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“YE SHALL KNOW THEM BY THEIR CLOTHES”: WOMEN AND THE RHETORIC OF
RELIGIOUS DRESS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1865-1920

by

Stephanie Ann Grossnickle-Batterton

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the
Doctor of Philosophy
degree in American Studies in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2019

Thesis Supervisors: Professor Kristy Nabhan-Warren
Associate Professor Bluford Adams

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines discourses surrounding religious dress in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly how various forms of religious dress were deployed by women. Analyzing the rhetoric used by women wearing distinctive religious garb as well as outsiders writing about religious dress, I show how religious dress not only held a variety of spiritual meanings for people of faith, but also served as a visual critique of a dominant Protestant paradigm that constructed religion as invisible, containable and private. I also show how discourses around religious dress were touchstones to negotiate larger cultural issues of the period between the end of the Civil War and the first two decades of the twentieth century, including consumerism and fashion, public education and secularism, and cultural imperialism.

I position this project as an interdisciplinary cultural study in dialogue with scholars who engage with a wide variety of sources to trace developments in U.S. culture between the end of the Civil War and the first decades of the twentieth century. Yet, I intervene by drawing more attention to religion, and more specifically women's religious dress, a category of analysis that has been virtually ignored by interdisciplinary U.S. cultural historians. Primarily using methods of literary and rhetorical analysis, I examine a variety of relevant primary sources, including novels, short stories, newspaper articles, denominational periodicals, promotional brochures, and legal documents such as court rulings and legislative proceedings.

This project also intervenes in religious studies scholarship on dress. Most scholars who study religious dress focus on one religion. By examining discourses of religious dress across multiple groups, I illuminate how religious groups in the United States did not operate

in vacuums, either apart from each other or from U.S. culture. Although religiously clothed persons may wear very distinct garb from each other, they share a commitment to wearing a visible marker of their faith. This opens up possibilities for a deeper understanding not only between groups, but also by outsiders. Thus, this project takes a more expansive approach than single-group studies, seeking to place multiple discourses in conversation with one another, especially within a context of hyper modernization, secularization, and imperialism at the turn of the century.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines representations of religious dress in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly how various forms of religious dress were worn, or talked about, by women. Analyzing the language used by women wearing distinctive religious garb as well as outsiders writing about religious dress, I show how religious dress not only held a variety of spiritual meanings for people of faith, but also served as a visual critique of a dominant Protestant idea that constructed religion as invisible, containable and private. I also show how conversations around religious dress touched on larger cultural issues of the period between the end of the Civil War and the first two decades of the twentieth century, including consumerism and fashion, public education and secularism, and cultural imperialism.

Primarily using methods of literary and rhetorical analysis, I examine a variety of relevant primary sources, including novels, short stories, newspaper articles, denominational periodicals, promotional brochures, and legal documents such as court rulings and legislative proceedings to show the multiple meanings religious dress held for the wearers as well as the wider culture. By examining discourses of religious dress across multiple groups, I illuminate how religious groups in the United States did not operate in isolation, either apart from each other or from U.S. culture. Although religiously clothed persons may wear very distinct garb from each other, they share a commitment to wearing a visible marker of their faith. This opens up possibilities for a deeper understanding not only between groups, but also by outsiders. Thus, this project takes a more expansive approach than single-group studies, seeking to place multiple discourses in conversation with one another.

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INTRODUCTION

I can go through my whole life being Catholic and no one would know, but in Tahera's case there is an immediate visual association that, hey, I'm Muslim and I'm devout.

~Stephanie Jarosz, friend of news reporter Tahera Rahman, February 2018

But the Capitol is not a temple of faith or faiths: it is not a Pantheon, but is strictly and emphatically, a political center, a political institution simply. It is not a place where Quakers and Calvinists, Jews and Gentiles, Methodists and Baptists, and Episcopalians and Shakers meet as such, and in their distinctive dress, if they have any. It is a place where all representatives who have been admitted, in statuesque presentment, have come simply as men of the State, in the garb of the arena of the State, bearing no hint of their individual religious faith.

~Editorial by "American," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 4, 1896

In 2018, Quad Cities reporter Tahera Rahman became the first full-time reporter for a U.S. news station to wear the hijab on air. A *Des Moines Register* article outlines the 27-year-old's trajectory to the newsroom, the station's decision to promote her from producer and reporter, and the response of the public to the presence of the hijab on camera. Rahman recalls her decision to wear the hijab full time when she was in fifth grade and her later experience being the only woman wearing a headscarf at sorority events in college. In describing her public faith, Rahman states, "what I prayed for every night for years is to be able to soften people's hearts and basically be a light for people in a scary world with a lot of misconceptions." While Rahman reports she was met with a good deal of support when she began appearing on air, she also received threats, including having her photo and personal information appear on a white supremacist website, where commenters criticized the visible presence of a Muslim on local news. One of the most telling comments reads "just take the

rag off your head and be a good American and enjoy your job.” It is unclear whether for this commenter, the hijab is shorthand for Islam in general and to “take the rag off your head” is to give up the Muslim faith, or if the commenter is suggesting her Muslim faith would not interfere with her job and her status as “good American” if it were less visible, if the hijab were not a visual reminder of her faith. In either case, it is clear that the commenter contests Rahman’s Americanness based on the presence of the hijab. The visibility of Rahman’s faith vis a vis the hijab is discussed in the story by her sorority sister, Stephanie Jarosz, when she states, “I can go through my life being Catholic and no one would know, but in Tahera’s case there is an immediate visual association that, hey, I’m Muslim and I’m devout.”¹

More than a century before Rahman made her debut on a Midwest television station, another incident regarding visibility and religious faith made headlines, but in this case it was the Catholic faith in question. In 1896, debate erupted regarding a proposed statue to be placed in the U.S. Capitol building’s National Statuary Hall, where notable figures were chosen by each state to be rendered. Public objections to Wisconsin’s chosen statue of Jacques Pere Marquette were obviously tinged with nineteenth century anti-Catholic rhetoric, but the arguments took on a very particular focus – the presence of religious garb, in this case a priest’s robe, in a building of the state. In a May 1896 dispatch from Washington, the editor of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote that the Capitol should be a place where people “come simply as men of the State, in the garb of the arena of the State, bearing no hint of their

¹ Courtney Crowder, “My America Too: This Iowa TV reporter is the first to wear a hijab on air in the U.S. – haters or no haters,” *The Des Moines Register*, Feb 22, 2018, <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/life/2018/02/23/iowa-journalist-makes-history-first-hijabi-reporter-american-tv-tahera-rahman-whbf-local-4/335297002/>

individual religious faith.”² For the editor, and others at the turn of the century, the *visibility* of religious difference was a problem and that visibility was embodied through religious dress. The editorial, notably signed “American,” reveals that at the turn of the century, religious dress was a site of public discussion in the United States. Beyond issues of a priest’s robes in the state house, debates occurred elsewhere: local school boards and state legislatures debated and passed anti-garb laws forbidding nuns from donning religious dress when they taught in public schools. Christian separatist groups debated the role and importance of religious garb to their individual and community expression, with many groups giving up their distinct dress. Christian missionaries and boarding school officials demanded sartorial changes for indigenous converts, tying white middle class standards of fashion to the project of religious conversion. At the heart of all of these discussions was the issue that Tahera Rahman’s friend identified in 2018 --- religious difference and visibility.

This dissertation takes up the issue of the visibility of religious difference as expressed through dress. Specifically, it examines the rhetoric surrounding religious dress, exploring how religious dress was described, debated, regulated, and deployed in a variety of cultural sites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examining a wide range of cultural materials, I show how religious dress served as a visual critique of a dominant Protestant paradigm that constructed religion as invisible, containable and private -- what religious studies scholar Robert Orsi calls “domesticated modern civic Protestantism,” and what Tracy Fessenden has identified as the “unmarked category” of a “protestant ideology that [grew] more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have often become less visibly

² “News from Washington: Status of the Fight on the Pere Marquette,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 4, 1896, 10, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

religious.”³ I also show how discourses around religious dress were touchstones to negotiate larger cultural issues of the period between the end of the Civil War and the first two decades of the twentieth century, including consumerism and fashion, public education and secularism, and cultural imperialism.

The cultural hegemony of Protestantism in the United States has been the subject of much scholarship. Scholars have shown that one of the ways that Protestantism manifests its dominance in United States is by constructing preferable religious belief as private, whereas more visible or public professions of faith are constructed as suspicious or excessive. Catherine Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin address this in their introduction to *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, writing, “stereotypically Protestant distinction between authentic inward faith and perfunctory public practice has had a long and extraordinarily influential life in American society, not only as a strategy for narrowing the definition of Christianity, but also as a working definition of religion in its entirety.”⁴ Similarly, in her work on religion and American law, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan identifies how the “modern protestant reading” constructs “true” religion as “private, voluntary, individual, textual and believed.” In this paradigm, other forms of religion, including those perceived to be “public, coercive, communal, oral and enacted” are “excluded, both

³Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 186. Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 5-6.

⁴ Catherine Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin, *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 6.

rhetorically and legally, from modern public space.”⁵ While Sullivan identifies Catholicism as the most visible example of the latter type of religion in American history and Islam as the most visible today, she also points out that the “modern protestant reading” moves beyond formal religious boundaries. For Sullivan, this protestant paradigm (which she delineates with a lowercase p) is less about formal church classification and more a “set of political ideas and cultural practices that emerged in early modern Europe in and after the Reformation.”⁶ In other words, even Protestants can be excluded from the protestant paradigm if they deviate too far from the boundaries of “true religion.”

This dissertation shows how religious dress is a key way in which this dominant Protestant paradigm is both constructed and resisted. As a public expression of faith, religious dress can be read, on the one hand, as a walking embodied violation of the (unmarked) Protestant construction of religion as inward, private, and non-material. Yet, many Protestants have historically emphasized sartorial values such as simplicity and modesty, belying the idea that Protestantism is not concerned with dress. Thus, I take up three different case studies, each representing a different relationship to Protestantism: representations and discussions of Quaker plain dress in literature and religious periodicals, debates surrounding the presence of Roman Catholic nuns’ habits in American public schools, and narratives regarding Native American religious dress and conversion.

In each of these case studies, I specifically turn to women’s relationship to religious dress, looking at instances where women wore and/or discussed religious dress. Continuing

⁵ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

⁶ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of religious Freedom*, 7.

the work of religious historians such as Anne Braude, who have insisted that women's religious experiences must be taken seriously in order to write a "more inclusive and accurate account of America's past," focusing on women and religious dress not only inserts religion more directly into cultural studies scholarship, but also inserts women into American religious histories.⁷ In addition, women's religious dress offers a convergence point to explore fraught issues related to religious, ethnic, and sexual identities at the turn of the twentieth century. In a cultural setting that was being reshaped by consumer capitalism, women's bodies were increasingly marked not only by gender, class and race, but also by their sartorial choices. In *American Beauty*, historian Lois Banner argues for the importance of turning scholarly attention to women's fashion, writing that in adorning their bodies, women "participated in rituals as central to women's separate experience of life as childbirth or the domestic chores on which historians have usually focused."⁸ Thus, most of this dissertation focuses on religious dress that women wear. In some cases, women write about their own religious dress or the dress of other women, as was the case for Quaker women in periodicals or non-Quaker authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe. In other instances, I analyze how men discussed and framed women's religious dress, most notably in the case of the Pennsylvania Religious Garb Bill, where male politicians and judges debated and legislated women's dress. Finally, I also include instances when women discussed the religious dress of men as well, most notably when I turn to the writings of Zitkala-Ša, whose writings included descriptions of her own experience with dress as well as that of male characters.

⁷ Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), xvii.

⁸ Lois Banner, *American Beauty: A Social History Through Two Centuries of the American Idea, Ideal, and Image of the Beautiful Woman* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2005), 25-26.

Working with a diverse archive that includes literature, newspapers, religious periodicals, legal documents, and other materials, I draw from the methods of interdisciplinary cultural studies scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as T.J. Jackson Lears, Gail Bedermen, Amy Kaplan, and Carrie Tirado Bramen. These scholars engage with a wide variety of sources and cultural sites as they trace developments in U.S. culture in the years between the end of the Civil War and the first decades of the twentieth century. In addition to methodological kinship with these scholars, I also draw and build on the foundation of their rich cultural analyses of this time period. Yet, I add to this archive by drawing more attention to religion, and more specifically women and religious dress, a category of analysis that has been largely ignored by interdisciplinary U.S. cultural historians.

In *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920*, Lears traces the preoccupation with regeneration in the years between the Civil War and the First World War, especially as it emerged in American Protestantism; for Lears, the cultural heavy “impulse to conduct a world crusade began in the recesses of the Protestant soul” and he focuses on the “origins of private feeling,” arguing that “regeneration was the molten core of American Protestantism.”⁹ In his earlier book, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of Modern America, 1880-1920*, Lears highlights various manifestations of an anti-modern impulse at the turn of the century, showing how these strong anti-modern impulses paradoxically served the modernizing secular economic and cultural system about which they expressed ambivalence or even open critique. Lears certainly identifies religion

⁹ T. J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 5.

as the crucial undercurrent in this reform and regeneration impulse, as well as anti-modern impulse against secularization. Yet, women's religious dress does not appear in any significant way in either of his works, even in his chapter on the late nineteenth century renewed interest in Catholicism as a "religion of beauty."¹⁰

Gail Bederman takes up the same time period in *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Bederman traces four key figures of the time period to reveal varying manifestations and contestations of the linkage between manhood and white supremacy developing at the turn of the century. Rather than suggesting these figures are representative, she insists instead that taken together they "show some of the different discursive positions possible to take at the time."¹¹ Bederman moves between Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching efforts to educator G. Stanley Hall's teaching on primitive masculinity to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's rhetoric of whiteness over gender and Roosevelt's concern with national masculinity, admitting that while these figures may seem disconnected, each interrogates and exemplifies the relationship between race and white manhood at the turn of the century. In *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Amy Kaplan explores rhetorics of U.S. imperialism in multiple cultural sites across a span of one hundred years. Kaplan examines popular and canonical fiction, domestic instruction guides, newspaper accounts, and film from the early 19th to the early 20th century to show how imperialism was not confined to the temporal moment of the late 1890s or to foreign

¹⁰ T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 184. Lears focuses on the fascination of premodern, medieval art, growth of art and ritual among urban protestants, and the spread of Catholic tendencies in the American Episcopal Church.

¹¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 43.

operations, but rather was integral to U.S. cultural development throughout the entire century and was manifested in the domestic realm as much as the foreign. Kaplan also plays special attention to religion in her chapter “Manifest Domesticity.” Yet while she analyzes missionary rhetoric across multiple cultural sites, she does not address religious dress in particular.

Carrie Tirado Bramen gives more attention to religion, and even briefly to religious dress, in *Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness*. Intervening in scholarship by Lears and Kaplan, both of whom she thinks view the late nineteenth century as primarily “fraught with fears of otherness,” Bramen instead frames the turn of the century as the moment when “‘Americanism’ and diversity were becoming increasingly fused” to redefine a national identity based on a diversity rhetoric, which she connects to current neoliberal concepts of multiculturalism.¹² To examine discourses of “heterogeneity-in-moderation” across what she calls “multiple cultural spheres,” Bramen turns to multiple sources for each chapter, including one chapter on the World’s Parliament of Religions that occurred in 1893 in conjunction with the World’s Fair. In analyzing speeches made by the organizers and guests of the conference in tandem with larger debates about a “universal religion,” Bramen shows how planners sought to both display and contain religious diversity, including that of the clothing on display.

Like these projects, my dissertation utilizes a heterogeneous archive to trace a phenomenon across multiple sites. Notably, I look specifically at the rhetoric surrounding religious dress. In other words, rather than a history of specific types of religious dress

¹² Carrie Tirado Bramen, *The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

(tracing how a style evolved over time, for example), I am most interested in the cultural work that religious dress does.

This project also builds on religious studies scholarship on dress. Many scholars have taken up dress as an important maker of religious meaning, cross-cultural negotiation, and identity in a variety of religions, geographic locations, and time periods. While cultural anthropologists and religious scholars in the early and mid-twentieth century explored sacred dress of religious groups in other countries, it was not until relatively recently that scholarship on religious dress in America emerged as a major area of study. In his article, “A Church-going People are a Dress-Loving People: Clothes, Communication, and Religious Culture in America,” published in 1989, Leigh Eric Schmidt identified a lacuna in American religious history scholarship marked by its attention to texts, writing “In concentrating on verbalization, historians of American religion have tended to neglect the many other ways in which religious people communicated with one another in the colonial and early national periods.”¹³ Schmidt encouraged scholars to attend to things like architectural settings, emblems, and religious dress as important markers of religion in American history. Schmidt’s article was also groundbreaking in its attention to Protestant religious dress. It has been followed by books like Colleen McDannell’s *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (1995), David Morgan’s *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (1998), and Sally Promey’s *Spiritual Spectacle: Vision and Image*

¹³ Leigh Eric Schmidt, “‘A Church-Going People Are a Dress-Loving People’: Clothes, Communication, and Religious Culture in Early America,” *Church History* 58 no. 1 (Mar 1989): 37. See also Schmidt’s article “The Easter Parade: Piety, Fashion, and Display” in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 4 no. 2 (Summer 1994): 135-164.

in *Mid-Nineteenth-Century Shakerism* (1993), which turn to multiple forms of material culture as a viable and important religious category of analysis—including dress.¹⁴

Comprehensive works such as Lynne Hume's *The Religious Life of Dress: Global Fashion and Faith* provide an overview of dress across several religions and regions of the world.¹⁵ The collection *Religion, Dress, and the Body*, edited by Linda B. Arthur, includes specific scholarly studies of the variations in religious dress across U.S. groups, including Mormon, Mennonite, Jewish, Muslim, Dakota, and the Black Church (a loose term the author uses to encompass several African American Christian communities). Although Arthur's edited collection is made up of the varying approaches and theoretical lenses of its contributors, her introduction theorizes religious dress as "social control of the body" and argues that, for women in patriarchal religious environments, dress functions as a "way to maintain a gendered imbalance of power."¹⁶ Other scholars have emphasized that religious dress does much more than control the body and have sought to revise and complicate notions of women's religious dress as investments of patriarchal power. For instance, in the 2008 edited collection *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, writers tackle the multiple meanings of the "veil" around the world, using that term to denote any

¹⁴ Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Sally Promey, *Spiritual Spectacle: Vision and image in mid-nineteenth-century Shakerism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁵ Lynne Hume, *The Religious Life of Dress: Global Fashion and Faith* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

¹⁶ Linda B. Arthur, ed., *Religion, Dress and the Body*, *Dress, Body, Culture* (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 1999), 2.

religious dress worn by women that is meant to “cover.”¹⁷ As such, they include various Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Christian dress in their analyses.

Many scholars, further, have done extensive studies on specific religious groups. Beth Graybill’s analysis of a conservative Mennonite group in Eastern Pennsylvania focuses upon the multiple meanings women assign to their plain dress and head covering, as their garb serves as a visual sign of their commitment to gender distinctions and hierarchy, separation from the larger society, communal values over individualism, and emotional and spiritual security.¹⁸ In a similar vein, books such as Leila Ahmed’s *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* and Katherine Bullock’s *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* have focused on the multiple meanings and resurgence of Muslim women wearing the veil.¹⁹ Elizabeth Kuhn’s *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* and Sally Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism* explore Catholic dress in particular to show how the attire of nuns, priests, and lay people serve as sites where religious, ethnic, and gender identities are defined and articulated.²⁰ In *A Cultural History of*

¹⁷ Jennifer Heath, ed., *The Veil: Women Writers on its History, Lore, and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Steven D Reschly, Kimberly D Schmidt, and Diane Zimmerman Umble, *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2003).

²⁰ Elizabeth Kuhns, *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). Sally Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

Jewish Dress, Eric Silverman traces the relationship between dress and Jewish identity from the Hebrew Bible to contemporary customs, arguing that Jewish clothing embodies “a series of ongoing, irresolvable conversations about identity.”²¹ Work by Evelyn Brooks

Higginbotham on dress of “respectability” in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* has been supplemented by scholars like Pamela E.

Klassen. In “Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African Methodist

Women in the Nineteenth Century,” Klassen uses writings by AME women and in

denominational periodicals to examine two streams of religious dress among AME church

members: the “plain” dress of figures like Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth, and the

“respectability dress” of figures like Hallie Q. Brown. Klassen reveals competing notions of

spirituality as they are expressed in dress, as well as the ways in which black women in the

AME church used dress to carve out spaces of authority both within and beyond the church.²²

This project shares the assumptions inherent in many of these studies that women’s religious dress is not merely a form of patriarchal oppression, but is also imbued with multiple meanings – meanings that may be described as religious, cultural, gendered, political, and racial. In positioning my project as an interdisciplinary cultural study, and one which takes religious studies and religion as an important part of that interdisciplinary

²¹ Eric Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). For a collection of personal essays regarding Jewish women and hair covering, see Lynne Schreiber, ed., *Hide and Seek: Jewish Women and Hair Covering* (New York: Urim Publications, 2006).

²² Pamela E. Klassen, “The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, no.1(2004): 39-82. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

endeavor, I aim to move beyond the notion that religious dress is either a place to assert and negotiate cultural authority (as studies like Klassen's or Higginbotham's tend toward) or a place to express religious belief removed from cultural politics (as Kuhns' work tends toward).²³ Rather, instead, I align myself with studies like Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads* and Ahmad's *A Quiet Revolution* in assuming that religious dress is a site of *both* cultural politics and religious expression, pointing to the multiplicity of identities religious persons have.

Each of the specific studies outlined above are extremely useful in their focused attention on one religious sect or group. However, by examining discourses of religious dress across multiple groups, rather than just one, I illuminate how religious groups in the United States (even those who espoused a distinctly separatist stance) did not operate in vacuums, either apart from each other or from turn of the century U.S. American culture. Placing representations of nun's habits alongside representations of Quaker plain dress may seem unusual; however the fact these representations were circulating in the same cultural milieu warrants a consideration of multiple representations. Further, the comparative nature of my study reveals connections between religious groups that may, on the surface seem incompatible. While religious dress is a visible marker of difference *between* religious groups, it can also act as a rhetorical invitation for one to understand the religious experience of another. In addition, though religiously clothed persons may wear very distinct and differing garb, depending on their sect, they share a commitment to wearing a visible marker of their faith. This opens up possibilities for a deeper understanding not only between groups,

²³ Kuhns is a Catholic journalist who describes her book *The Habit: A History of the Clothing of Catholic Nuns* as a "popular history, written from the viewpoint of someone working outside of religious and scholarly spheres" (4).

but by outsiders to the groups. While paying attention to difference so as not to subsume one group under the category of another, this project takes a more expansive approach than single-group studies, seeking to place multiple discourse about religious dress in conversation with one another, especially within a context of hyper modernization, secularization, and imperialism at the turn of the century.

Defining what “counts” as religious dress is as difficult a task as defining religion itself. Even the term “dress” proves difficult to pin down. An overview of the scholarship on dress, and religious dress in particular, shows that one scholar might include hair styling and body piercings as dress and another might look just at articles of clothing. Deciding what aspects of dress count as religious is another challenge, pointing to the unsettled – and questionable – distinction between sacred and profane. For this study, I use the rather expansive definition of dress set forth by foundational dress scholars Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher to encompass “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body.” As Roach-Higgins and Eicher write, “dress, so defined, includes a long list of possible, direct modifications of the body such as coiffed hair, colored skin, pierced ears, and scented breath, as well as an equally long list of garments, jewelry, accessories and other categories of items added to the body of supplements.”²⁴ I also follow the definition of religious dress Lynne Hume sets forth in *The Religious Life of Dress: Global Fashion and Faith*. Focusing on “the way anyone covers, reveals, adds to or in any way decorates his or her body in the name of religious or spiritual beliefs or activities, and

²⁴ Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, “Dress and Identity,” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 1. See also Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne B. Eicher, *Dress, Adornment, and the Social Order* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965).

the way those beliefs are ‘worn,’ she includes a wide range of items, such as the habits of nuns, the saris of Hindu women, and the Celtic tattoos of Pagans.²⁵ In this study, I include objects of dress that are tied explicitly to a religious group, such as the nuns’ habit, as well as articles that some may consider cultural rather than religious, but are deployed or discussed in a way that suggests a spiritual or religious connection. Indeed, as this dissertation reveals, the boundaries of religious dress themselves were often a subject of debate, shifting depending on the writer and the context. For a Quaker woman lamenting the waning of Friends’ distinctiveness within Protestantism, plain dress was religious; for a supporter of anti-garb bill, eager to assure plain communities they would not be affected, plain dress was merely a style preference, not religious dress like the habit. Thus, I take an expansive understanding of the term “religious dress.”

The first chapter, “‘A Hedge Against the World’: The Rhetorical Power of Plain Dress in a Time of Transition,” examines literary representations of plain-dressed Protestant Christian sects in late nineteenth century literature, as well as internal debates within these communities over the role of plain dress, especially for white women. Specifically, I turn to the rhetoric surrounding Quaker plain dress. Once known by their distinctive plain garb, by the turn of the century, Quakers had largely given up strict plain garb in favor of a more general ethos of “simplicity,” and a blending in with the wider culture. Yet, their plain dress remained objects of fascination for outsiders like local color writers in periodicals and for established writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe who idealized Quaker plain dress as a foil to high fashion and consumerism in the late 19th century. I analyze such portrayals in Stowe’s novels and stories after the Civil War to show how Quaker women’s plain dress function in

²⁵ Hume, *The Religious Life of Dress*, 2.

these narratives as a rhetorical space to negotiate cultural changes, even as it is constructed as “outside” the bounds of acceptable (Protestant) practice because its visibility marks it as too excessively plain. Yet for those Quaker women who continued to advocate for distinct plain dress, it was this very visibility that proved valuable in critiquing not just the consumerism of the wider culture, but also the push toward a monolith construction of Protestantism of the time period. To show this, I examine a wide range of articles published between 1865 and 1900 in two major Quaker periodicals, the *Friend* and *The Friend’s Intelligencer*.

In the second chapter, “‘With as good a will had they confessed Christ before men’: The Pennsylvania Religious Garb Controversy of 1894-1895,” I examine legal issues of religious dress at the turn of the century, using a key moment when anti-garb laws were debated and enacted to restrict nuns’ dress in public schools. I focus on debates surrounding the 1894 Pennsylvania Supreme Court case and subsequent state law banning religious garb in schools, the first of several state-wide bans across the country. I analyze the language of the court’s ruling as well as the legislative proceedings and newspaper accounts to show that nuns’ dress was interpreted as a type of visual education. Fears of children being unduly influenced by sisters’ garb were fueled by nativist organizations that lobbied for the case to go to court and the legislation enacted. Analyzing the rhetoric of supporters of the anti-garb law reveals that the law’s notion of “non-sectarian” dress was really just anti-Catholicism by another cloak. Yet, the alliances formed to resist the law, like those between legislators from Catholic districts and areas heavily populated by “plain dressed” Amish and Mennonites, suggests that religious dress was a site not just for tension, but also solidarity across religious and ethnic lines. These alliances remind us that the monolithic construction of Protestantism as always already set against Catholicism does not reflect the reality of the diversity of

religious experience in the United States during this time period. This builds on previous work done by scholars who explore the way that secularism and Protestantism were intertwined in the nineteenth century, but have often left out religious dress as a vital site of this interaction.

In the third and final chapter, “‘I snatch at my Eagle Plumes and Long Hair’: Zitkala-Ša and Convers(at)ions of Adornment,” I focus on Native women’s garb as a vital site of identity-making and re-making. Specifically, I analyze the writings of Yankton Sioux writer and teacher Zitkala-Ša to explore the fraught issue of religious conversion and dress. Zitkala-Ša explores the complexity of conversions in her writing as well as her life, and adornment of the body becomes one key way that these conversions were enacted, resisted, and embodied. This chapter looks at three “types” of conversion and will specifically examine how dress and the body come to be important in – or stand in for – these conversions. The first section examines how Zitkala-Ša uses her early personal essays to critique boarding schools’ violent project of “converting” Indian children through visual markers such as hair and clothing. The second section focuses on “reverse conversions,” as she makes the ultimate critique of the conversion project in her writings published between 1901-1903, when she presents traditional Native religion and its material expressions as superior to Christianity. The third and final section takes up the notion of “complicated conversions,” analyzing the costuming and promotion of *The Sun Dance Opera*, a 1913 collaboration between Zitkala-Ša and a Mormon composer, as well as Zitkala-Ša’s public appearances in native garb. I argue that the “messiness” of Zitkala-Ša’s own competing religious identities and writings on religion, often a source of confusion among scholars, should actually be read as an important critique of simplistic or totalizing views of religion. Rather than seeing conversion as a linear

progression, this chapter envisions “conversions” as multi-faceted, non-linear, and complex – sites of violence, but also creative resistance – and explores how dress and the body register these complexities. Finally, I contend that Zitkala-Ša’s willingness to use the visibility of Native garb as part of her advocacy for Native rights can be read as a religious act that stretches dominant Protestant understandings of religion.

While these three case studies are distinct, connections abound, often in unexpected places. The plain dress that is the subject of chapter one reappears in chapter two, as Anabaptists living in Pennsylvania lodged their own critiques of the anti-Catholic garb bill. Zitkala-Ša, the subject of the third chapter, wrote about her experience at a Quaker-run boarding school, attended a Quaker college, and eventually converted to Catholicism. Perhaps most importantly, they share the connection that women’s bodies and sartorial choices marked their religious difference and visibility. Ultimately, these case studies prompt scholars of American culture and religion to re-examine the ways in which women’s clothing became a touchstone, not just for politicians, ministers, and everyday citizens, but also for the garbed women themselves. This is the primary intervention that I seek to make to the related fields of American Studies and Religious Studies: That we must look more closely to women and what they wear as crucial indicators of their roles in the making of American society. The three chapters that follow show how religious garb is an important marker of beliefs and a form of material agency that illuminates the diversity of religious life in the United States and the complexity of women’s gendered lives and experiences.

CHAPTER 1
“A HEDGE AGAINST THE WORLD”: THE RHETORICAL POWER OF PLAIN DRESS IN A TIME OF TRANSITION

In an 1895 article for *The Outlook* titled “The Plainest of Plain Folk” author Eugene Camp recounts a Quaker meeting he “chanced to attend” in a rural part of Pennsylvania. Reporting that many Friends are no longer “peculiarly interesting,” Camp insists that the rural Quakers he worshipped with still “cling” their old customs and “you see in them what you see nowhere else in the world.” Camp goes on to describe the dress of the attendees, particularly that of the women, dressed in “severely plain garb,” and includes two prominent hand drawn pictures of Quaker bonnets. Describing a woman who rose to speak, he contrasts her plain bonnet with her “face whose purity serenity and maternal sweetness easily made you think that its owner never bore a trial in her life.”²⁶

Articles like Camp’s were quite common in a wide range of periodicals in the late nineteenth century. With its emphasis on a rural religious community, descriptions of practices deemed “old fashioned,” and hyperbolic images of participants meant to contrast with educated urban readers’ lives, the article shares many features that scholars like Richard Brodhead have identified as key components of regional and local color writing in the latter half of the century.²⁷ More specifically, Camp’s fascination with the plain dress of his

²⁶ Eugene M. Camp, “The Plainest of Plain Folk,” *The Outlook*, Jan 12, 1895, 52, American Periodicals.

²⁷ Richard H Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Brodhead outlines regionalism’s formal properties: a setting outside the world of modern development, where local variant folkways still prevail and ethnographically colorful characters speak in regional vernacular. He connects the rise of regional fiction with the creation of a leisure class, specifically the rise of travel and vacation, as regional writings allowing middle and upper class readers the chance to “travel” to a setting that was imagined as “non-modern.”

Quaker subjects is indicative of a larger trend of the time period. Descriptions of “plain” religious groups such as Quakers, Amish, Mennonites, Dunkards, and others abound in periodicals of the time period. From articles inviting the reader to “imagine a land where the untrammelled whisker floats peacefully in the breeze” to recounting a parade of women going to meeting with “prim, white caps” and “most primitive fashion, without ornament or embellishment of any kind,” authors presented plain dressed groups, often in rural settings, as foils to the fashionable life of urban centers.²⁸

Camp’s article is certainly indicative of outsiders’ portrayals of Quakers, but it also references a phenomenon Friends themselves were grappling with in the nineteenth century – how strictly to adhere to plain dress in a changing society. While still concerned about what they considered excesses of fashion, in the last decades of the nineteenth century many Quakers and other Christian plain groups would give up distinctive dress, in favor of more general notions of simplicity.²⁹ Yet, their plain dress still remained objects of fascination for outside writers. One notable writer was Harriet Beecher Stowe, who published her own stories in same periodical as Eugene Camp, but thirty years prior when it was managed by her brother under a different name, *The Christian Union*.³⁰ In Stowe’s writings, like that of

²⁸ “Untrammelled Whiskers,” *The Sunday Inter-Ocean*, February 1, 1891, 25. Clifford Howard, “A Peace-Loving People,” *The Ladies Home Journal*, July 1898, 5-6, American Periodicals.

²⁹ Throughout this chapter, I use the term plain group to mean a religious sect whose members wore visibly plain clothing.

³⁰ The *Christian Union* ran from 1870-1893, when it changed to the *Outlook* from 1893 to 1928. For more on the history of the periodical under both names, see Frank Luther Mott’s *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1958), 422-435.

other periodical literature of the time period, Quaker women's plain dress functions as a rhetorical space to negotiate cultural changes, even as it is constructed as "outside" the bounds of acceptable (Protestant) practice because its visibility marks it as too excessively plain. Yet for those Quaker women who continued to advocate for distinct plain dress within the pages of Quaker periodicals, it was this very visibility that proved valuable in critiquing not just the consumerism of the wider culture, but also the push toward a monolithic construction of Protestantism in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Quakerism and the Plain Life

From its beginnings in England in the 1640s, Quakerism was distinct from other Protestant faiths in several key ways. Anchored by the concept of Inner Light, the notion that "all people had within them a certain measure of the Light of Christ," Quakers were devoted to the concept of spiritual equality.³¹ This meant they did not have priests or other set apart clergy, and members gathered without a set liturgy, instead waiting in silence for the spirit to move them. They did not physically practice rituals such as baptism or communion, instead conceiving these as spiritual in nature. They refused to swear oaths, and as pacifists, refused to participate in war. From the beginning, Quaker women could speak in meetings and serve as ministers. These distinctive practices combined into a religious tradition that Hamm calls a "protest against the dominant religious culture of its day," one which "set Quakers apart from nearly all other Protestants."³²

³¹ Thomas Hamm, *The Quakers in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 15.

³² Thomas Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), xv.

Being ‘set apart’ from the world, and from other Protestants was not just a byproduct of the Quaker faith; it was a crucial part of it. As Emma Lapansky writes, “the visible eccentricities of Quakerism were emblematic of the theological basis of Friends’ faith.”³³ According to Lapansky, while Friends may have disagreed on the specifics of what it entailed, most “agreed that there is – or should be – something visible, tangible, and uniquely discernable that makes Quaker-liness (a way of looking, behaving, being) even more definable than the set of religious beliefs and practices that define Quaker-ism.”³⁴ Larry Ingle similarly describes Quakerism as “more a way of life than a series of statements and dogmas.”³⁵ For Quakers, devotion to the Inner Light required obedience and a continual shunning of the distractions of the world. Hamm describes the Inner Light as a “seed of Christ,” which would “lead believers gradually into salvation,” but only if believers were obedient to the light.³⁶ Notably, this concept of salvation, a gradual process of orienting oneself toward the light within was very different than the notion of salvation that would become popular in American evangelical Protestantism, especially in the nineteenth century.³⁷ Over time the concept of the Inner Light and its implications would shift in certain

³³ Emma Jones Lapansky, “Past Plainness to Present Simplicity: A Search for Quaker Identity,” in *Quaker Aesthetics*, ed. Emma Jones Lapansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 3.

³⁴ Lapansky, “Past Plainness,” 6.

³⁵ H. Larry Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 14.

³⁶ Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism*, 2.

³⁷ Lincoln A. Mullen details how American evangelists like Charles Finney, who emphasized direct, instantaneous conversion, influenced the landscape of U.S. Christianity in the nineteenth century. See Lincoln A. Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation: A History of Conversion in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2017), 30.

ways, with many Quakers, most notably the liberal Hicksite branch, emphasizing freedom of thought and individual conscience as an outgrowth. Nevertheless, according to Lapansky, from the beginning obedience to the Inner Light required “dampening the noise in daily life,” which meant Friends would adopt practices like silent waiting in worship and “following a closely monitored life path that was unlikely to conform to one’s peers unless the peers were also seeking the Light.”³⁸ From the late seventeenth century through the nineteenth century, a large part of this nonconformity or “peculiar demeanor,” was the plain life: a set of practices that ranged from speech (using the informal thee and thou), to architecture (plain meeting houses), and eventually to dress.³⁹

The concept of the “plain life” is hard to define and certainly shifted over time. Susan Garfinkel contends that for Quakers, plainness primarily “describes the orientation of a mental state,” rather than merely an adjective to describe specific practices.⁴⁰ Plainness was never uniform and its meaning often contested. For example, Garfinkel examines the records of several prominent Quakers in Philadelphia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and shows that many Quakers did in fact own high end, ornate furniture. She also examines the records of yearly meeting, finding that although there are directions to avoid “superfluity and excess in buildings and furniture,” plainness, as it applied to Quakers’ daily

³⁸ Lapansky, “Past Plainness,” 4.

³⁹ Hamm notes that in early Quaker writings, the word “plain” rarely appears; rather the practices that would later be known as plain were referred to as “obedience.” According to Hamm, Friends would begin using the term “plain life” by the early nineteenth century. See Hamm, *Quakers in America*, 101-102.

⁴⁰ Susan Garfinkel, “Quakers and High Chests: The Plainness Problem Reconsidered,” in *Quaker Aesthetics*, ed. Emma Jones Lapansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 68, 53.

life seemed to remain “part of a group of interrelated concepts for which Friends provide no easy definitions.”⁴¹ In examining the Rules of Discipline, Garfinkel did find that speech and dress warranted more attention than furniture. As Patricia O’Donnell maintains, dress became invested with particularly special meaning because it was “the most public of symbols.”⁴²

Quakers were not the only groups in nineteenth century America for whom plain clothes were an important symbol of their faith. In “A Church-Going People are a Dress-Loving People: Clothes, Communication, and Religious Culture in Early America,” Leigh Eric Schmidt contends that for Quakers, German Pietists, Anabaptists, and some evangelical groups, plain dress was a “central expression of social and religious protest,” one that communicated “an alternative, more egalitarian communal order.”⁴³ Even if they were not the only plain dressing people in nineteenth century America, Quakers were certainly the most famous. Yet, the nineteenth century also marked a shift in how the majority of Quakers viewed plain dress. Even as numerous writers continued to use plain dress as visual shorthand for Quaker characters in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Friends living outside the pages of novels and periodicals were fairly rapidly moving away from wearing distinctive plain dress.

In his essay “From Plainness to Simplicity: Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture,” J. William Frost traces the history of plain dress in the Society of Friends. Frost

⁴¹ Garfinkel, “Quakers and High Chests,” 63, 67.

⁴² Patricia C. O’Donnell, “Quakers as Consumers: Introduction,” in *Quaker Aesthetics*, ed. Emma Jones Lapansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 48.

⁴³ Schmidt, “A Church Going People,” 40.

points out the earliest Friends in England did not dress particularly plain and were especially leery of any such outward signs of religion, but rather quickly by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, Quakers on both sides of the Atlantic had adopted plain dress, speech, and furniture as “visible signs of godliness.”⁴⁴ As Friends grew weary of how wealth was influencing religious commitment, especially as many members began to experience material success, plain dress served to “create a Quaker culture separate from the world’s people” and became a visible sign of identity, “so a Quaker could always be conscious of his religious distinctiveness.”⁴⁵ Hamm ascribes several roles to distinctive plain dress: a visual separation from the world; encouragement of obedience to the Inner Light since distractions of fashion were reduced; a commitment to equality among Quakers; and finally, a “light and a hedge,” that is a light for others to reminded of Quaker beliefs, and a protection for Quakers against temptation.⁴⁶

Though there was never a prescribed uniform for Quakers and plainness was a fluid term, in her work on Quaker material culture, Mary Anne Caton has identified several distinctive features of women’s plain dress in the nineteenth century. By mid-century, the typical Quaker woman was wearing a version of an outfit common in American fashion of the time period, but with distinctive features that marked her clearly as a Quaker. Most women wore a fall-front gown, neckerchief (pinned outside rather than under her bodice), a

⁴⁴ J. William Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity: Changing Quaker Ideals for Material Culture,” in *Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption, 1720-1920*, ed. Emma Jones Lapsansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 23.

⁴⁵ Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity,” 17, 26.

⁴⁶ Hamm, *Quakers in America*, 102.

single cloth cap and rigid wide-brimmed bonnet. Maintaining what Caton calls an aesthetic of “recognizable absence,” plain outfits were devoid of ornamentation such as nonfunctioning buttons, ruffles, large ribbons, striped or floral textiles, and bright colors. Colors were generally limited to white, grey, or pale drab.⁴⁷

However, in the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by evangelicalism, along with fear that the requirement of plain dress was interfering with the efforts to attract and retain members, Quakers in England and many in the United States began giving up distinctive plain dress. Many Quaker scholars have traced the movement away from the distinctive plainness in the early nineteenth century to an even vaguer ethos of “simplicity” and “moderation.”⁴⁸ While Friends were still encouraged to be cautious about luxury and remain “free of the bondage of fashion,” meetings no longer disciplined members for dress, or expected uniformity in plainness, instead making the individual the “judge of simplicity.”⁴⁹ In many ways, leaving the individual in charge of deciding what was plain enough was in keeping with Quaker theology that privileged individual conscience, and was perhaps a

⁴⁷ Mary Anne Caton, “The Aesthetics of Absence: Quaker Women’s Plain dress in the Delaware Valley, 1790-1900” in *Quaker Aesthetics: Reflections on a Quaker Ethic in American Design and Consumption, 1720-1920* eds. Emma Jones Lapsansky and Anne A. Verplanck (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 247.

⁴⁸ Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity,” 17. According to Frost, British Friends had officially given up plain dress by 1860, and American Friends in the Midwest, especially the “Holiness Quakers” had also largely given it up by the end of the Civil War. East Coast Friends were slightly more gradual, with pockets holding out through the end of the century. Thomas Hamm also identifies the shift from plainness to simplicity, as it played out in specific subgroups within Quakerism, in his book *The Quakers in America*.

⁴⁹ Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity,” 38-39.

natural extension of the longstanding reluctance to prescribe a specific dress. Quakers had long preferred to prescribe what was *not* plain, rather than define what exactly *was*.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, this shift to a more general ethos of simplicity was quite significant. Frost contends that by the end of the nineteenth century, “plainness as social justice, as mortification, as a boundary that distinguishes Friends is muted.”⁵¹ Caton also identifies this transformation from conspicuous plainness to a notion of simplicity that “became less about signaling group identity and more about moderation and performing good works.”⁵² Quaker historian Thomas Hamm describes the shift from plainness to simplicity as one from “visible impact of separation from the world” to something “much less apparent.”⁵³ The important word here is visible. By the end of the century, this evolving Quaker ethos of simplicity, while still a rebuttal of high fashion, was intended to be less apparent, less visible than the former plain testimony.

One way to interpret this shift is that much as plain dress receded as a visual marker of Quaker identity, so too did Quakers’ distinctiveness not just within American society at large, but within Protestantism itself. Frost contends that this shift from plainness to simplicity was indeed one of the key ways Friends became indistinguishable from other white, Protestant middle and upper class Eastern Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hamm credits the influence of the larger evangelical holiness and

⁵⁰ Caton, “The Aesthetics of Absence,” 248-249.

⁵¹ Frost, “From Plainness to Simplicity,” 39.

⁵² Caron, “The Aesthetics of Absence,” 269.

⁵³ Thomas Hamm, “The Hicksite Quaker World, 1875-1900,” *Quaker History* 89 no. 2 (Fall 2000): 31. JSTOR.

sanctification movement to lead many Quakers to believe plain dress and language were unnecessary or even “dangerously separating Friends from other Christians.”⁵⁴ By the end of the century, according to Hamm, Quaker distinctiveness was at a “low ebb.”⁵⁵

Plain Dress in Quaker Periodicals

If Quakers had largely given up plain dress by the end of the century, it was not without vigorous debate. In the pages of Quaker periodicals, the deliberation over dress played out in writings from Friends ruminating on the value of plain dress, reprints of manifestos against fashion from other Christian and secular periodicals, and long biographies of deceased Friends whose lives were marked by the plain testimony.⁵⁶ Some writings lamented the

⁵⁴ Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, 53.

⁵⁵ Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, 54. In 1901, when Amelia Mott Gummere published her study of Quaker dress, she declared, “so far as the society of Friends is concerned, their peculiarities of dress belong to past history.” See Amelia Mott Gummere, *The Quaker: A Study in Costume* (Philadelphia: Ferris & Leach, 1901), 3.

⁵⁶ Quakers were not alone in working out the issue of dress and adornment in this time period. Studies on specific denominational histories reveal that the issue of dress was one of the key areas of debate within several Christian sects during the late and early twentieth century. For example, in his study of Free Methodists and plain dress from 1860 to 1894, Liam Iwig-O’Byrne finds seventy-seven articles on dress in denominational publications, making dress the second most popular topic in regards to “worldliness,” second only to tobacco and alcohol. Liam Iwig-O’Byrne, “Dress, Diversions and Demonstrations: Embodied Spirituality in the Early Free Methodist Church,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 40, no.1 (Spring 2005): 229. In *The Brethren in Industrial America*, Roger E. Sappington contends “the issue of ‘garb’ worn by Brethren [men and women] probably took more time at Annual Meetings than any other topic between 1865 and 1910.” Roger E. Sappington, ed., *The Brethren in Industrial America: A Source Book on the Development of the Church of the Brethren, 1865-1915* (Elgin, Ill.: Brethren Press, 1985), 94. Also see Pamela Klassen’s “The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity Among African Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century” in *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2004): 39-82. Klassen addresses several black female preachers who adopt plain dress throughout the nineteenth century.

waning of plain dress and language, but contended it was an inevitable evolution, others outright celebrated the departure from distinctive dress, and still others advocated for the continuation and renewal of a distinctive plain dress testimony. In a time period in which Quakers, along with other minority Christian sects, were moving toward what Hamm calls the “evangelical center” of American religion at the time, one that prized individual immediate conversion, salvation by “faith” alone, and the authority of the bible, the writings in Quaker periodicals provide a lens into the specific ways that transformation worked itself out on the ground through discussions of dress.⁵⁷ They also point to the ways in which plain dress could function as a critique of that transformation, and therefore a critique of the “evangelical center.”

Plain dress was an especially popular topic of discussion in two of the major Quaker publications at the time, *The Friend: A Religious and Literary Journal*, and *Friends’ Intelligencer Journal*. According to magazine historian Frank Luther Mott, *The Friend* aligned itself with the more conservative branch of the Orthodox Quakers, while the *Intelligencer* mainly featured the writings of Quakers in the more liberal Hicksite branch. Both periodicals ran weekly and were published in Philadelphia.⁵⁸ In general, many more women writers were overtly present in the *Intelligencer*, although identifying the gender of writers in nineteenth century periodicals is difficult due to the propensity of unsigned pieces or pieces signed only with initials.

⁵⁷ Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism*, xv.

⁵⁸ Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1930* Vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1958), 562. *The Friend* was published from 1827 to 1955. The *Friends’ Intelligencer* was published from 1844 to 1955. In 1955, after the reunification of the Hicksite and Orthodox groups, the two magazines merged to form the *Friends Journal*, which is still published. See Hamm, *The Quakers in America*, 61.

Both papers show a robust discussion of the role of plain dress from the mid-nineteenth century through the turn of the century. *The Friend* tended to feature more articles advocating for plain dress to continue or strongly admonishing the decline of plain dress. The *Intelligencer* featured a good number of articles that celebrated the decline of strict plain dress, instead advocating for an ethos of simplicity and moderation; however, the publication was far from monolithic in this regard. Many writers, including some women, argued for a more robust plain dress witness to continue.⁵⁹

Focusing on the articles either written by women, or articles that mainly discuss women's dress is in part an acknowledgment that women's bodies often did—and still do—bear the greater burden of registering distinct religious identity. Work by scholars such as Beth Graybill and Linda B. Arthur have drawn attention to the fact that in many conservative religious communities, the clothing standards for men allow them to more readily “pass in the wider world,” whereas the standards for women more distinctly “set them apart.”⁶⁰ Admittedly, for nineteenth century Quakers, this was not always the case. Certainly men's plain dress did render the wearer as markedly different than mainstream society, most

⁵⁹ Thomas Hamm identifies *The Friend* specifically as a Wilburite Orthodox publication, commonly known as Conservative Friends by the end of the nineteenth century. By that time, the Hicksites were solidly liberal leaning in their theological beliefs, but they had also always retained a desire for a strong Quaker identity, leery of losing Quaker distinctiveness. Thus, dress remained a point of contention for the Hicksites through the end of the century. For a history of the Orthodox/Hicksite schism of 1827 and subsequent schisms within those groups, see Larry H. Ingle, *Quakers in Conflict: The Hicksite Reformation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986). Also See Thomas Hamm's writings, including *The Quakers in America*, “The Hicksite Quaker World, 1875-1900,” and *The Transformation of American Quakerism: Orthodox Friends, 1800-1907*.

⁶⁰ Beth Graybill and Linda B. Arthur, “The Social Control of Women's Bodies in Two Mennonite Communities” in *Religion, Dress and the Body*, ed. Linda B. Arthur (New York: Berg, 1999), 17.

notably the presence of a plain coat. Discussions of plain dress in Quaker periodicals often did include mention of both men and women, suggesting it was never only Quaker women who bore the responsibility of the plain testimony. Nevertheless, by and large the admonitions against fashion were either lodged at women or were focused on women's fashion, perhaps because of larger cultural discussions about women's fashion.⁶¹

The Quaker transformation from a sect, visibly set apart in the beginning of the nineteenth century, to a position "closer to the American religious mainstream" by the end is seen in many of the articles in *The Friend* and the *Friends' Intelligencer* in the latter half of the century. While almost all writers criticize excessive fashion, many favor an ethos of simplicity rather than strict plainness for female Friends. In an 1867 piece, which began as a public reading at Quaker-founded Swarthmore College, the writer bemoans the tyranny of fashion that is "silently leading nearly all of us captive" and acknowledges that distinctive Quaker dress has served as "refuge in these days of rapid and absurd fluctuations of fashion." However, she ultimately advocates for the woman herself, rather than the Society of Friends, to be the arbiter of what to wear, assuring listeners that one can choose dress "according to her own taste ... without the danger either of forfeiting her position in society or of being supposed more religious than she is."⁶² Another writer cautions against fashionable dress at Swarthmore, which she worries makes sending their children to college more cost prohibitive

⁶¹ In an effort to counter the tendency to focus on women's fashion, one unnamed writer for the *Friend* included several paragraphs admonishing young men to resist fashion and instead take up the plain coat, warning readers, "We cannot wonder should our young women argue that if it is right for our ministers to follow the fashions it cannot be wrong for them to follow their example." "Bearing the Cross in Plainness of Dress," *The Friend*, April 1, 1876, 261, American Periodicals.

⁶² "Essay," *Friends' Intelligencer*, June 29, 1867, 266, American Periodicals.

for some Friends, but again favors a recommendation of “simplicity,” asking, “has it not been well said that the best evidence of being dressed with good taste is that the observer does not notice what is worn.”⁶³ In both of these cases, the desire to fit in to the larger society, and be *less* visible is upheld. Furthermore, at least in the case of the first writer, there is a fear of the wearer being seen as “too” religious. In a context in which Christianity still held immense hegemonic power, this fear is particularly curious. Paired with the writer’s fear of “forfeiting her position in society,” it becomes clearer that excessive religious expression that would include unstylish dress would potentially threaten her class position.

The main argument lodged by advocates to move away from plain dress was that plain dress was not an “essential” of the faith. Rather, advocates of a simplicity ethos framed outward signs like strict plain dress as outdated, antiquated and unnecessary. Certainly a part of this shift can be attributed to the influence of evangelicalism on many Quakers by the end of the century. Hamm points out that evangelical-minded Quakers became afraid that the traditional rules regarding dress suggested that salvation was achieved through works rather than faith, an idea that evangelicals rejected.⁶⁴ For Quakers like Emma Waln, who addressed a meeting in Philadelphia in 1905, fashion did pose a threat, but the answer was to hold to “principles” of simplicity rather than “peculiarities,” and those principles would point to a “high truth in which all the world must have a common share.”⁶⁵

⁶³ “Dress,” *Friends’ Intelligencer*, March 27, 1869. American Periodicals.

⁶⁴ Hamm, *The Transformation of American Quakerism*, 52.

⁶⁵ Emma Waln, “Plainness,” *Friends’ Intelligencer*, March 11, 1905, 147. American Periodicals.

These critiques of plain dress reach their fullest rendering in a speech by Esther Trimble Lippincott, delivered in Philadelphia in April 1887 and printed in the *Intelligencer* in May of that same year. Declaring that “peculiarities are not principle” she maintains plain dress is a “dry, meaningless form ... of no consequence to religion or principle.”⁶⁶ For Lippincott, plain dress is merely a reminder of former Quakers, a tradition that is better left with the elders, rather than new Friends. Comparing how someone feels upon seeing a fellow Quaker distinctive dress to “the heart of lonely Indian” or a “pale sister of charity” seeing another of their group in garb, she celebrates that “we have outgrown the superstition that only those who don the sober gray and peculiar habits are truly Friends at heart.”⁶⁷ For Lippincott, plain dress is framed as a regressive tendency, not only cast outside the modern theological bounds of Quakerism (she states “our principles are so full of spiritual life that we need no aids of outside worship”), but also outside the bounds of white Protestantism. Rather than lament that Quakers have blended in with the larger society, Lippincott celebrates this, insisting that “to keep ourselves unspotted *in* the world” is better than being “unspotted *from* the world.” In other words, Quakers can be the best spiritual workers, as Lippincott calls them, by blending into the world rather than remaining set apart.

All of these writers, while tending to agree that Quakers have a responsibility to shun high fashion, nevertheless favor a middle ground between excessive fashion and excessive plainness. In doing so, they hold up an ideal of religion as less conspicuous and more visually amenable to mainstream middle class Protestant values of moderation and restraint.

However, for Quaker writers arguing for the continuation of plain dress, it is this very

⁶⁶ Esther Trimble Lippincott, “The Vital Principles of Friends,” *Friends’ Intelligencer*, May 7, 1884, 289, American Periodicals.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

conspicuousness that they wish to retain. From reprints of biographies of Quakers that focus on their decision to wear plain dress as a sign of their conversions, to lamentations about the waning practice of plain dress, these writings share a commitment to the visibility of plain dress.

In a January 1895 article in *Friends' Intelligencer* that spurred at least four follow up responses, Elizabeth H. Coale defended the continuation of plain dress and speech. She acknowledged that many opposed plain dress or speech because they “make the person conspicuous” and there is a belief that “we should not want to show either by dress or address our religious affiliation.”⁶⁸ However, for Coale, it is its very conspicuousness that makes plain dress so important. Insisting that there is “no more impropriety in showing our colors in this way, than in an argument or conversation,” Coale envisions plain dress as an important rhetorical tool that invites conversation and camaraderie when she is traveling in public. In her piece, Coale recalls instances during travel when her bonnet or the white ribbon on her coat caused someone to approach her and talk to her about Quaker relatives they recalled, or identify themselves as members of the Society.⁶⁹ A Friend from England wrote two months later to agree with Coale about the visual witness plain dress affords. Lamenting that many Friends in England had long since “lost our outwardly distinguishing characteristics” because people think they “are of no account,” this author instead insists that

⁶⁸ Elizabeth H. Coale, “The Plain Language and Dress,” *Friends' Intelligencer*, January 19, 1895, 36, American Periodicals. Coale signed her letter from Holder, Illinois.

⁶⁹ Ibid. Coale’s writing on January 19, 1895 caused a cycle of several submissions related to plain dress to run in the following months. One such piece, signed “M,” recalls an instance when a young girl traveling alone sought “great protection” from the Quaker bonnet of a stranger by placing herself next to the woman on the crowded train. According to the author, the girl insisted “it was so like mother’s bonnet, I knew it must shield me.” M, “A Story of a Plain Bonnet,” *Friends' Intelligencer*, Feb 23, 1895, 127, American Periodicals.

plain dress could serve as a form of quiet evangelism, as it might “arrest the attention of thoughtful people, and cause them to look further into the principles” of Friends.⁷⁰

The notion of plain dress functioning as an invitation for strangers or fellow Quakers to talk to one while traveling was a common defense of plain dress. It also complicates the notion of plain dress as a “hedge” against the larger society. Both critics and proponents of plain dress emphasized the barrier that dress visually created between Friends and their neighbors. For critics of plain dress, this hedge could interfere with attracting and retaining new members. Yet for some Quakers the hedge was an important reminder to both Friends and non-Friends that Quakers were supposed to be set apart from the world. Numerous stories recount how Quakers felt beholden to act piously while in plain dress, both because they were aware others could recognize them as a Quaker and because the dress served as a constant reminder of their own faith. M. Fletcher writes about this visual barrier between her and “the world” in an article for *The Friend*:

When I appeared like the world, in Babylonish garments, I had its esteem and knew not how to part with it. But when I showed by my appearance, that I considered myself a foreigner, none can know, but by trying, what an influence it has on our whole conduct, and what a fence it is to keep us from sinking into the spirit of the world.⁷¹

For Fletcher, the solution to resist the “world’s” temptations is to have a constant visual symbol of her “foreign” status, a “fence” in the form of plain dress. Rather than blending in, she advocates visually standing out. Similarly, a writer named “J” recounts a time that she was at a boarding house and a woman dressed in “extreme of fashion” immediately

⁷⁰ “Plain Dress and Language,” *Friends’ Intelligencer*, March 30 1895, 202. American Periodicals.

⁷¹ “M. Fletcher on Dress” *The Friend*, Dec 14, 1867, 122. American Periodicals.

recognized her as a Quaker because of her plain dress; she asks, “why should our young Friends so readily give away their individuality?” Rather than see plain dress as inconsequential, compared to higher principles, she frames it as an important sign that one is living “according to the principles we profess.”⁷² Writings such as these suggest that for many Quakers, distinctive dress was not only a gesture toward plainness, but also toward other distinctive Quaker values, such as pacifism, equality, and the Inner Light.

As scholars like Hamm have proven, it would be Esther Lippincott’s view of dress, rather than Elizabeth Coale’s and M. Fletcher’s, that would ultimately win out in the Society of Friends. A privileging of moderation and restraint over conspicuous plainness found preference with the large majority of Quakers. The writings in the *Friend Intelligencer* and *The Friend* between the end of the civil war and the turn of the century bear that out. Yet, the papers also reveal that plain dress could and did function as more than merely a conservative reaction against fashion. Dress was also framed as an important tool Quakers could use to retain their distinctive identity, not just among the wider society, but among other Protestants as well; in advocating for peculiar dress, these writers advocated for the “peculiar” status of Quakerism as well.

Plain Dressed Quakers and Harriet Beecher Stowe

If plain-garbed Quakers were dwindling in numbers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they could certainly still be found in the pages of writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe. While Stowe’s most famous use of Quaker characters appear in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), Quakers continued to show up in her writings published after the Civil War, particularly in

⁷² J, “A Response,” *Friends’ Intelligencer*, March 12, 1864, 4. American Periodicals.

The Chimney-Corner (1868) and her New York society novels, *My Wife and I* (1871) and the sequel *We and Our Neighbors* (1873). Stowe's writings also continued to have wide circulation, especially in the periodicals of the time period, making her literature a ripe site for exploration of popular representations of plain religious dress.⁷³ Chapters of *The Chimney-Corner* (1868) were originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, and *My Wife and I* (1871) and the sequel *We and Our Neighbors* (1873) were both first published serially in *The Christian Union*, with a circulation estimated at 130,000.⁷⁴

Writing under the name Christopher Crowfield, Stowe published a series of domestic advice essays aimed at middle class readers in *The Atlantic Monthly* between the years 1864 and 1866.⁷⁵ The collection, which was compiled and published as *The Chimney-Corner* in 1868, addresses issues related to fashion and religion that would reappear in Stowe's fictionalized portrayals of Quaker characters in her society novels a few years later. Stowe's narrator, Crowfield, ruminates on the dangers of fashion, while ultimately stopping short of advocating for distinctive plain dress of groups like the Quakers. Instead, Crowfield

⁷³ Much scholarship has been done on the importance and prevalence of periodicals to nineteenth century culture, especially in the latter half of the century. See, for example, Broadhead's *Culture of Letters* and Mott's *A History of American Magazines*.

⁷⁴ Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 379. According to Hedrick, *My Wife and I* sold more than 50,000 copies in novel form. See Hedrick, 468 note 123. For more on the history of *The Christian Union*, which later became *The Outlook* in 1893, see Mott's *A History of American Magazines Volume III*, 422-435.

⁷⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Chimney-Corner by Christopher Crowfield* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1868). Bluford Adams writes that the essays were originally "conceived by Stowe as pleasant distractions from the harrowing news pouring in from the Civil War battlefields." See Bluford Adams, "A Word or Two on the Other Side': Harriet Beecher Stowe in the Debate over Women's Health," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 60, no. 4 (2014): 598.

constructs desirable Christian religion vis a vis dress as moderate and inconspicuous, ultimately forming a middle ground between fashion and austerity, a theme Stowe would continue in her novels.⁷⁶

Two essays in particular focus on the role of clothing: “The Dress or Who Makes the Fashion” and “What are the Sources of Beauty in Dress.” In a conversation Crowfield has with his daughter and her friends, whom he has dubbed with the names of birds, they discuss the “tyranny” of fashion, which Humming-bird admits, “we all bow down before it; we are afraid of our lives before it.”⁷⁷ The love of dress is called a “morbid, unhealthy epidemic, which really eats away at the nobleness and purity of women.”⁷⁸ Setting up a juxtaposition between American women and the French women and men who are the “dictators” of fashion, Crowfield claims that the fashion setters in Europe have “no moral quality, no association of purity, truth, modesty, self-denial, or family love.”⁷⁹ Tying fashion directly to both nationalism and religion, Crowfield goes on to claim that the dress of a woman, “the attention to buttons, trimmings, thread, and sewing-silk” is an “expression of their patriotism and their religion” and indeed American women must “hold back their country from following in the wake of old, corrupt, worn-out effeminate European society.”⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Biographer John Adams has called the Chimney-Corner essays “household sermons.” See John Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 60.

⁷⁷ Stowe, *The Chimney-Corner*, 213.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁸⁰ Stowe, *The Chimney-Corner*, 218.

Clearly in this essay, Stowe sets up the idea that women in America must mark themselves in contrast to those in Europe and resist the fashionable life exemplified in Paris fashion. Utilizing the imagery of sexual purity, Crowfield calls for a “cordon sanitaire” between the “daughters of the Christian American families” and the “fast women of Paris” to keep out the “contagion of manners, customs and habits” of the latter.⁸¹ Read in conjunction with Stowe’s later novels and her idealization of Quaker characters, one may think that Christian plain dress would provide the cordon sanitaire Crowfield mentions, a hedge against the influence of fashion. Indeed, later in the book, Crowfield praises Quaker dress as fulfilling “the true purpose of dress” by drawing attention to the woman herself, particularly her face, rather than the costume surrounding it.⁸²

However, when Pheasant asks about the notion of “a certain fixed dress, marking the outwardly character of a religious order,” Crowfield pushes back, not just on the idea of a uniform, but also on the notion of visible religion. Although plain dressing Christians would often refer to their particular dress as a daily part of their “taking up the cross,” Crowfield insists that the religion of the New Testament “calls to no such outward and evident sacrifices” as forsaking all fashion. Extending this, he writes, “the great, and never-ceasing, and utter sacrifice of [Christ’s] life was not signified by any peculiarity of costume, or language or manner; it showed itself only as it unconsciously welled up in all his words and actions that marked him out as being of a higher and holier sphere.”⁸³ For Crowfield, while a Christian’s actions should “unconsciously” signify her faith, a more visible form of

⁸¹ Ibid., 220.

⁸² Ibid., 254.

⁸³ Stowe, *The Chimney-Corner*, 228.

religious expression, such as a peculiar way of dress, is deemphasized. In fact, not only is the complete shunning of fashion unnecessary to Crowfield, it is in fact undesirable, as “it would indicate . . . an unamiable want of sympathy with our fellow-beings if we were not willing, for the most part, to follow what they indicate to be agreeable in the disposition of outward affairs.”⁸⁴ In other words, Christian dress that is too conspicuous is undesirable because it is not “agreeable” to society.

Instead, Crowfield proposes and praises a balance between fashion and plainness, a middle ground where moderation is key. He praises contemporary Quakers for moving away from their strict costume and “gracefully melting away into a refined simplicity of modern costume, which in many cases seems to be the perfection of taste.”⁸⁵ While praising “simplicity and the absence of ostentation,” he ultimately does not hold up strict Quakers as ideal, but instead what he calls “gay Quakers – children of Quaker families who, while abandoning the strict rules of the sect, yet retain their modest and severe reticence, relying on richness of material and soft harmonious coloring, rather than striking and dazzling ornament.”⁸⁶ For Crowfield, simplicity, not excessively fashionable nor excessively plain, is the ideal.

Stowe would continue working through these themes in her postwar fiction as well. In Stowe’s New York society novels *My Wife and I* (1871) and the sequel *We and Our Neighbors* (1873), as in other periodical literature of the post-Civil War period, religious dress becomes a marker of difference, a rhetorical visual symbol to negotiate cultural

⁸⁴ Ibid., 230.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 224.

⁸⁶ Stowe, *The Chimney-Corner*, 246, 255.

changes. However, much like the rural space in the urban travel narrative only exists as a vacation spot—a place of rejuvenation out of which the subject returns from and goes back into the “real world,”—so too does the religious dress of a “plain” sect like the Quaker only exist as a rhetorical space in which the author and audience can “look” for spiritual or cultural rejuvenation.⁸⁷ Though idealized as a foil to the excesses of high fashion, Christian plain dress is nevertheless constructed outside the bounds of acceptable Protestant practice, as its visibility marks it as too excessively plain.

My Wife and I and *We and Our Neighbors* focus on two main characters – Harry Henderson, a transplant from rural New Hampshire to New York, and his eventual wife, Eva Van Arsdon, a native New Yorker raised on Fifth Avenue. In the first novel, the narrator Harry moves to New York, begins working for a literary magazine, meets and develops a friendship with Eva, and eventually marries her. In the second novel, Eva sets up their household on an “unfashionable” street and the novel details the gatherings they host, as well as Eva’s involvement in her neighborhood, including befriending a Quaker neighbor and playing matchmaker to several of their friends.

The novels register many anxieties related to cultural transitions of the time period, including the shift from rural to urban (exemplified in the lead character and narrator Harry’s move from rural New Hampshire to New York), debates surrounding women’s rights and marriage customs, and the seeming transition from a producer to consumer society.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ For more on the travel narrative and regional literature’s urban middle-class tourist narrator, see Broadhead’s *Culture of Letters*.

⁸⁸ While Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is placed firmly within the nineteenth century sentimental tradition, her later works can be read as a sort of bridge between the sentimental tradition and the realism, local color, and regionalism that marked the end of the century. Theodore Hovet calls *My Wife and I* a cross between realism and sentimentalism, pointing

Scholars who have taken up *My Wife and I* and *We and Our Neighbors* have focused on these immense cultural changes. Theodore Hovet argues that *My Wife and I* strategically uses and revises “three major forms of nostalgia widely expressed in middle-class culture during this time” including a desire for religious experience, communion with nature, and family-centered rural communities, all things presumed to have existed in an imagined past.⁸⁹ For Hovet, however, Stowe’s novel, which is ripe with idealized descriptions of an old New England and hollow descriptions of places like Fifth Avenue, does not merely produce nostalgia, but rather “confronts [it] .. in a way that articulates what has been lost in modern life, particularly the religious and historical master narratives that had shaped American culture” and then redirects that nostalgia “to a redefinition of selfhood and to a cultural reconstruction” seen in a shift to mass culture.⁹⁰

For Lisa Watt MacFarlane and Astrid Recker, it is the shift from a producer to consumer society, and the implications this has for women, that are most acutely registered in the pair of novels. MacFarlane contrasts Stowe’s post-war fiction with her earlier novels about New England life, particularly the depictions of domestic spaces, arguing that whereas her earlier New England domestic spaces “embodied the belief system of the larger

out “one strand of the novel attempts to give a realistic picture of modern urban life while another strand consists of a highly romantic story.” Theodore Hovet, “The Power of the Popular: The Subversion of Realism in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s ‘My Wife and I,’” *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910* 29, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 2. Notably, regional literature scholars Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse place Stowe at the beginning of their foundational anthology *American Women Regionalists* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), and accompanying critical work *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

⁸⁹ Theodore R. Hovet, “Rummaging Through the Past: The Cultural Work of Nostalgia in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *My Wife and I*,” *Colby Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (June 1996): 114.

⁹⁰ Hovet, “Rummaging Through the Past,” 123-124.

community, her nineteenth century home no longer functioning at the center of production, but offering a haven from it, must self-consciously counter values prevailing in the public realm.”⁹¹ Yet, MacFarlane points out that in the urban middle-class economy Eva exists in, she is relegated to buying consumer goods to fill her household, as her home “functions as a showcase, “even as she is also in charge of carrying the imagined “anti-capitalist, anti-materialist values of previous generations.”⁹²

Astrid Recker sees the pair of New York novels as critiquing, albeit implicitly, the “commodification of women in the (marriage) market and their reduction to consumers (especially their coercion to excessive consumerism).”⁹³ For Recker, *My Wife and I* explores the negative effects of the larger cultural shift for middle and upper class women from producers in the family economy to consumers in an increasingly capitalist society, where women are simultaneously reduced to consumers as well as commodities, as marriage becomes the “primary site of commodification.” *We and Our Neighbors*, on the other hand, looks at the possible positive effects of this shift, as Eva utilizes her consumer power to become a “producer” of her home.⁹⁴

These cultural shifts manifest themselves in one of the major themes of Stowe’s postwar writings: a deep anxiety over fashion, specifically women’s engagement with

⁹¹ Lisa Watt MacFarlane, “The New England Kitchen Goes Uptown,” *The New England Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June 1991): 281.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 283.

⁹³ Astrid Recker, “To Market! Consuming Women in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *My Wife and I* and *We and Our Neighbors*,” in *Beyond Uncle Tom’s Cabin: Essays on the Writing of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, eds. Sylvia Mayer and Monika Mueller (Madison, N.J.:Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), 210.

⁹⁴ MacFarlane, “The New England Kitchen,” 210.

fashion. Echoing a wide range of commentators at the time, from dress reform advocates to medical moralists, Stowe describes fashion and the pressure to follow its trends in stark terms.⁹⁵ Ida, the plainer and more pious sister of Eva, bemoans the “morass of fashion-slavery and subjection” where women “flounder.”⁹⁶ Eva, though much more amenable to fashion than her sister, nevertheless concedes that “this dress question must smother us women and wear us out, and take our whole life and breath as it does.” She goes on to proclaim, “one is so fatigued that life doesn’t seem really worth living.”⁹⁷

By the time Stowe was writing *My Wife and I*, hyperbolic descriptions of fashion comparing it to slavery was common shorthand to register a host of anxieties over materialism, women’s bodies and visibility, immigration, and secularization. Historian Lois Banner traces how the concepts of beauty and fashion developed in the United States from the antebellum era onward. According to Banner, by mid-century, fashion was “universally called a tyrant” with its followers described as slaves, and to antebellum writers of women’s novels, it represented “the growing force of secular, capitalist values.”⁹⁸ Whereas the revolutionary period had been marked by “puritan aestheticism” and “simplicity of style and demeanor,” by mid-century, these values “seemed a thing of the past and fashionable display

⁹⁵ For more on dress reform advocates’ comparison of fashion and slavery, see Kathleen M. Torrens, “All Dressed up with No Place to Go: Rhetorical Dimensions of the Nineteenth Century Dress Reform Movement,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 189-210. For the relationship between medical moralists, anxiety over the Yankee female body, and Stowe’s writings, see Bluford Adams, “A Word or Two on the Other Side: Harriet Beecher Stowe in the Debate over Women’s Health,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 60, no. 4 (2014): 593-633.

⁹⁶ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1872), 178.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹⁸ Banner, *American Beauty*, 36, 43.

had triumphed over republican frugality.”⁹⁹ As a foil to the vilified fashionable woman, writers created a self-reliant female heroine, often adorned in a “simple dress made of muslin.”¹⁰⁰ This trope continued into the latter half of the century, with some writers doubling down on their anti-fashion stance, even as fashion became more accessible and widespread, especially through the early growth of the department store. Banner contends that by the end of the nineteenth century, department stores and banks had “replaced the churches and government buildings that had dominated the landscape of the late eighteenth century.”¹⁰¹

In *My Wife and I* and *We and Our Neighbors* Stowe continues the trope of contrasting fashionable and unfashionable characters, often upholding the unfashionable as the preferable and more pious. Ida quite literally sets herself apart from Eva and the rest of the fashionable family by retreating to her “little plainly furnished study whose air of simplicity contrasted with the luxury” of the rest of the Van Arsdel house.¹⁰² On the other hand, when Harry sees Eva for the first time, she is “attired as became a Fifth Avenue princess, who has the world of fashion at her feet,” though he immediately senses that she had “chosen and

⁹⁹ Ibid., 31. For more the early American focus on simplicity in dress as a contrast to European styles, see Patricia A. Cunningham, "Simplicity of Dress: A Symbol of American Ideals," in *Dress in American Culture*, eds. Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Press, 1993). See also T.J. Jackson Lears, “Beyond Veblen: Rethinking Consumer Culture in America,” in *Consuming Visions: Accumulations and Display of Goods in America, 1880-1920* ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Norton, 1989).

¹⁰⁰ Banner, *American Beauty*, 43.

¹⁰¹ Banner, *American Beauty*, 54.

¹⁰² Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 192.

adapted her material with an eye to taste.”¹⁰³ Eva’s attire, and her family’s European decorated house, immediately cue the reader that she could easily embody the very fashionable life and “growing materialism” with which Harry begins the novel wary.¹⁰⁴ Yet, Eva’s own misgiving and critiques about fashion keep both Harry and the reader from viewing Eva as a character “too” fashionable.

While Ida provides a stark foil to fashionable life, one which Eva calls “puritan” and “hardness,” ultimately concluding it is too extreme, the Quaker figures in the novel are described in uniformly positive terms.¹⁰⁵ Eva first encounters a Quaker in the novel after she and Harry have wed, when she sees her neighbor Ruth Baxter out of her window. In an image reminiscent of Ruth Stedman in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe describes Ruth Baxter as “the sweetest little Dove of a Quaker woman, in a gray dress, with a pressed crape cap, moving about as quiet as a chip sparrow among the flowers.”¹⁰⁶ Notably, it is Ruth’s appearance – her dress – which marks her as a Quaker, even before Eva meets her and which immediately inspires Eva to take “quite a fancy to her and [begin] to think how I should make her acquaintance.” When Eva does go over to Ruth’s house to meet her, she finds Ruth “looking just as pretty as a pink in her cap and drab gown” and tells her sister she has “a great mind to adopt the Quaker costume right away” as it is “a great deal more becoming

¹⁰³ Ibid., 158.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁰⁶ Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 459. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe describes Ruth Stedman as a “wholesome, whole-hearted, chirruping little woman.” See Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 123.

than all our finery.”¹⁰⁷ Eva has spent most of the book critiquing the high fashion world of her former peers, the world which her Aunt Maria continually tries in vain to get Eva to embrace, and expressing her disdain for the impulse to “keep up” with the changing fashions. Earlier in the book, she laments, “this matter of dress has a thousand jars and worries and vexations to a fastidious nature; one wishes one were out of it” and contemplates how nuns enjoy a “perfect and blissful rest” from the worries of dress.¹⁰⁸ With the introduction of Ruth Baxter as her neighbor at the end of the book, when Eva and Harry begin to set up house, in many ways, the Quaker dress has the “nun-like” potential to serve as a preferable option to the high fashion world Eva has left behind, much in the same way their “unfashionable” street becomes an antidote to the consumer impulses of Fifth Avenue. Eva makes this contrast explicit when she tells Harry that Aunt Maria would call Ruth a “nobody; not rich; not fashionable; not of the world,” but that to Eva she is “just as sweet and lovely and refined as she can be.”¹⁰⁹

Yet, the reader knows that Eva does not and would not seriously go so far as to adopt the Quaker dress and the absurdity of it makes her consideration of it mainly humorous. For Eva, and Stowe, Quakers and their peculiar dress belong firmly in another world; not only is this a result of their desire to live not as the “world’s people,” but also because their values – vis a vis their dress – are, as Eva describes them, “Arcadian.”¹¹⁰ Imagined by nineteenth century mainstream writers like Stowe as pastoral and part of an older time, Quakers and

¹⁰⁷ Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 459.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 213-14

¹⁰⁹ Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 462.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 461.

their plain dress are what Jennifer Connerley has called temporal gatekeepers, “reassuring referent[s] to an imagined and idyllic American past.”¹¹¹

Indeed, the character of Ruth, who teaches Eva skills of flowers and gardening missing from her former upper-class urban life, represents a link to the “Arcadian” New England life which Eva and Harry experienced briefly on their wedding trip back home to Harry’s New Hampshire home. Just as Harry realizes his former New England village, “calm and still and unchanged” would now be a “paradise where I could bring my Eve for rest and refuge” from city life—not an actual place to live – so too does Eva experience Ruth’s Quaker life (in her home as well as clothing) as a “place” to visit.¹¹²

As an idealized model of Christian charity, Ruth’s Quaker identity also serves a distinctly religious instructional purpose for Eva. In her first conversation with Ruth, Eva is impressed with how Ruth has made a “visitation of Christian love” to every family on their street, including a family of immigrants whom Eva describes as “very, very poor,” and a Jewish family. Eva is most struck by how Ruth gets to know these families, “cultivating an intimacy” with people Eva never has. After hearing Ruth speak about the Jewish family, Eva declares to Harry, “I’d no idea how good the Jews were.” Furthermore, Eva is prompted to charity by her interaction with Ruth, telling Harry she wants to take a meal to the family down the street. All of this leads Harry to declare, “Well, dear, I can’t but think your new acquaintance is an acquisition.”¹¹³ As James Emmett Ryan has identified in his work on

¹¹¹ Jennifer L. Connerley, “Quaker Bonnets and the Erotic Feminine in American Popular Culture,” *Material Religion* 2, no. 2 (2006): 178.

¹¹² Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 424.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 461-462

representations of Quakers, nineteenth century authors tended to use minor Quaker characters to teach their main characters lessons, as Quakerism is “administered homeopathically, temporarily,” something that is “illusory or untenable, but somehow necessary in small doses in order to create a virtuous citizenry.”¹¹⁴ Harry’s description of Ruth as an “acquisition” for Eva points to this role of Ruth’s Quaker identity; presumably Eva will take enough of Ruth’s Quakerliness to be transformed, without actually converting to the “Arcadian” form of Christianity. This extends also into the realm of fashion.

While Eva and Harry both critique the growing impulse to buy more and more “high fashionable” items, they stop well short of critiquing the desire to look fashionable in its entirety. For Harry, “his wife’s wardrobe was a daily poem” and he laments that the current men’s style of “drab colors” makes him wish men had a similar “poetry of dress” that was more colorful and varied.¹¹⁵ Although he wishes men had more choices available to them for expression, he also expresses anxiety that women dress reformers will blur the lines between men and women’s dress so that “sashes and bows and neck ribbons and tiny slippers and gloves [will] give way to thick-soled boots and buckskin gauntlets and broadcloth coats.”¹¹⁶

By her ultimate commitment to remain “becoming” despite her misgivings about high fashion, Eva ensures these gender boundaries that are tied to women’s attractiveness to men will continue intact. Whereas earlier in the book she fantasized about becoming a nun or a sister of charity to escape the hassles of fashion, by the end of the book, when she meets

¹¹⁴ James Emmett Ryan, *Imaginary Friends: Representing Quakers in American Culture, 1650-1950* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 181.

¹¹⁵ Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 430.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 429

Ruth, it is the *visual attractiveness* of the Quaker dress (“more becoming than all our finery”) that is the tempting reason to “adopt the Quaker costume.”¹¹⁷

The attractiveness of Quaker dress takes an even fuller form in Stowe’s sequel to *My Wife and I*. In *We and Our Neighbors*, the visual appeal of Quaker plain dress not only represents an alternative world, just out of grasp, but in the case of at least one character, inspire a divine change of heart. In the novel, Ruth Baxter is briefly joined by an older female Quaker character. Sibyl Selwyn is a Quaker preacher who accompanies Ruth to a dinner party hosting by Harry and Eva in their home early in the novel.¹¹⁸ When the two women arrive to the party, they are described in an extensive passage:

And now glided into the company the vision of two women in soft, dove colored silks, with white crape kerchiefs crossed upon their breasts, and pressed crape caps bordering their faces like a transparent aureole. There was the neighbor, Ruth Baxter, round, rosy, young, blooming, but dressed in the straitest garb of her sect. With her back turned, you might expect to see an aged woman stricken in years, so prim and antique was the fashion of her garments; but when her face was turned, there was a rose of youth blooming amid the cool snows of cap and kerchief. The smooth pressed hair rippled and crinkled in many a wave, as if it would curl if it dared, and the round blue eyes danced with a scarce suppressed light of cheer that might have been mirthfulness, if set free; but yet the quaint primness of her attire set off her womanly charms beyond all arts of the toilet. Her companion was a matronly person, who might be fifty or thereabouts. She had that calm, commanding serenity that comes to woman only from the habitual exaltation of the spiritual nature. Sibyl Selwyn was known in many lands as one of the most zealous and best accepted preachers of her sect. Her life had been an inspiration of pity and mercy; and she had been in far countries of the earth, where there was sin to be reprov'd or sorrow to be consoled, a

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 459.

¹¹⁸ The character of Sibyl Selwyn is thought to be inspired by the Quaker preacher Sybil Jones, whom Stowe met in 1853 in a trip to London. See Nancy Koester’s *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmann’s Publishing Company, 2014), 162.

witness to testify and a medium through whom guilt and despair might learn something of the Divine Pity.¹¹⁹

When another house guest, St. John, the rector at Eva and Harry's Episcopal church, glimpses the two Quaker women he is overcome, especially with Sibyl whose "head remind[ed] him of some of those saintly portraitures of holy women."¹²⁰ Upon her appearance, he immediately begins to question his earlier decision to deny her request to preach in his chapel. Although his aversion to female preaching "had been largely blended with the medieval masculine contempt of woman and his horror of modern woman public teachers and lecturers," after seeing her entrance as one who "just stepped from a higher sphere," St. John proceeds to not only go apologize for refusing her preaching privileges, but also suggests to her that she teach him about doing "Christian work."¹²¹

In this particular passage, Sybil earns spiritual power and authority in the eyes of St. John not merely through her actions (notably he is told about her wide-spread preaching endeavors and expresses admiration), but first and foremost by the visual appearance that the women exude. Their "higher sphere" is undoubtedly connected to their "otherworldly"

¹¹⁹ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *We and Our Neighbors* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hulbert, 1875), 184. The description of Ruth again echoes that of Ruth Stedman in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whom Stowe describes having a "cheery, blooming face, like a ripe apple," and "stray locks of decidedly curly hair." See Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 123. Stowe's description of Sibyl's entrance is reminiscent of her stylized account of meeting Sojourner Truth, which she wrote in "Sojourner Truth, The Libyan Sibyl," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 11, 1863, 473-481. For more on Stowe's depiction of Truth, see Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 151-163.

¹²⁰ Stowe, *We and Our Neighbors*, 85.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 186. Notably, this respect was contrasted with popular views toward Catholic nuns and the Habit in the nineteenth century, when women religious would sometimes resort to traveling in disguise to avoid public harassment. See Margaret McGuiness, *Called to Serve: A History of Nuns in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 56.

appearance, which the narrator describes as “an aesthetic sense, unfrittered and unworn by the petting of self-indulgence.”¹²² Furthermore, the description of Ruth as “round, rosy, young, blooming” embodies what Jennifer Connerley has identified the mixture of eroticism and alluring restraint typical of representations of Quaker women in the late nineteenth century. Tracing the rhetoric surrounding the Quaker bonnet in literature, music, and visual material at the turn of the century, Connerley shows how Quaker women were presented as “sensual, but quiet anachronistic and unattainable.”¹²³ For Connerley, this representation took the fullest form in the figure of the bonnet which morphed in popular imagination from “plain witness and a hedge around the faith to a lovely seductive, but substantive shorthand for Quaker women themselves.”¹²⁴ At best, in these depictions the women themselves matter less than the clothing they were wearing; at worst, they are erased and replaced with a bonnet and plain dress.

If, as John Adams has contended, *My Wife and I* is a “tract barely disguised as a serial story” then the religious lesson the story and its sequel teaches is certainly a warning against the excesses of Fifth Avenue fashion and finery.¹²⁵ Like Harry and Eva’s home on an “unfashionable street,” the plain dress of the Quaker characters serves as an important and instructive foil to that excessive consumption and can indeed even effect spiritual change on the part of onlookers. However, the novels also hold another lesson – that the plain dress of Quaker characters exists in another world, firmly outside the bounds of the mainstream.

¹²² Stowe, *We and Our Neighbors*, 184.

¹²³ Connerley, “Quaker Bonnets,” 183.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹²⁵ Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 56.

Ultimately, even Ruth Baxter's plain dress, while instructive and alluring, is too excessively plain and rigid for Eva and Harry – and by extension the reader – to adopt.

Stowe's rendering of plain dressing Quakers in her writings as too plain, strict and visible, and her emphasis instead on a moderate middle ground of "refined simplicity" can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Some scholars have written about Stowe's desire to fashion a "kinder, gentler form of Christianity" to contrast with the harshness of her family's Calvinist background.¹²⁶ Thus, the middle ground Stowe's characters forge and idealize can be read as Stowe demonstrating a more moderate form of Christianity.

Certainly Stowe's privileging of moderation was deeply bound in white middle-class notions of respectability. In her discussion of *The Chimney-Corner*, Joan Hedrick contends that Stowe was ultimately preaching to a newly affluent class, as she "helped the middle class find the middle ground" between Victorian excess and simplicity.¹²⁷ Jackson Lears also describes the mid-nineteenth century conflict between simplicity and extravagance that worked itself out in fashion magazines and popular periodicals through "the well-known Victorian compromise, respectability."¹²⁸

Christopher Crowfield's insistence that people need to follow fashion to the extent that they are "agreeable in the disposition of outward affairs" speaks to this privileging of middle-class respectability. The disdain for the *excessively* fashionable not only critiques the excessively rich, but also working class women who were using and adapting the latest

¹²⁶ Koester, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Spiritual Life*, 311. John Adams contends that Stowe "earnestly protested against the extremes of strict Calvinism." See Adams, *Harriet Beecher Stowe*, 51.

¹²⁷ Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life*, 321.

¹²⁸ Lears, "Beyond Veblen," 85.

fashions to carve their own space in society, much to the consternation of wealthier Americans.¹²⁹ However, casting aside fashion completely is also not acceptable. Rather, a middle ground is formed on the notions of moderation and restraint in both religion and fashion.

This middle ground, marked by moderation and restraint, was also a part of the construction of whiteness, as set apart from racialized others. In her work on twentieth century representations of the Amish, Julia Spicher Kasdorf contends that the Amish are often imagined as “whiter than white,” a phrase that positions them somewhere between the embodiment of “the myth of racial purity” and an “Other” that is an “extra-ethnic, nonimmigrant, anachronistic ideal.”¹³⁰ Using qualities associated with whiteness and racialized others, Kasdorf places the Amish as existing as the third category—whiteness in the extreme (for example, if racialized others are aligned with the “wild” and whites are aligned with “reserved,” then the Amish become “controlling and authoritative”). For Kasdorf, this project of making the Amish “whiter than white” ultimately becomes a tool to maintain whiteness’s “illusion of neutrality,” since both non-white and ultra-white aspects must be projected outside the mainstream.¹³¹ This paradigm can also be applied to how

¹²⁹ For more on fashion and working class women, see Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); and Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985).

¹³⁰ Julia Spicher Kasdorf, “Why We Fear the Amish: Whiter-than-White Figures in Contemporary American Poetry” in *The Amish and the Media*, eds. Diane Zimmerman Umble and David Weaver-Zercher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 69.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

Quakers and their plain dress function in Stowe's writings. The "illusion of neutrality" in this case takes on not only a racial tone, but also a specifically religious one.¹³² By constructing plain dressing Quakers as admirable, yet clearly outside the bounds of the middle class Protestant Christianity her main characters' practice, Stowe contributes to drawing the boundaries of acceptable religion. Visible forms of religion such as plain dress or the nun's habit, both of which are mentioned in tandem with each other in *The Chimney-Corner* and *My Wife and I*, become too extreme for Stowe's white middle-class Protestant characters to reasonably adopt.

If for Stowe and other non-Quaker writers plain dress represented a foil to their own society, a mythical place, instructive but outside the bounds of acceptable Protestantism of mainstream society, then for Quaker writers defending the practice, plain dress represented the best guard against that mainstream society. Certainly Quaker writers presented plain dress as a critique of fashion, a mode of witnessing for the faith, and a vital link to the past. More than that, it represented a vital way to preserve a distinct identity among other Christians, not just a Christian critique writ large against fashion, but going beyond that to embrace the very conspicuousness that drew the attention of outside critics and admirers alike. Regardless of the particulars of their argument for plain dress, those who advocated for its continuation and lamented its eventual demise tended to share a commitment to dress as a *visible* religious sign. Within their defenses of a distinct and visual testament to their faith lie a potential critique of normative evangelical Protestantism of the latter nineteenth century.

¹³² Tracey Fessenden discusses the illusion of neutrality in relation to Protestantism in U.S. Culture in *Culture and Redemption: Religion, The Secular, and American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

CHAPTER 2
**“WITH AS GOOD A WILL HAD THEY CONFESSED CHRIST BEFORE MEN”:
THE PENNSYLVANIA RELIGIOUS GARB CONTROVERSY OF 1894-1895**

In 2014, 65-year-old Ernest Perce registered a complaint with the East Pennsboro Township School District in Central Pennsylvania. He objected to a teacher’s necklace that depicted the traditional Jewish emblem of the Star of David, and he insisted she needed to remove it. In his complaint, Perce cited a Pennsylvania law, the 1949 Religious Garb act, which banned teachers from wearing religious dress and insignia while teaching. In his complaint, Perce claimed that “religious symbols can have crushing and traumatic emotional stress upon children” and insisted he was being neutral, as he felt the law should apply to “all faiths.”¹³³ A former atheist-turned-Christian, Perce was also founder and leader of an anti-Semitic organization called “Jesus Was Not a Jew Ministries.”¹³⁴ The 1949 Religious Garb Act that Perce cited, still in effect in Pennsylvania, was in fact a renewed version of a law enacted 55 years earlier, and although his complaint did not go far and made only a few news sources, it provides a striking window into the debates surrounding the original law. The 2014 incident harkens back to the founding of the law more than a century before, from Perce’s argument that visual religious symbols can have a deep effect on children, to the guise of neutrality and non-sectarianism, despite his clear bias against the religion in question.

¹³³ Mark A. Kellner, “Pennsylvania law bars Jewish, other religious symbolism from schools,” *The Washington Times*, December 11, 2014, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/>.

¹³⁴ Pat Fridgen, “Atheist turns to religion, apologizes to Greencastle-Antrim School Board,” *Echo-Pilot*, October 9, 2014, <https://www.echo-pilot.com/>. Notably, Perce had been a provocateur while he was an atheist activist as well, gaining publicity for marching as “Zombie Mohammed” in a Halloween parade years prior. See Eugene Volokh, “Atheist Zombie Mohammed becomes Christian, complains about schoolteacher’s Star of David,” *The Washington Post* (December 1, 2014), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>.

The 1895 *Pennsylvania Public Law 282* states:

Be it enacted that no teacher in any public school of this Commonwealth shall wear in said school or whilst engaged in the performance of his or her duty as such teacher any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination.¹³⁵

In passing the Religious Garb Law in 1895, the Pennsylvania State Legislature was responding to a State Supreme Court decision passed down a year earlier in *John Hysong et al. vs. Gallitzin Borough School District et al.* in which the court had concluded that the Sisters of St. Joseph did not violate state law by wearing their habits while teaching in the school district. The court's ruling in favor of the Sisters was handed down in October 1894, and included the suggestion that if the state of Pennsylvania wished to limit the garb of teachers in the classroom, they would need to pass a law doing so. The anti-garb measure outlawing religious dress in the classroom was signed into law in June of the following year.

An analysis of the language of the 1894 supreme court's ruling, as well as the rhetoric surrounding the legislative proceedings that followed, reveals a public about what constituted religious dress and its place in the public sphere. Through their insistence that the Sisters of St. Joseph's distinctive garb constituted visual sectarian education, proponents of the nativist-backed garb ban constructed acceptable religion in the public sphere as private, contained, and invisible. Their rhetoric drew on traditional anti-Catholic fears related to gender, individualism, and allegiance, even while their opposition to the Sisters' habits was cloaked in the language of neutrality, non-sectarianism and secularism. Yet, resistance to the garb ban, which came from both Catholic and non-Catholic opponents of the legislation, pushed

¹³⁵ "No. 282." *Laws of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Passed at the Session of 1895* (Harrisburg, Pa: Clarence M. Busch, 1895), 395.

against this Protestant secular construction of invisible religion and suggested that religious dress was a site not just for tension, but also solidarity across religious lines.

Background of the Case

The case of John Hysong vs. the Gallitzin Borough School District began when a small group of Protestant parents from the Catholic-majority community of Gallitzin brought a suit against the school district alleging that the six Sisters of St. Joseph who taught at the publicly funded school were engaging in “sectarian influence,” a violation of Pennsylvania law.¹³⁶

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet were originally established at Le Puy, France in 1650. As an uncloistered order, they had a long history of working in their communities, among the people. First coming to the United States in 1836 to open up a school for deaf children in St. Louis, the Sisters of St. Joseph spread throughout the United States and by 1860 had severed ties with the Motherhouse in France.¹³⁷ In 1869, the Sisters established a convent home and boarding school in the Gallitzin area of Cambria County, Pennsylvania, a

¹³⁶ According to Supreme Court documents, there were approximately 3,000 residents in Gallitzin, with 250 Catholic families and 50 Protestant. There were approximately 400 students enrolled in the school system. See “John Hysong et al., Appellants v. Gallitzin Borough School District et al.,” in *Pennsylvania State Reports* Vol. 164, by James Monaghan (New York and Albany: Banks & Brothers Law Publishers, 1895), 638. Gallitzin is located in Cambria County, about eighty miles East of Pittsburgh.

¹³⁷ Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 5.

region that had been settled by followers of the Catholic priest Demetrius Augustine Gallitzin in 1799.¹³⁸

The Sisters of St. Joseph were teaching in the Gallitzin School District as part of an agreement that had been in place since 1881.¹³⁹ While not common, formal “compromise plans” between Catholic communities and school districts were nevertheless a part of the educational milieu in several regions at the end of the century. Historian Jay Dolan describes how Catholics in the United States were divided on how to respond to public school systems that had emerged from the common school movement decades before. The formalization of a public school system that Catholics perceived as Protestant-biased, combined with the push among Catholic leadership for more Catholic-centered education, led many parishes to establish separate parochial schools.¹⁴⁰ However, in some towns in New York, Connecticut, Illinois, Georgia, and Pennsylvania, Catholics continued to seek compromises with the local schools. In a typical compromise plan, the local school board would rent a Catholic school to use during school hours and pay the teachers (who were often women religious) to teach.

¹³⁸ Adele Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers: Pages in the Early History of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, Pennsylvania* (Baden, Pa: Sisters of St. Joseph, 1952), 14; Phillip S. Klein and Ari Hoogenboom, *A History of Pennsylvania* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), 211.

¹³⁹ Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 30.

¹⁴⁰ The Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in November 1884 had mandated that bishops establish parochial schools in every diocese and that parents send their children to those schools rather than the public school. However, in practice, this was difficult for many to actually carry out, especially those in rural areas. See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present*. Garden City (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 271, 282.

After school hours, the Sisters could teach the Catholic students in religious instruction, provided it was after hours and was not paid for by the district.¹⁴¹

The Gallitzin School system had a set-up typical of others around the country. In this case, the school board operated several buildings, only one of which belonged to the Sisters of St. Joseph; however, in the fall of 1893, a new building consolidated all the district's students and teachers together and six of the eight teachers were Sisters of St. Joseph.¹⁴² Two Protestant parents, Mrs. Hysong and Mrs. Williamson, objected to their children now being taught by Sisters, and eventually brought suit against the school district, requesting an injunction for the Sisters to stop teaching, and taking their case to the Cambria County court in April 1894.

The plaintiffs made a litany of complaints, several of which the court found the evidence did not substantiate. For example, the plaintiffs maintained that the Sisters had been teaching the Catechism to students before and *during* school hours. While the court found no evidence the Sisters were engaged in Catholic teaching during the school day, and in fact had disciplined Catholic students for reading their Catechism during the day, they did find that the Sisters had been holding Catechism classes after hours for Catholic students to attend. The court determined this to be a violation of Pennsylvania law prohibiting the use of public schools for sectarian reasons and instructed the Sisters to stop the after school classes. It also instructed the Sisters to stop giving music lessons after hours. However, the court ruled in favor of the Sisters on two key aspects of the case brought by the plaintiffs. The court determined that nothing in Pennsylvania law prohibited students from addressing nuns who

¹⁴¹ Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 271.

¹⁴² "John Hysong v. Gallitzin," 635.

were their teachers as “Sister,” nor did it prohibit nuns from wearing their religious garb during instruction. The plaintiffs appealed this ruling, taking it to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in October 1894. In their appeal, the religious garb question became the focus, as the plaintiffs insisted, “the wearing of an unusual garb, worn exclusively by members of one religious sect, and for the purpose of indicating membership in that sect constitutes a sectarian influence which ought not to be allowed, particularly in view of the impressible minds of the children.”¹⁴³

The Pennsylvania Supreme court issued their ruling on November 12, 1894, upholding the decision of the lower court; they agreed that the after-school Catechism teaching was unlawful, but protected the Sisters’ right to wear the distinctive clothing of their order while teaching. In the majority opinion, Justice John Dean delineated between “sectarian teaching,” which was prohibited, and religious dress, which is “but the announcement of a fact, that the wearer holds a particular religious belief.”¹⁴⁴ Rhetorically asking if the courts are “to decide that the cut of a man’s coat, or the color of a woman’s gown, is sectarian teaching because they indicate sectarian religious belief,” Dean also insisted that to ban a teacher from wearing their distinctive religious garb is akin to “go[ing] back a century or two to a darker age, and establish[ing] a religious test as a qualification for office.”¹⁴⁵ He ended his majority opinion by pointing out that there was no law against teachers appearing in “dress peculiar to a religious organization,” and suggested that the legislature would need to enact a statute if they wanted to control what teachers can and

¹⁴³ “John Hysong v. Gallitzin,” 652.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

cannot wear. Such a statute became the law of the land just a few months later on June 27, 1895 when Governor Daniel Hastings signed the Religious Garb Law.

Press coverage of the court case and the subsequent law reached far beyond Pennsylvania, including articles in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post*, and *New York Times*. In debating the Sisters' garb in the state supreme court and by enacting a law, Pennsylvania became the first state to address the matter on a state legislative and judicial level.¹⁴⁶ Over the next fifty years, other states would take up the issue, so that by 1949, twenty-three states had laws against teachers wearing religious garb in public schools.¹⁴⁷ Locally, the law had direct effects; according to Sisters of St. Joseph historian Adele Whaley, the Sisters withdrew from the public schools of Gallitzin as a result of the law and moved to Baden, twenty miles west of Pittsburgh, to establish a new motherhouse in 1902.¹⁴⁸

Nativist Roots

Although the law itself makes no mention of a specific religion, instead banning “any dress, mark, emblem or insignia indicating the fact that such teacher is a member or adherent of any religious order, sect, or denomination,” it is clear (based on the context of the court

¹⁴⁶ In 1887, the New York State Superintendent's office had ruled on a local case regarding Sisters' habits. See page 95-98 of this chapter for a more thorough discussion.

¹⁴⁷ Kathleen A. Holscher, “Contesting the Veil in America: Catholic Habits and the Controversy over Religious Clothing in the United States,” *Journal of Church and State* 54, no. 1 (December 1, 2012): 74. Holscher reviews how anti-garb laws would become especially popular in the mid twentieth-century before becoming largely obsolete in the second half of the century, due to the Vatican lifting the requirements to wear the habit as well as far fewer women religious teaching in public schools. Today, Pennsylvania remains the only state with an official garb law on the books. See “Nebraska ends ban on religious garb in public schools” *Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 2017, www.chicagotribune.com.

¹⁴⁸ Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 34.

case and the background of the bill) that it was written with Catholic women religious in mind. Indeed, the fact that the original complaint and subsequent legislation was the direct result of a nativist fraternal organization belies any claim that the concern over religious garb was neutral and non-sectarian. In an article in *The North American*, a periodical based in Philadelphia with nativist leanings, that appeared just days after the Supreme Court ruling, the author informs readers that the “Hysong” in the case brought to the Supreme court was “only the nominal head of the movement” as the “real movers were the members of the Jr O.A.U.M., they supplying the money necessary to carry on the suit.”¹⁴⁹

The Junior Order of United American Mechanics (J.O.U.A.M.) had been founded as an offshoot of the Order of United American Mechanics before the Civil War, but had severed ties with the parent organization in 1885, and experienced a resurgence of popularity in the years following, especially in Pennsylvania where the organization was based.¹⁵⁰ According to John Higham, the J.O.U.A.M. combined anti-radical and anti-Catholic nativism to become “the undisputed leader among such organizations” in the 1890s, when its membership rose to 160,000.¹⁵¹ In his account of nativist organizations, *America for Americans: The Nativist Movement in the United States*, Dale T. Knobel describes the J.O.U.A.M. as a “solidly ‘middle’ middle-class nativist organization,” contrasting it with

¹⁴⁹ “Among Patriotic Bodies,” *The North American*, Nov 14, 1894, Gale Historical Newspapers. In his account of the Junior Order, M.D. Lichliter states that the Order spent 2,039.06 for the original court case brought to Cambria County. See M.D. Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order United American Mechanics* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1909), 261.

¹⁵⁰ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 57.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

more elite organizations like the Immigration Restriction League (I.R.L.), founded in 1894 by three Harvard graduates. According to Knobel, newer organizations like the I.R.L. focused much more heavily on a race-based understanding of “true” American nationality as Anglo-Saxon in character than the older nativist orders did. While they shared some interests and cooperated on legislation such as supporting a failed bill to require a literacy test for potential immigrants, older nativist orders like the J.O.U.A.M. were only “half-hearted about ‘racial’ fears that seemed to motivate the intellectuals of IRL;” instead J.O.U.A.M. continued to devote most of its energy to their fears of imported labor and organized “foreignism,” most specifically the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁵² On the labor front, the J.O.U.A.M. often supported legislation to prohibit the use of foreign contract labor and in 1897 introduced the Alien Tax Bill in the Pennsylvania legislature, which would tax employers of any foreign-born male over 21 years of age.¹⁵³ Much of their other efforts at state legislation across the country focused on preserving a Protestant character of public education, including defending the use of the King James Bible against complaints from Catholic parents.¹⁵⁴

The role of the J.O.U.A.M. in the Gallitzin, Pennsylvania court proceedings and the religious garb legislation fits what Higham identifies as the primary way nativists wielded power in the late nineteenth century, through patriotic organizations that acted as “pressure

¹⁵² Dale T. Knobel, *"America for the Americans": The Nativist Movement in the United States* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 222. Knobel casts the J.O.U.A.M. with other middle class nativist organizations such as the American Protective Association, which operated from 1887 to 1896, and was nearly exclusively focused on anti-Catholicism. Knobel points out that the APA was open to adult male Protestants including native or foreign born. See Knobel, “*America for the Americans*,” 217.

¹⁵³ The Alien Tax Bill was passed into law, but deemed unconstitutional in the Pennsylvania courts. See Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 274-275.

¹⁵⁴ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 253.

groups within the existing party structure.”¹⁵⁵ In *History of the Junior Order United American Mechanics*, published in 1909, order member M.D. Lichliter recounts the J.O.U.A.M.’s attempts to remove women religious from teaching in public schools in Pennsylvania. Beginning with a case in Pittsburgh early in 1894, when the J.O.U.A.M. successfully lobbied the local school board to stop teachers from wearing habits, Lichliter claims “this was the beginning of a crusade against sectarianism in the public schools of the state and the State Councilor [of the J.O.U.A.M.] proceeded to ‘beard the lion’ in his den in other sections of the commonwealth.”¹⁵⁶ The organization next turned its attention to the Gallitzin School District, 80 miles East of Pittsburgh, where the J.O.U.A.M.’s State Councilor launched the complaint and brought the case to court seeking an injunction on the teachers.

While the organization framed the issue as protecting children “brought boldly under such sectarian teaching” by the teachers in habits, Sisters of St. Joseph historian Whaley framed it as “bigotry versus Catholicity,” and contended that “no one had objected to the arrangement until the Junior Order of United American Mechanics enlightened two mothers of Protestant children to consider themselves ‘in the right church but the wrong pew’ educationally speaking.”¹⁵⁷ When both the Cambria County court and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled in 1894 that the Sisters could continue to teach in their religious garb, the J.O.U.A.M. immediately directed its legislative committee to draft a bill to be presented in the next legislative session. After Representative Robert Smith introduced the bill, the organization then put pressure on lawmakers to pass it; as Lichliter recounts “the Junior

¹⁵⁵ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 57.

¹⁵⁶ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 257.

¹⁵⁷ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 257. Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 30-31.

Order made it clear to the hesitating representatives that their constituency would call them to account for failure to perform their duty” and when the bill made it to the governor’s desk the Junior Order sent a contingent of members to persuade him to sign it.¹⁵⁸

The political influence of the J.O.U.A.M. to ultimately enact legislation that would have far reaching affects, not just on the Sisters of St. Joseph in Gallitzin, but state-wide and for more than a century to come, speaks to the wider climate of nativist sentiment in the 1890s, particularly anti-Catholic nativism, which Higham insists “retained its piercing directness and redoubled its energy” in the last decade of the century.¹⁵⁹ More specifically, the focus on the Sisters’ religious garb reveals a mixture of anti-Catholic anxieties familiar from earlier in the century, as well as shifting and developing anxieties around visual education and the “silent influence” of clothing, gender, individualism, and allegiance in the context of an increasingly secular-Protestant state.

Religious Dress as Visual Education

While the J.O.U.A.M. took issue with several aspects of the Sisters of St. Joseph teaching in the public schools, they targeted the Sisters’ dress as their main concern, by insisting that “the main question in this whole controversy ... was the question of the *garb* worn by these Sisters while engaged in their public school work.”¹⁶⁰ The central question, discussed in the court as well as the press, was whether the Sisters’ garb constituted sectarian education in and of itself. While the majority opinion of the court, written by Justice John

¹⁵⁸ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 266.

¹⁵⁹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 79.

¹⁶⁰ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 262.

Dean ruled against the J.O.U.A.M.'s claim that religious garb was sectarian teaching, the Order found sympathy in the minority opinion penned by Justice Henry Williams. In his dissent, Williams argued that because the teachers were "wearing their peculiar robes which tell of their church" they essentially operated "as ecclesiastical persons" while teaching, and thus were engaged in sectarian teaching.¹⁶¹ Key to this claim is an understanding of the habit as a type of visual education, an understanding that was articulated in much of the anti-garb rhetoric surrounding the case. Writers in periodicals frequently described the garb as a "method of teaching," or "perpetual object lesson" that was tantamount to teaching the doctrines of the church.¹⁶² For instance, in his speech to beseech the governor to sign the Religious Garb Bill, J.O.U.A.M. member Dr. W.H. Painter equated the nuns wearing their habits while teaching to a Methodist teacher requiring his pupils to attend a revival service and to then recount their experiences.¹⁶³

In part, such an understanding of religious garb as a type of visual education can be understood in the context of larger educational trends happening at the time. In his history of the American public school system, William J. Reese outlines the burgeoning interest in "object teaching" in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Influenced by European romantic thought dating back to the late eighteenth century, American education reformers began to emphasize that children "learned best not through books but through sensory

¹⁶¹ "John Hysong v. Gallitzin," 661.

¹⁶² "A trouble making decision," *Christian Advocate*, November 29, 1894, 773, American Periodicals; "Nuns in Public Schools," *The North American*, Wednesday March 7 1894, 4, Gale.

¹⁶³ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 270.

experience and contact with real objects.”¹⁶⁴ Although most schools continued to teach primarily through textbooks, this framing of objects as educational tools can help explain one potential reason why public debates about Catholicism in the public schools focused so heavily on religious garb in the last decade of the century.

Perhaps the more salient reason for anti-garb advocates to focus on the habit as a form of visual education is that it fit into anti-Catholic rhetoric that had long circulated, and found renewed expression at the end of the century, in the specifically Protestant fear of a Catholic “infiltration” of the public school system. Books like Richard Harcourt’s *The Great Conspiracy Against Our American Public Schools*, published in 1890 with illustrations from Thomas Nast, warned of a conspiracy on the part of the Catholic church to “overthrow” the American school system and use “circumvention” and “indirect aggression” to do so.¹⁶⁵ Fearful that symbolic objects like “the holy water, crosses, and beads” would replace Protestant teachers, Harcourt explains his objection to Catholic teachers by referring to the power of visual persuasion, an argument that would have saliency in the dress debates later in the decade.¹⁶⁶ Harcourt writes, “the force of example is not easily measured. It is stronger than precept ... no one can fail to recognize this wonderful power over childhood. Like the chameleon, our children take on the color of their surroundings.”¹⁶⁷ The notion that Catholics trafficked in underhanded or “hidden” methods is seen in J.O.U.A.M member Lichliter’s

¹⁶⁴ William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 91.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Harcourt, *The Great Conspiracy Against Our American Public Schools* (San Francisco: California News Company, 1890), 96.

¹⁶⁶ Harcourt, *The Great Conspiracy*, 56.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

contention that when the court found that the Sisters of St. Joseph were not stricter on Protestant children in their care, but actually more considerate and less strict, that this must be evidence of their plan “to get in their good graces and insidiously win their love and affection and thus, Rome-like, draw them toward the Catholic church.”¹⁶⁸

Protestant fears of children converting to Catholicism had long found traction in anti-Catholic newspapers and books. Captivity tales and stories of Protestant girls educated in convents remained popular throughout the century, alongside accounts of adults converting to Catholicism.¹⁶⁹ Rumors circulated among Protestant families that Irish Catholic domestic servants were proselytizing the children in their care, and even perhaps secretly baptizing them.¹⁷⁰ At the end of the century, the rhetoric of visual education and fear of Catholic “infiltration” of spaces from the home to the school combined to foster anxiety about the habit becoming a conversion tool.

The Habit and the Secular State

In the same decade in which the nativist press circulated a fake encyclical supposedly calling on American Catholics to “exterminate all heretics,” it is not surprising that Catholic

¹⁶⁸ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 259.

¹⁶⁹ Susan Griffin explores the intense interest many American authors had in “new Catholics,” including anxieties related to convent-educated Protestant girls and immigrants, in *Anti-Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (Cambridge University press, 2004). Jenny Franchot estimates that there were 700,000 conversions to Catholicism in the United States between 1813 and 1893. See Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), xx.

¹⁷⁰ Faye E. Dudden, *Serving women: Household Service in Nineteenth Century America* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 69.

women religious teaching in public schools would attract suspicion.¹⁷¹ That their habits became the target of that suspicion speaks to both the growing presence of nuns and Sisters in the United States and the growing significance of the habit as visual shorthand for them in the late nineteenth century. Scholars have identified how important women religious were in the development of American Catholicism, far outnumbering male clergy, and active in education, healthcare, and social services both within and beyond their religious communities. Dolan cites that between 1850 and 1900, women religious in the United States grew almost forty-fold, increasing from 1,344 to 40,340, whereas priests in the same time period increased ten-fold from 1,109 to just 11,636.¹⁷² Sally Dwyer-McNulty estimates the number of nuns and Sisters working in the country by 1900 to be closer to 50,000, belong to more than 100 distinct religious communities.¹⁷³ Considered the “visible manifestation of Catholicism,” their distinctive dress had long served as a sartorial metonym for the Catholic Church.¹⁷⁴

Although habits would not officially become required dress for women religious everywhere until 1889, they were usually included in the rule of each order. The Sisters of St. Joseph wore a habit that closely resembled what French widows had worn in seventeenth-century France. The main part of the habit, the tunic, was black with a cincture belt fastened around the waist. A black veil covered a white cornette with a white band on the forehead. A

¹⁷¹ Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, 85. According to Higham, the encyclical was printed and widely recirculated in 1893 and “struck panic far and wide.”

¹⁷² Dolan, *American Catholic Experience*, 277.

¹⁷³ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 58.

¹⁷⁴ McGuinness, *Called to Serve*, 2.

rosary hung from the belt and a crucifix was placed around their neck [see Figures 1, 2].¹⁷⁵ In her study of nuns in the nineteenth century, Dominican Sister and historian Mary Ewens points out that habits were often made of wool and caused “great discomfort” for many Sisters, especially in the summer months.¹⁷⁶

On the one hand, this visual embodiment of their faith, or what Dwyer-McNulty calls “a perambulatory cloister,” made Sisters the target of anti-Catholic ire.¹⁷⁷ When the Sisters of St. Joseph had first come to the United States in 1836, they had traveled in secular disguises to avoid harassment and violence, a common practice for nuns and Sisters in the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷⁸ On the other hand, the habit gave Sisters spiritual authority, a visible sign of their status above “ordinary women,” even if they were still below male clergy. Dwyer-McNulty contends that although nuns and Sisters clearly operated within a patriarchal structure, their habits did not “signal their allegiance to earthly men or clergy.”¹⁷⁹ Instead, at the end of the century, women often “tenaciously embraced the habit” on their own accord, even when male clergy suggested they adapt or put it aside, as was the case in another public school controversy in New York in 1898 when a priest suggested the Sisters

¹⁷⁵ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 78. See also Thomas P. McCarthy, *Guide to the Catholic Sisterhoods in the United States* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 156-57. See also Kuhns, *The Habit*, 5.

¹⁷⁶ Mary Ewens, *The Role of the Nun in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Arno Press, 1978), 282.

¹⁷⁷ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Coburn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 5, 43.

¹⁷⁹ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 71.

of Charity dress in secular garb to continue teaching and the women resisted.¹⁸⁰ In her discussion of the habit as “discursive field,” Rebecca Sullivan argues that the habit acts as a “living cloister,” a kind of portal that transports the wearer to the moment of “crossing a threshold from lay to religious” each time she completes the ritual of taking on and off the garments.¹⁸¹ Much of the layered meaning the habit may have held for women religious of course did not translate to outsiders eager to focus on how the garb violated the norms of what Jenny Franchot calls the “Protestant way.”¹⁸² In her book *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, Franchot traces anti-Catholic strains in Protestant antebellum literature, summarizing them thus:

Anti-Catholic attacks on the alternative family structures represented by the convent, the celibate priesthood, and devotion to both the Virgin and the intercessory community of the sainted dead exposed Catholic familial structures as intriguing and dangerously collectivist – elaborate institutional structures that suppressed the autonomous individual, that confusingly both elevated and oppressed women, and that finally evaded distinctions between public and private central to liberal democracy and middle-class heterosexuality.¹⁸³

Although some scholars contend that after the Civil War, the public perception of Catholic Sisters – and their habits – had vastly improved due to the Sisters’ service as nuns in the war,¹⁸⁴ in the last decade of the century, when the issue of whether the habit was

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸¹ Rebecca Sullivan, “Breaking Habits: Gender, Class, and the Sacred in the Dress of Women Religious,” in *Consuming Fashion: Adorning the Transnational Body*, eds. Anne Brydon and Sandra Niessen (Oxford: Berg Press, 1998), 112-113.

¹⁸² Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 4.

¹⁸³ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 117.

¹⁸⁴ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 66.

acceptable in a secular space like the public schools emerged, the antebellum anti-Catholic anxieties manifested themselves again, and the habit became the fulcrum for those anxieties. The dissent of Justice Williams in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court case is especially indicative of this, as he outlines his reasons for opposing nuns dress in the schools. His objections to the way their dress supposedly violates gender norms, erases individual autonomy, and visually signals their allegiance to something beyond the secular state shows that the anti-Catholic sentiments Franchot identified in antebellum literature were still persistent at the end of the century. His dissent also constructs acceptable religious expression within a secular space as private and contained. Although he represented the minority opinion in the 1894 Supreme Court ruling, that opinion would become the law of the land through the legislation passed a few months later in June 1895. As such, an analysis of his dissent, and the language of others who opposed the teachers' habits, elucidates some of the key understandings of women's religious dress and expression at the time.

One of William's arguments for why the Sisters of St. Joseph's garb is inappropriate for the school building is because the habit is "strikingly unlike the dress of their sex whether Catholic or Protestant" and it silently announces "they have renounced the world, their own domestic relations, and their family names."¹⁸⁵ For Williams, the habit is not only a violation of the established dress norms for a woman of the time period, but also a visual reminder that the woman wearing it inhabits a space --- both physically in the convent setting, and relationally in her vow of chastity and communal living --- that violates the normative construction of womanhood in nineteenth century America. In some ways, women religious

¹⁸⁵ "John Hysong v. Gallitzin," 659.

existed in a liminal space described by Dwyer-McNulty as “gendered in-betweenness,” as they maintained an “unwoman” position within the Catholic church, placing them above ordinary women, but below the male clergy.¹⁸⁶ Carol Coburn and Martha Smith describe the resistance women such as the Sisters of St. Joseph contended with in an environment in which they were often viewed as “uptight ‘abnormal’ women, rejected by males as unfit for marriage and motherhood and allowed to run amuck as ‘independent’ women with masculine tendencies.”¹⁸⁷ In Williams’ focus on the renouncement of “domestic relations,” and “family names,” perhaps referring to their rejection of marriage and motherhood, or perhaps their place under their father’s control in a childhood nuclear family, he draws attention to the “otherness” of the Sisters, embodied in their dress. In its deviation from acceptable female fashion, the habit becomes a constant reminder of their deviation from the expected role of wife and mother. Providing that as a reason that they cease to be “secular” persons and should not wear the habit while teaching, Williams implies that stepping out from contemporary gender norms, visualized in their dress, sets them too far outside of the mainstream.

In addition to anxiety related to their gendered status, Williams also expresses concern about the Sisters’ lack of autonomy and individuality vis a vis their dress. He draws attention to the fact they have “renounced their property, their right to their own earnings, and the direction of their lives, and bound themselves by solemn vows to the work of the church and to obedience to their ecclesiastical superiors.” In these ways, Williams states, they have “ceased to be civilians or secular persons.” He points out more than once in his

¹⁸⁶ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 57.

¹⁸⁷ Coburn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 42-43.

dissent that wearing their dress at all times is “obligatory” and “they are forbidden to modify it,” since it is “prescribed [and] unchangeable.”¹⁸⁸ Williams’ focus on what he perceives as a lack of choice and autonomy on the part of the Sisters, coupled with his assurance that his objection is not about limiting religious belief, since he considers “the rights of conscience ... no less sacred than the rights of property,” is in keeping with classical liberal ideas of freedom of conscience.¹⁸⁹ In his book *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History*, John T. McGreevy outlines what he calls American Catholics’ growing “uneasiness with a liberal emphasis on individual autonomy” in the nineteenth century.¹⁹⁰ While Catholics generally admired the American founders, they tended to understand freedom differently than the notion of the individual as “owner of himself,” instead framing freedom in the context of communities.¹⁹¹ Coburn and Smith describe how this focus on the community over the individual was especially important for women religious, as Sisters sought to eschew “singularity or the appearance of standing out in any way”; instead individuals were “subsumed within the community.”¹⁹²

To Williams and others like him, the Sisters’ avoidance of singularity is suspicious, drawing on a longer tradition of Protestant fears that Catholics were stripped of individualism and freedom of choice under papal authority. Williams specifically draws attention to the

¹⁸⁸ “John Hysong vs. Gallitzin,” 659.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: Norton, 2003), 37.

¹⁹¹ McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 36.

¹⁹² Coburn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 80.

idea that the Sisters are not choosing their own garments; however, other opponents of religious garb in schools focused heavily on the uniformity aspect of the Sisters' attire. When W.H. Painter of the J.O.U.A.M. made a speech before the governor to convince him to sign the Religious Garb bill, he addressed fears among some Pennsylvanians that the law would mean that plain dressing sects like the Amish, Mennonites, Dunkards, and Quakers could also not teach since they wore distinctive attire as well. Drawing a distinction between "garb" and "custom," he insists that the plain dressing sects' attire is simply a custom, whereas the Sisters' attire is a garb. The difference comes down to the fact that, according to Painter, you can tell two Mennonites, "Mrs. Brown" and "Mrs. Smith," apart from a distance, but you cannot tell "Sister Agnes" and "Sister Maria" apart. For Painter, sectarian plain dress is simply a matter of style, comparable to men's choice of ties – "that is your style and this is mine" – whereas the uniformity and papal prescription of the Sisters' dress puts it too far outside the bounds of acceptable fashion in the public school setting.¹⁹³

Painter's words are telling for several reasons, the first of which is the clear and open admittance that the law, while maintaining an air of neutrality in not naming any one religious group, is specifically intended to target Catholics only. Secondly, Painter's concerns about uniformity reveal an idealization of the way in which tiny choices in fashion, such as the pattern of a necktie, or the color of a cape dress (in the case of the Mennonite women), had begun to be seen as important exercises of individual autonomy. Moreover, his response ignores the fact that in the popular discourse surrounding plain groups, writers had often focused on the uniformity of the groups' dress, even comparing them to nuns in some

¹⁹³ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 270. Despite Painter's argument, the religious garb law did indeed apply to plain dressed sects, as seen in the 1910 Commonwealth vs. Herr case against a Mennonite school teacher, in which the court upheld the religious garb bill.

instances. Writers describing the sight of groups of plain dressed people would often focus on the way in which they appeared to all look the same because of their “uniform looking” outfits that were all “made after the same pattern.”¹⁹⁴ In his haste to (wrongly) assure fellow Protestants that the proposed garb law would only be applied to the habit, he inflates the distinction between the habit and other forms of religious dress. Regardless, Painter’s and Williams’ unease about the uniformity and lack of individuality of the Sisters’ garb point to a larger anxiety about their supposed lack of autonomy.

Williams’ concern that the Sisters’ garb indicates they have surrendered the direction of their lives to “ecclesiastical superiors” is repeated several times in his dissent; he often draws attention to their “renunciation of self and subjection to the church.”¹⁹⁵ The emphasis on their subjection to the church points to an anxiety about the Sisters’ allegiance. Whereas within Catholic communities, the habit’s role as “visual evidence of their allegiance to the Vatican” gave Sisters more authority and, as Dwyer-McNulty claims, “inspire[ed] trust in their activities,” for many Protestants, the Sisters’ visible allegiance to the Vatican called into question their allegiance to the nation.¹⁹⁶ Questioning the loyalty of Catholics was certainly not new at the end of the century. One of the talking points of Know-Nothing activism of the 1850s was the idea that Catholics, and especially Catholic clergy or women religious, were loyal to Rome over the United States, and this fear persisted late into the century. In the decades after the Civil War, the threat of Catholicism to the strength of the nation was often

¹⁹⁴ Clifford Howard, “A Peace Loving People,” *The Ladies Home Journal*, July 1898, 5, American Periodicals.

¹⁹⁵ “John Hysong vs. Gallitzin,” 659.

¹⁹⁶ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 84.

rhetorically compared to the threat of the Confederacy to the Union years prior.¹⁹⁷ By the 1890s, as intense nationalism manifested in nativist “patriotic” societies like the J.O.U.A.M. and patriotic displays such as flag exercises, salutes, and pledges in public schools, it is not surprising that anxieties around Catholic allegiance would inform the garb debates. Indeed, when writers like Richard Harcourt spoke of a “Roman invasion,” they emphasized the influence of a foreign ruler. When referring to Catholic immigrants, Harcourt declares, “to the people who come to our shores with no allegiance except to the Republic, we bid you welcome, and give you large place for your children under our flag and in our public schools. To those whose allegiance is sworn to a ruler beyond the seas, and whose work is to conspire against our public schools and our free institutions, we cry with our fathers, ‘No peace with Papacy, and no compromise with Rome.’”¹⁹⁸

However, it is notable that in Williams’ dissent he does not overtly mention the Sisters of St. Joseph’s allegiance to Rome. Instead, his concern is with the Sisters’ habits declaring their allegiance to a “particular church” and “religious order within that church,” over and above the “secular world.”¹⁹⁹ He describes how their distinctive garb “proclaims their church, their order, and their separation from the secular world as plainly as a herald could do if they were constantly attended by such a person.”²⁰⁰ In introducing the concept of the “secular world” in his dissent, Williams speaks to the way in which the public school was imagined by many Protestants to be a secular, non-sectarian space. Public school advocates

¹⁹⁷ McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom*, 93.

¹⁹⁸ Harcourt, *The Great Conspiracy*, 14.

¹⁹⁹ “John Hysong vs. Gallitzin,” 660.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 659.

and officials lauded the schools as a place where all could be educated, regardless of personal religious belief. A decade after the Religious Garb bill was enacted, Pennsylvania Superintendent of Schools Nathan Schaeffer would proclaim that even though they may differ on everything else, the school “was the one institution in which all Americans believed.”²⁰¹

Belief *in* the school system became synonymous with belief in the nation. As Jay Dolan puts it, by the late nineteenth century, the public school was essentially the nation’s “sacred temple” and to “attack the school was to attack God, nation, and government as well.”²⁰² When Catholics critiqued the school system for having a Protestant bias, pointing to the standard use of textbooks written by Protestant ministers or the required reading of the King James Bible, they were met with words like those of common school champion Horace Bushnell in 1853, when he declared if Catholics did not like the common school, they were “welcome to leave the country.”²⁰³ Forty years later, when Catholics were developing their own school system and sometimes requesting public funds to help do so, nativists like Harcourt interpreted that as another outright attack on the school system, suggesting that if anyone “point the finger of scorn” at the public schools they be met with “penalty of death” and “red-hot bayonets,” and that Americans should be ready to defend the school system “with sacrifice of life” if necessary.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 118.

²⁰² Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience*, 269.

²⁰³ Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 20.

²⁰⁴ Harcourt, *The Great Conspiracy*, 11, 88.

Allegiance to the public schools was tied to allegiance to the state, which is part of why employing the Sisters of St. Joseph as teachers was seen as such a threat to some citizens. As one writer in the *North American* put it, there was no place for a teacher who had “taken religious vows under which their first duty and allegiance are due, not to the state, but to some particular religious organization.”²⁰⁵ Although this writer focuses on the particular status of the Sisters as women religious, the implications for an inherent contradiction between allegiance to the state and religious allegiance can be applied more broadly. In her book *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan explores the fraught relationship between religion and the state. She writes

Religion challenges the rule of law. To be religious is, in some sense, to be obedient to a rule outside of oneself and one’s government, whether that rule is understood to be established by God, or otherwise. It is to do what *must* be done. To be religious is, for most people, to live *without* a certain amount of freedom. To be religious is not to be free, but to be faithful. To be free, on the other hand, is today understood to mean to have the ability to choose for oneself in all areas of life, without restraint. To be free is to be faithful only to oneself or to such ideologies and communities outside of oneself that one freely chooses.²⁰⁶

Sullivan articulates a contradiction inherent in the religious person as well as the government that regulates the religious person. On the one hand, religion always holds the possibility for an unruliness, a disobedience to the state, since one is bound ultimately not to a government, but to a higher power, faith community, or sacred text, which sometimes may come into conflict with the law. On the other hand, religion also represents a surrender of free will and autonomy to that same higher power, faith community, or sacred text, which is

²⁰⁵ “Sisters in the Schools,” *The North American*, Monday January 14, 1895, 4. Gale.

²⁰⁶ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, 156.

a violation of the notion that each man is free to rule himself. There is also an inherent dilemma for the government in a Protestant-secular context. On the one hand, freedom of religion demands a sense of respect for various religious beliefs; on the other hand, there is an assumption that those beliefs will line up with the values of the state and a fear when they collide. For some supporters of the Pennsylvania Garb Bill, the bill held the promise to address this fear, as it could serve as a visual litmus test for whether a Catholic was loyal to the Republic. In his speech to convince the governor to sign the bill, J.O.U.A.M. member W.H. Painter declared that “where a custom like this confronts us, where apparently there is a conflict between Church and State [is] when they will show that they are either good Catholics and good patriots or poor Catholics and poor patriots.”²⁰⁷

For Painter and other anti-garb advocates like Judge Williams, the Sisters’ habit is a visual and objective representation of the religious person’s devotion and allegiance to *something beyond the secular state*; it makes this possible contradiction between the rule of law and religion explicit. In the case of the Sisters of St. Joseph they have formalized this allegiance with their vows, but as Sullivan points out, all religious persons potentially have this conflict of interest. It is the announcement, made through the habit, of this potential conflict of interest that is too much for Williams. Williams states it is not their status as ecclesiastical persons that disqualify them from serving as teachers, rather it is their “striking and distinctive ecclesiastical robes” because they are always announcing that they are “separate” from the world. In the “secular world” that Williams refers to in his dissent, there is certainly place for religious belief, even for religious office – he and others make that clear

²⁰⁷ Lichliter, *History of the Junior Order*, 268.

– but it must be contained, private, and ultimately invisible to those around the religious believer while they are in the secular space of the school.²⁰⁸

This construction of religion as private, contained, and invisible is tied distinctly to Protestantism, and a particular formation of Protestantism at that, as several scholars have noted. In her work on Protestant encounters with Catholicism through literature, Jenny Franchot shows how over the course of the nineteenth century, Protestants framed their own history as the movement from an embodied, material religion, exemplified in Catholicism, to a “fully literate, increasingly bodiless ‘spiritual’ religion.”²⁰⁹ Sullivan elaborates on this and explores how this construction of acceptable Christianity extended beyond Protestantism. Using the distinction between Protestant and protestant, Sullivan explains that protestant (with a lowercase p) is a set of values, originating in the Protestant Reformation, but then moving beyond any one particular tradition to instead become a set of cultural values by which acceptable religion could be evaluated. In this paradigm, “true” religion “came to be understood as being private, voluntary, individual, textual, and believed” whereas “false” religion was understood as “public, coercive, communal, oral, and enacted.”²¹⁰ Identifying Catholicism as the most visible form of this “false” religion in the United States in the past, and Islam as the most visible form today, Sullivan argues that these forms of religion have

²⁰⁸ A member of the J.O.U.A.M. wrote in the *North American* to clarify that the Order was not opposed to “nuns as teachers on account of their religious belief,” but rather “their wearing of the distinctive garb as it was a standing object-lesson in teaching sectarianism.” See “Among Patriotic Bodies,” *The North American*, November 14, 1894, 4. Gale.

²⁰⁹ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 12.

²¹⁰ Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, 8.

historically been ‘excluded, both rhetorically and legally, from modern public space.’²¹¹

Tracy Fessenden makes similar claims in *Culture of Redemption: Religion, The Secular, and American Literature* as she interrogates what she calls the “implicitly Protestant center” of American life; however, it is her analysis of the relationship between this Protestant center and secularism that is most relevant for reading the case against the Sisters of St. Joseph and subsequent legislation. Fessenden writes:

the rule of noninterference between religion and government, far from consigning all religions equally to the silent margins of the political, instead created the conditions for the dominance of an increasingly nonspecific Protestantism over nearly all aspects of American life, a dominance as pervasive as it is invisible for exceeding the domains we conventionally figure as religious.²¹²

Schools were a key way this Protestant dominance was preserved. The understanding of Catholicism as “sectarian” and the school system as “non-sectarian” despite its clear Protestant history and slant was pervasive throughout the nineteenth century. As William Reese points out, Catholics questioning the Protestant bias of schools were often referred to as “sectarian bigots.”²¹³ In the case against the Sisters of St. Joseph, attorney A.D. Wilkin described the Sisters’ teaching in garb as a “sectarian invasion of public schools,” wording that would appear often in the nativist press coverage of the case.²¹⁴ However, it is notable that in his dissent Judge Williams’ takes pains to emphasize it is not the Catholic faith or even profession of the women that constitutes sectarianism, but rather their garb and the fact

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 71.

²¹³ Reese, *America’s Public Schools*, 38.

²¹⁴ “Among Patriotic Bodies,” 4.

it symbolize a separation from the “secular world.” His insistence that any religious belief, including Catholicism, is welcome in the classroom, as long as the believer does not dress in a visibly religious way, is the essence of the “vaunted secularization of public education,” which Fessenden insists “was made an instrument for maintaining its Protestant center.”²¹⁵ While supposedly welcoming to all religious beliefs, the condition that the belief be private and expressed in non-visual or non-embodied ways ensured that Protestant (or as Sullivan would say *protestant*) faith could continue to be normalized, while Catholicism was set apart. If, as Sullivan insists, “the mainstreaming or acculturation of American religions occurs ... in part by many encounters with law, formal and informal,” where religions are “disciplined by normative systems” rooted in Protestantism, the rhetoric expressed by Williams and anti-garb advocates in the Hysong vs. Gallitzin case – and the formal legislation that followed – are key examples of the way religious dress became a tool to exclude and regulate certain religious expression (specifically Catholicism) over others.²¹⁶

Yet, even while the Gallitzin case shows how rhetoric and regulation around religious dress could shore up the power of the Protestant center and exclude visible forms of belief, so too does it reveal how the habit could also serve as a vital visual critique of the Protestant-Secular paradigm and even yield alliances between seemingly disparate religious groups.

²¹⁵ Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption*, 66.

²¹⁶ Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, “Reforming Culture: Law and Religion Today,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 335.

Beyond the Habit: Alliances to Preserve the Freedom to Garb

When the initial court case went to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1894, Justice John Dean wrote the majority opinion, making the case for why Pennsylvania law permitted the Sisters of St. Joseph to wear their habits while teaching. In the opinion, Dean pushes back against the supposed invisibility and neutrality of Protestantism, instead calling attention to the ways in which Protestants have their own visible manifestations, including distinctive dress. He points out that, since the beginning of the common school system in Pennsylvania, schools have frequently employed Protestant clergy members as teachers, and he reminds his readers that “some of them wore, in the schoolroom where children of Catholic parents were pupils, a distinctive clerical garb.” He goes on to argue, “it was not assumed that the fact of membership in a particular church or consecration to a religious life, or the wearing of a clerical coat or necktie, would turn the schools into sectarian institutions.”²¹⁷ By pointing out that Catholic students have received instruction under Protestant clergy, and that those Protestant clergy did sometimes wear distinctive dress marking them as such, Dean refutes the construction of Catholicism as sectarian and Protestantism as neutral or secular.

Dean makes another rhetorical move in his statement, something that would resonate far beyond the courtroom and be taken up by many others in critiques of the garb bill that followed. He points to the specific religious context of the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, naming the presence of groups such as “Quakers or Friends, Ommish [sic], Dunkards, and other sects” and pointing out that “no one has yet thought of excluding them as teachers from the schoolroom on the ground that the peculiarity of their dress would teach to pupils the

²¹⁷ “John Hysong vs. Gallitzin,” 658. Dean also points out that the current State Superintendent of Public Instruction in Pennsylvania was a Protestant clergy member.

distinctive doctrines of the sect to which they belonged.”²¹⁸ By specifically naming groups of Protestant Christians who also wore distinctive dress and were numerous in Pennsylvania, Dean not only highlights that Protestantism had its own visible forms, in this case plain dress, but he also speaks to the diversity within Protestantism, which often gets erased through the construction of Protestantism as set against Catholicism.²¹⁹ If, as Jenny Franchot maintains, anti-Catholic discourse was partially about minimizing Protestantism’s own fractures and fissures, a way to unify “precariously behind a ‘protestant way’ that was subject to its own disturbing heterogeneity,” Dean’s reminder of the distinctive dress of certain Protestant sects brings that heterogeneity to the forefront.²²⁰

Dean’s reference to other Pennsylvania religious groups that wear distinctive dress would become one of the main critiques of the Pennsylvania Religious Garb Law when it was under debate in the legislature several months after the court decision. A forceful critic of the bill was Augustus Seyfert, a Republican representative from Lancaster County, who rose to speak against the bill, calling it “a blow at civil liberty ... the most vicious, atrocious,

²¹⁸ Ibid., 658.

²¹⁹ Here I am categorizing Anabaptist groups such as the Amish and Dunkards as broadly Protestant, as Dean and others of his contemporaries do. However, defining plain Anabaptist groups as such is complex because of the tradition’s origin as a radical alternative to the Reformation. Scholars like Walter Klaassen label Anabaptists as “neither Catholic nor Protestant.” Walter Klaassen, *Anabaptism: Neither Catholic nor Protestant* (Waterloo: Conrad Press, 1973), 1. Nevertheless, Anabaptists are often categorized within Protestantism, especially by outsiders. For example, the Pew Research Center places “Anabaptist Family” within both Mainline Protestantism and Evangelical Protestantism in their religious landscape surveys. See “Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center: Religion and Public Life*, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>. For more on the intersection between Anabaptism and Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, see Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014) 2-3, 11-13.

²²⁰ Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, xx.

outrageous and un-American measure ever offered,” and the sponsors “narrow-minded men.”²²¹ Seyfert insisted that the bill was aimed exclusively at Catholics, despite its guise of neutrality. While not a Catholic himself, he maintained he was “in favor of the fullest liberty” for the “great Roman Catholic Church in this state.” Seyfert’s solidarity with Catholics on this particular issue was likely at least partially explained by his geographic location. Seyfert pointed out that in his home county of Lancaster, although there were twenty-five Catholic teachers, none of those wore religious garb, but teachers from sects like the Mennonites and German Baptists did; thus, the Anti-Garb bill would be a “blow at these people and should be killed.”²²²

Writers outside of Pennsylvania made similar arguments. In a *Washington Post* editorial, “Folly in Legislation,” the writer highlights the irony of Pennsylvania passing a law against religious dress. Pointing out that in “the state founded by William Penn,” members of the Quaker sect that still dress plain could not hold the place of a public school teacher in the state under the new law, the editorial goes on to share a letter from a Mennonite who calls the law a “shameful outrage” and shares that “our mode of dress indicates that we believe in simplicity of attire and this is a matter of conscience with many of us.” Lest their readers think this law is insignificant, *The Post* ends their editorial with the declaration that, although many state legislatures have passed bad laws, “no other Legislature has surpassed the

²²¹ “Religious Garb in Public Schools,” *New York Times*, Mar 7, 1895, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. A biographical entry for Seyfert published later in 1895 ends with the declaration, “Mr. Seyfert achieved the greatest prominence during this whole legislative career in his bitter opposition to the Religious Garb Bill.” William Rodearmel, *Portraits and Sketches of Heads of State Departments and Members of the Legislature of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg, Pa: Harrisburg Publishing Company, 1895), 246.

²²² “Religious Garb in Public Schools,” *New York Times*, Mar 7, 1895, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Pennsylvania law-making machine in needless annoyance and insult to large bodies of the most peaceful, quiet, patriotic, and law-loving citizens.”²²³

In a letter penned to Governor Hastings, Mennonite teacher J.A. Ressler ponders why, if the bill rules against the insignia of religion, it does not “provide against the insignia of irreligion” as well? Pointing to fraternal organizations, the teacher writes, “Are secret and beneficial orders religious bodies? If not, they belie their claims. If they are, the members of their orders, under the Garb bill, must not wear the badge of their order in the school-room.”²²⁴ In taking aim directly at organizations like the J.O.U.A.M., which often cited religious as well as patriotic roots, Ressler complicates the notion of what counts as “religious” insignia, and in the mention of irreligion, pushes back against the supposed invisibility of secularism.

Despite Ressler’s assertion that the “absurdity of such a law must be apparent,” and the public opposition of legislators like Augustus Seyfert, the Garb Bill passed both the House of Representatives (191-38) and the Senate (31-11) and was signed into law by Governor Hastings on June 29, 1895. The *New York Times* reported that both of the state senators from Lancaster County, John Landis and C.C. Kaufman, voted against the bill.²²⁵ A

²²³ “Folly in Legislation,” *The Washington Post*, August 25, 1895, 6, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

²²⁴ “Fighting the Garb Bill,” *The North American*, March 19, 1895, Gale.

²²⁵ “No Religious Garbs in School,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1895, 1, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. The *New York Times* article says, of the dissenting senators, “seven are democrats, five are Catholics and two—Messrs. Landis and Kauffman—represent Lancaster County, where the Mennonites and Dunkards form a large proportion of the population.” Landis and Kauffman are recorded as Republican senators in *Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Legislative Directory, Session of 1895* (Harrisburg, Clarence M. Busch, State Printer of PA, 1894), 8.

later report recounted that when the bill came up for final passage in the senate, there were “nearly a hundred representatives, men and women of the Mennonites and Dunkards of Lancaster County” in the chambers, and that Kauffman rose to declare “if you pass this bill, then strike off the mast head the emblem which declares that this is the land of the brave and the home of the free. Trample beneath your feet that part of the constitution, which says a man can worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.”²²⁶ The opposition from plain groups and their representatives serves as a reminder that the monolithic construction of Protestantism as always already set against Catholicism does not reflect the reality of the diversity of religious experience in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century.

Of course, it is difficult to tell whether the complaints lodged by Mennonites and others like them (as well as their supporters) against the law were signs of genuine solidarity and cooperation toward Catholics, or simply acts of self-preservation. On the one hand, members of Anabaptist groups like the Mennonites and Dunkards, with their history in the Radical Reformation, could be considered the least likely allies for Catholics. On the other hand, their status as “outsiders” to mainstream Protestantism meant that they shared with Catholics a tenuous relationship to the broader American culture. American religious historian Mark Noll observes that “throughout much of nineteenth century, Roman Catholics in the United States looked a little bit like Anabaptists, building self-contained enclaves and a comprehensive network of institutions ... as alternatives to the ‘public’ (protestant)

²²⁶ “The Religious Garb Bill,” *Our College Times*, December 1908, 11.

institutions of mainstream American culture."²²⁷ The pushback from members of plain dressed sects and their allies to the garb law suggests that distinctive religious dress was a site in which disparate groups shared a commitment to maintaining the “alternatives” Noll mentions. In this case, distinctive religious dress, in the form of the Catholic habit, or the Mennonite plain garb, provides a visible alternative to the construction of acceptable religion as private and invisible, a construction seen in the language of anti-garb advocates.

It is also difficult to tell how much, if any, of the critique for the bill came from women of the time. While we do not know the gender of the Mennonite teacher who wrote a letter to the governor (J.A. Rossler), the *Washington Post* identifies the Mennonite letter writer they cite as a man. Like the Catholic church, Anabaptist communities in the United States were also structured around patriarchal systems, with male leadership in the form of elders and bishops. In this context, it is likely that the public critiques of the Garb Law were mainly lodged by men. Certainly, when looking at the judges handing down their opinions, the legislators debating and enacting the law, and most of the rhetoric in the newspapers surrounding the case, it is clear that the issue of religious garb in the public schools was decided by men. In a case where women religious were at the center, and specifically the question of how they could adorn their bodies while teaching, it is men who ultimately debated and decided their fate.

While the teachers in question in the original case were all Catholic women religious, Judge Dean’s mention of Protestant clergy teaching in schools, and the reference to members of Anabaptist sects broadens the scope of the law to include men. Especially in plain dressed

²²⁷ Mark Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 398.

sects, men would have also been easily identified by their plain dark frock, absence of collar, and other signs. The garb bill would have certainly affected male teachers from plain sects, as well any priest or other robed clergy that may have taught in a public school. Yet, the prevalence of women in the teaching profession by the end of the century effectively ensured that the brunt of the law would likely fall to religiously clothed women.²²⁸

Indeed, the Pennsylvania Garb Bill would be challenged fifteen years after its passage by a case that once again revolved around a woman teaching in distinctive garb. This time, the teacher was a Mennonite. Despite J.O.U.A.M. member W.H. Painter's assurance to Governor Hastings in 1895 that the law would not affect Mennonites and other plain dressing groups, because their dress was merely "style" and "custom," the case of the Commonwealth vs. Amos R. Herr revealed that plain dress was in fact considered distinctive religious garb and fell under the Religious Garb ban. Lillian Herr Risser, a plain dressed Mennonite, had been hired as a teacher by the Mount Joy Township school board in 1908. The following year, a group of parents requested she be removed and the school pay a fine, citing the Religious Garb Bill. The case went before the Lancaster County Court, where a judge ruled in favor of the school district, citing Article 1 of the Bill of Rights. With the Garb Bill under threat, the J.O.U.A.M. reportedly devoted 1,000 dollars to help appeal to the state supreme court. In 1910, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1910 overturned the lower court's decision, ruling against Risser and the school district and thereby upholding the Pennsylvania Garb Bill.²²⁹

²²⁸ For more on the increasing tendency to view teaching as a female endeavor, see Reese's *America's Public School: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind,"* 80.

²²⁹ Jean-Paul Benowitz "College Steeped in Religious Tradition of Nonviolence," *The Elizabethtown Advocate*, May 16, 2017, <http://etownpa.com/college-steeped-religious->

The case of Lillian Herr Risser shows one of the practical legacies of the 1895 Religious Garb Bill — religiously clothed women of various faiths would find it more difficult or impossible to teach in public schools in the state. Although the Pennsylvania law, and other states' subsequent similar laws, were clearly designed with the intent to restrict Catholic Sisters' dress, the implications extended to other religious women, including Mennonites like Risser, and eventually Muslims like Alima Reardon, who was terminated from her Philadelphia teaching job in 1990 for wearing a scarf to cover her head and loose dress to cover her arms²³⁰

Nevertheless, Catholic Sisters like the Sisters of St. Joseph were most certainly the most affected by the 1895 Garb Law, and similar laws passed around the United States. In writing about the religious garb debates of the 1890s, Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith maintain “anti-garb laws and negative reactions to the religious habit would continue to limit American nuns' participation in public schools into the twentieth century.”²³¹ This did not mean that Catholic Sisters were always excluded from public school teaching. In her study of renewed efforts to restrict the habit in schools in the 1950s, Kathleen Holscher points out that there were still between 1,200 to 2,500 Catholic Sisters teaching in public schools in various

tradition-nonviolence/. Benowitz maintains that the Religious Garb Bill was one factor that spurred members of Church of the Brethren (Dunkards) to found Elizabethtown College in Lancaster County in 1899, in part so that plain clothed members could have a place to teach and attend in their garb.

²³⁰ The U.S. 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals sided with the Philadelphia Board of Education in upholding Reardon's termination. See “Appeals Court Upholds Pa. Ban on Religious Garb in Public Schools,” *Education Week*, September 5, 1990, <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1990/09/05/10020081.h10.html>

²³¹ Coburn and Smith, *Spirited Lives*, 134.

parts in the United States in 1950s, even though 23 states had laws forbidding their garb by then.²³²

Other Religious Garb Fights

Turning to other states' discussions of religious garb, one can hear reverberations of the Gallitzin case. According to Holscher, most state-level garb debates tended to follow the precedent set by Pennsylvania. Courts erred on the side of allowing legislatures and state boards of education to ultimately decide the issue. Absent any law or state ruling regarding religious garb, courts would generally find that "garbed sisters were constitutionally permitted to teach," but would also uphold any law or state ruling that did forbid their dress.²³³ The state with the most striking similarities to the Gallitzin case was New York. In fact, New York had dealt with an isolated religious garb incident a decade before Pennsylvania, when the State Superintendent of Education responded to a complaint about three Sisters teaching in habits in Suspension Bridge, Niagara County. In 1887, Superintendent Andrew Draper decided against the teachers, concluding, "the wearing of unusual garb, worn exclusively by members of one religious sect, and for the purpose of indicating membership in that sect by the teachers in public school, constitutes a sectarian influence."²³⁴ Draper even maintained that the Sisters wearing habits "may constitute a much stronger or sectarian influence over children than the repetition of the Lord's Prayer, or the

²³² Holscher, "Contesting the Veil in America," 73-74.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 66.

²³⁴ William H. Shannon, *The Religious Garb Issue as Related to the School Question in New York State*, Ph.D dissertation (University of Ottawa, 1952), 19.

readings of Scriptures at the opening of schools.”²³⁵ However, the enforcement of Draper’s decision was localized to the Suspension Bridge school and did not have immediate ramifications across the state. Other compromise plans in New York, including the most famous Poughkeepsie plan, persisted, and Sisters across the state continued teaching in habits for the next decade. After New York added a constitutional amendment in 1894 banning the use of public funds for any school “wholly or in part under the direction of any religious denomination, or in which any denominational tenant is taught,” critics of compromise plans between school districts and the Catholic church were emboldened to work to dismantle them.²³⁶

The first controversy dealing with religious garb in New York after the 1894 constitutional amendment began in September 1895, when a small group of parents lodged a complaint about the Sisters of St. Joseph teaching in West Troy. In a list of grievances that mirrors those brought by the Protestant parents in Gallitzin, Pa, the complainants took issue with the sisters residing at a convent, dressing in garb peculiar to their order, and being addressed at school by their religious names. Like the Gallitzin case, they also accused the Sisters of not passing the required teacher exam, though the local board of education maintained that the Sisters had taken and passed their exams.²³⁷ On September 25, 1895, the local school board issued a statement defending the teachers wearing their habits. Again, their language is similar to the rhetoric surrounding the Gallitzin case one year prior. The board wrote:

²³⁵ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 74.

²³⁶ Shannon, *The Religious Garb Issue*, xvii.

²³⁷ Shannon, *The Religious Garb Issue*, 38.

the dress worn by these teachers is suitable for their work. We would not refuse to employ teachers who wear the garb of Quakers or Shakers, nor would we reject them for wearing a string of beads or a cross or other device, either as ornaments or as signs of their faith. We would not exclude from our school men or women wearing the badge of Masons or Odd Fellows or of the Society of Christian Endeavor; hence we can see no valid reason why we should object to the garb worn by these teachers²³⁸

The complainants appealed to the state superintendent, and in November 1896 Superintendent Charles Skinner instructed the teachers to cease wearing their Habits while teaching in the schools, citing the Sisters' actions as a violation of the 1894 state constitutional amendment.²³⁹ However, implementing Skinner's directive proved to be more difficult. The local board responded with a statement that "such teachers refuse to wear any other than their distinctive garb, and that to attempt through the Board to require them to discontinue their distinctive garb would be an infringement of their legal rights and an interference with their personal freedom."²⁴⁰ Finally, in May 1897, after Skinner again directed the Sisters to discontinue wearing their habits, and threatened to withhold state funding from the school if they did not obey the order, the local board of education ended their contract with the Sisters of St. Joseph. Several other local skirmishes over habited teachers continued in the years that followed, with the State Superintendent Skinner ruling each time that Sisters had to cease wearing their habits. In 1906, Skinner's policy against the habit in schools was upheld by the state's highest court.²⁴¹

²³⁸ Ibid., 41.

²³⁹ Ibid., 48.

²⁴⁰ Shannon, *The Religious Garb Issue*, 55.

²⁴¹ Ibid., xvii.

New York's garb discussions offer an important comparison to Pennsylvania's, as they occurred in roughly the same span of years and also garnered press attention. Although New York never passed a law specifically outlawing garb like Pennsylvania did, the decision by State Superintendent Skinner, bolstered by the non-sectarian Constitutional amendment, effectively outlawed teaching in habits. Moreover, the rhetoric used by those who wanted to prohibit Sisters from teaching in habits, as well as those who defended their presence, was strikingly similar. There is no indication that the J.O.A.U.M. was directly involved in the cases in New York, as they had been in Pennsylvania; however, certainly the rhetoric against the Sisters was very similar. Absent from the New York cases, however, was push back specifically from plain groups or their allies. Pennsylvania's particular history, as a colony founded by Quakers with a reputation for religious freedom, and the presence of many plain Anabaptist groups still wearing distinctive garb, clearly combined to make it a unique place for garb debates to occur.²⁴²

In both New York and Pennsylvania, it is notable that women religious teachers did not cease wearing the habit; they merely took it elsewhere, usually into parochial school settings. When forced to choose between keeping their employment and keeping the habit, they largely chose the latter. Of course, a large part of this was due to the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century, the habit was required for Sisters. One could certainly argue giving up the habit was not even a choice. However, there are certainly indications that women religious used their own agency to resist garb bans. In the words of the 1896 West Troy

²⁴² Nathan C. Walker has identified twelve cases dealing with religious garb in public schools that progressed to a state court between 1894 and 1965. Eleven of the twelve cases dealt with Catholic Sisters and the habit; Mennonite Lillian Herr Risser's case (Pennsylvania, 1908) was the only exception. See "The First Amendment and State Bans on Teacher's Religious Garb," NateWalker.com, <http://www.natewalker.com/publications/religiousgarb>.

board statement, no mention is made of a priest or the church in general, instead they state the “teachers refuse to wear any other than their distinctive garb.” Two years later, when the Sisters of St. Charity, teaching in Poughkeepsie, New York, were told to lay aside their habits, Father James Nilan wrote to them insisting he could request a dispensation and asking them to cease wearing their garb while teaching. The Sisters convened a meeting and voted against the idea to lay aside the habit; the Poughkeepsie compromise ended soon after.²⁴³

Turning back to the Pennsylvania case, the Sisters of St. Joseph continued to wear their habits, but Public Law 282 had immediate effects. They withdrew from the schools and soon after moved out of Cambria county to establish a new motherhouse and parochial school, Mt. Gallitzin Academy, in Baden. More than fifty years later, when Sister Adele Whaley would write the history of her order, she described the 1894-1895 garb controversy in this way:

A set of circumstances had operated to make them contributors to the history of religion and education in Pennsylvania. Not at the threat of guillotine, like their French Sisters a hundred years ago, but with as good a will had they confessed Christ before men. With as deep an assurance could they rely on His confessing them before his father in heaven.²⁴⁴

Framing the Sisters’ devotion to teaching in the habit as an important act of faithfulness and a visible witness for Christ, Whaley’s words also point to the lasting effects of the Pennsylvania garb bill. In passing the law, the legislators codified into law the notion that public visible religion – particularly via dress – was unacceptable in the classroom. Cloaked in the language of non-sectarianism and separation of church and state, advocates of

²⁴³ Dwyer-McNulty, *Common Threads*, 76.

²⁴⁴ Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 34.

the garb ban insisted teachers still had full rights to their individual, private religious beliefs. However, for the Sisters of St. Joseph, as well as Anabaptists and others who pushed back against the legislation, religious garb was not incidental, but fundamental to their religion, an important witness and sign of their faith, and one which ultimately challenged the protestant-secular state. To legislate against their clothing was to legislate against their faith.



Sister Daria Beiter

Figure 1. Sister Daria Beiter. From Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 15



Mother Hortense Tello

Figure 2. Mother Hortense Tello. From Whaley, *Salute to the Pioneers*, 37.

These two photographs show the typical habits of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Gallitzin, circa 1870-1890.

CHAPTER 3

“I SNATCH AT MY EAGLE PLUMES AND LONG HAIR”: ZITKALA-ŠA AND CONVERS(AT)IONS OF ADORNMENT

In 1898, Yankton Sioux writer Zitkala-Ša (Gertrude Simmons) posed for a series of photographs in Gertrude Käsebier’s New York Fifth Avenue studio (see Figures 3, 4).²⁴⁵ Taken together, two of the photographs are a study in contrasts. In one, Zitkala-Ša stands, dressed in a robe, beads hanging from her neck, and across her body, a patterned sash.²⁴⁶ Her hair is down and her hand is placed at her forehead as if she is looking outward across a plain. In the second, she is seated, hair slightly pulled back, a violin under her arm, as she looks over her shoulder toward the camera, and she is adorned in a white dress with puff sleeves that is indicative of the fashion of the day. According to Laura Wexler, Käsebier was most famous for capturing images of white motherhood, especially gaining prestige at the turn of the century. She was also a prolific photographer of Sioux performers, most notably the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show participants, whom she would photograph in an elaborate “bricolage of trinkets.”²⁴⁷ Käsebier’s insistence on dressing her Sioux subjects in traditional garb and her idealization of white womanhood are clear examples of the imperial gaze at work.²⁴⁸ Certainly, Käsebier – and presumably the potential viewers of the photographs –

²⁴⁵ For an extensive discussion of Käsebier’s other work, see Laura Wexler’s *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2000), 177-208.

²⁴⁶ Tadeusz Lewandowski calls this “(mock) traditional garb.” See *Red Bird, Red Power: The Life and Legacy of Zitkala-Ša* (Norma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 34.

²⁴⁷ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 202.

²⁴⁸ See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992). As Wexler states, the portraits “sustain[ed] a white racial-cultural consolidation, through the control and management of symbolic economy of female

would have been fascinated by the contrast between what they presumed to be Zitkala-Ša, the Yankton Sioux, and Gertrude Simmons, the Carlisle Indian School teacher, talented orator, classically trained violinist, and soon-to-become published author in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Placed together, the images may even be taken as a visual representation of a linear conversion from “Indian” to “Civilized,” reminiscent of the before and after photographs that schools like Carlisle and the Hampton Institute would send to potential donors as evidence of successful assimilation efforts.

And yet, Zitkala-Ša’s own story speaks to alternative interpretations of these photographs. Instead of Zitkala-Ša “turning into” Gertrude Simmons (later Gertrude Simmons Bonnin), it was in fact the other way around; she adopted the name Lakota name Zitkala-Ša after arriving at Carlisle as a teacher, when she began publishing stories, and she continued to use both names at various points throughout her life.²⁴⁹ If in the photographs, dress was the most visible marker of her differing identities, then placing them side by side with Sioux garb on the left and white dress on the right, would tell only a partial story about a woman who both penned an essay entitled “Why I am a Pagan” and also actively campaigned against Peyote while seeking to further the mission of the Catholic church on the

sexuality. In this process, sentimentalized images of womanhood first were created and then were circulated as a kind of password, or code, among the kin, a code that could be freighted with messages about racial superiority and inferiority. Finally, portraits of the Sioux defined those on the other side of the kinship line.” Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 206-207.

²⁴⁹ Indeed, Lewandowski points out that Simmons’ first recorded use of the name Zitkala-Ša was on the back of one of the Kasebier pictures. Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 34. She would go on to use the name Zitkala-Ša formally when she published her first writing in *The Atlantic Monthly* two years later. For more on Simmons choosing the name Zitkala-Ša, which means “Red Bird” in Lakota, see Amelia V. Katanski, *Learning to Write “Indian”: The Boarding School Experience and American Indian Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005), 114.

Ute Reservation. Nevertheless, these two photographs are rich for what they represent – not just about Zitkala-Ša’s story, as mediated, quite literally, through the lens of a white woman, but also about the cultural power of the notion of conversion, as represented through dress and the body.

This chapter takes up the fraught issue of conversion, specifically religious conversion, examining adornment of the body as a site of this conversion.²⁵⁰ Rather than seeing conversion as a linear progression, a one-way street, or a before/after paradigm, this chapter envisions “conversions” as multi-faceted, non-linear, and complex. While they are certainly sites of violence, religious conversions are also sites of creative resistance. Zitkala-Ša explores the complexity of conversions in her writing as well as her life, and adornment of the body becomes one key way that these conversions were enacted, resisted, and embodied. This chapter looks at three ways of framing conversion and will specifically examine how dress and the body come to be important in – or even stand in for –these conversions.

The first section, “The Violence of Conversion” examines how Zitkala-Ša critiques the boarding school project of “converting” Indian children through visual markers such as hair and clothing, most particularly in her two personal essays in *Atlantic Monthly*, “The School Days of an Indian Girl” (February 1900), and “An Indian Teacher Among the Indians” (March 1900), which describe her experiences first as a student at White’s Manual Institute in Wabash Indiana and later as a teacher at Carlisle Indian School in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. In registering this violent conversion in material as well as spiritual terms,

²⁵⁰ In this chapter I use “dress” and “adornment of the body” to include styling aspects such as hair, piercings, and tattoos. This follows the definition of dress put forth by Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins and Joanne B. Eicher, as “an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body” including “direct modifications” to the body, as well as garments. See Roach-Higgins and Eicher, “Dress and Identity,” 1.

Zitkala-Ša not only collapses the Western boundary imposed between spiritual and material concerns, but she also critiques the Christian or “civilized” dress of the dominant white Protestant culture.

The second section focuses on “reverse conversions,” as Zitkala-Ša extends her earlier writings to make the ultimate critique of the conversion project through a de-conversion. I argue that Zitkala-Ša’s short story “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” in *Harper’s Monthly* (March 1901) allowed her space to imagine a reverse conversion narrative, where the hair that was violently shorn off of students at White’s Manual Institute and other boarding schools grows back, and as it does, a spiritual renewal takes place. This reverse conversion would manifest itself even more openly and strongly in two essays published the following year, “Protest against the Abolitionist Dance” (August 1902) and “Why I am a Pagan” (December 1902). Through these pieces, Zitkala-Ša frames indigenous spirituality, embodied in dress, hair, and movement, as superior to that of White Christians.

Yet the forcefulness of Zitkala-Ša’s critiques through her “reverse conversions” are far from the whole story. Thus, the third and final section of the chapter examines “Complex Conversions,” taking up those aspects of Zitkala-Ša’s own story which appear to be quite the opposite of what I examined in the second section. Her formal conversion to Catholicism in 1909 and her subsequent efforts among the Ute Indians of Utah to convert them to Catholicism, as well as her eventual work against indigenous spiritual practices such as Peyote, revise any linear or providential notions of conversion. Refusing an either/or dichotomy, the very messiness of Zitkala-Ša’s own religious identities, often the source of tension among scholars trying to discern them, provides a critique in itself of simplistic or totalizing views of religion. Instead, religious hybridity should be understood less as before-

and-after conversion stories and more as here-and-now intersections that are adaptable and constantly in flux. Zitkala-Ša's simultaneous and multiple "conversions" reached their fullest representation, I argue, in *The Sun Dance Opera*, a 1913 collaboration between Zitkala-Ša and Mormon composer William F. Hanson, particularly in the costuming of the performance and the promotional display of Zitkala-Ša and Hanson in Native dress. In much the same way that the 1898 photographs (Figures 3 & 4) beg further consideration, the costuming and performativity surrounding *The Sun Dance Opera* provides a visualization of the complexities and fluidities of religious embodiment vis a vis dress. I read Zitkala-Ša's willingness to "play" with dress --- in the *Sun Dance Opera*, as well as in her movement between Native garb and conventional American dress in public appearances -- as a visual symbol of religious hybridity, one which ultimately critiques Protestant notions of conversion and dichotomies of religious belief.

Gertrude Simmons Bonnin/Zitkala-Ša

Gertrude Simmons was born on the Yankton Sioux Reservation in Greenwood, South Dakota in 1876. At the age of eight, she left to attend White's Manual Labor Institute, a boarding school run by Quakers in Wabash, Indiana. After moving between White's Manual Institute and her home reservation for a period of several years, in 1895 she graduated and enrolled at Earlham College, another Quaker institution in Richmond, Indiana. There she began writing materials for the school papers and giving speeches.²⁵¹ In 1897, she left

²⁵¹ In March 1896, Simmons represented Earlham in the Indiana State Oratorical Contest, where she delivered a speech about Indian & American relations entitled "Side by Side." See Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris, introduction to *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* by Zitkala-Ša (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), xvi.

Earlham to take a job at Richard Henry Pratt's famous Carlisle Industrial School.²⁵²

However, by 1899, she had left Carlisle, disillusioned with Pratt's methods and eager to study classical violin in Boston. While in Boston, she also began her literary career, publishing pieces in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* and a 1901 book of stories titled *Old Indian Legends* under the name Zitkala-Ša.²⁵³ After marrying childhood friend and fellow Yankton Raymond Bonnin in 1902, Zitkala-Ša moved with him to the Ute Indian Reservation in Utah, where Bonnin worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Though she did not publish in elite literary periodicals again, while in Utah she continued to write and eventually collaborated with Mormon music teacher William Hanson on an opera entitled *The Sun Dance*, which was performed locally in 1913 and 1914. The opera took as its subject the Sun Dance, a Sioux religious ritual that had been officially banned by the Department of the Interior and wove it into a love story to perform for audiences. Shortly thereafter, Zitkala-Ša began a campaign against another Native spiritual ritual, the use of peyote, which she saw as harming Indian communities like the Utes.²⁵⁴ In this cause she found herself allied with a former target of her critique of forced conversion,

²⁵² Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 27.

²⁵³ According to Davidson and Norris, this was a period when Zitkala-Ša was "lionized by high literary society." See Davidson and Norris, "Introduction," xix.

²⁵⁴ Tadeusz Lewandowski attributes Zitkala-Ša's fight against peyote to several factors, including her opposition to drug use in general, her fear that Indians were becoming addicted, and her belief that Peyote could cause men under its influence to become sexually violent with women, as she insisted had happened in at least one case. See Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 149. For more on her advocacy against Peyote as part of the Society of American Indians, see Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians: Native American Intellectuals, Race, and Reform* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

General Pratt. At the same time, she joined and became secretary of the Society of American Indians (SAI), an Indian-run political organization aimed at improving living conditions on reservations and representing tribal political interests. Reviving her formal publishing, she became the editor of the organization's publication, *American Indian Magazine* in 1918 and went on to publish a book of her collected essays and fiction (both new and previously published) entitled *American Indian Stories* in 1921. Zitkala-Ša continued her community and political activism, becoming active in the General Federation of Women's Clubs, where she lobbied for the creation of an Indian Welfare Committee and traveled to places such as Oklahoma and California to advocate for Indian rights. In 1926, she founded and was elected president of the National Council of American Indians (NCAI), in which position she served until her death in 1938.

A life marked by writing, political activism, and geographical movement (living in places such as South Dakota, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Boston, Utah, California, and Washington D.C.), Zitkala-Ša's life was also marked by varying religious identities. Indeed, her diverse religious commitments throughout her life have caused scholars to disagree on which religions she practiced and can be identified with. Julianne Newmark contends that she was a practicing Christian her whole adult life, showing interest in Catholicism, Mormonism, Christian Science, and Theosophy.²⁵⁵ For Jane Hafen, "Bonnin considers the Native cosmology as legitimate for Euroamerica as that of Christianity, although she practiced both Catholicism and Mormonism in her life."²⁵⁶ Tadeusz Lewandowski believes there is less

²⁵⁵ Julianne Newmark, "Pluralism, Place, and Gertrude Bonnin's Counternativism from Utah to Washington, D.C.," *American Indian Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 326.

²⁵⁶ P. Jane Hafen, "Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty," *Wicazo Sa Review* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1997): 38.

evidence to show she practiced Mormonism outright, and places more stock in her formal conversion to Catholicism in 1909, after which she began trying to convert the Utes.²⁵⁷ She and Bonnin would also send their son to a Catholic boarding school when they moved to Washington D.C. in 1916 for Zitkala-Ša to work for SAI. When surveying her religious identities and affiliations, one could conclude the only definite is a commitment to the indefinite.

The concept of religious hybridity complicates hegemonic Christian, specifically Protestant, notions of conversion. Scholars have established the importance of the concept of conversion – as understood as a distinct *before* and *after* – for Protestant Christianity, and by extension religious history of the United States. In their introduction to the book *American Christianities: A History of Dominance and Diversity*, Catherine Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin identify how Protestants in the United States have defined “true Christianity” as needing “a heartfelt experience of divine grace (or new birth).”²⁵⁸ Lincoln Mullen distinguishes conversion as “one of the ever-present themes of nineteenth century American religion.”²⁵⁹ It is in this religious and cultural milieu, one that included the proliferation of published conversion narratives, denominations competing for converts among the many multiplying Christian sects, and wide scale conversion efforts toward indigenous people, that Zitkala-Ša’s writings appear.

²⁵⁷ Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 70.

²⁵⁸ Brekus and Gilpin, *American Christianities*, 6.

²⁵⁹ Mullen, *The Chance of Salvation*, 11.

Violent Conversions

Zitkala-Ša's first published work was a series of three essays in the *Atlantic Monthly*, that ran between January and March 1900. "Impressions of an Indian Childhood" recounts her early life on the reservation with her mother, "The School Days of an Indian Girl" relates her experience at the White's Manual Institute in Wabash, Indiana, and "An Indian Teacher Among the Indians" reflects on her time on staff at the Carlisle school. In the second essay, Zitkala-Ša records her disillusionment at White's Manual Institute, a place she had imagined as an Eden-like "land of apples" and "rosy skies," but instead found to be a source of "deep, tired sobs."²⁶⁰ The most traumatic incident for Zitkala-Ša comes early in the narrative, on her first full day at the school, when "a palefaced woman" is cutting each pupil's hair. Zitkala-Ša tries to hide under a bed to escape, but the teachers ultimately tie her to a chair and cut her braids off in a traumatic incident that leaves her "moan[ing] for my mother" and declaring "then I lost my spirit."²⁶¹ Through her detailed description of the incident, Zitkala-Ša highlights the violence of this forced act of conversion, as she describes "the cold blades of the scissors against my neck" as they "gnaw" off her braids.²⁶² Just as she had physically resisted the act by crying out loud and shaking her head all the while, in making the violence of this act visible to the reader, she resists any idea that this was a minor, inconsequential rite of passage for boarding school children. Instead, she frames the act as one of physical as well as spiritual violence; it is when she loses her hair that she "lost [her] spirit" as well. Zitkala-

²⁶⁰ Zitkala-Ša, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* eds. Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 89.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 89-91.

²⁶² *Ibid.*

Ša's description of the incident points to the deep meaning embodied in physical attributes like hair, for both teachers and students alike. She explains the significance of long hair to Sioux children like herself, since "short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards."²⁶³ Her description also points to the significance that the school itself put on physical attributes such as hair, as the teachers take extreme measures to ensure students' conversions are complete, literally head to toe.²⁶⁴

White's Manual Institute, like many Indian boarding schools, had the express mission to convert Native children to Christianity. An 1889 article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* relayed that the "main objects" of the school were to "teach the Indians English, how to work, and to adopt the Christian religion." Pointing out that since the school was founded and run by Quakers, and that there was a preference given to that form of Christianity, the author also insists, "there is no compulsion" and students "converted to other faiths are not disturbed."²⁶⁵ Nevertheless, in a 1929 history of White's Institute, Alice Patterson Green boasted, "a number [of children] were received into membership with the South Wabash

²⁶³ Ibid., 54. Vine Delora, Jr. points out the significance of Sioux women cutting their hair to specifically signify mourning in *Singing for a Spirit: A Portrait of the Dakota Sioux* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1999), 15.

²⁶⁴ Charles Eastman, a Santee Sioux and contemporary of Zitkala-Ša described the spiritual significance of hair for the Sioux in *The Soul of the Indian*, published in 1911. According to Eastman, when someone dies, "both men and women among us loosen their hair and cut it according to the degree of relationship or of devotion." In addition, to honor the loved one, a lock of the deceased hair would be cut off and wrapped in a piece of their clothing to form a "spirit bundle," which would have a prominent place in the family's home for a year after the death. After a year passed, the family would hold a feast and give away the clothing, but the hair would be "interred with appropriate ceremonies." Charles Alexander Eastman, *The Soul of the Indian* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 151,154-155. Hathi Trust <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/hvd.hn3k7i>

²⁶⁵ "Taming Young Savages: Arts of Civilization as Taught at White's Institute," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 22, 1889, 25, American Periodicals.

Monthly Meeting of Friends at their own request.”²⁶⁶ Despite assurances that conversion was voluntary, other reports paint a fuller picture. One pastor at White’s reported that “by the daily pressure of Christian influence, many of the new pupils who seemed incorrigible at first, have been restrained.”²⁶⁷ A write up in the Gurneyite Friends publication *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* ends with the declaration, “Since the days of William Penn the Indian has found no other body of people in whom he could repose such implicit faith. They are civilizing Indians, not by killing them, but by Christianizing them.”²⁶⁸

The merging of “civilizing” with peaceful “Christianizing” and the notion that students could be “restrained” into Christian through “daily pressure of Christian influencing” point to common conversion tactics of missionaries at the time. In their work on the Eastern Dakotas’ interaction with Protestant Christian missionaries in Minnesota in the nineteenth century, Sandra Lee Evenson and David J. Trayte show how the missionary goal of “bringing the Dakota to Christ” was bound up in the goal to “transform all aspects of Dakota culture.”²⁶⁹ While missionaries disagreed on whether Native Americans could receive salvation before undergoing cultural changes, or whether those cultural changes needed to happen before spiritual conversion was possible, most agreed that “Christianity was a

²⁶⁶ Alice Patterson Green, *History of White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute* (Muncie: Scott Printing Company, 1929), 14.

²⁶⁷ Quoted in Ruth Spack, “Disengagement: Zitkala-Ša’s Letters to Carlos Montezuma, 1901-1902,” *MELUS* 26, no 1 (Spring 2001): 193, JSTOR.

²⁶⁸ G.B.M., “A Visit to White’s Institute,” *Herald of Gospel Liberty*, July 15, 1885, 442, American Periodicals.

²⁶⁹ Sandra Lee Evenson and David J. Trayte, “Dress and Negotiation of Relationships Between the Eastern Dakota and Euroamericans in Nineteenth-Century Minnesota,” in *Religion, Dress, and the Body*, ed. Linda B. Arthur (Oxford: Berg Press, 1999), 105.

sociocultural package requiring internal as well as external change.”²⁷⁰ A key part of that external change, or “outward manifestation” was adopting the dress of Euroamerican Christians.²⁷¹ Evenson and Trayte show how external markers like cutting hair and giving up blankets normally worn over the shoulders of men and women became important symbols to both white missionaries and the Dakota. For white missionaries, these sartorial signs became evidence of the working of the holy spirit; for Dakota, conversion to white dress often represented pragmatic negotiations to gain access to resources, as seen in the common practice of switching between white and native dress depending on the context.²⁷² For other Dakota, these changes to white clothing also represented the threat of assimilation and thus continuing to wear Native dress was a key symbol of resistance to colonialism.²⁷³

In boarding schools like White’s Institute, school officials enacted this visible conversion through intense control of the bodies of students, particularly, as K. Tsiana Lomawaima shows, of female bodies. Lomawaima explores how “the regimentation of the external body was the essential sign of a new life,” at schools like Pratt’s Carlisle School, where students were surveilled and controlled to ensure their outward selves demonstrated their inward transformation to “Christian belief, nontribal identification, mental discipline, and moral elevation.”²⁷⁴ For girls, that entailed a transformation into what Lomawaima calls

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 105, 109.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 104.

²⁷² Ibid., 110.

²⁷³ Ibid., 111.

²⁷⁴ K. Tsiana Lomawaima, “Domesticity in the Federal Indian Schools: The Power of Authority over Mind and Body,” *American Ethnologist* 20, no. 2 (May 1993): 229. For more on the history of American Indian boarding schools see Margaret L. Archuleta, Brenda J.

the “Victorian model of middle-class white domesticity.”²⁷⁵ Laura Wexler ties this model directly to religion, showing how boarding schools and other progressive reform movements of the late nineteenth century demanded concession to “universal superiority of the middle-class white Christian home” and proved their success visually through “before and after” photographs of pupils, often sent to donors and recruiting agents. Although it is not known whether White’s Manual Institute used photographs in this way, schools such as Hampton Institute in Virginia and the Carlisle School, where Zitkala-Ša would go on to teach, certainly did.²⁷⁶

In part, the boarding schools’ and missionaries’ focus on visible assimilation, manifest in before and after photographs, belies the dominant Protestant idea that faith is mainly internal and non-visible. Brekus and Gilpin contend that, “the stereotypical protestant distinction between authentic inward faith and perfunctory public practice has had a long and extraordinary influential life in American society, not only as a strategy for narrowing the definition of Christianity, but also as a working definition of religion in its entirety.”²⁷⁷ Yet, clearly for Protestants working to convert Native Americans, the converts newfound Christian faith often required a physical sign.

Child, and K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *Away from Home: American Indian Boarding School Experiences, 1879-2000* (Phoenix: Heard Museum, 2000) and Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

²⁷⁵ Lomawaima, “Domesticity,” 230.

²⁷⁶ Wexler, *Tender Violence*, 116-117.

²⁷⁷ Brekus and Gilpin, *American Christianities*, 6.

It is in this context of mandatory visual conversion *vis a vis* dress, that Zitkala-Ša writes her jarring description of the hair cutting incident at White's Institute. In the reports of the school that ran in newspapers and in the descriptions from dignitaries visiting the school, the act of "civilizing" through "Christianizing" is depicted as routine and matter of fact. Zitkala-Ša shifts the focus by pausing in the moment of the sartorial conversion in order to register its violence. While the before and after photographs visually depict the conversion, Zitkala-Ša draws the attention to what happens *between* the photographs.

In the same autobiographical essay, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," Zitkala-Ša not only registers the violence of the conversion of native children's physical appearance, but she also critiques the supposed morality of "Christian" dress over and above that of Native dress. When she first arrives at the school and sees her fellow students, "Indian girls in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses" and "sleeved aprons and shingled hair," she ruminates that these girls were "even more immodestly dressed than I, in their tight fitting clothes."²⁷⁸ That she is describing the dress of school girls in a Quaker boarding school as immodest is especially prescient, considering Quakers general commitment to what they considered modest and conservative dress. In making the claim that Native dress may be more modest than Christian dress, Zitkala-Ša introduces a theme she will pursue through much of her writing, as she identifies what she perceives as hypocrisy on the part of whites, especially Christians and posits that Native culture offers a morally superior alternative.

She would take this up again in the essay "An Indian Teacher Among the Indians," when she more forcefully critiques the "larger missionary creed" of the "large army of white teachers," a mission she claims is marked more by self-interest than altruistic desires to teach

²⁷⁸ Zitkala-Ša, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," 90.

Indians.²⁷⁹ In this essay, she declares, “for the white man’s paper I had given up my faith in the Great Spirit” and compares herself to a tree, “uprooted from my mother, nature and God” and “shorn of my branches, which had waved in sympathy and love for home and friends.”²⁸⁰ While the word “shorn” here refers to the cutting of branches in the tree metaphor, when read in conjunction with “School Days of an Indian Girl,” the word is also a reminder of her “shorn” hair that was a key part of this violent uprooting. At the end of the essay, Zitkala-Ša urges readers to consider “whether real life or long-lasting death lies beneath this semblance of civilization” at boarding schools.²⁸¹ Thus, she presents Indian education, and the Christianizing mission of the teachers involved, as a site of negative conversion, even comparing it to death. She also resists the notion that white Christians are the “civilized” ones, calling it instead a “semblance.”

Critiques like these would gain even more force not only in her future published writings, but also in her private correspondence. When writing to Carlos Montezuma, her one-time fiancé, in June 1901, Zitkala-Ša proclaims, “I consider the Indian spiritually superior to any race of savages white or black – I call the Indian simplicity of dress and freedom of outdoor life – wisdom which is more powerful than that of the hot house flower of which your large city can boast!”²⁸² By describing whites as “savages” and insisting on

²⁷⁹ Zitkala-Ša, “An Indian Teacher Among Indians,” *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* eds. Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 111.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁸² Zitkala-Ša to Carlos Montezuma, June 1901, Carlos Montezuma Papers, *The Papers of Carlos Montezuma, Correspondence*, [C 1887] through 6 May 1904, Reel No. 1. Microfilm.

Indian spiritual superiority, she is lodging a forceful indictment against the supposed racial order that casts Whites at the top and Indians at the bottom. Moreover, by using the term “simplicity of dress,” she is aiming directly at the Christian protestant tradition of moderation through simplicity, a tradition she would be familiar with after having spent time with Quaker teachers at White’s school. For Zitkala-Ša, it is not white Christians, but Indians who can provide the best spiritual model for simplicity of dress. In her early writings, especially the famous biographical essays that launched her into the literary world, and in her own correspondence, Zitkala-Ša puts on display the violence of Christian teachers’ conversion efforts and critiques the supposed superiority of Christianity over indigenous culture and religion.

Reverse Conversions

Zitkala-Ša’s first short story was published in *Harper’s Magazine* in March 1901. “The Soft-Hearted Sioux,” while less known than her autobiographical essays, provides a robust critique of the missionizing forces of Christianity (so much so that Pratt railed against it in the Carlisle School paper, *The Red Man*, and reportedly called Zitkala-Ša a pagan).²⁸³ It does so by imagining a “reverse conversion” scenario, one in which the hair that was so violently cut in schools like White’s Manual Institute is allowed to grow back, and with it a connection to its Native spiritual power.

²⁸³ Lewandowski, 51. According to Lewandowski, Zitkala-Ša told Carlos Montezuma that Pratt had labeled the story “trash” and called her “worse than a pagan.” A front page story in the Carlisle school paper *The Red Man* criticized the story as “pronounced morbidness” and claimed that Zitkala-Ša “injures herself and harms the educational work in progress for the race from which she sprang.” See ““The Soft-Hearted Sioux’: Morally Bad,” *The Red Man and Helper*, April 12, 1901, 1.

In the story, a young Indian man, whose grandmother once hoped he would become a “brave warrior” like his father, instead returns to his family from his mission school with the “soft-heart of Christ,” having been converted to Christianity, taught that killing is wrong, and convicted to convert his tribe. When he arrives, “with the white man’s Bible in [his] hand” and “wearing foreigner’s dress,” he finds his father is sick.²⁸⁴ Much of the story focuses on the conflict between his family’s belief system, embodied in the Medicine Man who visits the father, and the young man’s new-found “soft-hearted” Christianity, which compels him to make the Medicine Man leave the family’s home while the son prays instead for his father’s conversion. Trafficking in hyperbole, Zitkala-Ša takes the Christian pacifist tradition, which she would have certainly been exposed to while at White’s Institute, and stretches it to its furthest conclusion, making the young man unwilling to kill buffalo to provide his father with food. While it is ultimately the son’s actions that are critiqued in the story, it is his dress which most obviously marks him as different, especially to the medicine man, who embodies the traditional Native religious belief in the story. Garbed in a “loose robe,” the medicine man’s first words to the son deal with his White dress, asking “what loyal son is he, who returning to his father’s people, wears a foreigner’s dress?” before calling him a “traitor to his people.”²⁸⁵ As the medicine man goes on to predict, the son is unable to provide food for his father who continues to decline from starvation. Although the son has been dedicated to his newfound Christian faith for the first half of the story, a transformation begins as he stands outside one evening wondering if “the sky ... separated the soft-hearted Son of God

²⁸⁴ Zitkala-Ša, “The Soft-Hearted Sioux,” *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* eds. Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 120.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 122.

from us.” At this moment the young man also reflects, “my neglected hair had grown long and fell upon my neck.”²⁸⁶ When he returns inside and finds his father gnawing on a buffalo hide to no avail, he makes the decision to kill a cow from the herd of a white man nearby. After doing so, he is chased and eventually kills one of his pursuers in order to return with the meat to his father, whom he finds has already died. When he turns himself in for his crime and faces a death sentence, he wonders if he will meet Jesus or his “warrior father” in death, suggesting that he has begun to question his conversion to Christianity. This is further evidenced by the fact he takes his mother to the medicine man before turning himself in – the same medicine man he had earlier banished from his family’s side. In ultimately killing for his father (even if it was too late), he fulfills his grandmother’s desire for him to become a warrior, and, in taking his mother to the medicine man, re-affirms a Native understanding of spirituality. In the description of his spiritual reflection and de-conversion – as an “icy blast from the North blew through my hair and skull” – bodily and cultural materials become catalysts for this transformation, as the narrator reminds readers that his long hair is a key part of this transformation.²⁸⁷

Vine Deloria, Jr. elaborates on the relationship between hair and Sioux identity, specifically that of male Sioux warriors, in *Singing for a Spirit: A Portrait of the Dakota Sioux*. Recounting the life of his grandfather, Deloria writes that his great-grandparents had told their son, “a scalp lock of beautiful long hair is the most desirable thing for a warrior to possess. Take care of your hair.” In response, Deloria’s grandfather was reluctant to cut his hair because, “I wanted to keep my hair long and beautiful as became a warrior.” When he

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 123.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 123.

finally did convert to Christianity and cut his hair at the request of an Episcopal priest, it was difficult to return to his people, as he recounted that “many ... were disappointed and jeered at me” saying, “Coward! He fears warfare!”²⁸⁸ Much like the son in the “Soft-Hearted Sioux,” Deloria’s shorn hair is seen by his Sioux community as a loss of his Native identity, particularly manhood and power. In Zitkala-Ša’s story, however, the son’s hair grows back, and with it his status as a warrior. Thus, in the fictional space Zitkala-Ša creates on the pages of *Harper’s Magazine* she registers the cost of Christian conversion, a conversion that is manifested in “foreigner’s dress,” but she is also able to enact a reverse conversion, turning the traditional Protestant Christian conversion narrative on its head.

Zitkala-Ša continues this reversal of Christianity’s superiority to indigenous practices in “A Protest Against the Abolition of the Indian Dance,” originally published in the *Boston Transcript* in January 1902. Contesting the idea that the nudity in Native dancing is “shockingly immodest,” as she has heard some claim (and pointing out that dancers are not fully naked, but wear a loin cloth and body paint), she criticizes a “false modesty” that “would dress the Indian not for protection from the winter weather, but to put overalls on the soul’s improper earthly garment.”²⁸⁹ Furthermore, she pushes against the idea that dancing is a “relic of barbarism,” instead contending that it is the dress of whites that is barbaric. She writes:

The daintiness and exquisite web-cloth of the low-necked sleeveless evening gowns must be so from the imperative need to distract the mind from the steel frames in which fair bodies are painfully corseted. It may

²⁸⁸ Deloria, *Singing for a Spirit*, 43.

²⁸⁹ Zitkala-Ša, “A Protest Against the Abolition of the Indian Dance,” *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* eds. Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 237.

be gauze-covered barbarism, for history does tell of the barbaric Teutons and Anglo-Saxons. It may be a martyrdom to some ancient superstition which centuries of civilization and Christianization have not wholly eradicated from the yellow-haired and blue-eyed races.²⁹⁰

Here, it is not the “naked” Indian dancers who are practicing “gauze-covered barbarism;” instead, Anglo-Saxon customs are described as “superstition,” a term typically attributed at the time to Native American spiritual practices such as dances. Through these reversals, Zitkala-Ša criticizes the supposed normalcy of Anglo-Saxon customs. Rather than seeing them as “neutral,” she highlights the peculiarities embedded within them and insists they are no better (and in fact, to her, are worse) than Native practices.

Zitkala-Ša’s critique of Christianity would reach perhaps its most forceful in “Why I am a Pagan,” an essay she wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in December 1902. In it she connects spirituality to nature, ruminating on the “spiritual essence” of flowers, and the “kinship to any and all parts of this vast universe.” She also relays an encounter with a Native preacher who has come to convince her to attend church and avoid hell. She “listens with respect” to the man, despite the fact she only hears “the jangling phrases of a bigoted creed.” In describing her mother’s conversion, she calls Christianity “the new superstition.” She concludes her essay by stating her preference for “natural gardens where the voice of the Great spirit is heard” to the dogma of missionaries, finally declaring, “If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a pagan.”²⁹¹

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 237.

²⁹¹ Zitkala-Ša, “Why I am a Pagan,” *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1902, 801-803. Notably, when the essay was reprinted in her published 1921 collection *American Indian Stories*, she changed the title to “The Great Spirit” and altered the ending, taking out the final line declaring herself a pagan, and instead inserting more rumination on the Great Spirit.

The provocative language and imagery Zitkala-Ša uses in “Why I am a Pagan” turns Christian missionaries’ language regarding Christian vs. indigenous spiritual practices on its head, as she seems to embrace the label “pagan” and is refers to Christianity at one point as a “superstition.” According to Tadeusz Lewnadowski, this essay, read in conjunction with “A Protest Against the Abolition of the Indian Dance,” published earlier in the year “publicly undermined the basis of missionary involvement in Indian education by re-embracing the very belief system they sought to eradicate.”²⁹² Similarly, a reader’s attention to the details related to dress in “A protest against the abolition of the Indian dance” and the story “The Soft-Hearted Sioux” reveals that Zitkala-Ša specifically uses adornment of the body as a signal of and tool for undermining the Protestant missionary conversion project.

Complex Conversions

These reverse conversions and forceful critiques of Christian conversion are not the full story, however. Whereas in 1902 she declared, “I am a Pagan” and defended Indian dances, eight years later, she would write to the director of the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions requesting support for building a Church on the Ute reservation and expressing disappointment that the Utes were still practicing rituals like the Bear Dance and Sun Dance.²⁹³ Zitkala-Ša had converted to Catholicism in 1909 after a positive experience with the Benedictine Catholic Mission on the Standing Rock reservation. According to Lewandowski, she had been impressed with the “wonderful work” done by the nuns and

²⁹² Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 63.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 70.

priest and later declared simply, “I was converted.”²⁹⁴ In a similar vein, it could be that Zitkala-Ša’s dismissal of Native dances was a strategic rhetorical move to help her goal of building a church on the reservation. However, shortly after she lamented the continuation of annual dances among the Utes, she attended a Sun Dance ritual and would also go on to defend Native spirituality again, stating “I have been trained . . . In the concepts of the Christian religion, but I do not find them more beautiful, more noble, or more true than the religious ideals of the Indian. Indeed, if one allows for a change in names, the two sets of concepts are much the same. I should not like to see my people lose their ideals, or have them supplanted by others less fitted to influence their lives for good.”²⁹⁵

That Zitkala-Ša’s religious identities were complex is not surprising. The complexity and seeming contradictions of Zitkala-Ša’s religious life can on the one hand be understood in the context of the interplay between indigenous religious forms and Christianity. In their study of Sioux religious practices, Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks discuss the strategic reasons for formal conversions to Christianity, as well as the ways in which indigenous religious practice and Christianity were combined in practice. They insist that “an individual’s conversion to one of these Christian denominations should not be assumed necessarily to entail the rejection of native Sioux traditional religion.”²⁹⁶ Zitkala-Ša’s religious identities can also be understood within her propensity to move between cultural contexts more broadly. As Cathy Davidson and Ada Norris contend, “she did not live a dual

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ Quoted in William F. Hanson, *Sun Dance Land* (Provo: J. Grant Stevenson, 1967), 70.

²⁹⁶ Raymond J. DeMallie and Douglas R. Parks, eds. *Sioux Indian Religion: Tradition and Innovation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), 13.

or fractured life. Rather she moved in, out, around, and between worlds.”²⁹⁷ While her conversion to Catholicism might be the best example of this movement, she had always comfortably shifted between religious language and ideals. Indeed, a decade earlier, in the year leading up to publishing “Why I am a Pagan,” Zitkala-Ša had included in her letters references to attending church (though she did not specify what church) alongside references to the “spirit of a Universal God.”²⁹⁸

Even the seemingly forceful critique in “Why I am a Pagan,” reveals a religious understanding that is far from simple or linear. Within this essay, Zitkala-Ša in fact switches between both Native and traditional Christian spiritual terms, including phrases like “Great Spirit,” “loving Mystery,” “His magnitude,” “infinite Love,” and “God’s creature.”²⁹⁹ Perhaps most tellingly her last sentence, “If this is Paganism, then at present, at least, I am a pagan.” Including the phrase “at present, at least,” suggests that for Zitkala-Ša, religious identity was never settled, but rather something that could switch, shift, and embody different forms.

Shortly after Zitkala-Ša’s conversion to Catholicism, she participated in an artistic collaboration that in many ways embodied this religious hybridity. It is also one of the most vexing episodes of her life for contemporary scholars. In 1913, Zitkala-Ša, then a self-defined Catholic, collaborated with white Mormon music teacher Richard Hanson to write and produce *The Sun Dance Opera*. The opera uses the Sun Dance ritual as a backdrop for a

²⁹⁷ Davidson and Norris, “Introduction,” xiii.

²⁹⁸ Zitkala-Ša, Letter to Carlos Montezuma April 12, 1901, 5. Carlos Montezuma Papers. *The Papers of Carlos Montezuma, Correspondence*, [C 1887] through 6 May 1904, Reel No. 1. Microfilm.

²⁹⁹ Zitkala-Ša, “Why I am a Pagan,” 801-803.

fictional love story between a Sioux man, his Sioux love interest, and a competing Shoshone suitor. According to Jane Hafen, the opera represented a melding of “common musical interests [of Zitkala-Ša and Hanson], wild west shows, Indian cultural performances at fairs, and the tradition of Mormon pageants” to create a performance that would sound “like a cross between a Victor Herbert operetta and the sound track to a John Ford Western.”³⁰⁰ The opera was performed regionally around Utah and featured non-Native professional performers for the leading roles, with Utes sidelined as chorus members.

The ritual from which the opera takes its name was an important religious practice for many indigenous groups on the plains, but especially the Sioux. Zitkala-Ša purportedly called the Sun Dance the “national religion of the Sioux” and insisted on the performance including Sioux elements, even though the Utes also practiced a version of the Sun Dance.³⁰¹ The Sun Dance took on various forms throughout the Plains nations, but generally included several key elements. Taking place in the summer, the ritual involved ceremonial dancing, singing, and fasting. In preparation for the Sun Dance, a tree was cut and erected as a center pole and a circle drawn around the area. A leader, sometimes described as an intercessor, directed the ritual, as singers, drummers, and onlookers gathered outside the circle. The chosen dancer(s), adorned in paint and feathers, would dance around the pole for the duration of the Sun Dance, lasting anywhere from two to five days and nights. The dancer’s skin was pierced and

³⁰⁰ Jane Hafen, ed. *Dreams and Thunder: Stories, Poems, and the Sun Dance Opera* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xix; Hafen, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty,” 35.

³⁰¹ Hanson, *Sun Dance Land*, 76.

strings were placed to attach him to the center pole.³⁰² Thus, as he danced, his flesh would break open. The broken flesh was often seen as the culmination of the suffering and sacrifice the dancer took upon himself, as he offered up his petitions, either for himself or the larger group. In one account of a Dakota Sioux Sun Dance, as the dancers' flesh tore, his relatives gave something to the poor, and when all the skin was torn and his sacrifice thus complete, women gathered around him singing.³⁰³

The plot of the opera *The Sun Dance Opera* involves a love triangle between Sioux brave Ohiya (named after Zitkala-Ša's son), Sioux woman Winona, and a Shoshone man named Sweet Singer. The opera begins with Sweet Singer revealing he has stolen "sacred love leaves" from a medicine man, and unwittingly made a Shoshone maiden fall in love with him, but he does not love her. So he escapes to the Sioux, taking only the "songs of my people."³⁰⁴ Meanwhile, Ohiya and Winona have fallen in love, but Ohiya must prove himself to her father. Sweet Singer also falls in love with Winona and then is placed in charge of leading the Sun Dance in which Ohiya will be dancing. Sweet Singer vows to best Ohiya,

³⁰² In some versions of the Sun Dance, tiny buffalo skulls were also attached to the skin. See Lewandowski, *Red Bird Red Power*, 81. Jane Hafen notes that for *The Sun Dance Opera*, singers and actors feigned the body piercing. See Hafen, "A Cultural Duet: Zitkala-Ša and 'The Sun Dance Opera,'" *Great Plains Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 108.

³⁰³ Deloria, *Singing for Spirit*, 197. Deloria includes a detailed account of the Sun Dance, which was originally recorded by Sarah Olden in "The People of Tipi Sapa." See Deloria, *Singing for a Spirit*, 195-199. For more on the various forms the Sun Dance would take, see Joseph G. Jorgensen, *The Sun Dance Religion: Power for the Powerless* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972); George Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theology and American Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 55-59; Lewandowski, *Red Bird, Red Power*, 81-82.

³⁰⁴ Hafen, *Dreams and Thunder*, 131.

and make him suffer by singing “such long songs that Ohiya’s strength shall be as naught.”³⁰⁵

In the end, Ohiya lasts through the entire Sun Dance, dancing for five days and nights, thus proving his strength and love for Winona.

Scholarship around *The Sun Dance Opera* has focused on reconciling Zitkala-Ša’s activism on behalf of native rights with her participation in what Hafen admits would be understood today as “artistic colonialism” or “sentimental colonialism.”³⁰⁶ In addition to questions about how much control Hanson wielded over the project, and how little credit he gave Zitkala-Ša (her name does not appear on the title page, though he does give her credit as his collaborator in his memoir, *The Sun Dance Land*), the opera brings up questions about performativity, music, and sacred rituals. As Hafen points out, even though some specific prayers and rituals of the Sun Dance are omitted out of respect, the “domestication of the intense and sacred Sun Dance into the harmless music of light opera” full of song is problematic.³⁰⁷ Perhaps more significant is the fact that the opera includes the “public imitation of sacred rituals and enactments of ritual gestures by non-Indians.”³⁰⁸

Although Zitkala-Ša did not leave records related to her participation in the opera, Hafen suggests there are several possibilities for why she took part. In addition to giving her “a creative outlet for her musical, literary, and performing talents,” the opera may have also been a way for Zitkala-Ša to show the value of indigenous culture and religion, “elevating

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 147.

³⁰⁶ Hafen, “A Cultural Duet,” 103; Hafen, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty,” 38.

³⁰⁷ Hafen, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty,” 38.

³⁰⁸ Hafen, “A Cultural Duet,” 104.

Native arts to the pinnacle of Western civilization” in the form of an opera.³⁰⁹ Most importantly, as Hafen points out, the Sun Dance Opera may have provided a space in which the Ute dancers could openly practice some parts of a sacred ritual that had officially been banned by the federal government for several decades.³¹⁰

The majority of costumes for the white performers were made at Brigham Young University, but according to Hanson, they also included bead costumes and other “genuine Indian properties” partially provided by the Bonnins, and Ute performers wore their own attire, including “war bonnets which had ... been used recently in Ute ceremonials.”³¹¹ Hanson also writes that the Utes did the make up for all of the performers in order to “have proper symbolic facial and body designs so that our prayer and dance rituals may be authentic.”³¹² Because no record exists from Zitkala-Ša or any of the Ute dancers, it is hard to tell if this was an accurate account or if Hanson was attempting to assure readers that his performance was authentic. Similarly, a reviewer and friend of Hanson wrote that Zitkala-Ša had “furnished all the ideas for the magnificent costumes.”³¹³ Hanson described the moment

³⁰⁹ Hafen, “A Cultural Duet,” 109. Hafen, “Zitkala-Ša: Sentimentality and Sovereignty,” 38.

³¹⁰ Hafen, “A Cultural Duet,” 103.

³¹¹ Hanson, *Sun Dance Land*, 82.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

³¹³ Catherine Parsons, “An Operatic Skelton on the Western Frontier: Zitkala-Ša, William F. Hanson, and the Sun Dance Opera,” *Women & Music - A Journal of Gender and Culture* 5, no. 1 (2001): 4. ProQuest. This statement, if true, would suggest that if the Ute performers did wear their own attire, they were likely directed on what to include.

the men entered the stage, “fully dressed and adorned with the symbolic facial and body war-paint marking, and in the costumes of many colors and designs” as “religiosity supreme!”³¹⁴

Not only did the production include white performers in native costuming, the press and promotion around the opera often featured Zitkala-Ša, and sometimes Hanson himself, in native dress. An article in the *El Paso Sun Herald* titled “Indian Girl Writes Opera” includes a picture of Zitkala-Ša in a dress with beadwork and fringe, a blanket over her shoulders, and hair worn in braids (see Figure 5).³¹⁵ Another picture, featured in Hanson’s *Sun Dance Land* book, shows Zitkala-Sa in the same clothing and Hanson himself in a fringed buckskin suit.³¹⁶

“Playing” with Dress

The Sun Dance Opera was not the only place where Zitkala-Ša engaged in what Philip J. Deloria has called “native people playing Indian.”³¹⁷ From the New York pictures shot by Kasebeir, to her participation in Colonel Pratt’s Carlisle band tour when she performed Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* in Dakota dress at the White House, Zitkala-Ša had frequently donned native garb in selected settings.³¹⁸ She continued to do so after the *Sun Dance Opera* as well. Pictures from meetings of the Society of American Indians show her at

³¹⁴ Hanson, *Sun Dance Land*, 175.

³¹⁵ “Indian Girl Writes Opera,” *El Paso Sun Herald*, December 27, 1913.

³¹⁶ Hanson, *Sun Dance Land*, ii.

³¹⁷ Philip J. Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998), 126.

³¹⁸ Lucy Maddox, *Citizen Indians*, 152. For a detailed account of Zitkala-Ša’s participation in the Carlisle band tour, see Ruth Spack’s “Zitkala-Ša, The Song of Hiawatha, and the Carlisle Indian School Band: A Captivity Tale,” *Legacy* 25, no 2. (2008): 211-224. Spack contends that Pratt requested she come along on the tour in order to mitigate and contain the literary critiques she was beginning to write while in New England.

times in conventional American style dress, while other photographs also appear in which she is wearing native dress. When she was elected secretary of the Society of American Indians in 1917, two pictures of her appeared in the society's publication, *The American Indian Magazine*. Both were under the headings "Our Sioux Secretary." In one, captioned "Zitkala-Ša (Mrs. Raymond T. Bonnin)," she wears her hair in two long braids and wears what appears to be a dress with native patterns. In the other, captioned simply "Zitkala-Ša," she wears a white collared shirt with a ribbon tie at the collar, a dark skirt, fitted at the waist, and her hair is pinned up on her head (See Figures 6 & 7).³¹⁹ Just as she switches between the names Gertrude Bonnin and Zitkala-Ša, she also switches dress modes.

Lucy Maddox explores how Indian intellectuals like Zitkala-Ša, Charles Eastman, and Luther Standing Bear all frequently performed and were photographed in traditional Sioux dress as a "way of both inserting their embodied selves into the national consciousness and establishing their claim to a place on those stages."³²⁰ While Maddox admits that there is as "seeming contradiction" in working to "correct stereotypes" while also wearing the very clothing that "contributed to stereotyping," she also insists that figures like Zitkala-Ša "made it clear through their public performances and their representations of themselves, that citizenship and assimilation were not the same thing. It was entirely possible, from their perspectives, to demonstrate one's 'civilization' and one's Indianness in a single performance."³²¹

³¹⁹ "Our Sioux Secretary," *American Indian Magazine*, Oct – Dec 1917, 212, 268.

³²⁰ Maddox, *Citizen Indians*, 5.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

Philip Deloria makes similar arguments about the necessity for native people to “play Indian” in a cultural context in which that was the only cultural capital accessible to them. However, he registers this as loss more so than Maddox, as he focuses on the potential to “reaffirm” stereotypes for “a stubborn white audience,” rather than change the white audience’s attitudes toward native people.³²²

Wearing native garb in a performative fashion also opened figures like Zitkala-Ša up to ridicule, even from those who might be sympathetic to native rights. When she was fighting a campaign against the use of peyote, a white ethnologist and defender of the Peyote religion, James Mooney attempted to discredit her by referring to a newspaper photograph of her in Native dress. Pointing out that “she wore a fringed dress whose style identified its provenance as a southern Plains tribe; her belt was that of a Navajo man, and the fan she carried was itself, a type used by men in the peyote ceremony,” Mooney used her clothing to question her knowledge of Indian culture, and perhaps her authenticity as well.³²³ However, as Cathy Davidson and Ada Norris contend, “all evidence suggests ... that she was well aware that her ‘Indian costume’ (as she called it) was a tribal *mélange*, but wore it nonetheless because she felt it would help further the cause of Indian rights.”³²⁴ Zitkala-Ša’s decision to wear materials from various tribes may speak to her (likely accurate) assumption that most audiences wouldn’t be able to tell the differences, but it may also speak to what

³²² Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 126. See also Gerald Vizenor’s *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) and *Fugitive Poses: Native American Indian Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

³²³ Quoted in Davidson and Norris, “Introduction,” xxiii.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

Maddox identifies as her life-long commitment to a “pan-Indian consciousness,” framing her Sioux identity in relationship to her larger goal of pan-Indian rights.³²⁵

Zitkala-Ša’s choice to wear garb with a variety of symbolic meanings, in pictures or in performances, from *The Sun Dance Opera* to lectures, also represents a hybridity and willingness to hold multiple identities in tension at once. If, in the context of missionary activity on reservations and boarding schools, religious conversion was represented by a permanent change in clothing and appearance, Zitkala-Ša’s willingness to “play” with dress critiques the notion of a linear or one-time conversion. Like the hybridity of Zitkala-Ša’s religious identities, her sartorial hybridity is a visual embodiment of her willingness to shift between cultural and religious contexts.

Yet, this sartorial hybridity was not only a reflection of the complexity of her religious identities; it was also a tool that Zitkala-Ša could use in her activism for indigenous people. Zitkala-Ša’s was an activist operating in what Davidson and Norris identify as the “assimilative era of American Indian politics,” a context in which Native advocates had to negotiate “many different tribal interests while dealing with an increasingly punitive federal education and social welfare system.”³²⁶ Beginning in 1916, Zitkala-Ša became actively involved in organizations like the Society of American Indians, the first pan-Indian organization run by Native people, although, as Jace Weaver points out, the membership and leadership drew from Eastern educated, mostly Christian converts.³²⁷ She then went on to

³²⁵ Maddox, *Citizen Indians*, 127. In addition to Zitkala-Ša’s extensive work in pan-Indian organizations, Maddox also points to her use of “Indian” to self-identify in her writing, more so than Sioux.

³²⁶ Davidson and Norris, “Introduction,” xxv

³²⁷ Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 87.

join the General Federation of Women's Clubs, a conglomerate of mostly white women's groups, where she pushed for the creation of an Indian Welfare Committee and investigated land and oil rights abuses against Native Americans in Oklahoma. In 1926, she founded and was elected president of the National Council of American Indians, which held as its motto, "helping Indians help themselves in protecting their rights and properties."³²⁸

Zitkala-Ša's commitment to activism on behalf of Native peoples provides a key context for interpreting her decisions to "play Indian" in some public appearances. Juliane Newmark writes, "though some might critically see Bonnin's own Native-attire array and employment of Native symbolism, such as on the jacket of her 'blanket book' *Old Indian Legends*, as her own version of exploitive primitivism, her maintenance of a strong and nuanced commitment to tribal welfare alongside her individual celebration of her own indigeneity indicate her distance from doctrinaire protectionist nativism."³²⁹

Maddox contends that the tribal regalia Zitkala-Ša appears in for certain public performances "provides a physical representation of those visions of her past – including her own childhood past – that she includes in her poems and stories, using visual imagery to invoke the role she chose for herself and advocate for others."³³⁰ Zitkala-Ša's contemporary Charles Eastman, whom she collaborated with in the Society of American Indians, explained his agreement to perform for white audiences in what he called "our ancestral garb of honor,"

³²⁸ Davidson and Norris, "Introduction," xxviii.

³²⁹ Newmark, "Pluralism, Place," 329.

³³⁰ Maddox, *Citizen Indians*, 153.

by maintaining that his clothing made him “a pioneer in this new line of defense of the Native American, not so much of his rights in the land as of his character and religion.”³³¹

William Hanson, Zitkala-Ša’s collaborator for *The Sun Dance Opera* describes the dress that Zitkala-Ša wore for her lectures: “she always appeared in her gorgeous full dress of buckskin, beads, and feathers. Her two long black braids of hair hung to her knees.”

According to Hanson, her stories “won sympathy and appreciation for her people, the original Americans” and she “always reminded her white-man audiences of the current and past history ... boldly condemn[ing] the American people for the constant use of force and intrigue in the conquest of the red-man-inherited and occupied territory.”³³² Certainly for Zitkala-Ša, donning native garb for lectures did not preclude her from lodging forceful critiques in her lectures; more likely it was a tool she hoped would make her audiences more receptive to her message.

With an understanding that Zitkala-Ša donned native garb because she felt it would further the cause of Indian rights, or as she wrote to Arthur Parker of one instance, “in this case, the use of Indian dress for a drawing card is for a good cause,”³³³ her choice to do so can be read as its own kind of spiritual act to strengthen her community. Returning to the Sun Dance on which Bonnin and Hanson’s opera was based, George Tinker argues that no matter what personal reasons participants may have for dancing, ultimately, a person engages in the Sun Dance for the benefit of the whole community. According to Tinker, this is most embodied in the chant that commonly occurs during the ceremony, “That the people might

³³¹ Quoted in Maddox, *Citizens and Indians*, 139-140.

³³² Hanson, *Sun Dance Land*, 69.

³³³ Davidson and Norris, “Introduction,” xxiii.

live!”³³⁴ Perhaps Zitkala-Ša saw her participation in Hanson’s opera, and her decision to selectively don native garb for white audiences as her own way to ensure “the people might live!” Thus, her clothing was one of several “languages” she could adopt, along with writing and speaking to ingratiate, perhaps convert, her audience to the cause of native rights.

Interpreting Zitkala-Ša’s appearances in native garb as religious acts, even if they were primarily performative, requires a reframing of what has often been defined as religious in the United States. As Catherine Brekus and W. Clark Gilpin write, “the stereotypically Protestant distinction between authentic inward faith and perfunctory public practice has had a long and extraordinarily influential life in American society, not only as a strategy for narrowing the definition of Christianity, but also as a working definition of religion in its entirety.”³³⁵ Not only has a distinction been drawn between “inward faith” and “perfunctory public practice,” with the latter not counting as religion, but religion has also been defined as something that is distinct, set apart from everyday life. Dominant Euro-American understandings of religion have depended on the supposed dialectical concepts of sacred and ordinary. In her work on Pueblo Indians and the fraught concept of religious freedom, Tisa Wenger shows how the very concept of religion, “understood as a set of beliefs, practices, and institutions that can be separated from other spheres of life” was a European cultural and colonial concept, having no translation in Native American language.³³⁶ Instead indigenous

³³⁴ Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance*, 59. Similarly, Joseph G. Jorgensen shows how the post-reservation version of the Sun Dance, as practiced by the Utes and Shoshones, was primarily used to “promote inter- and intra-reservation well-being.” Jorgensen, *The Sun Dance Religion*, 19.

³³⁵ Brekus and Gilpin, *American Christianities*, 6.

³³⁶ Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Indian Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 5.

people, such as the Pueblo for instance, viewed all aspects of life as interconnected, framing a tribal ceremony as “community work, in the same category as maintaining the irrigation ditches and cleaning the public spaces – all of which provide mutual benefits and must therefore be shared by all members of the tribe.”³³⁷ With this understanding, Zitkala-Ša’s writings on dress and the body, as well as the visual rhetoric she employed in her own costuming, should be read in the context of her larger commitments. Engaging in what Jace Weaver has called “communitism,” a word that combines community and activism to describe the work of Native American literature,³³⁸ Zitkala-Ša’s used dress to critique White missionaries, explore her own religious identities, and ultimately advocate for Native causes.

Sixteen years after publishing the account of her hair cutting in “School Days of an Indian Girl,” Zitkala-Ša recalled the experience again in a poem titled “The Indian’s Awakening,” published in *The American Indian Magazine* in 1916. In the poem, the speaker reflects on feeling distant from her people. At the urging of a voice, she closes her eyes and has a vision of a horse, which carries her to the Spirit-world, where a group of ancestors assure her they are still connected to her in a “Memory-chain.” The horse returns her from the Spirit-world, and she ends with a praise, “Gift of Life, pray waste not in wails! / The

³³⁷ Wenger, *We Have a Religion*, 6. Wenger argues that while defining Pueblo Indian dances as religious allowed Pueblos to appeal to the concept of religious freedom and thereby protect their right to continue dancing, it reiterated boundaries around religion, making it harder for Pueblos and other Native Americans to appeal to religious freedom for other causes such as land rights issues.

³³⁸ Weaver, *That the People Might Live*, 43.

Maker of Souls forever prevails!”³³⁹ Like her other writing, the poem shifts back and forth between Native spiritual language such as “Great Spirit,” “One of the Spirit Space,” and “Spirit-World,” and traditional Christian references including, “Christ,” and phrases like, “Is there not a God on whom to rely? A part of His plan.”

Zitkala-Ša begins the poem with the words, “I snatch at my eagle plumes and long hair / A hand cut my hair; my robes did deplete / Left heart all unchanged, the work incomplete.” In this rendering, though her hair was cut and her native dress replaced, the work of assimilation was incomplete, as she is still “snatching” for her eagle plumes and long hair. However, later in the poem she writes, “I’ve lost my long hair; my eagles plumes too / From you my own people, I’ve gone astray,” words that express the feeling of being cut off. Although by the end of the poem she is feels at peace, spiritually rejuvenated by her vision of a journey to the Spirit-world, these words still register lament and regret. They point to the complexity of Zitkala-Ša’s religious and cultural identities, as both her hair and her deployment of indigenous garb stands in for a part of her faith identity she has lost and for which she is still grasping.

In her foreword to the collection *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape*, Michelene Pesantubbee interrogates a popular analogy about Native Americans navigating dual identities of Native and White culture. In the original allegory, a native person navigates down a river, with one foot in each “canoe” of cultures. As the canoes drift apart, they must choose which canoe to step in, or else risk falling in the water, thus being “alienated from both.” However, Pesantubbee points out that

³³⁹ Zitkala-Ša, “The Indian’s Awakening” (Jan-March 1916), *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings*, eds. Cathy M. Davidson and Ada Norris (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 164-167.

navigating two canoes is actually a “much more complex endeavor,” and so too is the relationship between Native Americans and their experience with missionaries. She writes:

The canoes do not just lazily drift toward and away from each other compelling either/or decisions. At times, driven by the currents, they violently collide, rocking and twisting against each other and the currents. Other times, the currents push the canoe so tightly together that they appear to be one canoe traveling downriver. Such is the case with Native American mission experiences as individuals, clans, and communities strove to adapt to changing conditions.³⁴⁰

Through her life and writings, Zitkala-Ša expressed the complexity of navigating these “canoes” in several ways, including utilizing the visibility of dress. At times, she used display and descriptions of dress to highlight the violent collisions with the Christian conversion project; at other times she used them to imagine stepping fully back into one “canoe,” and at still other times she used dress and the body to fully embrace and step into the collision of identities. Ultimately, by doing so, she critiqued dominant Protestant understandings of conversion, religious identity, and perhaps the very concept of religion itself.

³⁴⁰ Michelene Pesantubbee, foreword to *Native Americans, Christianity, and the Reshaping of the American Religious Landscape*, eds. Joel W. Martin and Mark A. Nicholas (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), xii.

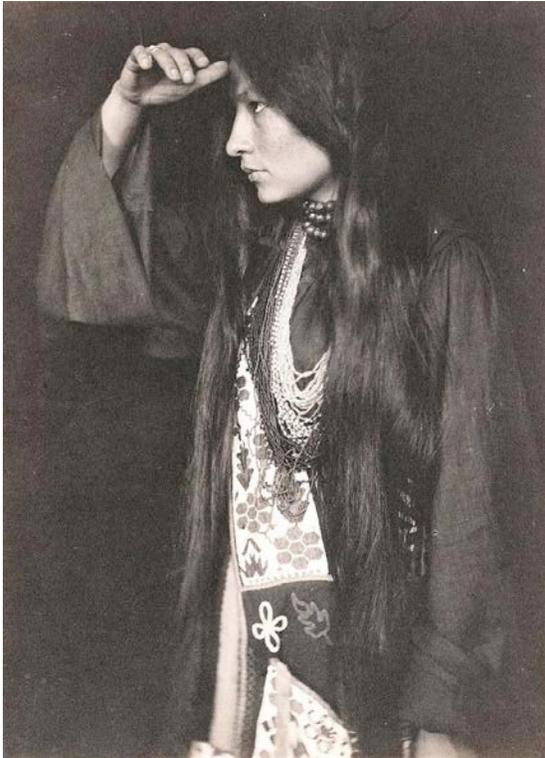


Figure 3. Zitkala-Ša photographed by Gertrude Kasebier, 1898. Smithsonian Institution.
<https://www.si.edu/spotlight/meeting-of-two-gertrudes>



Figure 4. Zitkala-Ša with violin. Photographed by Gertrude Kasebier, 1898. Smithsonian Institution,
<https://www.si.edu/spotlight/meeting-of-two-gertrudes>



Mrs. R. T. Bonnin (Zitkala Sa).

Figure 5. "Indian Girl Writes Opera," *El Paso Sun Herald*, December 27, 1913.



ZITKALA—SA

Figure 6. “Zitkala-Sa.” *The American Indian Magazine*. V 5-6 (Oct-Dec 1917), p. 268. Babel Haithi Trust. Public Domain.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081688537;view=1up;seq=282>

OUR SIOUX SECRETARY



ZITKALA-SA (Mrs. Raymond T. Bonnin)

Figure 7. “Our Sioux Secretary.” *The American Indian Magazine*. V 5-6 (Oct-Dec 1917), p. 212. Babel Haithi Trust. Public Domain.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433081688537;view=1up;seq=282>

CONCLUSION
RELIGIOUS GARB IN THE 21ST CENTURY

It is my contention, illuminated in the case studies in this dissertation, that religious dress has historically operated – on varying levels and in uneven ways – as a visual critique of normative formations of religion and culture in the United States. Its visibility critiques a Protestant understanding of faith as private and individual, as well as broader cultural issues such as consumerism, secularism, and settler colonialism. While the period between the end of the Civil War and the first two decades of the twentieth century is certainly not the only time in which religious dress has been important, it is particularly significant because of the multiple religious and cultural factors that were converging in the United States at the time. As fashion became more readily available through the rise of the department store, and as women became consumer subjects, especially in relation to the fashion industry, women’s dress choices were a target of significant discussion and debate. Religious groups grappled with the ever-diversifying religious landscape, particularly as Christian denominations institutionalized and competed for followers, causing many groups to debate giving up distinctive garb in an effort to attract more members. Improvements to transportation and media networks meant that Americans were exposed to more diverse religious and ethnic groups, even as anti-immigrant sentiment found emboldened expression. This was a time period which saw both the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, where representatives from many world religions shared lectures in an event in Chicago that was coordinated with the World’s Fair, as well as some of the most restrictive immigration legislation in the form of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and, later, the 1924 Immigration Act. Assimilation efforts directed toward Native Americans were institutionalized through government-funded

boarding schools and the reservation system. Together, these cultural realities meant that religious dress was an object of discussion for both religious and non-religious persons alike. Perhaps most relevant, the Protestant secular state was solidified in this time period through a variety of means, most notably the development of the public school system, which had emerged out of the common school movement of the earlier century. By the end of the nineteenth century, state governments were heavily involved in the school system, certifying teachers, establishing departments of education, and passing mandates and laws regarding the functioning of schools.

The habit of Sisters teaching in public schools, the subject of Chapter 2, provided one key visible critique to the assumed Protestant nature of the secular state *vis a vis* education; however, education runs throughout the rest of the case studies in this dissertation as well. The literature of Harriet Beecher Stowe in many ways provided a sentimental and domestic education to readers, most overtly seen in *The Chimney-Corner*, as Christopher Crowfield essentially gives lectures to his “pupils” (his daughter, her friends, and by extension, the reader). As one of the most famous female Protestant authors of the time period, Stowe can certainly be understood as educating her readers in hegemonic Protestantism, helping to reinforce the boundaries, outside of which religious dress was often cast. Quakers writing in periodicals to debate the role of plain dress in their faith were also engaging in informal theological education; indeed, religious periodicals were an important tool for educating readers on practices of the faith. Zitkala-Ša’ got her literary start writing about her experiences in childhood and, perhaps most famously, at her boarding school and her own life is marked by teaching. In addition, she engaged in an education of audiences – particularly White audiences – through her writing, public appearances, and other advocacy

of Native rights. In these contexts, religious dress – and the rhetoric surrounding it – operates as its own form of education as well, as it stretches the boundaries of normative Protestant secular framings of religion.

Women's bodies in particular register this education, both in terms of who was predominantly involved in actual teaching, as well as whose religious dress was most visible and most subject to debate. This dissertation has drawn attention primarily to women and their interaction with religious dress for several reasons. First, women's bodies – and their clothing choices – are viewed, debated, and regulated much more than men's. This was true of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and remains true today. Second, women play a key role in religious communities, even as they often lack access to traditional forms of power within those communities. Thus, turning attention to their experiences is important, both in understanding religion writ large, as well as women's lived religion. As women wear religious garb, as they talk about dress, and as their religious dress is debated by others, they are engaging in important religious practice that may go unnoticed in formal histories of religion. Simply put, this dissertation shows that turning attention to women and their experiences with religious dress is a worthy endeavor because women's writing, experiences, and religion matter.

While this dissertation has focused on the years between 1865 and 1920, the arguments I have made about religious dress as a visual critique of normative formations of religion and culture stretch beyond any singular time period and are particularly relevant in the current U.S. context. In the twenty-first century, plain dress is most associated with the Amish and some conservative Mennonite sects. The vast majority of Quakers today do not wear plain dress, although there are some who do. For example, Isabel, who runs the website

Quaker Jane, shares her journey in becoming a Quaker, explaining how she first felt an unexplained conviction to wear plain dress and then sought out traditions that would support this conviction, eventually realizing, “I was supposed to be a plain-dressing Quaker, a convinced Christian witness to God’s mercy and love in this life.”³⁴¹ Now identifying as a conservative Quaker, Isabel writes that she even changed her job so that she could continue to wear plain dress every day. In the wider culture, however, representations of plain dress continue to swing between idealization and denigration. For the former, take a peek at the cover of any popular Amish-themed Christian romance book and you’ll find a picture of a woman who looks strikingly similar to Stowe’s descriptions of Ruth Baxter. At the same time, plain dress is also often portrayed as a symbol for cult-like repression, most recently seen in *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, a web TV sitcom which follows its titular character after she is released from being held captive by a man who calls himself “the Reverend.” In the beginning of every episode, the credits feature shots of Kimmy and her fellow inmates emerging from a bunker in plain garb, a visual reminder to the viewer of Kimmy’s past life and The Reverend’s oppressive control.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), many religious orders began modifying or discarding the habit, thus making it a less common sighting than in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, some orders still require the habit and some nuns still choose to wear it. Sister Mary Jordan Hoover, a Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia, explained her choice to join a community that requires the habit. Emphasizing the importance of having a visual marker of her faith, she told an NPR reporter, “I wasn’t

³⁴¹ “How I became a (Bonnet-required) Plain-dressing Quaker (or Don’t blame me, it’s God’s fault).” QuakerJane.com, 2007.
http://www.quakerjane.com/index.php?fuseaction=plain_dress.my_path

attracted to living a religious lifestyle that looked just like the way I was living as a chaste laywoman teaching at a public school.”³⁴² Notably, it was a habited teacher that helped to end Nebraska’s anti-garb bill. After Sister Madeleine Miller applied for a substitute teaching job and found that she could not wear her habit in the classroom, Nebraska repealed the 98-year-old ban on religious garb in the classroom in 2017.³⁴³ As of this writing, Pennsylvania still remains the only state with a law against teachers wearing religious garb.

Native Americans continue to fight for their right to dress in traditional garb, especially in school settings. In recent years, students have been denied the right to wear feathers as part of their graduation regalia. In 2013, for example, Chelsey Ramer, a member of the Poarch Creek Band was fined 1,000 dollars from her Alabama high school for placing an Eagle feather on her graduation cap.³⁴⁴ In 2017, Native students in Montana successfully testified to get the state to pass Senate Bill 318, which allows Native students to wear traditional dress and objects like feathers for graduation activities.³⁴⁵ Similarly, Native American students, particularly boys, continue to face pressure to cut their hair in school settings. In 2010, a federal appeals court upheld the right of a Texas kindergartener to wear

³⁴² Barbara Bradley Hagerty, “Sisters and Vatican II: A Generational Tug of War,” *All Things Considered*, October 10, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/2012/10/10/162650803/sisters-and-vatican-ii-a-generational-tug-of-war>

³⁴³ “Nebraska ends ban on religious garb,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 27, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com>

³⁴⁴ Rebecca Klein, “Chelsey Ramer, 17, Fined \$1,000 After Wearing Eagle Feather At High School Graduation,” *Huffington Post*, June 30, 2013, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/chelsey-ramer-indian-feather-high-school-graduation_n_3380961

³⁴⁵ Nicole Schorchit, “Students Demand Right to Wear Native Regalia at Graduation,” *NEA Today*, June 29, 2017, <http://neatoday.org/2017/06/29/students-demand-right-to-wear-native-american-regalia-at-graduation/>

his hair in long braids “in observance of his religious heritage,” despite the school’s dress code which prohibited boys from having long hair.³⁴⁶

The hijab is perhaps the current most visible and controversial form of religious dress in the United States. Hijabi fashion sites and special Muslim lines of clothing are growing. In 2016 Ibtihaj Muhammad became the first Muslim American woman to compete in a hijab at the Olympics, and in 2019, Ilhan Omar became the first congresswoman to wear a hijab, which required changing a 181 year old rule banning headwear in the chamber.³⁴⁷ World Hijab Day grows each year, founded in 2013 by Muslim American Nazma Khan to celebrate the hijab, encourage women who wear it to share why, and even to invite non-Hijabi Muslims and non-Muslims to wear headscarves “to experience the hijab for one day.”³⁴⁸

One of the most popular representation of the hijab in recent years is a 2017 artistic poster of a woman in an American flag hijab, titled “We the People,” which was featured prominently on signs at marches protesting the inauguration of Donald Trump and which quickly went viral on social media. The image features a close up of a woman from the shoulders up, looking head-on at the viewer, her head and neck covered with an American

³⁴⁶ “Fifth Circuit Upholds Religious Rights of American Indian Kindergartner,” July 9, 2010, ACLU.org. <https://www.aclu.org/news/fifth-circuit-upholds-religious-rights-american-indian-kindergartner>

³⁴⁷ Deb Sopan, “Ibtihaj Muhammad: The Olympic Fencer is Charting Her Own Path,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/24/books/ibtihaj-muhammad-fencing-hijab-olympics.html>; David Smith, ‘My Choice’: Ilhan Omar becomes first to wear hijab in US Congress,” *The Guardian*, January 3, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jan/03/ilhan-omar-hijab-congress-headwear>

³⁴⁸ According to Khan, she created the day in order to foster religious tolerance and understanding. See “About Us,” [worldhijabday.com](https://worldhijabday.com/about-us/) <https://worldhijabday.com/about-us/>. Other Muslim women have critiqued the idea of non-Muslims wearing hijabs as a sign of solidarity. See for example, Mariam Khan, “Wearing a hijab for one day is not the solidarity Muslims need,” *Metro* (22 March 2019) <https://metro.co.uk/2019/03/22/wearing-hijab-one-day-not-solidarity-muslims-need-8981440/>

flag so that only her face is visible. [Figure 8] The caption reads “We The People Are Greater Than Fear.” Designed by artist Shepard Fairey, who made the iconic “Hope” Barack Obama poster for the 2008 election, the “We the People” poster follows the same ink block style, utilizing only blue, red, and white tones.³⁴⁹ The art work was conceived of as a visual symbol of resistance to the new administration. In addition to being made available for free download, carried in marches, and spread via social media, the image ran as a full page advertisement in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and several other newspapers on inauguration day. Several news outlets referred to it as “the face of the Trump resistance.”³⁵⁰

To create his image, Fairey also used a photograph that had been previously published ten years earlier; in 2007, Muslim American photographer Ridwan Adhami photographed Munira Ahmed in the American flag hijab for *Illume*, a magazine that featured content about and for Muslims in the United States. Adhami shot the photograph in front of the New York Stock Exchange close to Ground Zero as a way to respond to a rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric following 9/11.³⁵¹ Ahmed, who does not normally wear hijab, described her choice to pose in the photograph as a way to visually insist, “I am American just as you are ... I am American and I am Muslim, and I am very proud of both.”³⁵² The photograph had already been popular, or, as Adhami put it, was “viral before viral was really a thing” --- especially on Muslim blogs. When Fairey approached Adhami about using his photograph

³⁵⁰ Edward Helmore, “Munira Ahmed: the woman who became the face of the Trump resistance,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/23/womens-march-poster-munira-ahmed-shepard-fairey-interview>

³⁵¹ Helmore, “Munira Ahmed”

³⁵² *Ibid.*

for the 2017 poster, Adhami admitted, “I was over the image, and I was over having to make the statement: I’m an American ... I was saddened that the conversation kept coming up. But when Donald Trump and this election season came up it was, unfortunately, once again relevant and once again necessary.”³⁵³

Fairey used similar language to describe his purpose in making the design, clearly setting it up as a visual rebuke to the Trump administration’s anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies:

the image of American flag hijab is powerful because it reminds people that freedom of religion is a founding principle of the United States and that there is a history of welcoming people to the United States who have faced religious persecution in their homelands ... ‘WE’ includes everyone. The things Donald Trump has said about monitoring and banning Muslims are in my opinion, fear mongering and totally un-American.³⁵⁴

However, rather than being merely a symbol of “freedom of religion” in general, Fairey’s 2017 image operates on a number of symbolic levels. It uses the hijab as visual shorthand for Muslims, specifically Muslim women, and merges this with perhaps the most recognizable symbol of nationalism and empire, the American flag. Additionally, there are numerous layers of mediation embedded in the creation of the image. A non-Muslim white man created the 2017 artwork, based on a 2007 photograph taken by a Muslim man of a non-Hijabi Muslim woman wearing an American flag hijab. Thus, it should not be surprising that the 2017 viral image became the source of conflicting and complicated interpretations, especially among Muslims. Analyzing some of the responses to the “We the People” hijab

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Molly McCluskey, “Inaugural protest poster stirs debate among Muslim American women,” *Middle East Eye*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/inaugural-protest-poster-stirs-debate-among-muslim-american-women>

poster helps illuminate the various meanings of hijab, especially in relation to its visibility and possibilities as a critical visual and material symbol.

One of the most forceful critiques by Muslims stemmed from the decision to use an American flag as a hijab. Whereas Fairey saw the flag as symbolic of American ideals of religious freedom and framed America as a place that has welcomed people fleeing religious persecution, thus positioning Donald Trump as un-American outlier, Muslim fashion blogger Hoda Katebi saw the American flag as representative of “oppression, torture, sexual violence, slavery, patriarchy, and military and cultural hegemony for people of color around the world.”³⁵⁵ In her blog post, “Please Keep your American Flags Off My Hijab,” Katebi, who wears a hijab, outlined her many critiques of the image, including the fact that a white non-Muslim man created the 2017 poster and that Adhami, who posed for the photograph, does not normally wear the hijab. Most forcefully, Katebi pointed to U.S. policy in the Middle East, asking, “how are we able to hold up signs of Muslim women wearing the American flag and chant slogans of supposed solidarity while drones carrying the same flag killed our Muslim family in Yemen at the exact same moment and we said nothing?”³⁵⁶ For Katebi, the pairing of the U.S. flag with the hijab is antithetical, not because of a xenophobic sentiment that Muslims, and the hijab, do not belong in the United States (which is the message that Fairey, Ahmed, and Adhami sought to counteract). Rather, for Katebi, the hijab and the American flag are antithetical because the hijab serves as an important visual critique of the flag itself. She explains that for her the hijab, “represents a rejection of materialism, of

³⁵⁵ Hoda Katebi, “Please Keep Your American Flags Off My Hijab,” JooJooAzad.com, January 23, 2017, <http://www.joojooazad.com/2017/01/keep-your-american-flags-off-my-hijab.html>

³⁵⁶ Katebi, “Please Keep Your American Flags.”

capitalism, of euro-centric beauty standards (among other significance) and draping an American flag over it erases almost everything the hijab means to me.”³⁵⁷ Ultimately, for Katebi, the hijab represents resistance, not merely to Donald Trump, but rather to the dominant history and ideology the United States has long perpetuated.

Other Muslim women lodged similar critiques, yet focused more heavily on contesting the very notion that a hijab must always stand in for Muslim women. Ghazala Irshad, a journalist in New York sees the image as “problematic,” telling the *Middle East Eye* that she supports the freedom for women to wear the hijab, but “I do want the media, or an artist creating a narrative about us to recognize that we don’t all wear hijabs, and there is a diversity in this community that is being ignored.” She adds, “I don’t want to wave a flag around all the time and I don’t want to have to see a Muslim woman wear a flag as a hijab to prove that we’re Muslim and American.”³⁵⁸

Similarly, in a piece for the *Huffington Post* titled, “I’m a Muslim Woman, Not a Prop,” Melody Moezzi asks, “can we please retire the American flag hijab already?” Moezzi, goes on to write that “images of presumably patriotic Muslim American women turning flags into headscarves imply that we are easily identifiable by a piece of fabric, which we are not! ... A strip of fabric is not an abbreviation for a human being, and it fails to capture the complexity and variety of our experiences as Muslim women.” Moezzi, who does not wear a hijab, ends her piece writing, “I deeply respect my hijabi sisters, which is why I refuse to

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

³⁵⁸ McCluskey, “Inaugural Protest.”

politicize their bodies.”³⁵⁹ For Irshad and Moezzi, using the hijab as visual shorthand for Muslims ignores their complexity, while pairing it with the American flag is a reminder that Muslims must always “prove” their Americanness. The image carries with it the danger of reducing Muslim women to caricatures, or their identities to, as Moezzi says, “a piece of fabric.”

Other Muslims found important meaning in the 2017 poster. Safia Mahjebin, a young Muslim American woman who wears a hijab, said the image “gave me goose bumps” because although she had seen the photograph before, “seeing it again in this new context and in new circumstances makes me re-appreciate it.” For Mahjebin, it is the visibility of the hijab which is key. Speaking about the concern that the image of the hijab is reductive, or elides the diversity of Muslim women, Mahjebin said, “I think for the artist to show and represent a Muslim woman, the most obvious is to show a Muslim woman wearing the hijab. Because when a Muslim woman dons that piece of clothing, she’s not just practising an opinion of her faith. Wearing the hijab goes to the idea that people, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, have to don their identity on their physical bodies.”³⁶⁰ Here Mahjebin draws attention to the fact that it is women in hijab who primarily carry the visual manifestation their identities as Muslims. Further, Mahjebin does not see the hijab and the flag is incompatible, rather she frames both as visible markers of identities which she embraces: for her the image “is saying, my religion is so important to me and I wear it on my head and

³⁵⁹ Melody Moezzi, “I’m a Muslim Woman, Not a Prop,” *Huffington Post*, January 26, 2017. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/im-a-muslim-woman-not-a-prop_b_14416434

³⁶⁰ McCluskey, “Inaugural Protest.”

represent it every day, but my identity as an American is also important to me, and I wear that on my head as well.”³⁶¹

When Munier Ahmed describes her decision to pose for the original photograph, she also alludes to the issue of visibility. According to Ahmed, she was at first hesitant to pose in the hijab since she did not normally wear one and she knew it not “just a cloth.” However, she also felt she was “just as much of a Muslim as a hijabi woman is” and that she respects those who do wear the hijab. Ultimately, what made Ahmed feel she “could and should” pose for the photograph was when she read about comedian Dave Chappelle’s admission that he often hides his Muslim faith. According to Ahmed, “When someone asked [Chappelle] about his Islamic identity, he said ‘I don’t really like to put that out there because I don’t want anyone to associate the things that are bad about me with something that’s so beautiful.’ And when I read that I was thinking, ‘Wow, wouldn’t it be so cool if he didn’t care and just was Muslim and everyone in this country would find out one of the most popular pop culture figures in this country was Muslim, that it was just general knowledge.”³⁶² For Ahmed, Chappelle’s reluctance to put his Islamic identity “out there” inspired her to do just the opposite, take on a visual sign of her faith, even one she does not normally wear, for a photograph.

Whereas critiques by Muslims like Irshad and Moezzi drew attention to the way the “We the People” poster made Muslims into caricatures, Ahmed feels the opposite, believing

³⁶¹ Ibid.

³⁶² Christinia Cauterucci, “A Q&A with the Muslim Woman Whose Face Has Become a Symbol of Trump Resistance,” *Slate*, Jan 25, 2017, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/01/a-q-and-a-with-the-muslim-woman-whose-face-has-become-a-symbol-of-trump-resistance.html>

the image will help people see “we’re not just these caricatures; we’re real people.”³⁶³ Here Ahmed focuses on how the image could affect the non-Muslim viewers, though she doesn’t specify how it will help them see Muslims as “real people.” Perhaps she believes it will force them to confront the idea that a Muslim can embrace patriotism, or perhaps she hopes a viewer may be able to relate to a Muslim wearing a flag hijab because of the shared national symbol. Regardless, Ahmed sees in the hijab image a chance to expand non-Muslim’s view of Muslim women.

Nour Obeidallah, a Palestinian-American college student shared why she fully embraced the image: “When I first saw Fairey’s work, I immediately thought that I could be just like the girl in the photo ... I’ve never related to a political image before, because nothing has ever been made that could show Muslim women in that light.” The image inspired Obeidallah to wear a flag headscarf to the Women’s March, even going so far as to carry a frame with her to “parallel Fairey’s artwork.”³⁶⁴ For Obeidallah, the rendering of Ahmed in the flag hijab embodied something new: the possibility of representation of someone like her in political and visual culture.

While these responses to the American flag hijab image differ, ranging from biting critique to enthusiastic celebration, they share an understanding that the visibility and the gendering of the hijab is central. Many see the hijab as a way to make a *visual* claim to an identity that is minimized and excluded by dominant U.S. culture. In describing her decision to begin wearing the hijab outside of the Mosque and prayers, Mariam Gomaa outlined her

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Nadja Sayej, “Muslim Women Respond to Shepard Fairey’s American Flag Hijab Poster,” *Art Slant*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.artslant.com/ew/articles/show/47290-muslim-women-respond-to-shepard-faireys-american-flag-hijab-poster>

conception of the hijab as “resistance,” specifically to “whiteness and the American media.” Gomma writes because of her “racial ambiguity,” and ability to pass as white, “there were few markers of my race and my religion.” She continues “in spite of this, however, I had often felt that my religion was not something to be shed or stifled and hidden for the sake of others, for the sake of their comfort.” Thus, she began wearing the hijab as a “rejection of white-passing (or at the very least racial ambiguity), a privilege I was distinctly aware I had.” Gomma concludes that for her, the hijab is not only a religious decision, but also a “sociopolitical choice and representation.”³⁶⁵

Certainly, as Gomma alludes to here, the hijab operates at a sociopolitical level in a distinct way, as hijabi Muslims contend with racism, imperialism, and Islamophobia in a way that not all religiously clothed persons do. One can assume that in the current U.S. context, a White Sister in a habit would not regularly be threatened by violence as a result of her garb, in the same way a woman of color in hijab might. Yet, connections between the hijab and the religious dress analyzed in the previous chapters are worth noting. Muslim women framing the hijab as an important visual maker of difference is reminiscent of Quaker defenses of plain dress. Legislation against the hijab in the West, most recently a proposed ban on religious garb for teachers in Quebec, echoes justification for the garb bans in Pennsylvania and New York. (Notably, it was a Muslim woman who most recently challenged -- and ultimately lost -- the Pennsylvania Garb Bill in 1990). From another distinctly racialized context, the violence that Zitkala-Ša registers in her hair cutting incident persists in reports of women’s hijabs being forcibly removed by strangers in public. The circumstances around the

³⁶⁵ Mariam Gomma, “American Hijab: Why My Scarf is a Sociopolitical Statement, Not a Symbol of My Religiosity,” *Time*, November 11, 2014, <http://time.com/3576827/enums/>

“We the People” poster – of a non-hijabi Muslim woman donning a hijab for what she perceives as a larger purpose – also bring to mind Zitkala-Ša’s willingness to wear an assemblage of Native sartorial symbols in public appearances.

The connections between these examples from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the rhetoric about the hijab today are important. They are a reminder that, although the specific context around any one type of religious dress and any one historical moment may vary, forms of distinct religious dress have and continue to operate as public, visible signs of difference, holding the potential to express personal faith, communal allegiance and ultimately critique the dominant culture. By understanding the rhetoric surrounding a Quaker plain dress after the Civil War, a Sisters’ habit in the 1890s, and Native dress at the turn of the century, we can better understand, make space for, and value a diversity of religious expressions today.



Figure 8. “We the People - Greater Than Fear ”
by Shepard Fairey. *Amplifier*. Retrieved March
23, 2019. [https://amplifier.org/campaigns/we-
the-people/](https://amplifier.org/campaigns/we-the-people/)

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