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Reclaiming space: enacting citizenship through embodied protest during the British suffragette movement

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ABSTRACT

The British suffragettes are remembered for their dramatic and visually striking protests, such as their act of chaining themselves to public railings. However, this paper argues that the suffragettes' protests were embodied acts of citizenship that disrupted the existing political order and laid claim to full participation in the Edwardian polis. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's work, this paper argues that Edwardian women used their embodied protests to lay claim to political space and stage a scene of 'dissensus' and rewrite the political common sense and gendered norms of political participation at the time. Extrapolating on Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly and Rancière's performative theory of rights, this paper frames the suffragettes' protests as attempts to lay claim to political rights and citizen status through the enactment of these rights. In order to contest their gendered exclusion from the political realm, the suffragettes forcibly inserted themselves into masculinised political space through political techniques like heckling politicians, public speaking, and petitioning the king. Nonetheless, while the suffragettes actively laid claim to their own political rights, they also attempted to act for others, specifically other women who they saw as downtrodden, vulnerable, and oppressed. Although the suffragettes' attempts to act for other women demonstrated a degree of gender-based solidarity, it also illuminated the complicated class politics of the movement, and the tensions inherent in laying claim to rights on behalf of others.

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Introduction

In 2018, the United Kingdom celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act (1918), which allowed women over the age

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of 30 with the requisite property qualification the right to legally vote. The centenary of the Act was met with a large number of public events and ceremonies, the majority of which focused on the dramatic and spectacular acts of protest conducted by the suffragettes of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in the name of women's voting rights. Despite only constituting a small subsection of the women's suffrage movement, the suffragettes continue to dominate the popular and public imaginary of the women's suffrage movement. At the time, the suffragettes' attention-grabbing forms of political activism and protest added a new urgency to the women's suffrage campaign (Holton 2014). As Red Chidgey notes, the enduring legacy of suffragette spectacles, such as the images of women chaining themselves to railings or being violently arrested in the streets of London 'speaks to how thoroughly the militant women's suffrage campaign was mediated, and mediatised, at the time' (Chidgey 2018, 69). As a result, scholarship on the British suffragette movement focuses on the spectacular qualities of the suffragettes' protests, suggesting that their activism was primarily designed to grab headlines and draw attention to the women's cause (see Tickner 1987; Vessey 2021), and the suffragettes' embodied protests are often interpreted and theorised as deliberately staged political spectacles designed to generate maximum publicity for the cause of women's suffrage (Vessey 2021).

This focus on the suffragettes' protests as a form of media spectacle privileges the visual and discursive currency of the WSPU's protests. However, in this article I argue that the suffragettes' bodily protests were more than visual spectacles designed to increase the visibility of the WSPU's campaign for the vote. Prior to the representational politics of the movement, the suffragettes' embodied acts made political claims to citizenship *in and of themselves*. I frame the suffragettes' protests as embodied 'acts of citizenship' that disrupted the existing political order and laid claim to full participation in the Edwardian polis (Staeheli 2011; Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2). More specifically, the suffragettes used their bodies to lay claim to political space, contesting the gendered division of political space within a context that only allowed women to participate in politics in limited and gendered ways. The suffragettes forcibly inserted themselves into masculinised political space through political techniques like marches, pageants, public speaking, and petitioning the king. Through these protests, the suffragettes resisted the gendering of space into masculine and feminine spheres of influence and the gendered division between the public and the private realms. They used their bodies to lay claim to public space, and, in doing so, rejected the exclusion of women from politics on the grounds of their gendered embodiment and the gender-based violence used to police the border between public and private. They further enacted citizenship through their embodied protests in the context of the prison, where they went on hunger strike and used their bodies in a variety of ways to place pressure on prison infrastructure, with the goal

of attaining political prisoner status. Nonetheless, while the suffragettes actively laid claim to their own political rights, they also attempted to act *for* others, specifically other women who they saw as downtrodden, vulnerable, and oppressed. Although the suffragettes' attempts to act for other women demonstrated a degree of gender-based solidarity, it also illuminated the complicated class politics of the movement, and the tensions inherent in laying claim to rights on behalf of others.

This paper highlights the political and performative qualities of the body and how the suffragettes used their bodies to lay claim to being citizen subjects. The suffragettes' protesting bodies spoke of their political grievances while simultaneously enacting alternative political projects, allowing for the production of new gendered subjectivities that contest those imposed by the state. It frames these insights through Judith Butler's performative theory of assembly and Jacques Rancière's performative theory of rights. Like Butler, this article demonstrates how the suffragettes' embodied protests, rather than being mere spectacles or media sensations, were acts designed to question 'the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political' (Butler 2018, 9). Working from Butler's premise that 'embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive' and that they 'already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands they make' (Butler 2018, 8), it posits that by merely occupying political space that was deemed inhospitable to female bodies, the suffragettes contested inchoate notions of citizenship and political agency in the Edwardian polis. Moreover, while Butler's performative theory of assembly focuses on the gathering of bodily collectivities, this article also examines how the specific character of the suffragettes' embodied protests resisted the gendering of political space and actively laid claim to citizen rights. It suggests that, in line with Rancière's performative theory of rights, the suffragettes were able to stage a 'dissensus', or a deep rift in what was considered to be political common sense, by enacting the political rights they did not possess (Rancière 2004). Through the embodied enactment of their political rights and their creation of scenes of dissensus, the suffragettes used their bodies open up new intervals for political subjectification and novel ways of being a political subject (Rancière 2004).

This paper also specifically argues that the suffragettes' embodied protests challenged the gendered division of political space. The suffragettes, I suggest, subverted the masculinisation of established political spaces like Parliament and street politics. Through their collective gatherings they also actively politicised public spaces like parks and pavements. In making this argument, this paper builds on a rich body of feminist scholarship on gender, space, and place (Rose 1993; Massey 1994; Hanson and Pratt 1995; Oswin 2008). As Massey (1994) writes, 'from the symbolic meaning of spaces/places and the clearly gendered messages which they transmit, to straightforward

exclusion by violence, spaces and places are not only themselves gendered but, in their being so, they both reflect and affect the ways in which gender is constructed and understood' (Massey 1994, 179). It also advances feminist geographical preoccupations with the body as a site of political struggle (Domosh 1997; Longhurst 1994; Colls and Evans 2014). This paper follows the trajectory of recent debates in gender studies' shift from 'what a body "means", to what a body can do' (Ferreday 2012, 140), a debate that has similarly shaped feminist political geography (Dixon 2015; Zaragocin and Caretta 2021; Naylor 2022).

This paper draws on archival research conducted at five British archives to explore how the suffragettes used their bodies to lay claim to citizenship and contest the gendered division of political space. To foreground the suffragettes' own writings and oral histories of the movement, I draw on the official publications and writings of the WSPU and suffragette leaders such as Emmeline Pankhurst and Christabel Pankhurst, as well as the prison diaries and autobiographies of lesser-known suffragettes such as the artist Katie Gliddon and the actress and bomber Kitty Marion. This is a necessary corrective to accounts of the suffragette movement which historically have discounted the women's own voices and foregrounded critics of the WSPU and the masculinist eye of the state (see Holton 2011; Purvis 2013). I also draw on prison reports and accounts from state actors such as prison doctors and wardens from the National Archives in order to assess how the suffragettes' protests were interpreted and received by state authorities. The plethora of materials saved from this time period reflects the extensive efforts of members of the WSPU to ensure that their movement was memorialised and remembered (Chidgey 2018). However, it also raises questions about the veracity of suffragette narratives and the role of suffragette mythmaking in how the movement is culturally constructed and remembered, an issue of particular importance with regards to the use of suffragettes' oral testimonies. Additionally, while the source documents for this article reflects a range of class and ideological positions, they do demonstrate a strong regional bias in that they largely focus on the WSPU's activities in London and the South of England. Despite these limitations, though, the materials collected and used in this article still present a compelling case for the suffragettes' embodied protests as 'acts of citizenship' that laid claim to political space.

Deeds not words: the suffragettes' politics of enactment

The suffragettes framed the vote as the most 'fundamental right of citizenship' (WSPU ca. 1912). They laid claim to their citizenship rights by preemptively practising these rights. Contra the notion of rights as entitlements, Rancière argues that the Rights of Man are 'the rights of those who have not the rights that they have and have the rights that they have not' (Rancière

2004, 302). Put differently, subjects that are officially excluded from the rights of citizenship lay claim to these rights by showing that they are already able to practise these rights and act as though they are political subjects (Rancière 2004, 304). The most obvious example of this paradox of rights in the case of women's suffrage occurred in November 1867, when Lily Maxwell, a storeowner in Manchester, was accidentally registered as a voter in a by-election for a local Member of Parliament; she seized the opportunity to vote and became the first woman to vote in the United Kingdom (Marlow 2015, 12). By voting, Maxwell showed that she did not have the rights that she had, and yet had the rights she had not. Through their political activism, the suffragettes demonstrated their capacity to act as citizens and illuminated the hypocrisy of their exclusion from full participatory citizenship.

According to the WSPU, acts of citizenship allowed Edwardian women to establish political subjecthood by seizing political rights for and by themselves. Although the suffragettes were not the only women's suffrage organisation that engaged in militant protest or direct-action techniques, the suffragettes actively distinguished themselves from constitutional suffragists through their emphasis 'deeds, not words'. The suffragettes justified their turn to militant and direct-action techniques through recourse to the failure of constitutional methods to procure the women's vote. Reflecting retrospectively on the women's suffrage movement in 1976, former suffragette Hazel Inglis argued that,

> they'd been asking for the vote for forty years. And successive governments had promised it and always at the last moment they'd let them down or someone had talked it out or something like that…finally Christabel said…we're going to have a new motto. Deeds, not words (Harrison 1976b).

The suffragettes' insistence upon demanding their political rights and actively laying claim to them in the political sphere contradicted Edwardian gender ideologies that encouraged women to 'ask politely' for their rights (Purvis 2019, 1202). Within a context where women's political representation was denied or heavily circumscribed on the basis of gender, the suffragettes' acts of citizenship asserted women's capacity for and right to independent political action.

Furthermore, the WSPU's policy of 'deeds, not words' stressed the importance of women's self-representation on the national political stage. Anti-suffragists argued that male politicians adequately represented women's interests and that enfranchised women would lose the 'chivalrous attention' they enjoyed under male protection (Harrison 2013, 72–73). The suffragettes and their supporters disagreed with this analysis, arguing that women needed to represent themselves rather than relying on male benefactors to do so (Harrison 2013, 72). In her autobiography, Kitty Marion suggests that anti-suffragist men did not want to be deprived 'of the role of "rescuing

angel", doling out charity to the victims' (Marion ca. 1930, 217). The vote was essential, she asserts, because 'prevention is better than cure, and protection and safety better than rescue' (Marion ca. 1930, 217). Similarly, in a letter to politician and women's suffrage supporter Henry Harben, Christabel Pankhurst suggested that women must independently enact their own political rights if they are to be freed from patriarchal governance:

> Women must grow their own backbone before they are going to be any use to themselves or to humanity as a whole. It is helpful and good for men themselves when they try to promote women's emancipation; but they have to do it from the outside and the really important thing is that women are working for their own salvation, and are able to do it even if not a living man takes any part in bringing it about. (Holton 1997, 210)

Consequently, the suffragettes called upon women to 'rise up' on their own behalf and seize their unjustly denied citizen rights (Marlow 2015, 60).

The suffragettes' insistence on self-representation and political independence highlighted how, in Edwardian Britain, women's citizenship was partial and limited. Prior to obtaining the vote, Victorian and Edwardian women were formally and informally involved with politics in a variety of ways, from upper-class women's political canvassing, philanthropic work, and hostessing through to working-class women's participation in temperance campaigns, street politics, labour movements, and food riots (Holton 2014; Lawrence 2001). Nonetheless, women's participation was still highly unequal and subject to forms of gendered regulation, meaning that women were only able to politically participate in partial and deeply gendered ways. Kathryn Gleadle argues that middle and upper class Victorian women constituted 'borderline citizens', whose status 'hovered permanently in the interstices of the political nation', ensuring that their political subjecthood was 'often fragile and contingent' (Gleadle 2009, 25, 3). Women were able to observe and participate in aspects of political life, such as political hustings, but they were largely expected to sit separately from the male crowds, meaning that 'men and women did not possess that space equally' (Lawrence 2001, 204). They were also not expected to speak in this context, unless speaking on behalf of an absent male relative (Lawrence 2001). Hence, while many Edwardian women were highly involved in political life, they were barred from full participation in a masculinised political sphere.

The suffragettes' enactment of citizenship rights deliberately exposed the contradictory and partial inclusion of women in the Edwardian polity, calling their marginalisation into question (Lawrence 2001, 204). Although the suffragettes' 'politics of disruption' aimed to generate wide scale national publicity, the suffragettes' participation in the arenas of street politics challenged women's marginalisation in these hypermasculine political spaces (Lawrence 2001, 210). Public meetings and hustings, of central importance to Victorian

and Edwardian street politics, were highly masculine spaces shaped by the anticipation or actuality of street fights (Lawrence 2001, 203). They were also, ironically, hierarchical and conservative spaces: as Jon Lawrence notes, 'the unruly character of Victorian electoral politics appeared at odds with the ordered, hierarchical relationships of nineteenth-century whilst those elected to high office continued to be drawn overwhelmingly from Britain's social and economic elite, this hardly threatened the fundamental social order' (Lawrence 2006, 191). The underlying conservatism of these spaces extended to the gender hierarchies of the time. Even though women were not formally excluded from these places, as spaces rife with violence they were coded as 'powerfully male environments' (Lawrence 2001, 203). In 1905, Annie Kenney and Christabel Pankhurst conducted one of the first acts of suffragette militancy in their questioning of Sir Edward Grey at a political meeting. Kenney and Pankhurst disrupted the meeting through their insistence on bringing women's voices and a 'woman's issue' into this masculinised political space (Lawrence 2001, 208). By heckling politicians, disrupting public meetings, and displaying suffragette iconography and 'votes for women' banners, the suffragettes contested their marginalisation and enforced silence within these masculinised political spaces. The suffragettes' heckling was thus an act of citizenship that laid claim to the right to speak in public space, forcing male members of the Edwardian polis to reckon with women's partial inclusion in political life.

Female bodies, male violence, and laying claim to public space

By commandeering both 'public space and the rhetoric of citizenship in their quest for the vote', the women's suffrage movement opened up alternative forms of feminine subjectivity that diverged from the ideology of separate spheres (Cohler 2010, 33). The concept of differentiated male and female roles based on gendered spheres of influence underpinned the arguments of anti-suffragists (Bush 2007, Harrison 2013). By forcibly inserting their feminised bodies into what was understood to be the masculine political sphere, the suffragettes' embodied and public protests both symbolically and materially challenged the gendered boundaries between the political and domestic sphere. One of the suffragettes' most iconic acts of citizenship, chaining themselves to the railings of governmental buildings, similarly challenged the gendered partitioning of public space. Suffragettes rarely chained themselves to railings, but this particular act of citizenship has become emblematic of the suffragettes' wider direct-action campaign. Militant suffragists and suffragettes used this form of protest to break down the physical barriers that prevented women from equitably accessing political space. On October 28th 1908, two members of the Women's Freedom League, Muriel Matters and Helen Fox, chained themselves to the grille that separated the Ladies Gallery

from the House of Commons. At this time, women could only watch parliamentary proceedings from the segregated Ladies Gallery (Marlow 2015). The grilles formally separated the female spectators from the male politicians, keeping them hidden from public view. It also made it more difficult for women to observe Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons (Takayanagi 2017). In order to remove the two suffragettes from the House of Commons, parliamentary doorkeepers had to remove the grilles entirely, symbolically and materially breaking down the barriers between the masculine space of the House of Commons and the feminised political space of the Ladies Gallery. Through these protests, the suffragettes used their enchained bodies to break down the divisions between gendered spheres of influence.

The suffragettes also collectively assembled in large groups, through events like marches and pageants, to lay claim to public space. As Butler notes, freedom of assembly is distinguished from freedom of expression because 'the power that people have to gather together is itself an important political prerogative, quite distinct from the right to say whatever they have to say once people have gathered' (Butler 2018, 8). By gathering together, the suffragettes and their supporters made a political claim to being citizen-subjects, where collective citizenship was enacted by the assembly of 'plural, persisting, acting' bodies (Butler 2018, 59). The suffragettes similarly laid claim to citizenship rights through a range of public gatherings, such as demonstrations, deputations, meetings, and marches. In 1907, the WSPU held its first suffrage procession through London, known as the Mud March due to the poor weather (Holton 2014). On June 21st 1908, the suffragettes held a large demonstration in Hyde Park, where over 30,000 women marched in procession and 500,000 were believed to have attended (Marlow 2015). In June 1911, the WSPU organised the Women's Coronation Procession, where a collective of women over seven miles long marched from Embankment to Albert Hall (Pankhurst ca. 1912b). Through their public gatherings, the suffragettes' bodies made a collective claim to public space that extended beyond their formal, stated demand for the vote (Butler 2018). Their gendered bodies contested the masculinity of political space on the basis of their gendered embodiment.

In response, the Edwardian government attempted to restrict the suffragettes' access to political space, exposing the masculinist bias of the Liberal state. When political parties banned women from attending political meetings and public events, they exposed the gendered exclusions that, prior to these interruptions, had operated in a tacit form (Lawrence 2001). In 1908, the Government pushed through the Public Meetings Act, which criminalised disorderly behaviour at public meetings (Purvis 2019). The Liberal Party also introduced mechanisms such as only allowing ticketed guests to attend political events (Willmott 2019). In order to prevent suffragette hecklers from disrupting meetings, some organisers invoked a 'blanket ban' against all female

attendees. Suffragette protests in Parliament led to the banning of all women from the Ladies Gallery, and a ban on demonstrating near Parliament (Lawrence 2001, 221) Consequently, suffragette demonstrators outside Parliament were regularly arrested for 'disturbing the peace' (Purvis 2019, 1202). These prohibitions on occupying and moving through public space raised questions about the liberalism of the Liberal Government (Willmott 2019). For example, after the WSPU was prohibited from holding meetings in Hyde Park, the Free Speech Committee wrote to the Secretary of State that the ban went 'against the whole spirit of any government that can call itself Liberal' (Willmott 2019, 85). The limitations placed on the suffragettes' freedom of movement and freedom of assembly illuminated the broader, gendered contradictions that underpinned the British body politic at the time.

However, the suffragettes' political activism and desire to participate in the 'public, male world' of street politics also produced 'various forms of abuse' from onlookers and opponents, from verbally harassing and throwing garbage at suffragette speakers through to acts of physical and sexual violence (Purvis 2000, 137). The public assaults on suffragettes' bodies clearly showed how the division between women and men's gendered spheres of influence was upheld and maintained through male violence. Specifically, the suffragettes were punished for their political acts through sexual violence, revealing how gender-based violence policed women's ability to move through public space. In the context of the suffragette campaign, the threat of sexual violence on the part of hostile mobs or policemen served to discourage and punish suffragettes for their acts of citizenship and occupation of public space. On several occasions, hostile crowds tore off the clothes of suffragette hecklers; for example, in September 1912, an angry crowd 'stripped two women to the waist and took home pieces of their shirts as souvenirs' (Grant 2011, 136–137). Similarly, a suffragette called 'Miss H.' described how a policeman forcefully grabbed her left breast, while saying 'you have been wanting this for a long time, haven't you' (Purvis 2000, 139). The public stripping and sexual assault of suffragettes shows how gendered forms of violence were used to spectacularly punish 'immoral' suffragette women for their attempt to exercise the privilege of 'walking freely' and acting as citizens within political space.

Enacting citizenship through political imprisonment

The WSPU's contestation of space also extended from the gendered division of public space through to the prison, where the suffragettes both enacted their rights as political prisoners and used their bodies to reject the state's control of carceral space. The suffragettes acted as political prisoners through their refusal to comply with the restrictions attached to their status as so-called ordinary prisoners. They laid claim to political-prisoner status by

refusing to accept their designation as ordinary criminals. In her recollections of the suffragette movement, Ellen Crocker recalls how 'we were listed as second class [sic] prisoners, but we deemed ourselves political prisoners' (Crocker ca. 1940, 2). Similarly, Kitty Marion writes, 'we were not treated as 'political' offenders, as we always demanded to be and should have been, but never were, and protested against ordinary prison treatment in every way by disobeying the rules as it suited us' (Marion ca. 1930, 212). While in prison, the suffragettes contested their status as ordinary criminals through a variety of collective protests, including but not limited to smashing the windows of their cells and staging mutinies, where they refused to return to their cells (Harrison 1976b; Crocker ca. 1940). Consequently, the large number of suffragette prisoners admitted during the WSPU's window-smashing campaigns placed great infrastructural pressure on the Edwardian prison system. In 1912, Home Secretary Richard McKenna encouraged Commissioners to distribute suffragette prisoners among other, ordinary prisoners 'in the general interests of order' (McKenna 1912). In a prison diary entry on March 7th, 1912, Katie Gliddon described how the prison staff were 'only letting a few of us out at a time because they are afraid of a mutiny' (Gliddon 1912, 2). Similarly, Kitty Marion recalls how the suffragettes had to be shifted to other women's prisons because 'there was no room for us all in Holloway' (Marion ca. 1930, 218). Through their collective refusal of the prison's governance, the suffragettes both laid claim to their status as political prisoners while simultaneously laying claim to the space of the prison, attempting to occupy it on their own terms.

In particular, the suffragettes' hunger strikes constituted a profound rejection of their status as ordinary criminals, challenging both the authority and the 'practical capacities' of the prison system (Grant 2011, 129). While the hunger strikes were qualitatively and quantitatively different from the WSPU's more peaceful pageants and marches, I read the hunger strikes as the most extreme end of the suffragettes' continuum of embodied protest. During the hunger strikes, the suffragettes deliberately weaponised their gendered bodies to disrupt carceral space and lay claim to political prisoner - and thus, citizen - status. When the suffragettes first used the tactic of hunger striking, the unprecedented release of dozens of prisoners during the summer of 1909 posed a significant threat to the general order and discipline of the prison (Grant 2011). Emmeline Pankhurst, in her speech 'Freedom or Death', paints the suffragettes' collective hunger strike as a strategic coup: 'the authorities have to choose between letting you die, and letting you go; and then they let the women go' (Pankhurst 1913b). Similarly, Katie Gliddon argues, 'the women who hunger strike now say "you refuse to deal justly with me and put me in prison. But I refuse to stay in prison"'(Gliddon 1913, 5). Although the Liberal government introduced force feeding in order to prevent the large-scale release of suffragette prisoners, the Edwardian prison

system struggled to cope with the infrastructural, physical, and emotional challenge of force-feeding the suffragette hunger strikers, who could number up to dozens at any one time (Grant 2011). Marion, describing a brief hiatus during a collective hunger strike, suggests that the prison doctors and the other prison staff were 'much more relieved by the break in the strike than we were' (Marion ca. 1930, 221). A memorandum from the Prison Commission to the Home Office in March 1912 illuminates the real pressure placed on HMP Holloway by the large numbers of suffragette prisoners and hunger strikers:

> In order to relieve the great strain on Holloway…it is proposed that all the prisoners convicted at Sessions shall be moved out of London…there is a danger of insubordination at Holloway greater than we should be easily able to control, if all these prisoners with different sentences and different grievances were capable of combined action, either in the shape of hunger-striking or of open mutiny, at exercise, chapel &c. (Prison Commission 1912)

Subsequently, the Liberal government's 1913 Cat and Mouse Act aimed to reduce the pressure on prison wardens and medical officers, who complained of the 'intolerable strain' of force-feeding hunger striking suffragettes (Vernon 2007; Miller 2016). As well as laying claim to political prisoner status, the suffragettes' embodied protests fundamentally challenged the prison staff's ability to control and dictate prison space. In doing so, the suffragettes turned the prison, a site of disciplinary power and state surveillance, into a site of political contestation.

This transformation of the prison from a site of state control into a space for enacting citizenship also occurred through the suffragettes' attempts to build a collective identity inside and around the prison. The suffragettes and their supporters reinvented the prison as a site of rebirth and regeneration for both individual suffragette 'martyr-saviour' and the WSPU as a whole (Hartman 2003, 41). Imprisoned suffragettes saw the prison as a transformative site, one characterised by the strengthening of the militant spirit and political growth. In a letter to her mother smuggled out of Holloway Prison in March 1912, Louisa Garrett Anderson wrote that 'a prison in which block after block is full of people who feel it a consecration to be in it ceases to be a prison' (Anderson, ca. 1912). Inside the prison, the suffragettes strengthened their sense of collective identity through shared political symbols and rituals, such as shouting 'Votes for Women!', writing 'No Surrender!' on the walls of their cells, waving WSPU banners, wearing the suffragette colours of green, white, and purple, and singing suffrage songs (Kenney 2017; Marion ca. 1930). They built group cohesion through activities like football games, singing, reading aloud, storytelling, acting and dancing when group activities were permitted (Purvis 1995; Gliddon 1912). When prison rules limited contact with other suffragette prisoners, they found innovative ways to

communicate such as hiding notes in their stockings and passing them to one another during church services (Purvis 1995). Through these activities, the imprisoned suffragettes became, in the words of a WSPU member, 'a sympathetic family helping each other to endure' (Purvis 1995, 111). The suffragettes' solidarity contested the power of the prison to divide and control the state's unruly subjects, as well as laying the groundwork for future protests.

Furthermore, the prison community built by the suffragettes obfuscated the boundaries between the prison and civil society. By staging protests both within and across prison walls, the suffragettes further disrupted the state's governance over the space of the prison. The suffragettes' hunger strikes and other prison protests were not just an extension of their movement into the space of the prison. Instead, their prison protests generated their own political platform that shaped the suffragettes' activism outside of the prison and generated ideas that linked these worlds together (Kenney 2017, 234). Suffragette crowds would gather outside women's prisons and sing suffragette anthems such as 'The March of the Women' and the women's 'La Marseillaise' (Purvis 1995, 112). They would also smuggle materials into and out of the prison, including letters to or from family members and copies of suffragette publications (Purvis 1995, 115). Ellen Crocker recalls 'a chicken being sent in stuffed with our paper "Votes for Women" which was taboo', as well as receiving messages from the outside world *via* 'placards exposed in succession from a house outside the prison' (Crocker ca. 1940, 3). Outside of the prison, the WSPU commemorated suffragette hunger strikers and prisoners through public processions, medals for hunger striking, and illustrated scrolls commending their 'self-forgetfulness and self-conquest' during imprisonment and solitary confinement ('Procession to Welcome the Released Suffragette Prisoner Patricia Woodlock' 1909; WSPU 1909, 1912; WSPU ca. 1908–1909). Hence, even as imprisonment was a source of immense suffering for individual suffragettes, it was also a site of collective pride and the locus of a shared political identity through which the suffragettes laid claim to citizenship.

Race, class and the problems with acting for others

The prior three sections of this article have examined how the suffragettes disrupted gendered norms around political participation through their embodied and enacted protests. However, this final section interrogates the tensions inherent in the suffragettes' claim to citizenship through enactment and their attempts to act *on behalf of* all women, as a whole. The women's suffrage movement attempted to foster collective solidarity among women as members of an oppressed 'sex-class' in order to try and transcend 'economic-class consciousness and unite women in their shared interests as

a subject group' (Holton 2014, 250). To this end, Christabel Pankhurst claimed that 'any class which is denied the vote is branded as an inferior class' (Pankhurst 1913c: 117–118), while Constance Lytton highlighted the cross-class nature of the suffragette movement and emphasised the 'common bond that united all women' (Purvis 1995, 111). The WSPU's publications and circular letters to their membership repeatedly appeal to a sense of shared womanhood and the status of women as a subjected sex core motivations for their political activism; for example, Christabel Pankhurst argued that the suffragettes 'are conscious of intolerable evils and of deep wrongs inflicted upon the poorest and most miserable of their sex' (Pankhurst ca. 1912a, 2). Similarly, in 1910 the WSPU called upon its membership to help and care for other women, rhetorically asking who could 'have a closer claim or to whom can you give them with a more understanding sympathy than to members of your own sex, who share the same joys and dangers, on whose shoulders rest the same responsibilities and duties?' (WSPU ca. 1910, 1). In this sense, the suffragettes perceived themselves as both agentic political actors, laying claim to rights on their own behalf, *and* representatives of an oppressed collective, on whose behalf they fought.

Although suffragettes often regarded themselves as comrades and fellow prisoners with other imprisoned women, they also claimed to act for those who were less able, less enlightened, or less capable to lay claim to their rights (Anderson 1912b). In 1910, the WSPU stated, 'we want to help women. We want to gain for them self-respect and such freedom as is consistent with our duty to others; we want to gain for them all the rights and protection that laws can give them' (WSPU ca. 1910, 2). In the ca. 1913 pamphlet 'The Appeal To God', Christabel Pankhurst argues that the suffragettes struggled 'against the oppression of their sister women' (Pankhurst ca. 1913d, 1). Similarly, in a 1913 article in *The Suffragette* entitled 'What Militancy Means', Christabel Pankhurst argued 'suffragist violence is committed with the intent to put to an end the violence done to sweated women, to white slaves, to outraged children' (Pankhurst 1913a: 492). Hence, Christabel Pankhurst claimed that 'for the sake of other people more helpless and more unhappy than themselves that the militant women are ready to pay this heavy price"(Pankhurst 1913a: 492). Despite her recognition that militancy depended on each woman's personal circumstances, Emmeline Pankhurst still believed that militancy was an absolute moral obligation owed by each member of the WSPU 'to other women who are less fortunate than she is herself, and to all those who are to come after her' (Pankhurst 1913a). The suffragettes' insistence on the importance of women pursuing their own emancipation thus existed in tension with their desire to act on the behalf of the 'sweated and decrepit' members of their sex (Purvis 2000, 143). Through their multitude of references to the helpless and oppressed women, the suffragettes unintentionally entrenched social

and political divides between themselves and their disadvantaged 'sister women'.

Furthermore, despite their rhetoric of sex solidarity and feminist sisterhood, the WSPU - along with the wider women's suffrage movement - attempted to lay claim to citizenship through the invocation of racial, colonial, and class hierarchies (Cohler 2010, 35). In the context of the wider movement for the women's vote, suffragist writings were shaped by a 'consciousness of progress, of participating in a progressive movement of civilisation, to be differentiated from those other parts of the world still dominated by a 'savage' brutality' (Rendall 1994, 141). These discourses of progress reflected the preoccupation with evolution that shaped British political thought throughout the third quarter of the nineteenth century (Rendall 1994). Consequently, the British Empire and its associated imperialist ideals framed the broader suffragist imagination (Mayhall 2003, 179). In this regard, the WSPU was no exception. For example, the suffragettes' victimisation of women they perceived as 'helpless and oppressed' was imbricated in broader imperial logics of white saviourism that aimed to civilise colonised subjects (Schwan 2013). Their vocabularies of social reform, like those of many Victorian and Edwardian philanthropists, were rife with racialised metaphors and the trope of the civilising mission (Burton 1994). Like the white saviours of the civilising mission, the suffragettes saw it as their feminist duty to 'bring light to those who sit in darkness' (Schwan 2013, 157). The ca. 1910 leaflet 'A Message from the WSPU' claims, 'no matter in what circumstances you are placed, it is in your power to give the greatest gifts in the world – sympathy and a helping hand – to the helpless and oppressed' (WSPU ca. 1910, 1). It then continues, 'it is given to the influence of women to upraise and purify humanity. But if we are to develop this power at its highest, we must first be free women' (WSPU ca. 1910, 2). Here, contrary to the WSPU's insistence on women acting for themselves, the suffragettes attempted to win the vote through a distinctly imperial form of feminism, one which instructs British women to save other women in the name of sisterhood (Holton 2014; Burton 1994).

This claim to act on behalf of other women, even those who explicitly did not support their aims or want their help, also explicitly manifested itself along class lines. The WSPU's campaign for better conditions for working class women did demonstrate solidarity and awareness of their distinctive struggles. A large number of working-class women participated in the suffragette movement, and some, such as Annie Kenney, occupied prominent leadership positions in the WSPU (Purvis 2000, 142). However, as Laura Schwartz notes, attitudes of cross-class collaboration did not prevent the marginalisation of working-class women in the suffragette movement or their disempowering objectification as victims (Schwartz 2019, 67). The suffragettes' desire to act on the behalf of other women often reproduced class divides between upper- and middle-class philanthropists and their willing or

unwilling lower-class beneficiaries. Consequently, their support for working-class women was also shaped by certain forms of class prejudice. Christabel Pankhurst framed the vote as an 'education' for British women, especially working-class women, who needed to develop 'self-respect' and greater civic skills in order to become equal with men (Pankhurst ca. 1912b, 3). 'The chief cause of the under-payment of female labour', Christabel Pankhurst argued in 1912, 'is that women regard themselves and are regarded by others as socially and politically inferior to men. To give women the vote will be a great education, and will teach them to respect themselves more and stand out for better conditions' (Pankhurst ca. 1912b, 3). Christabel Pankhurst's claim that the vote would teach working women to 'stand out for better conditions' obscures the extensive history of working-class women's active political involvement in trade unions, riots, strikes, and other forms of political activism. This history includes female workers' role in the 'unprecedented levels of industrial action' of the Great Unrest of 1907–1914, a movement which corresponded with the heights of suffragette militancy (Schwartz 2019, 2). The leadership of the WSPU frequently argued that they knew what was best for women as a class and acted on the behalf of other women without necessarily consulting or corroborating with the women they were supposedly acting for.

The writings of middle and upper-class suffragettes reveal further ambivalences in their attitudes towards lower-class women (Schwan 2013, 155). For example, Gliddon's prison diaries extensively critique the 'refined cruelty' of prison and, in particular, its degradation of working-class women, with Gliddon writing that 'the prison system is absolutely wrong. It is not only not constructive of character but it is destructive. It aims at repression, nothing is done to help to rebuild the weak or erring' (Gliddon 1912, 20; Gliddon 1913). Nonetheless, her writings also reproduce the WSPU class-based narratives of victimisation through her excessive pity for the 'poor creatures' imprisoned in Holloway (Gliddon 1912, 13). Moreover, middle- and upper-class suffragettes' autobiographical writings frequently convey forms of class contempt towards working-class women. For example, in her autobiography Kitty Marion describes activists in the women's movement as 'intelligent, educated, (Upper class not "low hooligan") women' (Marion ca. 1930, 170). Although Marion's comment may be a critique of media coverage of suffragette protests as acts of hooliganism, her juxtaposition of hooliganism with intelligent, educated, and upper-class women reproduces Edwardian class structures and norms (Marion ca. 1930, 168). Similarly, when describing a wardress who stopped suffragettes from dancing together, Gliddon claims 'it is the sense of class hatred that comes out so often in the uneducated woman which gives her pleasure in this exercising of power over any member of the cultured classes who may come into her power' (Gliddon 1912, 35–36). In one of her prison letters, Louisa Garrett Anderson suggests that

the middle-class suffragettes endured the prison food and cold water better than those from 'poorer homes', going on to wonder whether 'officers stand deprivations with much less suffering than the men' (Anderson 1912a). Despite their overtures to sex solidarity, existing class prejudices shaped relations between middle- and upper-class suffragettes and the women they believed they were acting for.

Conclusion: echoes of the suffragette movement across space and time

In light of the significance of the British suffragettes in the contemporary British feminist imagination, it is essential that their political protests are contextualised and understood not as mere 'public spectacles' designed for media attention. Instead, as this paper has shown, the suffragettes' political protests were performative acts through which they attempted to lay claim to citizenship through 'deeds, not words'. Through their embodied acts of citizenship, the suffragettes questioned the ideology of separate spheres, highlighting the role of male violence in the construction and the maintenance of these gendered spheres of influence. Furthermore, the suffragettes' enactment of citizenship stretched beyond their public and civic activism into the space of the prison, where they assumed the status of political prisoners and rejected the state's authority over their bodies through protests such as hunger striking. However, the suffragettes' insistence on laying claim to their own rights existed in tension with their desire to act on behalf of other women, specifically those women considered to be less educated or less capable than themselves.

While the British suffragette movement took place over 100 years prior, the same tensions around reclaiming rights and acting for others continue to haunt and shape contemporary feminist movements. These tensions were particularly apparent during the centenary celebrations of the Representation of the People Act, the 2017 Women's Marches (Gantt-Shafer, Wallis, and Miles 2019), and the reception of the 2015 film *Suffragette*. As part of a promotional campaign, the all-white cast of the film *Suffragette* wore T-shirts with a quote from Emmeline Pankhurst reading, 'I'd rather be a rebel than a slave' (Gajanan 2015). This caused public outcry as, in the US context, the term 'rebel' is largely used to refer to those who fought for the Confederates during the US civil war (Gajanan 2015). As Lola Olufemi writes in Feminism Interrupted, a narrow genealogy of feminist protest based only on the suffragettes 'turns the history of feminism in the UK into a narrative of linear progress led by middle class white women and flattens the complex and interconnected ways that radical, grassroots groups transformed their communities, and in doing so expanded what it meant to be a 'feminist'. (Olufemi 2020, 11). The T-shirt public relations debacle and the *Sisters Uncut* protest

sparked a much wider debate about how race, class, and colonialism shaped the British and American suffragette movements, and how these power relations continue to shape feminist movements today (Gajanan 2015; Olufemi 2020).

Meanwhile, at the premiere of *Suffragette*, over 100 activists from the organisation *Sisters Uncut* stormed the red carpet in resistance to cuts to domestic violence services, chanting 'dead women can't vote' (Slawson 2015). Their direct action protest and bodily occupation of public space cites and echoes the suffragettes' performative political protests. Their bodies, assembled together, made claims on the British body politic and staged their own Rancièrean scene of 'dissensus'. However, as intersectional feminists who fight against 'sexism, racism, anti-blackness, classism, disableism, ageism, homophobia, transphobia, transmisogyny, whorephobia, fat-phobia, islamophobia, and antisemitism' ("Feministo", Sisters Uncut 2018), *Sisters Uncut* and their embodied protests echo the radical political potential of the suffragettes' acts of citizenship, while simultaneously imbuing these acts with a deeply held commitment to intersectional social justice. *Sisters Uncut's* embodied critique of state violence - and, implicitly, the tidy memorialisation of a complex and compromised feminist struggle in the form of a Hollywood film - shows how 'feminist histories are unwieldy; they cannot and should not be neatly presented' (Olufemi 2020, 1). Their protest compels us to reconsider the suffragettes' embodied protests as both a physical claim to space and an embodied enactment of citizenship - but specifically, a narrow and exclusionary concept of citizenship, one premised on existing class and racial hierarchies rather than a wider vision of feminist justice. When feminists follow in the footsteps of the women's suffrage movement, they do not only trace the archival remenants of the suffragettes' protesting bodies; they can and must simultaneously (re)trace these critical feminist conversations about power, action, and agency.

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