

Analysis of America's Historic Definition of 'Child/Girlhood'

By Jillian Duke

Familiar to its civil rights movements, America's validation of children's autonomy and rights has not developed equally among identity groups nor economic classes. This week's material paints a reality in which our historical treatment of children has been subjectively dependent on intersectional identities and centuries worth of their misrepresentation and dehumanization. America's definitions of girlhood and boyhood are further dichotomized by historic preconceptions formed under the conditions of patriarchy. For public historians, differentiating between adult society's intricately structured definition of girlhood from the true, diverse experiences of girls becomes uniquely challenging yet crucial.

The nature of this challenge is similar to our earlier analysis of marginalized histories under systemic threats of erasure—enslaved African American girls, whose illiteracy was enforced, could only document their experiences later as freed adults. Research by historians such as Tammy Cherelle Owens asserts that sources of this nature are as equally valid and significant as primary sources documented during or around the time of the actual events¹. Further, Owens emphasizes the restrictive nature of research methodologies normalized by white centrism. Contemporary public history research must acknowledge all the nuanced ways in which narratives may be obscured—either by an individual's lack of access to documentation, or by white-centric expectations imposed on historical research modalities.

The canonization of 'childhood' as a tangible concept in America's narrative happens nearly in tandem with the Gilded Age and the establishment of Jim Crow laws in the South. Through these two distinct realities of American life, we can observe how pre-established racism and classism impacts society's conceptualization of 'girlhood'. Jane Hunter's *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* details how the Gilded Age's economic boom meant that middle class families could establish a period of development for their children rather than rely on their labor for support². Hunter cites a letter by Louisa May Alcott in her adolescence, highlighting it as a 'prototypical' example for this new age of childhood innocence. While this was a significant development for (white) children's social autonomy, I believe the romanticization of childhood by the privileged adult society signifies

¹Corinne T. Field et al., "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions," *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (2016): 385–387, <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2016.0067>.

²Jane Hunter, "Friendship, Fun, and the City Streets," chapter, in *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, n.d.), 261–263.

how deeply subjective the concept was. Specifically, their conceptual model for childhood merely reflects hopes for their own families, thus fundamentally ‘othering’ non-white, lower class children.

By end of the Gilded Age in 1900, the public presence of black children in urban spaces is significant. The experience of young black girls, particular those under economic disadvantage, starkly contrasts with white peers. Despite the ‘childhood’ canon’s introduction, the historic precedent of enslavement and subsequent social implications have profound impact on black girls’ experience of childhood³. Saidiya Hartman’s description of a nude, black female child’s archival photo in ‘An Unnamed Girl, A Speculative History’ recognizes the depths of black girlhood’s erasure by way of society’s advancing dehumanization of non-white children:

“Looking at the photograph, it is easy to mistake her for some other Negress, lump her with all the delinquent girls working Lombard Street and Middle Alley, lose sight of her among the surplus colored women in Philadelphia, condemn and pity the child whore. . . The captions make no mention of her, noting only the moral hazard of the one-room kitchenette, the foul condition of the toilets, and the noise of the airshaft. The photograph taken of her in the attic studio is the one that is most familiar; it is how the world still remembers her.”⁴

In comparing Hartman’s interpretation of the unnamed girl’s experience with Hunter’s canonical example, we can better comprehend not only the nature of treatment between white and non-white children, but also how America’s foundation of systemic racism overpowered even our earliest conceptions of ‘childhood’.

³Saidiya Hartman, “An Unnamed Girl, a Speculative History,” *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-unnamed-girl-a-speculative-history>.

⁴Hartman, “An Unnamed Girl, a Speculative History,” February 9, 2019.

Bibliography

- Field, Corinne T., Tammy-Charelle Owens, Marcia Chatelain, Lakisha Simmons, Abosede George, and Rhian Keyse. "The History of Black Girlhood: Recent Innovations and Future Directions." *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 9, no. 3 (2016): 383–401. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2016.0067>.
- Hartman, Saidiya. "An Unnamed Girl, a Speculative History." *The New Yorker*, February 9, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/an-unnamed-girl-a-speculative-history>.
- Hunter, Jane. "Friendship, Fun, and the City Streets." Chapter. In *How Young Ladies Became Girls: The Victorian Origins of American Girlhood*, 261–313. New Haven: Yale University Press, n.d.