New Books from Childhood Studies Faculty

Dr. Meredith A. Bak, Associate Professor of Childhood Studies
*Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children’s Media Culture* (The MIT Press, 2020)

In the nineteenth century, the kaleidoscope, the thaumatrope, the zoetrope, the stereoscope, and other optical toys were standard accessories of a middle-class childhood, used both at home and at school. In Playful Visions, Meredith Bak argues that the optical toys of the nineteenth century were the “new media” of their era, teaching children to be discerning consumers of media—and also provoking anxieties similar to contemporary worries about children’s screen time. Bak shows that optical toys—which produced visual effects ranging from a moving image to the illusion of depth—established and reinforced a new understanding of vision as an interpretive process. At the same time, the expansion of the middle class as well as education and labor reforms contributed to a new notion of childhood as a time of innocence and play. Modern media culture and the emergence of modern Western childhood are thus deeply interconnected.

Drawing on extensive archival research, Bak discusses, among other things, the circulation of optical toys, and the wide visibility gained by their appearance as printed templates and textual descriptions in periodicals; expanding conceptions of literacy, which came to include visual acuity; and how optical play allowed children to exercise a sense of visual mastery. She examines optical toys alongside related visual technologies including chromolithography—which inspired both chromatic delight and chromophobia. Finally, considering the contemporary use of optical toys in advertising, education, and art, Bak analyzes the endurance of nineteenth-century visual paradigms.

Daniel Cook, Professor of Childhood Studies
*The Moral Project of Childhood: Motherhood, Material Life and Early Children’s Consumer Culture* (NYU Press, 2020)

Examines the Protestant origins of motherhood and the child consumer.

Throughout history, the responsibility for children’s moral well-being has fallen into the laps of mothers. In The Moral Project of Childhood, the noted childhood studies scholar Daniel Thomas Cook illustrates how mothers in the nineteenth-century United States meticulously managed their children’s needs and wants, pleasures and pains, through the material world so as to produce the “child” as a moral project.

Drawing on a century of religiously-oriented child care advice in women’s periodicals, he examines how children ultimately came to be understood by mothers—and later, by commercial actors—as consumers. From concerns about taste, to forms of discipline and punishment, to play and toys, Cook delves into the social politics of motherhood, historical anxieties about childhood, and early children’s consumer culture. [https://nyupress.org/9781479810260/the-moral-project-of-childhood/](https://nyupress.org/9781479810260/the-moral-project-of-childhood/)
Meredith Bak’s work exploring children’s media and material culture in the archive has resulted in several publications: an article entitled “Optical Toys and the Expanded Archive: Mapping Childhood and Media Archaeology” appeared in the journal Early Popular Visual Culture; an essay “Toying with Early Cinema: Media Studies in the Children’s Archive” is forthcoming in an In Focus Dossier on “Alternative Archives” in the Journal of Cinema and Media Studies; and a research methodology case study: “Material Artefacts: Using Objects to Illuminate the History of Media and Play,” is forthcoming in “Case Studies in Research Methods for Primary Source” from Sage. She additionally contributed an essay: “The Time Stretched Before Us: Rethinking Young Children’s ‘Screen Time,’” to the timely edited collection Pandemic Media: Preliminary Notes Toward an Inventory from Meson Press.

In spring 2021, Meredith was notified that she will be promoted to Associate Professor with tenure. This year Meredith was a faculty fellow at the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers University (New Brunswick) and presented work at the Society of Cinema and Media Studies’ annual conference. She was also invited to lead a workshop and talk on optical toys and children’s media at the University of Wisconsin’s Center for Design and Material Culture.

Kate Cairns delivered a talk entitled “Feeding Relations: Food as a Lens onto Inequality” as part of the Rutgers New Brunswick Department of Nutritional Sciences seminar series. Her coauthored article on the ideal of the “organic child” was republished in the edited collection The State of Families: Law, Policy and the Meanings of Relationships. She wrote encyclopedia entries on “Food studies and children” for the Sage Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies and “Food inequality” for The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Critical Perspectives on Mental Health. She was interviewed by Denmark’s OXY Magazine about her book Food and Femininity, and authored blog posts about young people and environmental justice for both Changing Childhoods and Common Worlds Research Collective. She also began parenting a small person who is teaching her new things about all areas of life, including childhood.

Dan Cook (on leave for ’20-’21) is working on several projects related to photography and visuality, including theoretical treatments regarding photographic images and imaginings, methodological and pedagogic possibilities, and historical dimensions of children’s relation to cameras and picture taking. His publication aspirations encompass academic journal articles, photo essays and, perhaps, a book-length project.

Lynne Vallone was promoted to Distinguished Professor on July 1, 2020.
Susan Miller, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Childhood Studies

In addition to learning to teach virtually this year, Susan Miller is working on several papers associated with her current book project, Young Defenders: American Youth, Patriotism and Nationalism, 1890-1939 for which she was awarded a 2020-2021 Rutgers Research Council Grant. One article – “Patriot Games” is focused on lessons of patriotism embedded in youth sports, particularly American Legion Junior baseball. Another is focused on the meaning and practice of children’s philanthropy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the past year, she has contributed an entry on historical methods to the SAGE Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood Studies, and reviews in HDiplomacy and the Journal of History of Childhood & Youth, among other publications. Like scholars and historians everywhere, she mourns the cancelation of conferences, closure of archives, and the lack of access to library books in the age of COVID-19. She was, however, able to participate remotely in a conference sponsored by the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences at Tampere University.

Sarada Balagopalan, Ph.D.
Director of Graduate Studies
Associate Professor of Childhood Studies

In addition to learning to teach virtually this year, Sarada Balagopalan published an article titled “The Politics of Deferral: Denaturalizing the ‘economic value’ of children’s labor in India” in Current Sociology. She co-organized, with Rachel Rosen and Spyros Spyrou, a series of four webinars on Re-imagining Childhood Studies, recordings of which can be found at https://reimaginingchildhoodstudies.com. She co-authored (with Peter Kraftl and Gabriela Tebet) an entry on “Children’s Geographies Beyond ‘Agency’” for The SAGE Handbook of Global Childhoods. Sarada served as co-convener of the ‘Education and Childhood’ network at the (virtual) European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) at which she chaired a session as well as presented a paper. She currently serves as an Editor of Childhood and remains on the Advisory Board of the journal, Contemporary Education Dialogue.

Lauren Silver, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Childhood Studies

Lauren Silver published an article in Feminist Anthropology, titled “Queering Reproductive Justice: Memories, Mistakes, and Motivations to Transform Kinship,” and a forthcoming chapter, “Survivor Methodology for Healing and Transformation: A love letter to survivors of childhood sexual abuse” in the edited volume, Survivor Criminology (Roman and Littlefield Press). Lauren is writing her new book, Abolitionist Childhood: Forging Freedom at the Riffs of Racial Capitalism. Lauren served as an invited interlocutor for the Graduate Center, CUNY Book Salon for Wendy Luttrell’s Children Framing Childhoods. Along with several colleagues, Lauren is a member of a collaborative research team studying The Independence Public Media Foundation supported IDEA Center for the Arts’ project, “Johnson Park: A Gallery of History Reimagined,” in Camden, NJ. She published an invited blog, Abolitionist Childhood Now. on Youth Circulations.

Lauren J. Silver, Ph. D.
Associate Professor of Childhood Studies

Daniel Hart, Ph.D.
Distinguished Professor of Psychology

Dan Hart continues to work on civic and political development in adolescence. One facet of this work explores the possibility of lowering the voting age to sixteen. A recent paper with collaborators on the topic (“Reconsidering the minimum voting age in the United States”, Perspectives on Psychological Science) argued that the best evidence suggests that sixteen-year-olds can vote as responsibly as can young adults. In another paper using voter registration data ("Family and community effects and contexts of lowering the voting age", Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology), Dan and his colleagues found that adolescents seem no more susceptible to peer and neighborhood influences on political party affiliations than are much older adults. Dan is also interested in social capital and philanthropy ("Philanthropy's rural blind spot", Stanford Social Innovation Review) and the application of machine learning to developmental data ("Early detection of severe functional impairment among adolescents with major depression using logistic classifier", Frontiers in Public Health).
Lauren Silver published an article in Feminist Anthropology, titled “Queering Reproductive Justice: Memories, Mistakes, and Motivations to Transform Kinship,” and a forthcoming chapter, “Survivor Methodology for Healing and Transformation: A love letter to survivors of childhood sexual abuse” in the edited volume, Survivor Criminology (Roman and Littlefield Press). Lauren is writing her new book, Abolitionist Childhood: Forging Freedom at the Rifts of Racial Capitalism. Lauren served as an invited interlocutor for the Graduate Center, CUNY Book Salon for Wendy Luttrell’s Children Framing Childhoods. Along with several colleagues, Lauren is a member of a collaborative research team studying The Independence Public Media Foundation supported IDEA Center for the Arts’ project, “Johnson Park: A Gallery of History Reimagined,” in Camden, NJ. She published an invited blog, Abolitionist Childhood Now. on Youth Circulations.

Anthony Wright published an article with Juhramuti José Velázquez Morales titled “Where Your Voice Burns Like Fire” in the journal Global Studies of Childhood (2021). The article offers an ethnographic analysis of youth art and radio broadcasting as practices of intergenerational political socialization. Anthony also submitted an article titled “‘Rise and Shine, They Wanna Keep Us Under’: Racial Embodiment and Pediatric Cancer in the United States” to Body and Society. He has also been invited to write a review of the book Cartographies of Youth Resistance: Hip-hop, Punk, and Urban Autonomy in Mexico by Maurice Rafael Magaña for The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology. Finally, he is working on a book manuscript titled The Promise of Poison: An Anthropological Account of Pediatric Cancer Treatment.

John Wall wrote Give Children the Vote: On Democratizing Democracy, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in November 2021. He is co-editing with Sarada Balagopalan and Karen Wells a 36-chapter Handbook of Theories in Childhood Studies, forthcoming in 2023. He published an article co-authored with Jonathan Josefsson, “Empowered Inclusion: Theorizing Global Justice for Children and Youth,” and two shorter pieces “Ethics and Childism” for the Australian ERIC Project and “Empowering Children through Childism” for Montessori International. He is Director of Rutgers Camden’s Childism Institute, a global project to develop child-responsive theory, research, and activism. And he is Co-Founder of the Children’s Voting Colloquium, an international coalition working to eliminate all voting ages.