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Setting the Tone: Commodified Black Children and Slave Imagery in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century French Fashion Press

Lise Schreier
Fordham University

In 2009, the actor and producer Sasha Baron Cohen co-wrote a mockumentary film about an Austrian fashion writer named Brüno Gehard. *Brüno* featured Cohen as the over-the-top, self-absorbed, down-on-his-luck journalist. Among his many attempts to stay relevant after a succession of professional failures, Brüno acquires a black baby and tells the African American audience of a reality show that he traded him for an iPod. An incensed member of the public exclaims: “I think you are using him as an accessory. I think maybe because he’s a black baby. That might be your cue, like some people walk in the park with dogs to pick up girls.”¹ While Cohen and his co-writer Larry Charles doubtlessly wrote this segment for its shock value, the scenes featuring Brüno and the child presented some art historians with an uncanny familiarity. Using boys and girls of color as accessories is nothing new. Late sixteenth-century author Pierre de Bourdeille wrote approvingly of “an excellent painter who, having executed the portrait of a very beautiful and pleasant-looking lady, places next to her [...] a Moorish slave or a hideous dwarf, so that their ugliness and blackness may give greater luster and brilliance to her great beauty and fairness.”² Over the next three hundred years, thousands of artists produced images of white women with black children. The trick was not limited to portraiture. Throughout Europe, real children of color were also used to emphasize, through contrast, the fairness of their owners’ complexion. Cohen meant to be provocative. Yet he also managed to encapsulate the moment when we understand that what we find repulsive can in fact be real. In other words, he reminded his audience that today’s fashion world still commodifies blackness.

This essay analyzes fashion plates and columns dating from the late seventeenth century to the late nineteenth century that feature objectified black children to show that race has constituted a marketing strategy for the fashion industry since its inception. While the documents I discuss here were produced in France, their impact goes beyond the country’s borders: as we know, what is now a global industry has many of its roots in the French cultural tradition. As we shall see, between the 1670s and the 1890s a steady stream of visual and textual imagery using dark-skinned children to denote elegance and prestige helped promote various fashion items. But the trope was also meant to promote the fashion press itself. Indeed, fashion illustrators and columnists deployed the black child-servant motif to demonstrate their own superiority in matters of style—a strategy intended to sell not just fashion trends, but the periodicals as well.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ofpRxc0GVg>.

² *Œuvres complètes de Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur de Brantôme*, ed. L. Lalanne, II, Paris, 1866, 414. Qtd. in L. Campbell, *Renaissance Portrait-Painting in the 14th, 15th and 16th Centuries*, New Haven, London, 1990, 134.

Yet the importance of the visual and textual genealogy I present here extends well beyond the world of fashion. In addition to prompting us to question enduring standards of Western beauty and femininity, it also reveals that race has remained a startlingly fixed concept in the collective imagination since the end of the seventeenth century. Finally, the continued use of nonwhite children as luxury items in the fashion press after 1848 suggests that for a significant part of nineteenth-century fashion setters and consumers, the abolition of slavery simply did not matter. For them, black children remained disposable material objects.

The Early Days of the French Fashion Press

The French fashion press has featured children of color since its inception. The earliest publications presented these children not as domestic workers attending to noblewomen, but as luxurious, ostentatiously flaunted props, as is the case in Nicolas Bonnart's "Dame de la Cour" (*Recueil des modes de la cour de France*, 1678-1693) [image 1]. These lavishly dressed black child-servants signaled the women's high status, echoing a trend that started in the Renaissance, when actual commodified nonwhite children became the epitome of beauty, wealth, and distinction.³ Between the 1670s and the 1710s, French printers continually produced, reworked, re-issued the motif. Artists such as Jean-Dieu de Saint-Jean, Jean Mariette, Nicolas Arnoult, Jean Bérain, the Bonnart brothers, and others drew and recycled dozens of such images, which were mass-produced and were still in circulation in the 1770s. In these illustrations, both the women and their retinues have uniform facial traits and finely detailed clothing. Their poses are conventional: the ladies stand by pilasters, recline on beds, sit at tables, or go for walks; their black attendants present them with trays of fruit, beverages or roasted quails; they bring them letters, hold their train, shawl, fan, parasol, kneeler or prayer book. Many other plates present women indulging in various pleasures, be it eating, napping in suggestive poses, taking the waters or taunting men, perennially flanked by diminutive black servants. Almost none of the captions printed at the bottom of the plates mention the boys, which only confirms their object status. The children's orientalizing costumes, which often included a turban, turned them into interchangeable props as well, and in doing so further dehumanized them. These early plates are illuminating tools, for they help us situate when fashion, race and leisure became a powerful triad, one that has endured to this day.

³ One of the earliest traces of the practice of securing a black child to showcase one's social status can be found in Isabella d'Este's correspondence. In a 1491 letter she sent to her agent, Giorgio Brognolo, d'Este asked for a little girl, demanding that she be "younger" and "darker" than the one already in her possession. She stated that she wanted her next acquisition to be between the ages of eighteen months and four years. And while she claimed that she "couldn't be more pleased with our black girl even if she were blacker," she insisted that the second one be "as black as possible." See Alessandro Luzio, Rodolfo Renier, "Buffoni, schiavi e nani alla corte dei Gonzaga ai tempi d'Isabella d'Este," *Nuova Antologia*, 19 (1981), 112-46, 140-5. See also Lise Schreier, "Playthings of Empire: Child-Gifting and the Politics of French Femininity" (forthcoming).



Dame de la Cour.
Dans l'air noble de cette Dame, Si pour elle un galand s'enflamme
L'on voit de bonnes qualitez; Il faut s'en prendre à sa beauté.

[1] Nicolas Bonnart, "Dame de la Cour," *Recueil des modes de la cour de France*, 1678-1693
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The black page trope present at the birth of the fashion press continued to appear in costume plates throughout the eighteenth century. “Dame de qualité à qui un jeune nègre porte la queue” (1779), a print by Claude-Louis Desrais, is a good example of the importance given to black pages in pre-Revolutionary imagery [image 2]. Both the plate itself and its caption indicate that the child’s costume is as lavish as that of his mistress. The attention given to the boy’s headdress—which is as ornate and voluminous as the lady’s pouf—and to his sumptuous clothes does not mean that his presence is fully acknowledged. Rather, it turns him into what might be called a “superaccessory;” an accessory that structures the entire image. Moreover, it is an accessory that *itself* is adorned. His costume is embellished with silver braids, his hat decorated with pearls and plumes, and his slave collar engraved with the arms of his mistress. The text only confirms what the image has already established: the boy constitutes part of the luxurious ensemble—indeed, he helps define it. Remarkably, while close to a hundred years separate Bonnard’s engraving from Desrais’, their composition and intention are identical.

Desrais’ print circulated for over a century, and like other images of its vintage, it would eventually influence nineteenth-century visual culture. The plate first appeared in *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français* (1779-1781).⁴ According to its original publishers, Jacques Esnauts and Michel Rapilly, the collection had a twofold purpose: “to give a real impression of all types of fashions” and “by circulating abroad, to foster a desire for French Fashions.”⁵ The series’ longstanding popularity suggests that the plans of its creators to produce work of cultural import met with some success. These engravings, as well as numerous copies, imitations and counterfeits, were disseminated widely for many decades. They sold in their initial format (a six-print fascicule), as a bounded multi-volume collection and as single page prints; in black-and-white, and in color; in their original dimension (40.5 x 30 cm) and in reduced sizes; in almanacs, and even as parts of games all over Europe.⁶ From the 1840s to the 1860s, fashion illustrators such as François-Claudius Comte-Calix and Frédéric Sorrieu used the collection as inspiration for their own work.⁷ *Galerie des Modes* prints were still very much in vogue a century after their inception: in the 1880s, they sold at various French auctions for significant sums.

⁴ Claude-Louis Desrais, *Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français, dessinés d’après nature, gravés par les plus célèbres artistes en ce genre; et colorés avec le plus grand soin par Madame Le Beau: ouvrage commencé en l’année, 1778*, t. 1, “19e Cahier de Costumes Français, 13e Suite d’Habillemens a [sic] la mode depuis 1779,” Paris: chez Esnauts et Rapilly, 1779-1781, 109.

⁵ Jacques Esnauts and Michel Rapilly, *Galerie*, j and iij.

⁶ Paul Cornu, “Introduction,” *Galerie des modes et costumes français dessinés d’après nature, 1778-1787*, vol. 1, Paris: E. Lévy, 1912, vii.

⁷ Claude Labrosse and Françoise Tétart-Vittu, “Galerie des Modes (1779-1781),” in *Dictionnaire des journaux 1600-1789*, n° 0483, 2011, s.p. Frédéric Sorrieu published a nineteenth-century adaptation of *La Galerie* in 1867.



[2] Claude-Louis Desrais, “Dame de qualité à qui un jeune nègre porte la queue,”
Galerie des Modes et Costumes Français, 1779
 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

These engravings, initially meant for a relatively limited circle of professional garment makers and amateur collectors, rapidly appealed to a wider, feminine audience. Since the seventeenth century, adorning costume plates was a popular pastime for women, who enjoyed hand-painting them or dressing them with fabric, lace, beads, and ribbons before hanging them on their walls. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many used the readily available plates from (or inspired by) *La Galerie des Modes* to this end, making them a long-standing feature of the middle- and upper-class visual world [image 3].⁸ Desrais' "Dame de qualité à qui un jeune nègre porte la queue" is a strikingly beautiful plate. Several copies of the original image remain, delicately hand painted. One can almost imagine a small brush dipped in gray, yellow, or red, coloring the boy's boots, breeches, and vest. Or picture a woman thoughtfully choosing the right hue for the child's coiffe. This representation of blackness, which served to enhance the element of fantasy to her activity, meanwhile, would be one of the few that would have been available to her.

While it is impossible to know how many copies and variations of the print circulated, it is safe to say that generations of men and women interested in fashion were aware of its existence and influenced by its rhetoric. According to fashion historian Paul Cornu, *Galerie des Modes* "paved the way for all the subsequent publications about fashion."⁹ It is thus possible to argue that *Galerie des Modes* helped the fashion industry appropriate the black-child motif and use it as shorthand for elegance in women's periodicals for decades to come. But "Dame de qualité à qui un jeune nègre porte la queue" may have spread its construction of racialized luxury and femininity in multiple other ways. Hand-embroidered prints were often gifted to family and friends. Embellished "Dame de qualité à qui un nègre porte la queue" prints might have further disseminated the original image's racial imagery on occasions such as patron saints celebrations or anniversaries. In some cases, women used costume plates as inspiration for costume balls. "Dame de qualité à qui un jeune nègre porte la queue" would have inspired a number of them. These various practices had one thing in common: they reinforced the notion that black children constituted perfect fashion accessories. Only in 2009 was the image adorned critically. Art historian Ingrid Mida embroidered the print by hand and adorned it with beads, as did generations of women, but beheaded the "Dame de qualité," in doing so finally giving the child a modicum of agency over the visual narrative [image 4].

⁸ Alice Dolan shows that seventeenth-century prints were sometimes embellished with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fabric. The Bonnard image she analyzes, for instance, was modified between 1688 and 1875. Alice Dolan, "An Adorned Print: Print Culture, Female Leisure and the Dissemination of Fashion in France and England, around 1660-1779," *Victoria & Albert Museum Online Journal*, Issue n° 3, Spring 2011. Eighteenth-century plates were adorned, following the same principle, well into the nineteenth century. See Vyvyan Holland, *Hand Coloured Fashion Plates 1770 to 1899*, London: Batsford, 1955.

⁹ Paul Cornu, "Essai bibliographique sur les Recueils de Modes au XVIIIe et au début du XIXe siècle," in *Documents pour l'Histoire du Costume*, Paris: Manzi, 1912.



[3] Embellished fashion plate, *Le Journal des Dames et des Demoiselles*, 1850s
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mode002.JPG>



[4] Ingrid Mida, *Revolutionary Fashion I*, 2009
Property of Ingrid Mida

Crucially for our understanding of constructions of race in Western material culture, these fashion plates suggest that racial imagery participated in the shaping of certain forms of gender identity. More specifically, they provided a visual template to represent assertive femininity that proved so powerful that it would be used for centuries. The increasing availability and affordability of these images played a role in further interweaving race into discourses about femininity. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, notably, the reproduction and circulation of these plates allowed the black-child-turned-fashion-accessory trope, previously limited to aristocratic circles, to reach an expanding number of consumers. Because these representations were so widely disseminated, the black-child motif started functioning as a sign of luxury and an emblem of femininity for lower-class markets as well.

Nineteenth-Century Iterations of the Black Child Motif

It is therefore unsurprising that the motif remained in use long after the end of the Old Regime. To be sure, nineteenth-century French fashion writers and illustrators repackaged the trope to make it compatible with their readers' sensibilities. But the basic composition of their images and narratives remained the same, thus showing that the trope survived prodigious historical upheavals—such as the French Revolution—virtually unchanged. This is worthy of note: if

fashion is often perceived as ephemeral, the startlingly fixed ways in which it has used human accessories as emblems of luxury demonstrate that its ideological grammar is remarkably stable. The significance of this stability becomes all the more clear when we shift our focus to the years preceding the abolition of slavery in France. In the early 1840s, black child-servant figures appeared frequently in women's gazettes. At this point in time, they still denoted elegance and prestige, which helped promote various fashion items. But they were also used to promote the fashion press itself. Indeed, fashion chroniclers and illustrators used them to demonstrate their own predominance in matters of style—a strategy adopted to sell not just fashion trends, but the periodicals themselves.

An 1844 print by Alexandre-Marie Colin demonstrates how the motif was used for the benefit of a variety of fashion workers ranging from dressmakers, to engravers, to columnists [image 3]. As was often the case at the time, the plate appeared in several periodicals, including *La Sylphide* and *La Mode*, two weeklies with a significant female readership.¹⁰ The captions accompanying Colin's picture show that the journals used it to present a wide array of products and services. *La Sylphide* utilized the engraving to advertise fabric, flowers, liveries, and gloves. *La Mode* employed it to tell its clients where to get the best hairdo, cloth, lace, handkerchiefs, gloves, corsets, perfume, fans, servant garments, drapes, curtains, and courier agency. Both captions mention a "jockey livery," presumably modeled by the child. "Jockeys" were not Colin's fabrication; they were young or small-framed lackeys hired by wealthy families to drive or stand behind a carriage. The boy thus served a distinct purpose: to underscore the prestige of upscale houses whose products are advertised here. The fact that Guerlain, perhaps the most up to date company of its kind in terms of advertisement (it is the first to have perfumed fashion journals to promote its line of products, for instance), chose Colin's plate suggests that the black-child figure was considered an effective marketing strategy at the time.

¹⁰ *La Sylphide (Revue parisienne)*. *Modes, Littérature, Beaux-Arts*, Ve série, t. 10, Paris: Aux Bureaux de *La Sylphide*, October 19, 1844, n.p.; *La Mode*, October 15, 1844, n.p.



[5] Alexandre-Marie Colin, *La Mode*, 1844
Rijksmuseum Amsterdam

That both journals referred their female customers to a men's tailor by the name of Becker (or "Becker Senior") for lackey liveries points to a practical aspect of the boy's presence in the picture. If the child was meant to highlight the two young women's good taste, he also helped female readers decide where to shop for their domestics' garb. Subscribers to *La Sylphide* and *La Mode* knew that elegance was not just about musing on ball gowns and hairstyles, but that it also implied a considerable number of decisions about more mundane matters, such as the color and cut of servants' costumes, or the type of fabric to be used for drapes. Colin subtly alluded to this by connecting the women in the image to various elements of the decor. The cordon wrapped around the boy's left shoulder, for example, resembles the one keeping the curtain open on his right, and points to the pom-poms dangling from the garment he is holding for his mistress. In this fashion plate, the black servant figure does not just denote elegance: it also represents a way to "dress up" the tedious and invisible work involved in the maintenance of the role of "naturally" stylish lady. Simply put, the black child's body is meant to make household shopping exciting again.

Colin's print was published in *La Sylphide* alongside an article that echoes Old Regime narratives in that it presents elite femininity as a glorified performance. The piece, written by noted chronicler E. de C., states the following about the plate:

Finally, while we are depicting dresses, a word about an accoutrement we noticed at the [Théâtre des] Italiens during a repeat performance of *Norma*, the very evening when the scent of the bouquets thrown at the feet of de Grisi, the queen of tragic opera, so cruelly sickened the diva Persiani.

A charming woman was wearing this outfit; never was there a more appropriate setting for such a pleasing sight: moiré dress, citron color (a nuance chosen for the lights); corsage à la Sévigné, with bertha collar; on the skirt, two quill trimmings, tied with several well-spaced ribbons; matching diamond hairstyle. This finery, adorned with a few flower clips, would be fit for a ball of the utmost distinction (327).

Typical of 1840s fashion writing, the short narrative prepares the reader for an otherwise dry depiction of the clothing. The feminine rivalry between two of the most legendary singers of the time, Guilia Grisi and Fanny Persiani, make the dress and piece of jewelry more desirable, as it associates both items with Grisi, the "queen of tragic opera," whose "bouquets thrown at her feet" by her worshippers had such a powerful scent that her rival allegedly fainted in her presence. Moving from the Théâtre des Italiens to a ball, where the owner of the "finery" and the ball itself would be "of the utmost distinction," adds value to the products. E. de C.'s strategy is a perfect model of this type of fashion writing. If columns like hers were important information systems providing customers with advice about where to purchase gloves or a corset, they also sold a less tangible, but equally prized product: a perception of relevance in fashionable Parisian society.

What is missing in E. de C.'s narrative, of course, is a mention of the boy. In omitting him, E. de C. complied with the idiosyncratic rhetoric of fashion columns. The chronicler may not have seen the young lackey as a character, but as a stabilizing sign in a rapid succession of styles. The plate's explicit purpose was to enjoin *La Sylphide*'s customers to acquire the latest fashion items. If wardrobes had to be renewed, the black boy was here to stay, much like other generic feminine

attributes, such as large eyes, delicate hands and enticing décolletages, none of which needed to be glossed. E. de C.'s omission of the second woman further clarifies her silence about the child, as it confirms that fashion writing itself was a driving force behind the boy's textual erasure. On the print, this second woman is deployed as a mirror image of the first, a mere variation on an already idealized representation of femininity. Such doublings were typical of this kind of imagery.¹¹ E. de C. understood all three characters to be part of the same visual unit and wrote her promoting paragraphs accordingly.

That this erasure of blackness reflected the erasure of black people in French society was never addressed in the mid-1840s French fashion press. If its writers deployed techniques of realist narratives, feigning objectivity, claiming to report what they saw with their eyes, they were not keen on reporting political events, let alone abolition discourses and movements. In a sense, then, columnists, illustrators and editors operated like pre-Revolutionary high society women. They flaunted fictional dark-skinned boys in ways that nodded to how Old Regime's noblewomen used real nonwhite children as luxury accessories. They used young people of color to assert their own superiority in matters of style like seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women used black pages to signal their power. Fashion magazines, in turn, led readers to dream of grandeur with tales such as those about Grisi, the "queen of tragic Opera" Ultimately, if the fashion press used these visual and textual narratives to appeal to subscribers who fantasized about social dominance, it also used the dark-skinned child-servant trope to bolster its own status—and boost its sales. Given how legible a trope the commodified black child remained in 1844, there was no reason to question its existence.

White Women, Black Children, and Fashion Gazettes for Sale

Not that the nineteenth-century fashion press never condemned the practice of using black children as luxury accessories. A story published in *Les Modes parisiennes* in 1865 makes it quite clear. The anecdote must be quoted in its entirety to be understood:¹²

For women of the hour, who lay claim to being reputable ladies, finding ways to stand out is a serious affair. But how to go about it? For a while, they adopted Havana bichons frisés, just about the size of their closed fist. Alas! Even pets go. For the past six months, dogs have been going out of style. One leaves them, gives them away, sells them or loses them; but painted ladies seem to have meditated upon Danton's philosophical and revolutionary saying; — "Nothing is destroyed until it is replaced." — How to replace griffons?

Emma R... found a solution.

She arrives at the Tuileries for a concert at five, escorted by a Nubian, an ebony-colored slave, barely two and a half feet tall. The black groom is fully clad in scarlet, like an enchanted gnome. At this sight, everybody turns around; walkers come to a halt, dandies ogle, fops whisper, whoremongers are in ecstasy, and the other women are jealous of her craftiness.

— Oh, that Emma, what an original idea she has!

One of these ladies even asks this small-footed Cleopatra:

— Madam, could you please point me to the store where I could find one of those little

¹¹ For more on mirroring in nineteenth-century fashion plates, see Susan Hiner, "From *pudeur* to *plaisir*: Grandville's Flowers in the Kingdom of Fashion," *Dix-Neuf*, vol. 18, n° 1, April 2014, 56.

¹² "XXX," "Petit courier," *Les Modes parisiennes*, September 9, 1865, 430.

Negroes?

The author's depiction of the naïve oglers transfixed by the fashion trends these women so brashly set is of course sarcastic. But the main target is Emma, whose "pretension" to respectability and her daring "ruse" are in fact not "original." According to this tale, in 1865, only "painted ladies," "whoremongers," "dandies" and "fops" would still have mistaken a small black servant for an innovation. Educated readers would have known they had been flaunted by fashionable women for centuries.

The journalist of *Les Modes parisiennes* used the motif of the dark-skinned retinue to poke fun at courtesans, their unrestrained fashion sense, and their problematic, yet undeniable success as trendsetters. In doing so, she reduced them to mere swindlers. In this version of the story, the company of a child of color is not so much daring as it is vulgar, a contemptible trick which could only impact gullible men and jealous rivals. Not only that, but the writer also explicitly labeled the black servant a "slave" and presented a woman in the crowd as eager to *purchase* a similar product. What better way to remind readers that courtesans were fundamentally venal creatures? In this case, the term "slave" is intended to point to the obvious: that these women were themselves for sale. The purpose of the article was not to portray sex workers or enslaved people as victims; it was meant to entertain. The Second Empire public regularly heard about the most famous courtesans' unapologetic consumption of men and goods from the periodical press; it was riveted by their boldness, erotic appeal, and irreverent lifestyle.¹³ A report on actual human trafficking would have been considerably less entertaining.

The Comtesse de Castiglione, a particularly flamboyant courtesan who had gained access to the European royalty by allegedly becoming Emperor Napoleon III's mistress, may have inspired the story. In 1863, she made an unforgettable appearance at a costume ball given by Empress Eugénie at the Tuileries. According to noted feminist Olympe Audouard, then director of the journal *Le Papillon*,¹⁴

Her Lady the Comtesse de Castiglione was the Salammbô I had told you about: hair let down, bare arms, feet naked in sandals, a gold tiara, a long dress whose train was held by the count de Choiseul, dressed up as a little Negro. The countess' beauty was captivating: she attracted everybody's eyes.

La Castiglione's grand entrance at the Tuileries, flanked by a male escort in the most submissive of costumes, and Emma R... 's arrival in the same locale two years later, alone with a black

¹³ According to Veronica Franco, "Part of the transaction between the courtesan and her rich protector was that she was to act as a status symbol, to declare to the world that he could afford to keep an expensive mistress and that he knew how to do so in style. [...] Courtesans enjoyed constant publicity in the press, their daily activities being tracked in newspapers, artistic periodicals, and popular journals—partly because of the restrictions placed on other areas of journalism, such as politics and religion." Veronica Franco, "France, Second Empire," in *Encyclopedia of Prostitution and Sex Work*, eds. Melissa Hope Ditmore, Santa Barbara, Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006, 172.

¹⁴ Olympe Audouard, "Courrier de Paris," *Le Papillon: arts, lettres, industrie*, February 15, 1863, 1. *Le Journal des coiffeurs* reported: "M. the count de Choiseul-Praslin's costume is often mentioned as an example of an absurd extravagance: he dressed up as a young black train-bearer for the Countess de Castiglione, gracefully swinging a pink taffeta parasol above the beautiful Italian." Louise de Nogarel, "La folle du logis," *Le Journal des coiffeurs: publication des coiffeurs réunis*, March 1, 1863, 2.

servant, had a similar effect. Like the famed Comtesse, Emma R... instantly became the center of attention. Emma R...’s tale might also have been inspired by other demimondaines equally invested in such publicity. The dashing Marie Colombier, for instance, was gifted a young boy of color at around the same time.¹⁵ Whatever the case may be, it is easy to see that these black retainues (be they actual nonwhite attendants or suitors in blackface) were key elements of these women’s performances, who flaunted them to display their beauty and their power over men. It is also easy to see that while *Les Modes parisiennes* aimed to ridicule such performances, it perpetuated the association between blackness and femininity.

These anecdotes indicate that in the mid-1860s, women had various uses for the black child-servant motif. Demimondaines deployed it to defy proper women, to pay homage to Old Regime courtesans, and perhaps as a theme in erotic role-playing games. The prominent feminist writer Audouard applauded its function in a sexualized spectacle of La Castiglione’s triumphant femininity. Others, such as the journalist for *Les Modes parisiennes*, appropriated it to vilify women of ill repute, and were so keen on making their point that they did not hesitate to categorize black boys as “slaves” seventeen years after France abolished slavery. What everyone did agree upon was the malleability of the dark-skinned servant character. In each of these scenarios, the constant is that children of color were objectified and deployed to structure polemics about sexual morality and feminine power—to the delight of gazette readers.

Much happened between Bourdeille’s advice to portraitists to use “a Moorish slave or a hideous dwarf” and Cohen’s spoof on today’s fashion world. Colonization and the slave trade ravaged much of the world; revolutions, liberations, abolitions, and regimes changes occurred; racial categories hardened, new understandings of racism emerged, perceptions changed, as did laws, tastes, practices and behaviors.¹⁶ Yet the black-child-turned-fashion accessory remained in the collective imagination. Examples from the Belle Epoque abound. In 1880, the princess Greffuhle borrowed a six-year-old black child her cousin had purchased in Tangiers for two hundred francs to go to a costume ball.¹⁷ The host was the fashionable Princess de Sagan, herself no stranger to this type of accessory, as a 1893 photograph of hers indicates [image 6].¹⁸ Both ladies were lauded in the fashion press; women and chroniclers were once again caught in a familiar loop, the princesses relying on the same racialized lexicon of beauty and privilege, the journalists reporting on them to stay relevant. The pattern was not limited to France. Nor did it disappear with the nineteenth century. In fact, the trope is alive and well. In October 2010, for instance, the fashion magazine *Numéro* featured model Constance Jablonski in a series entitled “The kid.”

¹⁵ Marie Colombier, *Mémoires: fin de siècle*. Paris: Flammarion, 1899.

¹⁶ See Andrew S. Curran, *Who’s Black and Why? A Hidden Chapter from the Eighteenth-Century Invention of Race*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022.

¹⁷ Étincelle [Henriette Biard d’Aunet], “Carnet d’un mondain,” *Le Figaro*, October 27, 1880, 1. Qtd. in Michèle Bocquillon, “Black Children as Pets in Eighteenth-Century European Courts” in *Childhood and Pethood in Literature and Culture*, Ed. Anna Feuerstein and Carmen Nolte-Odhiambo, New York, Routledge, 2017.

¹⁸ The photograph was included in Prince de La Rovère, “La Princesse de Sagan,” in *La Grande dame: revue de l’élégance et des arts*, vol. 1, 1893, 352-59.

Jablonski, in blackface, flaunts various outfits and pieces of jewelry (including a heavy chain around her neck). She is flanked by a black baby.¹⁹



[6] Paul Boyer, “Princesse de Sagan,” 1893
Bibliothèque nationale de France

About the author: Lise Schreier is Professor of French and Comparative Literature at Fordham University. Her studies of gender, race, colonialism, material culture and cultural violence have

¹⁹ *Numéro* 117. Many links about this issue are no longer available. To access some of the images, see <http://www.lalondon.com/2010/10/the-kid-racist-fashion-controversy/> <https://oneporktaco.wordpress.com/2010/09/30/constance-jablonskis-blackface-in-numero/>

drawn on feminist newspapers, medical travelogues, children's literature, vaudeville theater and early comics. She is the recipient of a Children's Literature Association Diversity Grant, an American Philosophical Society Grant and a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship. Her current project, "Playthings of Empire: Child-gifting and the Politics of French Femininity," follows the changes in French textual and visual representations of nonwhite children used as gifts, pets and fashion accessories during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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