

Performances of Death

Hunger Strikes, Discipline, and Democracy

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► **Abstract:** Hunger striking is a form of protest that escapes conventional forms of political participation. I argue that as a spectacular performance of death, the hunger strike not only draws attention to a particular cause or exert moral pressure on an opponent but can galvanize and strengthen a nascent political identity. Drawing on the example of the hunger strike of suffragette Marion Wallace-Dunlop, which I argue performatively constructed the identity of the disciplined “true suffragette,” I explain the hunger strike as a political becoming. Undertaken behind bars, by those denied citizenship rights, this protest should be understood not necessarily as the free expression of an already existing member of the demos but instead as a way of becoming a political subject while contesting and reconfiguring political boundaries.

► **Keywords:** death, democracy, discipline, hunger strike, performance, politics, protest, suffragette

“The hunger strike and the fast are reflective experiences, performances of death in which we see ourselves.”

(Grant 2019: 1)

“We have now learned our power to starve ourselves out of prison, and this power we shall use.”

(Christobel Pankhurst, quoted in Crawford 1999: 493)

Hunger has an array of social meanings. It can signify famine, diet, or fast (Ellmann 1993: 5). But it can also be a powerful form of political protest, in which a diminishing body becomes highly visible. In the hunger strike, starvation is used as a weapon that is turned inward, so that the body of the hunger striker becomes at once the site, object, and subject of protest. As I have argued elsewhere, the hunger strike is an embodied and spectacular performance that is both disruptive and mobilizing (Machin 2022: 107–135). In this article I aim to extend this analysis and consider



the implications of the hunger strike for democracy. More specifically, I intend to examine how a hunger strike performed by those with only their body left to use as an instrument and place of protest challenges dominant conceptions of political agency and participation.

Various scholars, from different disciplinary backgrounds, have studied political hunger striking (Abrahamsson and Dányi 2019; Anderson 2004; Ellmann 1993; Feldman 1991; Grant 2019; Lennon 2007; McGregor 2011; O’Branski 2014; Passmore 2009; Pfeifer 2018; Scanlan et al. 2008; Shah 2022; Valasquez-Potts 2019; Ziarek 2008). This scholarship shows the long history of this protest tactic “of the last resort” (Scanlan et al. 2008: 277), particularly in anti-colonial and dissident movements (Lennon 2007: 39). Yet this tactic does not fit neatly within the catalog of forms of political participation as it is conventionally understood in liberal and representative democracies.¹ This is not only because it is difficult to describe hunger striking as a straightforward matter of campaigning or even civil disobedience, but also because to reduce hunger striking to the activity of an already existing member of the demos is to omit how the hunger striker performatively (re)constructs herself and the demos. Through her spectacular performance of death, the hunger striker becomes a political subject while thus also contesting and reinventing the boundaries of the political community. Paradoxically, it is by moving closer to death that the hunger striker struggles into political life. This is a form of agency that is not enclosed within individual rationality but is “corporeal and distributed” (Krause 2011: 301) across the lived and dying body (Machin 2022).

As Patrick Anderson eloquently shows, the hunger strike can produce political subjects (2004: 819). But if the political subjectivity of those denied vote and voice can be rallied through a sustained and spectacular performance of death, it does not issue from the free expression of an already existing agent, or what Hans Asenbaum calls the “fugitive self” (2021: 88). Subjectivity here is rather premised on the sacrifice and suffering of an imprisoned and disciplined body. The power of hunger strike, I will argue, lies at least partly in its capacity to disrupt and reform the boundaries of political identity, but it also shows us that if identity (re)formation – and the “multiple self” that is the theme of this special issue – may at times “stretch freedom,” then at others it can arise in the sites where freedom is denied.

William Connolly observes “the politics of becoming” that can arise from suffering. He defines the politics of becoming as “that paradoxical politics by which new cultural identities are formed out of old energies, injuries and differences” and which occurs when a constituency “strikes to reconfigure itself by moving the cultural constellation of identity/difference then in place” (1996: 261, 256). The process of becoming is unpredictable and contingent, and it disrupts stabilized boundaries, categories,

and norms, which for Connolly is crucial for a democratic form of life. Drawing from this conception of “the politics of becoming,” I assert that in a context of oppression the suffering body itself labors to provoke such disruption within political life. By hunger striking for the right to vote, women in the early twentieth century, for example, used their suffering bodies to disrupt the barriers against them, experience themselves as political subjects, and forge a new collective identification. But the construction of the “true suffragette” that their activities reproduced was as disciplined and disciplining as much as it was emancipatory.

Drawing on the example of the hunger strike by British suffragette Marion Wallace-Dunlop in 1909, as well as the literature cited above (particularly the work of Patrick Anderson), I hope to illustrate how the hunger strike, undertaken by those denied citizenship rights, should not be seen only in terms of a particular cause or its exertion of pressure on an opponent but as a political becoming that ruptures notions of democratic participation, and performatively engenders collective identity and subjectivity.

Hunger and Suffrage

It is 24 June 1909 and Marion Wallace-Dunlop, a Scottish artist who has been campaigning for women’s right to vote, is arrested for stenciling an excerpt of the 1689 English Bill of Rights onto a wall in the House of Commons in Westminster in violet ink. The excerpt reads: “It is the right of the Subjects to petition the king, and all commitments and prosecutions for such petitioning are illegal” (Crawford 1999: 179; Puwar 2010: 303).² Wallace-Dunlop is a member of the suffragist organization the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU), led by Emmeline Pankhurst, who is planning to march on Parliament to deliver a petition to the prime minister demanding women’s enfranchisement. With its motto “deeds not words” (Purvis 1995), the WSPU uses militant tactics and civil disobedience to protest their exclusion from politics (Machin 2022: 49).

Charged with “wilfully damaging the stone work of St. Stephen’s Hall, House of Commons . . . doing damage to the value of 10s” (see Spartacus Education 2023), Wallace-Dunlop is imprisoned in Holloway Prison in London, and after being refused the status of a political prisoner, she starts a hunger strike (Grant 2019: 3; see also Lennon 2007; Purvis 2009; Puwar 2010; Williams 2008). Adopting what Kevin Grant calls the “Russian method” used, for example, in the Russian and Siberian prisons of the czarist regime (2019: 43), she refuses food. She writes a letter to the governor of the prison: “I claim the right recognized by all civilized nations that a person imprisoned for a political offence should have first-division treatment; and as a matter of principle, not only for my own sake but for the sake of others who may come after me, I am now refusing all food until this matter is settled to my satisfaction.” After 91 hours without eating, she is released (Williams 2008: 134).

She does not succeed in winning political status, or apparently in moving closer to the ultimate goal of women's suffrage. Yet she demonstrates a form of protest and contentious politics that can be used by those behind bars "to create political opportunities out of nothing" (Scanlan et al. 2008: 276). Wallace-Dunlop's performance will subsequently be adapted by various movements as a strategy of resistance to imperial power (Grant 2019: 3; Lennon 2007: 21). Hunger striking will come to be seen as an entirely rational strategy for the powerless that can draw public attention and stir public emotions. Certainly, the leaders of the WSPU see this tactic as a "stroke of genius" (Lennon 2007: 22). "From that day, July 5th, 1909" writes suffragette and WSPU member Annie Kenney "the hunger-strike was the greatest weapon we possessed against the government" (1924: 145).³

After Wallace-Dunlop's actions in 1909, many of the one thousand or so women campaigning for the vote who were imprisoned for participating in protest went on hunger strikes (Shah 2022: 32; Williams 2008). The prison regime's response was forced feeding, a violent practice using various contraptions often described by those who experienced it as an extreme violation of their bodies – a form of torture or rape (Kent 1990: 207; Purvis 2009; Williams 2008: 138) that also has been described as a "spectacle" (Armbruster-Sandoval 2017). Forced feeding, backed by respected physicians and notable authorities including the British home secretary and the lord chief justice, was "justified by reference to ordinary standards of liberal discourse and practice" (Williams 2008: 134).

This did not deter the suffragettes, for whom hunger striking "became common policy" (Purvis 1995: 97). Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence is quoted as saying that Wallace-Dunlop had discovered a "new way of insisting upon the proper status of political prisoners, and had the resourcefulness and energy in the face of difficulties that marked *the true suffragette*" (Crawford 1999: 179, emphasis added). Indeed, as I will go on to consider in the next section, Marion Wallace-Dunlop's hunger strike was a political performance that helped construct the ideal of the "true suffragette". This performance was highly disciplined; while it contradicted and disrupted the very gender norms that were the putative basis for denying her the vote, it was also a tightly scripted performance that demanded suffering and self-sacrifice.

Hunger and Performance

"Self-starvation," writes Maud Ellmann in her exploration of its various manifestations, "is above all a performance" (1993: 17). By this she highlights that when it is undertaken deliberately, hunger may function as a

spectacle designed to attract the gaze of an audience – a gaze that feeds on the diminishing corpulence of the performers body (on spectacle and the suffragettes, see Tickner 1987). Anderson agrees that the hunger strike is a performance; the prison he describes is a stage on which the strikers resist the disciplinary power of the state (2004: 821). The political performance of a hunger strike has no plush props or lavish costumes, and its choreography and rehearsal consist only in silent suffering and the repeated denial of food (Abrahamsson and Dányi 2019: 894). The striker’s body is both the object and the subject of the performance, and death is at both its center and limits. It is this sustained display of a dying body that distinguishes the hunger strike from protests such as marches and occupations on the one hand, and from self-immolation on the other; arguably, without the imminence of death sketched on and by the body, the hunger strike would not work so distinctly or powerfully. As the skeletal frame ineluctably rises beneath the wasting flesh, death is the terrible silent climax at which the performance is at its most intense and that also marks its termination.

The description of the hunger strike as a performance of death resonates with work showing performance to be an integral part of politics; politics and performance are said to be “co-constitutive” (Gluhovic et al. 2021; Rai 2015). Performance shapes politics, and politics uses performance to represent past events and to embody identities (Gluhovic et al. 2021: 2). Political performances, which often exceed verbal expression, contribute in different ways to a democratic public sphere (Ercau et al. 2022). By approaching the hunger strike as a performance, we become aware of it as a darkly theatrical event in which the audience, stage, and performers bodies interact together to enrich democracy and to bring death to life.

Understanding the hunger strike as a performance is helpful too because it draws attention to its potential performative effects (Abrahamsson and Dányi 2019; Anderson 2004: 821; Passmore 2009: 33). As a performative act, the hunger striker who has been denied voice and vote becomes a political actor and by doing so both institutes a new political identity. Identity here is understood not as an *already existing* starting point for politics but as an unfinished effect of performance – a political expression that can undermine and interrupt the reification of certain social categories through the democratic “politics of becoming” (Asenbaum 2021; Connolly 1996).

For sure, the hunger strike has ambiguous, unpredictable, and contradictory consequences; it is certainly not always successful in terms of its explicit demands. Its meaning can be highly contested. For example, although it aims to politicize an issue, the commentary over a hunger

strike – perhaps particularly one that is undertaken by female bodies – that presents it as individual pathology rather than collective protest can evacuate its political meaning (Hall 2008: 170). Nevertheless, by capturing the attention of an audience and rewriting the scripts that sculpt her body’s movements and behavior, the hunger striker enacts a deadly powerful performance of *becoming* that can embolden a nascent collective identification (Machin 2022: 109). By claiming a political stake, the performance of death can rupture the boundaries surrounding the demos and can potentially highlight and resist exclusion from political life.

The hunger strike of Wallace-Dunlop and her fellow WSPU members can therefore be understood as an embodied performance of death that worked not simply to inconvenience the prison regime – although it surely did that too – but also to construct and reify the identity of the “true suffragette”. This fits within the broader picture of what Barbara Green refers to as the suffragettes’ “performative activism” in which they transformed themselves (1994–1995: 68), using their bodies in protest to challenge conventional expectations of “womanly” behavior. Wendy Parkins describes how by undertaking “spectacular and daring feats of activism” such as street marching, window breaking, chaining themselves to railings, and hunger striking – in what she calls their “performance of citizenship” – the suffragettes contradicted dominant social norms of women as hysterical, emotional, and passive as well as challenging the idea that citizenship was exclusively masculine (2000: 63). The hunger strike and forced feeding thus allowed the suffragette to further actively challenge not only her exclusion from politics but also the very grounds for that exclusion. Expectations of class and ethnicity overlay the activism and discourses of the suffragette who were depicted as reputable and educated (Shah 2022: 63). As Mary Jean Corbett writes: “The imprisoned suffragette’s refusal to eat announced her willingness to use her body as a political stake and so to contest the cultural construction of the middle-class feminine body as marginal to the realm of politics” (1992: 163; see also Purvis 2009; Tickner 1987: xi). The suffragettes’ body was celebrated as being “disciplined rather than disorderly” (Parkins 2000: 68).

A “true suffragette”, then, was highly disciplined. But is the disciplined suffragette a free individual who displays her self-control by refusing food in protest? Or should we read her disciplined body differently and see her identity as a suffragette as configured through the disciplined practice of a hunger strike? This disciplined practice could be understood in terms of the discourses that subjugate rather than empower women. Michel Foucault argues that discipline “makes” individuals (1977: 170), and his feminist critics highlight the specific ways in which discipline works through gendered social discourses to “make” women. Sandra Lee

Bartky, for example, draws attention to the prevalence in modern society of “disciplinary practices ... by which the ideal body of femininity – and hence the feminine body-subject – is constructed” (1990: 71; see also McNay 1991). For Cressida Heyes, however, dieting should be seen not simply as the disciplining of a docile body but more in terms of the discourse of self-care and therefore as “a complex intervention in identity” (2007: 65). So, could hunger striking be seen as itself a sort of disciplinary practice that helps construct a feminine (and upper- or middle-class and white) body-subject – one that was different, yet not entirely separated, from the very feminine body-subject of patriarchal society that the suffragettes were challenging? As Corbett observes, the suffragette ideology contained the very “ethic of personal renunciation” and expectations of self-sacrifice that had characterized the norms of femininity in Victorian England: “Victorian women’s claims to autonomy had always been rejected on the basis of their prescribed part as the servants of others’ needs and aims, and even independent women were used to defining themselves in terms of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation” (1992: 158). The hunger strike, therefore, could seem in some ways as a continuation of the very disciplinary regime that the suffragettes were intent on rejecting.

However, as Foucault explains, disciplined bodies are those that have been conditioned through disciplinary power but that paradoxically, precisely because of their increased capacity, are able to resist it (1980: 56). As Corbett also acknowledges, the self-sacrifice of the disciplined suffragette, which was perhaps at least partly the result of her situatedness in Victorian patriarchal society, allowed her to experience herself as a political actor: “While the suffragette ethic of renunciation represented a revision of Victorian ideology rather than a radical break within it, the opening of a specifically political space of women’s altruism and activism enabled women to experience themselves as political and public agents of social transformation” (1992: 159).

By hunger striking, then, the suffragette was not entirely free from disciplinary power but was nevertheless able to experience herself as a political agent. The shared experience of suffering of the suffragettes galvanized a strong political identity, or what June Purvis calls the “feeling of sisterhood,” that at the same time gave them the “spiritual sustenance” to endure the pain of hunger striking and forced feeding (1995: 96; see also Corbett 1992: 150; Machin 2022: 126). Through the performance of death, the hunger strike constructs a political subject who becomes the vanishing point of a collective identification (Machin 2022: 126). While a liberal interpretation would understand the hunger striking suffragette a free subject participating in protest, I suggest a different reading, in which the “true suffragette” is the performative construction of a disciplined body

without rights, vote, or voice who has turned to the hunger strike as a desperate yet effective form of participation to *become* a political subject.

Hunger and Democracy

Hunger striking does not easily fit within the conventional catalog forms of participation in a liberal democracy. As Mark Warren explains, according to certain narrow accounts of democracy “political participation by most people, most of the time will, of necessity, be limited to the act of voting” (2002: 678). He calls for the rethinking of the meaning of democratic participation and refers to public criticism, boycotts, and protests (697). These activities however, as Warren recognizes, rest on the existence of rights; what happens when the individuals who protest are not awarded rights by the state? Hunger striking might seem to be close to civil disobedience, but according to John Rawls, civil disobedience is undertaken by existing citizens, not those who have been *denied* citizenship (1971: 363).⁴

Many hunger strikes are undertaken by those who, though desperate, are not necessarily imprisoned or denied citizenship rights. Nevertheless, what is distinct about the hunger strike is that, as a performance and a performative act, it can be a form of participation for those who are formally, and actually, excluded from politics and lack the rights to protest in other ways. So, for Ewa Ziarek, the hunger strike not only “repeats, mimics, and exposes in public the hidden irrational violence of the sovereign state against women’s bodies” but also “negates women’s exclusion and calls for the transformation of the law” (2008: 100). Hunger striking is also undertaken by refugees who by protesting in this way “make visible” their exclusion and the racialized violence inflicted on their bodies (Pfeifer 2018: 461) and can mobilize and bring them together across ethnic and national divisions (Ataç 2016: 640; Machin 2022: 127). I argue, in agreement with Ilker Ataç (2016), that the hunger strike shapes political identities; it is a form of performance by which those who are excluded may actually (re)construct their sociopolitical identities and *become* political actors. This is not to claim that they are free subjects who become full citizens, or to defer to the liberal conception of political subjectivity (Pfeifer 2018: 465). On the contrary, my claim here is that this protest, undertaken behind bars by those who are denied freedom, allows them to experience themselves as political actors and construct a political identity and alliance outside the formally bounded demos (Anderson 2004). In short, the performance of death that constitutes the hunger strike escapes conventional categories of democratic participation,

not only because it is contentious but because it is undertaken by those who have been denied political rights and freedom, who become political subjects through their performance.

The hunger strike is also distinct from conventional forms of democratic participation in its use of suffering and death in its performance. In their introduction to the *Oxford Handbook on Politics and Performance*, Milija Gluhovic and colleagues explain: “*Performing* is a verb that emphasizes the effort, labor, intent, and process undertaken to make a performance” (2021: 6). But the performance of the hunger strike involves not only *effort* but pain, and what Ziarek calls the “ambiguous political agency of self-hurt” (2008: 101). As Michelle Velasquez-Potts observes, “prisoners’ resistance to corporeal wholeness continues to function as a viable form of political self-expression” (2019: 26). She argues that, contrary to liberal conceptions of pain as something that must be avoided, pain and suffering in the hunger strike is seen as “essential components to political change” (2019: 26).

Paradoxes of the politics of becoming layer up in the hunger strikers’ bodies: their weakening bodies strengthen political solidarity; by performing death, they bring identities to life; through a disciplined refusal of food, the “true suffragettes” affirm their entry into the demos, and by doing so, they enrich and pluralize democracy.

Conclusion: The True Suffragette?

For June Purvis (2009), “the hunger striking suffragette who politicised her body contributed to a radical tradition of rebellion, dissent and resistance that is still reverberating around the world.” But we can read this the other way around: it is partly through the performance of hunger striking that a woman *becomes* a suffragette. I have tried to show that hunger striking stretches our understanding of political agency and participation, not only because it falls outside prevailing conceptions of activities of liberal democracy but because it highlights the participation of those excluded from the political realm. Hunger strikers who are behind bars and therefore not “free” in the liberal sense become political actors through performances of death, and by doing so disturb the boundaries patrolling the demos.

Some research on hunger striking asks important questions regarding what motivates hunger strikes and whether they are effective (e.g., Armbruster-Sandoval 2017). In this contribution I have engaged with a different question: What are the performative effects of the hunger strike? I am wary that as an embodied performance the hunger strike exceeds

rational and conscious efforts of explanation and documentation and that it is difficult to draw generalizations about this form of protest that takes place across cultures, time, and space (Scanlan et al. 2008: 285) and that it can be framed and interpreted in different, often gendered, ways (Hall 2008). Nevertheless, my analysis of the hunger strike of the suffragettes suggests that, in this case at least, the hunger strike should not be reduced to its capacity to draw attention to a particular cause or to exert moral pressure on its opponents; the hunger strike works above all here to help a political subject *become* and to galvanize a nascent political solidarity between those whose bodies are one of the few, if not only, sites of protest available to them. The hunger strike constitutes a spectacular performance of death through which political identity is violently summoned and strengthened through the weakening and suffering of the body.

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► NOTES

1. As Abrahamsson and Danyi point out, hunger strikes “expand the standard repertoire of modes of doing” (2019: 882)
2. Note the capitalization of “Subjects” but not “king.” As Puwar notices she was thus making “a typographical political intervention” (2010: 304). The capitalization was then reversed in newspaper reports.
3. Annie Kenney (1924) repeatedly went on hunger strike between the years 1909 and 1904, as she narrates in her account *Memories of a Militant*.
4. Scanlan et al. (2008), borrowing from Gene Sharp, refer to hunger striking as a form of “political jiu-jitsu” that “throws the opponents off balance politically.”

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