

Building Liberatory Community and Capacity at Camp: Lessons for Anti-Democratic Times

Briana M. Bivens and Maya Aleman
University of Florida

Abstract: What alternative spaces exist for children and youth to creatively construct their own futures, and what visions are they articulating for their lives and educational experiences? We are curious about 20th century summer camps — particularly those with social change missions — as a productive historical site from which to theorize how young people have built habits of democracy and cooperation, identified concrete levers for social justice, and developed a progressive political analysis in climates hostile to equality and transformative change.

The University of Florida, where we (Briana and Maya, co-authors of this article) study, teach, and work, is being reshaped in the image of conservatism. To comply with state law, courses that engage topics like race, gender, and identity were removed from the general education rolls and DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) funding was eliminated, foreshadowing the more systematic attack on DEI launched by the second Trump administration.¹ On the national scale, trans children are being stripped of gender-affirming supports, the Department of Education is in danger of being dismantled, and the federal government is trying its hand at dictating what can and cannot be taught in the nation’s classrooms. Children and youth are caught up in the hyper-partisan crossfire, arguably at the center of “culture wars,” as parents, policymakers, and pundits debate what can and should be taught in schools and higher education institutions young people themselves attend. At a moment when many people are talking *about* children and youth, and as schools and educational institutions increasingly become sites of censorship and surveillance, we wonder: What alternative spaces exist for children and youth to creatively construct their own futures? What visions are they articulating for their lives and educational experiences?

We seek to engage this question historically, looking to summer camps in the early- to mid-20th century that provided young people with critical opportunities for community-building and experimental democratic living. Summer camps attracted city-dwelling young people to the countryside for the leisure, freedom, community, and outdoor adventure promised by camp life. Camps were not uniform in their philosophies and approaches; they spanned the ideological spectrum, from camps that sought to socialize children and youth into prevailing social and cultural mores to those that aimed to structure camp as an experiment in cooperation, democratic living, and social change.² We are curious about 20th century summer camps — particularly those with social change missions — as a productive historical site from which to theorize how young people have built habits of democracy and cooperation, identified concrete levers for social justice and developed political analysis in climates hostile to equality and transformative

¹ Andrew Atterbury, “Florida Universities are Culling Hundreds of General Education Courses,” *Politico*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/14/florida-university-classes-ron-desantis-00183453>; Marjorie Valbrun, “U of Florida Eliminates DEI Positions, Appointments and Spending,” *Inside Higher Ed*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/quick-takes/2024/03/04/university-florida-eliminates-dei-positions-appointments>.

² Leslie Paris, *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); and Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

change. In times of political turbulence and uncertainty, we find power in historical inquiry not so much to draw direct connective lines between then and now, but to enrich the collection of possibilities for thought and action as we navigate what feminist historian Elsa Barkley Brown termed “an asymmetrical world.”³

We come to our shared interest in children and youth’s political capacity-building in anti-democratic times through our own histories as campers and community organizers. Briana spent seven years in Athens, GA as a community organizer, working in issue-based organizations and on electoral campaigns to advance social and economic justice through influencing local and state policy. She managed a winning campaign for a county commissioner, developed political education programming to build community members’ capacity to impact local policy, and supported volunteers in outreach efforts and direct action. She, and many other active local organizers, also experienced the exhaustion and debilitation of burnout, having witnessed the slow pace of change and struggling to build a sustainable relationship to organizing in a persistent climate of urgency. This experience with burnout that led to Briana’s passion for better understanding of social movement sustainability, especially to query the extent to which intergenerational, relationship-based approaches can support organizing and education for the long haul.

When Maya was in 6th grade, her elementary school in Carle Place, NY organized a long-term field trip at the end of the school year. For one week, the whole grade went to a sleepaway camp at The Ashokan Center in the Catskill Mountains. The Ashokan Center focuses on education and community building through integration of nature, history, sustainability, and art. Without access to digital technology, students came together to learn about the environment and its folk culture. Maya always remembered this experience as transformative. Camp was a place where she was able to interact with peers freely and explore social and physical spaces collaboratively. Especially when analyzing her current and past desires as a youth, she finds herself imagining spaces which are connective and collaborative.

U.S. Summer Camping and the Radical-Progressive Camp Milieu

Summer camps emerged in the late 19th century from two defining impulses. First, camp architects were motivated by the desire to protect the innocence of children — most often children living in urban areas — by bringing them closer to nature and evoking what Leslie Paris calls a “nostalgic countermodern” to urbanized, industrial trappings of modern life. Second, camp visionaries sought to bracket childhood as a precious sort of “time apart” from burdens of adulthood, reflecting the spirit of Progressive Era reforms across the criminal-legal, education, and social service sectors that invested in children’s welfare and development.⁴ Summer camps at the turn of the 20th century not only reflected anti-modern anxieties, but also, according to historian Abigail Van Slyck, helped to “invent a particular version of childhood.”⁵ Summer camps were part of the growing apparatus of Progressive Era institutions that produced and managed new definitions of childhood. Deputized to protect and care for children, summer camps joined public schools, after-school programs, and juvenile justice infrastructure in paradoxically embracing the creativity and rights of children while also seeking to channel and

³ Elsa Barkley Brown, “‘What Has Happened Here’: The Politics of Difference in Women’s History and Feminist Politics,” *Feminist Studies* 18, no. 2 (1992): 307.

⁴ Paris, *Children’s Nature*, 9 and 4, respectively.

⁵ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*, xxi.

contain young people's actions in ways adults deemed safe and appropriate.⁶ Summer camps reflected the notion that children deserved time for adult-directed leisure and creativity and that parents would benefit from embracing assistance from professionals and child development experts in the raising of their children.⁷

Early summer camps were operated by a range of entities — from foundations and religious organizations to social service agencies and charities — that socialized children into doctrinal values, cultural practices, and race and gender norms.⁸ Groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of America and the YMCA, for example, sought to inculcate Christian values, and Jewish camps emerged in the early 20th century to both challenge the discrimination Jewish children faced in other summer camps and to preserve Jewish cultural traditions.⁹ Boys and girls most often attended separate camps, and few children of color attended camp at all until after World War I.¹⁰ While most early summer camps were segregated by race, religion, and gender, organizations such as settlement houses sought to extend the benefits of bucolic camp life to a broader range of children, often curating religiously and ethnically diverse spaces for working-class children. While the history of summer camping reveals that there were some camps across the U.S. that served children across race, class, and gender lines, it was primarily urban, white, class-privileged children who benefited from the idyll of camp life.

A subset of camps, however, sought to transform dominant societal norms and socialize children into more marginal progressive and radical traditions. Mickenberg described how many radicals in the Popular Front — a broad political formation in the 1930s comprising progressives, socialists, communists, and others united against capitalism and fascism — saw “children as the logical outlet for their utopian vision,”¹¹ aiming not only to apply democratic and progressive ideals to the care and education of children but also to support children's capacity-building as social change agents. While radical and progressive summer camps taking shape in this context were certainly not a monolith, they usually embodied one or more of the following: a commitment to and/or outright affiliation with communism or socialism; affinity with the democratic, child-centered approaches of the progressive education movement; commitments to anti-racism and racial integration; and investment in and connections to the organized labor

⁶ See, for example, Dana Fusco, “History of Youth Work: Transitions, Illuminations, and Refractions,” in *Youth and Inequality in Education*, ed. Dana Fusco and Michael Heathfield (New York: Routledge, 2016), 39; Soo Ah Kwon, *Uncivil Youth: Race, Activism, and Affirmative Governmentality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27-44; Patricia Soung, “Social and Biological Constructions of Youth: Implications for Juvenile Justice and Racial Equity,” *Northwestern Journal of Law and Social Policy* 6, no. 2 (2011): 428-44; Geoff K. Ward, *The Black Child-Savers: Racial Democracy and Juvenile Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Robert Halpern, “A Different Kind of Child Development Institution: The History of After-School Programs for Low-Income Children,” *Teachers College Record* 104, no. 2 (2002): 178-211.

⁷ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 6; Julia Mickenberg, “The Pedagogy of the Popular Front: ‘Progressive Parenting’ for a New Generation, 1918-1945” in *The American Child: A Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Caroline Levander and Carol Singly (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 226-45; and Elizabeth Rose, *A Mother's Job: The History of Day Care, 1890-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 100-11.

⁸ Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness*, xxviii-xxix.

⁹ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 7; Sandra Fox, *The Jews of Summer: Summer Camp and Jewish Culture in Postwar America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023); and Jay Mechling, “Children in Scouting and Other Organizations” in *The Routledge History of Childhood in the Western World*, ed. Paula Fass (New York: Routledge), 592-612.

¹⁰ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 58, 74.

¹¹ Julia Mickenberg, *Learning from the Left: Children's Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

movement. Many camps were concentrated in the New York City area, where Jewish socialists and communists organized children's programs that brought Jewish cultural traditions and socialist, pro-labor values to the structure of camp life. Some camps were founded by Communist-led organizations and relied on the support of labor unions to enable kids' access to camp. Others sought to apply the principles of progressive education to summer camping, nurturing children's creativity and cooperation while organizing camp as an experiment in democratic living. The progressive and radical summer camps we discuss throughout this article were also defined by their racially integrated, coeducational composition, a transgressive choice in a camp landscape that predominantly reflected the gendered, racially exclusionary, and racially segregated norms of U.S. society.

The anti-Communist fervor of the Second Red Scare challenged the legacy and endurance of summer camps aligned with radicalism and progressivism. At a moment when racial integration and civil rights were expediently conflated with communism, broad swaths of Left-aligned organizations and individuals became targets of white supremacist and anti-Communist backlash. This political climate posed an existential threat not only to the organizations that sponsored some progressive and radical summer camps but also, by extension, to the summer camps themselves. For example, the International Workers Order (IWO) — a leftist mutual benefit society and insurance organization — was identified as a “subversive organization” by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and dissolved in 1954, imperiling summer camps like Wo-Chi-Ca and Camp Kinderland that relied on its support.¹² The anti-Communist purge extended directly to summer camps, too, with the State of New York launching an investigation into “Communist-established summer camps” in 1955 and HUAC demanding testimonies from many summer camp organizers targeted for their suspected subversive political affiliations.¹³

In addition to state-based targeting, summer camps faced racial violence and physical attacks by detractors emboldened by domestic containment and its underlying white supremacist, anti-integration agenda. Camp Wo-Chi-Ca is just one camp whose demise was hastened by racist backlash. After a series of mob attacks, and fears of escalating violence, the camp changed its name and relocated in an attempt to survive. But Red-Scare-induced financial troubles and low morale contributed to the camp's closure in 1954.¹⁴ Racialized backlash also conditioned the emergence of Camp Highlander, a children's camp run by the Highlander Folk School from 1956 to 1958. Highlander, the education center in Tennessee best known as a movement-building hub for adults in labor and civil rights organizations, absorbed the children's camp from Koinonia Farm, which was forced to find a new home for its camp after it was targeted by county officials enraged by its commitment to racial integration.¹⁵ For many radical and progressive summer camps, climates defined by white supremacist and anti-Communist backlash led to their demise. But others miraculously found ways to adapt and survive, drawing on

¹² Orion A. Teal, “The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping,” in *The Economic Civil Rights Movement*, ed. Michael Ezra (New York: Routledge, 2013), 60.

¹³ Paul Mishler, *Raising Reds: The Young Pioneers, Radical Summer Camps, and Communist Political Culture in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 132; Teal, “The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping,” 60.

¹⁴ June Levine and Gene Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca: Blacks, Whites, and Reds at Camp* (Walnut Creek, CA: June Levine and Gene Gordon, 2002), 151-205.

¹⁵ Nico Slate, “Between Utopia and Jim Crow: The Highlander Folk School, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Racial Borders of the Summer Camp, 1956-1961,” *The Journal of American History* 109, no. 3 (2022): 571-95.

community support and harnessing more explicit political education approaches with young people to weather coordinated assaults and equip children and youth with the tools for liberatory social analysis and action. As we ponder what we might learn from this summer camp legacy in our current anti-democratic moment, we propose that both sets of camps — the ones that endured and those that didn't — have something to teach us about the promise and possibility of children and youth's creative energy, cooperation, and justice-driven political action in hostile times.

Two Lessons from Camp Life for Anti-Democratic Times

Progressive and radical summer camps in the Progressive Era, interwar, and postwar periods provide a productive window through which to analyze liberatory, democratic space-making with and for young people. These spaces existed outside of schools, unfettering children from the conventions and confinement of the classroom and encouraging a creative, autonomous spirit. At the same time, many camps operated as sites of subversion, existing in contexts of political backlash. Orion Teal has also shown how the racially integrated communities that radical summer camps created buffered some of them from Red Scare attacks as community members came to camps' defense during moments of existential threat.¹⁶ We engage and build on this line of inquiry to explore how radical summer camps nurtured children and youth's cooperative ethos and political action within and against climates antagonistic to inclusive democracy, racial and social justice, and bold visions for a more equitable world.

Camp Life Lesson #1: Democratic, Cooperative Living for Social Change: As children came to be more widely regarded as rights-bearing subjects deserving of leisure, creativity, and autonomy, it was not uncommon for camp architects to claim camp as a democratic experience. Paris observed that "camp leaders of every generation extolled the democratic possibilities of camp life and promised to mold better citizens without coercion,"¹⁷ a lofty aspiration that didn't always translate into truly cooperative or intergenerational power-sharing. Many camps, for example, mimicked a rigid approach that echoed the efficiency and organizational logic of industrial life. Others, however, were inspired by the child-centered pedagogies and democratic education approaches of progressive education, striving to facilitate children's freedom, creativity, and decision-making. The radical and progressive camp milieu reflected an interest in democratic living and cooperation not as isolated practices but as part of a broader set of philosophical and political values. In many ways, camp was a reprieve from the regimentation and racial isolation most children experienced in their schools and communities. Children were often entrusted with decision-making power and contributed to planning and caring for the camp experience. Campers also learned about social issues through direct engagement with difference and social problems, building capacity for social analysis and effective action.

Between 1956 and 1958 Camp Highlander, the co-educational, racially integrated summer camp for children at the Highlander Folk School, reflected the values and commitments grounding Highlander itself. Highlander opened in 1932 as a hub for Southern movement-building, attracting folks in labor and civil rights circles from across the South eager to challenge capitalism, racism, and labor exploitation in their communities. Highlander staff rejected formalized curricula in favor of a democratized, bottom-up approach. Influenced by progressive educators and reformers like John Dewey and Jane Addams, Highlander's educational program

¹⁶ Teal, "The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping."

¹⁷ Paris, *Children's Nature*, 230.

was organized around the problems and knowledge that community members themselves brought. At residential workshops, Black and white movement-involved people lived, learned, and strategized together, a rare example of racial integration and collaboration in the Jim Crow South. The goal, ultimately, was to cooperatively build capacity for social analysis and action that workers and community members could incorporate into their own lives and workplaces.¹⁸

This spirit of grassroots knowledge production and democratic living was expressed at Camp Highlander, too. Young campers participated in outdoor and creative activities and shared in the maintenance of the camp experience, building community across lines of race and gender. The first camp newsletter in 1956 described how children worked together on tasks such as meal preparation and clean-up not simply for the sake of cultivating work ethic but for the explicit, collectivist purpose of developing “responsibilities to other than our own interests.”¹⁹ Campers contributed to the newspaper, too, furnishing creative stories, songs, and drawings and recounting tales of swimming, hiking, and dancing at camp.²⁰ In a 1957 report, camp staff cited how the outpost camping experiences were especially productive in cultivating a spirit of collaboration, noting the level of community care children learned to express in a situation where they had to figure out how to build a fire, administer first aid, and cook outdoors.²¹ In all, staff and counselors’ writings of camp life focused less on the specificity of the activities themselves and more on the quality of relationships and interdependence the activities made possible.

Camp staff understood cooperation and democratic living as an avenue through which to develop children’s social consciousness and prepare them for future social change work. They noted how the cooperative contours of camp life helped children to “mature socially and realize the definite responsibilities which will eventually be theirs as citizens.”²² Yet, historian Nico Slate observed how initially, the camp wasn’t very direct in its socio-political education, adopting a color-blind approach to racial integration and failing to forge explicit conversations with campers about race and racism. Exposure to racial difference through cooperative living was not sufficient to provide children with the critical analysis needed to identify and challenge racial hierarchy. However, as Highlander intensified its role in the civil rights movement and increasingly drew the ire of segregationists, Slate explained how “its approach to youth education changed.”²³ Slate argued that after police raided Highlander in 1959 looking for a way to compel its closure, camp life at Highlander took on a decidedly more activist stance. Highlander distanced itself from the colorblind approach of Camp Highlander, launching its Youth Project in 1960 with the explicit goal of equipping youth with concrete theories and strategies they could harness to uproot Jim Crow and agitate for desegregation in their

¹⁸ For accounts of Highlander and its educational approaches, see, for example, John M. Glen, *Highlander: No Ordinary School* (2nd Ed.), (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996); Frank Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander* (Winston-Salem: John F. Blair Publishing, 1975); Stephen Preskill, *Education in Black and White: Myles Horton and the Highlander Center’s Vision for Social Justice* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021); and Dale Jacobs, ed., *The Myles Horton Reader: Education for Social Change* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

¹⁹ “Appendix,” *The Koinonia-Highlandish News*, July 15, 1956, box 56, folder 11, Highlander Research and Education Center Records, 1917-2017 (hereafter HREC), Wisconsin Historical Society (hereafter WHS), Madison, WI.

²⁰ “Appendix,” *The Koinonia-Highlandish News*, July 15, 1956; *The Koinonia-Highlandish News*, August 11, 1956, box 56, folder 11, HREC, WHS.

²¹ “Camp Koinonia-Highlander Report: Summer Season 1957,” 1957, box 56, folder 11, HREC, WHS.

²² “Camp Koinonia-Highlander Report.”

²³ Slate, “Between Utopia and Jim Crow,” 582.

communities. Highlander's children's and youth camps illustrate how the spirit of democratic living and cooperation they sought to cultivate evolved into more explicit activist strategies, preparing young people to work together for anti-racist social change.

Further north and decades earlier, the Workers Children's Camp — or Camp Wo-Chi-Ca, as it was better known — also embodied an ethos of multiracial cooperative living. Wo-Chi-Ca was founded in New Jersey in 1934 for working-class children, many from union families. Like other radical children's camps, it was supported by the IWO and labor unions who recognized the camp's revolutionary potential. A memoir written by a former camper, June Levine, and her partner, Gene Gordon, recount what made Wo-Chi-Ca unique: "It was co-educational, secular, racially and ethnically diverse, not folklore-centric, and "dirt cheap."²⁴

Wo-Chi-Ca was a space for children to develop and practice liberatory values in camp life that they could carry with them out into the world. The goal, in other words, was for "children to experience 'The World of the Future' today, through shared living with those of different racial and ethnic backgrounds" so they could challenge oppressive social hierarchies. Former campers recalled activities that afforded children time and freedom to practice democratic ways of being, including electing a "bunk president," running weekly town meetings, and engaging in self-expression (through art, song, and dance, for example) that would "aid them in understanding and appreciating each other's ideas and differences." Campers' exposure to the habits and possibilities of labor movement-building and democratic living spanned beyond the interpersonal, too. They engaged directly with the labor movement, visiting picket lines and marching alongside hosiery workers, cement workers, steel workers, and masons. Campers were exposed to revolutionary concepts less through traditional instruction and more through the arrangement of relationships and processes at camp. Refuting claims that Wo-Chi-Ca was a Communist indoctrination camp, Levine and Gordon insisted, "The Marxism the kids experienced was in the fee structure that subsidized the poorest children, in the co-op where wealth sharing was applied to daily distribution of candy bars [...], in the internationalism the kids were taught, in the songs they sang, in unionism, and foremost in black-white unity." Many campers fondly remembered how the prefigurative politics nurtured at camp inspired them in adulthood, attracting them to social work, education, and movements of the New Left where they put anti-oppressive commitments to work for social change. While the camp's democratic, anti-racist, and activist spirit ultimately couldn't insulate it from the Red Scare attacks against these very values, the history and legacy of Wo-Chi-Ca exemplifies how children have practiced and can practice democracy and social change within and against political repression.

Camp Life Lesson #2: Community-Building through Culture and Folklife: Camp communities were also sustained by creating vital connections with history, nature, and place. In keeping with the anti-modernization impulse characterizing the 20th century summer camp movement, some camps focused on creating connections through reviving the folkways of the surrounding area, engaging young people in storytelling, song, and culture-sharing.

Camp Woodland, a progressive and racially integrated summer camp founded in 1938 and located in the Catskill Mountains of Phoenicia, New York, was one such camp that understood how folk traditions could nurture community-building and liberation. Mishler described how Camp Woodland's approach was anchored in relationship-building, as camp architects sought to

²⁴ Levine and Gordon, *Tales of Wo-Chi-Ca*, 2. Quotes in the immediately following paragraph are from Levine and Gordon, 3, 11, 20, and 110 respectively.

cultivate mutual respect through connecting progressive philosophies emerging from urban areas with the knowledge and resources possessed by the local rural community. Norman Studer, the founder and director of Camp Woodland, emphasized the importance of folklife and collaboration, seeking to ensure that campers were well-versed in the culture of the surrounding Catskills communities. Studer invited local residents to camp, cultivating mutual learning environments and creating space for community members to “share stories, songs, and life histories with children.”²⁵ Campers also immersed themselves in the local area, traveling to community sites with radical histories and visiting “local craftsmen, woodsmen, storytellers, and musicians.”²⁶ Campers strived to preserve the folklife of the region through documentation, even serving as docents at a local museum.²⁷

Camp Woodland facilitators also nurtured connection to local folkways through music. A book titled *Folk Songs of the Catskills* began as a “unique quest for rural folklore, folklife, and folk history” by the city children and adult staff members of Camp Woodland. Campers assisted composers Herbert Haufrecht and Norman Cazden in writing down lines of folk songs the musicians performed for them.²⁸ The collection of these unique oral traditions, songs, and stories led to the creation of more folk songs which spoke to the current events and feelings characterizing the local community. For example, Herbert Haufrecht’s “We’ve Come from the City” addresses “local resistance to the Lackawack Dam, which drowned several villages.”²⁹ Folk songs that Woodland campers helped to document and preserve were performed at the annual folk festival, uniting in song local community members, campers, and visitors from surrounding areas.³⁰

When Camp Woodland finally faced its own anti-Communist and segregationist probes — an increasingly common occurrence among the progressive and radical camp milieu — an attack on the camp felt like an attack on the locals. Teal documented how the camp’s interracialism and strong community ties enabled it to withstand Red Scare attacks. The Camp Woodland Parents’ Association rallied behind the camp and its values, boycotting nearby segregated establishments and advocating against calls for the Camp Director to undergo a loyalty oath. By using art and folklore to build relationships with the community and generate buy-in around shared progressive values, Camp Woodland survived the threats of the Cold War and operated until 1961, closing due to financial troubles rather than the common plight of racist and anti-Communist opposition.³¹

The practice and preservation of folkways and cultural life also anchored Camp Kinderland. The camp, founded in New York in 1925 during a time of thriving Jewish radicalism in the city, was firmly situated “within the milieu of the Communist-allied working-class movement” and immersed campers in Yiddish cultural traditions.³² In their book honoring the centennial of

²⁵ Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 103.

²⁶ Emily Paradise Achtenberg, “Friends and Neighbors: Remembering Pete Seeger and Camp Woodland,” *Monthly Review* 66, no. 8 (2015): 17.

²⁷ Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 104; Achtenberg, “Friends and Neighbors,” 17.

²⁸ Norman Cazden, Herbert Haufrecht, and Norman Studer, *Folk Songs of the Catskills* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1982), 1, 4.

²⁹ Achtenberg, “Friends and Neighbors,” 17.

³⁰ Cazden, Haufrecht, and Studer, *Folk Songs of the Catskills*, 4.

³¹ Teal, “The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping,” 65-68; and Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 106-07.

³² Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 89.

Camp Kinderland, former camper and staff member Fay Itkowitz and Mitchell Silver, respectively, recounted the cultural dimensions of camp programming that “stressed the Yiddish language, an awareness and pride in the contributions of Jewish immigrants to the American labor movement, and an acquaintance with the histories of freedom struggles around the world.”³³ Through song and dance, campers learned about Jewish history, liberation struggles, and the labor movement. For decades, dance teacher Edith Segal combined modern dance and “folk dances of Eastern Europe” to facilitate cross-cultural communication and connection.³⁴ She choreographed dances for campers that engaged directly with both contemporary social issues and histories of violence and resistance, including the “Tableau of the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters” that artfully conveyed Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.³⁵ Because dance didn’t require verbal communication, participants and spectators from different backgrounds and countries of origin were able to understand one another.

The strong sense of community that was created, in part, through celebration and practice of Yiddish cultural traditions helped to sustain Kinderland in times of crisis. Kinderland, like a handful of other radical children’s camps, was sponsored by the IWO. When anti-Communist hysteria landed the IWO on HUAC’s list of subversive organizations, Kinderland was directly threatened. Teal outlined how the New York State Insurance Board attempted to wrest control of Kinderland and foreclose on the property, threatening the camp’s very existence. Yet, Kinderland’s strong network of relationships enabled it to weather the threat. Citing one camp supporter, Teal described how community members raised \$100,000 in three days to avoid the foreclosure, demonstrating Kinderland was “not just a camp, but a cause.”³⁶

Camp Kinderland continues to thrive today at its new home in Massachusetts. It’s not centered as explicitly in a working-class politics and no longer aligns itself with the Communist Party, but instead engages a more expansive array of issues and adopts an intersectional, internationalist orientation to social justice. Nevertheless, campers continue to participate in many of the same cultural traditions sown in the camp’s early days: They attend marches, perform social justice musicals that integrate history and tradition, and participate in the “Peace Olympics” in which campers learn about history and progressive values through themed sports competitions.³⁷ Through art, dance, and other expressions of cultural sharing and folklife, these summer camps nurtured community and, as Teal described, a common “sense of purpose”³⁸ that built their capacity to stave off threats to their very existence.

Prefiguring Democracy, Building Intergenerational Capacity

Radical and progressive summer camps in the 20th century facilitated young people’s cooperation, democratic living, and engagement with social and cultural difference. Campers practiced their emerging progressivism in both the daily structure of camp life and through direct exposure to and action against societal inequalities. Through daily cooperation and democratic

³³ Fay Itkowitz and Mitchell Silver, *Kinderland: The First Hundred Years* (Tolland, MA: Camp Kinderland, 2023), 8.

³⁴ Mishler, *Raising Reds*, 92-93.

³⁵ Itkowitz and Silver, *Kinderland*, 42.

³⁶ Teal, “The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping,” 61.

³⁷ Itkowitz and Silver, *Kinderland*, 84, 115-29; and *Kinderland*, directed by Amy Grappell (Tel-Aviv, Israel: Film Platform, 2021), <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/Kinderland>.

³⁸ Teal, “The Moral Economy of Postwar Radical Interracial Summer Camping,” 67.

decision-making, children and youth learned habits and ways of being that would be useful for liberatory social action in labor and civil rights movements. We don't wish to suggest that the camps we've spotlighted were havens of young people's autonomy or untouched by the kind of oppressive logics that can creep into even the most well-intentioned social change projects. It was common, for example, for summer camps — including those discussed in this paper — to appropriate Indigenous practices and motifs as part of the romanticized nostalgia for the pre-modern that camps sought to approximate.³⁹ As was the case in Camp Highlander's early days, it's also true that racial integration wasn't always accompanied by the development of a shared anti-racist analysis, limiting the potential for structural change.⁴⁰ Finally, the spirit of democracy and cooperation that camp coordinators sought to instill with and among campers didn't mean that adult-child power hierarchies were absent. Paris, Fox, and Slate have shown how children and youth contested and negotiated camp visions put forth by adult facilitators, reshaping and subverting camp life to match their own values and desires.⁴¹

Despite the complexities — and, often, transience — of radical summer camps, they offer an example of how liberatory values can manifest at the level of relationships, shoring up collective capacity to create structural change. At camp, children and youth worked together — across differences of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion — to make decisions about their camp experience. They rooted themselves in place and culture, embracing folkways and traditions to construct a shared sense of identity and articulate common stakes in uprooting social hierarchies. In hostile contexts, some camps demonstrated a capacity to adapt their political education approach to more directly engage young people in liberatory struggles. Others centered culture, identity, environment, and community relationship-building in their political strategy, supporting their ability to endure backlash and nurture the changemaking capacity of young people. During our current moment when anti-democratic discourse and policy threatens the institutions and futures of young people, the enduring legacy of radical camp culture serves as a welcome invitation to curate micro-spaces with and for young people that seed participatory democracy in both quotidian and structurally transformative ways.

³⁹ Van Slyck, "Living Like Savages: Tipis, Council Rings, and Playing Indian," in *A Manufactured Wilderness*, 169-213; and Paris, "Tans, Tepees, and Minstrel Shows: Race, Primitivism, and Camp Community," in *Children's Nature*, 189-225.

⁴⁰ Slate, "Between Utopia and Jim Crow."

⁴¹ Paris, "Between Generations: Tensions in the Camp 'Family,'" in *Children's Nature*, 132-62; Fox, "'Is This What You Call Being Free?': Power and Youth Culture in the Camper Republic," in *The Jews of Summer*, 149-72; and Slate, "Between Utopia and Jim Crow."