



Identity formations in archived childhood memories of nature in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how the relation between childhood and nature contributes to the formation of identities through childhood memories written for archival purposes. Archival research lets us consider how written childhood memories of nature are formed, producing social identities through practices of archiving. The archived memories of 50 people in Sweden are analyzed, concentrating on how they described their childhood memories of nature. Understanding memories as performances of identity can give important answers as to how the idealized relationship between nature and childhood is constructed in the specific context of archiving.

Keywords

Memory studies, childhood, nature, archive research, identity formations, Sweden

Introduction

Childhood and nature are intimately and culturally linked. The ideal Western childhood takes place in close proximity to nature, with nature typically being seen as a place for a morally sound upbringing (Chawla, 2015; Halldén, 2011; Harju et al., 2020; Taylor, 2011). It has even been suggested that the link between nature and childhood is especially strong in the Nordic countries (Halldén, 2011). This link has been an active cultural construct at least since the time of Rousseau (Taylor, 2011). Within childhood studies, scholars have noted how the associations of children's relationship with nature are typically differentiated from the norms and values of adulthood and their perceived

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proximity to culture (Jenks, 2005; Taylor, 2011). The meaning and values associated with nature and culture tend to have ethical and political consequences. Here, I argue that the distinction between nature and culture is a social and cultural construct, taking inspiration from how feminist theory has critically grappled with nature for the past three decades (Alaimo, 2000; Plumwood, 1993). Distinguishing between what is considered nature and culture is an ongoing process of differentiation that varies over time depending on the historically specific context (see e.g., Haraway, 1992).

Childhood studies scholar Affrica Taylor (2011) encourages researchers in our field to carefully engage with the concept of nature to the same extent as the concept of childhood. With inspiration from human geography and the field's manifold conceptualizations of nature, Taylor presents two theoretical positions for understanding nature: a constructivist position that views nature as a social construct which 'cannot be located outside human experience' (2011: 425); and a relational approach that strives to destabilize a dualistic understanding of nature and culture as separate spheres. The relational position is developed from a critique of the constructivist position's neglect of nature's agency. In this paper, I lean on a constructivist understanding of nature and the aim of this paper is to analyze how the relation between childhood and nature contribute to the formation of identities though childhood memories written for archival purposes. The descriptions in the childhood memories are here understood as social and cultural constructions of both nature and culture. These constructions constitute social identities of the self as someone writing about themselves for archival purposes. The above understanding makes these memories particularly useful for investigating the relationship between childhood and nature relative to the historically specific context of writing down one's memories in the context of archivation. Accordingly, I understand the descriptions of nature in the analyzed written memories from the perspectives of what the respondents themselves considered nature and of how they described themselves in relation to it. These descriptions, I argue, lay bare the intricate and ongoing differentiation of the categories of nature and culture. As with many scholars from the social sciences and humanities who engage with the notion of nature, I view nature and culture as socially constructed categories that are in constant need of differentiation to remain possible to separate from one another.

Environmental issues became a matter of public concern in Sweden in the late 1960s (Larsson Heidenblad, 2021). Given the prominent connection between childhood and nature in Sweden and the Nordic countries, it is reasonable to assume that ideas about childhood, children's lives, and environmental degradation have existed in parallel at least since that time. It is also worth noting the process of rapid urbanization that has occurred during this period (SCB, 2015). As a result, the spaces where most children spend their time have changed since this period (Chawla, 2015; Halldén, 2011; Louv, 2005). This trend is also noticeable world-wide, perhaps best caught with Richard Louv's (2005) phrase 'nature-deficit disorder', signifying that today's children are increasingly detached from outdoor experiences.

The aim of this paper is to analyze how the relation between childhood and nature contribute to the formation of identities though childhood memories written for the purpose of archivation. I do so by analyzing written memories of childhoods taking place

in Sweden between 1910 and 1940. I draw on memory studies scholar Emily Keightley's (2010: 55–56) definition of memory as 'a lived process of making sense of time and the experience of it'. In the context of adults remembering their childhood, memories and memory stories allow us to consider how 'memories of childhood open spaces through which we can glimpse how children navigate adult orders' (Millei et al., 2019: 5–6). Accordingly, the analytical focus of this paper is on the generations born between 1910 and 1940 and their childhood memories of nature. By analyzing memories, we can better understand how people shape their own identities through the act of accounting for one's memory. David Sobel (1990) suggests that people's experiences in creating 'special places' during their childhood (such as dens and playhouses), remain with them throughout their life in the form of memories. These places might have 'a uniquely powerful role in the shaping of the self' (1990: 9). Researchers such as Jane Mulcock and Yann Toussaint (2002) have argued that memories and imagination are important for how people experience and understand nature. Previous research on childhood memories has a methodological focus on two distinct methods: collective biography (Davies et al., 2001, 2005; Gannon, 2015; Gonick and Gannon, 2014; Millei et al., 2019) and questionnaires (Asimaki et al., 2017; Friedman and Pines, 1991; Matthews, 2003). In the brief review of previous research on childhood memoirs below, I focus on the methodological choices in previous studies.

Collective biography can be characterized as a feminist method stemming from the work of German researcher Frigga Haug (1987) and her colleagues, who developed the memory-work method to improve methodological approaches to researching women's experiences. The collective biography method is often based on childhood memories of various embodied experiences. The method can be used to understand how subjectification works in practice (Clift and Clift, 2017; Davies et al., 2001) and how women experience academic work (Davies et al., 2005), and as a novel methodological approach to studying the meaning of childhood (Millei et al., 2019).

Questionnaires have been used on several occasions in previous studies of childhood memories. Anna Asimaki et al. (2017) studied memories of punishment in primary school as reported by students in a Greek university. The theoretical points of departure were Foucault's concepts of power, discipline, and discourse and the findings revealed real and symbolic violence in the experience of schooling. Ariella Friedman and Ayala Pines (1991) studied 45 women and 45 men in Israel, focusing on their earliest gender-related childhood memories. The participants responded individually in writing to the request: 'Please describe your earliest childhood memory that is related to the fact that you were a boy/girl or that people related to you as a boy/girl' (Friedman and Pines, 1991: 27). The analysis was conducted by testing Nancy Chodorow's theory of gender development, finding that two out of five hypotheses did not reach statistical significance. In their conclusion, Friedman and Pines (1991: 32) wrote that childhood memories can 'be seen as the result of a process of memory selection that colors the past, and reflects men's and women's different gender-related experiences as adults'. Denise Matthews (2003) used a symbolic interactionist perspective in a study of 70 essays written by college students about the media's contribution to individuals' self-development. Of these two

methodological approaches to childhood memories, the questionnaire is what most closely resembles the present approach.

Swedish archival history in brief and the archived questionnaire ‘Nature for Me’

The national context of the present study is Sweden, a country with a 400-year history of public archives. The Swedish National Archives is one of the country’s oldest public authorities, dating to the Middle Ages. The first official archive was established in 1618 with the mission of holding government and court records. Since 1766, the Swedish constitution has upheld the principle of public access to official documents through the Freedom of the Press Act. In accordance with Swedish law, most documents stored by public archives are available to the public. Collecting, archiving, and guaranteeing access to previously archived records is an important mission for public authorities in Sweden. Since the early 1900s, some of the functions of the central archive have been distributed to local archives.

The material analyzed here was collected from one such local archive, ([Lund University Folklife, 2021](#)) Lund University Folklife Archives (LUF), a regional archive that has been part of Lund University since its inception in 1913. The [Lund University Folklife \(2021\)](#) collections consist of ‘cultural–historical and ethnological documents in the form of narratives, sound recordings and photographs, and other images, which are sources of knowledge about everyday life in both the past and present’. This paper draws on the archive’s collected *frågelistor*, i.e., themed questionnaires, a type of archival material collected by the Folklife Archives in Sweden on different topics since the 1910s. A writers’ panel has completed themed questionnaires on a regular basis with a focus on personal and regional experiences of different themes. The themed questionnaire in focus here is ‘Nature for Me’ (NFM), a questionnaire administered by the Folklife Archives in 2010 as part of a research project studying the meaning of nature as cultural heritage in Sweden ([Ek-Nilsson et al., 2014](#)). In this study, I analyze the answers collected by LUF, a total of 64 people’s responses concerning their relationship to nature, including an item about the respondent’s first memory of nature.

I requested the material from LUF, and the archive digitally shared the collected responses of 64 respondents. Each item of the questionnaire was open ended, with responses ranging from two to 20 pages. Some respondents also added private photos in addition to the written answers. All respondents wrote their full names in the questionnaire; although it is not anonymous material, I have refrained from mentioning anyone by name in this paper for ethical reasons.

A total of 41 women, 23 men, and one person of unknown gender, born between 1917 and 1984, completed the questionnaire. I interpreted the gender of the respondents from the given names specified in the questionnaire. It is worth noting that all participants’ names can be regarded as typical Swedish names, so it is unlikely that the respondents represent an ethnically diverse group. A significant majority ($n = 50$) of the respondents were born in the decades between 1910 and 1940. Accordingly, they were already mature adults when environmental concerns gained public attention more broadly in Sweden

during the late 1960s (Larsson Heidenblad, 2021). It is the memories of being a child between 1910 and 1940 that are in focus here, since these respondents' childhoods occurred before processes of environmental degradation were widely known to the public in Sweden. Unlike the case today, global and local childhoods and children's lives during the first half of the twentieth century were not unfolding amidst a public imaginary of global environmental change caused by accelerated industrialization after the Second World War.

Once I received the material from the archive, I read all the responses and highlighted the parts of the questionnaire where people had written about their childhood memories in and about nature. I divided my findings into two parts regarding: (1) informants' explicit memories of their childhoods and (2) informants' writings about nature today in relation to their childhoods (e.g., blue anemone used to exist abundantly when the informant was a child but is scarce today). I present my findings from the analysis of these childhood memories under two themes: *Knowledge and proximity vs. ignorance and distance* and *the beauty of the past that is broken in the present*. The two themes were constructed after a close reading of the memories in relation to the aim of the study and they capture the most significant findings.

Frågelistor as a concept and method was established in the early 1900s to capture 'disappearing folk culture' (Westergren, 2003: 5) all around Sweden. The *frågelistor* questionnaires on various topics have been completed by reoccurring respondents, called *meddelare* (i.e., communicators), for archival and research purposes. In general, questionnaires containing lists of items on specific topics have been distributed to local respondents across the country for the past 100 years. The nature of the questions has varied over time, reflecting changing scientific paradigms of the types of knowledge claims possible with this method (Westergren, 2003). The epistemological focus has gone from fact-based to subjective accounts for the respondents' lives. The NFM questionnaire, distributed in 2010, comprises four areas where the respondents could provide open responses and give subjective accounts for their lives: (1) nature as place (e.g., Where is the nature you spend time in?); (2) what you do in nature (e.g., work, vacation, and leisure); (3) knowledge of nature (e.g., what you know and who taught you what you know about nature); and (4) my story of nature (e.g., the respondents are asked to write about one of their first memories of nature). The questionnaire was thoroughly analyzed by ethnologists in a project aiming to focus on nature as a cultural heritage in Sweden (Ek-Nilsson et al., 2014). The focus of the project was on people's everyday experiences of nature. Although many topics were covered in the project, the written childhood memories focused on the meaning of forests and not on nature more broadly.

Methodological considerations about using memories in research

How one presents oneself in relation to nature is not a neutral matter. Methodologically, it is important to note that it is impossible to access how someone's childhood actually was through memories due to the changing societal understandings of past phenomena accounted for in the present. What we can explore is instead how people *present* to us – as

readers and archival researchers – their *memories of how it was*. Several layers need to be disentangled regarding how the archive functions as a facility that produces social identities. The Algerian-French post-structuralist Jacques Derrida (1996: 17) famously commented about the archive that ‘the archivization produces as much as it records the event’. Accordingly, the NFM questionnaire and the memories stored in the archive allow us to explore identity formation at the nexus of childhood and nature. In that respect, this is a study of how people narrate their lives through childhood memories, specifically, how the relationship between the self and nature is narrated in relation to childhood. I will give a methodological account and justification of this view below.

The important role of childhood memories in qualitative research methodology has occupied sociologists since at least the 1980s, when Frigga Haug (1987) and colleagues developed the memory-work method in order to examine women’s experiences of sexuality, love, and gender. The methodological use of memories in social sciences directs our attention to the individual act of remembering as situated in a collective sphere. As Emily Keightley (2010: 58) stated, ‘acts of remembering extend beyond the individual and enter a web of social communication and knowledge, acting on, as well as through, the social world’. In recent years, memories of childhood have been investigated collectively in examining what it was like to experience life as a child in the Soviet Union and other socialist societies (Millei et al., 2019; Silova et al., 2018). Zsuzsa Millei et al. (2019) stated that the use of childhood memories requires epistemological, ontological, and methodological retooling. I agree with them that childhood memories ‘can provide important analytical incisions into the social norms, values, issues and concerns driving and producing societal, cultural/ideological changes and social transformations’ (Millei et al., 2019: 5). The present paper on childhood memories of nature has been written through investigating memories from the perspective that the act of remembering is ‘a performance rooted in the lived context’ (Keightley, 2010: 58). As such, it is also important to note how memories structure relationships between the past, present, and future, possibly selectively excluding memories and versions of memories of ‘socially unacceptable experiences’ (Keightley, 2010: 57).

Seeing memories as performances of social identities has led me to consider the work of sociologist Irving Goffman (1990), who in the 1950s provided a framework for analyzing and understanding how people form their identities in relation to others. He offered what he called the dramaturgical analysis of how people appear and perform their identities in relation to one another. I find this framework suitable for understanding and contextualizing the stories collected by the archive.

The NFM questionnaire provides a type of fabricated empirical material in the sense that people have been asked to, in their own words, report on a topic (i.e., nature) that is defining for moral sensibilities in our society. The respondents write not only for the purpose of participating in a research project, but also for contributing to a future archive on the nation’s cultural heritage. In this respect, they are writing themselves into the future. Childhood memory scholars such as Zsuzsa Millei et al. (2019: 6) believe that adults’ memories of their childhoods are often informed by ‘common knowledges, concepts and views that shape adults’ perspectives, including ideologised views and academic interpretations’. It is therefore telling that only two out of 64 respondents wrote

that they disliked or were uninterested in nature. Associating oneself with love for and interest in nature can be understood as a way of representing oneself as morally sound (Halldén, 2011; Taylor, 2011).

Identity formations as performance

It is reasonable to assume that the readers and interpreters of the questionnaire access people's self-presentations in relation to respondents remembering nature as a child. For this reason, I turn to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, which theorizes self-presentation in a productive way. Although Goffman developed his analysis to theorize face-to-face encounters between individuals in social life, elements of his conceptual analysis are useful for understanding the archive as a non-static actor that participates in the social production of memories. The NFM questionnaire collect responses written for the purpose of archiving people's relation to nature as part of the cultural heritage in Sweden. For this reason, I find that Goffman's concept of *performance* useful for understanding and analyzing childhood memories about nature through the act of archiving. Performance, for Goffman, denotes the acting out of the individual's desire to make an impression on others that asserts that he/she is who he/she wants to be seen as in a social situation. This self-presentation might be subject to idealization. Goffman (1990: 45) wrote that 'when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the official accredited values of the society, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole'. Here, Goffman clarified that there is an important distinction to be made between an individual's presentation of the self and his/her behavior. This is an important distinction to recall when analyzing the archived memories of nature, precisely because the material analyzed here was set up as fabricated questionnaires in which the respondents wrote for the purpose of archiving, so researchers could read and interpret their stories and memories at a later stage. The material was itself designed as a kind of self-presentation of the self as a child in relation to nature. In what follows, I will treat the memories I analyze as performances in Goffman's sense.

Theme I: Knowledge and proximity versus ignorance and distance

The written memories that describe the remembered childhoods of the respondents took place in close proximity to nature. Furthermore, the memories were compared by the respondents with the younger Swedish generations' relationship to nature as a distant and uninformed one. The children of today were portrayed as preferring computers rather than, for example, the knowledge of herbs. These written memories establish self-representations of generational differences and identities, particularly in relation to nature. I use the notion of generation here as a 'membership of a particular age group' (Biggs, 2007: 696) which shares social and historical characteristics in 'making up the consciousness of its members' (Mannheim, 1997: 304). The relative proximity to nature of previous childhoods is presented as morally superior, recalling what Zygmunt Bauman (2017: 9) called 'retrotopia', a nostalgic dream of the past in which 'the genuine or

putative aspects of the past, [are] believed to be successfully tested and unduly abandoned or recklessly allowed to erode' (see also e.g., [Mulcock and Toussaint, 2002](#)). These dreams may or may not have much to do with how things actually were, but they serve to help us understand morality of the self embedded in the present.

Most of the respondents born between 1910 and 1940 wrote about how they, as children, encountered nature though both everyday life and leisure, depending on their setting in urban or rural locations and on their socioeconomic status. Their written memories of nature concern associations with nature as aesthetic value, labor work, and knowledge. Respondents wrote about how they learned the names of plants and animals from relatives and teachers throughout childhood. One woman, born in 1929, wrote:

I had the great benefit of having a father who was interested in nature. He was especially knowledgeable when it came to plants. I was not very old when I first learnt the scientific names of plants.

Both knowing and learning the names of plants and animals, as a child, are recurring themes in the written memories. Respondents stated the number of bird or flower names they learned as children as well who taught them this knowledge. This way of relating to nature can be described as a 'Linnean worldview' of sorting and categorizing the non-human world which 'places plants and animals in a hierarchy with humans at the top' ([Snively and Williams, 2008](#): 116). Nature seems to be constructed externally from the respondents' own bodies and beings. Furthermore, this taxonomic knowledge seems to have been mentioned with a certain pride ('I had the great benefit of ...'), and seems important in recalling one's childhood. The theme of knowing many species by name points to the value associated with knowledge of nature in the broader cultural context of Sweden (see e.g., [Halldén, 2011](#)). Reporting this knowledge creates proximity to nature of high cultural value. In her study of the relationship between nature and childhood in Sweden, the Swedish childhood studies researcher Gunilla [Halldén \(2011\)](#) noted that the idea that childhood should take place in proximity to nature became dominant during the nineteenth century. This idea still has significance today ([Chawla, 2015](#); [Louv, 2005](#)). It is therefore unsurprising that the respondents positioned themselves in close proximity to nature, which can be understood as a way of self-presenting one's childhood as morally sound. By presenting oneself in close proximity to nature the respondents could escape the child-identity of suffering from the 'nature-deficit disorder' that Richard [Louv \(2005\)](#) diagnosed contemporary childhoods with. The respondents perceived knowledge of nature as a prerequisite for engaging with and caring for nature. One woman, born in 1939, wrote:

I get concerned when I notice how little knowledge many children have about nature nowadays. Blue anemones and bluebells are regarded as the same flower, for example. It must be difficult to have a serious engagement with environmental issues without a certain knowledge of the life of plants and animals, a certain familiarity with nature.

The above response establishes a relationship between how childhood *used to be* and how *it is now*, especially in relation to nature and knowledge of nature. It seems reasonable to assume that a moral dimension is established between past and current generations of children in the above passage. The concern here is that children today have little knowledge of flower names, while previous generations had that knowledge. Furthermore, it seems to concern the respondent that ‘serious engagement’ cannot be established with environmental issues when today’s children lack this knowledge. However, it is not only the lack of knowledge of flower names that concerns respondents when they think about the relationship between children and nature. Another woman, born in 1939, wrote:

As a farmer, I have always been close to animals and plants and I have always tried to explain to people from other professions how important it is for them to understand how dependent we are on food for survival. It is as if most people lack this insight. Countless school classes have visited us, and I become miserable when I realize how little they understand about our life.

The above woman explicitly mentions her proximity to animals and plants because of her life as a farmer. This proximity seems to give her both knowledge and understanding of the conditions of life. This proximity is compared both with the ignorance of people from other professions and with the ignorance of visiting school classes about the conditions of life and survival. In this way, writings about memories of nature construct a moral understanding of the good life in close proximity to nature. Another woman, born in 1930, wrote: ‘[I am] trying to offer my grandchildren names of herbs, but sometimes, I think that computer games rank higher!’ One man, born in 1931, wrote similarly: ‘To mediate knowledge of nature to the youth of today is not an easy task. Computers have taken over. Unfortunately!’ What is reflected here is an understating of the difference between one’s own childhood and contemporary childhoods.

Theme 2: The beauty of the past that is missing in the present

Within this theme, we see how nature, as remembered in Swedish childhoods between 1910 and 1940, is represented in different ways: as a resource for survival, a resource for human pleasure, a safe place, and as untouched and uncorrupted. These memories are constructed in relation to a ‘now’ that represents an opposite understanding of nature. Today, the respondents write, nature no longer has the same role for survival, it no longer connotes pleasure, safety, and sanctity. A way of understanding this difference in the representation of nature is that the respondents’ written memories help them establish a self-representation of presenting a good and morally superior relationship with nature.

Swedish childhoods between 1910 and 1940 were in many ways radically different from the childhoods of 2010 when these memories were written and submitted to the archive. One important change that has emerged in the public imaginary is the widespread knowledge of various environmental problems, which have been a public concern in Sweden since the late 1960s (Larsson Heidenblad, 2021). In recent decades children have been associated – both in Sweden and globally – with various sustainable development

projects and environmental resilience agencies (Dahlbeck, 2014; Ideland, 2019). One important change between these periods is that, more recently, it has become impossible to separate childhood and children's lives from environmental concerns. In the archived writings about nature, childhoods in the past experienced, according to the respondents, a cleaner and less damaged nature. One woman, born in 1926, wrote about how the view of nature as an endless resource for survival during her childhood has now been exchanged for a realization of current vulnerability:

In early spring, we picked coltsfoot and blue anemone and tied them, with moss, into bouquets that resembled small baskets. In those times, the blue anemone was not sacred. No one thought about how the flower could run out, even when we pulled the flowers out by their roots.

The woman described, in detail, the many ways in which her mother collected and sold berries, flowers, moss, and branches from the nearby forest throughout the year. The family collected these things together, 'which was not always very pleasurable', according to the woman's written memory. The woman described how her mother carried the various forest products on her bike to an open outdoor market in the capital city, where she sold them. Other memories also mentioned the blue anemone, a protected species of flower that grows in forests all over Sweden. The blue anemone serves as a national symbol of Sweden for several reasons. It was categorized and named in Latin by the Swedish botanist and taxonomist Carl Linnaeus. The blue anemone is featured in a classic children's song whose lyrics were written by Anna Maria Roos (1894); the music was composed by Alice Tegnér (1895), a famous Swedish composer, music teacher, and organist who composed several famous Swedish songs for children. The flower moreover bears the colors of the Swedish flag, and it is also the symbol used by the Sweden Democrats, a political party with a nationalist and socially conservative profile. It could be argued that reports of memories including the blue anemone are useful for the written self-representation of oneself as having a typical Swedish childhood (cf., Halldén, 2011; Harju et al., 2020).

The woman who wrote about her family collecting blue anemones in the 1920s and 1930s, rightly noted that the flower is now protected in Sweden (Naturvårdsverket, 2016) and has been protected since at least the 1970s (Forsèn, 2021). Today it is prohibited to pick, collect, cut off, pull up by the roots, dig up, or otherwise remove the flower from its natural habitat. It is possible to notice a shift in the understanding of the blue anemone as a resource that has happened between the remembered and present childhoods. A woman born in 1947 wrote about this change in a similar way:

When I was little, we sat by the ditches and strung wonderfully tasty wild strawberries on blades of grass. If you find wild strawberries today, they hardly taste of anything. It's awful how little we care – you get used to it. Fruits and berries tasted better when I was little, everything is so watery [today] – the speeding up of the growth, or whatever it is, might be the reason. Strawberries taste good, but not as heavenly good as they used to. It is the same with blueberries. Apples have less taste today, only a few apple varieties taste or smell of anything. We elderly don't have the energy to act on this, and the younger people don't know of anything else.

In the above passage, it is the taste of nature that has changed, according to the woman comparing her memories of eating fruit and berries in her childhood with their taste in the present. It is also notable that the previous taste represents knowledge and experience that the young people of today lack. Above all, it is nature's role as a resource for pleasure that is brought up, in nostalgic terms, and dismissed in the present. This sense of longing for the nature of the past is also highlighted in previous research on people's memories of nature in Australia (Mulcock and Toussaint, 2002).

The changes in nature were noted by a woman born in 1924, who wrote about how nature has gone from safe to dangerous since she was a child:

When I was growing up, I was never afraid of encountering anything dangerous in the forest. But in recent years, there have been animals in the forest that didn't use to be present in our region, so nowadays I don't dare walk alone in the forest anymore.

In the above passage, the woman described how nature has transformed into an unsafe place of fear, where one is at risk of encountering dangerous things, which estranges people from nature as something to be feared. This view represents an understanding in the written memories of nature: nature has shifted from being understood as a *safe place* in childhood to being an unpredictable place in a scary present. A different view of the transformation of nature was articulated by a man, born in 1921, who wrote:

I will limit my contribution here to thoughts about how we, today, because of our fornicating with nature, corrupting and consuming nature. A creek with clean water where we used to bathe in my childhood is today a drainage ditch with dirty water. ... The forest of my childhood has been 'pillaged' through 'rational' felling.

The above comparison between what nature was and what nature consists of today was presented through the metaphor of abusing a human body. The previously uncorrupted and unspoiled nature has now been pillaged, according to the respondent. The pure and clean has become transformed into the molested, echoing the notion of abusing a woman's body. Feminist theory has grappled, at least since Simone de Beauvoir wrote and published *The Second Sex* in 1949, with the idea of women's proximity to nature. Figures such as *Mother Earth* and the *Virgin Mary* highlight women's ability to give birth to new human life and, in a broader sense, the feminine connotations of nature. As such, many feminist theorists have noted the various ways in which cultural understandings of women and nature are linked (see e.g. Alaimo, 2000; Gaard, 2017). In the above passage, the respondent describes 'fornicating with nature', perpetrating corruption and abuse, recalling the molestation of a woman's body. What was once 'clean' in nature is now 'dirty'. Within this understanding lies the idea of nature as a passive and externalized object that suffers from (active) human abuse. It can also be understood as a way for the respondent to write himself into nature as it is the forest of *his* childhood that is destroyed by *others*.

Conclusions

This paper analyzed how the relation between childhood and nature contribute to the formation of identities through childhood memories written for archival purposes. I have defined memory, with the help of memory studies scholar Emily Keightley (2010: 55–56), as ‘a lived process of making sense of time and the experience of it’. As such, memories provide childhood researchers with episodes of sense-making about a past situated in the present of memory writing. Working with memories specifically written for an archive adds, I argue, yet another layer of accessing self-presentation. The respondents write not only for the purpose of participating in a research project, but also for contributing to an archive on the nation’s cultural heritage. For this reason, I have turned to Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis and his theories of self-presentation through the notion of *performance*. Performance, for Goffman, denoted the enactment of the individual’s desire to make an impression on others in a social situation such as, in the present context, that of archiving. Goffman clarified that an important distinction can be made between an individual’s *presentation* of the self and his/her *behavior*. The above analysis has shown that, as Jacques Derrida (1996: 17) famously noted, ‘the archivization produces as much as it records the event.’ The studied childhood memories of nature reveal active identity formation at the nexus of childhood and nature. The relationship between the self and nature is narrated in relation to childhood, and vice versa – the relationship between nature and childhood is narrated in relation to the self.

What becomes clear through this analysis of childhood memories is that the archive produces social identities with the help of different interpretations of the meaning of nature. It seems important to pay attention to how memories structure relationships between the past, present, and future in a way that excludes memories and versions of memories of ‘socially unacceptable experiences’ (Keightley, 2010: 57). In conclusion, archived childhood memories give us important answers as to how the idealized relationship between nature and childhood is constructed in specific contexts. These answers help us recognize the constitutive character of identity at the nexus of nature and childhood: presenting nature as a resource for survival, pleasure, and safety is constructed as morally superior, while being ignorant of and distant from nature is seen as morally questionable. These ideas are used by the respondents to create generation-specific identities of the good childhood in relation to nature.

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