

‘In Donkey Jacket and Doc Martin Boots’: Women Workers, Uniforms and the Patterning of Exclusion in the Male-Dominated Transport Industry¹

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Abstract

Uniforms played a key role in the construction of masculine occupational traditions in the British and Australian transport sectors: traditions that made it extremely difficult for women to enter these particular areas of employment. This article explores how attitudes to women’s clothing in non-traditional areas of transport work (especially on trains, trams and buses) changed over the course of the twentieth century. It shifts focus away from the wars as the only moments when women donned uniforms to enter these male professions. Women workers in the late twentieth century, even with anti-discrimination legislation in place, found a battle to enter male-dominated workplaces and to be provided with appropriate clothing. Management and union preferences for a feminised uniform, bound up with assumptions about women’s bodies, devalued women’s status in comparison to male colleagues and persistently excluded women from equal access to appropriate workwear. Nevertheless, women developed sartorial tactics, including dressing in men’s uniforms, that helped them to succeed in non-traditional roles. Some women transport workers

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were able to take pleasure in their workplace clothing, even as it posed significant challenges to their ability to be comfortable, safe and efficient in their daily tasks.

Clothing, which encodes a complex set of expectations for gendered behaviour, takes on particular meaning in the industrial workplace. The development of specialised workplace clothing was partly functional—suited to the demands and dangers of the task at hand; it was also symbolic—an expression of workplace cultures informed by changing fashions and gendered social norms.² These dual purposes were present in the workplace clothing of public transport industries (railways, tramways and buses) that took shape in Britain and Australia from the nineteenth century. Transport uniforms were markers of particular kinds of masculinity.³ Workers in these industries were imbued with a relatively high status, connected to the significance of these distinctly new modes of mobility, and the tendency to be reasonably well paid.⁴ Those in public-facing roles (such as train guards, porters and ticket collectors) were also required to be ‘respectable’, especially given that they would be dealing with women travellers.⁵ Workplace uniforms and distinct occupational clothing helped to mark out these predominantly male workers as privileged members of their class, differentiating them from each other within the industry, and making them distinctly visible to the passengers they served. They also enacted a mode of discipline on the bodies of male workers.⁶ An 1878 rulebook in the United Kingdom required railwaymen

2 See Carole Turbin on the ‘social’ meanings of functional working-men’s clothes in ‘Fashioning the American Man: The Arrow Collar Man, 1907–1931’, *Gender and History*, 14, no. 3 (2002): 482–83. On the history of workwear, see Steven King and Christiana Payne, ‘Introduction: The Dress of the Poor’, *Textile History*, 33, no. 1 (2002): 1–8; Anne Bettenson, ‘Industrial Protective Clothing and Equipment’, *Costume*, 8, no. 1 (1974): 46–50.

3 As in the naval uniforms examined by Quinton Colville, different ranks within the transport services were denoted by different uniforms, which in turn could invoke ‘different incarnations of masculinity’. Quinton Colville, ‘Jack Tar and the Gentleman Officer: The Role of Uniform in Shaping the Class- and Gender-related Identities of British Naval Personnel, 1930–1939’, The Alexander Prize Lecture, read 17 May 2002, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 13 (2003): 106.

4 Frank McKenna, ‘Victorian Railway Workers’, *History Workshop*, no. 1 (1976): 27.

5 Gentlemanly ‘courtesy’ from American railways staff towards women travellers was transformed into ‘service’ in the later nineteenth century. Amy Richter, *Home on the Rails: Women, the Railroad, and the Rise of Public Domesticity* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 124.

6 See Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), 36. On the potential of uniforms for both discipline and subversion, see Jennifer Craik, *Uniforms Exposed: From Conformity to Transgression* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); also Eileen Boris, ‘Desirable Dress: Rosies, Sky Girls, and the Politics of Appearance’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 69 (2006): 127.

to be 'clean shaven, with his boots polished, his uniform neat'.⁷ Early women workers in the railway industry—in roles such as gatekeepers at railway crossings, cleaners or waiting room attendants—typically appeared without such sartorial markers.

This article examines how transport uniforms in Britain and Australia, and the practice of wearing such uniforms, played a formative role in creating and sustaining gendered occupational 'traditions' that have then been a barrier to women's employment.⁸ Certain operational roles—including train guards, railway station porters, conductors (on trams and buses) and drivers across all sectors—have proven especially resistant to the employment of women. Even the introduction of workplace equality legislation in the later twentieth century had little impact on the segregation of transport occupations according to sex. The UK passed the Equal Pay Act in 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975.⁹ Australia took another 15 years to pass the federal *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*; the states of Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia passed Equal Opportunity Acts that same year (New South Wales had passed an Anti-Discrimination Act in 1977).¹⁰ Thirty years later, in 2014, there were just 70 qualified women drivers on the Victorian Metro trains network in Australia, compared to 805 men (or 8.7 per cent).¹¹ In the UK, the train drivers' union, ASLEF, reported just 6.5 per cent of drivers were women in 2019.¹² Breaking down the 'traditional' division of labour requires more than legislation by states or employers: it has taken (and continues to demand) concerted and combined efforts from the feminist movement, union movement and individual workers, against a backdrop of slowly

7 McKenna, 'Victorian Railway Workers', 41.

8 Such traditions, and their persistence, were not inevitable. In Soviet Russia, for example, women were driving trains during the Second World War—an issue that did not escape discussion within the British railway unions. Helena Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen: Exploitation, Betrayal, and Triumph in the Workplace* (Hastings: Hastings Press, 2005), 145.

9 Jonathan Moss, *Women, Workplace Protest and Political Identity in England, 1968–85* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 42–44.

10 Australian equal opportunity legislation has a complicated timeline according to state and federal implementation. Rosemary Hunter, 'Women Workers and the Liberal State: Legal Regulation of the Workplace, 1880s–1980s', in *Sex, Power and Justice: Historical Perspectives on Law in Australia*, ed. Diane Kirkby (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1995), 219–36, esp. 223–25.

11 Adam Carey, 'Metro on Track for More Women behind the Wheel', *Age* (Melbourne), 22 March 2014, www.theage.com.au/national/victoria/metro-on-track-for-more-women-behind-the-wheel-2014-0321-358ta.html.

12 Caroline Davies, 'Rail Union in Push for More Female and BAME Train Drivers', *Guardian*, 17 June 2019, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/jun/17/female-bame-train-drivers-aslef.

shifting cultural attitudes to gender roles. Here we examine how gendered traditions were stitched into the very fabric of transport uniforms and how this worked to exclude women.

Beginning in the First World War, when women (especially in Britain) first took on 'men's work' in the transport sector, the article focuses on developments during the Second World War and the 1970s–90s in both Britain and Australia. Whilst the wartime story of women's transport work (in Britain at least) has been relatively well documented, few studies draw out the longer chronology of women breaking down 'traditional' roles. Taking the story into the 1970s and 1980s reveals the continuities and changes around the issue of uniforms for women in 'men's' jobs, against a transnational backdrop of the Women's Liberation Movement and legislative change such as equal opportunities legislation. Clothing regulations that perpetuated male 'traditions' of transport work and that posed significant challenges to women's ability to be comfortable, safe and efficient in their daily tasks persisted throughout the twentieth century. The occupational traditions of British and Australian transport industries were closely interrelated.¹³ The movement of workers between the two countries, facilitated by imperial ties and their legacy, coupled with the sense of cultural connection between the 'Mother Country' and the dominion, allowed for cross-fertilisation of ideas about appropriate gendered work practices. Nevertheless, even within Australia the states were not consistent in their approach to women's workwear and the availability of sources has been somewhat uneven across the two nations. Our analysis is therefore suggestive of overarching themes rather than definitive in its comparison of Australian and British tactics. We highlight both the durability and the adaptability of gendered uniform cultures, across time and place, and the implications for women workers in the sector.

The analysis is structured into two sections. The first explores how the design of women's uniforms for those who did enter the male world of transport, especially during the two world wars, tended to privilege 'femininity' over the demands of the work. This perpetuated gendered divisions in the workplace that relegated women to lower-status, lower-paid roles. The second section examines how the wearing of 'men's' uniforms,

13 Bobbie Oliver, 'The British Origins and the Transformation of Work Culture in Australian Industry', Exploring the British World conference paper, 2004, 1044, www.researchgate.net/publication/47629570_The_British_origins_and_the_transformation_of_work_culture_in_Australian_industry.

particularly in the post–Second World War period, was condoned, even expected, by employers who failed to provide a dedicated uniform for women in male-dominated roles such as railway porters, guards and, eventually, train drivers. Women experienced this both as a marker of their marginal status and as an uncomfortable negation of their woman's body, even as it could provide a means of accessing elements of male occupational privilege. Not only has it been difficult for women to gain access to work clothing appropriate to the female frame, but in wearing, or sometimes choosing not to wear the uniforms of 'men's work', their gender and sexual identities, as well as their aptitude for the work, have been called into question.¹⁴ Yet individual women have exercised agency in asserting their right to choose appropriate workwear, and in finding elements of creativity and pleasure in workplace clothing.

'Attractive and Serviceable': Fashioning Femininity in the Design of Women's Transport Uniforms

The exclusion of women from most areas of work in public transport, which had become 'tradition' in both Britain and Australia by the twentieth century, had been temporarily suspended during the two world wars (though to a very limited extent in First World War–era Australia).¹⁵ Women were essential in keeping wartime public transport moving, as men left for the services, although they were never permitted onto the footplate of steam trains in Britain or Australia in either conflict.¹⁶

14 'Masculine' uniformed women and emasculated men on the British railways of the First World War were the focus of satirical cartoons in the National Union of Railwaymen journal, as discussed in Emma Robertson and Lee-Ann Monk, "'When Women Do the Work of Men': Representations of Gendered Occupational Identities on British Railways in World War I Cartoons', *Labour History*, no. 117 (2019): 47–77. Similarly, Eileen Boris relates how Rosie the Riveters in Second World War–era America might be 'hailed as women in drag' in their overalls. Boris, 'Desirable Dress', 125.

15 Eddie Butler-Bowdon notes, for example, a limited number of women on the railways during the First World War in the Australian state of Victoria. Eddie Butler-Bowdon, *In the Service: A History of Victorian Railways Workers and their Union* (South Yarra, Vic.: Hyland House, 1991), 90.

16 On the UK railways in wartime, see Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, especially 107, 143–45; also, Robertson and Monk, "'When Women Do the Work of Men'": 47–77. For general figures on women in transport work during the First World War, see Gail Braybon and Penny Summerfield, *Out of the Cage: Women's Experiences in Two World Wars* (London: Pandora, 1987), 44. Women were less visible on the Australian transport network during the First World War, but for the Second World War, see Kate Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front: Melbourne in Wartime 1939–1945* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), 61.

Where they were employed, women in transport uniforms became highly visible representatives of women's wartime employment. They were simultaneously emblematic, in often troubling ways, of women's modernity and increased mobility.¹⁷ During the First World War, the Victorian railways union watched the situation in 'conscriptionist' Britain closely, sometimes with a degree of alarm, reprinting several articles from the British National Union of Railwaymen (NUR) journal, *Railway Review*, on the employment of uniformed women on the railways.¹⁸ When the first women were employed as bus conductresses in suburban Sydney in late 1918, it was reported as 'following the lead of London', and if '[t]he picture of a cheery conductress, in a becoming uniform' was 'too good to be true', the forthcoming uniforms of the Sydney women workers were still rumoured to be 'quite fetching'.¹⁹

The transport employers' well-established commitment to provide a uniform, or quasi-uniform, to their male employees was extended (however reluctantly) to women. This was especially important in the case of patriotic wartime workers in public-facing roles. During the First World War, with no precedent in the sector, British railway companies (with oversight from the state) quickly had to grapple with what women might wear: would they simply adapt men's uniforms or design something entirely different? The resulting confusion caused delays in women receiving suitable clothing and they were forced to improvise—sometimes wearing an armband alongside their usual civilian attire to indicate their role. Yet little was learned from this experience. Each (re)entry of women into 'male' roles—during the Second World War, and then from the 1970s to the present—caused fresh angst about how to accommodate women's bodies, and their femininity, into the workplace in a way that suited the employers, the unions, the male workers and—though of far less concern—the women themselves.

17 Women's increased mobility in public was a source of anxiety in itself, to be managed through practices such as women-only carriages and waiting rooms. Jo Stanley, 'On Buffer-Kissers, Bus-Station Skanks and Mile-High Clubs: Sexualities and Transport', *Mobility in History*, 4, no. 1 (2003): 29–49. On the increased visibility of 'modern' Australian women in the interwar period, see also Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), 44.

18 For example, 'The Woman Railway Worker: She Arrives' and 'Women in War Time: Working as Railway Porters: Great Central's Interesting Experiment', *Railways Union Gazette*, 21 June 1915, 11 and 30.

19 *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 26 September 1918, 9.

In the early years of the First World War, popular representations of women in their new wartime roles often emphasised their undue obsession with appearance, for comic effect. Since the nineteenth century, assumptions relating to women's obsession with fashion and their looks had been used to undermine their economic motivations for paid employment (young single women would fritter away their earnings on clothes), and to cast doubt on their capacities as productive workers.²⁰ Women's wages in Australia in 1912 were determined according to the assessment that a woman employee 'merely wants some money for dress'.²¹ In the journal of the British NUR, wartime cartoons of early women recruits into male roles reflected a broader discourse of women as too distracted by their hair, makeup and clothing to be efficient workers.²² The trappings of femininity, and by extension women's bodies, were deemed to be entirely at odds with the work of public transport.²³ This stereotype proved remarkably resilient. In one episode of the British sitcom *On The Buses* (1969), a female 'clippie' is so preoccupied with checking her make-up in her compact mirror that she allows her driver to reverse over the 'Passengers' Waiting' sign.²⁴

20 Women workers in the UK were accused in the nineteenth century of rejecting protective clothing and masks for fear of spoiling their appearance. Barbara Harrison, *Not Only the Dangerous Trades: Women's Work and Health in Britain, 1880–1914* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), 73 and 151. Within working-class families the consumption of clothes was recognised as an increasingly important aspect of young women workers' expenses from the turn of the twentieth century. Louise A. Tilly and Joan W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 186–87; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work and Family in England, 1918–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 198–200.

21 Justice Higgins, in Rural Workers' Union Case, 1912, in Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, 73.

22 'The Porter', *Railway Review* (UK), 2 April 1915, 9.

23 As Conor notes, women workers faced 'uncertainty ... about what exactly was conveyed by good looks and attention to appearance ... Culpability in attracting the gaze remained important in drawing the fine line between appropriate and inappropriate attention to dress and style'. Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, 72.

24 'The New Conductor', *On the Buses*, Season 1, Episode 2, 1969. Murray argues that these hyper-feminine clippies were a 'disruption in the iconographic trajectory of the female bus worker', which had come to synthesise masculine and feminine attributes during and after the Second World War. Gillian Murray, '"Should Women be Bus Drivers": Defending a Permanent Position for Women on the Buses in ATV's Regional Television News, 1963–1979', in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 339–40.



Figure 1: Group portrait of the first female tram conductresses (wearing forage caps) to be employed by the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB), at Hawthorn Tram Depot, 1942.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Ref. P04389.001.

While ostensibly mocking women for their obsession with clothes and appearance, such representations shored up gender difference and provided reassurance that women's movement into male spheres of employment could only be temporary.²⁵ Management and union interventions in the question of women's transport uniforms throughout the twentieth century suggests, on the whole, a persistent desire to maintain a feminine aesthetic, even as fashions themselves changed. This was most easily achieved by insisting on a skirt, even where the top half of a uniform was similar in appearance to the men's. Jennifer Craik has argued that skirts, when used as part of a uniform, have taken on the masculine attributes associated with uniforms more broadly, as well as being tasked with communicating particular elements of femininity: 'modesty, neatness,

25 See also Juliette Pattinson, *Women of War: Gender, Modernity and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020). She argues this trope continued into the Second World War (pp. 106–07). Helen E. Smith and Pamela Wakewich, 'Regulating Body Boundaries and Health during the Second World War: Nationalist Discourse, Media Representations and the Experiences of Canadian Women War Workers', *Gender and History*, 24, no. 1 (2012): 56–73.

demureness'.²⁶ During the Second World War, the Tram Commissioner in Melbourne was especially vocal on the need to preserve femininity in his conductresses. Commissioner Bell had no doubt that women under his jurisdiction would be wearing skirts and stockings (see Figure 1). The *Argus* reported, '[t]heir uniform has not yet been decided except that the girls will definitely not be wearing trousers, being dressed, according to Mr Bell, "in a respectable manner"'.²⁷ Women's 'respectability', typically inflected by judgements about their social class, took on extra weight during the upheaval of wartime.²⁸

Skirts that restricted women's mobility could interfere with their successful fulfilment of work tasks and even compromise their safety. Women tram conductors in 1940s Melbourne, who became known as 'Bell's Skirts' after the Commissioner, wore skirts with an inverted pleat at the front to allow them greater freedom of movement.²⁹ Wearing skirts to climb or clamber over equipment could also compromise a woman's modesty and potentially expose her to unwanted male attention.³⁰ This was hinted at obliquely in reporting of the Australian Women's Employment Board (WEB) enquiry of 1943:

the Commissioners frowned on the idea of young women climbing signal ladders. 'How are they dressed when they do these jobs?' his Honor asked. He was told that the women wore skirts and that their uniforms would be quickly ruined by grease.³¹

The mention of grease is interesting, given that men climbing the signal ladders would be exposed to the same conditions. It would appear that the purely decorative appearance of women in uniforms was deemed of most importance by this male witness.³²

26 Jennifer Craik, 'The Cultural Politics of the Uniform', *Fashion Theory*, 7, no. 2 (2003): 130.

27 'Women Tram Conductors', *Argus* (Melbourne), 6 August 1941, 6.

28 Pattinson argues the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) of the First World War were spared the ridicule directed at other women in uniform because of their privileged class background. Pattinson, *Women of War*, 113.

29 'Between Ourselves—By Stephanie', *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 16 August 1941, 32.

30 Able to choose between skirts or trousers for her work as a Second World War guard, Edie Winsor was advised by her mother that 'it was more decent to wear trousers when there are men about'. Interview with Edie Rowe, 1995, in Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 192.

31 'News of the Day: The Big Sweep', *Age* (Melbourne), 7 January 1943, 2.

32 As Boris notes, 'what dress was desirable varied with the beholder': Boris, 'Desirable Dress', 123.



Figure 2: The First Uniform for Women Porters (featuring a divided skirt) on the Victorian Railways, Melbourne Australia, 1942.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Ref. P136625.

For women in public-facing roles in the transport industry, there was ongoing tension between what was deemed to be an appropriately feminine uniform and the practicalities of working on moving trains, buses, trams, ships and planes, or in busy stations.³³ The 'divided skirt' (culottes) appears to have been a compromise solution, preserving femininity whilst allowing greater freedom of movement (see Figure 2).³⁴ There was extensive discussion at the WEB hearing in Victoria in mid-1942 as to what constituted suitable clothing for women railway workers required to 'cross the pits' (walk over the tracks between station platforms):

33 Churella records tensions on the US wartime railroad between women workers themselves over the issue of skirts or pants, as well as with the male-dominated unions. Albert Churella, 'The Clothes make the Women: Skirts, Pants, and Railway Labor during WWII', *Business and Economic History Online*, 2009, www.thefreelibrary.com/The+clothes+make+the+women%3A+skirts%2C+pants%2C+and+railway+labor+during...-a0220202779.

34 Kimberly Wahl, 'Bifurcated Garments and Divided Skirts: Redrawing the Boundaries of the Sartorial Feminine in Late Victorian Culture', in *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, ed. Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2020), 22–34.

The agility of women was not questioned, and it was admitted they were as alert and as active as men. The suitability of their clothing seemed to perturb the board most, but when the department's spokesman pointed out that the uniform under consideration was to be either slacks or culottes—a divided skirt—it was decided that the 'pits' could be crossed in safety.³⁵

Even ostensibly 'service' roles such as tram conductress or ticket collector might include heavy operational responsibilities that required physical effort and mobility, though these were often modified for fear that they were too taxing for women to perform (with lower pay as a result). A revealing moment in the 1943 WEB enquiry to establish women's rates of pay notes the contention that 'many parcels were too heavy for women porters to handle', which was greeted by hearty laughter from 'some of the women in railway uniform who were taking a keen interest in the case'.³⁶

The question of what women themselves thought of their uniforms is difficult to ascertain. The *Weekly Times* in Australia reported that 'the majority' of women porters on the Victorian Railways, when asked if 'they would have preferred slacks, for warmth and to save stockings' were 'emphatic in their preference for the divided skirt, as most felt that slacks would not show their figures to the best advantage'. In this piece, it is women's desire to 'show their figures' (implicitly for male approval) that seemingly overrides comfort and cost considerations. No doubt this reassured some Australian readers that women in the state of Victoria were not about to sacrifice their femininity in the arena of paid work and that they remained immune to more rational arguments about dress. Their uniform was reported to be 'both becoming and practical'.³⁷ Elsewhere it was reported to be both 'attractive and serviceable', consisting 'of a well-cut coat and divided skirt of steel-grey cloth', 'completed by a matching cap of similar design'.³⁸ Such a combination of aesthetic appeal and practicality—with the aesthetic always privileged as the first part of this pairing—was regularly invoked in relation to women's wartime attire. Physical attractiveness was harnessed to foster the public acceptance of women in war work, including by the women themselves. Wartime women tram and bus conductors in neighbouring New South Wales

35 'News of the Day: Women on the Railways', *Age* (Melbourne), 23 June 1942, 2.

36 'News of the Day: The Big Sweep', *Age* (Melbourne), 7 January 1943, 2.

37 'First Women Porters Start Training', *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 15 July 1942, 24.

38 'Women Porters' Uniforms', *Argus* (Melbourne), 27 June 1942, 2.

were encouraged to 'make themselves as attractive as they like'. Yet again women faced contradictory messages about their appearance: lipstick and rouge were not permitted for women conductresses in Melbourne.³⁹

Challenges by women workers to the design or provision of uniforms—including claims for trousers—did surface, sometimes as part of broader complaints over working conditions (and pay).⁴⁰ When some women trainee porters argued in 1942 that they should be allowed to wear trousers (and be paid equally to male porters), sections of the Australian press accused them of a frivolous obsession with fashion:

When the important question of skirts or trousers was decided by adopting the compromise of divided skirts the women made no protest. But that was fully a fortnight ago, and it is probably an absurd masculine assumption that a fashion of so long ago should content the woman of today.⁴¹

Although there was tacit approval of women's concern with their (feminine) appearance in the workplace, this could quickly be turned against them if it threatened to tip over into industrial unrest (especially when it also lay claim to both masculine fashion and masculine economic privilege). That women may have actually been responding to the demands of their work is not acknowledged. In 1943, the *Guinea Gold* reported on Sydney conductresses complaining to their union about the rules against trousers: 'It's no use trying to dress like a woman when you are doing a man's job'. They argued the divided skirt 'will not be suitable in winter winds'.⁴²

Management preference for skirts or divided skirts for women workers led to an insistence that women also wore stockings or tights. The specific shortages of wartime, and associated higher costs, influenced some women's resistance to rules mandating stockings, which were not provided by the companies and had to be replaced regularly. Melbourne tram conductresses complained in 1944 that the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB) should either supply stockings or allow women to wear slacks in winter. Commissioner Bell refused to countenance women in trousers but eventually allowed women to purchase stockings from the

39 'N.S.W. Girl Conductors Allowed to Make-Up', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 8 September 1942, 4.

40 Kate Darian-Smith argues women porters made consistent demands for trousers, being 'unimpressed' with their 'steel-grey skirt'. Darian-Smith, *On the Home Front*, 60.

41 'The Female of the Species', *Herald* (Melbourne), 22 July 1942, 4.

42 'News Brevities from Every State', *Guinea Gold* (Papua New Guinea), 5 March 1943, 2.

company without using up their clothing coupons.⁴³ Australian transport employers continued to list stockings as part of the uniform, even as other companies allowed women to work bare-legged in the summer heat.⁴⁴ Some women conductresses on the Sydney trams opted instead to wear footlets or socklets with their navy serge culottes, to cope both with the summer heat and with the expense of constantly replacing snagged stockings. Skilled seamstresses could fashion these themselves from old stockings.⁴⁵ In 1944, Sydney conductresses were still lobbying to be allowed to wear slacks as part of their uniforms.⁴⁶

Even in the 1990s, transport uniform rules relating to women's tights proved contentious. In the UK, Helena Wojtczak notes:

one printed directive [on British railways] ruled that women train crews' tights had to be no thicker than 40 denier. Twelve pairs a year were issued, but we needed about 300 pairs because such thin, sheer tights would catch, snag and run very easily ... and rarely survived to the end of a duty.⁴⁷

The low denier for women's tights was no doubt related to the visibility of women's legs; it was certainly not determined according to practical reasons. As Liz Conor has pointed out in the Australian context, women's 'visual appeal' could be 'both their own and their employer's capital' but it also came at a cost.⁴⁸

Some wartime women transport workers were provided with trousers. A 1941 article in the British press made women active agents in the adoption of more masculine attire: they have 'discarded skirts for trousers, high-heeled shoes for more serviceable ones, and they are wearing the tunic coats and the peaked caps that go with their jobs'.⁴⁹ These no-nonsense women workers were ready to keep Britain moving. The issue of trousers also seems to have been far less contentious in South Australia than elsewhere in the country. When the South Australian press reported on women employed as delivery van drivers in the road transport branch of

43 Russell Jones, 'Stepping into the Breach: Conductresses in the Second World War', *Melbourne Tram Museum*, www.hawthorntramdepot.org.au/papers/conductressww2.htm#note15.

44 'Reaction to Bare Legs Favourable', *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 September 1942, 5.

45 'Bare-Legged Tram Girls', *Sun* (Sydney), 19 November 1942, 3.

46 'Bus Girls Want to Wear Slacks', *Sun* (Sydney), 25 May 1944, 3.

47 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 347.

48 Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman*, 73.

49 Mary Ferguson, 'Women Make the Wheels Go Round', *Tamworth Herald* (England), 9 August 1941, 4.

the Railways Department, they were described as ‘wearing bib-and-brace overalls’ and as ‘[w]earing sensible, serviceable clothes, often dungaree or slacks’ (see also Figure 3).⁵⁰ The 1942–43 Commission by the WEB also suggests that women were seen as more capable workers in South Australia, tackling jobs seen by the Victorian Railways as too arduous.⁵¹ The gendered term of ‘workmanlike’, often used to praise male workers, was used in one newspaper article to juxtapose trouser-wearing South Australian women workers with women railway porters in Victoria who reportedly preferred the more figure-flattering divided skirt: ‘Women porters in South Australia wear slacks, and look very workmanlike’.⁵²



Figure 3: Women cleaning trains at Adelaide Railway Station (Australia), 5 November 1943.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Ref. 045116.

In the Australian capital, women on the buses opted to wear trousers but had to provide these for themselves. Their argument was based on the practicalities of the job and the need for physical mobility: ‘[s]lacks are

50 ‘Girl Drivers for Railways’, *News* (Adelaide), 9 March 1942, 5; ‘Doing Men’s Jobs’, *The Mail* (Adelaide), 21 March 1942, 8.

51 ‘News of the Day: The Big Sweep’, *Age* (Melbourne), 7 January 1943, 2.

52 ‘First Women Porters Start Training’, *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 15 July 1942, 24.

best for this work, particularly when 158 passengers crowd into a bus to seat 40. You hang on by your eyelashes with one leg in and one out of the bus'.⁵³ That management was not entirely comfortable with their attire is revealed by the stipulation that women cover their legs with their long regulation coats: '[t]he Transport Department allows us slacks only if we wear a dustcoat or overcoat too'. The women claimed in addition that they 'should be issued with khaki slacks to match'.⁵⁴ This demand suggests not only their desire for a smart appearance (with all elements of their work attire being uniform); the request for khaki simultaneously lays claim to its associated meanings of military masculinity.⁵⁵ Some men were unwilling to share the social and cultural status of their transport uniforms. This same article on the Canberra conductresses goes on to mention the emasculating effect of women's presence by quoting one young male conductor: '[t]his job's all right, but there are too many women in it now, and a man feels a bit of a sissy'.⁵⁶ Women were indeed able to stay on as bus and tram conductresses into the postwar era in both the UK and Australia. However, the usual route for promotion to driver was blocked.⁵⁷

By the 1980s, when women could no longer be legally excluded from 'non-traditional' roles, transport companies in both Britain and Australia were at last beginning to recognise the need for uniform trousers to be specially designed for women. Jeans and trousers had become relatively common in women's everyday fashions. Yet skirts remained typical of women's workwear. On British Rail an incident relating to the redesign of men's uniform trousers suggests that women's clothing needs were simultaneously recognised and diminished by management and unions. According to Diana Robbins, in her 1986 report on the implementation of equal opportunities legislation in the company, '[a]ssumptions on the part of management about what was "usual for women's trousers" meant that a different and potentially even less practical design was proposed

53 'Canberra Fashion Note: Canberra Bus Girls Envious', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 26 September 1943, 4.

54 Ibid.

55 Lucy Noakes, "Playing at Being Soldiers": British Women and Military Uniform in the First World War', in *British Popular Culture and the First World War*, ed. Jessica Meyer (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 124–25; Pattinson, *Women of War*, 79 and 88.

56 'Canberra Fashion Note: Canberra Bus Girls Envious', *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 26 September 1943, 4.

57 Murray, "Should Women be Bus Drivers", 322; Margaret Bevege, 'Women's Struggle to become Tram Drivers in Melbourne, 1956–75', in *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788–1978*, ed. Elizabeth Windschuttle (Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1980), 437–52.

for women than for men'. The reference to what was 'usual' connects the design of work trousers to the arena of fashion external to the workplace (as perceived by male managers), rather than to the demands of the tasks within that workplace. The British NUR agreed to take this up with management and achieved a better result for women. Still, a comment at the AGM reveals the sexualised humour that accompanied even these victories: 'I cannot claim to be an authority on where females have zips on their uniform clothing. Perhaps I should ask the President that we could defer this until tomorrow, until I improve my knowledge on that particular subject!'⁵⁸ It is unclear exactly what this refers to but most likely it related to whether zips should be at the front of women's trousers or, as had been more common, at the side or back.⁵⁹

Even where trousers were permitted, uniforms specifically designed for women were typically distinct from those provided to men. This effectively marked women out as 'other', maintaining a gender binary, and could be achieved simply by changing the colour of the fabric, using different material, or specifying a different cut of jacket or style of hat. During the Second World War, for example, women conductresses on Melbourne trams had uniforms of brown rather than blue serge, and a 'forage cap' instead of the men's peaked cap. Russell Jones identifies the change from brown to blue, and from the forage to the peaked cap in the summer uniform of 1942, as a symbol of their acceptance into the role (see Figure 4).⁶⁰ Fifty years later, Susie Bosworth Brown related a keen sense of difference when she collected her guard's uniform from Waterloo station in London in the early 1990s: 'it made me stand out from the men. Their shirts were white with blue stripes and mine blue with white stripes'.⁶¹ Pennie Bellas, the first woman station manager in Britain, recalled:

Male station managers wore made-to-measure black suits with a fine white pinstripe. The plan for women was a fetching pale blue which looked more like an air hostess outfit and would be totally impractical. Eventually it was conceded that I should have a suit similar to the men's.⁶²

58 Diana Robbins, *Wanted: Railman. Report of an Investigation into Equal Opportunities for Women in British Rail* (London: HMSO Bookshops, 1986), 48.

59 Thanks to Dr Jennifer Jones for this insight into respectability and women's zips.

60 Jones, 'Stepping into the Breach', np.

61 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 324.

62 Ibid., 318.



Figure 4: A tram conductress in Melbourne, Australia, wearing her summer uniform in 1944.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Ref. 044516.

Pennie suggests that ideas around what would be appropriate for women—‘a fetching pale blue’—were far removed from the practicalities of rail work.⁶³ She achieved ‘concessions’ to get something ‘similar to the men’ but in the meantime was left without a suitable uniform.

Despite unequal access to appropriate workplace clothing, the decorative elements of transport uniforms, with embellishments such as metallic buttons, offered women occupational and social status, alongside more aesthetic, tactile pleasures.⁶⁴ On British Rail in the later twentieth century, Helena Wojtczak recalled that ‘[g]uards displayed two silver braid stripes on their sleeves and on their peaked caps to indicate that they were two steps up from a railman and one step down from a station supervisor’. She felt ‘exceedingly proud to be the only woman with the right to exhibit those two stripes’ and could ‘hardly wait’ to get her uniform (but would be disappointed, as we return to later).⁶⁵ Caroline Stephens, also working for British Rail, remembered how she ‘liked the waistcoats’ and ‘had one with lots of buttons and black and red striped sleeves’.⁶⁶ Building on the tradition of her wartime predecessors, and no doubt emboldened by her own high status in the British railway hierarchy, Pennie employed creativity, resourcefulness and sewing skill to ensure that she was not deprived of her station manager ‘gold rings’: ‘I wore a grey suit and purloined an air hostess hat and sewed my three gold “Station Manager” rings onto it’.⁶⁷ Faced with neglect by her employers, Pennie manufactured her own occupational identity: stitching together the traditions of the railway (the gold rings), alternative traditions of feminised labour from a parallel transport sector (the air hostess hat) and traditions of women’s business wear (a grey suit).

In designing uniforms for their women employees in male-dominated work, transport companies were broadly concerned to maintain a feminine aesthetic that preserved a gender binary. Anxieties over the wearing of ‘slacks’ by women speaks to broader anxieties about a disruption to the gender order, even if only ‘for the duration’ of the war. Gillian Murray has argued that women’s uniforms on the British buses of the Second World War were a deliberate synthesis of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, but that this

63 On air hostess uniforms, see Boris, ‘Desirable Dress’.

64 Craik charts the introduction of these decorative elements, which became canonical in uniforms. Craik, ‘The Cultural Politics of the Uniform’, 127.

65 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 342.

66 Ibid., 309.

67 Ibid., 318.

became less of a concern in the postwar era when gender binaries were understood as somewhat more fluid.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the debate over the design of women's trousers in 1980s British Rail cautions against optimism on this front. The postwar experiences of women in transport reveal that having to wear 'men's' clothes in the absence of a dedicated uniform, even when experienced as liberating, was a symptom of management and union neglect of the needs of women workers, who were breaking down persistent barriers to their employment in non-traditional occupations.

'So You Get a Man's Uniform': (Un)fitting Women's Bodies for the Postwar Male-Dominated Workplace

In the aftermath of the Second World War, fashion that emphasised feminine curves and frills had reinforced claims for women to vacate 'male' workspaces, and ideally abstain from paid work altogether: 'dress played a powerful role in redefining woman as wife and mother rather than paid worker'.⁶⁹ Certain sectors of the British and Australian transport industries were reclaimed as entirely male areas of employment. Others, such as driving trains, continued to exclude women as they had for decades. Breaking down barriers to these areas of male-dominated work from the 1970s onwards has proved remarkably difficult in both locations, even with the passing of anti-discrimination legislation. In wartime, the arrival of patriotic women workers had necessitated at least a degree of accommodation from employers and fellow workers, including the design and provision of a uniform. For women entering these last bastions of male work in the late twentieth century, there was no coordinated response to their clothing requirements. This reflected a broader, deep-seated resistance to their presence.

Management's inability to conceive of women in 'traditionally' male roles was made tangible through the design and provision of occupational dress that catered solely to men's bodies. Excluding women from access to workplace clothing associated with particular roles was one means of perpetuating their broader exclusion, even as the formal barriers to

68 Murray, "Should Women be Bus Drivers?", 320–47.

69 Peter McNeil, "Put Your Best Face Forward": The Impact of the Second World War on British Dress, *Journal of Design History*, 6, no. 4 (1993): 283.

recruitment broke down. When Helena Wojtczak filled in her first uniform application as a trainee British Rail guard in the late 1970s, for example, she was told 'not to bother: I'd never pass my training; it would be a waste of material'.⁷⁰ Thinly veiled in the rational language of economics—a 'waste of material'—this incident undermined women's basic right and capacity to work in the role of train guard. Applying for a uniform was one of the first steps for a successful new recruit, marking a symbolic moment of acceptance into the company, which Helena was denied.

Women without the correct uniform struggled to be recognised as legitimate even as they visibly engaged in transport work. Anne Winter, credited as the first female train driver on British Rail, recalled: '[h]aving no uniform, I was once accused of being the driver's girlfriend, along for the ride'.⁷¹ Helena Wojtczak outlined the risks, to railway operations and to passengers, of women not being immediately identifiable in their correct role. She was not provided with an equivalent of the male guard's uniform and was instead given a makeshift outfit comprised of a woman carriage cleaner's jacket and hat:

We'd been thoroughly drilled to take heed of the stripes on uniform clothing, because they indicated everyone's place in the pecking order ... But when my uniform arrived it had no stripes ... I felt insulted and humiliated ... When subsequently wearing the uniform out and about, nobody recognised me as a guard because ... railway workers ... had to rely on the stripes, braid and hat.⁷²

Uniforms for women workers did exist in the transport industries by the late twentieth century, but they were designed for women in feminised roles—cleaning and catering—and did not carry the same symbolic weight. Helena relates that the female carriage cleaners wore a 'cloth beret devoid of adornment' rather than the 'peaked, badged and braided' guard's cap. When pushed to provide uniforms for these new women workers in non-traditional roles, management thus effectively excluded women from accessing the symbolic meanings of men's uniforms—meanings accrued over generations of masculine workplace culture.

70 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 341.

71 She began her training in 1979, passing out as a full driver in February 1983. Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 320.

72 Ibid., 342–43.

Clothing was a logistical and administrative as well as a sartorial issue for women, demanding extra energy on a regular basis. In Anne Winter's case, the struggle to be automatically provided with the correct uniform continued over the course of a decade, which must have been both exhausting and demoralising:

When I questioned the uniform stores I was told that, as a woman, there was some doubt as to how long I would be staying in the job and so it would be necessary for me to submit a uniform request annually.⁷³

As late as 1991, there was still no official uniform for women signalmen: women in this role received a lower clothing allocation, with polyester rather than cotton shirts.⁷⁴ Women might in this way be excluded from the victories of their male colleagues in achieving comfortable, affordable, practical workwear.

In the absence of a specially designated uniform, women workers often had no choice but to wear protective clothing and equipment (PPE) that were designed for men. Recent studies have highlighted how poorly fitted PPE poses additional occupational hazards for women.⁷⁵ Carriage cleaning on the UK railways, once a male-dominated job but becoming a significant employer of women after the First World War, was one of the most hazardous occupations (Figure 5). Carriage cleaning had in fact become a form of punishment for male workers.⁷⁶ Women cleaners had unequal access to protective clothing compared to men working in similar conditions into the late twentieth century. Robbins reported of British Railways: '[s]ignalmen ... are entitled to overcoats; but carriage cleaners working "indoors" in large, unheated, possibly derelict sheds and out on the lines are not'. These women sometimes resorted to buying their own gloves to protect their hands from the corrosive chemicals: an additional expense of time and money.⁷⁷ In Australia, women carriage cleaners achieved greater equality with their male counterparts in the 1980s, according to an item in *Railroad* that allowed them to select from

73 Ibid., 320.

74 Ibid., 289.

75 See Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019); Seoha Min, 'Gendered Role Communication in Marketing Blue-Collar Occupational Gear and Clothing in the United States', *Fashion and Textiles*, 2, no. 24 (2015), 1–12.

76 Robbins, *Wanted: Railman*, 71–72.

77 Ibid., 72.

a choice of bib and braces overalls, trousers and blouse/t-shirt or shorts and blouse/t-shirt. They were also finally allowed to select their preferred type of fabric.⁷⁸



Figure 5: Women employed cleaning railway carriages in England during the First World War.

Source: Australian War Memorial, Ref. H08210.

The continued denial of a uniform, or providing only unequal access to one, was one way in which management could undermine women's rights to a male role. When male-dominated transport unions did not respond quickly to this issue, they were complicit in excluding women from traditionally male jobs. As Robbins concluded for the British case, 'details' such as uniforms and lack of toilet facilities added up to 'disadvantage' for women. These details could make work bearable—or not—for women on the railways and needed to be taken seriously by both management and unions. Robbins therefore advocated setting up small groups within the unions to address uniform, toilets and child care.⁷⁹ We argue that beyond being significant everyday details, uniforms were key elements in the perpetuation and very visible construction of masculine occupational traditions, ones that proved extremely hard-wearing in discriminating against women workers.

⁷⁸ 'Women Car Cleaners will be issued with Clothing', *Railroad*, no. 77 (September 1986): 8.

⁷⁹ Robbins, *Wanted: Railman*, 22, 92.

Women did deliberately contravene gendered uniform regulations. Wearing men's uniform could be a rational and efficient solution to finding regulation clothing suited to the task at hand. Helena Wojtczak records that male guards' uniforms 'were designed to accommodate the myriad of small items they were required to carry'. Where Helena's make-shift uniform in the 1970s had a jacket with 'no inside pockets' and no waistcoat, male guards' jackets had 'two reinforced outer pockets [and] ... three inside pockets and the waistcoat supplied a further four'. Helena resolved the issue by using a male guard's jacket.⁸⁰ Women might also exercise choice based on comfort and aesthetics. When Caroline Stephens started work in the mid-1970s, she remembers she 'wore a man's uniform because [she] didn't like the skirt: it was straight, grey and itchy'.⁸¹ Ann Henderson had no qualms in the early 1980s about pulling on a donkey jacket and Doc Martin boots to fulfil her work as a leading railman on the cold platforms:

they couldn't find my uniform—I suppose there were things like that, you know, so you get a man's uniform—which, for that job really didn't matter because I think I lived in a donkey jacket and Doc Martin boots and dark trousers and lots of jumpers and discovered the benefits of thermal underwear and a lot of—even the passengers just used to call me son all the time—I've got short, you know, I've got short dark hair and I suppose I'm quite tall and I just used to walk about the platform in my donkey jacket and my Doc Martin boots and nobody really noticed.⁸²

The neglect of her needs by her employers is understated: 'they couldn't find my uniform—I suppose there were things like that, you know'. Yet the interpretation of her woman's body in male clothing, by both passengers and male colleagues, reveals that uniforms were loaded with gendered meanings far beyond their practical application. She became effectively invisible as a woman on the station platform.⁸³

80 The absence of pockets in women's clothing was a legacy of nineteenth-century fashions, with the intention of preserving a feminine silhouette. Pattinson, *Women of War*, 84–85.

81 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 309.

82 National Railway Museum, York, UK (NRM), Oral History Collection, NAROH2002-142.

83 There is a long and complex history of women dressing as men and subsequently gaining access to male-dominated employment, which it is impossible to do justice to here. See, for example, Suzanne J. Stark, *Female Tars: Women Aboard Ship in the Age of Sail* (London: Pimlico, 1998); Lucy S. Chesser, *Parting with My Sex: Cross-Dressing, Inversion and Sexuality in Australian Cultural Life* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008). In our research, women adopted 'male' attire either as a last resort or as a conscious strategy to overcome continued exclusion, rather than to deliberately 'pass' as men.

An outward appearance that negated femininity could allow women to access elements of male privilege: 'a partial right to manoeuvre in male social space'.⁸⁴ But there were also negative consequences. Ann reports that she was often referred to by colleagues as 'Ann the Man' behind her back. For Ann, her relationship with her male colleagues was not improved by wearing men's clothing, even as this was permitted by her employer as a handy solution to their own neglect. As Ruth Barnes and Joanne Eicher summarise, Malcolm Young's study of women entering the police force in Britain revealed an 'attempt through uniform requirements and prescriptions to androgynize those females and subject them to informal ridicule'.⁸⁵ Here uniform rules were 'effacing rather than enhancing the body and, by implication, the self'.⁸⁶ We can add, such rules also exposed women's status as being marginal.

It would be impossible to completely untangle the intertwined practical and symbolic elements of transport uniforms. In her first guard's post, Helena was finally given a male guard's peaked cap by another colleague, 'which kept rain, snow and sun out of my eyes and gave me, at last, my two silver braid stripes'. Helena recalled that wearing a man's regulation cap 'brought instant recognition that I was a figure of authority'. When wearing the 'female-style hat', she found that 'people took me less seriously'.⁸⁷ Similarly, Pennie Bellas reported inheriting her male 'predecessor's "carnival hat" which was the most practical for wearing on the track and later still a bowler for meeting royal trains etc'.⁸⁸ Men's clothing is encoded with meanings about masculinity that confer power on the wearer. Anne Bettenson noted in 1974 that the success of 'hard hats' as protective wear in Australia was due to their successful association with a certain kind of working-class masculinity or 'virility', rather than (as had been the case in the UK) being presented to men solely as a management-sponsored safety measure.⁸⁹ While some women found a certain freedom, even power, in wearing clothing that effectively disguised their female bodies, others experienced wearing clothing designed for men as simply uncomfortable. Eileen Boris records that women riveters in the wartime US, 'subtly fought against attempts to police their dress and undermine

84 Malcolm Young, 'Dress and Modes of Address: Structural Forms for Policewomen', in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning*, ed. Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher (New York: Berg, 1992), 273.

85 Ruth Barnes and Joanne B. Eicher, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, 7.

86 Boris, 'Desirable Dress', 127.

87 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 343.

88 *Ibid.*, 318.

89 Bettenson, 'Industrial Protective Clothing and Equipment', 49.

their sexual expressiveness ... [and] remembered the need to distinguish gender identity'.⁹⁰ Auntie Recheal Daley, from Narooma, Australia, the first Indigenous woman train driver in NSW, was provided only with a men's uniform, which she subsequently adapted. She was 'chided' by a male supervisor 'for not wearing the standard uniform in the correct manner'. She responded, '[w]ould you wear a woman's uniform?'⁹¹ Auntie Recheal's retort is loaded with the extra weight of threatened emasculation.

Choices of workplace clothing are constrained by a uniform. This apparent restriction of choice was not necessarily experienced as a negative aspect of employment. Women's 'choices' on appropriate work dress involve navigating the fraught landscape of female sexuality in relation to workplace competence and professionalism.⁹² Women in non-traditional areas of employment have been criticised both for being too feminine and for being too masculine in their appearance. In the transport industries, 'attractive' women were gradually judged to be acceptable in taking on service-oriented roles such as bus conductresses. Where they remained in an unthreatening minority, women might also be positioned as aesthetically pleasing novelties in the male-dominated workplace. Pennie remembers an obsession with the 'decorative appearance' of her fellow women assistant managers in the corporate *Railnews* journal, which had unfortunately not resulted in any move towards providing her with an appropriate uniform.⁹³ In Australia and Britain, the railways even sponsored beauty contests for women who were either related to railwaymen or railway employees themselves.⁹⁴ When women threatened to break into blue-collar male-dominated transport roles outside the specific context of war, however, their sexuality and attractiveness could become potentially threatening. They were seen as bringing 'sex' into the

90 Boris, 'Desirable Dress', 128.

91 Jodie Duffy, 'Tale of Trailblazing Aboriginal Train Driver', *Illawarra Mercury*, 2 April 2014, www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/2193582/tale-of-trailblazing-aboriginal-train-driver/.

92 Nick Rumens and Deborah Kerfoot, 'Gay Men at Work: (Re)constructing the Self as Professional', *Human Relations*, no. 5 (2009): 776; Ann C. McGinley, 'Harassing "Girls" at the Hard Rock: Masculinities in Sexualized Environments', *University of Illinois Law Review*, 27, no. 4 (2007): 1229–77.

93 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 318.

94 The Australian Railways Union organised the Miss PTC Charity Queen beauty contest in the late 1970s, for example. Jim Longworth, 'Idealised Railway Women: Depictions of Women in NSW Railway Publicity', *Australian Railway History*, 62, no. 890 (2011): 20; 'Railway Queens of Peace', *ASLEF Journal* (November 2008): 22.

workplace and thereby curtailing the usual workplace practices of men.⁹⁵ Sexual harassment of women in non-traditional workplaces remains a serious issue that is beyond the scope of this article.

Some women appreciated their uniforms as a release from feminine clothing norms. When Caroline Stephens became a tutor training new railway recruits in Britain in 1986, she remembered, 'I didn't have to wear a uniform and I suddenly found it excruciating wearing dresses and skirts and attempting to look smart in "normal" clothes'.⁹⁶ Amanda Speake enjoyed the liberation from expectations of feminine dress in the 'male' work of on-track machine operator: 'I wouldn't have to get dressed up and do my hair every day—fantastic!' She describes her 'made-for-men overalls' and states, 'I would like to think that I'm asexual now in their eyes; at work anyway'. Amanda's narrative is a careful balancing of this aspiration to be 'just a normal Machine Operator and not a "woman operator"' with her statement of her own femininity: 'I keep my toenails painted constantly to remind myself I'm female!'⁹⁷ In an examination of the marketing of workwear, Seoha Min summarised that 'women in blue-collar occupations struggle not only with finding work clothing that fits but also with being able to identify and be identified as "female" in their work clothing'.⁹⁸ Nazanin Tork's analysis of interviews with women in blue-collar construction occupations in the US (conducted in the 1990s) revealed they felt they had 'to act like men or constantly worry about impressing their male co-workers' to cope with the 'gendered stress'.⁹⁹ The significance of dress for women in non-traditional roles goes well beyond the practicalities, even the physical safety, of actually performing their work tasks. It has broader implications for their psychological wellbeing.

Women who became pregnant were confronted still more starkly with a workplace not designed in any way with the female frame in mind. Transport employers were extremely slow to respond to the needs

95 For an early example of this in the American context, see Janet F. Davidson, 'The Goosing of Violet Nye and Other Tales: White Women and Sexual Respectability on the Pennsylvania Railroad', *Labor History*, no. 4 (2000): 437–52.

96 Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 314.

97 *Ibid.*, 339.

98 Min, 'Gendered Role Communication', 4.

99 Nazanin Tork, 'The Effects of Gendered Stressors on Female Construction Workers' Occupational Health and Safety: A Re-Analysis of Qualitative Data' (Master of Arts, University of Cincinnati, 2008), 33, 38. Tork used interviews originally conducted as part of L. M. Goldenhar and M. H. Sweeney, 'Tradeswomen's Perspectives on Occupational Health and Safety: A Qualitative Investigation', *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 29, no. 5 (1996): 516–20.

of pregnant employees, especially those in 'traditionally' male roles. Expecting her first child in 1994, Ann Henderson, by this time a train driver at Glasgow Queen Street, recalled that the 'maternity issue British Rail uniform was a ... clerical staff type smock and a blouse, which was totally impractical for going up and down to the signal telephones and working on the tracks'. Management clearly perceived pregnancy as an issue solely affecting feminised occupations. Women in non-traditional roles were resourceful in adapting uniforms to fit but the situation was hardly ideal. Ann wore 'some outsize men's trousers, from some of the very large drivers' until she was allowed to purchase 'proper maternity trousers and claim it back through some procedure'. She recalled 'a bit of tortuous discussion' to get to this point, which must have been personally draining. Her boss later asked her to go on leave, citing 'complaints from passengers who were concerned about this [laughing] very heavily pregnant train driver, walking past the windows of the train to take the train off somewhere'.¹⁰⁰ Pregnancy and menstruation were embodied experiences for women workers that were simply not accommodated—and that were certainly not expected to be visible—in the male spaces of the transport sector. It was not until 2011 that Luba Grigorovitch, the first women's officer for the Victorian branch of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union in Australia, was able to announce maternity uniforms for workers on the Metro system.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

Uniforms played a key role in the construction of masculine occupational traditions in the British and Australian transport sectors. Such traditions made it extremely difficult for women to enter these particular areas of employment, even into the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This was not simply practical workplace clothing: peaked caps and shiny buttons were markers of distinctly masculine status, respectability and authority in public transport roles. Uniforms thus became an important node of conflict and negotiation between women transport workers and their employers; between women workers and the unions meant to represent their interests; between workers themselves; and between

100 NRM, NAROH 2002-142. See also Ann's personal history published in Wojtczak, *Railwaywomen*, 331-37.

101 John Masanauskas, 'Luba has Girls on Track: Full Steam Ahead for Women Working in Public Transport', *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 28 June 2011, 18.

women workers and passengers. The provision, or not, of uniform (and the design of that uniform) was not easily divorced from wider ideologies about what constituted appropriate sexed and gendered bodies in the workplace. While employers sometimes justified a lack of uniforms for women in terms of an unnecessary or at least unexpected expense, their demand for women to wear inappropriate or unsafe clothing laid bare the inability of male managers and fellow workers to even imagine women in 'men's roles', perpetuated women's marginal status, and placed women's bodies under real threat.

The history of clothing for women workers in male-dominated occupations deserves critical attention. Workwear, especially uniform, has served as an initial marker of whether women have been accepted into the workplace. It has (in)validated their claims to occupational identity; enabled or hindered their efficiency in work tasks; protected them from, or exposed them to, workplace hazards (including sexual harassment); and created bodily and psychological comfort or discomfort in the short and long term. All these factors have affected whether women might apply for and remain in non-traditional areas of work. Occupational clothing is more than a surface issue. It has material, meaningful, implications for women's equality in the arena of paid work.

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