I grew up in one corner of the American West where two events marked my developing environmental sensibility. I had my “machine in the garden” moment in Seattle during the mid-1970s when I was eight years old, the age when geographer Yi Fu Tuan says we begin to develop emotional attachments to places. I remember stopping in my tracks as I passed a window overlooking my elementary school playground. Transfixed, I watched through the frame as a bulldozer chewed aging concrete like a mechanized Cookie Monster. The machine rolled through rusting jungle gyms and tetherball courts and across the painted yellow lines of foursquare courts and hopscotch games. The bulldozer revealed brown dirt just inches below the surface.¹

My parents are not baby boomers or old hippies. They were born too early. I was born too late. More like square beatnik-wannabes, they identified with aspects of the West Coast counterculture. But like most Americans, they expressed their politics in choices about how and where their children should be educated. Unsatisfied with conventional schools, they helped to create the first alternative school in the Emerald City. With their comrades they set out to salvage a dilapidated, antique South Seattle schoolhouse. It was one of the many crumbling wooden school buildings that neighborhood-level activists “liberated” in the early 1970s. The

upper floor remained boarded up, too dangerous to use. Alternative schools like mine always seemed to be marginal, on the verge of elimination by the fire marshal or by a school district that indulged us but saw little value in our experiment. While our parents endured interminable vegetarian “potlucks” and reached toward that ever-elusive 1970s goal of consensus, we ran unsupervised through the Douglas fir–plank halls bored out of our minds.

A few years later we created a second institution in a similar recycled school building. I spent six more years at Alternative Elementary No. 2, which inhabited one-half of the hulking University Heights School, another turn-of-the-century wooden schoolhouse in Seattle’s North End, just blocks from the heady atmosphere of the University of Washington campus. The timbers of those halls and stairwells still creak in my head. Again, we occupied only a portion of the building. The other half operated as the “regular” or “straight” school. We made fun of the straight kids’ artwork, a seasonal parade of identical turkeys and snowflakes plastered to their windows. We, on the other hand, took outsized pride in spending hours carting and spinning fresh wool, boiling plants to make natural dyes, and crafting God’s eyes and horrible half-finished wall hangings.

Like some charter schools in recent years, experimental schools like these existed in tandem with the public school system. The “alternative” aspects could be traced to a counterculture that hoped to create “free schools” and, it was hoped, freer children. They also inherited an older model of Dewey-inspired “progressive education” and even deeper Rousseauian assumptions about the natural state of childhood. My mother, a recovering education major, felt especially inspired by recent heretical experiments like Summerhill, the famous British boarding school where adults handed kids the tools and materials to build their own playgrounds and where the young participated directly in collective decision-making.

In place of traditional desks in rows, between grades one and six I sat with kids at collective tables or in a circle on an expanse of carpet. We shared songs and feelings each morning in the style of the era’s consciousness-raising groups. A poster depicting the “whole earth” hung on the wall above the terrariums we tended to learn about ecology. Instead of the Pledge of Allegiance, we sang, “Roll on Columbia” and “We Shall Overcome.” Reflecting the shifting lines of authority and the remaking of children’s autonomy that grew from the social movements of the 1960s, we always called teachers by their first names: Pat, Rick,
Laura-Lee. We emblazoned the school slogan – “Kid Power!” – on the shirts we designed.²

The bulldozer that destroyed my playground wasn’t meant to traumatize. It was part barn raising and part spatiopolitical intervention on behalf of children at the height of the Earth Day era environmental movement.

Once the bulldozer had done its work, we did much of the rest by hand. With the old concrete and steel cleared away, we dismantled the playground’s rectilinear legacy. We heaved salvaged wood planks to form rickety platforms for the multileveled play structures, a more “natural” and creative place for us to play. Logs, cable, and scrounged lumber gave shape to a new space of possibilities. Ironically, we built this new environment from the detritus left behind by construction projects in Seattle’s postwar metropolitan expansion. Much of it likely contained strong doses of creosote and heavy metals. We strung old tires together with chain to form a web of black rubber we could climb. Ropes and an old utility post became a permanent maypole to swing around. Leftover cement culvert tubes made for intriguing underground passages. A bed of pungent wood chips fresh from the lumber mills on Washington’s Olympic Peninsula cushioned us when we fell. A splinter from one of those wood chips remains embedded in the palm of my hand, though that playground is long gone.

We rarely spoke any explicit language of environmentalism or used the word “ecology,” but we constructed a playground intended to provide a more “natural” and “wild” field for our play, a landscape in which, liberated, we might embody and enact our parents’ hopes for environmental and social change. By the 1980s, of course, many of these pedagogical trends went mainstream in affluent school districts throughout the United States, especially the pioneering adventure playground style. In the early 1970s it all seemed very revolutionary and handmade, the special link between children and environment self-evident, natural.³

The second episode in my dawning environmental awareness featured a bus, not a bulldozer. After sixth grade I left the cozy, communal, predominantly white alternative school for Meany Middle School. The transition to middle school is always hard. But in the late 1970s at the


height of the school desegregation era in Seattle, the transition seemed especially fraught. With dramatic images of violent white resistance to busing in cities like Boston hovering in the background, Seattle voters approved a voluntary busing program to avoid a court order and to retain some control over the plan before the federal government could force the city to desegregate its public schools.  

More than twenty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, like other West Coast cities, Seattle schools and neighborhoods remained significantly segregated by race. On their second try, and after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Seattle voters finally passed an open housing ordinance in 1968. Seattle’s segregated urban geography persisted. A waterway called the “ship canal” built to connect Lake Washington and Lake Union in the 1910s formed the city’s most obvious racial line of demarcation in the 1960s, a moat with drawbridges no less, dividing two sections of the city. To the north lay a mix of mostly working-class and middle-class whites, like my family, living in inner-suburb bungalows built near the old trolley lines of the 1920s. Post–World War II “ticky-tacky” houses sat further north near the city limits. Closer to Lake Washington the neighborhoods were the most affluent, as they are still.

On the other side of the moat, to the south, where I attended Meany, the neighborhoods were more diverse and varied by race, socioeconomic status, and environmental conditions depending on proximity to the lake, to industrial corridors, and to the hills and valleys between. My new school stood just two blocks from the Mount Zion Baptist Church on Madison Street, the historic African American center of the city. The several square miles to the south of Madison and Meany also held the city’s highest concentration of poverty at the time. The history of discriminatory lending practices that had partitioned South End neighborhoods proved much more indelible than the yellow lines on my old playground.

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The Seattle School Board, with the support of the Church Council of Seattle and the District Wide Advisory Committee on Desegregation, hoped the busing program would level the playing field between Seattle’s neighborhoods. In the Seattle plan, a limited percentage of kids from each neighborhood would swap places, attending middle school in one neighborhood and high school in another. After the official end of the Vietnam War, at least 45,000 South East Asian refugees, out of a total of 100,000 who relocated to the United States each year after 1975, arrived in Seattle. The public schools hoped to integrate a large population of these newly arrived refugee children from the wars in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam who settled with their families in Seattle’s South End neighborhoods, competing for limited space. The hallways of Meany epitomized the dynamic and contested terrain of western urban life at the end of the decade.6

The neighborhood where I lived north of the University of Washington formed one of the islands of support for the voluntary busing plan amid significant white opposition. When the busing era commenced, many white middle-class families in the North End who could afford to send their kids to parochial schools or to burgeoning private academies did. Or they moved to spreading “edge city” suburbs and school districts on the other side of the city line. At the time, my father, a community college professor and teachers’ union leader, active in our Democratic Party precinct, took me along to canvass for candidates in the 1970s. He was committed to the idea of desegregating public schools as well as improving teacher’s wages.

On the morning of my first day of school at Meany in the fall of 1979 I woke up a bit earlier than in previous years and climbed on a bus at the end of my block to make the five-mile trip south. If I had been aware, I might have noticed young brown faces looking back at me through school bus windows moving in the opposite direction on a parallel

journey. The goal was to create a more equitable mix of students and resources. The inequality was obvious, even to my seventh grade eyes. I saw it in the landscape. When our bus rolled through the streets around my new school, I immediately noticed the deterioration of the housing stock as we passed farther away from the ship canal and closer to the neighborhoods near Madison – with the exception of conspicuous proud homes girded with short chain-link fences and well-tended flower rows. Unlike my neighborhood of ample public green spaces and regularly city-tended sidewalks and streets, the neighborhoods closer to the Central District were underserved.7

In hindsight and with attention to historical context, I now recognize that I was looking at homes that either were owned by absentee landlords or, due to redlining and other forms of federally sanctioned and locally practiced lending, real estate, and employment discrimination, reflected the fact that the predominantly African American residents had fewer chances of raising capital to grapple with material conditions in their neighborhoods. At the time I also had no idea of the extent to which people in the Central District had already been working for years collectively in those neighborhoods – especially between the 1940s and 1970s – to change this equation of power, to better influence the shape of their environments, make them healthier, and gain access to safe housing and jobs.

Even as a child experiencing the contrast between these neighborhoods within the city it was obvious that some people – like North End families who had the power, capital, and sway – could more easily determine the conditions of their communities for their children. As we moved across the city in buses, we kids were finally being asked to help heal these environmental and social rifts. But had the rifts been created in our name in the first place?8

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After World War II, people living in the United States reconceived their relationship to the environment and to youth. This was no coincidence. In this book I argue that these developments were inextricable. With the

7 In other cities, activists made environmental health a crucial aspect of their activism during and after the War on Poverty; see Robert R. Gioielli, Environmental Activism and the Urban Crisis: Baltimore, St. Louis, Chicago (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).
double meaning in the title – Razing Kids – I hope to capture the central and contradictory role that children played in the development of both heightened environmental concerns and increasing environmental inequality after the war. To raise healthy youth in an era that putatively elevated children and family also seemed to require razing, or at least neglecting, the environments and health of some youth so that others could thrive. The postwar American West showcased this dynamic at different scales. Workers, policy makers, and reformers linked their anxieties about youth to environmental risks as they debated wartime housing developments; worried about the impact of radioactive particles released from distant hinterlands; or obsessed over how riot-riddled cities, rural work camps, and pesticide-laden farms would affect children.9

Both categories – youth and environment – have histories. Yes, we were all children once. But there is no monolithic childhood. The social meanings and definitions of childhood and adolescence are historically diverse, contested, and uneven as my story of the two Seattles suggests. Historians of childhood and youth place the idea and conditions of these designations in deeper historical context. They explain that what childhood meant over time depended on race, place, environmental conditions, gender, and class positions.

Razing Kids focuses less on the lives and agency of children or a search for the child’s point of view. Young people often sought autonomy and even argued for new legal status for themselves, especially during the 1960s and 1970s. But for the most part this book emphasizes how adults in their roles as activists, policy makers, regional reformers, corporate leaders, and allies acted on their concerns about youth and what they believed youth needed in order to be healthy. In the process they obviously projected a great deal onto children as they made sense of environmental change. I attend to the words that these actors in the past used and defined. Most often I employ the more encompassing word “youth” in order to include the different meanings that people in the past attached to this nebulous category.10

Yet it is important to recall when and how many of the contemporary terms we use and the categories and meanings we assign to youth and environment first took hold. The nineteenth century marked a particularly pivotal moment in the creation of contemporary notions of childhood and youth in the United States, for instance. Middle-class reformers of that era staked out many of the meanings and assumptions we still hold about youth. Historian Steven Mintz argues that these elements “continue to structure children’s experience.” Modern notions of the teenager and even the use of the term “adolescence,” for instance, took hold in this era as well. Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive era have studied in detail how an emerging middle and professional class nurtured the modern view of childhood, part of their elaboration of a bourgeois domestic sphere and the rise of the “compassionate family” as a model. The expansion of kindergarten, high school education, and the “proliferation of adult controlled environments” during this period paralleled new understandings of childhood as a distinct stage of life requiring private and eventually state support to ensure healthy development, protection, and proper citizenship.

New professional groups including social workers and urban planners responded to the perceived moral disorder, as well as the real abuse and exploitation that accompanied industrialization and nineteenth-century urbanization. They defined new scientific understandings of child development and reform. In Chicago, for instance, reformers pioneered a separate juvenile court system and new ways of policing delinquency that often meant to protect children. In doing so they helped to mold modern conceptions of youth. In the process reformers and new experts created ways of thinking about youth in tandem with the rise of the bureaucratic state. These reformers were the first to systematically define who qualified as a child or an adolescent in ways that we still recognize. They invoked these modern categories in debates about housing, work, play, poverty, race, crime, gender, pollution, risk, and consumption in an era of dramatic social and environmental changes.

The postwar era faced a similarly dramatic set of social and environmental changes. The demographic explosion of children and youth during the period this book explores acted as a new frame and is central to the stories that I argue need telling about the postwar era also.11

Just as it is easy to assume youth is timeless, environment is no less self-evident or without history either. Nature, with a capital “N,” is central to some of the case studies in this book, but with the term “environment,” I include everyday places where people lived and worked and began to understand environmental risks to youth. Such places offer a meaningful contrast to abstract and powerful ideals – of both nature and youth – that Americans purportedly valued so highly in the era. This book spends little time on summer camps or the supposed deification of wilderness in children’s lives. Such histories are important and revealing. They help to explain how people in the past attached meaning to the material world on behalf of youth at different times, as my experience on the Seattle playground suggests. But an exclusive focus on wilderness or idealized nature can encourage an overly narrow focus on certain kinds of youth and certain ideas of environment. I include forests and deserts in this book, but also rats and squalor, airborne radiation, suburban housing developments, isolated work camps, city parks, western organic farms, and the foods and toxins that youth consumed. These environmental and social circumstances, I argue, help us understand how Americans understood and defined the stakes of different social and environmental conflicts central to the postwar era.12

I use the word “environment,” therefore, with caution. With it I hope to encompass a variety of material places and entanglements that people after World War II demonstrated in their worries about youth and in their actual words and actions. As environmental historians of the Cold War have argued, the word “environment” itself took on a broader and more encompassing meaning after the war. I show how the meaning of youth evolved in tandem with this changing conception. When postwar reformers and other actors described the environment, they often used the word to describe a variety of conditions that they thought shaped youth behavior or health. When policy makers and the public discussed postwar youth and health, they often, and for good reasons, included playgrounds, backyards, city streets, forests and farms, disease and illness, toxins, vacant lots, and school buses as part of their efforts to reform or construct ideal environments for youth. In the process they reordered social and material worlds with reformist zeal and often uneven results.

My schoolyard experience in the era of popular ecology was certainly not the first time that Americans self-consciously sought to mold their youth and their environments in unison either. In the great social transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century reformers and new professionals developed ideas about youth and environment significantly in tandem. The entwined concerns drove public policy and debates about what constituted the social good. Plans for children’s built environments and environmental experiences echoed these broader societal transformations and subsequent reform movements around child labor, public health, recreation, and suburbs. Concern for youth drove political environmentalism in the nineteenth century, as I argue it would in new forms after. In fact the turn-of-the-century playground that my parents helped demolish had once held great promise for contributing to childhood health, which was based on a set of assumptions derived from nineteenth-century notions about the nature of the young, the nature of the society they would inherit, and the role of environment to ensure each. As I hope to show, the postwar period expressed new variations on these themes and reflected distinct responses to new social and environmental challenges.
