

“Pity the Poor Working Girl”

Nylons, Work, Class, Ideology, and Politics in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1945-46

Austin Davis

In a Tortoiseshell: *Austin Davis's "Pity the Poor Working Girl" looks into the Pittsburgh Nylon Riots, which rocked the city shortly after the end of WWII, and examines how this event exemplified broader tensions that were at play in the city and nation at large. This excerpt from the first several pages of the essay is a strong **introduction** that describes the event, clarifies its relevance, and transitions smoothly into Davis's thesis.*

Excerpt

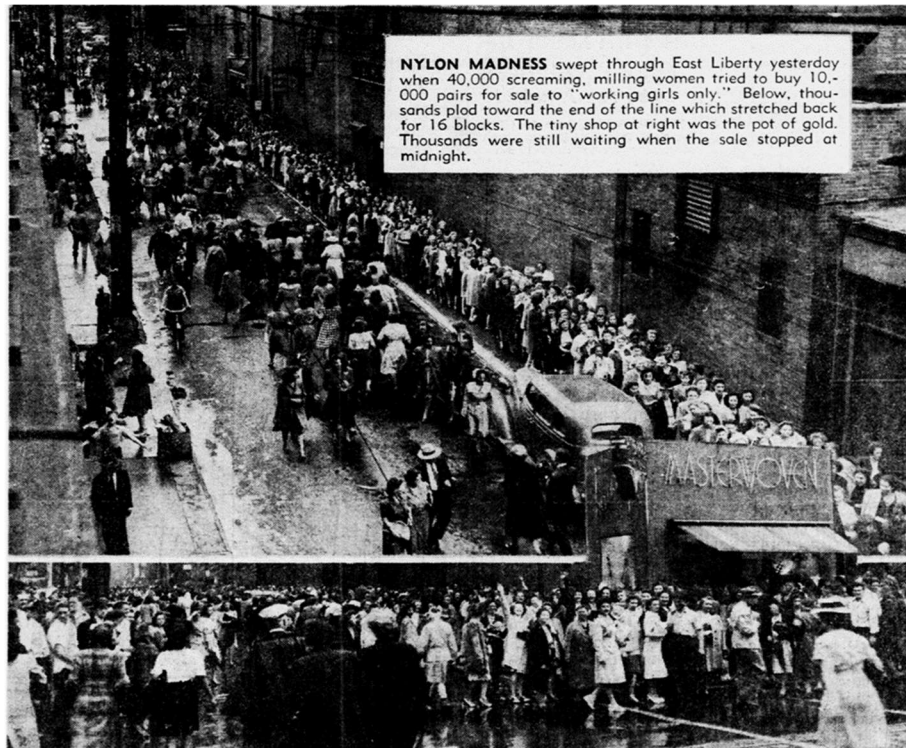


Figure 1. “Nylon Madness” grips Pittsburgh’s East Liberty district as 40,000 attempt to buy nylons.¹

¹ William Cooper, “Nylon Mob, 40,000 Strong, Shrieks and Sways for Mile,” *Pittsburgh Press*, June 13, 1946.

On June 12, 1946, more than 30,000 Pittsburgh women lined up outside an East Liberty neighborhood hosiery store, determined to buy some of the store's 10,000 pairs of nylon stockings for "working girls only."² As afternoon gave into night, these women withstood any challenge that came their way. While torrential rain showers drenched the city, many sought refuge under spare newspapers or umbrellas. When a group of men gathered across the street to taunt the women, many of these women fired back with their own insults. Women pushed police officers and threatened to kill any man who entered the line.³ Although united in their desire for the "gossamer leg glamorizers,"⁴ these women were not necessarily unified. Some women scared off any line-cutters with language worse than a "Boston fish-peddler," while two others got into a "good old-fashioned hair-pulling, face-scratching fight" until they were pulled apart by police.⁵ Nothing—whether it was weather, hunger, exhaustion, or each other—could stop these women. Only the midnight closure of the shop—two hours past its planned closing time—disappointed the thousands of women who remained in line for two pairs of nylon.⁶ This was Pittsburgh's so-called "Nylon Riot."⁷

In the years following the Second World War, lines for scarce goods were a common scene in the United States. Many materials had been reallocated for defense purposes instead of the consumer market, and nylon was exclusively being produced for army tents and parachutes.⁸ Thus, as the United States reconverted to a primarily consumer-driven economy, some companies like DuPont, the manufacturer of nylon, struggled to transition their industrial operations back to meet peacetime demand.⁹ Although shortages for many goods existed, ranging from butter to refrigerators, nylon's recent arrival on the American consumer market and total nonexistence during wartime heightened demand.¹⁰ Since demand was compounded by nearly continuous

² See Cooper, "Nylon Mob, 40,000 Strong, Shrieks and Sways for Mile," June 13, 1946 and "Nylon Hungry Girls From 16-Block Line," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, June 13, 1946.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ "Orderly Nylon Sale is a Surprise to All," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 22, 1945.

⁵ Cooper, "Nylon Mob, 40,000 Strong, Shrieks and Sways for Mile," June 13, 1946.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Susannah Handley, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 50.

⁸ Jeffrey Meikle, *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 147.

⁹ Handley, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution*, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

advertising campaigns,¹¹ as well as various associations with sacrifice and its wartime use,¹² the nylon line became symbolic of what contemporaries dubbed the rowdy “standing-in-line fad” directly following the war.¹³ In traditional literature, the post-war nylon shortage is a mere footnote in history, despite its distinct differences from other rationed goods.¹⁴ For instance, both Susannah Handley’s *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution* and Jeffrey Meikle’s *American Plastic: A Cultural History* devote few paragraphs to the general significance of the nylon shortage, favoring longer-term arguments looking at the entire history of nylon itself.¹⁵ Although nylon was simply one of the consumer scarcities during and directly after the war, the nylon line became both an everyday occurrence and common cultural trope.¹⁶ With its preeminence in American media and everyday life, debates on the standing-in-line culture, particularly for an item that is arguably a non-necessity, sprung up in news stories, opinion pieces, and editorials. These discussions regarding nylons coincided with a broader transitional period within American history, from female employment to domesticity, Great Depression fears to post-war prosperity, and greater consciousness of the unequal guarantee of individual rights. With such an active

¹¹ DuPont had its own magazines, including the *DuPont Magazine* and *Better Living*, which targeted both businesses and individual consumers. In many editions, DuPont highlighted the durability, low cost, style, and American freedom associated with its synthetic fabrics, most notably nylons. See *Better Living Magazine* Vol. 2, No. 6, a 1946 edition solely focused on nylon for an example.

¹² Meikle, *American Plastic*, 147.

¹³ Lucia Loomis Ferguson (Mrs. Walter Ferguson), “A Discouraging Craze,” *Pittsburgh Press*, April 5, 1946.

¹⁴ Nylon combined ideas of “luxury,” “function,” and “seduction” into one (see Handley, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution*, 48) while evoking both war and sacrifice (see Meikle, *American Plastic*, 147), which is something further elaborated on in this paper. In comparison to another good like butter, complaints about unfair distribution mostly had to do with its price (“There is butter – but it’s too expensive to eat,” from Ruth Millett, “We’re Going Nowhere,” *Pittsburgh Press*, July 30, 1946) and not its actual distribution, which allowed women to devise appropriate buying plans (see Ruth Millett, “Mothers Beat Rising Costs,” *Pittsburgh Press*, July 23, 1946). On top of this, most butter lines were portrayed as relatively calm, friendly, and viewed as a necessary purchase by most members of society (see Rachel Kirk, “Butter Customers’ Line Longer Than in Wartime,” *Pittsburgh Press*, January 31, 1946).

¹⁵ Handley offers a short synopsis on pp. 150-151 of her book, *Nylon: The Story of a Fashion Revolution* before discussing nylon’s 1950s couture. Jeffrey Meikle’s book *American Plastic* explores the nylon riots generally, focusing on the news stories’ often warlike and exaggerated words and connecting them to a sense of wartime sacrifice for women on pp. 149-151.

¹⁶ The “nylon line” became one of the go-to cultural allusions. In a March 26, 1946 *Pittsburgh Press* by Kaspar Monahan (“Show Stops: It’s ‘Gable Week’ in Pa’s Pitt Town”), Monahan compares a “stampede on the box office” to a “rush on the nylon counter.” Press reporter Gilbert Love revealed tidbits of everyday life in his “Reporter’s Notebook” series, a little girl asked whether or not they were waiting in line for “butter” or for “nylons.”

contemporary discussion, the matter of the post-war nylon shortage can illuminate new understandings of the United States in this transitory period.

Nylon, unsurprisingly, meant different things to different people, given its status as both a rationed good of women's wear and its vital military uses. As the United States transitioned from war to peace, this paper explores nylon stockings' exposition of simmering tensions within American society, whether it was women's occupational status, socioeconomic differences, or political maneuvering by local government. In all, Pittsburgh's Nylon Riot and the events that led up to it allow us to explore these debates, looking through the lenses of housewives, working women, and the city's Democratic mayor, David L. Lawrence. In turn, this paper argues that nylon helped Americans explore questions of fairness regarding the equal and just distribution of goods—as well as having the ability to purchase these goods—through its peacetime, economic reconversion. In both social and political circles, Pittsburghers, and, more broadly, Americans, debated what they believed was 'right,' often working within a distinctly American framework of individual rights, citizenship, and societal mores.

Author Commentary

Austin Davis

Often, it feels like history is done to death. Beyond what unfolds before our very eyes, it feels as if every historian or scholar has carved out their piece of the historical canon as their very own, leaving us with little wiggle room. What novel interpretations can be added to old events? What discoveries lie before us? Besides an earth-shattering archaeological find, how can the scholar leave their mark on historiography?

For me, I began my historical research on Wikipedia, sorting through a few pages until I came across a stub about my hometown: the Pittsburgh Nylon Riot: an event in which 40,000 women gathered at a Pittsburgh nylon hosiery shop to buy scarce nylon hose in 1945. Although Wikipedia is not a scholarly source, I used this apparent lack of information as a starting point. From here, I explored existing scholarship on nylon's cultural history, finding that the Pittsburgh Nylon Riot, as well as the thousands of other nylon lines across the country, were a part of the larger trend of post-war domestic shortages as the country transitioned back to peacetime production. These scholarly discussions, however, did not focus on the significance of the nylon riots and lines themselves; instead, they contextualized them within the broader history of nylon as an iconic cultural item in American society.

From here, I tapped into one of the best resources for contemporary American society: the newspaper. The newspaper, particularly before the rise of digital media, captured the events, trends, and voices of contemporary life, and Pittsburgh's two major papers in the 1940s, the *Post-Gazette* and *Press* were no different. Using the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database, I combed these papers, picking out news stories, op-eds, cartoons, and images of the nylon shortage. From the multitude of sources alone, I was sure that I could craft an argument about what was going on during the nylon shortages and its resultant riot, which would enable me to draw out a new argument from previously unused sources. With my sources compiled, I scanned them for recurring themes, allusions, and qualities, before settling on one: fairness in the distribution of consumer goods. Most notably, there seemed to be a divide between the worked woman and unemployed women, who were implied to be a housewife dependent on her husband's money. Thus, some believed that working women were being cheated out of nylons as they worked during sales hours, which they then assumed that married women were buying up all the nylons then. With this in mind, I could argue about this idea of fairness concerning the equitable distribution of goods. Moreover, I could also explore it from multiple angles, including employment, domestic living, among other things.

In all, it oftentimes feels like there is very little room to insert one's voice into the historical discourse. However, I found that not only exploring Wikipedia pages for niche topics but then applying these keywords to historical newspaper databases, I was able to effectively research a topic that has received little attention besides its situation in a larger historical context. In a sense, there is a lot more below the surface than we can see. By exploring newspapers and other historical materials, we might get a new insight into the period it covers.

Editor Commentary

Caroline Bailey

Writing a paper's opening can be a daunting task. Even after you have crafted a thesis statement, constructed an argument, and perhaps even written most of the paper, the first couple of sentences can evade your grasp. What exactly is a good "hook," and how does this concept transfer into college-level academic work? What is the best way to craft an opener that both catches your attention and moves the paper along? In this excerpt, Austin Davis introduces his topic—the 1946 Pittsburgh "Nylon Riot"—in a way that is informative, interesting, and transitions fluidly into the rest of his paper.

Austin's description of the riot in the first paragraph of the essay uses the dramatic nature of his subject matter as a natural hook for the reader. It also begins to subtly introduce many of the tensions that will be central to the rest of his paper, including gender and class friction. The next paragraph broadens its scope, explaining why this isolated event is an important window into domestic American problems of the time period. Austin's layered motive is honed over the course of this paragraph, as he brings up the lack of scholarly attention this issue has received, as well as the global motive of its importance in American history.

Ultimately, the final paragraph of this excerpt ties all these ideas together to arrive at a concise statement of Austin's thesis. Readers feel well-oriented on a topic and a historical event they have potentially never heard of before, and they understand what the paper must prove before its conclusion. Perhaps most importantly, they are interested and invested, because the paper's introduction does an excellent job of combining the human, political and social elements of its subject matter.

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Bios

Austin Davis '23 is an aspiring History concentrator from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, hoping to acquire certificates in Urban Studies and Ethnographic studies. A history lover since he was young, Austin has increasingly connected his research to an urban context, including topics relating to social life, historical memory, and urban renewal. Outside of academics, Austin is the Undergraduate Student Government Historian, a Programs for Access and Inclusion Community Ambassador, a Matriculate advisor, and quizbowler. Austin is also a proud member of Forbes College. He wrote this essay as a first-year.

Caroline Bailey '20 is from Palo Alto, CA, and she is an English concentrator with certificates in Linguistics and Cognitive Science. Her research interests include postmodern American literature, the history of the English language, and the use of constructed languages in fiction. Outside of working for the Writing Center and the Tortoise, Caroline is involved with diSiac Dance Company, a student dance group specializing in hip-hop and contemporary dance. She wrote this as a senior.