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"The Power Is Yours, Planeteers!"

Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Children's Environmentalist Popular Culture

Many of the patterns of symbolic nature discussed in the previous chapters deal with naturalizing gender and sexuality. These patterns may be important in terms of upholding gender, race, and sexual stereotypes, but they also have consequences for our understanding of environmental problems, especially when they appear in environmentalist popular culture. These gendered, raced, and sexed stories, particularly the promotion of certain kinds of family forms and reproductive practices as "natural," may be problematic environmentally. A broader understanding of human reproduction, one that includes social and economic aspects, is fundamental to a notion of global reproductive justice that more responsibly embeds our reproductive practices in global environmental and political systems, not just as individuals or families but as societies and integrated natural entities.

In a post–cold war context, environmentalism became a new moral framework for children's popular culture. But we should not rush to celebrate this, because the messages contained in these environmentalist stories are often counter to what environmental justice, ecofeminist, and Global South environmentalist activists are fighting for. Instead of the recognition central to these radical environmental justice positions that social equality and environmental sustainability are interconnected, these stories contain habits of thinking that naturalize social inequality and disconnect environmental problems from their corporate causes. Promoting ideas about what constitutes "natural" men and women, "natural" families, "natural" racial/ethnic identities, and "natural" sexuality might have a toxic effect. Those

of us who support global environmental justice efforts should be wary of underlying messages in these mainstream environmentalist stories that contradict their moderately progressive surface. We need to be aware of how these dominant cultural messages may undermine the understanding of environmental justice issues we want to promote. Though doing so may sometimes go against our own unquestioned assumptions, we must be very careful of fostering cultural arguments or movement practices that accept the "naturalization" of gender and sexual relations, or racial/ethnic identities; in these children's stories as well as other dominant cultural products, these three aspects (sexism, heterosexism and racism) often reinforce one another.

Two particularly problematic themes in these environmentalist popular culture stories for kids are the association created between homosexuality, evil, and environmental destruction, coupled with an anxiety about the successful reproduction of white middle-class nuclear families; and the "naturalizing" of racial and ethnic differences in the gender-balanced multicultural kids' teams that successfully deal with environmental problems. In these stories, the white, middle-class, nuclear family form is presented as "normal" and "natural," without any critique of its complicity in the overconsumption of corporate products in an environmentally destructive system in which the toxins, waste, pollution, and radiation produced are visited on the poor, people of color, and the tribal peoples of the world. The patriarchal white middle-class nuclear family, organized in the 1950s specifically as a unit of increasing post–World War II consumption situated in environmentally problematic suburbs, was presented at the time as the antithesis to the extended or non-nuclear families located in the inner cities, rural close-knit communities, or tribal reservations (May 1999). The insistence in these children's films that this nuclear family form is natural, normal, and the best for the planet goes against the argument of most environmental justice activists that healthy empowered communities, strong extended families, tribal sovereignty, participatory democratic politics, and interconnections with the land through sustainable practices (such as increasing public forms of transportation and decreasing long-distance travel for food) are the social and economic forms we will need to create social justice and environmental health. Thus, what I call in this chapter the "heterosexist" family is meant to point to a particular emphasis of these stories on the "normal," "natural" status of a specific kind of white, middle-class, suburban nuclear family in which men often have most of the power. I am certainly not against families per se—even small families formed of one man, one woman, and one or two kids living in their own house, with

a yard and a garage for their car, outside urban areas (a family that looks a lot like my own at the moment, incidentally). But this family structure, held up as an ideal and a pinnacle of natural evolutionary development, is built on environmentally consequential economic, geographic, racial, class, and gender policies and institutions that we should be able to critically examine if we want to solve environmental and social problems. Doing so becomes difficult when we think of this kind of family as "natural," without historical and social origins.

Additionally, racial and ethnic differences are "naturalized" through the idea that environmentalism is best achieved through the work of gender-balanced, multicultural kids' teams—such as those of *The Animorphs* (Applegate 1997) and the Planeteers of the television cartoon series *Captain Planet* (1990–93)—which present all cultures as equally responsible for environmental problems; their enemies are never corporations or the military or governments. Furthermore, despite the superficial evenhandedness of these racially balanced environmentalist kids' groups, white, male, and middle-class characters have the most power, while people of color, especially women of color, are seen as closer to nature and less powerful. The predominant intertwining in children's popular culture of environmentalism coupled with a certain promotion of liberal racial equality could serve to raise concerns about the role of inequality in creating environmental problems; instead, the logic of these stories ends up "naturalizing" white middle-class values and economic practices.

Bringing Up Baby to Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle: Environmentalism as a Post–Cold War Framework

How and why did environmentalism become such a common framework for children's culture? As a new parent in the early 1990s, I was exposed suddenly and rather overwhelmingly to U.S. kinderculture. One of the things I was struck by was the importance of environmentalism as a theme in nearly every aspect of my son's life. This environmental emphasis popped up everywhere: on unbreakable plastic plates and fast-food containers, on T-shirts and backpacks, in books and museum exhibits, in elementary science curricula and field trips—and above all in movies and television shows such as those I concentrate on in this chapter.

The appearance of this emphasis in my son's and other U.S. children's lives, however, should not be simply accepted as the positive influence of environmentalism; rather, it should be approached with a critical eye, in hopes that these cultural products can be improved. Of course, as Susan

Davis (1996), among others, points out, there is a long-standing Western middle-class practice of using images from nature to educate children (Davis 1996).[1] But the thematic narratives encountered by U.S. children in the 1990s and afterwards, especially from those from three to ten years of age, were about saving nature, not just identifying with Moles who like to boat and Toads who like to drive automobiles (as in the classic 1908 children's story, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame [1983]). Something new was going on; what did it signify?

Certainly, environmentalism was not a dominant theme in my childhood in the 1960s and 1970s. In my recollection, I moved without any memorable cognitive dissonance from Fran and Ollie and Captain Kangaroo to *Mad Magazine* and Bullwinkle, to the Beatles and then Jimi Hendrix. Though my family background definitely has some eccentricities, I think I partook in standard U.S. children's popular culture, which, while dominated by white middle-class liberal ideas and values, was definitely mass culture and thus broadly experienced by my cohorts in many different race and class locations. We were taught to save the world, yes, but not necessarily to save the planet. Aside from Shel Silverstein's *Giving Tree* (1964), Dr. Seuss's *Lorax* (1971), and Bill Peet's *Wump World* (1970)—all produced in the 1960s and early 1970s, during the emergence of the mainstream U.S. environmentalist movement—moral tales for children about greed and sharing, good guys and bad guys, were told not through an environmentalist lens but through an anticommunist lens. Additionally, the civil rights movement, with its emphasis on social equality and democratic participation, provided many of us with a different moral framework of right and wrong.

But for children today, environmentalist stories of protecting endangered species and saving forests are the ones that are most frequently coupled with lessons about how to treat others, how to fight against greed and corruption, and how to maintain family values.[2] The appearance of the threat of global climate change in these children's lives makes the environmentalist framework even more pertinent. It also encourages an emphasis on global environmental issues that has the potential to both "bring the world together" and obscure differences of power and resources that underly our problems. Globalizing environmentalisms are ambiguous political initiatives, holding out the possibility of comprehensive solutions but also the imposition of policies and practices on the less powerful.

One of the pervasive qualities of the environmentalist material and popular children's culture is the peculiarly American stories about nature that are being told (similar to the frontier myth examined in chapter 3). The parochial status of these tropes about nature does not, however, make them

incidental or marginal to processes of globalization. Rather, these U.S.-inflected children's cultural forms, sold and consumed around the world, are frequently tales about a global world, a U.S. dream of a common planet and an undifferentiated childhood experience. This is particularly true of the movies and television shows I concentrate on here; these objects travel cross-culturally more easily than do environmentalist museum exhibits or primary school practices. So in a strong but not totalizing way, I want to emphasize that these cultural objects reflect and reinforce a project of U.S. cultural hegemony that aims to assist the opening of global markets and the imposition on other cultures of the equation between liberal democracy, postindustrial economics, and free-market ideologies.[3] These are exactly the kinds of messages that global environmental justice activists might seek to counter. Like the discourse of anticommunism that in 1950s and 1960s popular culture pitted American apple-pie democracy against godless evil communists, the hegemonic discourse of globalizing environmentalisms too often turns out to be about good-guy U.S. scientists and ecologists against bad-guy foreign polluters and poor brown people squandering resources. Surely the fact that environmentalism has become so accepted a value in our society today is a clear mark of success for environmentalist movements even as it belies the movement's claims that environmentalist values are incompatible with ideologies of growth, exploitation of labor, and militarism.

Environmentalism was pervasive in post–cold war children's culture; it was often used as a frame for the action even when it was not necessary to the plot, thereby providing an important logic for moral adventures of good and evil, similar to the way in which earlier cold war–era children's stories of good and evil centered on tropes of world domination, the revealing of central national secrets, doomsday weapons, and invasion by dark alien hordes.[4] In this respect, the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) is interesting as a transitional narrative between saving the world cold war style or environmentalist style, in that it moves from the Second Cold War ideology of Reaganism, which promoted can-do white male fighter pilots against the communistic "evil empire," in the first movie to a saving encounter with the Luddite animal/human tribe of furry Ewoks in the third movie. Movies such as *Babe* (1995), the *Jurassic Park* movies (1993, 1997, 2001), *Open Season* (2006), and *Over the Hedge* (2006) also depend on an environmentalist frame to tell their stories. In television shows such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987–93) and *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1993–96), even though the heroes were not specifically environmentalists, the evil in the world was antienvironmentalist. The Turtles' mutation was the result of a toxic

poisoning of some kind, and the Power Rangers fought against figures such as Ivan Ooze, who planned to cover the globe with mucky stuff very like toxic waste.

There are also plenty of examples of deliberately environmentalist movies and television shows, which have as their animating purpose raising children's consciousness about the destruction of nature through telling entertaining and adventuresome stories that kids will identify with and love. In this category are films including *Ferngully: The Last Rainforest* (1992), *Once upon a Forest* (1993), *Free Willy* (1993, 1995, 1997), *Happy Feet* (2006), *The Simpsons Movie* (2007), and the television cartoon show that inspired part of the title for this chapter, *Captain Planet* (1990–93).

Given the status of these objects as carriers of dominant raced, gendered, classed, sexed, and naturalized stories that are part of global contests for cultural, political, and economic hegemony, it is crucially important to examine what stories are being told, what values are being promoted, which actors get to have agency, and what solutions are being offered. What lessons are being learned, and what kind of environmentalism has become the medium of these messages? What connections are made for children between environmentalism and social justice, between nature and morality? How will children use these frameworks as adults faced with the seriousness of such issues as global climate change?

Saving the Planet Is Saving the Family

One of my favorite examples of the theme of offering the nuclear family as the answer to environmental disruption is in *White Fang* 2 (1994). The ending of this 1994 movie neatly encapsulates several themes that I want to discuss. The main character, a young white man named Henry Casey, comes from a broken family, travels to the Alaskan wilderness, and ends up fighting against greedy miners (who are environmentally destructive) on behalf of what appear to be Northwest Coast Indians, along with his animal sidekick, the wolf White Fang. At the end, after the miners have been defeated, one of the young women of the tribe (who also happens to have, coincidentally, a female wolf sidekick) declares her love for the young white man, her willingness to form a family with him. The touching scene in which this happens shows her calling him as he walks away (supposedly leaving forever); in classic Hollywood style, the two are then shown running slowly toward each other for a heartfelt (but relatively chaste, given the PG rating) kiss. At the same time, intercut comically and ludicrously with the two human lovers, the two wolves also run together and kiss. The

movie closes with a charming scene in which the female wolf has puppies, and White Fang is, in very unwolflike ways, behaving like a proud daddy.

Some of the themes found in this movie we could easily predict, given their long-standing involvement in the U.S. cultural imaginary: two main ones are the figure of feminized nature and natural femininity, especially in its maternal form; and the naturally Ecological Noble Savage (see chapter 2). In the historical inflection of these children's films, these aspects are almost always combined, as represented in *White Fang* 2 by the Northwest Coast Indian woman and in *Pocahontas* (1995) by the title character. Earth Mothers are almost inevitably brown women, especially indigenous women, thus ensuring that nature and natural wisdom are feminized and raced simultaneously (while white mothers, as discussed below, are almost entirely absent). These movies began to be made after civil rights and women's movements challenged many cultural stereotypes, and their makers, generally liberal-minded folks, clearly want to do the right thing. Post-feminist and post–civil rights–era inflections mean that these figures are also presented as tribally specific, independent, choosing beings, even if their romantic choices are still narrowed to nice white guys (such as Henry Casey in *White Fang* 2 and Captain John Smith in *Pocahontas*).

This female Ecological Indian trope does not prevent, however, the bad guys in these stories from being sometimes imagined as racialized (on occasion orientalized) others. But more frequently the bad guy is a sexualized other, a nonreproductive, unnatural upper-class twit, the kind of campy, limp-wristed, unpatriotic male closet queen long seen as subversive to the naturalized patriarchal American nuclear family, the only legitimate reproductive unit in the cold war era. Figures such as Scar in *The Lion King* (1994) and Governor Ratcliff in *Pocahontas* represent the deeply problematic idea that gay men in particular are threatening to the "natural" family.

Starting in the middle 1980s, as part of what was a major conservative move to gain political power, the U.S. religious right wing was anxiously arguing that civil rights, feminism, and gay liberation movements had supposedly destroyed the suburban cold war family unit. Though the liberal makers of many of the environmentalist cultural items I am talking about here may reject this conservative position, a similar anxious message about the collapse of the "traditional" nuclear family (ignoring the limited historical, raced, and classed characteristics of this family form) is strongly promulgated throughout these children's stories. Those cultural, economic, and social factors that "threaten" nuclear families also involved challenges to masculinist power within the family and to images of white normality and superiority. Clearly in reaction to achievements of the women's move-

ment in the 1970s, the instability of the nuclear family is thus presented by these stories as a crisis, one that can be solved only by reinstating a "natural" order. Over and over, the plots of these movies involve nature in the task of saving young white boys (and more rarely, white girls) from "broken" family circumstances. In particular, mothers are peculiarly absent; if an alien came down and watched kids' films from 1990 to 2005, she would be convinced that there was a 95 percent chance of a kid's mother (especially if the child was white) having met a fatal accident around the time the child was seven or eight (an incomplete list of recent popular U.S. children's films in which the mother has died, or the child is completely orphaned, would include *Alaska, Free Willy, Finding Nemo, Fly Away Home, Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King, James and the Giant Peach, Anastasia, Once upon a Forest, Harry Potter, Spiderman, Jurassic Park II, Star Wars, Batman, X-Men, Aladdin, The Black Stallion, Babe, Ice Age,* and *A Little Princess*).

As a response to this postfeminist absence of the "good maternal woman," nature is deployed again and again in many of these films to reconstitute the heterosexist patriarchal family, in movies including *Alaska* and *Free Willy, Fly Away Home* and *Wild America, White Fang 2* and *Homeward Bound, The Emerald Forest* and *Jungle 2 Jungle*. Sometimes the nature that accomplishes this healing of the broken family is an animal, such as the geese in *Fly Away Home* (1996) that teach the young girl who has lost her mother to accept a new family with her father and stepmother, or the orphaned bear cub in *Alaska* (1996) that helps bring two kids together with their missing dad. But equally often (and again utilizing the Ecological Indian motif discussed in chapter 2), the nature that accomplishes this reconstitution of the nuclear family is a combination of a indigenous figure and an animal, as with *Free Willy*'s Indian character, Randolph, who along with Willy the whale helps the white boy Jesse accept his foster family, or in *Jungle 2 Jungle* (1997), in which the white boy has "gone native" and, with the help of a friendly tarantula, instructs his wayward father in how to get back together with his mother, or in the example from *White Fang 2* mentioned above. A figure related to White Fang and Willy the whale is the baboon–African shaman character Rafiki in *The Lion King*, who reinscribes the lion-cub Simba properly into the patriarchal legacy he initially rejects and thereby recovers the (environmentally sound) circle of life from its dangerous and deadly nonreproductive state.

In equating the restoration of natural harmony with the restoration of the two-parent, suburban family, then, this kind of environmentalism naturalizes the nuclear family. In perfect symmetry to this dominant message of mainstream environmentalist popular culture that protected and valued

nature equals white heterosexist reproduction (meant on both biological and social levels), the figure of the evil male homosexual often inhabits the ecovillains of these films. One of the best illustrations of this figure is the character Scar, the evil uncle in *The Lion King*, voiced by Jeremy Irons, who depends on his past history of playing sexually perverse, socially dangerous male characters to animate his depiction of Scar. This is clearly evidenced in a famous interchange with the lion cub Simba, in which, when Simba says, "You're so weird, Uncle Scar," Scar replies, "You have no idea," the exact same line that Irons spoke in the exact same plummy overtones as the sexually ambivalent Claus von Bülow in the film *Reversal of Fortune* (1990), with enough style to win an Oscar nomination.

A segment from *The Lion King* chillingly demonstrates the way in which racialized, sexualized, and ableist identities inhabit the depiction of environmental villainy (Ingram 2000, 22). In this scene, the nasty hyenas, voiced by Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin to lend them the proper "ghetto" feel, are given a demonstration of Scar's desire to become king in Simba's father's place. Scar's musical number begins with a thoroughly campy intro, in which he prances about in classic drag queen style, and ends disturbingly with a scene of goose-stepping hyenas worshipping him, borrowed almost frame by frame from Leni Riefenstahl's film promoting Hitler, *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Scar is figured here first as an evil homosexual, then as a Hitler worshiped by hyenas either marked as people of color by their voices or presented as mentally disabled.[5] My narrative description of this scene does nothing to convey the emotional power of these images and sounds for kids and their accompanying parents, carried by the high production values of these movies. The audacity of the use of the Riefenstahl images to depict a campy gay male figure as a Hitler in league with untrustworthy and moronic people of color is appalling. Here, Hitler as the embodiment of evil is equated with Scar's "unnatural" sexuality and his antinature power politics—quite contrary to the history of the Nazis' deadly combination of racism and the slaughter of Jewish, gay, and disabled peoples, along with their celebration of heterosexist reproductive family forms and their deep love of nature.[6]

In case the importance of this evil gay male figure seems exaggerated in my argument, I can point to other examples. For instance, in the film *Ferngully* (subtitled *The Last Rainforest* and a specifically pro-environmentalist film), there is the evil character Hexxus, voiced by another sexually ambivalent actor, Tim Curry, best known and most well-loved as the actor who played the "sweet transvestite from Transylvania," Dr. Frankenfurter, in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975). Hexxus is not merely campy and

creepy; he is very, very black, both in color and in his mutable features. In his signature musical number, "Toxic Love" (the title alone gives away the sensibility), Hexxus oozes dangerous and nasty dark sexuality, tied to a stomping rock beat. Once again, the high quality of the music and images makes this movie, like *The Lion King*, a product that is intensely pleasurable; try to watch those two scenes from a critical perspective, without tapping your feet. Another of these evil gay male figures appears in *Pocahontas* in the form of the nasty imperialist Governor Ratcliffe, who is more concerned about the state of his hair than the people he callously orders to be killed as "savages." Ratcliffe carries a little dog around with him on a velvet pillow, and his valet is always close behind with a mirror.

As discussed in chapter 2, that people of color, particularly indigenous people, should be exploited as natural resources for white environmentalism is an old story in U.S. environmentalist history, a story the environmental justice and Global South environmentalist movements are determined to disrupt. But the persistence of combining this story with the notion that part of restoring natural balance involves promoting heterosexist patriarchal family forms as the only means to healthy reproduction (of white people in particular) points to our dominant culture's constant confusion between "nature" and the naturalization of social inequality. In fact, successful environmental strategies may require us to rethink entire modes of production and reproduction that are presently built on this nuclear family form. But our children, particularly U.S. white male children like my son who will grow up privileged in multiple ways, will not learn to think through these connections between environmental destruction, middle-class consumerism, and racism if all they have are these environmentalist stories to go on. We need instead stories of other kinds of reproduction (see chapter 5) that do not depend on these heterosexist, racist, and naturalized tropes.[7]

One could see the movie *Babe* (1995), for instance, as a counterexample to most of the messages of these other films. In *Babe*, the story of a pig who wants to be a sheepdog—an argument against naturalizing political orders, "racial" identities, or social roles—is clearly, charmingly, and humorously presented. In an environmentalist plot containing strong statements against the exploitation of animals as workers or as meat as well as the importance of certain participatory democratic practices, the story has Babe accept as a "mother" the dog Fly, in a cross-species complication of naturalizing families. In an important scene in which Babe is asked by the farmer to show his sheepdog abilities by rounding up some sheep in a pen, he at first encounters failure as the sheep just laugh at his attempts to intimidate

them. Fly, his sheepdog mother, tells Babe to take power over the sheep: "You have to dominate them . . . You're treating them like equals. They're sheep, they're inferiors." Babe protests, "Oh no, they're not." Fly continues, "Of course they are, we are their masters . . . Make them feel inferior. Abuse them, insult them, bite them! Whatever it takes, bend them to your will." As Babe trots off to try this method, which fails miserably, the male sheepdog, Rex, who does not approve of Fly's attempt to teach Babe sheepdog methods, reprimands her with a speech that knits together the rationale for violence and power with strong racialized overtones: "You and I," he tells Fly, "are descended from the great sheepdogs. We carry the bloodline of the great Bahoo. And today I watched in shame as all that was betrayed." Babe achieves success with the sheep only when he rejects the "natural" tendencies of sheepdogs to use violence, by treating the sheep as equals and asking for their consent to be herded out of the pen. As the lead ewe says to him, "No need for all this wolf nonsense. All a nice little pig like you need do is ask." This rejection of naturalized bodies, violence, families, racial roles, and hierarchies could serve as one example of a different way of imagining the connection between environmentalism and social equality that does not naturalize the dominant order.[8]

In most of these films, however, not only is the white nuclear family naturalized, but also kids are given the responsibility to fight environmental problems on their own without adults (Dauer 2004). Often, they do this work in racially balanced, gender-equal kids' teams. What kind of environmental and social messages are contained in promoting multicultural kids' teams as the ultimate ecowarriors?

Combining Powers: Liberal Multiculturalism or Environmental Justice?

Of course, my criticisms are likely to come as a shock to the producers of much of this environmental children's culture, for they clearly want to create liberal messages about racial and gender equality (though less attention is paid to equality for those who challenge sexual norms, until perhaps *Happy Feet* [2006], discussed in chapter 5). Everywhere in this material, there is an insistence on a certain notion of easily achievable multiculturalism and gender equality, a diversity just as naturally achieved as biodiversity is imagined to be. Yet as environmental justice activists know, achieving collaboration across racial differences in U.S. society is no easy task for coalition politics.

In popular culture texts, this racial and gender diversity is often rep-

resented by groups of five or six teenagers, with particular patterns that unfortunately ensure the reinstantiation of white middle-class men in the position of leadership. Thus, the Animorphs (characters in a 1990s book series and a less popular television show) are teenagers who are given the power to acquire animal DNA and morph into animals to fight against the invasion of mind-controlling sluglike communards called Yeerks. Like the Power Rangers, the Animorphs group consists of two white boys, one white girl, one boy of color, and one girl of color. This is a liberal form of multiculturalism, of course, in which racial differences are seen as naturally necessary to an effective team, like certain notions of ecosystems in stasis, in which differences never reflect competing interests or signal histories of genocide, slavery, rape, or exploitation but instead are brought into accord as examples of good managerial theory.[9] Just as static notions of biodiversity (sometimes found in mainstream environmentalism) only make sense within depictions of ecosystems as closed, circular, in-balance, and without history, so too does the easy necessity of racial and gender diversity of these kids' teams exist within a homogenous middle-class existence in which the favorite place for the kids to meet is the suburban mall (a kind of closed ecosystem in itself).

These discourses of mainstream environmentalism and liberal multiculturalism effectively combine in these children's stories to eviscerate power-laden histories of socially constructed difference. For example, in the *Animorphs* books, Cassie, the African American girl on the team, is figured as closer to nature by her ability to befriend animals (both of her parents are veterinarians) and by her comfort with her body (she is the most controlled and graceful morpher, given her natural affinity with animals). These associations follow long-standing U.S. cultural patterns of portraying African Americans as closer to animals. However, when faced with the Animorphs' risky attempt to free two members of the enslaved alien species Hork-Bajir, which are almost always defined in the books by the adjective *enslaved*, Cassie responds not by referencing abolitionist discourses one would assume to be easily deployed by a fourteen-year-old African American girl. Instead, Cassie passionately wants to save them because they are a breeding pair of an endangered species (Applegate 1997, 72).

This form of liberal multiculturalism serves a more distinctively post–cold war purpose in the service of a globalizing environmentalism in the *Captain Planet* television series. Here the five teenagers of the group hew pretty much to the pattern mentioned above (one white U.S. guy, one black African guy, one brown South American guy, one white Russian girl, and one generically Asian girl), but this pattern of biodiversity is very much about globally significant cultural diversity, a quasi-U.N. version of multiculturalism (Dauer 2004).

Despite (or rather, through) this cultural diversity, the Planeteers are a United Nations clearly led by the United States, while dependent on the work, body, and knowledge of a brown woman. Gaia, voiced in the first Captain Planet by the distinctive tones of Whoopi Goldberg, is a brown woman who is the spirit of Earth and serves as the source of the Planeteers' abilities. Once again, the Mother Earth figure is a woman of color. But for the animating life-force of Earth personified, Gaia is curiously powerless, dependent on the work of the five teenagers she gives rings to so that they can call up the powers of fire, water, earth, wind, and the fifth element, heart (Dauer 2004). Of course, the U.S. alpha male, the white Wheeler, has the power of fire; the African male, Kwame, naturally has the power of earth; and the geopolitically marginal brown male, the South American Ma-Ti, is given the feminized power of heart.

When the Planeteers are in deep trouble, they combine their powers and call up a real superhero, Captain Planet, who, despite his blue skin and green hair, is a typical wisecracking suburban white guy straight out of sitcom-land. For example, when faced with a mutant giant octopus created by toxic dumping off Japanese coastal waters, Captain Planet says, "I've got to stop that super-squid before it turns the city into sushi!" And zipping into the sky, he calls out, "Calamari, dudes!" The character Captain Planet, to quote from the "Mission to Save Planet Earth" section of the show's Web page,[10] is meant to be "a metaphor for that which can be accomplished by teamwork," and thus he "symbolizes that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of its parts." But this particular whole created by the unification of the "world's cultures and ethnic diversity" is—far from being anything like the "sum of its parts"—nothing more than a good old American white male adolescent superhero. The notion of the world's cultures "combining powers" may seem like a nice metaphor for political coalition, but not if its purpose is creating a unity that looks and acts just like a white Southern California surfer dude with body paint.

In some ways, it may seem supercritical to pick on *Captain Planet*, which is a thoroughly self-conscious environmentalist cultural product—and a very successful one, garnering several media and educational awards and reaching over 7 million people a week in the United States alone, while being distributed in over sixty countries during its heyday in the mid-1990s, according to its promotional material.[11] *Captain Planet* is unusual and commendable as a media product in its effort to provide action-oriented information, political inspiration, and organizational linkages. More chil-

dren's cultural products should emulate this. At the end of every episode is a thirty-second bit called "Planeteer Alert," which focuses on a specific problem (for instance, the safe disposal of household wastes) and gives kids tips on how they can be environmentally conscious consumers and citizens.[12]

Turner Enterprises, the creator of *Captain Planet*, through its Captain Planet Foundation (http://captainplanetfoundation.org) also set up several links with other institutions in a position to influence kids and their parents, a process the producers call "combining powers" (which is what the Planeteers do when they summon Captain Planet). The Captain Planet Foundation makes the shows available to teachers for classroom use and has collaborated with such organizations as the American Public Transit Association, the Environmental Protection Agency, Microsoft, Whole Foods, the Weather Channel, Coca-Cola, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. (With the latter, it has held a program called "Earth Day with the Braves," neatly combining Ted Turner's environmentalism with his love of baseball, while ignoring the Atlanta Braves' use of Native American stereotypes.) The Captain Planet Foundation also funds numerous children's grassroots environmental efforts.[13]

So why pick on *Captain Planet*? After all, wouldn't we rather have environmental messages than non-environmental ones? Messages of multiculturalism rather than messages of bigotry? Messages in which women play important roles rather than ones in which they are powerless or invisible? Messages that allow agency to non-Western peoples rather than ones that assume the only teenagers with power are middle-class U.S. suburbanites? Yes, of course. But its very status as the most radical example of children's environmentalist popular culture shows the deep dependence of these stories on problematic tropes of powerless (but protofeminist) brown indigenous women, exoticized pure nature such as Gaia's Hope Island, and individuals characterized by naturalized differences operating in conflict-free teams.

Captain Planet's attempt to produce a liberal message is also beholden to certain assumptions about the necessity to preserve corporate America's good reputation. The producers explain,

> The use of villains to delineate good and evil is common in action-adventure series. However, given that we deal with real life issues, we were concerned [that] children might come to the conclusion that if their parents worked in a polluting industry they were somehow villains. Although our show is basically realistic, our eco-villains are intentionally exaggerated so that they are clearly operating outside of the law. They are symbolic of the environmental problems rather than representative of the actions of individuals. We are careful not to be critical of business/industry, but to encourage responsible business practices and a balance between the needs of people, environment/wildlife, and industry.[14]

Like every other one of the environmentalist objects of children's popular and material culture that I have encountered, then, *Captain Planet* presents solutions that are almost entirely restricted to individual lifestyle changes, to legitimating the rule of law rather than challenging business as usual. In the world of *Captain Planet*, environmental catastrophes always happen "outside the law" rather than exhibiting the reality in which legal parameters often protect polluting corporations or governments. Ecovillains are nasty male queens, dark spirits, long-haired men with accents, brittle and demented white female scientists, or mutant human/animal paranoids with delusions of grandeur.[15] Though children get the notion that trees are cut down and animals killed because of greedy behavior, it is almost always the greedy behavior of a single ecovillain. Never are the ecovillains corporations or militaries or governments or white patriarchal science—the real ecovillains on our planet, the ones the global environmental justice movement is presently confronting. Gaia lives on a pure tropical island far away from the many urban sites of environmental struggle. As discussed in chapter 2, solutions that romanticize ecological Noble Savages lock both nature and people of color in an imagined preindustrial past, but they are almost the only solutions offered, along with the idea that recycling and disposing of toxic waste "properly" (rather than identifying the source of the waste and preventing it from being made) are important tasks for children.[16]

Who's Got the Power?

In a story such as *Captain Planet* (which, like other examples of children's environmentalist popular culture, wants to equate environmentalism with social equality), how do we evaluate the notion that "the power is yours"? There are a number of ways to read this phrase and to speculate about its likely results as an internalized message. We might start by thinking about who gets to be a Planeteer, which individuals most easily can imagine themselves as global citizens, empowered to combine powers with others on a planetwide scale. That this story might be most invested in addressing or interpellating privileged Western children comes as no surprise. And it may be an appropriate strategy, given the inordinate amount of the world's resources these children will consume over their lifetime. So perhaps this

message will have unforeseen radical results. After all, some of the important demographic actors in the sixties movements were privileged children like myself, who, having been brought up on the notion that we were empowered to promote Truth, Justice, and the American Way, realized with a shock that it was up to us to follow the lead of those less privileged and to force our country and our parents to correct deeply held hypocrisies. Perhaps the Planeteers of tomorrow will someday rebel against the corporate forces that are destroying the planet and causing suffering for so many of the world's peoples. Perhaps the megamedia empires, such as Turner Enterprises, will take responsibility for the misleading stories they are promoting, in which environmental damage can be cured by constructing a suburban nuclear middle-class family or by promoting superficial multiculturalism. This is perhaps a utopian hope, but maybe one day the multinationals will wish that they had never told these kids "the power is yours," allowing the liberal, superficial, and individualistic solutions presently offered to be rejected for collective, social, and revolutionary action.

But another, more pessimistic reading of this message is possible. Clearly, the dominance of the environmentalist theme is not centrally about environmentalism at all but about producing morally uplifting and privilege-maintaining stories that legitimate the notion that especially for white middle-class children, the power is theirs to do what they will with the world. Like the idea of easy multicultural kids' teams, the "environment" appears to be a safe issue when freed from questions of power, privilege, and history. Given the Planeteers' superpowers, their incapacity for wrongdoing, and the overwhelming priority of saving an otherwise doomed nature over other social problems, the privileged kids who identify with the Planeteers might feel fully justified in imposing putatively environmentalist solutions undemocratically on less powerful non-Planeteers.

And what about the kids who do not readily identify as Planeteers? Certainly the kids being poisoned by lead in the cities, the kids who are malnourished by corporately produced salinification and erosion, the kids who are drinking pesticide-laced water at migrant farmworkers camps, the kids who are living on uranium tailings on Navajo land—are Captain Planet's producers worried about whether *they* will start holding *their* parents responsible for "polluting industries"? Will these kids be satisfied with the idea that nature will be restored if they all form happy, consumption-oriented nuclear families? It is less likely that these kids, in a postfeminist, post–civil rights environmental justice era, will be unaware of the shape and character of the real ecovillains. These kids cannot wait—and in fact are not waiting—for an awakened force of white middle-class Planeteers

to take on the combined problems of environmental destruction and social inequalities.

Looking critically at environmentalist children's popular culture underscores the difficulty of telling stories about saving nature from the point of view of dominant U.S. culture without engaging in problematic stories about social difference, which depend on the naturalization of social inequalities, via the invocation of the "natural order," nature as truth, foundation, all that is right and valuable. These themes are particular to our present historical and political context, showing the traces of recent social movement critiques while transposing them onto justifications of white, male, straight, liberal capitalist hegemony—that is, they tend to be postfeminist, post–civil rights stories about environmentalist new world orders. But even when apparently promoting the kind of environmentalist values shared by environmental justice activists (for instance, struggling against toxic waste in poor communities of color or against uranium and coal mining on Indian lands), these stories often portray people of color or gay people either stereotypically or as the villains. Even more disturbingly, they combine homophobic and racist portrayals in ways that distract audiences from remembering that the ecovillains of the real world are corporations, militaries, and governments (Seager 1993).

Rather than thinking that the power is yours or ours or theirs or the planet's, we must think about powers that arise out of struggle and contest, which are justified on the basis of participatory democratic practices rather than what is natural. Rather than look to superpowered teams that naturalize U.S. white male middle-class leadership, we need to think about combining powers in political coalitions that go against the present "natural" order. And this is what the global environmental justice movement, in its refusal to depend only on biocentric environmentalist arguments about saving a "pure" nature, has the potential to do.

The intertwining of naturalizing "family values" discourses with environmentalism does not only occur in children's popular culture. In the next chapter, we will look at some more adult examples, and engage the question of what concepts of reproduction are most useful for constructing a global feminist environmental justice framework.