

Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Youth, Children, and Childhood in the United States

Instructor: Natalie Rose

Course Description

In their essay “Reflections on the History of Children and Childhood in the Postmodern Era” historians Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner write “Childhood as a social construction, that is, the ideals and expectations that adults establish for children, should not be confused with what children actually experience anymore than an experienced teacher assumes what is taught is necessarily learned.”

This course serves as an introduction to historical approaches to children, childhood, and youth in the United States, especially during the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The class is organized around four units that are arranged thematically and chronologically: Youth and Children in the American Family; Migration, Assimilation, and Acculturation; Youth Cultures, Revolutions, and Rebellions; and Beyond a “Traditional” Childhood. Under these four main units we will explore the history of childhood and youth including the lived experiences of young people and the cultural and social meanings of childhood, which is more than a biological stage of life. We will also engage with major themes such as family formations/construction of the family, work, education, the development of adolescence, memory, and generational tensions. Each class will ponder the effects of age, gender, class, race, ethnicity, religion, and geographic diversity on children’s actual experiences and changing perceptions of childhood.

Course Objectives

This class is designed to educate you about

1. The process of historical writing, teaching above all that history is always a process of interpretation, not a list of facts or an official chronicle of events.
2. The analytical tools of the historical profession: identifying research questions, the analysis and interpretation of primary sources, evaluation of secondary sources, and the ability to use evidence to construct a clear and compelling argument.

By the end of the course you should be able to

1. Describe how the concept of childhood varies across time periods. This will be measured by writing assignments in which you will be asked to evaluate primary sources and apply secondary sources.
2. Evaluate how what we know about children in the past elucidates issues that children encounter in the United States today.

Course Texts

Readings

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave by Frederick Douglass

Out of the Shadow by Rose Cohen

Warriors Don't Cry by Melba Pattillo Beals

How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?: Being Young and Arab in America by Moustafa Bayoumi

The rest of the required readings, in the form of articles, primary documents, and selections or chapters from books, are found on the course website. Sometimes we will be reading these documents in class together. I highly suggest you make sure to print out the articles/materials and bring them to each class.

Films

An American Rhapsody (dir. Éva Gárdos)

The Murder of Emmett Till (dir. Stanley Nelson)

Fordson: Faith Fasting and Football (dir. Rashid Ghazi)

We will watch the above films (or substantial portions of them) in class. There will be extra credit opportunities based upon these films.

Course Requirements

Class Participation:

- Each student is required to attend class and participate in class discussion. Participation in class consists of both asking questions and responding to questions. In addition, students will also participate in activities and writing exercises during class that count toward participation points.

Reading Assessments and Response Questions

- Students will take a short answer assessment over the assigned reading or submit completed reading response questions at each class to demonstrate basic understanding of the assigned texts.

Interview Paper

- You will conduct an interview with an older individual (preferably twenty years or more older) about his or her reactions to and perceptions of a national historical event during his or her childhood (For example, the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001 or the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989).

Website Review

- I will give you a list of website about the history of childhood. You will choose to review. The assignment will consist of answering a set of questions and choosing a non-textual source from the website to discuss.

Final Exam

- Your final exam is a take home exam. It will feature two essay questions that encompass course material and readings from the four units.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introductions

Class discussion topics:

- What is historical thinking?
- Primary versus secondary sources: why does the difference matter?
- No assignment for this class.

Unit 1: Youth and Children in the American Family

- Questions to consider during this unit: What do we learn from studying childhood and youth? How have Americans from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century defined “family”? How did the definition of “family” change according to religion, race, class, and/or ethnicity? How does the structure of a family shape one’s childhood experiences?

Week 2: Theories on the history of Children and Family

Class 1

- Assignment: Hawes and Hiner, “Reflections on the History of Children and Childhood in the Postmodern Era”
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: Coontz, “Mythology and History in the Study of the American Family”
- Reading assessment due

Week 3: Defining Family

Class 1

- Assignment: Purdue, “Matrilineal Kinship Among the Cherokee Indians in the American Southeast”
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, vii- 30
- Reading assessment due

Week 4: The Modern Family

Class 1

- Assignment: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 30 – 76
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: May, selection from *Homeward Bound*
- “Polygamist Kids Grow Up” and “Kids’ Voices Key on Both Sides of Gay-Marriage Debate”
- Reading assessment due

Unit 2: Migration, Assimilation, and Acculturation

- Questions to consider for this unit: Why do families migrate? How does migration affect family structure? How does being first or second-generation affect one’s childhood? What are the differences between domestic and international migration? How does forced relocation affect ideas of one’s national identity?

Week 5: Migration to the United States

Class 1

- Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 9-145
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

Assignment for Tuesday, October 1 and Thursday, October 3:

- Cohen, *Out of the Shadow*, 149-313
- Reading assessment due

Week 7: Varieties of Migration

Class 1

- In class reading: “A Nisei Daughter Describes Family Life in a Detention Camp, 1942”
- **Interview Paper due**

Class 2

- Assignment: Ruiz, “‘Star Struck’: Acculturation, Adolescence and Mexican American Women”
- Assignment: “My Life as an Undocumented Immigrant” by Jose Antonio Vargas from the *New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2011
- selections from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

- Reading assessment due

Unit 3: Youth Cultures, Revolutions, and Rebellions

- Questions to consider this unit: How do children and youth exercise their power in different social movements? How and why do children contribute both to the success or failure of social movements/revolutions? Why do some adults view members of different youth cultures with suspicion?

Week 8: Youth Culture, Sexuality, and Juvenile Delinquency

Class 1

- Assignment: Alvarez, selection from *The Power of the Zoot*
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: Bailey, “From Panty Raids to Revolution: Youth and Authority, 1950-1970”
- Reading assessment due

Week 9: Children and the Long Civil Rights Movement, Part 1

Class 1

- Assignment: Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, introduction and 1 -68
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 69 -113
- No reading assessment

Week 10: Children and the Right to Education

Class 1

- Assignment: Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 114- 173
- Reading assessment due

Class 2

- Assignment: Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 174 - 226
- Reading assessment due

Unit 4: Beyond a “Traditional” Childhood

- Questions to consider this unit: How do social scientists, parents, and other adults define a “normal” childhood? How have children used their personal space throughout American history? What are the particular issues relating to race, class, gender, class, religion, and ethnicity that have affected youth in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries?

Week 11: The Invention of Adolescence: The “Storm and Stress” of Growing up

Class 1

- Writing Workshop

Class 2

- Assignment: Assignment: Reid, “My Room! Private! Keep Out! This Means You!”: A Brief Overview of the Emergence of the Autonomous Teen Bedroom in Post–World War II America”
- Reading assessment due

Week 12: Does Religious Difference Matter?

Class 1

- Website Review paper due

Class 2

- Assignment: Sanua, “We Hate New York”
- Reading assessment due

Week 13: Ethnic Difference in the Twenty-First Century, Part 1

Assignment for Tuesday, November 19 and Thursday, November 21

- Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, 1 -114
- Reading assessment due

Week 14: Ethnic Difference in the Twenty-First Century, Part 2

Class 1 & Class 2

- Bayoumi, *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, 115 -259

Week 15: A Normal Childhood?

Class 1

- Assignment: Elijah Anderson, “How racial prejudice in America has changed in the last sixty years” from the *Washington Monthly*, January/February 2013
- Reading assessment due Tuesday December 3rd

Class 2

- Prologue to *Huck's Raft* by Steven Mintz
- Final review

Finals Week:

Final Exam due.