(Un)packing the Natural: Exploring Tactics of Empowerment for Girls through Outdoor Education

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(Un)packing the Natural:
Exploring Tactics of Empowerment for Girls through Outdoor Education

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
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by

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I am seventeen, sitting on the line of the continental divide. Monstrous glaciers and shifting clouds move across my vision. This is the first time I’ve been above the tree line and the blues, greys, and whites make me feel like I am on a different planet. This day has been easy and exhilarating as we stay to high ground, almost touching the sky. My first night in high altitude made me feel like I was meant to live in the sky. Today, I am the Leader of the Day and I believe I am doing a good job keeping people focused, hydrated, on time and healthy as we move across the ridge. My GirlVentures training is showing up well on my first National Outdoor Leadership (NOLS) Course. This is the sixth day of a thirty day backpacking course. I have come to NOLS through GirlVentures’ recommendation, with a full scholarship to any of their thirty day trips.

As Leader of the Day, I am eager to demonstrate my leadership skill, just as GirlVentures had set me up to do. When we arrive at our drop down destination (to get to the lake we are
staying at), I feel confident in my leading the group the whole way. At this point in the trip, the instructor is hiking with us, but he doesn’t help us unless we get at least a mile off course. As we begin to descend, it starts to rain. Immediately the instructor and some other members of my group put on rain jackets. I don’t feel like I need one, considering we are so close to camp, and besides, I love the rain.

As we keep going down, I realize that I haven’t put much thought or planning into exactly how we would make it down. I just thought we’d go down the side of the mountain in the general direction of the lake as shown on the map (which we couldn’t see with our eyes yet). It begins to rain a little harder. The open air of the continental divide had made me feel like travel was easy, but now that we are descending, and certain features of the rock and mountains are blocking our view, our path has become less clear.

We continue hiking down and suddenly I have no idea where to go. We are on a small ridge just above our lake but I have no clue as to the next point at which we should descend. I feel myself beginning to panic as we travel in circles on the ridge, having a hard time knowing where the sheer cliffs are and where the path down is. It is raining in earnest now and my panic level is growing. Where is the lake?

As I make a third walk across the ridge, I step down onto a wet rock and my legs fly out from under me. With the full weight of a fifty-five pound backpack, my face hits rock before my brain can even tell my hands to catch my fall. I have failed. All my expectations for myself as a leader crash down with my fall. I had not made it to camp on time, I couldn’t find the way down, and now I have fallen, creating a potentially dangerous situation for the whole group and myself. These thoughts rush through my head as I frantically jolt back up exclaiming “I’m okay, I’m okay, I’m okay.”
At this point my instructor steps in. He sits me down, makes sure I don’t have a head injury, and tells me to change into warm dry clothes. After that, he helps me find the way down and I lead the group the rest of the way.

I have never forgotten that moment as it is one of the most formative memories I have of backpacking. I didn’t realize it at the time, but now I can see that it makes for an excellent story of mountain climbing. By facing the mountain, I had in turn faced myself, having been pushed against my challenges and forced to learn from my failures. *Always stick to high ground, look around the corner, and take the path of least resistance.* These are the three rules of mountaineering that I will never forget. The importance of keeping dry in order to conserve energy also drilled itself into my memory.

My experiences in the outdoors began at GirlVentures, which I started as a twelve year old girl, participating on their twelve day kayaking and backpacking trip along the coast of The Point Reyes National Seashore in California. Ten years later, I returned to this organization not as a participant or instructor, but as a curious undergrad anthropology student. GirlVentures is a non-profit outdoor education organization founded twenty years ago, that takes girls on week to two week long backpacking, rock climbing and kayaking adventures. I was drawn to the organization as a place to conduct research because of the initial tensions that I experienced during my time as an instructor. As a non-profit, GirlVentures mission involves empowering young girls and also creating greater access within outdoor education and recreation. They do this by making the space available to only girls¹ and making tuition assistance and full scholarship widely available. The reason for its founding was to create a space for girls to grow

¹ On the website, the organization includes this quote at the bottom of the page: “GirlVentures believes in practicing radical inclusivity. Girls* refers to gender expansive youth (cis girls, trans girls, non-binary youth, gender non-conforming youth, gender queer youth and any girl-identified youth).” When the organization was founded the definitions of girlhood might have been more confined. GirlVentures constantly strives to adapt and change in order to become more inclusive. This is an example of that work.
uninhibited by societal pressures. Overarching themes of inclusion and justice pervade their non-profit work. This being said, outdoor adventure is historically exclusive, along lines of gender, race and class. I wanted to know how GirlVentures reconciled their work within these narratives of exclusion. In what ways do they justify their work in these spaces that are historically difficult to access? As I continued conducting research, interviewing instructors, and spending time on courses, I realized these questions revolved around issues of belief and identity formation. Even as GirlVentures works within narratives of the outdoors that have occasioned exclusion, intentionally calling attention to and naming injustices within the outdoors has allowed them to continue to believe in their work as they pursue their social justice objectives. Outdoor spaces have long been constructed as places to create identity, and GirlVentures follows this same narrative. They take advantage of the shared acknowledgement of nature as a place for identity forming and create their own subjects. The GirlVentures subjects stress intentionality and self awareness, all thought being formed towards the growing of the self in relation to the group.

GirlVentures envisions a world where “girls and women are actively engaged in the leadership of thriving communities; communities that are strengthened by diversity, civic engagement, healthy choices and environmental responsibility” (GirlVentures Instructor Handbook 2017, 4). GirlVentures was created out of a belief that something was happening to adolescent girls’ self esteem that could be remedied with the discovery of strengths through outdoor adventure. The GirlVentures curriculum is designed around three core values: Live Healthily, Relate Wisely and Lead Confidently. Healthy living is characterized by emphasizing and talking about self care and expression. Relating Wisely is characterized by a curriculum that focuses on social justice, taking pride in who they are and also learning how to be open to others.
Leading Confidently is characterized by a curriculum that allows for girls to practice risk assessment and group management, learning how to find their voice and discovering their form of leadership. My senior project looks at the ways that GirlVentures constitutes itself within the field of outdoor education and conservation that has an historically exclusive and privileged past.

This project explores GirlVentures’ form of nature use and the various tensions existing in its history and continued existence. As an organization that emphasizes social justice, they continuously look for new ways to adapt their model in service to greater access. Sometimes they succeed and sometimes they don’t. Within these conversations they do only the best that they can, even if more is still yet to be done. This project is not meant to lend suggestions towards “what can be done,” but continues to explore these questions of nature use, the greater historical context, and the implications for today. Within a GirlVentures tradition, I wish to contribute to the greater awareness surrounding these questions, knowing that these conversations will continue as they did when speaking to my interlocutors.

**Methodology**

For this project I conducted research through participant observation and interviews with my interlocutors, who were instructors for GirlVentures. I have also used some auto-ethnographic data from my own experiences in the outdoors. The majority of my participant observation took place on the courses I was allowed to attend both as an instructor and just as an observer. Due to the work I have done with the program, I have gained a considerable amount of trust within GirlVentures. I conducted participant observation during almost the entire Transitions course (girls going into high school), was able to see some days of the Project Courage trips (ages 12 to 13), and was an instructor on the Redwood Adventure Coast trip (ages
10, 11 and 12). Besides the courses I was also able to attend and observe all staff trainings where I spent more time with instructors who were learning the pedagogy of GirlVentures. I also spent time volunteering in the office, watching the ways adventures were created from within the city, the base of the operation.

In addition to participant observation, I also interviewed many of the instructors who worked for GirlVentures in the summer of 2017. Interviews would typically take place outside, sometimes on trips but most of the time meeting up in a park, a café, or just in my own home. The only difficulties that arose while conducting research happened during the longer trips. A large amount of activity to be done each day leaves very little space for taking constant notes. I would scribble notes on my arm or a loose piece of paper that I would later parse out in a free moment. When I myself was an instructor (for the Redwood Coast trip), it was much harder to take notes on everything that was happening because my first job in those moments was to be an instructor. In this situation my research came second and I had to reflect back on the trip in considering what I wanted to include. Nevertheless, I tried to keep a journal entry every day.

During the Transitions Course where I was able to spend a large majority of my time researching, I could focus much more on recording information but again I had to improvise during days spent on the trail. Another interesting complication created by my presence had to do with having an extra adult on the trip. Even as the instructors were aware that I would be joining their trip and were people who trusted and cared for me, there would still be tensions with my presence. Even if the girls understood I was not an instructor, they would still register me as an authority, as another adult highly involved in the world of GirlVentures. I would often have to redirect questions that were meant for instructors in order to maintain a distance from the group as an authoritative figure. Even as I was hoping to not be a factor that the instructors
would have to worry about, they still had to consider my presence in relation to the girls and in relation to themselves. This ultimately resolved itself in that the instructors became welcoming of my presence and the time off that I could provide for them, which was atypical on these trips.

**A Few Words on my Position**

My introduction to outdoor adventure and education as a skill set happened through GirlVentures. During my childhood in California, my family took routine trips camping, hiking, or road trips down the beach. At age twelve, I took my first backpacking and kayaking trip with GirlVentures. After that, I continued participating in their programs, my mother believing in their core values and myself more than happy to learn about climbing walls, hiking long distances and continuing to grow up dirty. Through GirlVentures, I was recommended for a scholarship to participate in a month long backpacking course in the Rocky Mountains with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). The following summer, the GirlVentures mentorship program offered me a job as an Assistant Instructor on one of the Transitions Courses, and from there it was an easy path to more outdoor leadership opportunities. The summer after my sophomore year of college, I was hired for a paid position as an instructor, and learned a great deal from the other inspiring outdoor leaders on staff training.

I am a GirlVentures baby. I owe my own sense of strength and comfort within outdoor settings and among groups to the work done at GirlVentures. The experience that I took for granted as a young girl is what I seek to explore now. GirlVentures moved me through an understanding of myself and forms of subject building that I wish to explore more deeply, and through a critical lens. However, Avalon the anthropologist runs the risk, at times, of forgetting about Avalon the GirlVentures alum, Instructor and community member. My embedded position
within the organization sometimes made me miss events and situations that have been
naturalized for me. I have done my best to maintain awareness of my dual presence in
GirlVentures but these things rarely happen as seamlessly as we would like them to. I have
struggled constantly with an intention to remain critical, while not wanting to diminish the work
this organization has done by way of my own personal growth.

Part of my research had to do with a curiosity about how people come to believe in what
they do or believe in what they believe, just as I came to believe in the work I was doing at
GirlVentures. In the process of my research, I found myself reifying the constructed separation
between “wilderness” and “civilization.” My internal experiences of “outdoor spaces” were
different than the ways I conducted myself in the city. My research, unfortunately, is littered
with concepts of nature, wilderness and civilization that constantly place them in opposition to
each other. I recognize the danger of this reification in the way that it has served to idolize the
pristine/untouched which erases or naturalizes the people who inhabited these spaces before they
were colonized and turned into public parks (Cronon 1996). However, I use these terms because
this is the way those who participate in outdoor adventure map out their relation to the outdoor
spaces they enter. I use these terms because these are the terms my informants use and it is the
way this world has been naturalized to us. In using these terms, I hope to leave room for critique
of my own work and what is left unsaid within words.

So often, it seems, that the people I met were all just trying their best to do what seemed
right. Even in moments where our best effort did not always result in the best results, we
continued on. Nothing really happens perfectly. This is a group of people who find themselves
happy spending time participating in outdoor activities, but who also seek to make a difference
through their knowledge of outdoor spaces. Questions revolved around how they can continue to
love what they do, love being outside, while also not feeding into narratives of exclusion through outdoor use. Generally, the staff and instructors of GirlVentures are not people who wish to lose themselves in the freedom and lack of responsibility that outdoor adventure is perceived to provide. They wish to remain firmly rooted with the concerns of society. This is part of why so many of them were attracted to GirlVentures, being a place where they can do what they love but have work that is impactful. I wish to pull these tensions out further, weaving in between tensions that sometimes cannot be reconciled.

_How Brave You Are_

On one of the final days of a fourteen-day backpacking and rock climbing course called Transitions, the girls prepare to rappel down a cliff for their first time. For the rappel day the girls are asked to pick a rock, a stick and a leaf. The rappel, while being a physical experience, demands that it be coupled with a transcendent forms of identity. The leaf represents what you would like to leave behind, the stick represents something that you would like to have “stick” with you, and the rock represents something they rocked at on this course. The rappel is the final big activity of all Transitions courses and this exercise is part of transference. Transference is the act of finding symbolic ways of transferring the lessons and ideologies learned at GirlVentures back into everyday life. The girls are nervous about rappelling because they are the only person in control of how fast they go down. As I am scribbling in my notebook, Lana asks, “are you writing about how scared I am?” I respond with, “No, I’m writing about how brave you are”... My speech slips easily into the GirlVentures language. I could’ve asked why she was scared and maybe gotten more words to scribble, but that didn’t seem important in the moment.
On courses, it is common to hear girls talk about how they are not good at something and the instructors will quickly respond with language to subvert these ideas. I wasn’t writing in that moment about Lana specifically, and I wasn’t necessarily writing about how brave she was. But she was brave and I wanted her to hear that. These were the parts of my GirlVentures identity that would respond without thinking.

**Context**

The conversation of inclusion in outdoor recreation extends past the GirlVentures mission. The Outdoor Industry Association releases reports of outdoor recreation participation each year. The 2017 Outdoor Participation Report stated that in 2016, 73% of all outdoor participants were white, 10% Hispanic, 9% Black, 6% Asian, and 2% identified as other. 50% of white Americans participated in outdoor recreation as opposed to 33% of black Americans who participated in outdoor recreation (Outdoor Recreation Participation 2017, 6, 28).

In the year 2013, the first mountaineering team comprised entirely of African Americans planned to Summit Mt. Denali. The expedition was sponsored by NOLS as part of a mission to “inspire diversity in the outdoors” (NOLS website). *The Adventure Gap: Changing the Face of the Outdoors* by James Edward Mills was published soon after, documenting the climb up Mt. Denali. In the Forward, Shelton Johnson depicts the importance of *The Adventure Gap* as providing “a more complete vision of who is experiencing the Great Outdoors and the achievements of African-Americans historically and today. The wilderness experience shaped the American character, and Africans in America were an integral part of that national story” (Mills 2014, 16). The act of mountain climbing takes on metaphorical meanings as the expedition up Mt. Denali became a chance to open doors for future generations of African
American outdoor adventurers (Mills 2014, 17). Mt. Denali is the highest mountain in North America and is highly valued because of the technical and mental skill required to climb it. The expedition would be the beginning of the climb, hoping that generations after would be inspired by this team (Mills 2014, 25).

As an African-American himself, Mills found it important to document this expedition in order to better represent what is possible and to fight boundaries that “deprive ourselves of nature” even though the nation’s “founding principle is freedom” (2014, 26). The beginning of the book details the many ways that people of African descent were closely involved in “the outdoor realms of exploration, discovery, and adventure” that are usually hidden from the narrative (2014, 36). There was Pedro Alonso Ninno, a Spanish navigator of African descent, who piloted Santa Maria when Columbus landed in North America and continued on to explore much of the New World. There was also York, the slave to Lewis and Clark who was said to help forge relations with Native Americans as a person of color. There were the Buffalo Soldiers, the black members of the US Cavalry who were essential in the creation of the first national parks. The first person to stand on the North Pole was a black man from Baltimore, Maryland (Mills 2014, 37). These narratives are not common knowledge in the outdoors world and these people are not who pops to mind when many in the mainstream think of wilderness explorers and adventurers.

Mills recognizes that there exist many “uncodified cultural limitations that discourage people of color from spending time outdoors or pursuing careers in outdoor recreation, conservation and wilderness advocacy” (Mills 2014, 196). He explains that hopefully, with the right role models such as the Expedition Denali team, this narrative can change. The goal of this expedition was to subvert narratives of who belongs outdoors and in exploration.
In the summer of 2017, the first outdoor education and adventure conference exclusively for people of color was hosted in Berkeley, California. The People of the Global Majority Summit 1 (PGM1), comprised of outdoor educators and adventurers of color, shared their experience in the outdoors and the history of people of color in the outdoors. The two-day conference was full of energy and excitement as these people came together to share common passions, as well as shared experiences of not always feeling comfortable or visible in the conventional outdoor industry. Here they were able to feel seen and heard. One of the main organizers of this summit was the woman who organized Expedition Denali.

In a recent REI campaign advertisement, the emphasis is on women in the outdoors. The minute long video is comprised of a montage of images, videos and words. It begins with pictures of women in the outdoors and then flashes over to words that the convey societal messages that women hear. The women in the video consist of different races and different sizes, an attempt to not conform to one type of woman. After these words, it flashes to images and videos of women challenging societal expectations. In the first example, the screen flashes with the words “you should be careful,” then a video of shoes and legs (assumed to belong to a woman) are seen at a rock’s edge. The next series of words say, “you should be quiet,” the screen then depicts women yelling in different outdoor locations. It continues this pattern by presenting phrases of societal expectations and then images of women doing the opposite in the outdoors. These flashing images of women outside are also coupled with portraits of women’s faces, with lighting and editing that is supposed to make the viewer see composed, wise, strong, and powerful women. Eventually a female narrator’s voice is heard: “these are the voices we’ve been hearing our whole lives…” Scene flashes to more women revelling in the joys and adventure of the outdoors… “but they get harder to hear, the further out we go.” The final words
that flash on the screen are “join us,” and then “let’s make outside the largest level playing field on earth.” The advertisement announces that there will be 1000+ outdoor events geared towards women starting May 6th. Just like GirlVentures, the REI campaign draws on the idea of a shared subordinate experience that is part of being a woman and both these movements draw on nature as a way to subvert these oppressions.

This advertisement was part of a larger eight year REI campaign that is working towards getting more women outside. The goal is to provide a series of intro level classes on outdoor sports and activities that are all geared toward women. The underlying assumption is that girls and women might be interested in doing an activity, but they might feel nervous about picking it up on their own. REI wants to subvert these narratives and tell women that the outdoors can be the “largest level playing field” where the farther out they go, the farther they can get from societal expectations of what it means to be women. The Outdoor Industry Association says that in 2016, 54% of participants were identified as male and 46% were identified as female (Outdoor Recreation Participation 2017, 6). While this number has become more even over time, the majority of participants remain to be male.

Expedition Mt. Denali, the PGM1 Summit, and the REI Force of Nature campaign, are all part of a bigger movement to make outdoor spaces more accessible. They are part of a larger movement to defy stereotypes and instill positive associations by way of going outdoors. Expedition Denali was characterized as African Americans participating in mountain expedition, and therefore part of a historic American narrative. The expedition was turned into a movie called “An American Ascent”, demonstrating the intentional way this is being added to American history.
GirlVentures falls right within this movement with intentions towards making the outdoors more accessible. As a non-profit, GirlVentures provides tuition assistance, scholarship opportunities and supplies any gear needed for their trips. At the bottom of the job page, a single line says “women of color encouraged to apply,” demonstrating their desire to create more women of color role models for the diverse youth who attend these trips. GirlVentures is part of a larger shift that attempts to turn a historically privileged field into a place of access and strength. While GirlVentures works along lines of access, their work also focuses on using these outdoor spaces in the hopes that it will translate into greater equality and social presence in life outside of wilderness. This project explores these assertions as GirlVentures navigates through larger preconceptions of nature use while also participating in the movement towards greater inclusion in the outdoors.

**Brief Summary of Chapters**

The majority of my project focuses on the time I spent on the 2017 staff training and the 2017 Transitions course. While other research from the entire summer also informed my work, these two GirlVentures trips provided me with the richest ethnographic material. The project jumps back and forth between these trips. One trip exemplifies grown instructors providing the idealized GirlVentures and outdoor participant subject. The other trip demonstrates the way these ideologies map themselves onto unknowing girls.

Terms that repeat in this work are “wilderness,” “nature,” and “the outdoors.” When I speak to “wilderness” I am generally referring to its idea as a construction. When I speak about “the outdoors,” I am talking about the spaces in which people go to participate in outdoor recreation. As I have mentioned earlier, setting up these terms as a separate space serves only to
reify the nature/culture divide. Knowing their distinctions in my project is important for understanding the spaces my interlocutors inhabit. For this reason, I attempt to provide an understanding of “the outdoors” as the spaces of recreation and adventure in designated wilderness spaces. When I use “nature,” it is somewhere in between “wilderness” and “the outdoors.” It is used to talk about the ideals of an original pristine nature, but is also used to talk about the physical environment spaces of nature. This differs from “the outdoors” in that “the outdoors” is constituted as a space of recreation as well as time in nature.

The first chapter, “Nature Use,” explores wilderness construction as it has served white settlers and the shaping of the American identity while at the same time excluding other identities. This chapter explores GirlVentures presence within such a narrative. Further I seek to explore the tensions and contradictions within the GirlVentures’ mission to help girls uncover an authentic self and the way this parallels a wilderness construct of exclusion. The chapter ends exploring the tensions of mountain climbing, as the use of nature for empowerment a enacted through the ascent of Mt. Shinn.

The second chapter, “Time on the Mountain Intensifies,” follows the forms of hyper-rationalization that occur in the outdoor setting as it is exhibited at GirlVentures. Rather than present a picture of a pristine escape from the confines of capitalist society, a heightened attention to time and efficiency demonstrate a structure closely resembling industrial capitalism pervasive within outdoor activity. The chapter concludes demonstrating the way this rationalization manifests when mapped on to the uncontrollable natural events of lightning storms and the subsequent physical risk specific to exposure in nature.

The intentionality of time then segues into my final chapter, “Intentions.” This chapter focuses on GirlVentures and the intentional community and spaces created and reaffirmed each
day. The main gathering of a circle structures daily GirlVentures life. The structures within and around the circles demand that girls habituate and re-habituate certain thought processes that encourage self and group awareness and reflection. Each day each girl is prompted reaffirm her presence in the group. After focusing so much on structure, this chapter consummates by exploring the spaces between structure and what is created there.

The conclusion looks at the various themes that have been explored, particularly around identity, intentionality, and nature use. It will attempt to illuminate what can be taken away from this short undergraduate thesis about girls in wilderness, while also holding a critical lens to issues of power and privilege.
Chapter One: Nature Use
Constructions, Ideologies and Attempted Subversions

this place will not be this way forever
we can only forget ourselves for so long

the ground beneath our feet demands our
attention as we keep looking for ways to pierce the sky

and it wasn’t so long ago that we did not have to
think in terms of how many decades it would
take for the earth to recover before we could plant again

- Narinda Heng
GirlVentures Instructor
Excerpt from her poem: Land

Founders Visit

On the last day of staff training the founders of GirlVentures come to meet the 2017 GirlVentures instructors. They arrive from the trail at the designated time, emerging through the grass to land on our seaside campsite. Their entrance prompts the instructors to gather in a circle, typical of a GirlVentures gathering. After introductions they tell us a little bit about their journey in creating GirlVentures. It is a familiar story for most of us, having heard parts of it at various points before in our varied involvement with GirlVentures. We sit in the grass next to our tents, with a strong wind countering the hot sun rays. The mid afternoon sun makes the group sleepy.

The founders’ adventure started on Outward Bound courses. Outward Bound is a large well known outdoor education organization that values inclusion and active participation on all trips. The founders express their experiences at Outward Bound as powerful. They wanted to bring the ideals and skill building from Outward Bound to young girls before girls began “losing some gusto.” The founders believe that after a certain point in many girls’ lives, they begin to lose the energy they had when they were younger.
The founders met each other at the Harvard School of Education (having already both participated in Outward Bound courses separately). During their time at Harvard, they decided to pursue research around girls and self-esteem. Together they continued to develop and research the pedagogy of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), particularly in relation to girls and their relation to “the self.” Their explanation of the work of developing GirlVentures is their way of introducing themselves to the staff. It is not a common occurrence for the founders to come to staff training and the opportunity to hear their story from them is interesting.

They continue to describe SEL as a lens through which to look at the world. SEL is the practice of turning all experiences into opportunities for learning. With this lens, outdoor education can be used to better understand life. One of the cofounders even goes so far as to say that outdoor education can be seen as a “metaphor” for life. Any emotional reaction to physical or mental adversity that presents itself in the different environmental conditions experienced on course is a chance for personal reflection. This reflection is meant to allow for a better understanding of the individual and how one relates to certain experiences whether they be in outdoor settings or in everyday life. The emotional experience that comes out of adventure can inform a person’s self-awareness rather than drive and control their behavior. Rather than letting emotional reactivity take charge, placing an emphasis on Social Emotional Learning turns every emotional experience into an opportunity to learn about the self. SEL is the act of building social awareness around one’s emotions and thus learning from them.

As we listen in our circle like perfect GirlVentures’ students, the founders stress the importance of the GirlVentures model as being a strength-based program, following a belief that all girls already have what they need inside them in order to succeed. Their intention is to focus on these strengths and pull them out so they become visible to the girls themselves.
After explaining all of the ideals and goals of their work, the founders facilitate an activity with us about voice. The activity consists of various forms of sound being passed around the circle, with the goal of encouraging uninhibited voice and expression. The instructors stand up without hesitation, very accustomed to group facilitated games and activities. Nonsensical sounds are passed around with certain sounds manifesting as a continuous movement of noise, while other sounds stop the sound from moving. They relate this activity to any moment wherein voice is used, but most specifically to a position that girls take on during course, called the Leader of the Day (LOD). By passing around uninhibited sound, the objective is to ground the participants in their voice expression and to help them learn how to use it. They ask us to stand tall, proud, and to use our “authentic” voices. They ask us to be loud in order to portray this authenticity.

One of the instructors, however, feels frustrated by this expectation of loudness as equated with authenticity. Within the circle she expresses her discomfort with the idea that you have to be loud “or you’re doing it wrong.” The facilitators respond: “Well what can we learn from being loud? Even if you don’t express that way normally?” “Is there something else that you can get out of that? That you can get from it?” It seems that the founders are operating along the assumption that girls need to be encouraged to be loud, due to the ways in which society has conditioned them to be quiet. It also seems that some of the instructors are saying that loudness should not be the only way that one can lead or have a voice (following a masculine assumption of leadership). “Can you be loud without sound?” The activity has changed into one wherein the adults of GirlVentures expand the ideas of authenticity, and what it means to encourage the “real” voice in a girl.
Nature Gets Complicated

This project begins by exploring the forms of identity building that GirlVentures aims to construct by engaging girls with outdoor adventure settings and activities. Girls are brought into nature in order to engage them with a sense of their truer self and identity. In these settings, nature takes the form of what is most useful to the user. The girls fill the space they are in with their identities.

GirlVentures is not the first to use nature as a container for identity formation and expression. This chapter will demonstrate and draw parallels between various kinds of subject making in nature and the way nature is used in service of those subjects. Nature has been used and constructed in different ways at various points in history. GirlVentures falls within this history, doing their work within nature and wilderness places. They too have found a use for nature. GirlVentures work is made possible, and sometimes impossible, by the narratives that have come before it within the creation of wilderness. It is made possible because of the collective understanding and shared meanings of engagement in wilderness and outdoor adventure for those who spend time in these spaces. It is made impossible by the histories and narratives that have perpetuated a use of nature that excludes others. Processes of identity formation in nature are bound by these narratives. GirlVentures’ work exists within a longer history of wilderness use that has produced assumptions about what can be done while outside. This is not an attempt to invalidate their work, but a chance to problematize the hidden ironies that exist within the context of wilderness that presupposes what GirlVentures does. These presuppositions include the languages of outdoor setting, which outdoor educators have been trained to speak, and the ability to access “public” government owned lands. It is within these
narratives that GirlVentures uses nature to construct identity. This next section will detail the ways wilderness has been constructed for human use and who gets left out of these constructions.

*Here’s The Thing About Wilderness*

The concept of wilderness is embedded in the history of the dominant American narrative. Wilderness has been constructed as the “last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth” (Cronon 1996, 69). This concept of “civilization” as being an illness that can be cured by spending time in the wilderness undergirds the narrative of the American frontier. In “The Trouble with Wilderness,” William Cronon describes how wilderness folded itself into the American tradition as European immigrants came to the “unsettled” frontier land, thus ridding themselves of civilization. In their adventuring, they conceived of themselves as being “reinfused with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source for American democracy and national character” (Cronon 1996, 76). The “natural” spaces (untouched by humans) became the threshold for the molding of the American character. The creation of the concept of a “natural” space allowed for identities to be formed and assumed as also “natural.” This naturalness was contingent upon the idea that outdoor spaces preexisted humans. The work then done in nature is defined by these conventions.

Wilderness, here, is to be understood as something that is conceptually created to mark a divide between nature and civilization. Part of this wilderness narrative relies upon the healing properties of nature in relation to civilization and nature’s transformative power for the individual. In many ways GirlVentures works within these constructs. Donna Haraway’s chapter “Teddy Bear Patriarchy Taxidermy in the Garden of Eden, New York, 1908 - 1936” (which I will subsequently refer to as “Teddy Bear Patriarchy”), from her book *Primate Visions,*
deconstructs the colonial mindset in which nature was used, that was key in the creation of the concept of wilderness. Haraway demonstrates the way Europeans used the wilderness in order to escape from civilization so to rejuvenate a more authentic form of manhood, not found in the trappings of capitalist industry. By working within these constructed spaces of nature, GirlVentures traditions run the risk of replicating and reproducing these colonially placed concepts of wilderness. It is a story that has carried itself out from the “African wilderness” back to the American frontier. The term “African wilderness” represented the homogenizing view with which colonizers and settlers constructed a pre-political, pre-civilization idea of wilderness. The wilderness, as a construct, has been used and created as a tool to escape or cure civilization and other accompanying ailments. At the time, women were not a part of that construct.

Cronon (1996) goes further to explain the way nature is conceived of as place for the rediscovery of the authentic self in “The Trouble with Wilderness.” He demonstrates how wilderness’ “escape from history” is why the language used to describe it is filled with spiritual and religious values that reflect the ideals of humans rather than a physical material world (Cronon 1969, 80). Wilderness becomes an apolitical and ahistorical concept and space where it is the natural origin and counter to an unnatural civilization. This concept of a place of origin marks it as a location where “we can recover the true selves” that have been lost in the “artificial” construction of civilization (Cronon 1996, 80). It becomes the “ultimate landscape of authenticity”, a place where the world is seen as “real” and therefore are able to “know ourselves as we really are - or ought to be” (Cronon 1996, 80). The ability to find the authentic self in nature is only made possible when wilderness spaces are separated from history and its own construction. Going into nature in order to find transformation plays into the narrative that created nature in exclusion of certain groups and identities. This finding of the authentic self has
historically served western men. The wilderness is a space constructed as existing outside of history in order to make it a space where the true essence of the self can be found. By existing outside of history, the historical construction of exclusion is obscured. This occasions the discovery of the authentic self through nature at the expense of excluded identities.

While Haraway demonstrates the way wilderness has been used in service of the identities of white men, Cronon, Carolyn Finney, and Bruce Braun all detail the various ways in which the ahistorical and apolitical nature of wilderness has set up to exclude various groups of people. Within the American frontier, Cronon highlights the displacement of Native Americans in order to create a myth of the wilderness as being “Virgin,” uninhabited, and pristine, which “reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is” (Cronon 1996, 79). If American wilderness was constructed upon false assumptions of neutrality, then the American identities dependent upon ideas of pristine wilderness were falsely defined, depending on a narrative of exclusion and displacement in order to legitimate the pristine. The wilderness adventure narrative that constructed the American adventurer only had room for those who fit the picture. Native Americans were removed from their land in order to create an image of wilderness, untouched by humans, that settlers explored. European settlers came and formed their identity, creating a nature setting only accessible to them. In this created reality, other marginalized communities were also excluded.

In Black Faces, White Spaces, Carolyn Finney brings emphasis to the importance of land and land use in the construction of the American wilderness narrative. The various ways people from non-dominant cultures have been related to the American land either by being disenfranchised, displaced, cheated or forced into labor has had an effect on their relationship to ideas of wilderness. As wilderness spaces were being constructed, how people related to the
land affected their continued relationship with outdoor spaces. Finney first cites the “The Trail of Tears” and the displacement of Indigenous people from their lands. She also documents the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago which allowed Hispanos “(this term specifically identifies people of colonial Spanish descent who live in the South West)” to be “systematically disenfranchised of their land” (Finney 2014, 22). She mentions the Chinese who built the railroad in order to make the wilderness of the west more accessible but were cheated out of being paid and recognized. Finally, she recognizes the black slaves who were made to work the land and then made to fear the dangers of the forests if they were to run.

The narratives of the frontier and land conquest persist within the dominant American consciousness. Finney proposes, however, that understanding the present day environmental movement challenges the idea that one narrative actually works for everyone. Even as national parks have come to reflect national identity and values, she argues that these spaces are “not immune to processes of representation and racialization” (Finney 2014, 16, 25). These realities also hold true for GirlVentures as their work is conducted in these spaces. The reasons behind the exclusive nature of outdoor and wilderness participation are both ideological and physical as nondominant groups find themselves as not belonging in outdoor spaces.

In “On the Raggedy Edge of Risk”, Bruce Braun suggests that “nature was troped as a site of moral and racial purity: the true foundation of the nation, and the true home of its original settlers… The journey into nature was in part how whiteness was constituted” through colonialism (Braun 2003, 197). Braun talks about the ways that people of color have often been excluded from the outdoor adventure narrative, whether that be within history or in the way that the gear is marketed. He argues that by only catering to a white population in outdoor magazines, assumptions are made about those who “have the resources and security to take risks,
and those who are instead continuously positioned at risk” (Braun 2003, 177). These forms of exclusion penetrate the ideological narratives of the risk taking adventurer who is seen to belong in the great outdoors. The presence of the nonwhite adventurer threatens the believed naturalness of risk taking that is not part of “risk society” (Braun 2003, 185). The single narrative of the frontier that has shaped American identity often does not take into the account a wide variety of narratives and exclusions (Braun 2003, 190). Braun cites Kevin DeLuca when he notes that the “dominant constructs of wild nature in North America invariably posit a ‘white’ nature” that comes from European ideals of nature as the origin, therefore positing humans as separate from it (Braun 2003, 195).

In conversation with Cronon’s recognition of displaced Indigenous people in order to create a pristine wilderness, Braun goes further when he recognizes that within “the racial text of primitivist discourse, the figure of the Indian seeking danger or the ‘black adventurer’ wishing to return to nature becomes absurd, even comical. When John Muir asserted that the Journey into nature was a universal human need, he did not have in mind non-Europeans: they were already there” (Braun 2003, 196).

These are the stakes of wilderness. These are the histories that precede GirlVentures work in outdoor spaces. In many ways, GirlVentures seeks to subvert these narratives by making a space for only women and working to make outdoor adventure activity monetarily more accessible. Haraway’s analysis of the Teddy Bear Patriarchy reveals forms of nature use that have perpetuated within outdoor adventure activities and ideologies. These ideologies and activities were created in service to the white male adventurer and his structure of nature use. If we look closer at these structures, there are ways in which GirlVentures parallels these
structures, with the risk of unwittingly replicating them. This next section will take a closer look at the construction of nature that served to inform the identity of the white settler.

**Settler Wilderness**

Haraway documents how wilderness was used as a place for transformation and healing from the evils of capitalist society for Europeans such as Carl Akeley and Theodore Roosevelt. Adventure and wilderness were meant to allow for healing for the western man from an industrial capitalism controlled by time and consumerism. Spending time in wilderness settings was meant to rejuvenate his sense of manhood.

In “Teddy Bear Patriarchy,” Haraway looks specifically at the life of Carl Akeley, his work with taxidermy and the creation and encounter with his “African wilderness”. Akeley spent his life trying to create the perfect representation of the pristine African wilderness that he saw in his travels. Killing and picture taking were done in the name of science and preservation, in hopes of capturing the perfect representation of pristine wilderness. For Akeley and his colleagues, they did this because, “civilization appeared to be a disease in the form of technological progress… The leaders of the American Museum were afraid for their health; that is, their manhood was endangered” (Haraway 1989, 42). These fears of losing manhood through civilization is also seen within moments of the American Wilderness movement.

In “From Woodcraft to ‘Leave No Trace’: Wilderness, Consumerism, and Environmentalism in the Twentieth Century America,” James Morton Turner details the changing identity of wilderness through the American Wilderness movement. Specifically he looks to the way wilderness activity went from the ethic of woodcrafters to an ethic of the “Leave No Trace” (LNT) principles. Woodcrafter ethic was concerned with a return to a truer
masculinity that could only be found with a return to wilderness (Turner 2002, 464). The wilderness was constructed within their consciousness to fulfill these needs. In doing this, a woodcrafter hoped to demonstrate his “working knowledge of nature by using nature to his own end” (Turner 2002, 465). In America during the late 1800s and early 1900s, those who connected with nature by practicing woodcraft held similar beliefs about manhood and the assumed evils of technological capitalist advancement. The men who wrote the woodcraft handbooks were concerned that their work maintain “an independent masculine ideal rooted in the frontier” (Turner 2002, 464). A shared vision of what it meant to go back to nature during the time of woodcrafting was the “suspicion of the ill-health pervading the growing metropolises” (Turner 2002, 464). Perfecting skill and outdoor tradition has served to combat the disease of civilization on multiple fronts, locations and times in history. Nature has been used as a tool to protect against the deterioration of manhood. One’s ability to conquer and consequently be in nature because of it, was built as an index of masculinity.

Haraway gives further example of the way nature was used as a tool to heal the ailments of civilization. She states that, for the western hunter,

spoiled nature could not relieve decadence, the malaise of the imperialist and city dweller, but only presented evidence of decay’s contagion, the germ of civilization, the infection, which was obliterating the Age of Mammals. And with the end of that time came the end of the essence of manhood, hunting. But unspoiled Africans, like the Kivu forest itself, were solid evidence of the resources for restoring manhood in the healthy activity of sportsmanlike hunting (Haraway 1989, 53).

The existence of a nature that the western man could hunt and conquer was imperative to manhood. And manhood was imperative to the continued use, and therefore existence, of nature. Much of the wilderness movement debate in America was discussed within tensions of use. As conservationists sought to limit the amount of visitors to wilderness areas, they proposed and created sites that were not open to the public. These spaces were, however, more easily
susceptible to logging companies as the government would give in to their lobbying for land. Land not being put to use in service of human need does not go untouched for long (Turner 2002, 471). As long as there were people who believed that nature was important in curing the ails of civilization, there would be those who advocate for its protection. These ailments were specifically seen as detrimental to manhood and this is where nature derived value in Western culture. Wilderness, as it exists in National Parks must be seen as useful to the American identity. Thus, it depends upon this identity.

At GirlVentures, girls go into nature so they can return and make society better, combatting and changing norms. Drawing upon Haraway’s work, however, raises questions of what kind of subjects are being formed at GirlVentures, and for what kind of system. In many ways, GirlVentures participates in the ideal of separating from civilization in order to access a “truer” sense of self through the use of wilderness concepts. As mentioned earlier, similar concepts were used in the creation of American identity through the frontier as part of the American identity, and can also be seen in constructions of the “African wilderness” for white settler use. In being limited to women, GirlVentures seeks to subvert a wilderness narrative that has been exclusive to white men. The similarities, however, in the way they use outdoor wilderness spaces also runs the risk of perpetuating narratives of exclusion that have been made possible through the colonial construction of wilderness.

*GirlVentures Work in Wilderness Spaces*

This next section will take a closer look at GirlVentures curriculum and the 2017 GirlVentures Instructor handbook. GirlVentures frames their work as providing the space and techniques for creating an alternate experience for girls from the one they may be living.
Through their research and time in graduate school, the founders of the organization came to the
collection that “narrow definitions of girl/woman-hood, societal and self-imposed pressures, and
a lack of strong role models and relationships all make the transition from childhood to
adolescence potentially traumatic for girls today” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 1). These are
a few of the first lines of text in the GirlVentures Instructor Handbook. This handbook gives
them the goals and the “why” of their work. The section then mentions the founders’ research
that had been done that documents “disturbing losses in self-esteem and confidence in adolescent
girls” which can lead to various societal problems such as “depression, eating disorders,
substance abuse, school failure, early pregnancy, and other self-destructive behavior” (GV
Instructor Handbook 2017, 1). In the beginning of the handbook, GirlVentures is identifying a
problem with the way girls have been socialized to act in our current “civilization.” The final
concern of this section points to girls being caught in a “vicious cycle” where they miss
opportunities to excel in their careers, gain economic prosperity and healthy psychological
development (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 1). Just as Haraway’s men find, in wilderness, a
repose from the infection of civilization so too do girls on GirlVentures. As demonstrated in this
text, GirlVentures provides an opportunity for girls to distance themselves from the ills of
society. These exact ills are what influenced the founders’ decision to create GirlVentures.

One curricular activity provides explicit examples of what being outside is supposed to
accomplish for girls. On courses where it is feasible, the instructors bring a stack of magazines
for girls to flip through in groups in a circle. The prompt is to notice the way women and girls
are portrayed in the magazines. After the girls take some time, the instructors then ask the girls
to share what they noticed. The assumption underlying this exercise is that the girls will
recognize ways women are portrayed that don’t reflect how these girls actually want to be portrayed in their real lives. When this exercise is done on staff training, comments are made about the way women are objectified and how their behavior is often represented as passive. Women are beautiful, thin, often white and are used to sell items that have nothing to do with women specifically. The instructors also notice an absence of people of color in the outdoor magazines.

The next part of the exercise is to have the girls cut out clippings from the magazines and recreate a page that they would want to see in a magazine, portraying women the way the girls would rather see them portrayed. How would they rather see themselves represented? On staff training, the instructors eagerly rip up pages and slice frozen models out of their manicured pictures, placing them, instead, on mountain sides. Through creating their own magazine pages, the girls and instructors participate in constructing a collective representation of themselves. The magazine, which symbolizes dominant social culture, is transformed to reflect the supposed dominant culture of any given GirlVentures trip.

On staff training, the exercise is framed as being valuable because when we are in the “outdoors," there is distance from a constant bombardment of media. A GirlVentures value is the ability to stop and reflect, free from distractions. Being free of distractions is made even more possible by being separated from urban life. Being outdoors and away from the trappings of society, this separation is supposed to allow girls to fully express their values and strengths without media influences. Being outside allows for a clarity within which the magazines can be more critically viewed. While the girls are expected to come up with their own ideas and inferences, the prompts of the activity seem to prime them for a specific type of answer and outcome for the project. GirlVentures instructors expect girls to recognize women as being
portrayed unjustly and expect the girls to want to be portrayed differently. Space is provided to create their own images, but the exercise depends on girls recognizing injustices in the pages. By being on GirlVentures, with only women and girls, in nature, girls are expected to be free from the ills of civilization that show in the form of media bombardment.

In the GirlVentures purpose and mission statement, there is a sense of fear for the girls’ health, and their development toward womanhood, in today’s society. The work being done at GirlVentures was “founded on the belief that every girl has natural strengths - courage, creativity, intuition, body wisdom, and compassion - to develop into a healthy woman” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 2). These attributes are depicted as inherent in all girls. GirlVentures’ work is to develop and encourage the growth of these strengths. GirlVentures also takes girls out into nature so they can face physical challenges and learn strong technical skills. By working “in concert with these technical skills, GirlVentures’ prioritizes healthy relationship building as a means of promoting positive social and emotional development” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 2). Going out into nature allows these girls to have space from negative perceptions of the self and allows them to use the technical skills (backpacking, rock climbing, kayaking, living outside, etc.) to enable a sense of competence and self growth with themselves and others. More specifically, their mission is “to empower adolescent girls to develop and express their strengths” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 3). GirlVentures uses outdoor adventure to develop these strengths. They “envision a world in which girls and women are actively engaged in the leadership of thriving communities; communities that are strengthened by diversity, civic engagement, healthy choices and environmental responsibility” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 3-4). The introduction to the GirlVentures handbook does not
make any explicit mention of the importance of nature, but the work GirlVentures finds necessary in promoting self growth is done almost exclusively in the setting of outdoor adventure.

There are also a number of curriculum pieces that GirlVentures uses to encourage self expression. For younger students, one activity is called body sculptures in the sand. In this activity, the girls trace their forms in the sand and then build up their traced figures with the surrounding materials. This exercise is meant to encourage girls to honor the body and describe “parts of the self within the context of the body” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 44). Here, expressing the self is embodied by using physical bits of nature. Another activity called masks instructs the girl to cut out or draw masks on a piece of paper. On one side of the paper, the girls are asked (using words or pictures) to portray what parts of their personalities are visible to the outside world, obvious features, etc. The other side of the mask is where they are asked to represent the parts of themselves that people might not see immediately upon first introduction. All these activities are supposed to provide a medium by which girls can more consciously express their true selves, especially the parts that they feel are not always recognized.

These conversations of finding voice and self expression are tied to the various identities around girlhood. The work GirlVentures does seeks to help girls find their more authentic self. The GirlVentures handbook states that this organization “offers girls the unique opportunity to uncover their true potential - through the discovery of their voice, their community, and their ‘selves’” (GV instructor handbook 2017, 4). While these sentiments differ slightly from narratives of “restoring manhood”, they still contribute to a search for authenticity that can be found in nature. This belief in an authenticity that can be found in nature is similarly reminiscent of Cronon’s description of the belief in the discovery of authenticity that relied upon a
construction of an apolitical and ahistorical nature. However, while Haraway’s men kill and conquer in order to reaffirm their sense of manhood, girls on GirlVentures courses are meant to come together and face challenges in order to find and identify their true selves.

**Tensions of Attempting to Subvert the Narrative**

While ideologies and the curriculum of GirlVentures exemplify a return to the essence of the self through nature, there are also ways GirlVentures may attempt to subvert these narratives. During Staff training, one of the instructors, Julia, begins the first evening meeting turd circle by wanting to recognize our presence on occupied land. The *turd circle* is a time that is dedicated to creating space for expressing frustrations. If someone feels upset with the way something has been going, this is their chance to voice that feeling and have it be heard by the group. It is also a chance to take ownership for an action that might have been (this will be explored further in chapter three). In that moment Julia recognizes and brings the attention of the group to how these spaces have been constructed for us to be in them. Her ownership lies in recognizing how she is taking advantage of conquered land, originally inhabited by the Miwok Indians. The statement is not meant to lecture anyone, but to take ownership for her presence on that land. It is a chance to bring this awareness to the group.

This particular evening meeting on staff training takes place at Sky Camp in Point Reyes National Seashore. Our camp on a hill overlooking the ocean from a distance is surrounded by shrubbery, with an expansive view of trees and hills that separates us from the ocean. GirlVentures had applied for these permits in the fall in order to secure a spot for the summer. This land is in high demand by Californians and a limited number can obtain permits at any given time. This land has been set aside for us to use, so long as we go through the formal
government channels. The way Julia recognizes our presence on occupied land is in the context of something she would like to take ownership for. Ownerships in a turd circle are a chance for people to recognize where they might have done wrong and therefore need to do better, either within the group or within the day. As a person with certain privileges she wants to own and recognize how she is taking advantage of the conquest and destruction that allowed her to spend time on this land. She wants to recognize the contradictory tensions within her presence here, while at the same time she is attempting to carry out social justice work. In her social media life, whenever she posts a picture on Instagram she will often add a sentence informing the viewer of whose native land is being occupied in the photo. She takes ownership and responsibility for something that she is benefiting from even if it isn’t directly her doing. During the meeting, Julia’s ownership prompts Bri (the Program Director and staff training leader) to talk about this idea of recognizing land and seeing what it can teach us. The land can be used to bring up important discussions. This moment depicts the central tensions and ironies that GirlVentures grapples with as an organization committed to social justice. While this recognition works to subvert dominant narratives of neutrality within nature, the land is still used to carry out curriculum and activities in service to transformation and self discovery. By using the GirlVentures language of a turd circle, intentional speech and awareness around these issues are some of the first steps taken in grappling with these ironies.

Many of the GirlVentures Instructors actively seek to cultivate awareness around recognizing the contradictions within their work. Jay, another GirlVentures instructor, spends time in nature spaces but tries to stay away from differentiation between herself and the spaces around her. She believes it is “not about connecting back to nature but having this intimate experience with it, with elements. I guess I try to shy away from, or I shy away from saying
‘closer to nature’ because we can’t make nature something constantly separate from ourselves because then we fuck it up…” She, like Julia, also grapples with the concepts of supposed public lands. When talking about the things that she would like to make different about outdoor education she says she would “like it to have a stronger awareness of what public land means - stronger awareness that this is called public land but it was taken”. She understands that nature is not as easily accessible for all and she wishes that there is “accessibility for different bodies that wouldn’t have it, and it’s really frustrating that we don’t have ways of being more cooperative with the elements, or cooperative with the other life forms on this planet, even with ourselves. I mean outdoor education does help teach that cooperation”. There might be hope in this last comment amidst the frustration. Maybe going into nature isn’t a “return” but instead a way to learn how to engage more fully with any space you are in.

These instructor comments represent an attempt to think differently about the outdoor spaces they explore. Even as GirlVentures works towards social justice and access within the outdoors, they continue to use nature in a way that replicates the narratives prevalent within the colonial use of nature. When Julia, in front of the group, took ownership of the occupied land, she used voice as a public attempt at subverting this narrative. The narratives of exclusion are still used to inform our use of nature. Nature use can also be a collective experience that speaks to larger global implications which can inform identity. The previous section looked at the ironies and contradictions of GirlVentures’ work and the momentary attempts at subversion. In this next section, I will be looking more closely at GirlVentures’ use of mountain climbing and it’s wider implication as a global symbol of strength and accomplishment found in using nature. This is a different kind of nature use, that also carries relevance and impact around identity formation.
On the Mountain

It is still dark as small bodies begin to shift in partial wakefulness. Lights come on little by little as inexperienced hands scramble to find items in darkness. It is amazing that it really could be morning when it feels like the middle of the night. Little lights walk by as they gather gear and make their way to the designated kitchen. It has taken two days to get to this site in the backcountry. The only things to demarcate the kitchen and tent areas are their own imaginations. The lake they are camped next to is encircled by granite rock, cliffs, and trees. This creates a site that feels elevated and cradled as if within a private bowl. After spending a day walking back and forth between kitchen and tent areas, the trees and rocks began taking on a home-like familiarity. Today they move within this newly familiarized space in almost darkness, preparing for the long day of mountain climbing ahead.

Today the girls are meant to summit Mt. Shinn. The base of the mountain starts at 11,000 feet and the girls climb up 1,000 feet to get to the 12,000 foot summit. This is one of the largest days on the Transitions Course expedition plan. They have just backpacked two days to arrive in the backcountry, with only a mile between their campsite and Mt. Shinn. For many of them, this is their first time in the backcountry wilderness. This location feels especially separate to them due to the lack of designated campsite spaces, running water, and bathrooms. The only signs of human construction are trails, their own gear and the very occasional wood sign marking their location on the trail. They have also had to do off trail hiking in order to get here. This adventure into the backcountry itself is enough to consciously separate their understanding of this space as epic, and now they are taking it even further: attempting a summit.

Four adults, already awake and alert, stand watching the little lights move in and out of darkness. When the instructors and course director wake up this morning, they are hoping for
the smoothest expedition possible and they are calculating each and every possible impediment to that smoothness. In *Friction*, Anna Tsing uses the metaphor of “friction” in order to counter the myth of global motion as being smooth, due to popular global stories suggesting that “The flow of goods, ideas, money, and people would henceforth be pervasive and unimpeded. In this imagined global era, motion would proceed entirely without friction” (Tsing 2005, 21). She argues, however, that “motion does not proceed this way at all. How we run depends on what shoes we have to run in. Insufficient funds, late buses, security searches, and informal lines of segregation hold up our travel; railroad tracks and regular airline schedules expedite it but guide its routes” (Tsing 2005, 21). Friction is what allows movement. Tsing uses friction to think about the way universal ideas function on the ground in local contexts. The metaphor is applicable to the experience of mountain climbing as it also exists within a universal concept. The metaphors of mountain climbing is understood as universal through the larger implications it has for groups of people around the world. This is evident in Expedition Denali in their desire to mountain climb in order to “extend an invitation, particularly to minority youth, to experience true freedom” and therefore represent something much larger than their personal adventure (Mills 2014, 39). For Tsing’s group of nature lovers in Indonesia who have formed their identity around their experience with nature, climbing to the top of a peak can have larger implications for the Indonesian identity, allowing them to be universally recognized in their success (Tsing 2005, 133). Mountain climbing itself is meant to provide an experience and a narrative of transformation and accomplishment that challenges a team’s ability to work together. This experience is viewed as being globally recognized as awe inspiring and collectively transformative. What Tsing highlights in global movement, however, are the not usually expressed fricticious moments that exist when these universal experiences play out on the
Mountain climbing is used to amplify social success and perseverance but these events do not always play out in the ways that are expected.

When speaking to Bri (also the Course Director for the Transitions trip), she expresses the frustrations and tensions that can exist between the course realities and the perceptions of the administrative staff. The administration wants to hear success stories, of girls making it to the top of the mountain, or of girls having revelatory moments of self discovery - the classic global perception of mountain climbing. As the Program Director, she also works on the other side of the outdoor field, in the office. As a non-profit organization, GirlVentures relies heavily on donors and fundraising. The trap that GirlVentures can fall into is selling an image of itself that appeals to philanthropists on a mission to make a difference. An image that sells includes a globally understood experience of the mountain that transcends the girls into a transformatory understanding of self worth and empowerment. Bri recounts a frustrating moment where a top administrator asked “well did anyone cry?”, hoping to extract an image of sellable emotional perseverance. Such desires are the expectations of motion without friction; a desire for a story without seeing the frictitious process. Bri believes that these intentions behind philanthropists have the potential to change the goals, and make it more about production and imagery of a frame of adventure activity. These tensions are projected onto the instructors as their concerns involve what the girls need to be doing and what they need to be experiencing. On the Transitions course, the instructors are often concerned with the girls apparent lack of time management and efficiency.

Bri holds firm to the idea that just because a group might not make it to the top of the mountain because of poor time management or poor weather, does not make the day a failure. It can be seen as an opportunity for growth and learning. This, however, can be difficult to see. It
is difficult for people (administrations, philanthropists, parents, etc.) to see anything but reaching the peak as a form of success and this drives intentions and expectations for a certain type of narrative. Besides this, however, there still exists a real desire from the instructors and course director to make possible the experience of summiting a peak, outside of just providing a product. There certainly is something universally appealing and empowering about making it to the top, and authentically desirable to the girls, but that doesn’t stop it from being co-opted or misused or turned into an agenda.

Anna Tsing’s friction helps map the intersecting experiences that also exist amidst the epic of the mountain climbing adventure. It is not just about adventure and achievement but also about watchfulness, fatigue, strain, flexibility, improvisation, and frustration. Tsing demonstrates the way friction can allow “coercion and frustration [to] join freedom as motion is socially informed” (Tsing 2005, 21). Moments of friction on course are as follows: the day before the ascent, the sole of a girl’s boot rips entirely off, forcing the course director to take improvised means of repairing it using zip ties and string. If the girl does not have the suitable equipment, she will not be able to be a part of the expedition. The efficiency with which the girls leave camp influences their success in reaching the top before the mandatory turn around time (so as to avoid afternoon cloud build up that has the potential to expose the group to a lighting storm). The slowness of the group causes frustration with the instructors, as the experience that the mountain and the instructors are supposed to provide could be compromised. That morning, on the 2017 Transitions Course, girls are tired and the oatmeal gets burnt, making the consumption of food (i.e., sustenance, energy) even more difficult. This worries the instructors as the day requires energy, lots of energy. Any deficiency of energy could be dangerous. One girl is nauseous because she accidentally had milk the day before even though
she is lactose intolerant. Instructors continue to count and calculate any form of possible energy lost. On top of this, Kai (the Transitions instructor) barely slept the night before, adding a layer of stress to the supposedly transcendent day.

While climbing the mountain, swarms upon swarms of mosquitoes follow the warm bodies as they climb, leaving blood stains on swollen faces as girls swat and scratch. On the way back down, one girl, Lila, has an especially difficult time coming down the mountain, as little by little she begins to lose trust in her footing. This slows the group down a significant amount to the point where Bri pulls the instructors aside during a break in order to strategize about what can be done. This is becoming more of a challenge because as they have taken more time waiting in the sun for Lila to catch up, water bottles are beginning to empty and time left for getting back to camp is waning. Energy is lowering and headaches are forming. Julia finds herself in the back supporting Lila for most of the way down, draining a significant amount of her energy as well.

Bri’s need to manage the overall safety of the group supersedes the need to wait for Lila to catch up. When they finally make it to the bottom, Bri races ahead with the group to get them over the saddle\(^2\). Julia maintains patience with Lila as they hike slowly up. She tries to make Lila aware of the way she might not have eaten enough in the morning or how she drags her feet and needs to use a little more mental energy. Nothing seems to really get through to her as they hike slowly up. When the group finally reconnects, it is clear the instructors are very frustrated and mentally drained from this last part of the journey. As is said for mountain climbing: the top is only halfway there. Reaching the peak is seen as the ultimate moment in mountain climbing,

\(^2\) If there are two high points are right next to each other, the lower ground in between those two points is the saddle. The approach to Mt. Shinn required that we went through a saddle that had a full view of the mountain. We then had to descend a little in order to get to the base of the mountain. This is why when we get to the bottom of the mountain, we have to go back up again.
but many forget about the climb down and the frustrations that can ensue that don’t neatly fit into an ideal narrative of a purely transcendent experience.

These are the countless moments of friction that inform movement on this day. They create and impede movement in the way the group reacts to each new development, influencing the experience. The experience of the mountain is constructed by these frictions that allow for specific kinds of relations to the mountain. The narrative of GirlVentures and the adventure of the mountain is constructed within a belief of empowerment, but each of these moments are as much a part of the adventure as any other more expansive sense of empowerment. The girls triumph over tiny insects as much as they triumph on the mountain top. All of these overarching frictions dictate the local (zoomed in) motion that is made towards the top of Mt. Shinn, just as Tsing’s understanding of friction constructs global movement. Friction shows the multiple layers of frustration which couple that of freedom when trying to make it to the top of Mt. Shinn.

In the Mountain

Climbing Mt. Shinn is not just about making it up the mountain, it is about constructing an experience of the mountain that satisfies the culture of GirlVentures, the goals of the trip, and the symbolism in this moment for the group. GirlVentures explicitly uses the surrounding landscape to create social movement, self-discovery, and narratives of perseverance. Tsing talks about Indonesian nature lovers and how “in international understanding, to scale a mountain peak is to conquer it for the nation. Mountain climbing as “something that gives pride to the Indonesian nation’ is a good example of a nationalized cosmopolitanism, that is, a world-embracing standard that enters local notions of nation-making” (Tsing 2005, 133). The symbolism behind climbing a mountain suggest an ideal with significant power and transcendent
energy. There is an objective, an expectation, but there is also the understanding of the mountain as a meaningful summit that can only exist through the combined energies and beliefs of the group. On GirlVentures, the mountain can also become a learned lesson (in the case of not reaching a goal), or an understanding that we cannot always be in total control (in the case of thunder heads that build up earlier than planned). Through these more literal “frictions,” social experiences are mapped onto nature. They combine and formulate to produce the experience of the mountain.

Within Tsing’s chapter “Nature Loving”, she emphasizes the way nature loving is connected to an international cosmopolitan ideal that ties itself to local identity. She looks specifically at groups in Indonesia who call themselves nature lovers who “strove to learn international ways of enjoying and appreciating nature” (Tsing 2005, 124). Tsing describes “contingent lineages” as commercialized nature imagery that influences the expression and understanding of nature internationally. Nature lovers in Indonesia use these international senses of enjoying and understanding nature to connect with the cosmopolitan. Tsing recounts the story of the nature lovers who scaled a mountain but two of the four teammates had to be evacuated due to mountain sickness. Despite these moments, the rest of the group was still encouraged to continue because it was believed that only from the peak, could they have influence over Indonesian nature loving (Tsing 2005, 141). Similarly, Expedition Denali was seen as a chance to inspire diversity in the outdoors through the symbolism of being the all African American team to scale its peak. The importance of reaching the peak holds international weight and is similarly held in reverence for the GirlVentures expedition. To be a group of all girls and women to climb a mountain, holds internationally understood significance that further constructs
the importance of the mountain climbing experience. This weight in mountain climbing allows for social values to be mapped onto nature.

By paying attention to her informants’ social values that are mapped onto nature, Tsing was able to understand the way that nature becomes “a substantial thing in the nature loving community” (Tsing 2005, 153). She documented the way her informants associated their time in nature with “wisdom and healing,” “freedom and mobility,” “organizational aptitudes” and “responsible guardianship” (Tsing 2005, 153). Ideologies are used to understand their time in nature. For GirlVentures, the empowerment of the individual (and specifically girls) becomes the social force that informs their time in nature as substantial. These social forces hold weight in that when they are in nature, they can be recognized on a cosmopolitan scale.

Climbing the mountain therefore becomes a tool used to support GirlVentures’ mission to empower their universal concept of girl self-hood. Tsing talks about a deep irony in the way “universalism is implicated in both imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment” (Tsing 2005, 24). This concept does not differ much from nature use and GirlVentures’ attempt to use it for social justice and empowerment while simultaneously being implicated in an imperial framework. The imperial framework that makes nature use globally visible as empowering is why GirlVentures looks for success in its symbolism. This same framework, however, contradicts some of their goals both locally on the day of mountain climbing and in the contradictions of using nature within a white settler framework. The climbing of Mt. Shinn contributes to the larger goal of empowering young girls to develop their strengths. Yet Tsing also demonstrates the way “friction gives purchase to universals, allowing them to spread as frameworks for the practice of power. But engaged universals are never fully successful in being everywhere the same because of this same friction”
(Tsing 2005, 25). Even as the mountain is part of a larger universalizing objective of empowering girls, the frictions that conjoin during the expedition give light to the contradictions and imperfections that are involved on a day like this and in an organization like GirlVentures. Tsing notes that “actually existing universalisms are hybrid, transient, and involved in constant reformulation through dialogue” (Tsing 2005, 24). The constantly shifting, transient, and improvised character of the universal mountain climbing day lends itself to the complexities and ironies of the work GirlVentures attempts to do. Just as Julia reformulated transient universals “through dialogue” when she brought awareness to occupied land.

**How do We Empower and Change Narratives**

GirlVentures work of empowerment seeks to bolster an image of the girl, facing and conquering her own fears by accomplishing technical challenges. This is the subversive narrative that GirlVentures intends to provide. Besides having the organization be entirely for girls, GirlVentures also functions along a model of thirds.³ The intention of this model is to provide greater access to outdoor education and activities, and to create courses with socioeconomic diversity. GirlVentures works to intentionally subvert narratives of access based on gender and socioeconomic access. The subversion of the narrative of race in the outdoors is not as blatantly tackled. When I ask Bri about the model and the intentions behind it, she admits to the possible imperfections within GirlVentures’ work. During her time at GirlVentures she has come to notice that how “successful” GirlVentures is has to do with “who’s driving.” She says that intentions are important, but a plan is what determines success or failure underneath poor leadership. Living up to intentions depends on who is on staff.

³ The thirds model provides the structure for each course. On each course, a third of the girls are on full tuition, a third are on partial tuition, and a third are on full scholarship.
Bri expresses her belief that what GirlVentures attempts to accomplish through the thirds model is to create something that nobody else has: a true mix. Socioeconomic diversity is meant to pull people from very different parts of society, allowing girls the chance to spend time with people that they might not have otherwise. The end goal for socioeconomic diversity is to have girls connect and learn from those from different backgrounds. Success, however, still depends on who’s “driving”. Jay, another instructor, felt similarly in that she wished that GirlVentures did a better job keeping women of color but it “is not to say that GirlVentures does not do well in comparison to its peers on the grand scheme”. GirlVentures work is constantly shifting and adjusting. There work started with the focus being about girls, but as they create more access, it also becomes more clear where they might need to do better.

In “On the Raggedy Edge of Risk,” Bruce Braun also highlights the way “‘encountering nature’ in the United States is entangled with cultural and political economies of difference” and that the “articulation of race and nature” has become more evident as adventure travel and extreme sport have become more popular and commercialized (Braun 2003, 176). There are narratives of race and nature that exclude beyond just economic ability. GirlVentures is still working through how to manage and understand these inequalities as an organization with a lens of social justice and equity within the outdoors. These imperfections can be analyzed by Tsing and her use of friction because, “as a metaphorical image, friction reminds us that heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power” (Tsing 2005, 20). It is not that GirlVentures does not have awareness of these privileges, yet they must continue to navigate the frictions of these unequal encounters. Part of their navigating involves dialogue, and another involves social justice oriented curriculum.
Dots is an activity in which the instructors gather the girls in a circle and ask everyone to close their eyes. While their eyes are closed they place colorful circle stickers on their foreheads. Some stickers are blue, red, yellow and others are split to make one circle with two colors. The instructors then tell the girls to open their eyes and put themselves into groups without talking. What generally happens here is that girls will start arranging themselves in groups based on the color on their forwards, being that this is the newly introduced element. After they have finished the group will debrief. The instructors ask the girls to repeat the instructions of the exercise. Through discussion the girls come to realization that at no point did the instructors say to put each other in groups based on the color of the dot on their head. The point of this exercise is to have girls recognize how easy it is to group people together solely based upon what they see on the outside. The instructors then facilitate a debrief on how this might show up in their everyday lives back home. Sometimes we make split decisions on who people are before we get to know them.

Another curriculum piece is the activity high card. In this one, in a similar way, the instructors give each girl a card to place on their forehead without them looking. The girls are then asked to interact with each other and to treat each other based upon how high or low the card is. When the instructors pass out cards, they make sure to not give low cards to girls who are more introverted or less a part of the group. The debrief prompts the girls to think about what it felt like to be treated poorly or to treat someone poorly. They are asked how this might show up in their everyday life and are their things you can do to belay negative assumptions made about people based solely on their perceived status.
While this curriculum doesn’t necessarily ask girls to think about implications of their nature use, it attempts to construct nature as a place where these conversations of injustice can be had.

**Mountain Identities**

At the base of Mt. Shinn, the instructors tell each girl to find a small stick to carry with them up the mountain. When they find a stick, they are told to think of something that they would like to let go of, whether that be in their life, or in their mind (such as unrealistic expectations or criticisms). The reason behind this ritual is to create a symbolic moment of letting go by taking the object and throwing it off a ledge at the top of Mt. Shinn. The mountain is used to help the girls and instructors identify something that might weight down their life and then let go of it. By starting to think about this at the bottom, the mountain climb symbolizes the weight of this burden that one must carry. When one reaches the top, the moment of success and freedom, they can let go of this heavy burden. Nature in this sense is a tool to assist in the experiencing of the friction and movement of human life. All of the moments, sounds, factors, environments, and people are incorporated into the construction of an experience of the mountain. All these aspects become part of the experience of nature that is being constructed. Nature is turned to in order to articulate one’s own identity. These social values are part of a shared global perspectives, histories and portrayals of mountain climbing as demonstrated by Tsing’s nature lovers. Yet they are also part of the settler narratives of using nature to find the authentic self. The multiple ways that nature has been used informs the work at GirlVentures.

The experience may contribute to ideas of “conquering” the mountain, but more importantly, it is the mountain that helps the girls (i.e., throwing objects over the edge ritual) -
and thus participates in their new self construction. They are not creating culture over nature, they are creating their culture out of nature and the mountain is a tool that is constructed similarly to, and inextricably in relationship with, the newly constructed form of the self.

Nature becomes a place for identity building. In *Friction*, Anna Tsing explores Indonesian “nature lovers’” relationship to outdoor adventure. For the nature lovers, nature embraces the “breadth and freedom of the outdoors. The outdoors is made modern, technical, and scientific. It must be taught in classes and taken into one’s own practice through discipline and experience. The cosmopolitanism of nature lovers results from a training of internal agency, desire, and identity; it is a matter of crafting selves” (Tsing 2005, 122). Turner’s work tracks the way identity changes from the woodcrafter to the Leave No Trace backpacker in relation to wilderness (Turner 2002, 468). The move from the woodsmen to the modern day backpacker demonstrates the tensions and identity changes both within the meaning of wilderness and the people who consider themselves in relation to nature. They are building their nature and they are writing their relations into the narrative they build. The narrative of nature and wilderness has been one of crafting identities. The outdoors is imagined as separate from history, but its existence is dependent upon those who continue writing its story. They are less people who appreciate, enjoy or know nature, but more people who build and relate to nature. People are involved in the building of their own identities into a form of nature that works for them.

GirlVentures does their work within a field riddled with historical implications of exclusion and narratives of nature use. GirlVentures attempts to consciously work within a narrative of subversion, creating a space within the wilderness for girls that has historically been dominated by white men. What has happened in the past has the potential to contradict their work of access. The mindful placement of wilderness (wilderness consciousness) within history,
however, has been built around identity formation. The narratives of using nature as a restorative tool for the true self from the ills of civilization take wilderness out of history in order to make it a place of neutral purity and restoration as exemplified by Cronon. In GirlVentures, there are moments, however, where instructors do try to recognize history; exemplified by Julia recognizing how the land is occupied rather than a pristine place of neutral identity finding, untouched by humans. These desires to bring to the forefront the narratives that have been silenced in the past are a part of the work that GirlVentures does. Yet this work still inhabits the wilderness spaces that had been constructed in order to help the privileged find their identities. From the days of the great white hunters in Africa, to the American Frontier colonization that formed wilderness, to the woodsmen, to the modern LNT backpackers, and to GirlVentures itself, they all have worked in identity building. Maybe now, however, GirlVentures begins to make the recognition of exclusive history a part of their identity construction within nature.

The next chapter now looks at the ways in which extreme rationalization is carried into the wilderness space despite these ideals nature as an escape from the structures of civilization. As much as GirlVentures takes girls into nature in order distance them from the oppressive binds of society, moments of hyper rationalization serve to contradict the image of nature as free of the ailments of civilization.
Girl enjoys view and lack of mosquitoes at the summit on the 2017 Transitions Course

Base of Mt. Shinn
Chapter Two: Time on the Mountain Intensifies
Rationalizing risk and the efficiency of time and energy

pack, unpack, repack,
roam, return, repeat
repeat, yes, but
not so quickly that
I do not catch my breath,
set my home in order,
see the leaves of
my apple tree unfurl,
harvest the unruly
mint growing by my door,
repeat, but not before
feeling time slip quietly
away in warm embraces

- Narinda Heng
GirlVentures Instructor
Excerpt from her poem: pack / unpack / repack

Wake with the Sun

Light creeps into my consciousness before I am even woken by my 6am alarm. I am still
growing accustomed to the closeness of the rocky earth and the way the air is always
immediately present and cold in the morning. I hear the slow stirring of another human also
growing accustomed to re-entering life when the day starts from the ground. I drag clothes on
and begin making all of my items smaller and closer together. Sleeping bag, clothes, tools,
equipment. They all have their place and I don’t need to look for anything. Eggs and tea were
prepared the night before. Water is boiled. We move quickly without talking, two humans quite
comfortable with this limited quick form of moving. We want to beat the sun and the
mosquitoes. Our early morning quickness serve to replace the structures that protect us from
these annoyances in the front country. Movement in the morning is not labored as we have woken with the sun at a time when it does not slow us down but wakes us up.

We move efficiently and at a quick pace in order to catch up with our little group of girls and instructors who took the entirety of the day before to make it to a campsite that we aim to arrive at before 9am. We are to travel with them this day because there is a short bit of off trail hiking in which the instructors want the Course Director’s guidance. Generally (if Transitions’ Orientation training had happened) they would go alone and the Course Director would just carry on ahead of them. The majority of our trail remains in the shade and the air feels so vibrant that we can smell it. By the time we arrive at their camp at 9am, the tents are still up and they have not even eaten breakfast.

The tents and humans are situated among tall trees in a flat area about 200 yards from a lake. Almost everyone is wearing a head net, converting their worlds into black mesh around them. Most of them have never experienced mosquitoes this bad and the worst is still yet to come. Julia asks us if we will be joining them for breakfast and Bri says no. Later she explains that as a course director she does not want to be taking too much attention away from the group. We are new and different and therefore exciting and people want to hang out with us. So we stay away with our tea. We make more tea for ourselves in the morning because we have the power of a portable stove in our pockets. Tea is our unnecessary necessity. The girls sit together in a circle around some logs, away from their tent-homes and their kitchen. Here they have constructed their dining room in a circle with each other. Faint laughter and a still sense of calm falls over them. But soon that has to end since they are terribly behind schedule. And they are slow. Understanding efficient movements has not yet been effectively translated to them. Their crawling movement jars against the quickness of my morning and the expectations of the

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4 Urban, non-wilderness designated spaces
Instructor team. Human items litter the forest floor as they slowly become compiled, divided, and compressed by unpracticed hands. The experience of putting all material parts of life in a bag is slow when this has never been a reality before.

With time and the acquisition of skill, the instructors, Course Director, and I all experience a stark contrast between the girls’ timing and that of our own. This moment depicts only the second day of backpacking of the fourteen day long Transitions Course. The girls have not yet spent enough time disciplining their bodies to become accustomed to each item and its place on their back. As much as GirlVentures strive to have girls use their time in nature to come closer to their authentic selves, they also demonstrate an intention for a disciplining of the body through time management and the acquisition of skill. These two intentions urges a hyper-rationalized use of efficiency in order to engage with the natural world around them. This chapter will look closer at the way GirlVentures Instructors and courses engage in intense rationalization that orients their mindsets to being outside. This intense rationalization is mapped onto time, efficiency and their shifting relation to risk. The slowness of the girls this morning demonstrates an apparent lack of intensified rationalization as everything the adults do serves a coherent and consistent rationale.

**Efficient Management of Energy**

As mentioned in chapter one, the work done at GirlVentures is meant to subvert preconceived notions girls might have about themselves due to societal pressures. The curriculum is structured in order to inspire the discovery of individual strength, not tied or controlled by the structures of society. Another irony of GirlVentures seems to show up within these intentions. The repeated ideal of escaping the structures of civilization by being in nature
does not entirely hold true in these outdoor spaces. Continually being outside and doing this work requires efficiency and good time management in order to be truly successful. A marker of skill is an instructor’s capacity for efficient energy use.

Julia is twenty nine and grew up in the Bay Area for a good portion of her life. She is one of the more experienced outdoor educators, and while she might not be the most veteran, she definitely holds considerable clout in the way she conducts herself and the knowledge that has come with years of experience facilitating groups. This was probably going to be one of her last summers as an outdoor instructor as she was entering into a new stage of her life, hoping to become a nurse. It is very difficult to find her not doing something productive whether that be outside or in her regular life. “Maybe that’s why I’m getting out of the game at twenty-nine: because I don’t know how to chill,” she jokingly expressed to me once.

Regardless, Julia has a skill with facilitating that conveys ease and experience with a satirical humor that spices up any lesson she teaches. Laughter in a group is usually attributed to her wit. She also fears the sun (i.e., she burns easily) and she often wants to find a place where we can spend time shuffling the gear while not wasting unnecessary energy. Julia, like many outdoor educators and adventurers, dedicates detailed attention to orienting her time around energy. An instructor's experience can be measured by their ability to conserve and save energy in whatever form that may be. Forms of managing energy include, but are not limited to, environmental awareness, sola (what GirlVentures called time to oneself) time awareness, awareness of time in general, group silliness awareness, group motivation awareness, and many other forms of energy awareness. Managing energy is important because a lack of energy awareness could potentially expose the group to different forms of danger or fatigue. Lack of energy awareness could disrupt the efficiency of a group in an environment where collective
group performance is essential. When spending extended amounts of time together, the energy of individuals must be constantly negotiated in order to ensure the smooth functions of the everyday. Not enough food or water can lead to a relapse in attention, opening up opportunity for injury. Not enough sola time can lead to individual irritations, rendering an individual incapable of functioning within a group. One of an instructor's main responsibilities is to be aware of these forms of potential fatigue because lack of awareness could lead to a relapse in the proper functioning of the group. A further indicator of skill is how efficiently one can pack a backpack.

The instructor team for the Transitions Course, Julia and Kai, take the lead on teaching how to pack a backpack on the 2017 Staff Training. As confident as the instructors are about one another’s competence, it is important that everyone know how to actually teach packing a pack. Transitions is a trip for girls entering high school and in most cases these girls are venturing into the backcountry5 for the first time. Knowing how to properly teach packing a pack for this trip is essential. We go through the motions, trying to absorb the best ways to convey the important messages of packing a pack, trying to remember what it was like to not intuitively know what to do with a backpack, before we had been disciplined to rationalize each moment of energy use. Kai leads us through the ways one might teach girls how to pack. Packing a pack starts in chaos but the rationale behind packing allow it to become organized. In a similar sense, Kai mentions how when she’s in spaces where “a lot of stuff is going on, my brain kind of feels scattered in a way that, like things are physically happening around me and that’s how my brain feels. If I’m in a busy city and there are cars everywhere, and noises and people, my brain will feel crowded. So when I’m in a space that’s relatively remote, or just somewhat secluded, doesn’t have to be, but somewhat, it tells my brain that it is okay to have

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5 Opposite of the front country. The backcountry is another term for designated wilderness areas.
that calm inside as well.” The packing of the pack replicates an embodied calm that accompanies the satisfaction of having focused awareness of every item. This calm allows for greater efficiency and use of energy during the trip.

The lessons of packing a pack reveal the hyper-rationalization that informs the efficiency of packing. Each item has a rational location and rational use. For the lesson our gear is separated into the “rocks” and the “water,” the hard stuff and the squishable stuff. This metaphor helps express the best use of our energies and the energies of the items. Each item has its place, and knowing where that place is, is incredibly important. The lesson is taught by using the ABCD’s of packing a backpack. A, is for what we want accessible. As the backpack is not an open cabinet, there will be moments where we will not be able to access parts of the pack without undoing the entire thing. Days and days of hiking with this mass of materials on our backs allows us to quickly identify exactly what we want accessible. Not only does orienting our mind around what we need accessible save us energy, the things that we keep accessible are energy savers in themselves. Some typical accessible items that one might see in an experienced backpacker’s pack are: water, snacks, sunscreen, sun hat, warm hat, warm layer, rain jacket, water, pocket knife, maps, etc. The purpose of each of these items is to conserve and save one’s energy. If it gets cold, conserve warmth with a layer. If it gets too sunny, sunscreen prevents burning and the subsequent waste of more energy.

Packing a pack begins with an explosion. Exploding a pack means taking out ALL gear so it gathers around the empty backpack. The items are then efficiently managed. Just as an instructor must manage the unpredictable moments of energy loss in the outdoors, so too does this experience happen when packing a pack correctly. While there are multiple methods and techniques to packing a pack, they all follow a general formula of energy conservation. Similar
to measuring their ability to conserve energy, the skill of a backpacker can be measured by how well they pack their pack. Packing begins with a large compactor bag, using it to line the pack like a trashcan. If one goes through a river crossing, or if it rains, there is little risk of the gear getting wet. Wet clothes in the backcountry are one of the biggest fears because if the main warm layers get wet, the loss of energy can be dangerous for oneself and the group, sometimes even leading to an evacuation if one becomes hypothermic. This whole process comes from calculating all energy loss and allowing only the smallest amount of energy loss at every step.

The next item is the sleeping bag. Years of technological advancements have produced many different ways of compacting sleeping bags to be as small as possible. It is one of the most important items for living outside but is one of the least necessary to have accessible unless in an emergency. This goes at the bottom of the bag. Next are the clothes that are generally worn while at base camp but not needed on trail. This includes long underwear, a change of regular underwear, maybe another shirt (if you aren’t hardcore), the heaviest warm layer, and any other optional warm layers that one might bring depending on how cold the location is or what a person knows about themselves and their needs.

When I was on a thirty day NOLS (National Outdoor Leadership School) course, the first day I was deciding what extra shorts or shirts I would like to bring so I would have a change of clothes. My instructor walked up to me to check my things and told me it was optional to bring extra clothes and that I could just bring the clothes I wore on my back. He said “ounces are pounds and pounds are pain.” I left all of my extra clothes and wore the same bra, shirt and shorts for a whole month. I have never packed any differently since. When I say packing another shirt wouldn’t be hardcore, it is from this experience I had with NOLS. The more time I have spent outside, the more tricks I have learned in order to further maximize energy
conservation. The tricks and strategies we use become indicators for the subjects that we create of ourselves, as this subject exists in the outdoors. Packing as little extra clothing as humanly possible is an indicator of my comfort and skill level as outdoor instructor and adventurer. Packing few clothes might be a marker of toughness (being hardcore), but more importantly it is a marker of energy efficiency.

The amount of extra clothes one brings is optional but each decision falls into the calculation of energy use. Will I need this? Will I be too cold? Will this make my pack too much heavier? Is it worth it? These are common questions that every backpacker will ask of gear or clothing. Will it be useful or will it waste my energy? Is this piece of gear worth the energy loss that its weight represents, because it will become optimal in another way? Each piece of gear is considered based on its efficiency or lack thereof (and if it’s worth it anyway). Again, this maintains an extreme rational involved with this form of energy conservation and use.

All of these clothes are shoved into the bottom of the backpack with the sleeping back. When I say shoved, I do not mean to use a word to conjure up images for the reader, I mean shoved is the only appropriate word. I mean that I am trying to make the bottom of the backpack as dense as possible. No air pockets are left behind. The clothing and sleeping bag section shouldn’t fill up more than a fifth or a sixth of the entire backpack. The most skilled backpackers can go through these motions while they are sleeping, with their eyes closed, in the middle of a cold dark morning, quickly so they can get breakfast made and get moving within the hour. After days in the backcountry, my cuticles may crack and bleed from all the intense stuffing I do. At this point there is no longer chaos, but a backpack bursting with the potential for adventure due to its extreme efficiency. All space is used, as the more air pockets left the
less efficient it is. This intense sense of compact chaotic efficiency often challenges girls’ sense
of organization when being taught how to pack for the first time. Instructors usually have to pull
out neatly folded clothing in order to demonstrate the real order of *shoving*.

Next in the pack is the group gear. First the compactor bag is twisted, compressed (so all
the air escapes) and then folded into the sides, rendering all the clothes and sleeping bag
completely waterproof. If you have a bigger plastic bag, some people like to keep all items
(personal and group gear) in the plastic bag (another indicator of their system), but I usually
don’t mind if my group gear gets wet. A small bag is less weight anyway. Now we have arrived
at the middle part of the pack. Another big reason why the clothes and sleeping bag go at the
bottom is because you want the heaviest gear to be in the middle of the pack, right where your
back is, so the weight isn’t falling past your hips. This is generally where food, cooking
materials, and any other group gear go. If carrying a pot, stuff the pot with food. Packaged food
items sit loosely in my bag so they fill up more air pockets. If I just put a whole bag of food in
my backpack, it wouldn’t fill the edges of my pack quite as well.

The final main item is the tent. The number of people you travel with will determine what
parts of the tent you receive. The tent is completely taken out of the tent bag and separated into
three parts: tent, fly and tent poles (the heaviest but smallest item). If you are carrying the tent
you take one part of it and you *shove* the tent down into the sides of your backpack. Remember
all the food and group gear that we packed in? There are a ton of little inefficient pockets of
space left over that are in dire need of filling. The fabric of the tent is shoved into these spaces,
giving the backpack a very beautiful and svelte look from the outside. The chaos is controlled
and contained within. If shoved properly, the tent will not take up much room past the group
If you have the tent poles, sometimes you can shove them in on the side of your gear, or they can be strapped to the outside if absolutely necessary.

After this, the last remaining items need to be packed. These are the accessible items and the sleeping pad. These details vary depending on individual preference. The toiletries could have gone in with the clothes, but sometimes people like them accessible. These are the last items, so there shouldn’t be much left around your bag. There are the personal items that each individual decides whether they need or not and figures out how to place them into the equation. I take the clothing I want accessible and shove it into the inside edges of my pack, around the gear, while simultaneously leaving a sleeve out. This sleeve is then folded over any final gear that is packed at the top. If I am cold, I grab the sleeve and pull. This way I can easily reach my item while it also fills up more air pockets, interfering minimally with the top of my pack. Kai notices this trick I have and admires its cleverness. Kai is reading one of my skill indicators, noting the way I optimally use my space. She then begins to take on this trick, constantly developing her skills with packing. The slight variations of techniques and skills that are shared by outdoor enthusiasts takes on a form of communication. The more time one spends outside, the more tricks they obtain and thereby grow their tool bag. The explosion has been contained as the materials are optimally placed bit by bit.

We just covered B for balance and C for Compression. Finally, D is for Dangles. There should be as little as possible dangling off your pack, because if things sway during hiking or catch on branches, that is just too much energy to waste when we got miles to go!

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Cronon addresses how people often fled into the wilderness so “an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life” (Cronon 1996, 77). He highlights the male members of elite society who ran to the wilderness in order to
flee “urban-industrial capitalism” and its “debilitating effects” and that “for them, wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation” (Cronon 1996, 78). While it is not to deny the idea of recreation, the way one manages oneself while traveling in nature is one of extreme productivity and optimizing of energy and time. This is obvious in how GirlVentures insists upon teaching these skills and conveying messages of efficiency. Packing a backpack demonstrates the way time and energy is used in the outdoors. Energy and time are maximized to an extreme degree in order to gain the utmost efficiency in the face of the increasing uncertainty of nature. Each item has a reason and a place in the backpack.

While in designated outdoor spaces, the proximity to nature is perceived as closer than “normal,” and therefore the stakes feel higher. Closeness is perceived because the immediate environment is filled with less human technologies. In a place where a lapse in judgement could put an individual or a group in immediate danger, extreme awareness of energy use and time efficiency allows for a group to fully participate in the recreation of the outdoors. They are not shedding the trappings of civilization but instead focusing the skills of energy and time efficiency in order to fully experience the world around them. The backpack contains a chaos similar to the uncontrollable aspects of the natural environment that outdoor educators and adventurers learn how to navigate. Just as the backpack has compressed, compacted, and made efficient the conglomeration of gear, so too does an instructor pack in their knowledge of the unpredictable landscape in which they enter. This knowledge shows up as acquired skill and knowing how to handle themselves outside. Jay attributes her time outside as having “to pay attention to a lot of things because they might be critical to my comfort or survival out there. I like the feeling of responsibility, I am responsible for what this experience is going to be like for
me.” New forms of responsibility inform Jay’s experience as an outdoor educator and participant.

When packing the backpack, people doing work or learning in the outdoors are taking all of the material items they need to live with and placing them in an exact comprehensible but seemingly chaotic order. Ideally, as one spends more time in the outdoors, they become better and better at knowing exactly where all of their items are at all times. Every item has a purpose and every item is accounted for. Within a landscape that is conceived as outside of one’s control, the control and order created within the backpack serves to free up the mind, allowing it more energy to be hypervigilant in the outdoor setting. A well packed pack also sits better on the hips, allowing for less energy wasting movement. In addition, being able to efficiently pack a pack allows for taking full advantage of daylight, never wanting to be caught on trail in the dark. All these aspects demonstrate the rationale that drives the imperative of this process.

The way one packs a backpack contributes to their understanding of themselves in relation to their surrounding environment. Knowing how to efficiently and effectively pack a backpack requires meticulous and precise repetition and practice. Similar to the way Anne Allison recognizes how the subjectivity of motherhood in Japan is created by the making of the obentō box, so too does continuous construction of the backpack produce a subjectivity in the girls and instructors on courses. Expectations of motherhood in Japan are constituted by the societal and school expectations of mothers in making a perfect, ordered, and beautiful obentō box for their children. These expectations determine the obentō as “not only a gift or test for a child but a representation and product of the woman herself” (Allison 1996, 96). Allison demonstrates the way that “intense labor, management, commodification, and attentiveness” that go into creating the obentō box, gives it “various meanings” (Allison 1996, 102). The mother is
reinstating an aestheticized coded social order through the meticulous way that she orders and structures the obentō boxes for her child. Because of her labor, the obento’s message “is that the world is constructed very precisely and that the role of any single Japanese in that world must be carried out with the same degree of precision. Production is demanding; and the producer must both keep within the borders of her or his role and work hard” (Allison 1996, 102). The making of the obentō box constitutes subjectivity in Japan. The packing of a backpack serves a similar purpose in constituting a subject in the outdoors. The role of any participant of outdoor recreation must be carried out with the same degree of efficiency and subsequent rationalization as it is carried out in packing their pack.

Packing a backpack for outdoor adventures often forces girls to let go of any preconceived conventional notions of orderliness. Through this form of packing, the packer enters into a hyper rationalized world where understanding of energy and efficiency are maximized or minimized to the extreme. The backpack represents the importance of time management, as the faster the pack is packed, the sooner one can head out on the trail. It also represents orderliness as you are aware of every one of your items, just as you are aware of each detail of being outside. The individual is disciplined in their packing, keeping everything the utmost accessible and efficient, standards which they also must hold themselves to. The order inscribed into the backpack is additionally an order that is conscious of comfort, placing the items in a position that will be most comfortable for the backpacker. The packing of the pack places a person into an exaggerated space, constantly thinking about how to not waste energy in exaggerated terms. Before any adventure, the first thing is to pack the backpack and this action signals the entrance into a different mindset, a different subjectivity of efficiency related to being
outdoors. This greater efficiency leads to greater time management a value highlighted in the next section.

**Time Efficiency: Outdoor Capitalism**

*Light in the Day*

The emphasis, urgencies, and expectations surrounding time and efficiency are not concepts isolated to GirlVentures and outdoor trips. Obsession with time has changed in conjunction with industrial capitalism and other technological forms of advancement. In *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, E.P. Thompson details the ways in which labor has changed in an industrial capitalist society due to the introduction of time keeping. Thompson describes the way labor is dealt with in farming communities, their form of work revolving around “task-orientation.” In “task-orientation” communities, the workers follow the “natural” rhythms of the world around them. Thompson notes how “labour from dawn to dusk can appear to be ‘natural’ in a farming community, especially in the harvest months: nature demands that the grain be harvested before the thunderstorms set in” (Thompson 1967, 60). GirlVentures instructors work in a similar fashion. Instructors are ready to start the day at dawn and end the day once the sun has set. Often a successful day is marked by an evening circle that occurs when daylight still exists in the sky.

On the Transitions Course, the group often has trouble staying on task and on time. This often means that dinner is eaten, if not prepped, in the dark. On one of the last nights, dinner is finally prepared and eaten while there is still light. Due to this early timing, Julia (one of the instructors for the trip), is able to make a surprise cinnamon and sugar bread dessert for the girls for the evening meeting. As the girls sit in silent satisfaction, enjoying the surprise sweet, Julia
remarks, “See what can happen when you start dinner early!” This is not to say that every time a day ends within light Julia will make everyone a treat. Rather, she is alluding to the exciting possibilities that could occur if the girls were able to be more efficient with their tasks during the day. Just the very act of having evening meeting when there is light could itself count as an exciting event due to efficiency. Julia’s comment demonstrates her continuous efforts to disciplining the girls around timing and efficiency.

The tasks of the day can really only best be done when it is light out. The tasks accomplished on trips are dictated by the light of the day. Thompson also notes how the laborers from a task-oriented community appear “to attend upon what is an observed necessity” and that “the community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between ‘work’ and ‘life’” (Thompson 1967, 60). Again there is a similarity in that within GirlVentures courses; there are specific tasks that must be completed in order for the day to move forward, these are the “observed necessities.” Water must be purified at efficient times so people can stay hydrated; gear must be packed in the morning so the group can leave at an appropriate time; food must be made and eaten so everyone has enough energy for the day.

Thompson also says, however, that “men accustomed to labour timed by the clock” may find this task-oriented labour to be “wasteful and lacking in urgency” (Thompson 1967, 60). Much of the way most outdoor courses are conducted might allude to a sense of task-orientation because of how contingent they are to the workings of the world around them (i.e. sunlight, weather, etc.). In contrast to the idea that GirlVentures courses contain only “task-oriented” ideals is the continued sense of urgency and a desire to not waste time while on course. It is quite often that an instructor will be working to impart a sense of urgency and efficiency to the students they are leading. This push around urgency comes from a very real desire to not lead
groups into dangerous situations, including hiking at night, being caught in a rainstorm, or being caught without the proper equipment.

On the Transitions course, one of the first things that one of the instructors, Kai, mentions to me when Bri and I reach their camp was how slow she found this group to be. Kai is an avid rock climber and finds great solace when she is able to spend time outside, climbing, backpacking, etc. She is quick to learn new skills and is always eager to find more teachers, emphasizing her desire to work towards her own personal growth both technically and emotionally. That same night, during the evening meeting, she brings her frustrations to the turd circle section of the evening meeting. She voices her frustration with the girls’ poor timeliness within the context of this style of meeting rather than framed as an instructor lecture. The context of the turd circle allows her frustrations to be framed in a way that asks the community to do better, for the good of themselves and as members of the community.

Even as the girls try to do better, when I later approach Kai and Nora (the Apprentice Instructor), they still express feelings of stress about how difficult it is for the group to get things done. Whether this group is actually slower than most, or if the instructors are experiencing their slowness as multiplied because of the contrast to their own efficient timing, the inefficiency is a constant source of stress.

This emphasis on timeliness and efficiency does not entirely reflect a “task-oriented” community dependent only on the light of day. The instructors explicitly do not want to be wasteful of time nor inefficient. Thompson provides further insight in demonstrating the way that the ideas of “task-orientation” are complicated when the labor is no longer personal, but employed (Thompson 1967, 61). He explains that when employed, the laborer feels a difference between their “own” time and the time of their employer. The employer does not want “their”
time wasted and it must be used: “Not the task but the value of time when reduced to money is dominant. Time is now currency: it is not passed but spent” (Thompson 1967, 61). This relation between employment, time, and money may give added understanding to an instructor’s need for efficiency and urgency. They are not just laboring in the outdoors for themselves, they are GirlVentures employees, meant to produce an expected outcome. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, this outcome is deemed successful by what is accomplished on course as instructors are supposed to provide and therefore produce a specific experience for girls. I acknowledge, however, that motivation for GirlVentures instructors, is complex. Besides needing to produce a certain outcome, instructors will often express how restorative this work is, citing their sense of personal reward. Many go to GirlVentures because the work that is done aligns with their values. The fact that they need to be paid may complicate this seemingly pure desire.

**Capitalist Time Management**

Thompson says that “in mature capitalist society all time must be consumed, marketed, put to use; it is offensive for the labour force to merely ‘pass the time’” (Thompson 1967, 91). The ways in which instructors constantly consider time and efficiency reflect this desire to put their time to “use.” Poor time management and a lack of organization are often seen as deficiencies that should be corrected. As depicted above, The Transitions instructors’ biggest challenges with the group is getting them to be more efficient and on time. This frustration is prevalent especially on days when larger tasks such as summiting Mt. Shinn or hiking 10 miles are supposed to occur. Some of these frustrations on the surface come from safety concerns. If Mt. Shinn isn’t summed at the proper time, they have to turn around early in order to miss any
potential thundercloud building. If they don’t leave for the ten mile hike at the proper time, they might get stuck hiking in the dark.

These all contain valid safety concerns, but what lies underneath these concerns is the need to provide a product at the end of the trip. They are being paid with money that has been raised by GirlVentures through fundraising. Parents also invest either money or time in order to send their daughters on these trips. Employers, philanthropists, and parents often want to see a specific outcome. They want to see their daughters, the girls they have invested in, succeed. They want to see the money they have donated put to good use. Certain things on a course must be completed. The trip is laid out and planned. There are goals and summits to reach and miles to traverse. Success, from a program perspective, is marked by how well and how many things are accomplished. The instructors are paid to provide labor that will bring about this success. Much of this success revolves around rationalized time management. The money paid demands that they put time into the work they are expected to do in providing the experience.

The work the instructors do to instill the ideals of timeliness and efficiency can also be understood through Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Bourdieu says that habitus is “constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions” (Bourdieu 1990, 52). When Kai expresses the importance of timeliness, it is justified ultimately with the idea that there are practical needs that the group must accomplish. Time must be watched and followed as closely as possible. Habitus is a “structure of which it is the product governs practice” (Bourdieu 1990, 55). The constant monitoring of time is passed onto the specified Leaders of the Day (LODs)6. This understanding of time is then embodied, as rest time and walk time are managed closely on the trail.

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6 The Leader of the Day is one of the many jobs that are exchanged each day.
The close attention to time management and efficiency is reminiscent of capitalist society at large. The push for this kind of management is discipling the girls to be successful in society without it being explicitly stated. Success on course often can be marked by how efficient everyone is. This success prepares girls to return to society and excel in the structures in place that value efficiency and time management. As leaders, girls are encouraged to enforce efficiency and timeliness as they keep track of how long they’ve been hiking and how long they’ve sat down to rest. Successful hiking days are marked by their ability to reach camp at a designated hour. As demonstrated above, in a society of industrial capitalism, time management is valued in the way it allows for efficient production. In this way, girls are being disciplined for success in society by using the context of the trip and hiking. The message being conveyed, however, has deeper implications about what is seen as success in society.

On the second day of backpacking, the closer they get to camp, the more concerned Kary, the LOD, becomes with reaching their time goal. This has only been their second day backpacking, so she has not been consistent with keeping track of how long breaks are and making sure to keep up a certain pace for hiking. Even though she has not been regulating time well, she still feels a sense of urgency as we come nearer to our destination. She recognizes the need for efficiency only once the majority of the day has gone by and the time which is intended to reach camp comes closer and closer. The sense of efficiency and timing that had been impressed upon her previously is beginning to manifest within her experience on trail. Even though she is not yet proficient in keeping time well during most of the day, she still begins to feel urgency around timing. All of sudden she is constantly checking her watch and looking eagerly at the group. This concern does not, however, involve worry with how much light is left in the day, but has more to do with the fact that there is a chance that their time goal might not be
reached. Here, Kary finds herself bound to an ideology of time and efficiency under the presumption of its hyper rationality. She has come to embody the ideologies of efficiency in that she becomes a subject of time management.

**Acquisition of Skill in Efficiency**

Besides having time efficiency, there are the ways in which skill and expertise are valued and upheld as outdoor instructors. As instructors we are meant to impart knowledge and skill as well as demonstrate a common expected proficiency within the work that we do. Everything we do seems to require a certain skill set and it is meant to demonstrate the utmost rationality. One example of the expectation of a skill set is the shared understanding of cleaning one’s personal dishes outdoors.

There are various ways to clean a dish in the outdoors. It is not by any means close to what is done at home. For an impressive amount of time, water is all that is needed for cleaning personal bowls and utensils. Like much of anything that is done while backpacking, cleaning our bowls is also meant to exhibit a rationalized level of efficiency and wasteless-ness. We try to eat all that is in our bowls and in the pot because anything we don’t eat we have to carry out ourselves. Then we take a splash of drinking water and pour it into our bowls. The techniques vary but people like to use their eating utensils, fingers or personal sponges (if they find the extra weight worth it). What happens next depends on how “hardcore” you wish to be. A common thing to do is to spread the water into the ground (making sure there are no large food bits), endeavoring to spread it evenly. What I like to do (and many others) is drink my grey water, ensuring that none of it ends up in the earth. Many people find this method a little “difficult to swallow”, especially depending on what we eat. Final steps can or cannot include using dirt to
wash away any remaining grease. Dirt can be the best way to clean a bowl. It scrubs out any undetectable grime and grease; a rinse after that leaves the bowl spotless, as if cleaned with soap.

On our first night of staff training, one of the newest members of the staff goes about cleaning her bowl. After she drinks her grey water, she proceeds to scrub her bowl with dirt, wiping away any traces of oil that might have been left behind. “Is cleaning with dirt a thing we do at GirlVentures?” she asks after rinsing off the last traces of dirt and presenting her spotless dish. Her question assumes that technique is required, learned, used and approved, even of the most menial of tasks. The technique of washing a dish must be institutionally approved by GirlVentures before the skill is passed on to the students.

Generally instructors tend to get a kick out of teaching their students how to clean their dishes with dirt. It challenges the conventional notions of what it means to be clean and to make something clean. In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas highlights dirt as “essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (Douglas 2003, 2). In the case of cleaning the bowl, the “dirt” is what is left from our own food creations whereas the dirt (the earth) is seen as clean and pure. Douglas goes on to describe the ways that ideas of dirt reflect order to disorder, giving clear markers for what should and shouldn’t be. She notes that “wherever ideas of dirt are highly structured their analysis discloses a play upon such profound themes” (Douglas 2003, 6). The immersion within and acceptance of dirt that comes from the earth transforms the state of being and comprehension when within ‘nature.’ While cleaning with dirt simultaneously subverts a sense of convention, it also reinforces the idea that there is a language and proficiency one must master if they wish to spend time outside. It is a proficiency differs from “normal” everyday life.
The acquisition of skill sets goes hand in hand with senses of time and efficiency. Skill is developed in order to find the most efficient and productive way of achieving a task. In this vein, the backpack is packed as a skill that establishes the utmost efficiency in order to save time in looking for items. Each item is rationalized in its presence and placement in the pack. Saving time is rationalized in that leaving at a certain time to reach the next backpacking destination is imperative so as to not be caught in the dark. Hiking time and break times are calculated down to the minute.

Woah dude, are you lost?

Much of what GirlVentures instructors do when they are outside on course can be seen as related to their set of skills and knowledge in working outdoors. Seemingly simple tasks like cleaning a bowl or packing a bag become specific skills that are to be learned, performed efficiently and done well. This desire to sharpen one’s proficiency and skill also comes from industrial capitalist ideologies. Thompson notes that during the 1830s and the 1840s, English industrial workers weren’t necessarily marked as superior to the Irish workers for an ability for hard work. Rather they were seen as better for their regularity and for the methodical way they efficiently used their energy, not choosing to relax in “uninhibited ways” (Thompson 1967, 91). It was not exactly hard work that was valued, but the skills acquired in being able to efficiently use their time that elevated their status. Proficiency and skill in efficiency was thus valued and internalized. As women make a place for themselves in the outdoors world, many endeavor to make their work efficient and skilled. Being seen as efficient creates the conditions for them to be taken seriously and demonstrates their regularity and ability to be productive. These are also what signify success in the capitalist industrial society.
A moment on staff training further exemplifies the desire to be seen as proficient in the work that instructors from GirlVentures do outside. As we are taking a break from curriculum and circles, we notice a lone man go to the spigot to get water. Somebody jokingly remarks to the group of us sitting and watching at the picnic table, “Woah dude, are you lost?”

This comment immediately sparks a cacophony of laughter and jokes among the instructors as the bit continued: “Hey dude you know it’s not safe out here right?” “What’s a guy like you doing out here all by yourself?” “Are you with anybody?” “Where’s your girlfriend?” The laughter continues in the group as we watch the man fiddle with the spigot. Eventually another woman walks over to join him. The humor is amplified as we give sarcastic sighs of relief as we remark on how “Thank god he’s with a woman, we were worried he was lost.”

This bit of comedy leads to Bri discussing all the frustrating or strange remarks she has received quite often when on solo trips. Bri is the Program Director and has been involved with GirlVentures for a long time. Besides her work with GirlVentures she fully embodies being what it means to be an aficionado of the outdoors. She is a skilled and knowledgeable climber, backpacker, and kayaker. She is another long time member of the GirlVentures team and she has gained respect in many of her fields of expertise. Many instructors, especially the younger ones, often go to her for guidance.

Bri remarks on how many comments she has received regarding her “alone-ness” when she does solo outdoors trips. While we joke about this man from a distance, these comments directly reflect the real questions Bri would receive on her trips, except in those situations the questions were not jokes. Our comments are a chance to demonstrate to ourselves the negative assumptions about women when they operate in the outdoors on their own. This moment
reaffirms one of the many reasons instructors work at GirlVentures. The desire for respect exemplifies the desire to be seen as professionals in their work. Part of the active attainment of skills comes from the need to be respected. Bri notes how she is never able to be on a solo trip without someone making a comment on her being alone. She is not just a person enjoying a solo backpacking trip, but a woman alone in the wilderness. The latter identity is marked by others as inherently being in need of protection or being out of place.

It is interesting to think of this moment in relation to the GirlVentures tradition of sola time. In the GirlVentures handbook, sola is defined as “going from movement to meditation, action to reflection and connecting with place” (GirlVentures Instructor Handbook 2017, 54). Instructions that follow include challenging “the girls to be with themselves and not to disturb other girls. If a girl needs to talk to somebody, she can return to the instructors” or ask them to “reflect on how this experience relates to life” (GirlVentures Instructor Handbook 2017, 54 - 55). The idea of girls and women being alone seems to be another skill that is learned and also reflected on.

While not necessarily intentional, built-in sola time on GirlVentures’ courses serve to normalize the concept of being alone, for the girls on course. In relation to efficiency and energy use, sola time is also seen as a way for an individual to recharge so they can more fully engage with the group. On staff training Bri often emphasizes the importance of being able to give yourself and others time “to do your own thing.” She reiterates that sola time is very important when doing work “like this” for extended periods of time. We are allowed down time to do what we need to do to take care of ourselves. This moment is significant in that it allows us to conserve energy, recharge and thus regroup. This also makes for a more productive member of the group later on.
Control, Risk, Lightning

This chapter so far has focused on rational uses of time and energy and the acquisition of skill that accompanies this orientation. Extreme rationalism marks the importance of using time and energy wisely, but it also has a specific relationship to ideas of “risk” in the outdoors. The monitoring of risk, time, energy, and skill all fall under an intensified rationalism prevalent in outdoor adventure culture and at GirlVentures. As I have spoken at length about the steps that are taken in order to ensure productivity, safety, and control, I feel that it is also important to note the moments that fall far from the reaches of anyone’s control and rationality. As instructors calculate, regulate, time, and monitor each minute of the day, the unpredictability of the world around them continues to move. This unpredictable lack of control can best be exemplified by lightning.

In the mountains, afternoon build up is a frequent occurrence. It doesn’t happen regularly enough to be predictable, but if the temperatures of the valley below become very hot, then there is a likely chance of afternoon storms. Preparation for lightning, however, does not make lightning or the situation much safer, easier to understand, or control.

The GirlVentures policy protocol for lightning storms is to have everyone far away from each other, among trees of equal height, all crouching on their rubber sleeping pads (with the understanding that these pads will provide a level of protection by insulating from the ground where electric currents move through). If lots of rain is a concern, they send the girls into their tents to stay on their pads. The reasoning for this is because making girls sit out in the rain, not moving, can be more dangerous than getting struck by lightning (for fear of hypothermia, a much closer danger than lightning). Policy says that the ideal position is having girls at an equidistant
position from each other, not being too close and in an unexposed area. This policy gets trumped in the case of cold, wet weather, demonstrating the rationalized weighing of the risks. There is protocol that is used to make sure they are following bureaucratic policy, but when it comes to practice, the instructors make their own judgments as to the best way to ensure the girls’ safety.

While the girls sit in their tents during a lightning storm, Julia minds her own business walking around the area, staying out of the rain, organizing, preparing food and keeping busy. The handbook also recommends instructors do what they can to insulate themselves from the ground as well. Her attitude is that if she is to be struck by lightning then she’ll be struck by lightning, considering how low the chances are and how random strikes really are. The safety procedure around lightning allows for GirlVentures to be legally protected in case of a lightning strike because they follow best practice; it does not necessarily ensure complete protection of the participants. Lightning strikes are unpredictable, and while it is true that there are some patterns that can be followed, often it can be quite random. Policy and best practice advises us to get to the lowest point, but Bri has also seen lightning strike the valley below her while on the side of a mountain. The more times instructors spend outside, more stories they hear and experiences they have, which seem to further convince them that one can never be truly safe from a lightning strike. Even though lightning protocol exists, the real lived experiences of the instructors make them feel certain that there really is only so much you can do if it’s meant to happen.

During one particular lightning and rain storm at our camp next to the Courtright Reservoir, underneath a tarp that would in no way protect us from lightning, Julia tells us about the origin of the NOLS lightning policy. One time on a NOLS trip, all the instructors were in one tent and they all got struck by lightning at the same time, leaving the group alone without
any authority figure to help them or help themselves. Ever since then, protocol mandates that, in the case of a lightning storm, all instructors must be separate from each other.

There is no controlling lightning. No amount of efficiency or conservation of energy and time helps with making exact predictions of lightning strikes, the way it helps with getting to camp before dark for example. Even as the chances of being hit by lightning are very low, they are still a bit higher while outside. At any point that someone is outside of a human made structure (that is enclosed with metal wiring or plumbing or encased in metal), they are in danger. This fact upholds itself whether we live in a city or in the woods. The difference is that if someone is in these outdoor spaces, the structures that actually protect from lightning are absent. Policy is created as best practice, but it is impossible to enforce policy onto nature. Instructors continue to rationalize their time next to lightning, and this intense rationalization can lead to an understanding that these risks are unavoidable.

On my final night in the Sierras with the Transitions Course, I enjoy a final meal with Bri. We watch the clouds and world change around us as colors dance across the sky, giving us a real high Sierra mountains goodbye. Quite suddenly big black “menacing” clouds roll in with a distant boom signaling a storm moving towards us. Clouds that earlier had seemed like a purple and gold magic land are now menacingly dark and close. My tent isn’t even set up yet. Watching the clouds, we let h slip our sense of productivity and timeliness.

Frantically setting up in the semi darkness with scant light, we just finish as the first raindrops fall and the last light goes. It is the last time we work so quickly against the definitive time marker of light leaving and weather approaching. Finishing the work that must be completed before the weather changes and the light leaves recalls similarities to E.P. Thompson’s “task-orientation” societies. Now the light exists only in the bright lightning, the
thunder is LOUD and so we understand it as close and dangerous. Even though the lightning is just an electric current passing through the air, its proximity feels menacing, almost as if it were directing itself at us. Within that small level of stress, practice and discipline demand that I remain rational throughout the frantic process.

We successfully get everything storm proofed just in time for the rain to come. Bri suggests watching the storm from the dam, both because it is more exciting and fun and because she wants to keep an eye on Voyager Camp where our girls are, next to the reservoir. Besides this, because we are close to the car, it is the safest place for us to be.

Lightning lights up the sky, the lake, and the silent domes, an incredible light show. We watch bolts strike in the distance, between clouds, and on shore banks. We are very close to the electricity. We watch and count the distance between sound and strike (an indication of physical distance), hoping the storm will skirt over our girls. I ask Bri what she would do if she did see a lightning bolt hit Voyager Camp. “Who’s number 1? I would wait for the storm to pass then I would be running in the make sure everyone was safe or okay or help in any situation. I can’t make myself another victim. But I would be shitting my pants and you would be hearing it.”

During Wilderness First Responder training, one of the first rules during a medical emergency is to ask, “Who’s number 1?” This means that before we rush in to help, we must make sure the scene is safe for ourselves. We are number 1 on the list of whom to take care of. This is where the management of risk meets the management of nature. There is almost no “managing nature.” We can manage ourselves and our actions, and by asking “Who is number 1?” we remind ourselves that there is only so much an individual can do in a natural disaster. These are the ways nature risks are rationalized.
We watch as bolts hit the other side of the lake. This is one moment where I grapple with the differences between being “outside” and being “in civilization.” The tensions between these two concepts of space seem to center on beliefs about control. “Civilization” seems to allow for an idea of more control, over your life, the environment, your safety, etc., even if this is not always the case. In an interesting way, this sense of “control” in civilization makes disasters seem more unbelievable. In the mountains, however, we know there is more weight placed on how much we know we don’t have control over. Outdoor aficionados do not fool themselves in believing themselves invincible. We control the controllable: such as time and energy. We cannot control the lightning and we know it. We do our best to rationalize our behavior around its presence just as we rationalize time and efficiency. This is not an uncommon understanding among those who spend a significant amount of time outside.

In the June 1991 edition of Backpacker, an article was published called “Living, and Dying, with Risk” by Mike Link. Mike Link is an outdoors instructor whose son died in a kayaking accident. The article is short, with a shot of a kayaker in the middle of the page. It recounts the death of his son and the pain that accompanied such a loss. In the article, Link reflects further on what it meant to lose his son to a dangerous outdoor sporting activity. He states that “Risk is part of the wilderness experience, a part of the beauty of our relationship with the outdoors” (Link 1991, 80). He notes how his son also understood the importance of risk in his time outdoors. He said that his son had “honed his skills until he felt comfortable in class V rapids” and that in “each situation he assessed the risk and accepted it or turned around. He chose to paddle that river that day” (Link 1991, 80). There is an acceptance of the release of control in certain moments. This release of control exemplifies an extreme rationalization.
around the realities of risk. Risk might just as easily be found within an urban setting, but being outdoors and understanding of a lack of control contributes to this rationalization.

In the GirlVentures handbook, one of their guiding principles is understanding healthy risk taking. They believe that society fails to “recognize both the very real dangers some risks pose and the tremendous benefits that others can yield” (GV Instructor handbook 2017, 6). Part of what GirlVentures offers in taking pre-adolescent and adolescent youth outdoors is the opportunity to become better versed in risk assessment. They believe that adults and teens need to be “well informed about the risks themselves and about how young people currently look at risks and make decisions” (GV Instructor handbook 2017, 7). GirlVentures views this as imperative in terms of helping young people develop health habits (GV Instructor handbook 2017, 7). In this situation, the risks posed in the outdoors provide an ability to think rationally about risk.

Bri and I sit and talk as we watch light flash across the reservoir. The girls are technically in danger, but not entirely. At least not any more than crossing the street or driving a car, we are just more aware of the potential danger. Their Course Director watches over them; they are cared for. But they are outside, and they cannot protect themselves beyond following basic protocol. The protocol is done so that in case of an accident, it is clear from a legal perspective that they did everything within their control. We do what we can to protect from lightning but there’s never a guarantee.

We watch the storm pass. We are utterly useless in protecting the group in the case of an emergency. The girls remain in their tents, kept awake by the flashes and the booms. The storm passes over without any lightning strikes on our girls’ shore. Light continues to flash in the distance as the energy moves away and the sky clears.
This chapter closes in awe of the greater uncontrollable forces of the world around us. Within outdoor settings, the extreme emphasis on time management, efficiency and proficiency contribute to a hyper rationalization that informs every action while outdoors. The emphasis on these forms of productivity might even surpass in intensity those of the capitalist society in “civilization.” Efficiency in time management and energy use contribute to a hyper-rationalization which habituates girls for the labor markets in which these levels of efficiency are valued. Being in nature prepares them for society.

This rationalization, however, makes for an interesting relationship to risk in the outdoors. This emphasis on rationalization and efficiency exhibits hyper-awareness of the physical risks of being outside. You can have all your skills together but still need to be in humble relation to the greater forces of nature, such as lightning. Even within extreme efficiency, we lack control. This contrasts interestingly with the ways in which efficiency is not as extreme in the front country, yet the illusion of control is stronger. It seems that the more skill acquired, the greater awareness of our lack of control. Within all the disciplining in efficiency, our limits our become even more clear.

Any expenditure of energy or time or monitoring of risk is done with the utmost intentionality. In the next chapter, this emphasis on intention is explored further. While the imperative of efficiency and rationalization undergirds the need to be intentional with our actions, intentionality in this next chapter is framed along lines of creating space. This is the ideological space of the GirlVentures structure.
2017 GirlVentures Instructors wait to hear instructions for how to teach packing a pack.
Chapter Three: Intentions
Circles, Sola, and Spaces in Between

I would stay
in one place
if I were
convinced
that the place
for me
were actually
a place
but no
particular
geography
holds me
I know
that the place
for me
is always
Moving-

- Narinda Heng
GirlVentures Instructor
Excerpt from her poem: on staying

Community Agreement Flag

The GirlVentures community emphasizes intention within action. The act of creating a community is held to such intentions. The ultra-intentional way in which the a GirlVentures community starts is with a community agreement flag. The flag is typically created together as a group before they even get in the cars to go to the outdoor spaces. It is a way to bring awareness to the community that we choose to be a part of. Everyone has agreed by contract to go on a trip, but in creating the flag we agree to make it a community. The community agreement flag is a GirlVentures tradition that is performed at the beginning of every course. For staff training, it is no different.

The agreement begins with a large blank white sheet, big enough for a group of at least fifteen to circle around. Large adults make for a bit more crowded drawing space, but it is not dissimilar to 10 unacquainted girls trying to make room for these new faces with whom they will
be sharing a new community. Crayola markers are thrown into the center, with all the colors to choose from. Each person places a hand along the edges of the white cloth and traces it, stamping themselves onto the flag. A circle rainbow is formed out of the hands. A line is then drawn from each hand to the hands of the people on either side so that the hands become connected to each other. The individual connects to the community and the community to the individual.

We are then instructed to draw or write the words that represent what we would like to see in our community on the inside of the circle of hands. For a moment there is silence as we scribble our ideas and thoughts. Many of the people in this instructor group have done this many times before, on courses or with previous staff trainings. Each time, however, will always be different because the group of people will always be different and we sit here thinking thoughtfully of past community agreements and of what might be new to bring into this particular group.

When we finish scribbling our thoughts, we are asked to sit in a circle and share some of the things we wrote. As in almost all groups young or old, there are a few words and ideas that come up quite often, such as non-judgement, listening, open-mindedness, love, laughter, respect, etc. People in this moment are given the chance to bring in their own ideas of what makes a safe community. One person adds “responsibility for harm regardless of intentions.” She is bringing in rhetoric to encourage open mindedness in a way that analyzes one’s own actions in a community. It is true that there may not be bad intentions within certain actions, but sometimes harm may still be caused. She wants to bring this awareness into the community.

The next step to the community agreement flag is to think about what we want to see left out of the community. While we as adults have come to choose any color that is nearest to us, I
was told a story in the past of a facilitator's intention of removing all the black and brown pens from the middle before giving this prompt to girls. The reason why this person did this was to highlight the fact that often in our society, negativity is associated with black and brown colors. Without thinking, girls will often choose these colors when writing down the negative things they do not want to see in a community. The instructor also says that they are transparent, letting the girls know their reasons behind this action. This activity is all about setting intention, and by doing this, the instructor sets the intention to leave negative associations about color out of their community.

Again, we go in a circle and share some of what we have written. We want to leave out judgement, hate, stereotypes, assumptions, closed-mindedness, etc. One desire asks that we do our best to rid our community of all exclusionary language but most specifically to call attention to ableist language. This is a new idea to me and I am eager to learn more. Ableist language is talking at the expense of those who have mental or physical disabilities. This includes avoiding words such as crazy, lame, dumb, insane, etc. This moment sparked a difficult battle to train my brain out of some words that I use casually every day. This community that is built around our shared desires to go outside, wants to bring awareness to speech. Words have power over the way we think and this moment calls attention to the privilege inherent in being able to spend time engaging in outdoor activities. Our able bodies allow us to be here at GirlVentures.

Even though one of the goals of GirlVentures is to make outdoor adventure more accessible, the community encourages the recognition of privileges in forms that might not have been thought of before. Rather than focus on the community’s lack of privilege, the opposite is emphasized. Through setting intention, GirlVentures’ staff spend much of their time being analytical about their own positions. Each opportunity to set intention is an invitation to become
more aware of the way hegemony dictates our lives and how we might best be able to change
that. Whether these instructors practice this intentionality in their day to day, GirlVentures
allows for a space in which these individual intentions can be disseminated to the rest of the
community.

The final step in this community agreement is about the individual. Next, inside our
traced hands, we draw what we ourselves bring to this community. The final intention for the
flag is to officially and symbolically bring out the individual within the larger community. The
intention is to remind each person that they bring something unique to the community that holds
value even as we exist within the larger context of community. This is where each person can
bring in their individuality. Some people say that they bring in strength, others talk about their
ability to listen, desires to nurture, open heart, sense of fun, good cooking skills, confidence with
a map, and the ability to step back and hold space or the ability to provide guidance. This is how
the GirlVentures community begins.

This same ritual happens on the trips with the girls. The emphasis is on intention. We
name exactly what we want to see and what we do not want to see, bringing awareness to our
own actions and how we might move and occupy space. On course, instructors and girls alike
participate in the community agreement. The instructors share their words and hands just as
equally as the girls. Even with their authority, they sit in the space as a member of the
community, agreeing to what is decided on by the group.

Circles

The community, culture and courses that GirlVentures strives to create require a
concentrated amount of intentionality. This hyper-intentionality creates spaces of intense social
interaction. Some forms of GirlVentures’ intentionality show up most clearly in the language they create and use and the ideological structures which frame each day. The intentionality of language and thought within the GirlVentures structures leads to a re-habituating of ideas and values, asking that girls develop and maintain consciousness of themselves, their thoughts and the people around them.

One of these ideological structures revolves around circles. The GirlVentures’ space is made up of circles. These circles give form to the day regardless of the activities performed. Circles appear any time the community gathers together, whether it be for a meeting, recreation, or an activity. Circles appear as morning circles, chow circles, evening meetings, and any other activities that are done within circles.

When the course starts, parents and students participate in what GirlVentures calls the “Circles of Comfort.” Two circles formed with rope are placed on the ground. One is smaller and goes inside the bigger one. The spaces within and around the circles represent “zones of comfort.” The center circle is our “comfort zone,” the space between the littlest circle and the larger circle is the “learning zone” and the space outside of the largest circle is the “panic zone.” The “comfort zone” is where you feel the most at ease: comfortable, safe, relaxed, in control, etc. The learning zone is where you feel less comfortable, uneasy, heart rate is a little higher, but you are still able to focus on what you’re doing and learn from the experience. This idea implies that in order to learn, one must take a risk and step out into a space that challenges them. The panic zone is where you feel so out of control and so panicked that learning is impossible, and all you want to do is return to the comfort zone.

The Course Director (liaison between the course and the parents) facilitates the exercise by reading aloud certain activities. The activities range from “watching netflix in bed” to “river
rafting” to “rock climbing” to “sleeping outside” to “trying new foods” to “meeting new people” to “telling a friend something that might be hard for them to hear.” Each participant’s feelings about a statement determines where they go within the zones of comfort.

At the end, the Course Director explains the purpose of the activity. They explain that, on GirlVentures, they want girls to be in their learning zone. On GirlVentures courses, girls should expect to step out of their comfort zone and say “yes to try.” This does not mean, however, that they should ever put themselves in a situation where they feel unsafe physically or emotionally (i.e, the panic zone).

This exercise demonstrates the focus on intentionality within every moment on GirlVentures. This is the first activity that sets the tone and expectations for girls on course. Participants are perceived as going in between these circles of comfort throughout the entire trip, and they are asked to be aware of these transitions. This intentionality is marked and understood through the movement of the body. By placing these circles on the floor and having people walk to the zone that corresponds with their feelings about an activity, GirlVentures provides an association of movement.

This association can be understood by Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Bourdieu uses the term habitus, to describe practical belief as “a state of the body” (Bourdieu 1990, 68). He explains that social order works through the “disposition of the body” and that thoughts can be “triggered” just by “re-placing the body in an overall posture which recalls the associated thoughts and feelings” that will create a specific state of mind (Bourdieu 1990, 69). This reveals the tendencies by which individuals organize themselves in relation to their perception of the social world around them. By moving to different places within the circles, the girls are asked to associate a state of mind with each location. These zones are then carried within their bodies out

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8 A GirlVentures favorite because of the value they place on conflict resolution.
onto course. The physical experiences they have on course are understood through the intention of these circles of comfort. Using the frame, GirlVentures asks that girls re-habituate how they think about comfort in preparation for this trip.

Circle Structures

Circles on GirlVentures are intended to provide structure. The language in this space involves individual check ins, appreciations, naming feelings or goals for the day, ways in which one might want to do better, etc. The languages used within these circles are used in order to exemplify an individual’s intention. Girls are asked to be continuously conscious of themselves, re-habituating their conscious presence in the group. Each circle has a different intentional function that informs the structures of the day. Besides this, the egalitarian spatial position of a circle allows for a sense of belonging. On the first night of Staff Training, Bri reinforced the importance of the circle. She said that “circles facilitate belonging because everyone is included equally among each other.” The belonging is further emphasized by the consistency and habitual nature of the circle. The circle is something girls return to each day, which provides familiarity and consistency regardless of the changing landscapes. There is no head in a circle and the instructors place themselves among the girls, momentarily subverting authority even though it is still there. If girls are old enough, they are expected to lead the evening meaning (with minimal prompting from instructors). The instructors place the power into the girls hands as they use the space put in place by GirlVentures to fill it with their own intentions.

The day begins with a morning circle that girls are expected to attend after they wake up. The morning circle is short, including a check-in, sometimes including stretches. The morning
circle allows for the group to rejoin after their time away from each other during sleep. The start of the day is marked by this intentionally created space.

*Chow Circle*

Any activity or curriculum happens in a circle, and girls can call a circle at any time if they wish to convey something to the group. Every evening, before dinner is served, the group has a *chow circle*. The chow circle is the only circle that is held while everyone is standing up. The group comes together from their various activities and they begin by linking arms, elbows crossed over elbows. The circle starts with appreciations, wherein anyone can express something they appreciated about the events of the day. They can appreciate the weather, a moment, their own bodies, certain people, etc. The scribe of the day is then asked to read a quote they chose during the day. The group then asks the cooks what’s for dinner, there is a moment of silence, and then they pass the pulse.

During the moment of silence, everyone is asked to close their eyes and, when the Leaders of the Day decide, they pass the pulse. One Leader of the Day squeezes the arm of the person next to them, and then that person does the same to the person on their other side. This all takes place while everyone’s eyes are still closed. Once the pulse goes all the way around and reaches the one who started it, that person then says “peace love and chow.” The group then responds in unison, “chow love and peace.” Then the circle is broken so everyone can sit and eat.⁹

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⁹ On the particular Transitions Course that I observed, I joined their chow circle for the first time, and after the first pulse was passed I expected the LODs to say “peace love and chow,” but then Julia whispered to me “they like to do a speed round.” The group then (with their eyes open) proceeded to pass the pulse but as fast as they possibly could. This highlights how the act of making a space so intentional actually means that each course is going to have a very different group dynamic. This makes my presence change the course.
Girls enter the last meal of the day with the intentions created by the chow circle. The day is coming to a close and this moment stops them before they go and eat. Moments for appreciations are meant to encourage girls to reflect on their day positively, taking an intentional second to be thankful for something you might not have been conscious of otherwise. The quote is so that the girls can express the words that they find inspiring for themselves. The moment of silence is held so that if any girls have traditions before eating that they practice in their households, this is a moment for them to do so on their own. Passing the pulse allows for a feeling of connection to the group without talking or seeing. The deliberateness of standing for the chow circle allows for a warm and enveloping moment of coming together after the long days. Each chow circle, the girls are re-habituated into an intentional making of space before dinner. Every time they say an appreciation, they are re-habituating thought that reflects positively, letting this be the reality of their mindset.

*Evening Meeting*

The evening meeting is the circle held after dinner and before bed. It starts with a check-in. This check-in can be in the form of a “rose, bud, thorn,” where the individual expresses the best part of the day, a part where they are learning or growing, and the worst part of the day. The girls on the 2017 Transitions Course check in with each other by having the Leader of the Day (LOD) come up with a question for the day. The question can be anything like: “What are you looking forward to?”; “What are you proud of?”; or “What kind of fruit do you feel like right now?” It is left to the imagination of the LOD

A time within the evening meeting is also dedicated to turds/ownerships. This space is designated for people to express frustration with how something is going or to own up to
something that they might have done that they are not proud of or wish to work on. The act of creating an intentional space for airing these feelings allows for a chance to mitigate and normalize conflict. Instructors and girls are given space to step up and express their needs without fear of judgement or fear of saying something that would be difficult to bring up in any other context. The turd circle is a space created in order to habituate girls to think about their needs and give space to something that doesn’t come up naturally.

During one opening of the turd circle, Julia expresses wanting people to be more aware of when they use the phrase “you guys” when addressing a group. She brings it up because GirlVentures works with groups of non-male identifying people. In asking this, Julia encourages the group to be more intentional with the way they use their words. The turd circle allows for people to ask for more awareness, and therefore be more intentional with their actions. The evening circle opens a space that encourages action and speech that doesn’t always find a natural place in our everyday lives. The mind is rehabituated around these intentions, demanding their continued awareness of themselves and others.

Depending on the day and how much time there is, evening meeting can also be an instructional space, used for curriculum. Therefore, the environment constructed by evening meeting can be made for for absorbing information, expressing oneself or learning about others.

These circles move girls and instructors from one part of the day to the next. The curriculum and work done in these circles, however, are not necessarily helping girls become better at spending time in nature. The purpose of the circles is to help them better participate within their social lives. These are the forms of the GirlVentures community; the circles create both spatial and ideological structures which girls can depend on to align with each day.
allow for a transition from one activity to the next, provoking intentional thought with each new space.

**Transitions, State of Transition, Transitional Status**

While time within GirlVentures is incredibly structured, the frame within which girls are taken outside and away from their everyday lives when brought on GirlVentures exemplifies a process described in Victor Turner’s book *The Ritual Process*. It is explicitly reflected in the name of the GirlVentures course for girls entering high school: Transitions. This course is named for a specific time in a girl’s life when she makes the transition from middle school to high school. The very name of the course allows for a seamless interpretation using Victor Turner’s definition of liminality. Turner identifies three phases of passages of rites that include separation, margin, and aggregation. The first stage is signified by a symbolic removal of the individual from a “fixed point in the social structure, [and] set of cultural conditions” (Turner 1969, 94). Girls on GirlVentures courses are taken out of the structures of society to participate on these courses in outdoor settings. The next state is the “liminal period” in which the cultural realm does not reflect the characteristics of the past state in society. This reflects the GirlVentures space, which asks girls to become a member of a community that has different requirements, assumptions, and ways of living, than are experienced through their normal membership in society. The newness of this creates a liminal space for the girls, even though their time on course is highly structured around efficiency and time management. The third phase is when the passage is consummated and the participant can re-enter social life. This is exemplified by course graduations and the emphasis on transference, an act of intentionally recognizing what can be taken from this trip back into daily life.
Turner says that “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969, 95). Not only are the participants physically removed from society, to a space where none of their normal comforts support them, but they are also between two fixed states of schooling that are recognized in society. The transition to high school is often seen as a large step, not only in a person's academic life, but also in their social life as well. The Transitions Course was created purposefully in order to facilitate this social transition. The activities and structures of the Transitions Course make it unique from any other course. For one, this is the first GirlVentures course on which they spend time in the backcountry.

On course, the girls also take on roles and positions that do not exist within their lives back home. They become leaders, cooks, washers, scribes, navigators, medics, and many other jobs that are specifically assigned to them each day. These jobs change daily, destabilizing structures of hierarchy. While these jobs give them positions with certain status, they all get the opportunity to fulfill each one, making it so “distinctions of rank and status disappear” (Turner 1969, 95). They eat the same and wear the same and they often tend to “develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism” with each other just as Turner describes happens with “neophytes” in liminal spaces (Turner 1969, 95).

**Jobs: Status Transitions**

In many ways it seems that the Transitions trips (and many other GirlVentures courses) holds attributes of a liminal space. There lies a contradiction, however, in how deeply structured and intentional the space is. Girls are taken out of society in order to experience and live within a place that mirrors society in a hyper-simplistic yet also intense way. Every day, everyone has a
job that they are expected to perform. There are: the cooks (who assist instructors with cooking); the scrubbies (who assist instructors with cleaning); the scribe (who keeps the group journal); the Leader of the Day (is in charge of facilitating needs of the group and making sure everything runs as planned; the medic (who carries the student med (first aid) kit, can learn how to care for blisters and reminds everyone to drink water and eat food); the navigator (who carries the map and learns basic orienteering), and the Gear head (in charge of sorting gear and making sure camp is organized); and perhaps a few other jobs depending on the size of the group. Being that each day girls are assigned a new job, this also contributes to their structured equality. Each job is intentional in making sure each girl has a specified purpose for the day. The jobs structure the equal status of each girl, even as it serves to divide the labor.

The constant shift of job positions also demonstrates a constant transition of status throughout the trip. In taking on a new job each day, girls are constantly re-habituated to have awareness about their role. There is no time to settle into the given job, each day requires a new affirmation of the self in relation to the group. This continues to lend itself to the intentionality of nature, forcing girls to constantly think about their changing presence in the community.

Goals and objectives are experienced physically and mentally as the group learns how to accomplish tasks and overcome challenges together. They form and build as a team while undergoing physical and emotional exertion, intensifying their social experience. Even as it is used to physically separate the girl from everyday life, nature, in this case, is also used to intensify social experience. Even as the physical separation from everyday life demarcates a liminal experience, the structures of GirlVentures intensify the connection to the sociality of the group. The act of separating girls from society replicates the liminal phase, but the structures within the course create its own cultural understanding of the GirlVentures space.
Sola Ideologies: Liminal within the Liminal

One of the structural markers of the Transitions trip is the six hour sola. All GirlVentures courses incorporate sola time into the life of the course. It is not free time, but structured and intentional alone time. Girls are spaced apart from each other, instructors doing their best to keep them out of range of each other’s sight. Sola time is meant to be reflective and often a task is given. Girls are asked to write poems, make a gift for someone else, or just simply write (often with a prompt from an instructor). The emphasis, however, is on being alone. Girls should not spend too much time doing prompted writing so they can spend time becoming more comfortable with being alone with themselves. In the GirlVentures handbook, a quote by Anne Morrow Lindbergh is placed next to the section about sola time, setting the tone for sola. Part of the quote reads that “when one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too” and for Lindbergh, finding her inner core, is best found “through solitude” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 55). The six hour sola on Transitions is a culminating point, happening in the middle of the Transitions Course and is just as big of a moment as scaling a mountain. Now, rather than overcoming a physical challenge, they face a mental one. Within the liminal space of the GirlVentures trip, girls are then further physically separated from the daily life that was put in place by GirlVentures. The liminal experience of the Transitions trip structures another liminal space within it: sola time.

Around hour five of the six hour sola, the first thunder clap sounds of the afternoon build up. The instructors decide to leave the girls where they are on their pads(according to the lightning protocol). Eventually, cold and wet girls return from sola - they immediately join together, excited to be in each others’ company again. They are full of giggles. Bri has made biscuits in order to welcome them back after their six hours alone. This is something she has
done on every Transitions Course because, specific to her decisions and personality as a Course Director; she believes in marking the return with a form of celebration. It is the mark of the end of an ordeal, a coming together again. Coming together after an extended period of separation should bring a greater sense of community. On the sola, the girls are instructed to write a poem with prompts that expected self reflection. Each girl is also given a name of another girl and was asked to make that girl a gift. The gift could manifest in any individual form of creativity. Gifts are made from the nature around them, poems or letters are offered with their own words, songs, etc. This self reflection encourages girls to think about themselves, and then the gifts allow them to connect that self with the greater community.

What manifests during the coming together and the gift giving is a real sense of joy to be reunited again and a large amount of giggles, goofiness, and farts that they share. There is joyful laughter, and Kai says to Julia that she is glad this is not a campsite. Their ceremonial sola time is completed and marked by loudness in contrast to the silence they experienced with just themselves for so long. The time apart created social bonding at an exaggerated scale. These forms and structures within which the girls move give way to intense emotional moments, whether they be of sadness or joy. In this case there is joy. Through these structures, the girls are able to build together. They are able to build for themselves an experience that becomes entirely specific to their understandings of the space and relation to the community.

The time of the instructors during sola time is also intentionally used. During the six hour sola, the instructors take the opportunity to regroup and reflect on the course so far. This is a chance for the instructors to think about how the course is going, what is working and what might need to be changed. Bri describes this moment as a chance to “re-calibrate.” Often, at this point in the course, the instructors will have found a rhythm and a method that they fall into.
This is a chance to change the things that can be changed and expand on the things that are doing well. What Bri notices specifically with this group is that all of their leadership styles are really different from each other and they often compliment each other. Just as the girls spend time on their sola as individuals, to recharge before regrouping, the Instructor team, as a single unit, comes together and reflect.

Ideals of the Sola Mapped onto Outdoor Spaces

Going beyond the GirlVentures practices, I now take a further look at the ideals exhibited within sola time and apply them to many of my adult informants’ experiences with being outside. The habitus shared by the instructors in relation to the outdoors is that of a place to escape the trappings of society. This is a concept that has developed and solidified within the history of the concept of wilderness. Many of the GirlVentures’ instructors speak of the sense of calm that going outdoors gives them. The question I ask them, however, is loaded: “Why do you go outdoors?” This question already holds within it the assumptions that “the great outdoors” is a separate place and that there is a specific reason for going there.

While what I ask may immediately prompt their minds to think of their time “outside” as separate from their time in “urban” life, what they often emphasize is a feeling of being able to “recharge.” While I speak to Bri on the bank of the Courtright Reservoir, she talks about how the physical vulnerability that she feels in outdoor spaces makes her feel empowered rather than the opposite. In contrast to everyday urban life, this “feels fucking good” and it gives her a chance to recharge. These empowering feelings of vulnerability which recharge are also brought home and applied in her daily life. Similarly, Niki feels closer to the recurrence of the “natural
cycles” of the wilderness when she is hiking or backpacking. The perceived proximity allows her to “feel recharged and renewed in terms of a cycle of mental well being.”

For Skylar, the work itself feeds their soul. GirlVentures is a place where they can “recharge” and it is work that feels rejuvenating versus working at more privileged organizations. For Skylar this rejuvenation is possible when their work outdoors aligns with their beliefs. For Kai, being outside allows for a calm within her to settle that is not often felt within the bustle of urban life. She is able to feel “100% in my body when I’m outside; there’s no comparison,” and she is more capable of “being in that moment and content.” The mental spaces that help mark these places as separate from their everyday life allow for new energy and calm that enables them to better participate in society upon their return.

The same ideals that motivate my informants to spend time outside exist within the ideals and objectives of the sola. A quote in the handbook, next to the sola time description, notes how taking moments of solitude can be difficult. It is difficult to leave friends and family but “when it is done, I find there is a quality of being alone that is incredibly precious. Life rushes back into the void, richer, more vivid, fuller than before… It is not the physical solitude that actually separates one from another, not physical isolation but spiritual isolation” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 55). The belief that a person is something that must be refreshed and recharged in order to better engage with society pervades this quote and the intentions behind the practice of sola time, just as it motivates the instructors themselves to go to outdoor spaces. Sola is a time to reflect, be with yourself, improve the self and allow for self care. All of these actions allow an individual to return to the group, more ready to engage. Lindbergh further describes how “often, in a large city, shaking hands with my friends, I have felt the wilderness stretching
between us” and that “only when one is connected to one’s core is one connected to others” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 55). The time taken out in the wilderness enables one to be even better engaged with the social reality. There is a sense of escape, but it is escaping in order to connect with the self, enabling a return to be even more vibrantly a part of the social world. The GirlVentures handbook also expresses this intention of bringing girls on their courses, so they can return and “actively engage in leadership of thriving communities; communities that are strengthened by diversity, civic engagement, healthy choices and environmental responsibility” (GV Instructor Handbook 2017, 4). Even though it is not explicitly stated, there is a connection between the desires to go outside and into the wilderness, and the values of sola time, which take one even deeper into the experience of removal from any trace of society. The act of being alone and being outdoors are both tools to allow students and instructors to better engage with the social reality. Just as girls come back from sola time and are expected to better engage with the group, so too do some instructors express that going outside allows them to better engage with the social world around them. The goals of GirlVentures also express the hope of passing this sentiment on so that girls can go forth and better the world from which they have come. Sola time is a liminal space, meant to habituate a bonded sense of community upon their return to each other.

During staff training, Bri makes a point to mention that taking time “to ourselves” is very important when “doing work like this.” We can see here another parallel between courses and society. This further supports the sense of courses being intensified (however idealized) versions of society. The difference is that sola time is a structured part of every trip. Often, people in everyday front country life have to make the active decision for themselves to step away from
society in order to recharge by being outdoors. By creating outdoor courses just for girls, GirlVentures proposes a structure within which girls can and are supposed to recharge from the strain of society. Sola time is an intensified representation of the entire GirlVentures trip, allowing for the rest of the trip to reflect an idealized and intensified version of society. The intentionality of GirlVentures allows for them to shape this microcosmic society according to their own ideals and intentions. The GirlVentures trip and going outdoors is a chance to recharge from society. The sola time on course is a chance to recharge from the group. Normalizing the necessity of sola time within the social structure, allows for the courses that GirlVentures creates to be conceived as a normalized necessity and that taking time away from society is essential. Just as instructors feel that they need to spend time outside, so too does GirlVentures’ believe that sola time must be structured into the work.

Returning to Victor Turner’s concepts of liminality and communitas, both the GirlVentures course itself and sola time can be seen as forms of liminality. Sola time becomes a liminal space within the liminal space of a GirlVentures course. Both mark time away and both necessitate a symbolic return to the larger whole. On course, the return from the liminal sola is marked by further engagement with the community; represented by the shared “I am” poems and the handmade gift for another member of the course. When girls return home from their GirlVentures course, their return is marked by a graduation in which the girls must present a skit representing their time on course. GirlVentures also places high emphasis on transference. For GirlVentures, transference is the educators duty to make sure “students take what they have learned home with them” (GV Instructor Handbook, 2017, 56). The handbook emphasizes that instructors encourage each girl to learn how to voice her needs, and that each girl also needs to know how to “apply that to her school life among peers and in appropriate situations with adults”
What is less explicit or intentional is how the GirlVentures instructors unconsciously apply these understandings of transference to the reason they go outside. The instructors take what they learn from their time outdoors and apply to their life in urban spaces.

**Lights Between the Trees: Cracks in Structure**

The circles of GirlVentures represent the consistent structure that informs daily movements on course. The intentional circles of the GirlVentures space even structures free time, as it is built in to the day. Liminal cracks still show through the circle structures. These moments take place on the trail or in transition from one activity or moment to the next. These cracks demonstrate the time in which girls form bonds amidst the structured socialization of the GirlVentures circles and curriculum. If the social experience of the girls is intensified on GirlVentures, then this holds true for the unstructured moments, made to be even more intense due to how little they show up.

The night before the ascent of Mt. Shinn, the girls are getting ready for bed. Bri and I watch, sipping our evening tea. Lights bob around in the darkness signalling the spatial placement of the girls, but not the trees and rocks they walk past in the dark. Slowly a few lights begin clumping together. “In theory they are brushing their teeth, really they are just standing in a circle and talking,” Bri notes with the amused awareness of a seasoned instructor and Course Director. Brushing teeth is a part of the series of activities girls need to do in order to be ready in their tents by the time instructors say that they must be. Giggles bounce off trees and rocks that hide in the dark, surrounding the cluster of lights. At this age, teeth brushing isn’t something that needs to be regulated. At this point in the course (day 5) the girls have become much more
accustomed to each other and their conversations flow with more ease. The necessity to brush teeth places them in a position to chat aimlessly and for a moment the structure falls away. They are no longer just girls on a highly structured GirlVentures course, but human beings existing in that present moment for each other and their teeth.

These cracks within the structure give way to the communitas that develops within the group. They are no longer paying close attention to structure, they simply live within it, creating their everyday experiences. And in this way, the communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority. It is almost everywhere held to be sacred or ‘holy’, possibly because it transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships and is accompanied by experiences of unprecedented potency (Turner 1969, 128).

The simple act of brushing teeth becomes a social experience and a space where communitas shows through the spaces between structure. Typical understandings of brushing teeth are not often a place to socialize and chat. It is not usually a place where girls can feel the warm comfort of each other’s presence in contrast to the especially proximate darkness of the night around them. The lights on their head further enclose them within each other’s presence. The only things visible relate to their teeth brushing task and each other. The structure of the day remains reliable regardless of the activities and events of each day. But these unpredictable liminal moments between the structures of the community are what give way to their social bonding.

They are each other’s only social experience, and the need for closeness and social connection can only be satisfied with face to face interactions. In theory they are doing an activity required of them before they go to sleep, yet time slips away as they chat and giggle. In this place where all time is spent and regulated, they for a moment do not think of time. They
are just moving from one activity to another, teeth brushing, to bathroom, to bed, to sleep. These are the structured and expected activities. In between these activities they find themselves falling naturally into talking to each other, laughing, giggling, and now without effort. They have found so much more comfort with these people that they’ve come to share so much time with. They share moments of silence, joy, and sadness and now they are supposed to be brushing their teeth, but they really are just talking in a circle. In these moments, the space in between the teeth brushing is used to laugh, chat and connect.

More Cracks

After the 10 mile hike day, the group sits down for evening meeting. The curriculum planned for this night is called “if you really knew me.” This curriculum is meant to allow girls to express who they truly are if they feel comfortable with it. It goes around in a circle and girls are allowed to say pass if they can’t think of anything they want to share. On this trip, it starts out simply. Girls reveal things about their habits, pet peeves, favorite foods, etc. As the words pass around the circle, however, more personally intense information is shared by each girl. By the end, the whole group is caught up with emotion for themselves and each other, providing love and hugs for one another.

The instructors bring everyone close in a group hug, speaking a few words to let the girls know that they can talk to any of the instructors, any of their friends in the group, and to just generally let them know they are safe here. Even with this closeness, the girls don’t really seem to want to leave each other’s side to do the rest of what they are meant to do. The instructors again try to facilitate a close by offering that they play a quick fun game before bed, and the girls even respond positively to the idea. Even as the instructors try to gather them, however, they
don’t seem physically ready to leave each other’s side and move to another structured activity. Eventually Julia tells them they can all spend some time together in just one tent. This is something that is not generally allowed to happen (i.e., not part of the GirlVentures structure), as girls are expected to go to bed soon. Later, the instructors discover that in the tent, the girls went on to continue sharing, continuing to deepen their bonds and understandings of each other.

Here, the instructors try to provide the proper closure to a structured activity. The intense emotional response, while expected, does not always find a fit within the confines of the structure. Communitas is created within this between time of emotion, and then continues to be fostered in the tent after the activity. This moment in the tent, where they all equally share one space, can be seen as liminal in the way that it is in no way a structured part of the trip. This moment could only happen because of the structures set in place by GirlVentures and these intense emotional moments are what define the structures (by contrast) as effective parts of the course. What happens, in this instance, is an overpowering of the structure by the unstructured. The emotional bonding cannot be confined within an activity, and so the girls create a new place within and beyond the structure where they could continue to share.

Intensified bonding that happens on outdoor trips is also represented in Anna Tsing’s *Friction*. The nature lovers from Indonesia face similar experiences of social bonding. They “survive harrowing experiences together, worry through problems of identity and spiritual focus, and make passionate attachments” (Tsing 2005, 126). The time they spend outside allows them to “remake themselves in relation to the beauty, the skill, the danger, and the leadership opportunities” (Tsing 2005, 126). These “passionate attachments,” however, do not only show up in the structure of the adventure, but in the spaces pulled out from between these structures. Post-GirlVentures course photos portray fearless girls conquering the mountain top, but they fail
to catch the unstructured details as the camera flash would chase away the dark of night that hides stifled giggles and trusting whispers.

This chapter provided detail of the intentional use of space and the forms of consciousness that are re-habituated daily for the girls. What these intentions make room for are the opportunities that allow girls to learn how to assert themselves in any given space. By forcing a return to an intentional consciousness of themselves and the group, they repeatedly habituate an affirmation of themselves within the day, activity, or moment. These intentional moments encourage them to speak their minds, constantly engaging their own thoughts with those of the group.

Girls on the 2017 Transitions course hide from mosquitoes on their designated kitchen area
Conclusion

*But there is no right way to love, only the persistent effort to do it better*

- Narinda Heng
GirlVentures Instructor
Excerpt from her piece: *along the Bassac*

The course area of each GirlVentures trip incorporates a specific set of adventures and skills that are meant to ground the entire experience. The course area is constructed with intention. The GirlVentures ideologies are mapped onto these course areas and put into practice, even as they don’t always succeed. GirlVentures constructs its meanings and myths of empowerment, even as they are influenced by history, which are then transmitted into the course area and curriculum. The natural environment, the mountain, then becomes a tool in service of these constructions, while at the same time recreating imaginations of empowerment and perseverance.

Intentionality has shown up in many places within this project. It began with Julia intentionally owning her presence on occupied land in an attempt to subvert normative narratives of land use. Intentionality continued to show up within a hyper-rationalization of efficiency in time, energy, and risk. Being that every minute, movement of the body and item placement were set and thought about with extreme intention. Finally it shows up in the way girls consciously reaffirm their presence within a given space, whether this be in the job they perform, the thoughts they share, or the structures they enter. While, of course, they are also filling in the unstructured parts in between. These intentions have all been used to bring awareness to the wilderness spaces participants inhabit on GirlVentures courses.

Concepts of wilderness come with their own history, riddled with relations of power and definitions that dismantle their own ideological claim to naturalness. Wilderness has become a place for identity building and exploration, regardless of whether the constituting of it as such a
space was built on falsity or not. Part of its creation in America was reliant on its function in identity formation, and as it continues to exist in that way, it continues to be a place for the forming of identity. The ability to access this space of identity formation is still largely contingent on one’s ability to access the space. GirlVentures hopes to provide that access even as they reify dividing concepts of wilderness. In this way they take advantage of what wilderness space was originally constituted for. GirlVentures has their desired subjects of empowered girls, for whom they use nature to shape. This construction is, in fact, intentional. Humans create whatever “true” self they wish to extrapolate from their time in wilderness. GirlVentures creates their desired subject within the curriculum that is then mapped onto outdoor education and skill training. They too participate in the building of subjects, yet they hope these subjects look different than the ones who came before them. They are subsumed under the identities of wilderness that have come before, yet they use them for their own means and objectives of empowerment.

In The Nature of Whiteness, Yuka Suzuki’s research on white farmers in Zimbabwe seeks to understand how “does one make such claims [to belonging] as a former settler bearing the stigma of history? How does one defend a way of life based on visible inequalities in wealth?” (Suzuki 2017, 5). In the same way that Suzuki’s farmers use symbols in nature to construct white identity as belonging in Zimbabwe, so too it might seem that GirlVentures continues to renegotiate the complexity of their presence in the outdoors. These forms of recognizing privilege (rather than to deny it as in the case with white farmers in Zimbabwe) seem an attempt at opening up the possibility of mutual belonging in the outdoors. On the one hand, GirlVentures was created and instructors work in it because it allows for bounded constructions of gender within the outdoors to be challenged. GirlVentures gives a space for women to feel like they
belong in the outdoors. At the same time, participation in outdoor activities often involves
spending time in National Parks. Julia calls our attention to the stolen lands in which we spend
time, naming the people who lived their originally. It is not about justifying a right to be
outdoors or about belonging on these lands, but about naming the forms of power and privilege
that have given us access. There is hope that this awareness brings integrity to the goals of the
organization around subverting the dominant narrative by creating access for women and people
of color. These intentions bring voice and dialogue to circumstances and peoples that have long
been silenced.

Is there a qualitative difference between constructing identities as a means of justifying
colonization for example, and constructing identities with the intention of uplifting otherwise
marginalized populations? Perhaps this is where the critical use of intentionality comes to play.
What is the intention at the base of GirlVentures’ use of wilderness for identity formation?
Maybe the identity that GirlVentures seeks to support is simply about girls just being the most
themselves they can be. Maybe the authenticity they advocate doesn’t have to do with fantasies
of an original or pure self, but with the self that is found when somebody feels truly happy for
themselves, and not at the expense of others. I refer back to how Kai finds that when she is
spending time outdoors she feels “in my body when I’m outside, there’s no comparison, there’s
no ‘Oh I could be doing this instead’ or ‘I could be going to the gym,’ whatever, little
subconscious thing’s telling me to do something else more than I am. I am just capable of being
in that moment and content.”

Jay talks about not necessarily being closer to nature but “having this intimate experience
with it, with elements,” that can be experienced anywhere and not just in separate outdoors
locations. Jay hopes that people can be “more cooperative with the elements, or cooperative
with the other life forms on this planet, even with ourselves. I mean outdoor education does help teach that cooperation.” In words of authenticity and spending time in nature, Jay and Kai speak not to laying claim to land, but to relationships between themselves and others. Being the authentic self doesn’t look towards an origin story, but to the self that you create for yourself. This can be constructed, like everything. And if we can construct ourselves in a way that leads to richer cooperation with ourselves and other life forms, does this allow us to move forward? We try to be in a wilderness space no longer frozen in time. And the joy and bonding of girls in between structures gives us the first step. They are the teachers when they bring their whole selves to the community and again when they find the spaces in between to know each other, to bond and to love. They engage with the elements of their community and they do the work towards cooperating with one another.

This awareness does not absolve of us the fact that public land that was taken from Indigenous people is still used to play out identity building. For now, GirlVentures’ answer to this is to talk. GirlVentures believes that conflict should be identified and resolved, the conversation of conflict must be returned to. They construct dialogues and templates from which we learn how to use our voices to express our feelings while also learning how to listen to the other.

I want to believe in GirlVentures because they were an integral part of my growing up. And they are not perfect. There are still moments that are overlooked, taken for granted, and forgotten as we enjoy our access to public lands and other privileges that allow us to be doing this work. Nevertheless, part of the intention is to foster greater awareness, better communication, and honest dialogue. Toward that end, this project represents the power of one girl giving voice to what she has seen and experienced.
I go to fill my water bottle in the moonlight and I see the glow of the girls’ tents across the glow from Bri’s tent. We are situated a little ways off from their group, again so as not to intrude. The light is the only thing to demarcate location, and in the dark I can no longer see ridges, rocks or trees that sit in the space between. I only see their lights and darkness, and in that light they only exist within themselves, unable to see past their own light bubbles. Their sphere of light holds laughter, giggling, shrieks, dances, and movement. Bri’s sphere of light holds a single person preparing for the day ahead, mapping the course, and remembering the route. She prepares a day for those who remain oblivious within the light of their giggling and shrieking.

A light moving in the darkness towards the laughing light signals Julia’s approach. Her voice drifts out across the darkness, across the lake, clear and easy to hear before it is swallowed into the night and over the ridge. She gives a ten minute warning before quiet time and asks if anyone needs any help before going to bed. She is gentle, but firm, hoping deeply with all her heart that the girls go to sleep soon, so she can go to sleep soon, and so they are ready and have energy to focus for the next day. Every ounce of energy will be important for tomorrow. She doesn’t even realize I’m listening as her directions and voice seem to only exist within the circle of her own light and for the glow of the girls in the tents. She doesn’t in that moment think about the way her voice is the only human voice for miles around and how it is swallowed by the night. It is as much part of that night, of that location as anything else. The glows in the tent quiet down, a bull frog adds its voice to dance across the lake. The moon glistens, only visible to those without their own light. The trees stay where they have been, this whole time, and whole times before, doing what they always do but this time also housing young bodies between their
trunks. They need not and do not change, their safety and protection comes only from our presence and perception of them… and many other living creatures.
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