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Performing Prison: Dress, Modernity, and the Radical Suffrage Body

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Abstract

In 1917, members of the National Women's Party—the radical branch of the suffrage movement in the USA—were arrested and jailed during an ongoing picketing campaign in Washington, DC. While incarcerated, suffrage prisoners wore coarse prison uniforms that they believed unjustly clothed their bodies in criminality; in time, however, reproductions of these much-loathed uniforms became the costumes for the suffragists' celebrated "Prison Special" speaking tour, and, indeed, a critical element in their rhetorical campaign for equal rights. This essay examines the NWP suffragists' engagement with the workhouse

uniform over time, tying the changes in the suffragists' conception and wearing of prison dress directly to shifts in party tactics. I conceptualize the wearing of prison uniforms outside of the workhouse as a public performance of suffrage rights that was dependent on the suffragists' claim to be political prisoners. Once suffragists could separate themselves from common criminality, their use of prison dress took on incongruous proportions, in which coarse dress on the white, elite suffrage body was self-consciously used as visual evidence of what was shocking about disenfranchisement. Further exploration will show that such juxtaposition relied on exploiting existing discourses about class and race to tacitly underscore the legitimacy of the suffragists' claims.

KEYWORDS: suffragist, prison, performance, uniforms, modernity

Introduction

Radical suffragists in the National Women's Party (NWP) were "jailed for freedom" when they picketed for their rights in the last years before the ratification of the nineteenth amendment.¹ Though picketing had started in January 1917, activity reached crisis level in June when the arrest of two picketers kicked off a provocative cycle of protest and arrest that would distinguish the NWP from the more conservative wing of the suffrage movement. By mid-July of that year, arrested NWP protesters were sentenced to an unprecedented sixty days at the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia. Upon entering the workhouse, each woman was made to relinquish her personal belongings and strip naked in front of the group. It was, in the words of one NWP member, "the juncture at which we lost all that [was] left us of contact with the outside world—our clothes" (Stevens 1920: 108). Contemporary suffragist accounts dwell at length at the iniquity of the prison initiation, a process concluded by re-dressing in the "allotment of coarse, hideous prison clothes, the outer garments of which consist of a bulky mother-hubbard wrapper of bluish gray ticking and a heavy apron of the same dismal stuff" (Stevens 1920: 108). The relationship between prison dress and moral decay in the early days at Occoquan was almost causal; in fact, the suffragists called their uniform the "cloth of 'guilt.'" To the jailed suffragists, the forced adoption of prison dress corrupted the integrity of their bodies by enveloping them in the poor hygiene, rotting food, and loose morality of the Occoquan Workhouse. Although they indicated their skepticism at being considered criminal for protesting on behalf of equal rights—their so-called "guilt" remained in quotation marks, while tellingly "cloth" does not—they were unable to remain distanced from the effects of criminality once they donned their prison uniforms. This article is about the tension between the suffragists' perception of their rights crusade as a political, not criminal, act and the powerful

and lasting statement of guilt and criminality embedded in the prison uniform they were forced to wear in the workhouse.

Nearly two years after jailing first occurred, the NWP staged a cross-country “Prison Special” speaking tour; twenty-six of the most prominent formerly jailed suffragists toured the country by train to speak to throngs of listeners while the Senate debated the suffrage bill in Washington. The tour was a public reenactment of prison: the women gave dramatic readings of arrests, played the comb, sang jail songs, and greeted townspeople, in their words, “lockstepping in true convict style” (*The Suffragist* 1919e: 12). In fact, when the Railroad Administration refused to carry their car as planned—decorated with the purple, white, and gold banners of the party and a painted facsimile of the prison doors—the suffragists decided to promote their cause on their bodies instead. Speakers on the tour wore “calico wrappers designed exactly after the pattern of those which they were forced to wear in the work-house, thereby making the accounts of their experiences in the jail more vivid” (*The Suffragist* 1919b: 5; see Figure 1). The use of the word “wrapper” to describe their clothes seems to deliberately connote externality, indicating that the dress had become removable packaging for the cause.²

How did prison dress go from being endemic of moral corruption, nearly at the top of the suffragists’ list of complaints about prison, to a costume worn for a celebrated speaking tour? How did the internalized “cloth of ‘guilt’” become the externalized “Prison Special” “wrapper?” While prison dress is only briefly mentioned in most histories of radical suffragist tactics, I will argue that in a rights campaign waged overwhelmingly with visual rhetoric, dress should be considered the most potent form of rhetoric that represented the shift in NWP activism from 1917–19. Though historiographies of the US women’s suffrage



Figure 1

Lucy Branham in Occoquan prison dress, speaking during the “Prison Special” tour, c. 1919. Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman’s Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 276031.

movement cite the need for more exploration into the “creative tactics” of the campaign—such as cartoons, banners, songs, and advertisements—few studies directly address the use of fashion (Chapman 2006: 3).³ Prison dress, especially, has remained undiscussed, even though deliberate description and photographing of prison dress abounds in NWP party rhetoric during the incarceration years, both in the party magazine *The Suffragist*, and in newspaper articles, memoirs, and personal papers. Scholars Katherine Adams and Michael Keene rightly claim that the NWP achieved public success largely through attention to “nonviolent visual rhetoric,” and, specifically, bodily spectacle, wherein suffragists “[used] their bodies to literally ‘stand up’ against degradation, inequality, and violence” (Adams and Keene 2008: xviii). Adams and Keene do not, however, root their argument in the rhetoric of dress, even though prison dress was a fundamental part of the NWP’s rhetoric of the body during incarceration. Prison dress was a distillation of all of the injustice of suffrage imprisonment into one universally understood metaphor of bodily oppression; as *The Suffragist* proclaimed, “What one of us can think of Alice Paul, of Lucy Burns, as prisoners of the National Government, and not feel on her own body, and on her own spirit, the coarse prison clothing, the galling weight of prison rules?” (*The Suffragist* 1917b: 9). Working from the notion that NWP suffragists self-identified their political cause with dress, one can see that the deliberate manipulation and co-option of the prison uniform later in the NWP campaign is an example of dress as constitutive of political identity. As seen in Deidre Clemente’s work on the clothes of striking textile workers in 1910, dress, especially when used for a political message, is more than simply a reflection of the social order; in the case of “girl strikers” as in that of radical suffragists, dress is intentionally “hybridized” to exploit established norms of respectability and challenge existing structures of power (Clemente 2006: 2–3).

Examining NWP suffragists’ engagement with the workhouse uniform over time, one sees that the dress is intimately tied to shifts in party tactics. Party leader Alice Paul’s request for political prisoner status in October 1917 marks the moment at which the party rhetoric of jail experience shifted from that of involuntary reaction to voluntary action. After October, suffragists fought to be physically separated from the daily hardships that connoted criminality: they refused spoiled food, mutely shirked labor, and kept their civilian clothes on. The insistence on keeping civilian dress outwardly signified their wider resistance to prison’s effect on the physical body through hunger and work strikes. I suggest that establishing this boundary in turn gave them the agency to use prison dress as an advertisement outside the prison, without fear that doing so would brand them as “criminal.” Criminality on the “Prison Special” speaking tour became intentional and ironic; the wearing of prison uniforms outside of the workhouse can be conceptualized both as a costume for the public performance of suffrage rights and as a

performance of absurdist hypocrisy, in which coarse dress on the white, elite suffrage body was self-consciously used as visual evidence of what was shocking about disenfranchisement. Wearing the prison experience both in and out of the workhouse made the body a primary site for the perceived injustice of the radical suffrage cause, materially juxtaposing the women's degradation at the hands of the government with their status as educated, socially elite citizens. Further exploration will show that such juxtaposition relied on exploiting existing discourses about class and race to tacitly underscore the legitimacy of the suffragist's claims. This article will use textual and photographic evidence produced by NWP members to chart the progression of prison dress in three key moments of suffrage activism—prison dress as synonymous with criminality in the workhouse, prison dress as a site of resistance in the fight for political status, and prison dress as a self-conscious performance of rights on the “Prison Special” tour.

Bodies on the Inside: The “Cloth of ‘Guilt’” and the Suffrage Body

Fundamental to the NWP's telling of prison experience—both in member Doris Stevens' 1920 memoir *Jailed For Freedom*, and the organization's journal, *The Suffragist*—was the eagerness with which suffragists undertook the sacrifice. Stevens declared that the first six women to be arrested and tried, herself among them, were “privileged to serve the first terms of imprisonment for suffrage in this country,” while a later article in 1919 welcomed home members of the NWP who “[went] to jail so joyously and willingly for their cause that some of our friends, as well as our critics, fail to recognize the sacrifice involved” (Stevens 1920: 95; *The Suffragist* 1919a: 5). Experiencing the workhouse as non-suffrage female criminals would have encountered it became a keystone in the suffragists' rhetorical strategy for freedom. In 1920, Stevens wrote indignantly about the false reports of comfort, luxury, and delicious food in the workhouse that were being printed in national newspapers—long before *The Suffragist* could set the record straight that much “mental suffering” occurred as a result of “the entire lack of fresh air, the filth found everywhere, the want of food and sleep and the vermin in the jail” (Stevens 1920: 109; *The Suffragist* 1919a: 5). The NWP needed to reinforce the unnatural environment of the prison to suitably highlight the injustice of the suffragists' captivity.

The repeated references to hygiene, food, and dress in NWP-endorsed accounts of prison experience indicate that members felt a preoccupation with how the body's interior might be affected by their exterior surroundings at the workhouse. Dress was seen as a conduit for the filth, both physical and moral, of the prison environment; it was as if, simply by putting on prison clothes, one ceased to have any defenses against

the corrupting potential of the prison. In one speech, Mrs Edmund Evans declared “I had not been in jail for more than a few hours when I felt the standards of a lifetime slipping away. I became dirty, untidy, and lost all sense of dignity” (*The Suffragist* 1919a: 5). Another published letter alluded to the same dangerous slide into decay by asking, “Do you know that the women’s division of the jail is a hotbed for mental, moral and physical disease of all kinds? That the air is foul? That the prison is filthy? ... That the women and girls, too, are allowed to smoke cigars and cigarettes?” (*The Suffragist* 1919a: 5). In her memoir, Mary Winsor recalled “rotten food, association with tubercular and syphilitic victims and unspeakable brutality” at the Occoquan Workhouse; proximity to prisoners with criminal histories and sexually transmitted diseases contributed an environment of “cruelty and corruption where the human being is destroyed, body and soul” (Winsor n.d.).

While many of the conditions in Occoquan were the result of systemic neglect and ill-treatment within the US prison system, much of the abuse leveled at the suffragists was a deliberate attempt to humiliate the women into paying fines for traffic obstruction—their ostensible charge for arrest—and abandon their political efforts by purchasing their way out of jail. Certain aspects of the prison experience were especially designed to make the women look, as well as feel, uncomfortable; as Doris Stevens recalled, one male, anti-suffrage politician told her that the Wilson administration’s had the right tactic in jailing suffragists, for “if you can just make what a woman does look ridiculous, you can sure kill it ...” (Stevens 1920: 117). The most efficient way to make the suffragists look ridiculous seemed to be the wearing of prison garments, especially ones that were deliberately soiled. Winsor recalls that although the first uniforms given to the women were clean, “later on others were provided soiled with deep smears of grease on the inside of the collar” (Winsor n.d.). Removing civilian clothes for the “cloth of ‘guilt’”—not simply adopting the uniform itself, but the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness inherent to forced nudity during changing—was considered by some suffragists the worst part of the ordeal. In Stevens’ words, “No woman will ever forget the shock and hot resentment that rushed over her when she was told to undress before the entire company” (*The Suffragist* 1917a: 7).

Concerns about the hygiene of prison dress—not only the cleanliness of the garment, but the healthfulness of its cut, fabric, and shape—are consistent with those of mid-nineteenth-century movements for dress reform, itself an avenue for early suffrage-rights activists. Feminist proponents of the movement for “rational and healthy” dress targeted fashion for restricting women both physically—hence Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s early adoption of Amelia Bloomer’s scandalous, and ultimately short-lived, trouser design for women—and morally, by promoting slavish attention to trends to attract men (Steele 1985: 146). The abolition of long, muddy skirts and coarse, unbreathable fabrics became an

additional locus of reform that linked cleanliness with health, morality, and equal rights. One sees a possible residual effect of these earlier reformers' association of dirty clothes with moral depravity in the suffragists' complaints about unclean prison clothes. Moreover, by indicating a causal relationship between prison dress and declining hygiene and morality, the suffragists projected a conception of dress as an extension of the physical body, in which the "cloth of 'guilt'" was inseparable from the entire, unclean bodily experience in prison.

The design and fabric of prison dresses were part and parcel of what made their wearing especially scandalous. Press coverage of the suffragists' stay at Occoquan picked up on the controversy of the uniforms, equating prison dress with other foul conditions in the workhouse, such as the insufficient quality and quantity of food. In two articles in the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin*, prisoner Mary Winsor's sister Ellen offered what she considered the salient details from a hurried visit to the workhouse to see Mary. After describing the great number of worms in the cornmeal and hominy, Ellen states:

[My sister] has been forced to wear the clumsiest sort of clothing— heavy, shapeless dresses; underclothing of unbleached muslin and woolen stockings—garments that are hot in summer and cold in winter, and given to prisoners regardless of season. (*The Evening Bulletin* 1917)

Similarly, in *Jailed for Freedom*, Stevens took care to describe the lasting indignity of prison through dress:

It takes a dominant personality indeed to survive these clothes. The thick unbleached muslin undergarments are of designs never to be forgotten! And the thick stockings and forlorn shoes! What torture to put on shoes that are alike for each foot and made to fit just anybody who may happen along. (Stevens 1920: 108)

Photographs of the prison costume worn in the Occoquan Workhouse show that the uniform was more than just unsightly; the utilitarian shirtwaist and skirt, as well as the rag tucked into the waistband, are obviously clothes meant for labor, and so in that sense the "designs never to be forgotten" were not so much shocking, as highly appropriate for the suffragists' stay at the workhouse (see Figure 2).

Stevens' written description of prison dress is notable because it takes care to subtly differentiate the type of "dominant personalities" that could transcend the indignity of the prison clothes from the "just anybody" who could wear them without question. Historian Linda Ford has claimed that the prison experience of NWP members in 1917 broke down the class barriers that caused tension within the party from 1913–16, creating a "sisterhood of struggle" among those who



Figure 2

Doris Stevens, Alison Turnbull Hopkins, and Eunice Dana Brannan in Prison Costume, c. 1919. Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 160059.

experienced jail together (Ford 1991: 197). Similarly, Belinda Stillion Southard claims that the actions of the so-called “Silent Sentinels” in front of the White House, the “rhetoric of bodily protest,” worked in conjunction with the largely self-referential newspaper *The Suffragist* to solidify a collective, militant party identity (Stillion Southard 2007: 402). The idea of universal struggle among suffragists deserves closer scrutiny, as it seems to be heavily contingent on both time and audience. For instance, oral testimony in the edited volume *From Parlor to Prison* hints that the “sisterhood of struggle” might have only existed temporarily as an exigency of the prison experience. Ernestine Hara Kettler, a working-class Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) activist and NWP member jailed for suffrage alongside more elite party members in 1917 found that when she was reunited with the woman she had most

bonded with in jail, Peggy Johns, after a forty-four year separation, they “weren’t that impressed with each other.” Johns, who in Kettler’s words had become a *grande dame*, reminded Kettler of the conservative-liberal women who “came from fine, rich families with very good minds and a willingness to fight for their ideas,” but who were ultimately not true radicals and limited their vision for social equality only to voting rights (Gluck 1976: 249). Although the shared belief that “militancy and civil disobedience remained women’s only avenues to winning the vote” may have temporarily created a sense of communal struggle among NWP members, one sees that such bonding within the suffragist group was made possible at the expense of various others who offset and highlighted the injustice of NWP women’s imprisonment (Ford 1991: 197). A united struggle of suffragists regardless of race and class—if it did exist—was not necessarily presented as such to audiences reading *The Suffragists*, attending suffrage marches, or watching the “Prison Special” speaking tour.

One important difference that separated suffragists from other prisoners was some suffragists’ political status via social and familial ties—genealogies that were overtly established in NWP party publications, which were meant to establish an understanding of these women as “elite.” Although working-class women made up about 13 percent of the party base, party leaders realized that it was the arrest of well-educated and well-connected women that made headlines (Adams and Keene 2008: 173). Both *Jailed for Freedom* and subsequent articles in *The Suffragist* take pains to recognize the credentials and connections of the imprisoned women—one article on participants in the “Prison Special” tour reads like a litany of accomplishments for each formerly jailed woman, complete with universities attended, committees served, professional affiliations, religious participation, and relationship to male politicians and business leaders (*The Suffragist* 1919c: 3). Photomontages accompanying such texts juxtapose images of former inmates in recreated prison dress with fashionable portraiture. The visual rhetoric of such composites is one of jarring disjunction: the elegant dress and coiffures of the posed women heighten the incongruous effect of the shapeless gingham sack dress. Such images are more than just compelling “before and after” sequences; they also offer visual evidence of social pedigree through fashionable presentation that allowed the suffragists to project a sense of themselves as worthy members of society. Elaborate political genealogies in *The Suffragist* demonstrate that support for the cause of jailed suffragists relied on a mixture of elitism, fear of political upset, and adherence to existing discourses of gender and respectability:

Senator J. Hamilton Lewis, of Illinois, Democratic whip in the Senate, heard alarming reports of two of his constituents, Miss Lucy Ewing, daughter of Judge Ewing, niece of Adlai Stevenson,

Vice-President in Cleveland's Administration, niece of James Ewing, minister to Belgium in the same Administration, and Mrs. William Upton Watson of Chicago. He made a hurried trip to the workhouse to see them. The fastidious Senator was shocked—shocked at the appearance of the prisoners, shocked at the tale they told, shocked that “ladies” should be subject to such indignities . . . He is a gallant gentleman who would be expected to be uncomfortable when he actually saw ladies suffer. (Stevens 1920: 142)

By tapping into the moral imperative of gentlemanly conduct, this plea seems to fall out of sync with the platform of radical equality espoused by the NWP. Alternatively, one might suggest that the elitism in such a defense might simply be fair; the credentials offered in *The Suffragist* demonstrated that a large majority of the NWP members were part of a new generation of college-educated, professional women who were already participating, albeit without official recognition, in the political sphere, and wished to be recognized for their abilities.

Like class and political connections, discourses around race in the workhouse became another important way for suffragists to highlight the seeming unfairness of their situation. NWP members believed that prison wardens used proximity to black prisoners and the wearing of black prisoner's clothes to humiliate the incarcerated suffragists, who were all white. In turn, the suffragists used such practices in their own rhetoric to evidence the hardship of their struggle. Continuing her account of false reports on the luxurious conditions in the workhouse, Stevens described an additional missing element in the morning papers during her time at Occoquan:

The correspondent could not know that we went back to our cots to try to sleep side by side with negro prostitutes. Not that we shrank from these women on account of their color, but how terrible to know that the institution had gone out of its way to bring these prisoners from their own wing to the white wing in an attempt to humiliate us. (Stevens 1920: 109)

A deliberately titled photo from the NWP archive corroborates this attempt to use documentation of integration as evidence of a dutifully paid hardship (the caption on the back of the photo reads: “Negro Women prostitutes were brought to this sleeping room and placed in beds alternating with suffrage prisoners, 1917”; see Figure 3). When the clothes of black inmates were appropriated for the suffragist's use, Stevens' decried that “the unpleasantness at wearing the formless garments of these unfortunates made us all wince” (Stevens 1920: 113). The suffragists' use of race to offset the unfairness of their situation differed from their use of class to the same ends—the catalog of achievements that elevated

Figure 3

"Negro women prostitutes were brought to this sleeping room and placed in beds alternating with suffrage prisoners, 1917" (title transcribed from item). Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 160047.



NWP members economically, socially, and politically from their peers was highly publicized (and even published), while the privilege of whiteness was taken for granted in party rhetoric as a given. Though hesitant to admit complicity with the wardens' racism by recoiling from African American prisoners "on account of their color," the jailed suffragists were happy to "wear" the African American prisoner experience insofar as it quietly bolstered their claims of personal injustice inside Occoquan. Eliding race in order to maximize the potential audience for their message was nothing new to the suffrage campaign. Although the NWP did not expressly limit suffrage to white women, Alice Paul and other leaders prioritized suffrage at the expense of racial equality. African American suffragists' contributions to the NWP were not directly discouraged, but instead were quietly downplayed to appease conservative party members. For instance, when young women from Howard College wished to participate in a suffrage parade, causing various other groups of participants to withdraw their support, Paul enlisted a group of Quaker men to escort the women separately and farther away from the group (Adams and Keene 2008: 88). The solution was supposed to maintain peace between all party factions and avoid negative press, but clearly did so by eliding the African American suffragists' political presence and abandoning the party platform of "radical equality" for the political exigency of suffrage alone.

At the end of her first stint in the workhouse, participant Doris Stevens recounted the transformation back to civilian space in terms of dress: "It was sad to leave the other prisoners behind. Especially pathetic were the girls who helped us with our clothes ... it was hard to resist digressing into some effort at prison reform. That way lay our instincts. Our reason told us that we must first change the status of women" (Stevens 1920: 116). This especially telling statement addresses

a fundamental ideological standpoint that differentiated the NWP from more conservative groups like the National American Women's Suffrage Association (NAWSA). The NWP's radical belief in sexual equality meant jettisoning the reformist justifications for suffrage that saw women as "naturally" suited to arenas like social work (in this case, the "instinct" to reform prisons; Rosenberg 1982: xiii). However, any embrace of full equality without biological differentiation between the sexes clearly did not necessarily encompass a similar commitment to equality in terms of race and class.

Recent work by Juliet Ash addresses the topic of suffragist prison dress from a British perspective, an important counterpoint to the American suffragist experience since multiple sources trace Alice Paul's radical methods to her time spent in England with suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. Ash's work aptly demonstrates how prison dress was especially poised to be used as a method of humiliation against campaigning UK women during the fashion-conscious *fin de siècle*; her work also connects the vocal (if not physical) rejection of prison uniforms as part of UK suffragettes' fight to construct their prisoner "self" as political, not criminal (Ash 2010: 58, 65). This connection bolsters an equivalent argument about NWP suffragists, especially with regards to the perceived injustice and bodily degradation that UK suffragettes felt was inherent in the wearing of prison uniforms. Importantly, Ash's history similarly shows tensions between the UK suffragettes' desire to reform the treatment of the poor once in prison and their desire to use their experience as a rhetorical tool to invoke moral outrage on behalf of suffrage—essentially a tension springing from middle-class reformist versus radical socialist political priorities (Ash 2010: 62). Ultimately Ash does not resolve this conflict, possibly because the British suffragettes themselves did not resolve the problem of class in the suffragist prison experience. Ash suggests that the degradation of prison uniforms was a universal experience, and that Sylvia Pankhurst and other middle-to upper-class suffragettes' descriptions of them reflect accurately across class and gender lines (Ash 2010: 58).

This point is well taken—there is no reason that working-class women would have felt less demeaned by prison clothes than upper-class women, even if they were not the ones recording their feelings about it at the time. Based on the example of NWP writing and performance, however, we might add that the re-presentation of the prison dress experience (via textual accounts if not public performance) seemed entirely dependent on the social position of the wearer. The cultural work of Pankhurst's radical writing and campaigning about the prison experience is entirely wrapped up in her self-presentation as a middle-class and—although Ash does not mention it specifically—white woman.

In her biography of Alice Paul, Christine Lunardini claimed that although "class, social standing, education, or experience did not particularly concern [Paul]" when recruiting organizational lieutenants, she

still “harbored many of the same biases and prejudices associated with her elite, white, upper middle-class milieu” (Lunardini 1986: xvii). This complicated blend of vocal equal-rights rhetoric and tacit class and race prejudice set the stage for the next incarnation of the prison uniform. The NWP lieutenants who went on to participate in the “Prison Special” tour played upon the differences established within the workhouse to separate themselves from the social other, and, ultimately, the moral associations of the “cloth of ‘guilt.’”

Bodies in Flux: Political Prisoner Status

After numerous arrests, Alice Paul made the first request for political prisoner status on behalf of herself and other arrested NWP suffragists in October 1917. Working from a precedent established by suffragists in the UK, the NWP pushed the US government to recognize that suffragists had been politically persecuted on US soil—what would have been an unprecedented admission by the federal government that was ultimately denied (Adams and Keene 2008: 196). *The Suffragist* outlined NWP complaints as follows: “in the United States political prisoners are confined in the same prisons as criminals, are dressed in the same garb, given the same food, made to do the same work, and subjected to the same rules” (Fisher 1919: 10). Eleven suffragists in Occoquan signed a petition of protest that led to the resistance of workhouse food, work, and dress, thereby ending the period of sacrifice that was formerly considered a “joyous struggle” for freedom. By separating the suffragist body from the prison experience through political status, the NWP would seem to have collectively abandoned the best rhetoric about prison that had been promoted thus far: the unfair immersion of elite bodies into guilt and corruption. One finds, however, that as prison dress was resisted on the inside of the workhouse, it started to make a voluntary appearance in promotional photos published on the outside.

As protesting and arrests continued, jail became an increasingly voluntary experience; for instance, in November 1917, Lucy Burns—co-leader of the NWP—wrote to a friend that she had “not been able to make up [her] mind as to whether [she] would go to prison at the end of the week,” debating between leading the party from jail or honoring a speaking commitment (Adams and Keen 2008: 195). Apparently, the political exigency of prisoner status was the greater priority for the party—a photograph of Burns during the November 1917 stint at Occoquan shows her seated outside a cell with a newspaper in her lap; her fashionable middie blouse with draping sleeves shows that she had resisted the prison dress along with prison food (see Figure 4). On scraps of paper snuck out of the workhouse, Burns recounted her fight to keep her clothes as part of her fight for political status: “I asked for counsel to learn the status of the case. I was told to ‘shut up,’ and was again

Figure 4

Lucy Burns in Occoquan Workhouse, Virginia, November, 1917. Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 274009.



threatened with a straightjacket and a buckle gag. Later I was taken to put on prison clothes, refused and resisted strenuously” (Stevens 1920: 200). Interrogations of political prisoners that included harassment about the refusal of prison dress indicate that the wardens understood the submission inherent to the garment. One technique involved breaking solidarity—“Each one was told she was the only one hunger striking. Each one was told that all the others had put on prison clothes and were working”—while other strategies were more direct: “Each [prisoner] was called to the mat and interrogated. ‘Will you work?’—‘Will you put on prison clothes?’—‘Will you eat?’” (Stevens 1920: 200).

Without political status officially granted, suffragists were in a state of flux between guilt and exemption, hence the violence of their struggle to maintain the boundaries of their bodies against the rules of the workhouse. Food and dress were consistently linked as sites of defiance,

where the refusal of dress on the exterior of the body shows the resistance to internalize—literally, to ingest—criminality. The violent and bloody practice of force-feeding provides a metaphor for the permeability of the resistant suffrage body. In an early journalistic experiment, modernist writer Djuna Barnes was voluntarily force-fed for an article in *The World* magazine—although, in 1914, she was trying to understand the ordeal as experienced by her “English sisters,” whom she called the “bravest of my sex” (Barnes 1914). Poetic in her language, Barnes emphasizes the pain and violence of such bodily transgression: “I saw in my hysteria a vision of a hundred women in grim prison hospitals, bound and shrouded on tables just like this, held in the rough grip of callous warders while white-robed doctors thrust rubber tubing into the delicate interstices of their nostrils and forced into their helpless bodies the crude fuel to sustain the life they longed to sacrifice” (Barnes 1914). Burns’ description of Occoquan of her own experience was equally brutal:

I was held down by five people at legs, arms, and head. I refused to open mouth. Gannon pushed tube up left nostril. I turned and twisted my head all I could but he managed to push it up. It hurts nose and throat very much and makes nose bleed freely. Tube drawn out covered with blood. Operation leaves one very sick. Food dumped directly into stomach feels like a ball of lead. (Stevens 1920: 201–2)

The period in which protesting NWP members underwent force-feeding represents a moment between submission and agency in the suffrage campaign—after they viewed their bodies as separable from the taint of prison dress, but before the imprisoned body was safely distinct from the suffragist body and able to be self-consciously performed on the “Prison Special” tour.

In the same month that Lucy Burns was photographed wearing street clothes in Occoquan, *The Suffragist* printed a full-length studio portrait of Abby Scott Baker wearing prison dress (see Figure 5). The archival caption does not indicate the location or the date this photo was taken, only that it was published on November 3, 1917. Since Baker was sentenced to sixty days in Occoquan in September 1917, the portrait could have taken place within the prison or just after her release. This and other photos of NWP members in prison dress pose somewhat of a problem in terms of historical evidence. Since we know from written sources that facsimiles of the dresses were fashioned for the “Prison Special” tour, and since dates on the photos are vague, it is unclear whether these are the actual clothes worn inside the prison or reproductions. The formal, posed style of portrait, however, suggests that the photo was taken outside the prison, since those taken within the DC jail look like hastily taken snapshots, which is consistent with

Figure 5

Abby Scott Baker in prison dress, c. 1917. Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 274004.



the description of the prison environment as one of fear and mistreatment. Additionally, Baker's tight, lace-up boots seem inconsistent with Stevens' description of the generic, one-size-fits-all shoes worn by inmates (Stevens 1920: 199). A similar photo taken of Pauline Adams and published in February 1919 shows the suffragist sitting at a table in prison clothes, raising her right arm with a cup (see Figure 6). The gesture—of liberty?—indicates the sitter is in a position of power, in which the wearing of prison dress has shifted from forced indignity to a voluntary act of political performance. Although the date of this photo is similarly unknown, the caption reads “Mrs. Pauline Adams in the prison garb she wore while serving a sixty-day sentence.” The ambiguity of the phrase—does “in the garb” mean in *a* prison outfit, or in *the* actual artifacts?—introduces the possibility that the suffragists

Figure 6

Mrs Pauline Adams in prison dress, c. 1917–19. Courtesy of *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Digital ID mnwp 147002.



played with a slippery conception of authenticity. Without being able to guarantee whether the prison dress Baker wore in her photograph was authentic, one might argue that the design and material for the dresses carried such symbolic weight that even a reproduction was a potent display of reasserted agency by formerly jailed suffragists. The potential for prison dress as its own evidence of struggle informs a reading of the use of dress as its own performance, a text that can be read like other forms of rhetoric in the “Prison Special” speaking tour.

Bodies on the Outside: Performing Prison

By 1919, NWP suffragist’s prison antics—as well as one infamous instance in which a suffragist burnt an effigy of Wilson outside the White House—made the public wary and constituency in the party began to

decline (Ford 1991: 242). Perhaps in response to this, the “Prison Special” speaking tour of twenty-six formerly jailed suffragists toured the country by train in February and March of 1919. As usual, the NWP populated (and publicized) the tour with the most prominent members of the party. Paul wanted the tour to be more than just a series of genial town hall meetings; Adams and Keene claim that she “reached for greater physical presence and more confrontational interaction for her travelers—as a war-worn battalion moving into new theaters of the fighting” (Adams and Keene 2008: 238). The idea of a “war” was not so far off from reality—after speaking outside the Metropolitan Opera House, where Wilson was meeting with William Howard Taft, the speakers were violently assaulted by onlookers and police. Stillion Southard similarly claims that post-imprisonment NWP rhetoric combined language from World War I—women collected in “squads” and used techniques in prison that were learned from the “trenches”—with that of the American Revolution and the fight against tyranny for democracy (Stillion Southard 2007: 410). Considering the militaristic mentality that had developed over two years of protest and imprisonment, the prison dresses that were worn on the NWP tour were more than just a costume: prison dresses had become a military uniform that represented a history of persecution and struggle, as well as solidarity amongst citizens with shared set of goals for political recognition. Prison dresses marked NWP suffragists as part of the same army, fighting for a common cause.

The “Prison Special” tour was a reenactment of prison for the public eyes—the next step in the deliberate visual rhetoric set forth by the studio portraits of suffragists in prison dress. Photos from the cover of *The Suffragist* during the tour show the speakers in various candid moments throughout the tour; one image depicts the entire group waving and laughing off the back of the “From Prison to People” rail car in San Francisco (*The Suffragist* 1919f: 13). The obvious gaiety in this photo hints at the control the speakers had gained over their prison experience, in contrast to the earlier descriptions of forced labor and feeding. In performing prison, the suffragists showed audiences that they had re-commanded their own bodies after incarceration, and could now “play” at prison in the public eye. The use of incongruous dress, then, was still a pivotal part of the NWP’s strategy of visual rhetoric, although opposed to previous methods that relied on differences *between* bodies (their former selves and their jailed selves, the white prisoners and black prisoners) the incarnation on the tour relied on disjuncture *on* the body (between themselves and their heavily symbolic clothes). Such a distinction indicates that the suffragists had finally separated their own bodies from the connotations of guilt, and were now comfortable projecting the clothing’s new meaning—as the material representation of a political struggle—to an audience. The prison “wrappers” that were to act as substitutes for railcar decorations had become external bodily advertisements for the suffrage cause.

Some reports indicate that the “Prison Special” tour was well-received, often because, not in spite, of the costumes; according to *The Suffragist*, audiences were often “shocked that such obviously upstanding women could be clothed in prison gear, much less have suffered the treatment they reputedly had” (Ford 1991: 242; *The Suffragist* 1919d: 8). Considering that research suggests *The Suffragist* was a party organ that catered to an audience of mostly NWP suffragists, accounts of crowd reaction to the “Prison Special” within it tour carry an inevitable bias towards party propaganda (Stillion Southard 2007: 402). Maia Joseph’s work on representations of female orators in suffrage literature suggests that women on the public stage in this period might be seen as representative of “the masses,” any number of marginalized groups who were making their public presence known in the modern age; in this context, Joseph claims that the specter of a woman speaking for political purpose might have “served as a symbol of growing mass empowerment” for the working class, African Americans, and immigrants (Joseph 2006: 71). As the above quote from *The Suffragist* indicates, however, rhetoric on the “Prison Special” tour still relied on class bias for justification. Furthermore, the wearing of prison dresses added an element of visual rhetoric to the speeches that was deeply ironic; the dress was meant to cause confusion over its wearing by an elite suffragist. In wearing prison dress on the public stage, suffragist orators showed confidence in their position as “upstanding women” who were fighting for the vote. Rather than implying guilt, this newly ironic wearing of prison dress on a suffragist body hinted at underlying innocence and unfair persecution. Without knowing precisely how audiences received the “Prison Special” tour, one might consider how the suffragists’ words might have worked in concert with their dress to incorporate and project a variety of tensions—between elite and working-class suffragists, political and criminal prisoners, sympathetic audiences and disorderly crowds.

The NWP’s deliberate adoption of prison dress as a costume for suffrage is not inconsistent with other, less militant, activist performances of fashion. Historian Margaret Finnegan has detailed how the non-radical wing of the suffrage movement—generally included under the umbrella of NAWSA—adopted performance strategies of the NWP but sought to maintain a “respectable” relationship to their bodily presence through the acceptance of consumer commercialism (Finnegan 1999: 95). Women’s natural talent as consumers of fashion and material goods made them apt to become good citizens and political “shoppers,” just as their reform-oriented priorities assured they would contribute their vote for the social good. In general support of consumer values, these moderate reformers wore their suffrage ideals on their bodies via sandwich boards, purple and yellow sashes, buttons, hats, and suffrage blouses. If the NAWSA’s use of fashion seems overly concerned with consumerism, it was merely a sign of the times. According to Elizabeth Wilson, by the 1910s, dress “was now no longer a moral and hygienic project, but had

become a symbol of the wearer's taste and politics" (Wilson 1987: 218). The shift from "clothing as part of a social project" to "clothing as part of an identity"—an identity easily purchased—is what brought dress into the modern era (Wilson 1987: 218). Still, feminist dress reformers of the mid-nineteenth century shared with the leaders of NAWSA the belief that dress would change the position of women in society. Political change for women, to the suffragists in NAWSA, was compatible with fashionable consumerism. Finnegan details how some mainstream suffragists imitated the fashionable appearance of budding movie stars like Mary Pickford in order to gain and hold the attention of their audience. One NAWSA suffragist donned alluring dresses and makeup because she believed that "her job was not only to deliver a convincing speech, but also to sell the movement—and thus women's citizenship—by affiliating it with femininity, good looks and style" (Finnegan 1999: 95). Historian Maureen Turim's work on fashion and modernity in early silent cinema similarly traces the effect of suffrage and women's rights on the "redesigning" of womanhood through fashion (Turim 1994). Although feminists viewed fashion reform as a way to alter political and social circumstances, Turim maintains that they rarely endorsed "a repression of the beautiful, the elegant, and the seductive," suggesting Elizabeth Cady Stanton's famous assertion that women "be as bold in the area of the discourse on the vindication of rights as they were in the display of their bodies" (Turim 1994: 146).

In contrast to the more conservative, consumer-minded suffragists of NAWSA, radical NWP members also wore their values on their bodies, but did so without embracing respectability through fashion. The confidence to depart from fashionability, however, came only from a conception similar to the consumerist view, where dress remained distinct from the body, not a natural extension of the self. Here, then, is a modern conception of dress as part of purposeful identity creation—markedly different from suffragists' initial fear in 1917 that prison clothes would inculcate guilt. Moreover, it is a modern use of dress taking place completely outside the marketplace, countering any argument that modernity, identity creation, and consumerism necessarily go hand in hand. The prison clothes might have been handcrafted, and made to imitate in reproduction the forced labor of the workhouse, but they were worn deliberately to project the NWP political cause. If NWP suffragists held onto mid-nineteenth conceptions of dress hygiene during their initial stay at Occoquan, by the "Prison Special" they had fully embraced a modern conception of fashion and the self.

Conclusion

A photo of Lucy Branham on the "Prison Special" tour in 1919 shows the suffragist shouting over a sea of listeners with her hands pressed to her sides, her gingham sack dress buttoned to the throat (see Figure 1).

Her posture and facial expression are determined, even angry, befitting a woman who had been imprisoned in the struggle over her civil rights. The dress tells its own story, one of sacrifice and injustice, poor hygiene and forced labor, government hypocrisy and civil rights—but *not* one about fashion and good looks. It is rhetoric based on incongruity—the speaker is raised above the audience, privileged as an orator debating for her rights, but without a dress that matches her social position. Branham’s prison dress highlights the difference between how the government had treated women, and how they believed they should be treated, between the types of bodies that were unfairly forced to wear such clothes, and the types of bodies that would be expected to wear them instead. Far from making a case for absolute equality—in which case coarse clothes might send a message that all women are the same and therefore all deserve equal rights—the NWP suffragists’ use of prison dress emphasized privilege and existing discourses of race, class, and morality to shock their audiences into sympathy with their cause.

Prison dress was the essential visual manifestation of the radical suffragist activism of the NWP. While the early prison experience and forced adoption of prison dress threatened to corrupt the suffrage body through its association with poor hygiene, loose morality, and criminal guilt, the fight for political prisoner status separated the elite body from the taint of criminality through dress. By reclaiming their bodies as political and non-criminal, thereby drawing a distinction between dress and the self, suffragists were able to use prison dress deliberately as a form of visual rhetoric to express suffrage rights in publicity photos and public performances. Such performances relied on the perceived disjuncture between elite suffragists and coarse clothes, exploiting the unspoken privilege that made the adoption of prison clothes by suffragists shocking to most audiences. These performances also point to an anomaly in most fashion histories that claim modernity and the rise of consumer capitalism are necessarily linked. The radical suffragists of the NWP created their political identities through dress outside of the expected channels of fashion and good taste. Their decidedly modern political campaign pushed the boundaries of good taste to make a striking case for women’s rights.

Notes

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2. All photographs are courtesy of the Library of Congress collection *Women of Protest: Photographs from the Records of the National Woman's Party*.
3. One notable exception is Margaret Finnegan's *Selling Suffrage: Consumer Culture and Votes for Women* (1999), although this work focuses on the National American Women's Suffrage Association specifically, and does not consider the radical suffrage movement's (and the NWP's) use of dress.

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