* Aug., 1943. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/owi2001034946/PP/>.

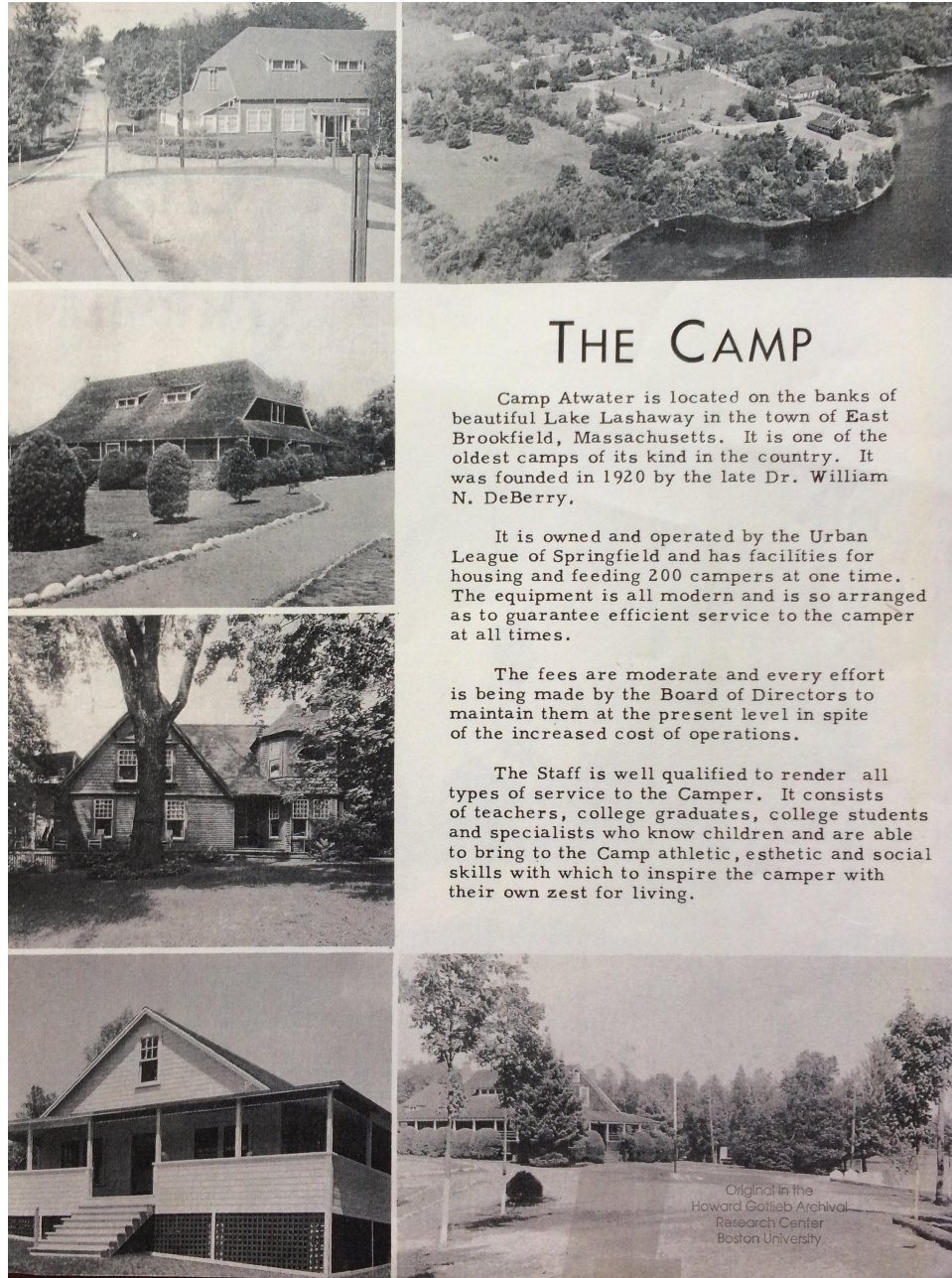


Figure 2. This page appeared in an informational pamphlet printed by Camp Atwater in 1938. Camp Atwater boasted modern facilities and catered to an affluent African American clientele.⁸³

⁸³ Camp Atwater for boys and girls, C Ser.-L .C26745 46564-41, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. New York Public Library. New York City, New York.



Figure 3. A group of teenage girls pose during dance class at Camp Atwater in 1940. Activities at Atwater reflected a bourgeois sensibility, with courses such as ballet and equitation. In this way, Camp Atwater practiced “the politics of respectability” in an effort to advance social equality for African Americans.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.



Figure 4. Wiltwyck students recreate on the lawn of Val-Kill, Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt's vacation home in Hyde Park, New York in 1948. The Wiltwyck School was established to rehabilitate and educate African American boys deemed "delinquent" or "pre-delinquent" who did not receive aid from other institutions because of their race.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Martha Homes, *Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt's Picnic for Wiltwyck School Children*, 1948, *Life Magazine*. Accessed April 17, 2017. https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/asset/mrs-franklin-d-roosevelt-s-picnic-for-wiltwyck-school-children/NAFmqXI9-WKz_A?hl=en



Figure 5. In *The Quiet One*, a documentary created in 1948, a young Wiltwyck student watches as a butterfly flaps its wings on his hands. The film attempted to portray the African American students at Wiltwyck in a sympathetic manner, in contrast to the mainstream culture's growing villainization of black males.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Meyers, Sidney. *The Quiet One*. Archive.org Video. 1948.

CHAPTER TWO

NATURALIZING INTEGRATION

Ellen Marvin rested her oars and sat silently in the boat, contemplating. Away from the excitement of the children bustling about their summer camp activities, she could simply relish the scenery in the fading light. Perhaps she noticed the water gently lapping against the hull or felt a chill from the cool dusk air. Whatever she observed, Marvin could scarcely remember a more beautiful landscape than the sunset illuminating Lake Cohasset that evening in 1941. How different from the crowded tenements, frenetic streets, and electric energy of New York City. The tranquility of it all reminded her of a scripture: “I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help.” A fitting passage for how Marvin felt about the nearby summer camp that bore her name. Above all, Marvin—a social worker who operated a settlement house in East Harlem—wanted the camp to offer “a place of unity” and rest where the racially diverse inhabitants of the settlement’s neighborhood could coexist happily. In her mind, and in the mind of the directors who ran the two other summer camps affiliated with the Camp Ellen Marvin, the atmosphere of “wholesome, rugged living” created an ideal environment to develop interracial camaraderie. “Many races are represented among the campers,” one information packet about the organization boasted. The diverse campers and staff, the description elaborated, represented “a cross section of America” that resulted in “a

typical community in miniature - a multi-patterned community of youth and hope.”⁸⁷

Unlike Ellen Marvin, most white Americans who could afford wilderness excursions in the 1940s did not view nature as an ideal space for diversity. To the contrary, many viewed the outdoors as a pristine reprieve from the anxieties caused by an increasingly heterogeneous modern nation. From the late nineteenth century until the Immigration Act of 1924, many whites worried that European and Asian immigrants would overpopulate them, presaging what some fearfully called “race suicide.”⁸⁸ Then, in search of factory work and to escape the Jim Crow South, African Americans migrated to the urban North in huge numbers, causing another threat to the racial status quo. Many European-Americans feared that urbanization, industrialization, and diversity were inextricably bound. As a result, they envisioned the natural world as an escape from the maladies of society: a foray in nature had the capacity to transport one into an exclusively white “pre-modern” existence.⁸⁹ The summer camp industry itself was founded on these ideals, as a place for white children to cultivate the character that the city’s undesirably mixed crowd seemed to hinder. As historian Leslie Paris explains, camps “made possible a degree of ethnic, racial, and religious homogeneity that could not be achieved in cities, the kind of imagined “village” intimacy that the adults who organized camps feared had

⁸⁷ Administration I, Histories, Box 3, Folder 8, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

⁸⁸ Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 97.

⁸⁹ Patrick McGreevy, *Imagining Niagara: The Meaning and Making of Niagara Falls* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 77.

waned in the heterogeneous modern age."⁹⁰

Despite the prevalence of this racist white-nature ideology, three summer camps worked to make the outdoors a place that cultivated harmonious equality, both in the wilderness and in society at large. The Union Settlement Association—a religious charity affiliated with Columbia University that ran a settlement house in East Harlem—operated Camp Ellen Marvin (for mothers and their children) in addition to Camp Nathan Hale (for boys) and Camp Gaylord White (for girls). In Brookfield, Massachusetts, a division of the Urban League opened Camp Atwater for affluent African American children. Finally, the Wiltwyck School for Boys in Esopus, New York opened a summer camp that later evolved into a boarding school for delinquent black boys from New York City. Using similar—albeit, very distinctive—tactics, these three organizations optimistically harnessed outdoor recreation as a social tool to increase integration. Although successful in their small enclaves, the camps faced overwhelming barriers from the dominant culture, which increasingly excluded African Americans from public parks, swimming pools, and a variety of other outdoor recreation spaces across the country. Still, the camps persisted in their work for decades, creating environments that one camper’s mother marveled as “a place of rest where worries flee” that forged “a warm, united people.”

This chapter outlines the cultural origins of a sociospatial segregation that, beginning in the late nineteenth century, demarcated wilderness as a space that developed an exclusively white identity in contrast to racially diverse urban spaces.⁹¹ As population

⁹⁰ Leslie Paris, *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 8.

⁹¹ Christopher Sellers, “Nature and Blackness in Suburban Passage,” in *To Love the Wind and*

growth and demographic changes altered the complexion of American cities in the northeast, a growing number of whites sought refuge from their anxieties in the wilderness. These changes especially excited adult fears about what reformers perceived as the deteriorating morality of urban youth, who seemed to lack the virility and moral discretion of their rural peers. To maintain the preponderance of the white race, a growing number of parents sent their children to summer camps to develop good character and robust physical strength. This valorization of wilderness evolved into an insidious racial dichotomy between urban and nature spaces: a dualism that eventually equated the “inner-city” with black criminality and “wilderness” with whiteness and virtue. I will trace how this binary in outdoor recreation emerged, grew, and was resisted by three summer camps: the Union Settlement Association, Camp Atwater, and the Wiltwyck School for Boys.



Dr. William DeBerry had a problem. He worried about the growing number of black youth in the city of Springfield, Massachusetts who spent their time socializing on the streets. DeBerry, the African American president of Springfield’s Urban League and pastor of a local church, became troubled by what he perceived as a lack of moral development among black adolescents. In a 1936 community newsletter edited by DeBerry, one headline warns of “YOUTHFUL OFFENDERS”: a “large group of colored young people” who engaged in “continued boisterous conduct” and the “rowdiness of gangs.” Worse, this “gang” loitered nearby DeBerry’s church and the Dunbar

Rain: *African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994), 95.

Community Center, a branch of “the Young People’s Division” of the N.A.A.C.P. The article’s author scolded the young people for desecrating the church and tarnishing the neighborhood’s “orderly conduct,” a long-held source of “pride and praise.” The author also predicted dire consequences for Springfield’s black community at large, warning that “no group of young people can persist in such demoralizing behavior without serious reflection upon the race it represents.” Finally, the article ends with an exhortation: “We call upon the church members and the good citizens of the community to join us in a determined effort to suppress this nuisance.”⁹² DeBerry believed Camp Atwater provided a major solution for eradicating this “nuisance.”

In the early decades of the twentieth century, young, largely working-class blacks began to flow into Northern urban spaces in unprecedented numbers—a transition that gave black and white members of the middle class pause. This flow fundamentally transformed both the complexion and age of Northern cities in the United States in a matter of decades, quickly making them more youthful, diverse places.⁹³ At the beginning of the century, less than ten percent of America’s black population lived in the North. A majority of African Americans (roughly seven million) lived in the rural South and were often regarded as immutably fixed to this region.⁹⁴ However, in a matter of decades, these statistics changed dramatically. Millions of black Americans moved north to find factory jobs and escape the violence of the Jim Crow South in what later became

⁹² Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

⁹³ Ira Berlin, *The Making of African America: The Four Great Migrations*, (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2010), 153.

⁹⁴ Berlin, *The Making of African America*, 167.

known as “The Great Migration.” As African American populations grew in cities, so did white efforts to construct “insuperable racial barriers” between black and white spaces.⁹⁵

People of color also expressed concern over the transforming American metropolis. The National Association of Colored Women “decried the prevalence of crime, filth, and debauchery within overcrowded areas. Women expressed the most concern over the effects on children. One woman noted succinctly, ‘the city streets are the devil's kindergartens.’”⁹⁶ As American landscapes rapidly industrialized, a new class of “street children” emerged. The street child “was not attached to an adult but ran wildly and independently through alleys and streets,” fomenting adult fears of “civil disorder” and juvenile delinquency.⁹⁷ Further, the street children typically came from working class backgrounds. In response to this new type of child, a strong emphasis on “the disciplining of leisure and pleasure” emerged as a tactic to refashion children according to middle class propriety.⁹⁸ Capitalizing on what Hull House reformer Jane Addams termed an “insatiable desire for play,” concerned reformers harnessed children’s need for recreation “to change [them] in carefully guided ways.”⁹⁹ Not content to leave children to their own inclinations, adult supervision became paramount to these new play places. Far from frivolous, playgrounds provided a productive venue for adults to encourage certain values (teamwork, promptness, and politeness) and abandon others (selfishness, spitting, and

⁹⁵ Berlin, *The Making of African America*, 196.

⁹⁶ Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” *To Love the Wind and Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 83.

⁹⁷ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 113.

⁹⁸ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, xiv.

⁹⁹ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, xiv.

swearing).¹⁰⁰ Adult-supervised outdoor leisure proliferated the American landscape in the form of sports teams, playgrounds, youth-centric facilities like the YMCA and the Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts clubs, and summer camps.

These concerned adults also believed that playing in the natural environment had crucial benefits for childhood development. They “worried that an important connection to the land was being lost, and with it, the traditional locus of republican character”, a character forged from “frontier conditions that tested one’s mettle, and American morals grown out of rural soil.”¹⁰¹ Nature as purifying playground congealed in both black and white middle-class minds as an antidote for urban debasement. The healthful benefits, both physically and spiritually, seemed certain. However, historians seldom discuss the ways in which whites consistently excluded people of color from this wilderness ideology, contributing to a drastically segregated rift in America’s natural spaces.

In the early decades of the Great Migration, whites vehemently blocked African Americans from the new public parks cropping up across the nation. On one summer day in 1919, five black boys in Chicago fashioned a makeshift boat out of railroad ties. As the boys playfully floated along the shore of Lake Michigan, they accidentally crossed an invisible line of segregation in the water that pushed them into Twenty-ninth Street Beach, an unofficially white recreation area. Outraged, a group of white beachgoers began to throw rocks at the boys. A white man’s rock struck fourteen-year-old Eugene Williams in the head, causing him to slip off the raft and drown. Despite several

¹⁰⁰ Steedman, *Strange Dislocations*, 112.

¹⁰¹ Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp*, (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 26.

eyewitness accounts by black beachgoers nearby, a white police officer refused to allow a black police officer to make any arrests. The charged incidents at the beach resulted in a week of riots between blacks and whites on Chicago's South Side.¹⁰² Eugene Williams' death and the resulting riots illustrate the vitriol efforts to claim the outdoors as a what Carolyn Finney calls an exclusively "white space."¹⁰³

In addition to this physical exclusion, "scientific" theories about childhood emerged that celebrated white children who engaged in outdoor play while degrading children of color for the same activities. G. Stanley Hall, a prominent white psychologist who founded Clark University, created the field of child psychology in the 1880s. Hall created a "theory of recapitulation," wherein he conceived several developmental stages of childhood play. Aligned with Social Darwinism, each progressive stage in the theory coincided with an era in human history. Hall's gendered categories proposed that girls refined their maternal skills in a "feudal" phase, while boys harnessed their independence from adult society during a "primitive" phase. This "primitive" stage reflected negative stereotypes about minorities, with boys displaying aggression, reckless emotion, and a crass union with nature. But only European-American children could advance past the inferior stages associated with non-white peoples and ultimately make it to the final "civilized" stage. As a result, reformers began to reinterpret white boys acting inappropriately or recklessly as "healthy evidence of male growth"—a luxury not afforded

¹⁰² Fisher, "African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot", 64.

¹⁰³ Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

to children of color.¹⁰⁴

Hall once implored a convention of kindergarten teachers to “encourage the little boys in their care to act like savages” so that they may cultivate ample masculinity later in life. He also heartily endorsed summer camps as an ideal place for white boys to work out their “savagery.”¹⁰⁵ But youth workers were careful to keep these excursions temporary: a summer spent darkening one’s complexion and “playing Indian” had healthful benefits, but a prolonged lapse from civilization could prove precarious for white superiority.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, blackface minstrelsy performances became a derogatory staple at nearly “all kinds of white-owned” summer camps, excluding “all but a few left-wing endeavors and camps for minority children.”¹⁰⁷ To conclude the season of outdoor excursions and group bonding, blackface performers condescendingly symbolized “the “old-timey” nature of camp, while [they] intensified community by humorously playing out what the group was not.”¹⁰⁸ In contrast, when non-white children demonstrated rowdy behavior in the outdoors in any capacity, Hall’s hypothesis suggested that they were merely acting according to their race’s “inferior” tendencies. Recapitulation theory’s acceptance among childhood reformers permeated summer camp culture, creating a prominent double standard that celebrated wilderness excursions for whites but condemned them for people of color. In short, one anxious white journalist wrote that

¹⁰⁴ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 28.

¹⁰⁵ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 191.

¹⁰⁶ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 29.

¹⁰⁷ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 205.

¹⁰⁸ Paris, *Children's Nature* 203.

Hall is “teaching our sons to do what we have been teaching the savages to avoid.”¹⁰⁹

Amid this torrent of degrading representations, African Americans worked to reconceptualize their identities for both themselves and the dominant culture. In the nineteen-teens, a self-defined vision of the “New Negro” emerged—a singular embodiment of the black race that effused confidence and eschewed subservience to whites.¹¹⁰ Similarly, black intellectual leaders like W.E.B Du Bois championed “uplifting the race” by cultivating exceptional African American role models for others to emulate. In his essay “The Talented Tenth,” Du Bois argues that African Americans faced “the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”¹¹¹ This signaled a significant departure from prominent black thought leader Booker T. Washington, who championed an accommodation strategy. In 1895 Washington proposed that in “all things that are purely social [blacks and whites] can be as separate as the fingers.” But at the outset of the twentieth century, Du Bois decried this perspective. He openly advocated for integration and attested to African Americans’ capacity to coexist equally in every facet of society, co-founding the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (N.A.A.C.P.) in 1909.

In Brookfield, Massachusetts, William DeBerry revealed a perspective similar to Du Bois’ when he opened Camp Atwater. In 1926, a decade before the band of “youthful

¹⁰⁹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 77.

¹¹⁰ Painter, Nell Irvin, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 174.

¹¹¹ Robert Chrisman, “Black Studies, the Talented Tenth, and the Organic Intellectual,” *The Black Scholar* 35, no. 2, (2005): 5.

offenders” vexed members of Springfield’s Urban League, DeBerry’s church published a brochure highlighting its numerous programs. Known simply as “Free Church” when its original black members founded it in 1848, St. John’s Congregational Church developed a reputation for activism with notable visitors such as Frederick Douglass, John Brown, and Sojourner Truth.¹¹² In this same vision of social consciousness, the 1926 St. John’s brochure explained all of the church’s annual activities in relation to the “abnormal increase of the Negro’s numbers on northern soil.” Churchgoers feared Southern transplants might not make the necessary “industrial adjustments,” which could compromise “the traditional friendly attitude of the North toward the Negro.”¹¹³ Among its “social betterment” programs, the brochure prominently highlighted “St. John’s Camp for Boys and Girls”, a fifty acre property gifted to DeBerry by a white woman named Mary Atwater in 1921. DeBerry equipped the facility with gardens, farm animals, tents and a camp house for visitors to enjoy.¹¹⁴ By 1937, “St John’s Camp” had blossomed into Camp Atwater, a nationally renowned summer camp for affluent black families with approximately 500 annual campers. Atwater’s facilities were lavish in comparison to many summer camps, boasting “modern” facilities complete with running water, electric lights, shower baths and indoor toilets. Campers could learn archery, swim in Lake Lashaway under lifeguard supervision, take ballet lessons, or receive equestrian instruction from a professional for an additional fee.

¹¹² “Our History,” St. John’s Congregational Church, accessed 24 December, 2016, http://www.sjkb.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=23&Itemid=136

¹¹³ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

¹¹⁴ Printed Matter, 1929-1951, Box 1, SB 3E, Camp Atwater, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University.

Although DeBerry and his colleagues initially opened Atwater to reform working-class black migrants from the South, the camp quickly evolved into an institution that exemplified the Talented Tenth. When Clifton Wharton, the first African American Secretary of State, attended Camp Atwater as a child in 1935, he viewed the counselors as an “obviously elite group” who attended “predominantly white schools such as Harvard, Bowdoin, Bates, Temple, and Syracuse University. “But Wharton did not find the camp atmosphere exclusive. He explained that “a number of slots were set aside for youth from low-income households, but you could hardly ever tell who was who.”¹¹⁵ Ellen Jackson, a former camper who became a prominent education leader (founding Head Start as an adult) described the campers as “primarily...children of Black middle and upper class families.” Jackson reminisced about the famous jazz musician Cab Calloway’s niece reading her fortune, and watching the arrival of a pair of twin girls from Texas who always traveled by limousine. She felt that everyone who attended Atwater exhibited unusual ability in some capacity, whether in academics, the arts, or sports.¹¹⁶ In places like Camp Atwater, historian Khalil Gibran Muhammad explains how many black elites saw “themselves as walking billboards for the race’s capacity for equal citizenship,” and worked to distinguish themselves from “uncouth” poor blacks through “the language of racial uplift and the ‘politics of respectability’.”¹¹⁷

By creating this exceptional enclave of black potential in the outdoors, Atwater

¹¹⁵ Wharton Jr., *Privilege and Prejudice*, 35.

¹¹⁶ The Black Women Oral History Project. Volume 6. From The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College. Edited by Ruth Edmonds Hill. Meckler: Westport, London. 1991.

¹¹⁷ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 9.

openly resisted the narrative of inferiority imposed on blacks by popular culture. The camp overflowed with impressive African Americans worthy of Du Bois' title who transgressed Hall's theory of recapitulation, and rejected the buffoonish manners of minstrelsy. In fact, Du Bois' daughter Yolande visited Atwater in 1921 and enjoyed "boating and bathing in the lake everyday."¹¹⁸ Even still, outside of camp the emerging stereotype that conflated blackness with "ghettos" and inner city despair gained traction. In 1945, Richard Wright published his famous childhood memoir *Black Boy*. Replete with dismal stories of abject urban characters and a racially fragmented nation, Wright's widely read account became representative of black childhood in popular culture. Du Bois lamented this, writing that "there is scarcely a ray of light in [Wright's] childhood. He is hungry, he is beaten, he is cold and unsheltered...The world is himself and his suffering."¹¹⁹ While Du Bois did not object to the accuracy of various events in Wright's book, he criticized the overall tone of the book. He found that "the total picture...is not convincing," but overwrought with a sense of suffering that makes misery the defining aspect of black childhood.¹²⁰

But Atwater subverted this narrative, often with powerful psychic benefits for its campers. However, not all African Americans found Atwater inspirational. In 1940, the Negro Youth Improvement League confronted the camp with an accusation of elitism. The organization published a pamphlet condemning the Dunbar Community League for

¹¹⁸ Du Bois, Nina. Letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 30, 1921. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

¹¹⁹ William L. Andrews and Douglas Taylor, eds., *Richard Wright's Black Boy (American Hunger): A Casebook*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34.

¹²⁰ Andrews and Taylor, *Richard Wright's Black Boy*, 36.

not hiring local African Americans and for focusing most of its efforts on supporting Atwater when only ten to fifteen percent of its generally wealthy campers lived in Springfield.¹²¹ As Michael McGerr points out, “Du Bois and Washington, along with other black middle-class leaders, shared the often condescending attitude of white progressives toward a working class supposedly in need of improvement.”¹²² Although patronizing at times, Atwater forged a space where successful black Americans engaged in outdoor leisure as the norm, not the exception. At camp, Clifton Wharton first encountered a large group of successful middle-class blacks that most white Anglo-Americans viewed as “anomalies.” Camp Atwater reversed the status quo of outdoor recreation as white, refashioning the wilderness into an environment where blackness thrived, and where people of color actively defied marginalization. Surrounded by several hundred other children from similar racial and economic backgrounds, Wharton felt a new sense of comfort and pride in his identity. He felt “no need, here, always to pick the scab of race,” because “Atwater was a wonderful retreat from the racial knocks and bruises of the outside world.”¹²³



Visions of palpable joy, two boys sit side-by-side as they work together to row a wooden boat. (Figure 6) Clearly aware of the photographer, they display their teamwork

¹²¹ “The Relationship of the Dunbar Community League to the Social Welfare of the Negro in Springfield . and An Open Letter to the Members of the Corporation of the Dunbar Community League and the Community Chest of Springfield,” AbeBooks.com, accessed December 31, 2016, “https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=825926985&cm_sp=collections-_item_4_1_-bdp

¹²² McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent*, 20.

¹²³ Wharton Jr., *Privilege and Prejudice*, 37.

and nautical prowess with childlike vigor. Their vessel appears well worn, likely from numerous other excursions taken by similarly enthusiastic summer campers (excursions that occasionally involved the popular activity of frog-hunting). On this summer day in 1949, these young campers—one black and one white—floated atop Lake Cohasset, the same lake where Ellen Marvin sat contemplating eight years prior. In this captured moment, they exemplified Marvin’s hopes for a more peacefully integrated world. The photograph’s composition creates a portrait of blissful equality: the boys wear the same t-shirt emblazoned with the words “Camp Nathan Hale 1949,” connoting their shared status. Each boy maneuvers one oar, making their joint cooperation essential to their journey’s progress. The boys’ giddy camaraderie made integration appear effortless, enjoyable, and—with a wilderness backdrop—natural. But while this scene seems like a moment of happenstance, Camp Nathan Hale (and all of the Union Settlement Association Camps) consciously worked against a culture that embraced segregation to create a microcosm of happy integration that would “naturalize” racial diversity.

From 1895 to 1959, the Union Settlement Association operated summer camps that its leaders described “as heterogeneous as the neighborhood about the Settlement.” One brochure characterizes East Harlem as the poorest and most crowded neighborhood in New York with a serious “race problem” between its black, Italian, and Puerto Rican residents that was nearly unrivaled across the country.¹²⁴ Another brochure proclaims that whether a camper comes “from an Italian or Puerto Rican or Negro family makes no

¹²⁴ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

difference at Union Settlement,” because “the common joy of music, pottery, drawing, painting or living and eating together at camp—or just playing together for fun—leaves no room for race feeling.”¹²⁵ Settlement workers posited that peaceful camping activities outside the city would assuage racial animosity and foster bonding between various groups when they returned home to Harlem. Childhood historian Robin Bernstein explains how “children often serve as effigies that substitute uncannily for other, presumably adult, bodies and thus produce a surplus of meaning.”¹²⁶ For Union Settlement directors, the successful integration of children at summer camps validated the plausibility of friendly interracial relationships among people of all ages. Settlement workers believed that children practiced “Democratic living” at summer camp, and proudly expressed this through the organization’s slogan: “THE AMERICAN WAY—means equal opportunity for everyone regardless of race, creed or color.”¹²⁷

When the Union Settlement Association touted this perspective in the 1940s, segregation remained rampant across the United States. Although most histories of America’s racial apartheid focus on the South, the urban North experienced an “increasingly violent and enduring contest over racialized space” that affected the children of East Harlem firsthand.¹²⁸ The Union Settlement Association even proved an

¹²⁵ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹²⁶ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 23.

¹²⁷ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹²⁸ Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of*

exception among other settlement houses in the north. According to Muhammad, most settlement house workers only made their resources available to whites. Coupled with “YMCA officials, playground managers, and recreation center supervisors” who consistently “locked black youngsters out of constructive sites of leisure and supervised play,” many black children had few opportunities for recreation outside of their neighborhood streets.¹²⁹

In the late nineteenth century, the Union Settlement founders’ originally worked to assimilate new European immigrants living in East Harlem. This effort smacked of the paternalism of well-intentioned reformers like Du bois who viewed working-class migrant children (both black and white) as an “obvious opportunity for reform.”¹³⁰ Over the decades, as the dominant white culture folded subsequent generations of European immigrants into “white” society, Harlem demographics shifted toward a black majority led by migrants from the South. Unlike other similar organizations, the Union Settlement Association incorporated this new demographic into its constituency with no qualms: its goals of naturalizing the marginalized remained. Indeed, interracial activities became a major tenet of the institution’s activity, placing them in stark contrast to the status quo of segregation. The association’s summer camps crystallized their hopes and efforts for a more integrated and equal society.

When Joan Starr--a college student studying education who worked at Camp Ellen Marvin during the summer of 1952--recalled the experiences she gained at

Modern Urban America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 9.

¹²⁹ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 9.

¹³⁰ Eric C. Schneider, *In the Web of Class: Delinquents and Reformers in Boston, 1810s-1930s*, (New York: New York University Press, 1992), 146.

camp, she admired how “given the proper atmosphere,” a group of people with such “varied backgrounds” could “forget [themselves] and become one group of happy people.”¹³¹ A mother who also attended Camp Ellen Marvin that year mused that “the U.N. in a body should visit our camps and see what brotherhood really means. We live it every day at Union Settlement.”¹³² The settlement did not limit its diversity to campers. One application for counselors described the staff as “a cross-section of America.” In a photograph consistent with this description, a group of sixteen diverse men pose together for the picture, all wearing shirts that read “Camp Nathan Hale 1949 Staff.”¹³³ Like Camp Atwater, the Union Settlement Association used its influence to reconstruct the ideology of white outdoor recreation. However, the Settlement camps created a reprieve from the city for the working-class poor in contrast to Atwater’s elite clientele. Union Settlement leaders viewed nature as an opportunity for the impoverished to escape the crowded, dilapidated conditions of urban living. Much like other childhood reformers, settlement workers felt that urban environments had adverse effects on children. They worried that youth became “over-stimulated by city life” and should experience “horizons unblocked by tenement walls.” Summer camp, reformers believed, offered “the only healthful experience” East Harlem children had all year. But unlike many white

¹³¹ Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹³² Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹³³ Photographs, Box 46, Folder 3, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

Americans who fled to the outdoors to experience what they considered a more natural homogenous existence, the Union Settlement reframed the natural ideal as a space where humans of all races and ethnicities lived together in peace. “With this [outdoor] environment as a backdrop,” one Camp Nathan Hale publication stated, “the stage is set for a healthy group experience” marked by “the development of well-integrated” children.¹³⁴

Although the Union Settlement Association worked to improve the quality of life for its children, the descriptions that the organization used to espouse the benefits of their summer camps played into the urban-nature binary. Rather than focusing on the benefits of “fresh air” like prior camp publications, summer camp advertisements in the late 1940s and 1950s began emphasizing the dangers of urban environments. The language of these ads elicited employed sensational language to describe street children in East Harlem: “On their own since infancy,” one camp advertisement warned, “youngsters of East Harlem flirt with violence in dangerous pastimes.”¹³⁵ The brochure called “A Vacation at Camp Ten Strikes Against Delinquency,” effectively refocusing summer camp’s goal on eradicating juvenile delinquency.¹³⁶ By characterizing predominantly non-white neighborhoods as dark, crowded—and, increasingly, full of dangerous street children—

¹³⁴ Administration, Box 40, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹³⁵ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 7, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹³⁶ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 7, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

the Settlement unintentionally “incriminated black culture.”¹³⁷ Despite their efforts to better the quality of life for the children in East Harlem, the Settlement’s condemnation of urban minority neighborhoods (that would later be referred to as “the inner city”) contributed to the growing narrative that blamed blacks for their inferior social status. Still, the Union Settlement camps openly resisted segregation in housing, work, and the outdoors during an era of violent exclusion. Camps Nathan Hale, Gaylord White, and Ellen Marvin created rare venues for Americans of all colors to recreate in nature that many campers remembered with great fondness. But as these camps shifted tactics, from confronting racism with endearing scenes of integrated children to fomenting delinquency fears, a growing anxiety about urban black criminality saturated popular culture and permeated the country’s imagination.



Whereas Union Settlement attempted to ease racial tension among the poor, and Atwater wanted to create successful racial role models who inspired blacks and impressed whites, another camp in Esopus, New York—the Wiltwyck School for Boys—hoped to rehabilitate the types of young black boys W.E.B. Du Bois may have considered “the Worst.”¹³⁸ Instead of trying to prevent delinquency before it ensnared children, Wiltwyck worked to rehabilitate children already dubbed delinquent. Originally founded as an experimental Episcopal summer camp for black boys in 1936, Wiltwyck later became a year-round school for delinquent boys of all races from New York City. This

¹³⁷ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 10.

¹³⁸ Robert Chrisman, “Black Studies, the Talented Tenth, and the Organic Intellectual,” *The Black Scholar* 35, no. 2, (2005): 5.

transformation occurred when a group of concerned wealthy philanthropists (including Eleanor Roosevelt, whose property faced the campus) saved Wiltwyck from closure in 1942. The staff at Wiltwyck made a conscious effort to employ interracial counselors, social workers, and teachers to illustrate that “color is no longer an important factor.” One board member expressed the hope that the interracial staff would help erode tension for boys who have “lived in conflict especially with the white community.” Like the union Settlement Association, he described Wiltwyck as a place where students could truly “live Democracy,” as opposed to the exclusion they experienced outside the school.¹³⁹ Two decades prior in 1925, Manhattan’s Urban League had already expressed deep concern for “the overt neglect of black community” in regard to “inadequate facilities in the recreation field and in the field of care of dependent and delinquent children.”¹⁴⁰

Jane Bolin’s research on racial discrimination in New York City’s children’s courts in the 1940s confirmed this. Bolin, the first African American woman to graduate from Yale Law School, found that “black delinquents and dependents in New York City, as elsewhere, were commonly denied placements on the bases of race and religion,” leaving them subject to the sympathies of nearly nonexistent private facilities like Wiltwyck.¹⁴¹ Because of this, Bolin advocated to keep Wiltwyck open in 1942 as a crucial space to counteract an inequitable justice system. In his book *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, Muhammad

¹³⁹ Board of Directors & Committees, 1942-1981, Box 3, Folder 51, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁴⁰ Ward, *The Black Child-Savers*, 114.

¹⁴¹ Ward, *The Black Child-Savers*, 191.

explains how this institutional neglect disproportionately increased crime in black neighborhoods that forged a stereotype of “black criminality” during the early twentieth century. Gibran defines black criminality as the perception that crime was endemic to the black community, whereas white crime could be attributed to individual failures.¹⁴² According to Gibran, the Great Migration “fueled an invidious black migration narrative framed by crime statistics and reshaped broader racial discourses on immigration and urbanization during the Progressive Era.”¹⁴³ Under the guise of science, these biased crime statistics created an “enduring statistical discourse of black dysfunctionality” that, in the eyes of many whites, justified segregation.¹⁴⁴

In 1947, Wiltwyck’s board of directors decided to make the camp a full-time boarding school to better accommodate their students. The school employed an interracial staff to care “for dependent, neglected, abandoned, destitute, delinquent, and emotionally disturbed children, without discrimination as to race or color,” a demographic that typically elicited very little sympathy from the broader American public.¹⁴⁵ Historian Miroslava Chávez-García explains how Anglo-Americans largely “took an increasingly grim view of the rising numbers of children and youths roaming community and city streets, causing disorder and disrupting neighborhoods, local businesses, and city projects.”¹⁴⁶ Rather than faulting systemic inequalities, many whites blamed criminal

¹⁴² Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 3.

¹⁴³ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 6.

¹⁴⁴ Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness*, 7.

¹⁴⁵ Printed Material, 1966-1975, Box 48, Folder 1115, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁴⁶ Miroslava Chávez-García, *States of Delinquency: Race and Science in the Making of California’s Juvenile Justice System*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd., 2012), 12.

behavior on supposed racial deficiencies. Because of this, Wiltwyck reformers believed its rehabilitative work with juvenile delinquents could have powerful effects on the rest of society. To assist their students and establish a model for other schools to emulate, Wiltwyck offered character development, psychiatric consultations, social workers, art and music classes, academic tutoring, and outdoor recreation for children of all races.¹⁴⁷ Essentially, Wiltwyck directors hoped to divorce the expanding stigma of delinquency from impoverished, urban minority children. If Wiltwyck could effectively rehabilitate its students, directors hoped that the children would no longer face marginalization.

Wiltwyck student Claude Brown spoke highly of the school's influence on his life. Brown, an author who gained notoriety in the 1960s for his memoir *Manchild in the Promised Land*, attended Wiltwyck during the 1940s. Though he had multiple skirmishes with law enforcement as a child that sent him to Wiltwyck several times, Brown later earned degrees from both Howard University and Rutgers University, becoming a spokesperson and success story for Wiltwyck as an adult. As a child growing up in Harlem, Brown considered Wiltwyck "home", and the only place where adults did not treat him like "a pig."¹⁴⁸ In a 1967 brochure for Wiltwyck, Brown wrote that "Wiltwyck is one of the most valuable institutions of its kind in the entire world." To Brown, the school's "task was to convince young, but genuine cynics that they were lovable little boys and also to administer to the emotional injuries of these extremely delicate souls." For him, Wiltwyck's success manifested in "strong, independent and sensitive young

¹⁴⁷ Board of Directors & Committees, 1942-1981, Box 3, Folder 51, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁴⁸ Claude Brown, *Manchild in Promised Land*, (New York: Touchstone, 1965),120.

men throughout the country, who are daily making constructive contributions to a society of vast and multiple needs.”¹⁴⁹

Despite individual successes, Wiltwyck struggled to shake the label of criminality from its majority black students. Unlike Camp Atwater or the Union Settlement camps, the Wiltwyck leaders quickly wanted to move off of their campground property and build an urban campus in Yorktown closer to the city. But Yorktown residents met this plan with protest, leaving Wiltwyck stuck in the outdoors with inadequate facilities for decades, until the school was finally permitted to build in Yorktown in 1966. As late as 1981, the year of Wiltwyck’s ultimate closure, some surrounding Yorktown residents described Wiltwyck as a “dumping ground” that would “pollute innocent communities.”¹⁵⁰ So, while Camp Atwater and Union Settlement chose the outdoors for a reprieve from society, Wiltwyck and its students remained actively excluded from society, marginalized in the wilderness, viewed as social contaminants, and ostracized from the dream of a new social order that its leaders envisioned. Despite decades of resistance from organizations like Wiltwyck, mainstream culture increasingly equated blackness, crime, and urban squalor. For most surrounding whites, the students at Wiltwyck did not experience reform in the wilderness. Instead, they simply polluted it.



Historian Steven Mintz explains how “the history of childhood is inextricably

¹⁴⁹ Printed Material, 1966-1975, Box 48, Folder 1115, 6262245, Wiltwyck School for Boys records, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

¹⁵⁰ Philip Wolfe, “Schools that Pollute Innocent Communities,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 1981.

bound up with the broader political and social events in the life of a nation.”¹⁵¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, African Americans of all ages increasingly faced exclusion from outdoor recreation spaces across the country. Far from meaningless pastimes, “leisure activities...[became] crucial symbols of Americanization.”¹⁵² As a result, the seemingly trivial act of children of color attending summer camp became a powerful symbol that presaged a more equal society where everyone could access public spaces.¹⁵³ Despite the concerted efforts of Camp Atwater, Wiltwyck, and the Union Settlement Association to redefine the role of outdoor recreation, America’s white majority succeeded in expanding the grasp of segregation in the urban Northeast and across the United States throughout the first half of the century. This denied children of color the capacity to be viewed as fully “American.” The segregation of black and brown bodies from wilderness recreation spaces furthered a growing cultural chasm between whites and people of color. And while camp reformers notably reversed this trend by successfully integrating their small enclaves, these private facilities could not quell the expanding color line that permeated American wilderness culture and categorized nature as white terrain. Conversely, black inhabitants became scapegoats for all of the proverbial city’s maladies, creating a stereotype of “black criminality” that became synonymous with “urban blight” in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Still, by creating “a place of rest where worries flee” with “warm united people” unaffected by racial difference, camp reformers set an important precedent for contesting segregation in

¹⁵¹ Steven Mintz, *Huck’s Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), xviii.

¹⁵² Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 209.

¹⁵³ Mintz, *Huck’s Raft*, 209.

outdoor recreation.¹⁵⁴ The activism of these summer camps foreshadowed powerful protests against segregation in city parks and public swimming pools that punctuated the Civil Rights Movement in the decades to come.

¹⁵⁴ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.



Figure 6. Two campers row together on Lake Cohasset on a summer day in 1949. During the 1940s, the Union Settlement Association ran Camp Nathan Hale to foster positive interactions between children of various races and ethnicities, which administrators hoped would foster harmonious relationships between the residents of East Harlem, where the campers lived.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Brochures and Promotional Material, Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 4, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM HAPPY CAMPERS TO NOIR CRIMINALS: BLACK AND WHITE
LANDSCAPES IN THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF GORDON PARKS

Unable to swim, eleven-year-old Gordon Parks tumbled uncontrollably under the surface of the water. The force of the Marmaton River pushed his small body along, but a different, unnatural current instigated his close brush with death that day in 1923. It was the vitriol tide of racism in his rural Kansas hometown that incited three white boys to push Parks into the river knowing that he would likely drown. "Swim, black boy, or die!" they shouted as Parks ducked his head into the river, hoping he would somehow find himself washed ashore far away from his assailants. In fact, that is exactly how Parks survived that day—but he remembered the terrifying incident for the rest of his life.¹⁵⁶

Though he could not have anticipated it at the time, Parks' future career as a documentary photographer would come to reflect the way landscapes—both rural and urban—became ideologically inscribed with the rampant racism in American culture. In the summer of 1943, Parks found himself on the shore of another body of water. Now thirty, Parks worked as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a New Deal initiative that originally sought to eradicate rural poverty. FSA photographers traveled across the country to document scenes of everyday life, and collectively produced a visual rhetoric that ennobled the lives and struggles of average Americans

¹⁵⁶ Gordon Parks, "Alone on City Streets for Christmas Eve: 'I Knew I Was In for a Hard Time, and I Had Only Myself to Count On for Survival,'" *Los Angeles Times*, December 3, 1990, accessed January 13, 2016, http://articles.latimes.com/1990-12-03/news/vw-4401_1_hard-time

during a time of great economic hardship.¹⁵⁷ Photography historian James Guimond articulates how FSA photographers “intended to overcome or disprove some false, superficial, or stereotyped viewpoints about their “ordinary” subjects,” creating a visual “process of contrasting cultural stereotypes with more realistic images.”¹⁵⁸ Dorothea Lange’s iconic “Migrant Mother” became the most famous photograph produced by the organization. FSA Photo Editor Roy Stryker—a former professor of Economics at Columbia University—hired Parks in 1942, primarily to document the lives of black Americans living under segregation.

On a warm August day in 1943, Parks photographed something rare in America. He hovered along the shore of a lake in New York, capturing scenes of children of various races swimming, laughing, and playing together at a summer camp run by the Union Settlement Association, a settlement house operating out of East Harlem.¹⁵⁹ These images were not shown widely at the time, and while Parks is now celebrated as one of the twentieth-century’s most important documentary photographers—with numerous books, memoirs, and articles written about him—his summer camp photos still rarely receive mention. In contrast, Parks’ late 1940s photographs of urban black youth mired in lives of criminality in Harlem quickly reached millions. In 1948, five years after taking the summer camp photos, Parks published an assignment in *Life* magazine that also

¹⁵⁷ Mary Murphy, *Hope in Hard Times: New Deal Photographs of Montana, 1936-1942* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2003), 12.

¹⁵⁸ James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 5.

¹⁵⁹ Brochures & Promotions, 1940s, Box 1, Folder 6, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

depicted youthful subjects. This time, the children were photographed against a backdrop of broken windows, smoky hideouts, and city streets—much different from the pastoral vision of summer camps. Unlike the camp photos, Parks’ urban photo-essays that focused on the violent lives of gang leaders accrued a massive audience. Reminiscent of the popular *film noir* motion pictures that emerged during this era, Parks’ edgy “Harlem Gang Leader” photo-essay ran under the manipulation of *Life*’s white editors, who emphasized a theme of black criminality and urban vice despite Parks’ attempts to portray his subject with dignity and complexity.¹⁶⁰

In postwar America, “Harlem Gang Leader” fit into a national narrative in which blacks were increasingly stereotyped as inherently urban. This stereotype was laden with the dominant white culture’s negative assumptions about “the streets.” In contrast, wilderness areas solidified as spaces of white refuge where European-Americans could escape from their anxieties about the “blackening” of American cities.¹⁶¹ This ideology manifested in physical segregation, creating racialized landscapes that increasingly marginalized African Americans to urban “ghettos,” while also largely excluding them from many outdoor recreation areas. As made apparent in the photography of Gordon Parks, the visual reproduction of certain depictions of black life and the obfuscation of others also perpetuated this physical and cultural segregation that rendered some landscapes as white, and others as black. Despite Parks’ efforts to portray the complex and diverse humanity of black life, many of his predominantly white editors and audience read his

¹⁶⁰ Maren Stange, *Bare Witness: Photographs by Gordon Parks* (Stanford: Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts, 2007), 17.

¹⁶¹ Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 8.

images in unintended, often stereotypical ways, influenced by their own perceptions. The eager consumption of Parks' urban gang photography, coupled with the obscurity of his integrated summer camp photos, reflects the strength of the racist black-white, urban-nature binary that gained immense traction following World War II.



In defiant contrast to Parks' childhood near-death experience decades previously, "The Scene at the Swimming Dock" offers an image of harmony across the color line. (Figure 7) Within the square black-and-white image, two figures clasp hands as one helps the other emerge from the lake, offering visual and conceptual balance. The eye is first drawn to the figure in the top half of the image: a black youth, likely in his early teens, helping a younger white boy climb a ladder out of the water and onto a dock. Then, the eye quickly moves to the clasped hands, which thematically centers the frozen narrative on equality via physical contact. In an era of stark racial segregation, the significance here cannot be understated. The black camper appears older, larger, and more capable than his companion. His face, nearly obscured, has an expression of equanimity. Parks' framing crops the image just below the boy's torso, which accentuates the strength and poise of his upper body. He rests one hand coolly on a post, and with the other hand, he effortlessly helps the younger white boy—who is clearly struggling—out of the lake.

The photograph is shot tightly so that the black boy's heroic, physically capable shape is accentuated with details of his sinewy arms. The boy's muscular physique, dark skin, and nimble posture recall the famous bronze Greek sculpture from the fifth century,

The Discobolus of Myron—all athletic energy and marvelous physicality. Far from being a victim, the African American camper is the helper, pulling this young white child to safety. In contrast, the younger white swimmer desperately grabs the palm of his companion. His other hand is suspended in the air, a clumsy blur of motion revealing the precariousness of his balance. Surely, this boy would fall without assistance. Aside from his eyes actively looking up toward his companion, their clasped hands obscure the white boy's face. The near-anonymity of both faces suggests a universal theme rather than an isolated incident. Dark uninviting waters expand into oblivion behind the boys, making this “scene at the swimming dock” (as Parks captioned the photo) a moment of human warmth and altruism amid a backdrop of cold and dispassionate—even dangerous—nature. The two figures are forever suspended in a scene of kinship, where the strength and virtue of the black boy are pivotal to the safety of the white boy. No jeering faces screaming “swim or die!” nor any hint of racial animosity exist.

In the summer of 1943, Parks photographed a number of interracial summer camps run by New York City-based Methodist organizations. Among them were the Union Settlement Association's three camps: Camp Nathan Hale, Camp Gaylord White, and Camp Ellen Marvin. Parks' photographs of the camps glow with the possibility of interracial harmony. Scenes of black and white children happily swimming, playing, eating, dwelling, and even washing together joyfully confront some of the most contentious spaces of segregation in the national context. To varying extents throughout the nation, African Americans faced forceful exclusion from public parks, restaurants, and neighborhoods. Not merely restricted to the South, segregation policies crept into

Northern cities. In 1913, for example, President Woodrow Wilson extended segregation rules to federal offices in Washington, D.C. Parks' summer camp photos overtly challenged the status quo of segregation in outdoor recreation areas that many affluent whites regarded as spaces in which to uphold their racial supremacy.¹⁶²

At Camp Gaylord White, Parks photographed what appears to be a candid interaction between three campers in an image titled "Rest Period." (Figure 8) In a seemingly nonchalant moment, two teenage girls sit together and read a book in their tent while a third stands watching from a slight distance. The camper holding the book is African American, and the other two are white. The scene takes place in front of beds, suggesting that these young women are tent mates for the summer—a rarity, as most summer camps only admitted white campers.¹⁶³ As the black girl shows something from the book to her friends, all three smile effusively. The onlooker simultaneously engages in a separate task—perhaps reaching for something or tidying the tent—suggesting an unposed moment serendipitously glimpsed by Parks. However, Parks was known to occasionally orchestrate his photos, once asking a Danish military commander to "please move your army two steps back for a better composition."¹⁶⁴ Moreover, a poignant childhood memory likely influenced how Parks posed this photo. As a student in Kansas, Parks received instruction from a white teacher who once told him that African Americans should not waste their time pursuing higher education. She told Parks that his

¹⁶² William E. O'Brien, *Landscapes of Exclusion: State Parks and Jim Crow in the American South* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 29-30.

¹⁶³ Leslie Paris, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

¹⁶⁴ James Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 151.

intellectual capacity could not match that of white students. As an adult, the conversation still haunted him. Though Parks said he harbored no anger toward the teacher, he always wished he could disprove her claim by showing her the numerous honorary degrees he earned from universities across the country. He even dedicated one to her to pacify himself.¹⁶⁵ The “Rest Period” nonverbally illustrates this sentiment. Photography critic Susan Sontag argues that “although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.”¹⁶⁶

This photograph reveals Parks’ mentality by visual depicting a young, literate black woman confidently sharing a bit of entertaining knowledge to her white peers at a time when black illiteracy rates were roughly six times higher than whites.¹⁶⁷ This reflects the era of “The New Negro,” which emerged in Harlem after World War I and celebrated black confidence and competence of “race pride.”¹⁶⁸ The physical closeness of the two girls sitting together also suggests notions of equality. Their arms push against one another as they gleefully examine the book together. Moreover, Parks took the shot from a distance, framing the girls’ tent with the surrounding woods, which, again, lends to the idea of a casual passerby happened upon this scene. The natural scenery also

¹⁶⁵ Andy Grundberg, “Gordon Parks, A Master of the Camera, Dies at 93,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2006, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/08/arts/design/gordon-parks-a-master-of-the-camera-dies-at-93.html>.

¹⁶⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, (New York: Picador, 1973), 6.

¹⁶⁷ “120 Years of Literacy,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed January 13, 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/naal/lit_history.asp.

¹⁶⁸ Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 174.

reinforces the idea of integrated outdoor recreation spaces in contrast to the dominant culture's growing perception of nature as exclusively white. Overall, this photograph presents a dignified moment of African Americans' equal intellectual capacity—a notion that was still contested in the 1940s.

To communicate ideas to his audience, Parks often referenced well-known imagery as a way to demonstrate the contradictions inherent in the United States' mistreatment of African Americans. Parks employed this method in his most famous portrait, "American Gothic," in which Parks parodied Grant Wood's famous painting of the same name. (Figure 9) For the image, Parks photographed an African American charwoman working in the FSA building named Emma Watson. Watson stands in front of an American flag and wields the tools of her trade: an upside-down broom and mop accompanied by the same blank stare the farmers display in Wood's painting. But, instead of crafting a celebration of rural American strength, Park's portrait of Watson serves as an indictment of African Americans' limited opportunities. When Roy Stryker saw the image, he laughed and said, "well, you're catching on, but that picture could get us all fired."¹⁶⁹ Art historian Jesús Costantino describes this portrait as "an act of disclosure, but it is a disclosure of that which is already intimately familiar; it is the unveiling of the everyday."¹⁷⁰ In his photography, Parks worked to highlight the banal

¹⁶⁹ Gordon Parks, *Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective*, (Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1997), 32.

¹⁷⁰ Jesús Costantino, "Harlem in Furs: Race and Fashion in the Photography of Gordon Parks," *Modernism/Modernity* 23 (2016): 789, accessed March 15, 2017, doi: <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.proxybz.lib.montana.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=216520fe-a4cf-48d7-a26a-27c68f57e997%40sessionmgr103&hid=108&bdata=JmxvZ2luLmFzcCZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmU%3d#AN=120374751&db=ahl>

inequalities of American existence that often went unnoticed by the white majority.

Parks utilized a similar tactic while photographing summer camps. In March of 1943, *The Saturday Evening Post* published Norman Rockwell's celebrated painting "Freedom From Want." A joyful white family gathers around a pristine, rectangular dinner table with a sumptuous turkey as their centerpiece. Their happy, disembodied faces frame a rectangular table that fills most of the frame—a symbol of abundance. In 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt gave an important speech titled "The Four Freedoms." In his address, Roosevelt called on Americans to actively defend their freedoms (the freedom of speech and religion, as well as the freedom from want and fear) as universal human rights. Rockwell created a corresponding series of four paintings that illustrated each "freedom."¹⁷¹ Parks surely knew of these paintings when he photographed Camp Nathan Hale five months after the *Post* ran the cover in 1943. One day, while Parks accompanied the campers during a meal, he took a photo he called "The Boardinghouse Reach." (Figure 10) Its composition bears a striking resemblance to "Freedom From Want," hovering similarly above a long rectangular dining table that fills the frame, surrounded by cropped smiling faces. But while "Freedom From Want" portrays a homogenous white family, Parks' image captures a scene filled with a group of black and white children. The boys' seemingly menial act of dining together differed from segregated restaurants across the nation—one of which unceremoniously ousted Parks on

¹⁷¹ Laurie Norton Moffatt, "Voting is Norman Rockwell's fifth freedom: Voices," *USA Today*, November 2, 2016, accessed January 14, 2016, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2016/11/02/norman-rockwells-fdr-four-freedoms-vote-column/93163518/>.

his first day working for the FSA in Washington, D.C.¹⁷²

On his first day working for the FSA, Stryker gave Parks an unconventional assignment. Since Parks was new to Washington D.C., Stryker told him to put away his camera, buy a meal at a restaurant, see a film, and purchase something at a department store. Intrigued, Parks headed to a nearby drugstore to buy breakfast. When he sat down at the counter to order, the white waiter barked at him, saying “Don’t you know colored people can’t eat in here?” He instructed Parks to go around back if he wanted food. Parks’ had wrongly assumed that the nation’s capitol was an equitable city, and felt too shocked to reply. He silently left the drug store, and was startled to experience racist exclusion at the movie theater and department store, as well. Infuriated, he returned to the FSA office and photographed “American Gothic” later that day.¹⁷³

As historian Leigh Raiford articulates, those who examine the work of black photographers should “continually read the photograph, especially in the context of the long African American freedom struggle, as both artifact and artifice, as indexical record and utopian vision, as document and performance.”¹⁷⁴ By photographing these rare scenes of integration in his summer camp photographs, Parks pointed out the hypocrisy of American “freedom.” Yet, Parks’ images of diversity in outdoor recreation also offered an optimistic revision of society by portraying a blissfully multicultural America: one that incorporated citizens of all colors into the narrative without hesitation. Further, the wilderness became a backdrop for diversity rather than a racist retreat for whites. In

¹⁷² “Gordon Parks: My First Time in Washington, DC,” last modified March 22, 2010, <https://youtu.be/cAeAo2PqPPA>.

¹⁷³ “Gordon Parks: My First Time in Washington, DC,” last modified March 22, 2010, <https://youtu.be/cAeAo2PqPPA>.

¹⁷⁴ Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

Park's photographic revisions, he imagined equality across all of the nation's landscapes. However, as geographic demographics began to shift after World War II, these hopeful visions receded in the reality of white flight, a phenomenon fueled by urban anxieties saturated in racial fears.



“Damn, Mr. Parks, you made a criminal out of me.”¹⁷⁵ Seventeen-year-old Leonard “Red” Jackson was not pleased with the images and accompanying story that profiled him in *Life* magazine's November 1948 issue. Newly minted as the first black photographer hired by the magazine, Parks spent six weeks with Jackson to capture the everyday life of a “Harlem Gang Leader,” as the story was titled. Harlem itself stood as a significant focal point in the story. Historian Christopher Sellers explains that by the 1920s, the neighborhood became “the largest colony of African Americans in the United States” due to blockbusting, redlining, and white panic that excluded Great Migration arrivals from living elsewhere in the city.¹⁷⁶ During their time together, Parks and Jackson developed a close rapport. Jackson frequently invited Parks into his home to photograph his family, allowed him to tag along on outings, and even gave a neighborhood boy a black eye for stealing some of Parks' camera equipment (which the boy promptly returned).¹⁷⁷ Hoping to maintain this congenial relationship, Parks took a new copy of the issue to Jackson to hear his reaction. Yet, Jackson felt that the story

¹⁷⁵ “Gordon Parks and ‘Harlem Gang Leader,’” The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed January 13, 2016, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/exhibit/gR1Ft4si>.

¹⁷⁶ Sellers, “Nature and Blackness in Suburban Passage”, 96.

¹⁷⁷ “Presentations,” The Eddie Adams Workshop, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://www.eddieadamsworkshop.com/presentations/>.

unfairly villainized him, and not without reason. Although Parks intended to portray a sensitive account of a complicated young man trying to navigate systemic inequalities, the article and accompanying select images presented a simplistic and nefarious version of Jackson's life.

Excited by the prospect of a sensational magazine cover, the white photo editors of *Life* initially selected a dramatic photograph to run on the front of the issue: Red Jackson wielding a smoking gun. Divorced of context, however, Parks believed that the isolated image characterized Jackson as deviant, which contradicted his intent for the photo-essay. As a result, he implored his editors to refrain from publishing the photo. The editors refused. Such dynamics characterized Parks' time working at *Life*. He described his colleagues as "a blur of silent white," among whom he felt like he was walking a "tightrope" as a "pepper seed in a mountain of white salt." Historian Erika Doss outlines how Parks often felt he wavered "between expectations of objectivity and his own agenda of raising racial consciousness."¹⁷⁸ In this particular instance, Parks chose to prioritize his own perspective. As a result, he took the photonegative from *Life's* photography office and cut it in half. Parks felt that destroying the image was the only way to prevent his editors from misconstruing his intended sympathetic message that Jackson was a victim of unfair circumstances. However, this act alone could not prevent his predominantly white audience—and significantly, the culture at large—from viewing African Americans as deviously urban.

Parks began working for *Life* in 1948, at a time when documentary photography

¹⁷⁸ Erika Doss, "Visualizing Black America: Gordon Parks at *Life*, 1948-1971," *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss, (Washington: Smithsonian, 2001), 233.

experienced declining social significance. *Life* magazine popularized a new style of photography characterized by “big, glossy pictures meant to surprise, awe, shock, or delight readers” in contrast to the FSA photos that presented critiques of class and opportunity. *Life*, on the other hand, offered a celebratory “‘mirror’ and ‘showcase’ for middle-class Americans because it enabled them to see their virtues reflected in magazines.”¹⁷⁹ Historian James Guimond calls *Life* an example of “Capitalist Realism,” which represented a profound shift from FSA values.¹⁸⁰ Photo essays in *Life* ran beside flashy advertisements, making the fictional commercial world the standard to which photographs of common people were compared. The final pages of “Harlem Gang Leader,” for example, ran among a smattering of cheerful advertisements. Among the ads, a photogenic white child dons a new knit hat and a group of grinning white women known as the “Hour of Charm” (an “All-Girl Orchestra and Choir”) wear floor-length ball gowns. Spliced within this visual context, Jackson juts out as the anomalous “other” who fails to attain the American dream.¹⁸¹

Despite Parks’ attempt to portray African Americans in a complex fashion, the white editors of *Life* interpreted his photos in a sensationalist manner consistent with their publication. “Harlem Gang Leader” was published during a time when America’s burgeoning “mass culture” fixated on urban crime and squalor in popular media, and the magazine emulated this trend. In the years immediately following World War II, film noir (literally, “black film”) emerged as a cinematic genre and style that used dark cutting

¹⁷⁹ Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 152-153.

¹⁸⁰ Guimond, *American Photography and the American Dream*, 153.

¹⁸¹ “Gordon Parks and ‘Harlem Gang Leader,’” The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed January 13, 2016, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/exhibit/gR1Ft4si>.

shadows, drastic angles, and themes of “betrayal, alienation, and disillusionment.”

Historian Erica Avila explains how *noir*, popular from roughly 1941 to 1958, engaged with the somber postwar mood, and gained incredible popularity in the United States by concocting a “portrait of an urban wasteland [that] intimated a deep ambivalence toward the American metropolis.”¹⁸² *Film noir* focused on murder, general deviance, crime and gangsters in a way that galvanized white fears about urban—essentially, black—spaces even as its actors were always white. Historian Paula Rabinowitz adds, “these films tracked urban anxiety, contracting the city into a region of inner terror as they spread its claustrophobia across the vast landscape of the nation.”¹⁸³ In short, *noir* films perpetuated fears of declining cities across both urban and rural America through the medium of movie theaters.

Yet, a subset of the *noir* genre produced narratives that humanized the downtrodden in society, showing how they were pushed into lifestyles of violence. To this end, some scholars have described a “noir sensibility,” which cultural critic Dan Flory describes as “a feeling or attitude that invokes the features and effects of noir, especially its ability to critically examine social institutions.” Flory explains that many “outlaw and marginalized groups” identified with noir characters, since the genre’s protagonists “reflected an implicit pessimism and dissatisfaction felt by the audience members against prevailing established orders.” During the 1940s in particular, a number of *noir* films humanized the downtrodden in society, showing how they were pushed into

¹⁸² Eric Avila, *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 71.

¹⁸³ Paula Rabinowitz, *Black & White & Noir: America’s Pulp Modernism*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 4.

lifestyles of violence.¹⁸⁴

As an avid art consumer and a future film director, Parks drew heavily from the thematic and visual motifs of *film noir* in this manner, *particularly* when documenting black life in the city. However, working with all-white editors at *Life*, who revealed a penchant for splashy, sensational images, proved challenging. Although Parks took many shots of Jackson reading, finishing chores, and playing with children in his neighborhood, Parks' editors forewent publishing these more mundane photos, and instead ran a bevy of images dealing with violence, death, and urban decay.¹⁸⁵ Through the manipulation of white editors, Jackson and his companions lost their complexity, and became caricatures of criminals. The accompanying text largely augmented this stereotypical depiction, calling Jackson's life one of "violence." Parks understood the power of representation, and feared the story would portray Jackson unfairly. When he destroyed the negative of Jackson holding a gun, he adamantly refused to allow his white editors to publish such an overt portrayal of urban black criminality. In retaliation, the editors ran an image from another article on the cover, and buried "Harlem Gang Leader" deep into the magazine. Further, *Life* published Red Jackson's profile in 1948, at the height of the film noir craze, which contributed to an ambivalent reading of Parks' imagery. Though he referenced the genre as a tool to elicit sympathy, some of *Life's* audience likely associated Jackson with the crime of the genre, but without sympathy for his plight. Art historian Maurice Berger asserts that *Life's* editors relegated Jackson's story to one that perpetuated stereotypes:

¹⁸⁴ Dan Flory, *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*, (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2008), 24.

¹⁸⁵ "Gordon Parks and 'Harlem Gang Leader,'" The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed January 13, 2016, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/exhibit/gR1Ft4si>.

“While the photo essay focused on a community beset by racism and poverty, its view of Harlem was narrow, a foreboding and stifling cityscape shrouded in mist and shadows.”¹⁸⁶

Further, film noir’s instantly recognizable lighting technique dramatically contrasted dark angular shadows with bright white light, which, intentionally or not, played into the dichotomy between black and white. In what became a staple of the genre, unidentifiable black silhouettes slink dangerously through precarious smoky alleys or loiter forebodingly below city streetlights. A majority of the black-and-white images that ran in the “Harlem Gang Leader” are those that most closely resembled stills from a fictional *noir* movie. The article visually introduces Jackson in a larger-than-life portrait where he appears as a specter looking menacingly over a smoking Harlem. (Figure 11) The magazine editors’ conscious choice to overlay this photo on an ominous urban landscape—a skyline that editors cropped tightly and darkened in production—presented Jackson as a dangerous omnipresence that could be skulking behind any wall or corner in the metropolis.¹⁸⁷ When juxtaposed with a dark landscape and a subtitle that reads, “Red Jackson’s life is one of fear, frustration and violence,” the photo-essay takes on a sinister *film noir* quality that also reflected a commonly held stereotype that historian Tonia Anderson describes as a “theme of blacks as-social problems.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Maurice Berger, “Gordon Parks’s Harlem Argument,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2015, accessed March 16, 2017, doi: <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/11/11/gordon-parkss-harlem-argument/>.

¹⁸⁷ “Gordon Parks and ‘Harlem Gang Leader,’” The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed January 13, 2016, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/exhibit/gR1Ft4si>.

¹⁸⁸ Tonia L. Anderson, “Richard S. Roberts: Race, Cultural Capital, and Visual Politics,” *Southern Quarterly* 52 (2015): 54, accessed March 15, 2017, doi:

In postwar America, this “social problem” was seen as uniquely urban—a stereotype laden with the dominant white culture’s negative racial assumptions about “the streets.” Although Parks’ *noir* sensibility meant to evoke the genre’s capacity to humanize “fallen” characters, the notion of being downtrodden by society was quickly replaced by a cultural emphasis on individual responsibility in the postwar era. Instead of understanding black poverty as a result of white panic, blockbusting, and forced exclusion from most neighborhoods and employment opportunities, many whites blamed African Americans for their inequitable predicaments. Avila explains how, beginning in the early 1940s, the federal government’s initiative to decentralize industrial city-centers attributed to this ideological shift. To prevent the country’s “burgeoning military-industrial infrastructure” from being vulnerable to foreign air strikes, the government gave corporations substantial incentives to open plants outside of urban spaces. However, this shift was not solely economic. Avila states that movements of the Great Migration “aroused hostility from local whites, whose sense of entitlement to defense jobs rested on an entrenched conviction of white supremacy.” In 1943, the same year that Parks photographed the summer camps, the country roiled with urban race riots that exacerbated segregationist mentalities.¹⁸⁹

<http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.proxybz.lib.montana.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=549ec952-c092-4610-8042-4622bf029dc5%40sessionmgr103&hid=108&bdata=JmxvZ2luLmFzcCZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmU%3d#AN=109277090&db=ahl>

¹⁸⁹ Eric Avila, “Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Film Noir, Disneyland, and the Cold War (Sub)Urban Imaginary,” *Journal of Urban History* 31 (2004): 5, accessed March 15, 2017, doi: <http://journals.sagepub.com.proxybz.lib.montana.edu/doi/pdf/10.1177/0096144204266745>

Amidst this precarious atmosphere, suburban life seemed to offer a retreat from the racial tensions with which city's became synonymous. Conversely, suburbia's seemingly idyllic, pastoral environment became associated with ample outdoor areas: namely, green lawns and spacious backyards. Government programs (such as the Homeowners Loan Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration, and the Veterans Administration) provided homeowners with generous incentives to purchase homes outside city centers. However, Avila explains that "discriminatory measures built into federal housing policy created the basis for the racial resegregation of postwar America." Unable to pursue suburban life in the manner that whites could, "African Americans and other minority groups largely remained concentrated within decaying cores of urban poverty." This swift spatial realignment "gave rise to 'chocolate cities and vanilla suburbs,'" which continued to characterize the geography of race in America throughout the twentieth century.¹⁹⁰

Given this new national context, and compounded by the manipulation of Parks' white editors, the manner with which audiences read "Harlem Gang Leader" became ambiguous. Some of *Life's* audience responded positively. For example, one reader sent a letter to the magazine, writing, "[I] hope that the people who are seriously and practically interested will get out and do something about it."¹⁹¹ However, Doss explains how Parks' photo aesthetics fell into a category known as "damage imagery," which aimed "to show the destruction of racism, to encourage an empathetic response from postwar Americans,

¹⁹⁰ Avila, "Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight," 6.

¹⁹¹ Doss, "Visualizing Black America," 223.

and to thereby promote racial rehabilitation and inclusion.”¹⁹² While well intentioned, damage imagery struck a precarious balance “between pity and agency,” and placed emphasis on “an eminent individuality” that sometimes eschewed larger social phenomena.¹⁹³ Further, historian Daryl Scott argues that rather than consistently eliciting a favorable response, damage imagery often engaged “white America’s deep-seated contempt for blacks” by emphasizing stereotypical themes of pathology and crime.¹⁹⁴

As both the physical and cultural rift between “black” cities and “white” wilderness grew, images like “Harlem Gang Leader” became increasingly characteristic of African American representation in popular culture. Sellers outlines the ramifications of these race and space distinctions: “Gradations in skin pigment acquired new significance because of the lines drawn by real estate developers, local governments, and employers...[causing] continuing distinctions between city and country [that] bolstered racist thinking.” As a result, “the distinctions between black and white gained further footholds in the imaginations of blacks and whites because of how it was being hard-wired on the land itself.”¹⁹⁵ As urban spaces became increasingly associated with blackness, the whiteness of wilderness spaces as an urban escape increased through government incentives and popular culture representations. Although not his intention, Parks images of Jackson—and the eagerness with which the images were consumed—reflected America’s postwar racial climate that solidified the spatial distinctions between

¹⁹² Doss, “Visualizing Black America,” 231.

¹⁹³ Doss, “Visualizing Black America,” 231.

¹⁹⁴ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 148.

¹⁹⁵ Sellers, “Nature and Blackness in Suburban Passage,” 95.

black and white landscapes.



As Parks photographed for the Farm Security Administration during the 1940s, he experienced a spectrum of human interactions. Photographing predominantly in the Northeast, he learned that life across the United States could be “very vicious for a Negro around certain areas, in New York even.”¹⁹⁶ On one assignment, Parks found himself in Springfield, Massachusetts on the same day that a lynching occurred there.¹⁹⁷ Parks stopped into a diner for lunch, feeling a weight of anger about the violence. Inside, he noticed a white man who appeared Southern with “the perforated shoes, the little straw hat and pinched lips and a mean look.” To Parks’ frustration, the man occupied the stool next to the only available seat in the restaurant. Bracing himself for a volatile interaction, Parks took the seat, “ready to belt him if he said just one word.” As soon as Parks sat down, the man turned toward him and said, “It’s a nice day. You’re the nicest person I’ve seen in this place. Nobody talks to you in Springfield, you know.”

For Parks, such moments were the highlights of his brief tenure as an FSA photographer. He explained that “the great value” he experienced while documenting American life “was a great humanitarian feeling, brotherhood and so forth and so on.” Throughout his career as a documentary photographer, Parks witnessed a variety of circumstances and events that led him to fluctuate between hope and despair over the issue of race in America. As he described it, “there were things that happened that pulled

¹⁹⁶ “Oral history interview with Gordon Parks, 1964 Dec. 30,” doi:

<https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gordon-parks-11480>.

¹⁹⁷ Coincidentally, the Urban League of Springfield founded Camp Atwater.

me back and forth over the line.” The structural inequalities he encountered while photographing “Harlem Gang Leader” evoked a sense of disillusion, though Parks still hoped to portray the humanity of his young subjects. The instances at the Union Settlement Association camps, however, reveal moments of Parks crossing back over the line, envisioning a different narrative of America’s racial landscape.

In 1943, on assignment at a summer camp, Parks photographed an interaction between two boys that he captioned “Dinner Bell.” One child is black, and the other white. Pictured together toward the bottom of the frame, the boys clutch a dangling rope that hangs from a tree. (Figure 12) Their clenched fists stack directly on top of each other, hands alternating in a vision of unity. Below their closed fists, the rope gathers in what resembles a small noose. This unsettling configuration of a rope hanging from a tree referenced a symbol charged with the nation’s lynching epidemic. Parks must have understood that lynching imagery had a history of its own, with white perpetrators often crudely commemorating the murders by taking a snapshot to share with friends and relatives.¹⁹⁸ Yet, in spite of this loaded symbolism, the boys gaze toward the top of the tree with happy expressions. They see no “strange fruit,” but a dinner bell that bears a resemblance to the Liberty Bell: a symbol of freedom that they chime together.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Marcus Wood, “Valency and Abjection in the Lynching Postcard: A Test Case in the Reclamation of Black Visual Culture,” *Slavery and Abolition* 34 (2013): 202, accessed March 15, 2017, doi: <http://eds.b.ebscohost.com.proxybz.lib.montana.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=c673c6bb-6801-4fea-9f40-77b4ecb90dc9%40sessionmgr102&hid=108&bdata=JmxvZ2luLmFzcCZzaXRIPWVob3N0LWxpdmU%3d#AN=88071588&db=ahl>

¹⁹⁹ In reference to Billie Holiday’s famous 1939 recording of “Strange Fruit,” a protest song about lynching.

When they returned home to the city, these summer campers from East Harlem likely occupied the same urban spaces that Leonard “Red” Jackson did. Both “Dinner Bell” and “Harlem Gang Leader” captured portions of life for black adolescent males living in New York City during the 1940s. Still, the urban scenarios Parks’ photographed for *Life* received abundant attention in their time, and have retained popularity among art historians and photography aficionados into the present day. Parks himself never mentioned photographing the Union Settlement camps in any of his numerous interviews, articles, or memoirs.²⁰⁰ For him, the experience may have blended into his many “less specific projects,” wherein he “was sent to some countryside, some village, to record the way of life there... in a sociological sense to know the people as Americans, their way of life and all the little everyday intimacies.”²⁰¹ However, in the history of the United States, Parks’ summer camp images are exceptional. The historical paucity of photographs depicting minorities or integration in outdoor recreation spaces demonstrates American wilderness culture’s legacy racial exclusivity. As black and white film negatives of diverse summer campers remained tucked away in the government’s archival drawers, faces like Jackson’s became the imagined prototypical portrait of black life in the United States—one imbued with the burdens of poverty, crime, and urban squalor—a portrait that lost its complexity on the one-dimensional pages of countless magazines.

²⁰⁰ This statement is to the best of my knowledge based on my current research.

²⁰¹ “Oral history interview with Gordon Parks, 1964 Dec. 30,” doi: <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-gordon-parks-11480>.



Figure 7. In this image, titled “Scene at the Swimming Dock,” an African American teenager assists a white child out of the lake at Camp Nathan Hale during the summer of 1943. Swimming pool became a locus of Civil Rights activism during the 1960s. Photographer Gordon Parks’ framed this image to highlight interactions between different races during an era in which physical contact between blacks and whites was considered inappropriate.²⁰²

²⁰² Gordon Parks, photographer. *Southfields, New York. Interracial activities at Camp Nathan Hale, where children are aided by the Methodist Camp Service. A scene at the swimming dock.* Aug., 1943. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/owi2001034946/PP/>.



Figure 8. A group of teenage campers examine a book together in an image photographer Gordon Parks titled, “Rest Period.” During 1943, when the image was taken, white literacy rates were six times higher than African American literacy rates, due to unequal education opportunities. “Rest Period” offers an alternative narrative, in which the black teenager reads to her white companions.²⁰³

²⁰³ Gordon Parks, photographer. *Southfields, New York. Interracial activities at Camp Gaylord White, where children are aided by the Methodist Camp Service. Rest period.* Aug., 1943. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/owi2001034946/PP/>.



Figure 9. Emma Watson poses in “American Gothic,” a portrait that arguably became photographer Gordon Parks’ most famous image. Parks intentionally posed Watson to reference the famous “American Gothic” painting by Grant Wood. Watson’s mop and broom highlight the constraints placed upon African Americans, who were often limited to domestic labor jobs. Parks asserted that he used his camera as a “weapon” to highlight social injustice.²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Gordon Parks, photographer. *Washington, D.C. Government Charwoman*. Aug., 1942. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/fsa1998023725/PP/>.



Figure 10. This image from Camp Nathan Hale, which photographer Gordon Parks titled “The Boardinghouse Reach,” depicts a scene of teenage campers sharing a meal in an integrated environment. During 1943, when Parks captured this scene, the United States maintained cultural and legal segregation across the country. Two decades later, during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, lunch-counters became a contentious venue for desegregation activists.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁵ Gordon Parks, photographer. *Southfields, New York. Interracial activities at Camp Nathan Hale, where children are aided by the Methodist Camp Service. Boardinghouse reach.* Aug., 1943. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/owi2001034946/PP/>.



Figure 11. Leonard “Red” Jackson (left) appears in *Life* magazine’s 1948 photo-essay, “Harlem Gang Leader.” Gordon Parks photographed Jackson to convey a sense of disillusionment among African American males living in urban spaces. However, under the manipulation of *Life*’s all-white editors, the story took on a more sinister theme.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ “Gordon Parks and ‘Harlem Gang Leader,’” The Gordon Parks Foundation, accessed January 13, 2016, <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/u/0/exhibit/gR1Ft4si>.



Figure 12. “Dinner Bell.” Two boys ring the dinner bell at Camp Nathan Hale in August 1943. Photographer Gordon Parks’ captured this image on assignment for the Farm Security Administration. The rope dangling from a tree, coupled with the suggestion of a noose underneath the boys’ clenched fists, appears as an unsettling reference to the United States’ lynching epidemic during the first half of the twentieth century.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Gordon Parks, photographer. *Southfields, New York. Interracial activities at Camp Nathan Hale, where children are aided by the Methodist Camp Service. Dinner bell.* Aug., 1943. Image. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, accessed January 15, 2017, <https://www.loc.gov/item/owi2001034946/PP/>.

EPILOGUE

“Why do not those who are scarred in the world’s battle and hurt by its hardness travel to these places of beauty and drown themselves in the utter joy of life?” W.E.B. Du Bois posed this question in his essay “Of Beauty and Death,” after providing picturesque descriptions of his visit to Mount Desert on the coast of Maine. “God molded his world largely and mightily off this marvelous coast and meant that in the tired days of life men should come and worship here and renew their spirit,” Du Bois speculated. Yet, in spite of nature’s capacity to “renew” burdened spirits, Du Bois suggested why few African Americans made frequent visits to America’s wilderness spaces through an anecdotal explanation: demeaning Jim Crow facilities.

Du Bois described the frustration of traveling as an African American in an apartheid society. Black travelers entered the “colored” car toward the rear, close to the engine and usually exposed to the elements (sun, dust, or rain). Segregated cars seldom had an adequate step, leaving passengers to climb awkwardly through the entrance. When white passengers passed through this section, they often did so with “swagger and noise and stares,” and displayed condescension for anyone who appeared a “darky dressed up.” The segregated compartments were old, composed of “grimy” floors and “dirty” windows “caked with dirt.” As for the toilets, it was best to avoid them altogether.²⁰⁸ To travel to outdoor spaces as an African American in the first half of the twentieth century was a near-guarantee of enduring rampant degradation, discrimination, and humiliation.

²⁰⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999), 176.

In 1940, Du Bois described a sense of “double environment,” which expanded on his notion of “double consciousness.” Just as double consciousness described the conflicting, dual-identity African Americans often felt in being both black and American, double environment spoke to a sense of separation between the “white surrounding world” and the “environment furnished by his own colored group.”²⁰⁹ In *Darkwater*, Du Bois described America’s racial inequities in a purely environmental lens. “Whiteness,” he asserted, “is ownership of the earth.”²¹⁰

Though most of the facilities—including the one that Du Bois’ daughter attended—considered in this thesis are now shuttered, forgotten, or refashioned for new purposes, the discrimination these organizations worked to redress remains entrenched in American culture. Racism does not solely reside in the minds of individuals or institutions. To the contrary, the history of racism in the United States assumed (and continues to assume) physical forms, retaining its shape in the cultural chasm between the racialized landscapes of urban and wilderness spaces.



In 1959, the Union Settlement Association’s Headworker, William Kirk, issued a solemn announcement. The Settlement would no longer operate any of its summer camps, which the organization had offered the residents of East Harlem in various forms since 1900.²¹¹ Citing financial constraints, Kirk explained that the “decision has been

²⁰⁹ John Claborn, “W. E. B. Du Bois at the Grand Canyon: Nature, History, and Race in *Darkwater*,” *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 118.

²¹⁰ Du Bois, *Darkwater*, v.

²¹¹ Brochures and Promotional Material, Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 4, 4079915,

made to give priority to other areas of the Settlement Program,” despite “the intent of the Settlement to not only continue this camping tradition, but to increase it in view of the expanding child population in our East Harlem neighborhood.”²¹² Beginning in the 1940s, the Settlement feared an expanding delinquency epidemic in the city. Camp advertisements and brochures began to reflect this anxiety, touting “A Vacation at Camp [as] Ten Strikes Against Delinquency.”²¹³ The organization created a “Teenage Work Camp” to promote good habits in lieu of focusing on recreation for younger campers.²¹⁴ Additionally, they founded a “pre-teen delinquency project” that met within the city. By 1959, Union Settlement’s leaders decided to refocus their efforts on programs in the city that might more directly address criminal behavior among the neighborhood’s teenagers.²¹⁵ By the early 1960s, the Progressive Era tactics of summer camps seemed out of date, and Union Settlement’s social work began to reflect the community-led activism characteristic of the decade.

By 1962, The Wiltwyck School for Boys also experienced numerous challenges.

The Executive Director’s annual report described “chronic problems of distance, lack of

Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹² Series I: Administration, Box 3, Folder 11, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹³ Brochures and Promotional Material, Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 7, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹⁴ Series I: Administration, Box 3, Folder 11, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹⁵ Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 11, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

adequate space, high staff turnover, and the uncertainty of the Yorktown Heights decision” as major problems that plagued the organization throughout the year. Still, he optimistically added, “despite these handicaps and problems, this has been a year of most striking achievement.”²¹⁶ Regardless of his hopeful addendum, Wiltwyck struggled to garner consistent funding or attain community support as it failed to create a cohesive staff philosophy in regard to handling its students. In 1968, a group called the Concerned Citizens Committee questioned Wiltwyck’s use of corporal punishment as “brutality,” labelling the school “complex but completely disorganized.”²¹⁷ When the school moved to a Yorktown Heights campus in 1966, it faced the animosity of the surrounding residents.²¹⁸ Wiltwyck ultimately closed in 1981 due to inadequate funding.²¹⁹

Of the three organizations considered in this thesis, only Camp Atwater remains, still hosting campers each summer in its original Brookfield, Massachusetts facilities. Its tuition fees and decision to function as a typical summer camp (rather than a charitable organization) have kept Atwater financially sustainable. The Urban League of Springfield still operates the camp, which takes pride in its history as “the prestigious and oldest African American owned and operated summer residential youth camp in the nation.”²²⁰

²¹⁶ Series I: Administration, Box 1, Folder 141, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹⁷ Series I: Administration, Box 16, Folder 290, 4079915, Union Settlement Association (New York, N.Y.). Union Settlement Association records, 1896-1995, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.

²¹⁸ Philip Wolfe, “Schools that Pollute Innocent Communities,” *The New York Times*, June 27, 1981.

²¹⁹ Maurine Hoffman Beasley, Holly Cowan Shulman and Henry R. Beasley, *The Eleanor Roosevelt Encyclopedia*, (Westport: Greenwood, 2000), 568.

²²⁰ “A Experience of a Lifetime (sic),” accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.campatwater.org/>

Among its conventional activities still available to campers—such as hiking, swimming, and canoeing—Atwater also offers educational activities in “African and African American history,” as well as “Academic Enrichment” courses in science, math, and reading.²²¹ In this way, Atwater still fulfills the goal that Dr. William DeBerry established in 1921: to create an enriching, emboldening outdoor retreat for black youth.

The stories, struggles, and efforts of these summer camps illuminate the extensive scope of racism and the attempts to rectify its impact in the United States. Early in the twentieth century, these activist camps each recognized the power that wilderness spaces held in the American imagination. They understood that access to the outdoors was entangled with ideas about citizenship, equality, and national identity. The rarity of this type of integrated camp in the United States, coupled with the ultimate closure of Wiltwyck and the Union Settlement Association camps, reflects the degree to which wilderness ultimately became a space of white privilege in America.

Yet the historical presence of these camps speaks to the alternative possibilities that could have replaced this racist, sociospatial exclusion. Vivid memories immortalized in photographs and etched in childhood memoirs remain. At these camps, the hopeful notion of a more equitable society sprung up unexpectedly around campfires, teepees, and canoes, providing generations of children with an alternative vision of race in America, one that earnestly celebrated difference and embraced unity.

²²¹ “Activities and Classes,” accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www.campatwater.org/about-camp/activities-and-classes/>

Du Bois struggled to reconcile the immense beauty of the natural world with the vitriolic racism he experienced firsthand. “There is not in the world a more disgraceful denial of human brotherhood than the ‘Jim-Crow’ car of the southern United States,” he wrote in *Darkwater* in 1920. He continued, “but, too, just as true, there is nothing more beautiful in the universe than sunset and moonlight on Montego Bay in far Jamaica. And both things are true and both belong to this our world, and neither can be denied.”²²² One year later, in August 1921, Du Bois received a letter from his wife, Nina. She described the “fine time” their daughter Yolande was having at Camp Atwater, “boating and bathing in the lake everyday.”²²³

²²² Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 177.

²²³ Nina Du Bois. Letter from Nina Du Bois to W. E. B. Du Bois, August 30, 1921. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

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Abbreviations

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CU	Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York City
NYPL	Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, New York City
PPOC	Prints and Photographs Online Catalog, Library of Congress, Washington
UMA	Special Collections and University Archives, University Libraries, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst

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