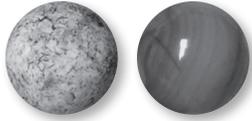




Archaeologies of American Childhoods



Writing a book on the American experience from any angle is a daunting task. The very term “America” is a protean concept that is heartily debated and contested at any given moment of the nation’s history, and has shifted profoundly with the growth and development of the nation. The diversity of the American population rests at the core of this mythological, singular identity as a “melting pot,” and the multiplicity of human experiences that can be reasonably termed “American” makes any concise summation a challenge. As Stacey Camp (2013) illustrates in her book on the archaeology of citizenship, ideas about identity on a national scale are most visible archaeologically at broader levels of institutions, communities, and social movements rather than at more intimate scales such as the internal dynamics of family life. While ideas of childhood and adolescence are germane at these broader scales, the lives of children and adolescents are quite often defined and understood in more intimate, interpersonal terms and are perhaps most often archaeologically visible at domestic sites and in moments of individual commemoration and loss. In her recent book on American childhood, historian Paula Fass (2016) addresses explicitly this tension of bridging scales between the personal world of the family and broad sweeping ideas of America. She notes that, despite the difficulties

inherent in such an endeavor, there is a deep and abiding relationship between the two arenas that demands historical attention.

Archaeological work on the American past suggests archaeologists share this sentiment. The idea of “becoming American” has been an enduring theme in historical archaeology, where broad ideas of identity, worldview, and membership have been connected to the fragmentary remains of daily lives and the mundane objects that structure the material world (Deetz 1977; Loren and Beaudry 2006). The idea of becoming and the idea of America have been invoked together in archaeological studies of early contact, the formation of the republic, and later experiences of immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Loren and Beaudry (2006: 255) have actively critiqued this idea in saying, “The words ‘becoming American’ evoke a process by which people in early America created (using material culture, of course) identities that could be described as *American*.” This idea of moving toward a singular sense of identity is erroneous, as people are often negotiating multiple, often conflicting identities simultaneously, and the diversity of how America is understood as part of this negotiated, often political process is a much more realistic understanding of life in the past than any singular notion of “Americanness.”

Contemporary childhood is also commonly understood as a time of becoming as well as of being, creating a poignant parallel between these concepts. Childhood, like America, is a social construction that is historically, culturally, and socially variable, and the meaning of childhood is negotiated both in public discourse and in interpersonal relationships (Mintz 2004). The definition and maintenance of the social category of childhood depends on multiple types of discourse. There are adult discourses about childhood produced primarily for adults, and others produced by adults for children. Children also actively negotiate their categorical identity among themselves and with adults. Material culture is integral to all of these types of discourse, as these contested and negotiated identities are embodied and performed in the material world as integral aspects of people’s daily lives.

Childhood is a category that is both relational and ideological. It is primarily defined by its opposition to the category of adulthood, and can be internally expanded and contracted to include multiple stages and phases of nonadulthood, including the concept of adolescence. Childhood is also a set of meanings that are informed by an ideology, which

“serves to rationalize, to sustain, or to challenge existing relationships of power between adults and children, and indeed between adults themselves” (Buckingham 2000: 11). Given these understandings of the interrelationships that create childhood in a historical moment, the archaeology of childhood is perhaps best understood as the archaeology of everyone undertaken from a vantage point that offers unique and potent ways of exploring shared experiences of family, community, and nation.

Writing about the archaeology of childhood in the American experience is an exercise in capturing a moving target, and normalizing categories of identity that are characterized by diversity and contestation at any given moment in time. Accomplishing this task requires a great deal of selectivity in case material and a multidisciplinary arsenal of sources. This chapter sets the stage by delving into the works of historians and others who have already attempted diachronic studies of American childhood, as well as exploring the disciplinary basis for studying children archaeologically. Resulting from these summations are a series of strategies for defining a broad and complex topic, and themes that transcend historical changes, site types, and categories of material culture when thinking about childhoods and adolescences that are particularly American.

What Is an American Childhood? A Historical and Thematic Approach

The landscape is becoming crowded with historical considerations of what constitutes an “American” childhood. Beginning in the 1980s, edited volumes addressing aspects of American childhoods emerged on the scholarly landscape (e.g., Hawes and Hiner 1985; Hiner and Hawes 1985) and became quite influential, as did historical monographs focusing on American childhoods in particular regions, time periods, and topical perspectives (e.g., Ashby 1997; Berrol 1995; Calvert 1992; Clement 1997; Graff 1997; West 1989). The twenty-first century has seen historians tackle America as a concept for understanding childhood in relationship to particular topics such as play (Chudacoff 2007) and nature (Riney-Kehrberg 2014), and for examining the diversity of childhood through different populations including slaves, pioneers, farmers, and urban laborers (Fass 2016; Mintz 2004). Authors of these works have each developed their own unique approach to handling time and change when telling the American story. Most often, the issue of change takes on a