H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leslie Paris. *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp.* New York: New York University Press, 2008. xi + 364 pp. $39.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-6707-8.

Reviewed by Allison E. Wright (University of Texas at Austin)
Published on H-Childhood (December, 2009)
Commissioned by Patrick J. Ryan

Camps for Kids: Age, Gender, and Power in the Woods

Baby boomers seeking to read about their own camp experiences in the pages of Leslie Paris's *Children's Nature* should look elsewhere. Paris cautions against this expectation in her introduction: "To those adults who attended camps of the 1940s onward,... you are younger than the generations whose experiences I chronicle here" (p. 14). Yet Paris acknowledges that certain camp traditions have survived the decades and she allows for generational recognition of such rites of passage. *Children's Nature* is the history of the American summer camp, broadly defined. It is the story of segregation, regionalization, and the politics of gender and generation under tents and, later, within cabins. Paris connects the rise of the camp movement (whose founding she traces to the United States) to the fin-de-siècle Progressive urban reform movement and to the rise of modernity and Theodore Roosevelt's brand of rugged masculinity; and she identifies camping as a response to increasing industrialization. In doing so, she is attentive to distinctions of class, race, and gender: "Inasmuch as camps were spaces of children's leisure, they make visible the lives of those children who actually had vacation time in the summer months and had parents and local organizations able and willing to support these kinds of experiences. For this reason, camp histories are disproportionately those of white, urban children" (pp. 6-7). Paris's focus is on sleep-away summer camps, where children spent nights and days away from home for at least a week, because these "typif[ied]" camp experiences (p. 11).

Propelled by the words of a 1920s camp director, Paris's goal is twofold: "first, to approach the history of American children's summer camps with 'sympathetic imagination' and, second, to make this seasonal world intelligible and compelling" (p. 2). She succeeds on both counts. While the seasonality of summer camps, as Paris suggests, heightens the sense of community for campers, *Children's Nature* itself recalls their "inherent impermanence" (p. 257). "By the shores of quiet rural lakes," Paris describes, "summer camps have come to serve as emotionally intense spaces of age-bound transition.... Youth, the end of the season suggested, was itself transitory and impermanent" (p. 260).

Exhaustively researched, Paris's sources vary from commercial brochures and official camp histories to campers' own writings in diaries and letters home (among a myriad of other sources). Assistant professor of history at the University of British Columbia and an established scholar of children and youth, Paris identifies the tension inherent in working with such rich historical material: "Although the challenge of writing the simultaneous history of childhood ideology and children's experience remains, wherever possible I have worked to set adult intentions into conversation with children's own observations" (p. 13). *Children's Nature* profits from Paris's attention to children's unique agency in creating their own individualized camp experiences.

Paris shows an intense attention to sociohistoric context as she recounts the growth of the camp industry in America. For instance, while she explains that the first charitable camps (funded by charitable organizations, such as the YMCA, as opposed to private camps, funded by campers' families) were established around the turn of the twentieth century and grew out of urban reform efforts, she also relates, "Like most camps of the period, the first camps specifically for working-class children served boys." This was "a reflection of reformers' concern that working-class boys represented a greater threat to the social order and their belief that boys had a particular need for outdoor adventure.... All in all, this was a civilizing mission in the woods" (p. 56).

Beginning with only a handful of private camps in the 1880s and growing to several hundred by the 1910s, the camp movement in its earliest decades was the purview of educated, native-born, Protestant, middle- and upper-

class males, and it was centered in the northeastern part of the country. The democratization of camping soon followed. Paris notes that college-educated women began opening camps for girls by the 1910s; perhaps one hundred girls' camps were in existence in 1915. Overall, an estimated five to seven thousand camps were in operation nationwide in 1930, leading Paris to conclude, "By the interwar years the camp industry had come of age" (p. 63).

Although Abigail A. Van Slyck's 2006 monograph *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* was the first fully considered study of the summer camp environment, Van Slyck–professor of art history and director of the Architectural Studies Program at Connecticut College–was interested in camps as built environments and how they intersected with the natural landscape. As a historian, Paris is not only concerned with tracing the rise of the camp movement in the United States, but also, as a scholar of childhood and youth, interested in the social and cultural implications of this movement on such broader realms as education, the then-burgeoning discipline of psychology, the family, and the negotiations that took place therein. Beyond the broader scope of childhood studies, *Children's Nature* represents a significant contribution to girls' cultural studies, building on Kelly Schrum's analysis of teen girls' consumerism in *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-194*5 (2004). As Paris notes, "Well before the Second World War, the era when many merchants began particularly to target adolescents through specialty teen clothing lines and magazines such as *Seventeen* (1944), a distinctive 'teenage' culture was already under development at summer camps" (p. 110).

According to Paris, "camps were worlds of age hierarchy" (p. 107); age was "a category of difference at camps" (p. 111). Power was restricted unequally based on age. Adults asserted their authority as camp leaders and counselors by restricting campers' access and organizing their time. Because of this inequitable distribution of power, campers would occasionally participate in transgressive, even counterhegemonic activities. For example, some camps engaged in "baby parties and baby parades" which "returned campers backward in time. Campers who played at being babies broke with the convention while marking, through exaggerated performance, their own fundamental nonbabyness" (p. 112). Gender was also a category of difference, despite the existence of coeducational camps. As Paris points out, "Boys and girls received somewhat different lessons about their bodies" (p. 127). She offers a profound example: on the one hand, "both boys and girls were encouraged to show courage, competitive enthusiasm, and good sportsmanship, but the pressures were greater on boys to participate in competitive sports and to avoid crying in front of others. On the other hand, boyhood had its privileges. Particularly in the early years of camping, these included the right to be naked ... At New Hampshire's Camp Mansfield, the boys remained undressed on land as well as in the water and slept naked wrapped in blankets. Girls, especially adolescent girls, were far more physically restricted at camp, and swimming naked was at most a very occasional treat for all but the very youngest" (pp. 127-128). And yet "camps represented for many girls the most freely physical spaces of their lives and a point of entry into traditionally male realms of adventure," especially when they engaged in cross-gender play and experimented with gender-neutral identities (p. 128).

Paris ends her study of the American summer camp in the early 1940s, but she notes that at the industry's peak, in the twenty years or so following World War II, roughly one-sixth of American children attended summer camp. The postwar years saw a rise in coed camping as well as a continued uproar over interracial camping. "However," Paris says, "the degree to which camps sorted out children along lines of difference declined as traditional American social hierarchies came under attack and as many camp communities became less exclusive" (p. 271). Bringing it forward, Paris compares previous generations of camp owners' wrestling with the shift from tents to cabins to contemporary camp leaders' struggles with allowing campers to bring cell phones with them to camp.

Citation: Allison E. Wright. Review of Paris, Leslie, *Children's Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp*. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23552