Embracing Ambiguity in the Historiography of Children’s Dress

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This article examines the historiography of children’s dress, arguing that it has been limited by an unreflexive, uncritical conceptualisation of children and childhood. Drawing on insights afforded by the emergent field of childhood studies, by socially inflected perspectives on fashion and dress and by theories of consumption and consumer culture, the discussion turns toward ways of reconfiguring the historical study of children. It is suggested that future work may do well by embracing the ambiguities of children’s identities, rather than trying to attenuate them.

Introduction

Children’s clothing history remains largely trapped in its own historiography, bounded by a conceptual myopia inherited from fashion theory and limited by an unreflexive, uncritical conceptualisation of children and childhood. Consequently, historians of children’s dress, in a large part, have been unable to bring their particular and particularly valuable subject matter to bear upon pressing questions and problems surrounding, for instance, the configuration of children’s social identities and the changing nature and contours of childhood and youth. One need only look toward the growing field of children and childhood studies to realise that historical treatments of children’s dress and appearance do not inform general childhood history to any great extent or the history and theory of fashion, for that matter. In what follows, I seek to offer ways to reconfigure some aspects of the historiography of children’s dress by drawing on the insights afforded by childhood studies, by socially inflected perspectives on fashion and dress and by theories of consumption and consumer culture. Proceeding by way of an examination and critique of histories of children’s clothing, the discussion moves toward providing some analytical benchmarks with which to re-conceptualise and re-theorise the relation between children/childhood and clothing as they have arisen in this literature. I conclude by addressing the ambiguity historians necessarily encounter when studying children and argue that ambiguity can be seen as offering new insights in the pursuit of the history of children’s dress.

The Legacy — Untheorised Childhoods

It is perhaps a bit ironic that the history of children’s clothing would occupy the periphery of a field it helped to establish. It was, after all, ruminations about the changing nature of children’s dress in Europe that informed Philippe Ariès’ seminal contention that childhood is something that has a history — that it is not fixed or determined in
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nature but must be understood as a social construction, subject to social practices, meanings and beliefs. In *Centuries of Childhood*, he proclaimed that prior to the twelfth century ‘medieval art . . . did not know childhood or did not attempt to portray it’. What was portrayed were ‘little men’ or ‘miniature adults’ — small (mostly) males whose morphology mirrored that of grown adults. When adults began to depict children with body shapes now stereotypically associated with infants, boys’ and girls’ dress was virtually indistinguishable from that of their adult gender counterparts. From the early part of the seventeenth century to his present in the early 1960s, however, the clothing of children and adults had become increasingly differentiated, to the point that garments had come to indicate membership in this particular phase of the life cycle.

Of the 400-plus pages in Ariès’ landmark study, about one-fourth is spent on the ‘discovery’ or ‘invention’ of childhood theme, a theme which utilises half of his citations. Indeed, it is this ‘discovery’ proposition which overshadows all the rest and is often the only argument for which the work is known and cited. Ariès, of course, is not without his critics. His work has been challenged as ‘presentism’ and ‘present-minded’ in that he took present-day practices as the standard against which earlier centuries were judged. Scholars have also raised significant and valid challenges to Ariès’ notion that the change in the dressing and depiction of children indicated a change in sentiment toward them. Despite these, his core insight regarding the social-historical construction of childhood stands as a foundational premise for an expansive and expanding field of study that includes and extends beyond children’s history.

Decades prior to Ariès’ study, a number of fashion historians had enjoined the connection between children’s dress and children’s social identity and social status, taking as their focal point the distinction between utility (or functionality) and fashion rather than the invention or discovery of the ‘child’ or ‘childhood’. This distinction appears to have organised the study of, and approach to, children’s clothing well into the twentieth century for both academic writers and for those working in the garment industries. Accordingly, normative evaluations and judgements of historical progress have been based upon the degree to which children’s garments achieve some level of functionality.

Early writers measured functionality by the looseness of fit and the corresponding freedom of movement allowed to the child by the garment and, to a lesser extent, by how well the garments protected children from the elements. In so doing, writers offered a theory connecting dress, historical change and children’s status. For instance, writing in 1923, Percy Macquoid observed:

> Until the first half of the eighteenth century, children had been reared with the utmost severity and discipline and although there is every reason to suppose that this process was continued in other countries far later than in England, it is not until the second half of the century that children were clothed as children and not like their elders . . .

James Laver, the prominent and prolific fashion historian, writing in 1951 noticed that:

> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, clothes for boys and girls were really very sensible. The boys had loose, light-coloured garments, open at the throat; the girls had
dresses the only fault of which was that they were too long. The girls had no constriction round the waist and the boys had no constriction round the throat, these being the two stock vices of male and female clothes respectively.\textsuperscript{15}

Doris Langley Moore discusses the criteria for selection of clothing from the nineteenth century which were displayed in her book:

They do not call for the constriction, the mincing gait, the renunciation of normal childish activities which the engravings in fashion journals suggest ... It could be said that they were considerably more functional than those of adults — thus showing on the part of adults an understanding lacking in earlier centuries. And indeed we cannot read of the callowness with which children were once treated without feeling that there has been progress, though not of the steady or universal kind. Their emancipation from unyielding and ostentatious clothing coincides closely in period with their emancipation from the insensate obedience and idolatrous reverence formerly extracted from them.\textsuperscript{16}

These early statements prefigure the core approach to the grand history of children’s clothing in the West as it has been written. Implicitly and explicitly it is asserted that the shift to specialised garments marked a change in the social meaning of childhood by recognising the presumably pre-existent and shared special nature of children that was hidden or otherwise obscured by how they were regarded and indicated by their dress. Dressing children in adult clothing was physically restricting and tantamount to oppression. The emancipation of children began with the gradual elimination of this practice. Here physical constriction and social restriction are causally related and iconically linked. In other words, children’s physical bodies are made the site of transformations of the social body through the very act of recognising that these bodies and beings require a different set of interpretations than those of adults regarding their ‘nature’ and ‘needs’.

Lest it be thought that the connection between physical and social emancipation (and the corresponding relation between child and adult dress) is made off-handedly by a few, early scholars, virtually all of those I have surveyed make this claim in one way or another.\textsuperscript{17} Elizabeth Ewing is particularly explicit about the notion that the history of childhood is one of increasing liberation through the vehicle of specialised, functional clothing. In Chapter 1 of History of Children’s Costume (1978), entitled ‘Swaddling and Subjugation’, Ewing states clearly that ‘[t]he emancipation of the child has been a part of an immense social revolution which began about 200 years ago and is still going on, and the development of his [sic] particular kind of dressing from that time onwards has been an outward sign of his changed status’.\textsuperscript{18}

Others echo Ewing’s faith in clothing as a source of accessible, direct evidence about children’s social status and standing. Linda Martin remarks that ‘children’s styles have mirrored adults’ conception of childhood and the value of play\textsuperscript{19} and that with the Great Depression ‘[a]s the economic situation constricted, so did the waist’.\textsuperscript{20} Estelle Worrell is confident that ‘[h]ow people dress their children and how they feel about them go hand in hand. By studying children’s costume, it is possible to gain insight into the attitudes of a society toward its young’\textsuperscript{21}. \textsuperscript
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With the exception of Laver and Ewing, these commentaries are made as prefaces or adjuncts to works primarily concerned with historical documentation through fashion illustration as opposed to, say, fashion history generally or childhood history. All writers explicitly recognise the selective nature of surviving garments. Percy Macquoid, for instance, relates that the French Duc de Lauzan, ‘when speaking of his boyhood, said he was brought up like all other children, his fine clothes being reserved for his appearances in public, whilst at home he was half-clothed and always hungry . . .’. Similarly, Moore gives ‘every allowance . . . for the strong possibility that most of the sitters for formal portraits were depicted in their best clothes’. Laver, Martin, Sichel and Rose make the same sort of acknowledgement, recognising the upper- and middle-class bias of surviving children’s depictions. Few lower-class children’s garments have survived due to being handed down until they became rags.

Strong on specific insights about the particularities of garments and occasions for wearing them, this historiography — the historical narrative — of children’s clothing generally relies on unexamined and problematic presumptions and formulations which limit its impact on scholarship at large. For one, despite the recognition of changing views about children over time, the underlying notion at work in these narratives is that of the existence of a singular, universal child or child nature that has been hidden or otherwise suppressed by ‘adults’. Unquestioned and unexamined, this view reduces and essentialises ‘the child’ to biology and ‘nature’ in which social and cultural influences, as well as historical variation can be discarded as ultimately secondary and superficial; that is, the ‘true’, extant or sublimated child ultimately emerges over time.

A second and related presumption underlying these historical treatments centres on epistemological and methodological questions regarding the meaning of clothing. It appears that many of these historians of children’s fashion are quite comfortable in asserting a direct relationship between the meaning of a garment and overarching — and supposedly shared — meanings of childhood within a particular time. One need only consult the quotes offered above to grasp that clothing for these writers functions as something of a pure reflection of children’s identities — that dress indexes, without much if any mediation whatsoever, how ‘adults’, in general, thought about ‘children’, in general. The assertion of a direct relationship between garment and an ‘adult’ view of children does not entertain or recognise the child’s view. Such a view is assumed and derived, it would seem, from the authors’ unexamined understanding of children’s ‘nature’ as discussed above — for instance, that all children at all times ‘naturally’ want loose-fitting clothes that can be dirtied and torn in play.

The twin presumptions of a universal child or childhood faithfully reflected through clothing capture the general thrust of the history of children’s dress. Some scholars do not forefront a grand historical narrative in their studies, preferring to examine the emergence of gender indicators, or to detail various changes in styles and silhouettes. These efforts harbour their own analytical difficulties. Lacking an explicit theoretical stance hinders the ability to make anything more than general descriptions of supposed ‘objective’ changes in dress, as when it is asserted that certain styles somewhat mystically ‘fell out of favour’. Alice Guppy, for instance, describes the origin of playwear for children in this way:

By the end of the 30s a new idea had been born, garments especially for play, not the more serious sports, tennis, swimming or school games which were provided for, but for
mucking around at the seaside or in the country. The most important of these additional garments and the most revolutionary were shorts. So much publicity had been given to the tennis star who had adopted these practical garments that the children had seen how good they would be for their own boisterous pursuits. It was they who persuaded their parents to try and get some youthful editions for themselves although they were still controversial and regarded as unsightly and a matter for headline stories in the Press.30

In addition to a lack of documentation of this scenario, the narrative is astounding in the simplicity and directness with which it represents the process of historical change. Indeed, even if the plausibility of the general assertion is granted or at least entertained, the question does not arise as to how it is that children of that particular historical time and social context could assert influence such that an entire new category of dress was created. The question does not arise because the narrative is based on unexamined theories of children/childhood, clothing and social change.

A Childhood Studies Perspective

It is clear that the writers discussed above have laboured to represent the history of children’s dress by steeping themselves in garments and documents so as to be faithful to the historical record. The discussion and critiques offered thus far and below by no means intend to dismiss these efforts, rather to highlight that they are the product of a particular historiographical moment and to offer a new and different frame so as to enrich the study of children’s clothing and its history in ways which are only now beginning to be undertaken. I take these empirically rich studies as points of departure for opening up the historiography of children’s dress to theoretical and conceptual resources drawn from kindred fields of inquiry.

For the present discussion, the most directly relevant resources include: conceptualisations of children and childhood arising from the emerging field of childhood studies and approaches which incorporate the role and place of commerce, markets and consumption in the meaning and configuration of children’s dress. I will address these in subsequent sections with the idea of re-thinking how fashion theory and historiography may be re-visioned in light of new approaches to children and childhood. How these notions interact with children’s wear history (or with any particular historical undertaking) and how they may emerge as relevant to that endeavour will only be fully known in the context of specific studies and in response to specific questions and problems posed by researchers. Hence, what I offer below should be taken as an effort to outline some parameters and considerations to be taken up by others in their own ways for their own purposes and not, in any sense, to be construed as closed, definitive or exhaustive of the topic.

Scholarship on the history of children’s dress has the potential to contribute substantively to the expansive and growing body of work in childhood history and childhood studies generally, as well as to the study of consumer and popular culture and, of course, fashion history. The possibilities reside most richly in the ability to take up and bring forward insights and theoretical perspectives related to children and childhood. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, historians, sociologists and anthropologists began to formulate a new sort of approach to children and childhood. This ‘new paradigm’ 31
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posited, among other things, that children are not passive recipients of adult meanings but active in the interpretation of their own lives. Standard child development and socialisation theories had long ignored or discounted children’s perspectives and understandings, conceptualising them not as human ‘beings’ in the here and now, but as human ‘becomings’ — that is, only fully human at some future point. In this approach, the idea of a single universal child or childhood is replaced with a view that recognises that there exist multiple childhoods that vary with regard to culture, history and context and it makes no sense to think about a universal child or a singular version of childhood.

One conceptual and epistemological thrust of this approach seeks to bring children’s perspectives, voices and experiences into the analysis of history and social life. Often absent or lost to history, researchers nonetheless must account for the absence or ‘erasure’ of children from the historical record, to recognise the partiality and thus the bias of that record in this regard, and to work toward recognising children’s historical experiences and voices even when not necessarily inscribed by them. As Karen Sanchez-Eppler notes, ‘[t]he predominant accounts of children’s culture depict it as conservative and derivative, casting childhood as the repository of older cultural forms relinquished by adults’. Hence, children often ‘function as scavengers and inheritors of an eviscerated culture’ in many historiographic renderings. Historians of childhood have contributed to and have taken up this general approach in their works, in the process re-making their task not the ‘discovery’ of some pre-existent inner child nature or ‘true’ essence of childhood, but the recovery of children’s historical agency — that is, of how children acted in relation to their circumstances.

The history of children’s fashion and dress, as we have seen, does not theorise the ‘child’ as an active agent, but more like a clotheshorse for ‘adult’ preoccupations with class, status display and gender. Hence, the meaning of childhood is read as the meaning adults give (for whatever reason) to children’s garments of the time. Being able to offer some evidence or some discussion on how specific children and specific adults thought about or felt about children’s clothing in particular times or contexts could unsettle the linear narrative of emancipation and dislodge the privileged and contextually bound interpretations of the writers.

When writers situate children, their voices and perspectives, as central to the research endeavour, it becomes exceedingly difficult to offer either grand narratives about children’s wear history or to see clothing as directly reflecting the entirety of children’s identities. Indeed, when a child’s voice is offered (even if retrospectively) — as when Macquoid notes (above) that the Duc de Lauzan said he spent most of the time ‘half naked’ — we gain an insight into the partiality of extant evidence which, in turn, potentially calls into question the entire framework of ‘emancipation’. If the Duc often was ‘like other children’ and portraits of him and others were made for ‘special occasions’ requiring ‘special dress’, then is it possible that Ariès’ most cited and compelling evidence of the invention of childhood (i.e. ‘miniature adulthood’) is nothing more than numerous images of children periodically donning adult (i.e. formal) styles for posterity? Could it be that miniature adulthood existed only in European, upper-class portraiture and then only on formal occasions?

When children are allowed to enter history — to be part of the historiography in whatever ways possible and available — the garments become enlivened with an array
of interpretations and meanings. Elizabeth Ewen, for instance, writes on the world of European immigrant women and families in early twentieth-century New York. Clothing — particularly a daughter’s dress — for Italian and Jewish families in this context served as a site for contestation over the intertwined issues of parental authority, the loss of Old World ways (particularly with regard to gender display) and the rising prominence of a public, popular culture. Flashy clothes, the wearing of hats in the public realm of dance halls and other leisure locations all combined to suffuse young girls’ dress with multiple and oft-times contradictory meanings.

Ewen relates, for instance, a story recollected by an interviewee who was married and living with her husband away from the family home: ‘My two younger sisters would come to my house, telling our parents they were visiting. Then they’d change their clothes, get dressed up and sneak out dancing. They always came back at 9:30, they’d change and I’d walk them home. Our parents never knew’. Incorporating recollections, testimonials and descriptions such as this disrupts any simple narrative about the meaning of clothing to the extent that we learn of the dynamic interaction between the uses and interpretations of actually worn garments. The ‘traditional’ garb favoured by the sisters’ parents only makes sense when set against the ‘dressing up’ in modern and unapproved of clothing that the girls themselves donned surreptitiously. By being able to glean some direct voice and experience of how these young persons handled their sartorial lives, we gain insight into the multiple practices surrounding garments in this context and at this time. It is left for further, systematic study to determine the typicality or uniqueness of this narrative; but its interpretive and potential analytic power is clearly evident.

The ‘Other Adults’ — Accounting for Commercial Contexts

Histories of children’s clothing do not generally account for or consider the contexts of commercial production, including advertising and marketing. Virtually all such treatments confine themselves mainly to pre- or early twentieth-century garments, with a few exceptions. Largely a home-made enterprise in the USA for example until World War I, infants’ and children’s clothing up to about age six for both boys and girls could be pieced together from store-bought cloth using patterns purchased at dry goods’ stores or taken from women’s magazines such as Women’s Home Companion, Harper’s and Ladies’ Home Journal. As a sideline to women’s apparel, fully made infants’ and children’s garments did not begin to undergo mass production in earnest until about 1910 in the USA and elsewhere, and most likely later in the UK. The USA Census of Manufacture did not begin keeping separate statistics on children’s apparel until 1937; in Britain this did not occur until 1949.

With the advent of mass manufacture of garments generally, styles tended to take two directions. Initially, at least, they move toward a kind of class ‘democratisation’ where social class distinction cannot easily be read from dress because of increased accessibility of styles donned previously by those in the upper strata. Also, mass manufacture brings about increased diversity of styles and makes readily available styles, colours and fabrics that previously were difficult to obtain. For children’s wear, factory manufacture meant, in addition, that increasingly nuanced styles and silhouettes became tied to an increasingly finely graded early life course. In the 1920s to 1940s
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period in the USA, new size-style ranges arose that help provide fine-grained definitions for new divisions within young girlhood, where previously only general, gross categories such as ‘child’ and ‘girl’ sartorially demarcated the early life course for females. In addition, entirely new named categories — for example, the ‘toddler’ — emerged and, importantly, emerged simultaneously as a clothing size range, as a phase in the life course and as a manufacturing and merchandising category.

At the same time, something of a revolution in merchandising was occurring in retailing in American and some European department stores whereby children’s wear areas and floors were being designed with the perspective of the child, not the mother, in mind. Retailers had noted as early as the late 1920s that children were expressing their desires about their apparel and that mothers often enough were listening to them. Colours, fixtures, themes and the placement and layout of the retail space itself gradually came to be oriented toward the presumed viewpoint of specifically aged and gendered children until, by the 1940s, such practices became commonplace. Similar innovations were made in pre-teen and teen departments, mainly after World War II, and were described by retailers as a response to adolescent girls’ desires. Children’s voices and perspectives — or, at least, retailers’ renditions of them — in these ways became integrated into commercial practice and integral to shaping the industry as whole.

Clare Rose’s recent work on boys’ clothes in late Victorian England demonstrates in exquisite detail how the ‘making’ of clothing can be understood as a multilateral, multi-faceted set of practices which extend over time. Eschewing the historical example and temptation to view clothing as a pure reflection of a childhood zeitgeist, she places the making of boys’ garments in this era in relation to extant notions of respectability, to the interaction between aspects of the mass-production process, design, material availability, practices such as home sewing and hand-me-downs, as well as emerging patterns of consumption and an emerging acceptability of purchased garments. Such careful attention both to documentation and to theoretical issues — such as problematising the social identity of boys and the social meaning of garments — allows Rose to contemplate and demonstrate how multiple boyhoods were expressed and produced by and through garments.

A focus on manufacturers, designers, retailers, advertisers and others offers insights as to how these market actors contribute to fabricating the meanings of consumer goods generally, as well as the meanings of garments of the various childhoods expressed with and through them. These actors comprise the ‘other adults’ in children’s worlds — in addition to parents, teachers and clergy — who have a collective hand in shaping key aspects of children’s lives. Mass manufacturing in conjunction with advertising, marketing, branding, media (of various sorts) and popular culture multiply readily available cultural forms of expression and display — in this case, vestmental forms — thereby enabling the proliferation of multiple childhoods. Accounting for the role of industries and of commercial practices complicates any simple declaration that a particular garment, style or good somehow reflects a singular ‘adult’ view of childhood.

Re-Visioning the Child and Re-Thinking Fashion Theory

The concerns here voiced about the historiography of children’s dress are not meant to decry or otherwise replace the interesting and insightful details and findings of historians
whose work has been, and will be, invaluable to the ongoing development of this field of inquiry. Discussion, rather, has been trained on the explanatory mechanisms of the analysis of children’s clothing history and on a few key assumptions and omissions concerning children/childhood, the related semantics of dress and commercial enterprise. The driving motivation here has been to make children’s dress and its history investigable and its historiography critical and reflexive.

The starting point for re-visioning the history of children’s clothing, unsurprisingly, rests with re-visioning the ‘child’ — with the conception of children and, relatedly, of childhood — in light of the foregoing remarks. The question posed by historians has been directed to examining how clothing and fashion capture and render children and childhood, but not the other way around. Yet as a decidedly moral and moralised category in the West — and increasingly so over recent centuries — it is childhood and ‘the child’ which set the frame for the interpretation of garments and styles. The traditional issues confronting historians of children’s dress centre on concerns about the appropriateness or the ‘rightness’ of clothing in ways never posed when adults are at issue. The driving problem is not about the effect of this or that garment per se, but about the extent to which a garment or style can be said to be ‘right,’ that is, morally appropriate, for a child — hence, we encounter the understandable desire to pin the history of children’s dress onto a teleological template that asserts an evolution or emancipation toward correct clothing for children. It is not the dress that makes the child, but rather the (stated or unstated) view of childhood that makes the meaning of the dress.

Garments take on particular kinds of meaning when worn by children. They can be seen as comic when a child dons ‘adult’ clothes, ‘cute’ when young children dress in formal styles intended to be taken ‘seriously’ and, of course, sexualised and dangerous depending on garment, pose and context. Fashion studies, Joanne Entwistle notes, are obsessed with gender. We might extend this observation to children and children’s fashion. Gender itself, however, acquires different meanings when examined historically and from the perspective of childhood, as Ariès pointed out, as Paoletti’s studies demonstrate and as Rose has documented and theorised. The solidification of gender markers in infants’ dress and their adoption by parents for children at younger ages than their predecessors not only identifies children as male or female at an early age, it also can effectively transform the gendered landscape of all dress as children come to be understood increasingly as fully formed, but diminutive, social persons from their earliest appearance and imaginings. That is to say, it may be worthwhile investigating not how clothes serve as simple and discrete markers of relatively stable gender categories (i.e. male and female), but how historically situated moral contexts of childhood can, over time, inform the overall contours of social roles and positions like gender, for adults and others. How to interpret when and whether such specific meanings hold in one era rather than another and whether children themselves understood their dress in these ways constitute the challenges facing the historian. Central to that challenge must be a reflexive engagement with the various configurations and forms of significance that create the childhoods under consideration.

Focusing on children and childhood in this way disrupts the causal and interpretive directionality often presumed between children and adults. By approaching children, the ‘child’ (as a conceptual construct) and childhood as historically and culturally variable, the focus turns away from ‘discovering’ the ‘real’ child underneath the images and
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garments offered by the historical record and toward investigating how various actors
and structures understand and configure their own notions of children and childhood in
the service of their own interests and practices. One may ask, not only what factory
production does for children but, in addition, how did those producing garments for
children conceptualise the child they strove to dress? Which children, in terms of class,
ethnicity and race, were imagined as representing a modal or ‘normal’ childhood?
Cook, for instance, documents the changing focal notions of the ‘child’ in the USA
children’s garment industry during the early twentieth century, arguing that retailers
and manufacturers, as well as parents, increasingly came to see the ‘child’ as a wilful,
desiring consumer at a younger and younger age. In that context, garments and their
selling spaces increasingly came to be oriented toward the child’s viewpoint, rather than
only that of the mother’s. The alliance between market actors and children here helped
to alter radically traditional parent-child power dynamics and to set the stage for later
iterations of children’s popular-consumer culture.

Fashion and dress history, in the main, has not considered the child as anything
other than a receptacle for vestments, and many of those examining children have
followed suit. For those who have offered grand theories of fashion, from sociologist
Georg Simmel and Herbert Blumer, to John Flügel and Quentin Bell, the child is
non-existent, an appendage seemingly wholly subsumed under adult/parental actions.
Recent theorising has not done much to change this state of affairs. The presumed
conceptual model of the social actor in fashion theory is no doubt that of an adult who
can make decisions for his- or herself, even if ‘irrational’ — as in Bell’s notion that the
irrationality of fashion can be found in the ability of people to suffer and go ‘ill-clad’
for the sake of appearance.

It will be an important step when fashion theory recognises children as social actors
who, albeit inextricably entwined in adult relations, nonetheless express their voice and
enact their personal agency in relation to those constraints and not apart from them.
From this angle of vision, the child of fashion theory is something of an improbable
subject who cannot act or decide with regard to sartorial issues in a manner consonant
with the received ways of understanding how dress and fashion work. Yet, it is the task
and challenge of the historian to find ways to discern how children have indeed acted,
consumed, desired and thought about fashion — as the girls in Ewen’s study (above)
demonstrated in the 1920s.

Another conceptual legacy of ‘adult’ fashion theory found in children’s history has
been the assumption that the audience for children’s dress has been comprised of other
adults. In the studies discussed herein, the appearance of children and the accompanying
judgements of appropriateness or inappropriateness revolve around parents’, teachers’
or reformers’ views. No consideration is given to how children may have thought about
other children’s clothing, or that they might adjust their appearance in relation to peers
and others. Again, the difficulty of obtaining such historical material may be daunting,
but acknowledging the selectivity of perspective of extant evidence and research is a key
step in moving into new understandings.

Moving Forward — Embracing Ambiguity

A number of considerations come to mind regarding the future historiography of
children’s dress. For one, histories of children’s clothing need to engage with
twentieth- as well as twenty-first-century childhoods, as both areas of direct research and as resources for examining childhoods past. What is clear with regard to Western/Global North childhoods over the course of the twentieth century is that there has arisen a general and profound conceptual ambiguity and cultural ambivalence about the social identity of children. The desire or expectation of innocence and of a ‘direct’, step-wise path from subordination to personhood — which finds its origins in philosophy, romanticism and developmental psychology — has been confounded by the proliferation of many actual childhoods that do not follow this pattern. Recent concerns expressed about the sexualisation of children, of KGOY (Kids Getting Older Younger) and of children behaving in ways counter to expectations (as in the USA school killings or the Bulger incident in the UK) call into question contemporary assumptions about the trajectory of childhood and the timing of maturity. Similar concerns can be found throughout the popular and parenting literature since the early twentieth century, certainly in the USA context.

It might be useful to think of such ambiguity and tension as constitutive of, rather than peripheral to, childhoods of the modern era. Since the late 1800s, a variety of childhoods have become available for display and observation through various forms of media, from print and radio to televisual and now digital. Theories of fashion do agree that, in order for fashion to arise and transform, there need to be public arenas for display of fashion leaders. These arenas have proliferated for children and youth resulting in, among other things, a proliferation of images and models of childhood replete with modes of dress. Additionally and consequently, some argue that the cultural and moral correlates of age — especially the traditional adult-child authority relations — have transformed, blurring into one another and making for unclear power relations. As a result, the youth peer culture, emergent in the 1940s and 1950s, now extends into early and middle childhood, with the category of the ‘tween’ being a manifestation of, and site for, a childhood that is oriented toward media, consumption and peers. There is evidence that these versions of childhood, which are based on middle-class culture and material wealth, extend as aspirational models for children outside of the Global North.

If fashion is about publics, about the gaze of others and about an audience for display, then who children (or parents) see as the relevant publics will constitute an important analytic benchmark for discerning the meaning of dress in any given context, historically and contemporarily. Dressing for peers positions children differently in relation to the meaning of clothing than dressing for parents, and coming to distinguish and discern these differences is necessary for the researcher. Peer display and distinction take on less obvious forms in the UK and Australia — both with legacies of school uniforms — than in the USA. Social distinction by and through youth is undertaken through different social avenues in different national and cultural contexts.

Attending to children’s social worlds and taking them seriously has become an unavoidable aspect of parental purchasing and decision-making for both middle-class and economically struggling families. At every point when a mother dresses her young children, or considers the kind of garments thought suitable for them — from fancy fashionable dress to everyday play wear — she is aware that it is her motherhood that is on display and that her children’s social “dignity” is as well. One might very well ask, ‘Fashion (or dress) for whom?’ Who is the relevant audience?
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‘Clothing’, Elizabeth Wilson remarks, ‘marks an unclear boundary ambiguously . . . If the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self’. The ambiguity of children’s social identities hence may be enhanced, rather than attenuated, by their dress. Indeed, ambiguities surrounding children’s social identities may contribute to fuelling the fashion process, as Fred Davis has posited for gender, social status and sexuality. Rather than fleeing from ambiguity, historians of children’s dress would do well to embrace the ambiguities encountered so that the multiplicity, variety and richness of what we study comes into focus.

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References
4 Ariès, Centuries of Childhood, p. 33.
5 Ibid., pp. 33–34.
6 Ibid., pp. 50–54.
7 Ibid., pp. 54–62.


Worrell, *Children’s Costume in America*, p. 4.

Laver, *Clothes*; Laver, ‘Children Should be Seen . . .’.


Paoletti, *Clothing and Gender*, p. 141.


James and Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*.


Sánchez-Eppler, *Dependent States*, p. xv. Many accounts of children’s garments make the claim that aspects of them are ‘left over’ from adult garments of an earlier era and hence do not pursue investigation any further, in particular Ariès, *Childhood*; Ewing, *History of Children’s Costume*; Martin, *The Way We Wore*; and Guppy, *Children’s Clothes*.


Ewing, *History of Children’s Costume*, p. 99 offers the observation that the leaders of the ‘emancipation movement’ came not from the moneyed classes but from the middle classes in some part because the former needed to maintain ‘smart and fashionable appearance’ and were ‘therefore much dolled up’.
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43 Kidwell and Christman, *suiting Everyone*.
45 Cook, Ibid.
46 Cook, Ibid.
47 Cook, Ibid.
48 Cook, Ibid.
51 Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*.
53 Rose, *Making, Selling and Wearing Boys’ Clothes*.
54 Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood*.
56 Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood*.
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66 Allison Pugh, Longing and Belonging (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).


68 Pugh, Longing and Belonging.

69 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams.

70 Wilson, Adorned in Dreams, pp. 2–3.

71 Davis, Fashion, Culture, and Identity.

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