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Altaring Reality: Examining Normative Messages in Wedding Reality Television

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Abstract

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The prevalence of white weddings in American culture is a fascinating and expansive topic that has received considerable critical attention within the last decade. Many scholars have attributed the wedding's continued popularity to popular culture. Chrys Ingraham specifically explains how sites of popular culture form a wedding ideological complex that informs our commonly held beliefs about the matrimonial ritual. However, despite the acknowledged importance of popular culture within wedding culture, scholars have failed to consider how reality television may function as a critical part of the wedding ideological complex. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze episodes of wedding reality television representative of the variety of wedding-oriented programs currently on the air. First, I consider the recent history of the American wedding and its contemporary role in our cultural landscape. I pay particular attention to the commodification of the wedding ceremony and how we may understand the commercialized ritual through Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital. Next, I outline the genre of reality television and consider how wedding culture dovetails nicely into the narratives of transformation prevalent in reality programming. I then provide a close reading of seven individual episodes of various reality programs and a separate analysis of one serialized wedding program, Bridalplasty. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the aftermath of wedding spending and the consequences of the omnipresent standard of the commodified wedding.

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Introduction.

"Your wedding will still go on, but it may not be perfect."

In late November of 2010, the E! television network launched a reality television show so provocative that one person proclaimed it, "the final TV show ever made before mankind slips quietly into the dust" (Gabe). This show is none other than *Bridalplasty*, wherein a dozen women compete against each other for plastic surgery each week in hopes of winning the grand prize of a dream wedding and total body makeover.[1] Each week, a bride is eliminated, and as she leaves, she is told by the host, "Your wedding will still go on, but it may not be perfect." This send-off is indicative of widely held beliefs about weddings: it's not just about having the ceremony; it's about making it *perfect*.

Coming from a group of cosmetic-surgery-hungry women, perhaps it is possible to dismiss their desire for wedding perfection as just another byproduct of their appearance-oriented attitudes. Yet the women of *Bridalplasty* are far from the only brides-to-be who dream of a perfect wedding day. Many brides-to-be felt the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, but they did not want a natural disaster to stand in the way of their wedding ideal. Wedding scholar Katherine Jellison relates that amidst the cries for housing and education also came pleas for wedding materials from the brides who lost their wedding gowns in the hurricane. She says, "That hurricane survivors would think of formal wedding paraphernalia when they had lost homes, livelihoods, and even loved ones is a testament to the centrality of elaborate weddings in contemporary American culture" (231). Clearly the desire for a wedding goes

[1] It should be noted that all of the women on the show want multiple procedures and one contestant's "wish list" even includes fifteen separate cosmetic surgeries (her profile on the show's web page explains that she wants "every type of plastic surgery possible done before her wedding").

beyond superficial consumer wants; the desire is meaningful and is deeply rooted in our collective American psyche.

The prevalence of white weddings in American culture is a fascinating and expansive topic that has received considerable critical attention within the last decade. Wedding culture is something of a curiosity, begging questions of why the ritual seems so important to so many, why couples are willing to spend beyond their means to have a wedding, and why the wedding is the location for such emotional, societal and financial investments. There are no easy answers to these questions, but many scholars and authors have reflected upon the history of weddings in an attempt to discern how we have arrived at a cultural moment that produces the likes of Hurricane Katrina brides. In particular, feminist wedding scholarship has emerged to critique the wedding as an exclusionary institute that has been propped up and perpetuated by two major forces: the first is the seductive advertising of the multi-billion dollar wedding industry (and associated industries that indirectly benefit from wedding spending), the other is the collected sites of popular culture that color Americans' commonly held beliefs about the ritual. Strangely, despite the importance attributed to popular culture by multiple wedding scholars, the literature has failed to consider a critical component of popular culture that shapes wedding culture: reality television. Reality television scholarship has additionally treated wedding-oriented programs with neglect, even though a substantial number of wedding reality programs enjoy success on the air today, and have for several years. To address this critical absence, I will explore how wedding-oriented reality television shows create and perpetuate consumer desire for a lavish wedding, especially for women. I would like to examine how the marriage of consumerism and romance is powerfully normative, particularly regarding class and gender. I would like to

approach the normative messages contained within wedding reality television programs as they may be received and understood by viewers.

In the first and second chapters, I will chronicle the history of the Anglo-American white wedding ceremony, building up to the current standards for a lavish wedding. Although many scholars have chronicled wedding culture, I rely heavily upon Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck's engaging and informative *Cinderella Dreams* and Katherine Jellison's detailed history of twentieth century wedding culture in *It's Our Day* to help reconstruct the wedding's recent past. In examining the wedding's contemporary cultural significance, I will produce an understanding of the desire for a lavish wedding and the major factors that contribute to the ritual's enduring appeal. Chrys Ingraham's book *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture,* and in particular her notion of the wedding ideological complex, have been critical to my analysis of contemporary weddings. In these chapters, I will ask: What are the contemporary expectations of—or standards for—a lavish wedding? Who participates in them and why? What is the relationship between the wedding ceremony and the institution of marriage?

In the third chapter, I would like to consider reality television's role in wedding culture. I will differentiate reality programs from scripted television, but also explore the difficulties of defining the reality genre. I will ask: How does the claim to "reality" impact the way that these programs are received or believed by audiences? Wedding reality television has a decades-long history, but I would like to specifically focus on the recent spate of wedding-oriented reality programs currently on air. Why has the wedding reality program been so popular, and why particularly in the last few years?

In the fourth chapter, I will analyze specific television shows: *Bridezillas*; *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?*; *Platinum Weddings*; *Say Yes to the Dress*; *My Fair Wedding*; and *Four*

Weddings. What can a close viewing of an episode from each of these programs reveal to us? What messages or values do these shows convey to their audience? Which shows invite us to judge or laugh at their subjects, and which shows hope to inspire empathy? In the fifth chapter, I will examine another television show separately, because it is distinct enough to warrant its own analysis: *Bridalplasty*. I will ask: How does this serialized wedding program differ from its episodic counterparts? Perhaps more importantly, I will consider the implications of the show's extreme content.

Finally, I would like to examine the aftermath of wedding consumption, which has been left unconsidered all too often. How do couples (and particularly brides) feel after months of planning and spending that culminate in a ceremony lasting only a few hours? What television shows–if any—allow us to see beyond the moment of consumption and why might other shows stop at a purchase or stop at the wedding ceremony? What messages are conveyed to viewers by the inclusion or exclusion of this information? Does knowledge of wedding aftermath alter our understanding of the function of wedding spending? Finally, how do we understand the function of wedding spending relative to consumer culture as a whole? Despite the "once-in-a-lifetime" billing, do weddings actually hold a unique place in the lives of consumers, or is the consumption of a lavish wedding merely part of an individual's lifelong search for the acquisition of luxury goods and experiences?

Chapter One. *A Brief History of the White Wedding in America*

Once upon a time, wedding ceremonies looked entirely different than they do today. The lavish white wedding has been cast as an American tradition, but the tradition does not extend very far back in time—most common elements of the contemporary wedding (such as the bridal costume) have their point of origin no earlier than the late nineteenth- or early twentieth century

(Howard 2). Even considering the relatively recent origins for many recognizable hallmarks of a wedding ceremony, marked and rapid social changes in the later twentieth century have denied the contemporary wedding a fixed context or meaning.

In fact, given the social contexts that once informed the white wedding tradition, a casual glance at the contemporary American cultural landscape might lead one to the conclusion that weddings are becoming increasingly irrelevant. The median age for first marriages, the percentage of couples that cohabit before marriage, the number of people who get divorced and the number of people who choose not to marry have all risen in the last fifty years (Otnes and Pleck 5). All of these figures indicate significant change in the institution of marriage, and it seems logical that the ritual that precedes the institution would change as well. Yet a quick look in another direction, say, towards the pages of *People* magazine, the *Sunday New York Times*, or a multiplex or reception hall near you,[2] will prove that in spite of these factors, weddings—and lavish weddings in particular—have retained their popularity. This counterintuitive phenomenon has inspired a deluge of scholarly books and articles in the past decade determined to explore the curious existence of American wedding culture. Wedding scholarship endeavors to discover why and how lavish weddings have such an enduring and appealing presence in our society and what wedding popularity signifies.

Through examining the history of the lavish wedding and particularly focusing on social forces that have impacted the ritual from the mid-twentieth century onward, it is possible to gain an understanding of the wedding ritual's resilient presence in American culture. However, it is an

[2] I refer to *People* magazine's regular coverage of celebrity weddings; the "Weddings and Celebrations" section of *The New York Times*; the popularity of wedding-oriented cinema, including (but not limited to) films such as *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Muriel's Wedding*, and the more recent *27 Dresses*; and of course, wedding receptions themselves, occurring all across America.

understanding not easily reached: wedding historians cannot establish a simple trajectory for most wedding traditions or easily procure a catchall theory to explain the allure of wedding culture. In *All Dressed in White*, Carol McD. Wallace cautions her readers against misguided assignation of the source of wedding rituals (5). She uses the wedding veil as an example: bridal veils reach as far back in history as the Roman Empire, but the veil does not have a direct two-thousand year lineage in wedding culture. Instead, the veil fell out of fashion and "at some point in the nineteenth century, when the fashions of the ancient world were being rediscovered, a clever woman put a length of sheet fabric over her head and thought it looked fabulous" (6). Thus, Wallace proclaims, the veil clearly has its roots in ancient civilization, but it is essentially an invented wedding tradition (6).

Other wedding items have a complex history akin to that of the veil, and while it is certainly possible to examine the lengthy past of bridal gowns, engagement and wedding rings, garters, etc., I am concerned with the trajectory of the wedding as a whole. However, the purpose of considering the history of these items, even in passing, is to note that most of the major hallmarks of a lavish wedding (such as a white dress for the bride; a formal reception following the ceremony, typically in a space outside the home; and wedding bands for both the bride and groom) are not only invented traditions, but were invented to increase wedding spending: "Nearly every so-called tradition we associate with weddings is not something that has been passed down from generation to generation because it has some familial or community-based meaning, but is part of the taken-for-granted because a marketer did their job well" (Ingraham 222). The invented tradition is exemplified by the white wedding dress. Although white wedding dresses have a history that reach as far back as the late fifteenth century (Geller 226), Queen Victoria's white gown at her 1840 wedding to Prince Albert is generally cited as the

genesis of the white wedding dress tradition that has continued to this day.[3] Even though this tradition arose from a public figure's personal fashion decision, some commonly held expectations about the wedding dress can actually be traced back to marketing campaigns of the 1930s.[4]

The "traditional" and lavish white wedding as a widespread American ritual did not fully emerge until the mid-twentieth century, but the formal wedding ceremony has its roots among the early-nineteenth century Northern elite, and slowly made its way into other subgroups of the American population as the nation became increasingly urbanized and industrialized (Howard 15). Although many people—from religious figures to etiquette gurus—expressed discomfort or active distaste for the commercialization of the wedding, the trend continued into the early twentieth century, (Howard 31). Ultimately, consumption ceased to been seen as amoral, as the 1930s and 1940s ushered in ideas about spending money to help the economy (Howard 31). The standard of perfection in association with the wedding ritual emerged in advertisements during the 1920s and 1930s, but the ideal of a lavish wedding remained fiscally improbable for most Americans through the Great Depression[5] and the Second World War (Otnes and Pleck 43). "Perfect" weddings became more attainable in the postwar era, due to increased American prosperity and an inclination to consume: "A 1946 Gallup poll indicated that after nearly two decades of economic depression, rationing, and shortages, Americans were in a mood to spend their income rather than save it" (Jellison 13). During the late 1940s and 1950s, marriage—and

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[3] See Arend, Jellison, Otnes and Pleck.

[4] "It should be white, it should be worn only once in a woman's lifetime, and it should be a fashion statement all its own that was not ruled by the hemlines and styles of the moment" (Otnes and Pleck 41).

[5] Although weddings remained unpopular throughout the Great Depression, this was not for a lack of wedding industry advertising in the 1930s. Wedding retailers attempted to sell couples on the idea that "love knows no depression," but to little avail (Howard 7).

the appropriate wedding to initiate it—became the status quo. Wedding industry advertisements and periodicals from the postwar period made a departure from prewar trends of upper class exclusivity and began targeting newly arrived members of the middle class; the message of these new advertisements being that "average" couples could and should participate in wedding consumption (Jellison 18). By targeting non-elites, the wedding industry expanded their potential audience in the postwar era, although the steady growth of the middle class in the 1950s meant that the industry did not have to curtail the push for lavish wedding spending to effectively reach a wider audience.

The wedding industry also expanded their target audience in a different way during the 1950s through the sale of wedding-related consumer goods to young girls. In their book *Cinderella Dreams,* Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck provide a description of the new ways that retailers successfully marketed the wedding fantasy to children. For example, in the 1950s the Sears catalog began to offer a variety of "dress up" outfits for young girls and their line included a bridal look. A plethora of bridal dolls emerged during the same time period, but one in particular has gained notoriety: Barbie. Mattel released its famous doll in 1959, and within the year Barbie was a bride. Barbie's bridal look was a perennial bestseller for the company (Otnes and Pleck 47). The bridal dolls of the 1950s instigated a continuing trend of marketing the wedding to children through toys and popular culture. This benefits companies two-fold, first by profiting from the sales of toys to children, and later profiting when the girls grow into women who desire the fulfillment of their lifelong wedding dreams.[6] The commonly held belief that

[6] Chrys Ingraham details the incentive for companies to instill wedding dreams in young girls through toy sales: "Toy companies, generally part of large conglomerates that also own related commodities such as travel or cosmetics, work to secure future markets for all their products through the selling of wedding toys. For example, Toy Biz, which was owned by the same

women dream of their wedding days from early childhood may possess a certain degree of truth, but these dreams are clearly aided and abetted by corporations that market wedding-oriented products to children, and by the parents who buy such things for them.

Toys were not the only things that inspired bridal fantasies within America's youth during this period: in 1950, Walt Disney released a little animated feature entitled *Cinderella*. The Cinderella story has a lengthy, global history,[7] but Disney relied upon the best-known version of the tale, *Cendrillion*, from Frenchman Charles Perrault in the late-seventeenth century. Perrault added many now-familiar elements to the Cinderella story, such as the glass slipper, the fairy godmother and the midnight expiration of her magic (Otnes and Pleck 26). Perrault also wrote Cinderella as a relatively passive heroine,[8] which perhaps led to its popularity with both nineteenth-century publishers and Disney, who took her passivity one step further: "Disney turned Perrault's Cinderella, who had suggested magical ideas to the fairy godmother (such as changing rats into coachmen) into a passive 'good girl,' patiently singing 'Some Day My Prince Will Come'" (Otnes and Pleck 46).[9] In the 1950 film, Cinderella acquiesces to her servitude; although she occasionally offers polite resistance to her stepmother, she does not openly protest against her oppressive stepfamily. Thankfully, Cinderella has a fairy godmother (and a clothed coterie of mice) to look out for her, magically providing her with the means to go to the prince's

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company as Revlon, produced a product called the 'Caboodles Wedding Playset' featuring not only a wedding but also 'free' makeup for the future bride" (96).

[7] The earliest recorded Cinderella story comes from mid-ninth century China (Otnes and Pleck 26).

[8] The Grimm brothers also wrote a version of Cinderella, but their heroine had a bigger, more active role to play in her own destiny. The Grimm Cinderella did not rely on a fairy godmother, but instead planted a hazel tree and watered it with her tears (Otnes and Pleck 27).

[9] N.B.: In the film, Cinderella does not sing "Someday My Prince Will Come," a musical number that was actually featured in Disney's first full-length animated film, *Snow White*. Instead, Cinderella sings "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," but the sentiment of the Snow White song is fitting for both Disney princesses.

ball. When she arrives at the ball, Cinderella is approached by a handsome man who waltzes his way into her heart; unbeknownst to her (because she does not actually converse with the man), this charming fellow is none other than the prince. In the morning, Cinderella realizes the identity of her dance partner, and love seems to have given her the courage to emote: in stark contrast to her contained politeness in the face of other cruelties from her stepfamily (just the night before, Cinderella maintained her composure as her ball gown was torn apart, waiting until her stepfamily left to weep), she cries out, screams, and pleads for freedom when her stepmother locks her in her room to prevent her from trying on the glass slipper (*Cinderella*). The perpetually polite Cinderella is eventually rewarded for her kindness and virtuous motives (love over money) with a crown, a handsome prince, and—of course—a beautiful white wedding gown.

Disney's *Cinderella* is important to consider because it operates as more than an enjoyable children's story. Katherine Jellison argues the film functioned as a sort of a how-to guide on gender role and courtship practices:

> The king's goals for his son mirror those of the 1950s domestic ideal. He is in search of a woman who will be a 'suitable wife' for his son, and, more important, a 'suitable mother' for his grandchildren. The demure and beautiful Cinderella seems to fit the bill—until the fairy godmother's spell ends at midnight […] Without the appropriate accouterments, Cinderella can no longer attract a suitor who outranks her. (156)

Cinderella may be a beautiful and resourceful[10] young woman, but the film tells viewers that the prince is the "catch," or more desirable partner, (presumably because of his higher social

[10] Granted, her beauty is of the problematically racist blond-haired, blue-eyed variety, but the gown she constructs for herself out of discarded clothing unequivocally evidences her resourcefulness. This resourcefulness, of course, is not valued—Cinderella's stepfamily throw away the dress, and the fairy godmother provides Cinderella with a "better" dress anyway (Jellison 155-156).

standing)[11] and that she must meet male standards for suitability. This is a disturbing message, and one that seems to be absorbed predominantly by women (who are the primary targets of wedding media). Disney's movie experienced substantial success at the time of its release—it was the sixth-highest grossing film of that year (Jellison 156)—and continues to leave its cultural imprint through direct viewership[12] and the indirect impact of the wedding ideals presented in the film. In addition to the film's box office success, it has been re-released on video and now DVD, making the story accessible to the youth of multiple generations (Jellison 156). This version of the story has gained considerable cultural currency and has figured largely in American societal formations of wedding ideals,[13] even though viewers never even see Cinderella's own wedding in the film—we merely catch a glimpse of her donning her wedding gown and riding off with Prince Charming to live happily ever after. Perhaps, though, the lack of an actual ceremony is counter-intuitively what makes *Cinderella* such an excellent source of continuing inspiration for a wedding fantasy: women can project their own desires and imaginations onto the wedding they know took place, but did not see.

Given the fairy tale's long, international history, Disney's movie was clearly not the genesis of the Cinderella bridal fantasy; even within the United States, advertisers have been using Cinderella in marketing campaigns since the turn of the twentieth century (Otnes and Pleck 28). However, the Disney film is seminal in later-twentieth-century understandings of the

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[11] The prince has barely any lines in the film, and is only ever referred to by his royal title, so the fact that he is a prince really seems to be his sole qualification, even though Cinderella is quite taken with him before learning his identity. Perhaps, then, his appeal lies in his skills on the dance floor.

[12] "One bride remembered the devastating effect of 'watching *Cinderella* on video' prior to her […] wedding. After viewing Cinderella's magical transformation, the bride slipped into her gown hoping for similar results. She was sorely disappointed" (Jellison 156).

[13] Although the generic "fairy tale" is a trope in wedding culture, Cinderella is the only fairy tale that warrants a specific mention (see Boden, Jellison, Otnes and Pleck).

Cinderella tale as a trope for "fairy tale romance" and wedding ideals. For many brides, the ostensible appeal of the Cinderella fantasy is her transformation, which presents an idealized version of the transformation they themselves hope to undergo. Susanne Friese argues that brides-to-be are in a liminal stage—they are in between belonging to a group of single women and to a group of married women. To make this transition, women must first cross one social boundary to become brides, and then cross another on their wedding day to become wives (Friese 56). The transition is intimately linked with a romantic fantasy: many women want to cross these social boundaries feeling like a princess, in large part because they have been directly and implicitly informed that they can and should feel like royalty on their wedding days. While this fantasy is in some ways indebted to the Disney film, it is not solely a product of the movie, or even the decade—a variety of cultural sites, including (but not limited to) cinema and advertising, promote the notion of the wedding as a perfect "fairy tale" to kick off a young woman's happily ever after with her husband. The romantic fantasy continues to play a critical role in contemporary wedding culture, and may even be the main vehicle for the ceremony's endurance. However, some elements of the film seem more closely connected to the time of its making, such as Cinderella's passive achievement of class mobility.

Marriages have long been an avenue for class mobility—and the weddings that precede them have been opportunities to communicate class standing over the course of centuries—but wedding ceremonies achieved particular class importance during the mid-twentieth century.[14] During the postwar period, many familiar elements of the wedding ceremony were symbolic of the lived realities of the couple getting married and the institution they were about to enter into. Marriage rates reached an all-time high during the early 1950s (Otnes and Pleck 45), while the

[14] And perhaps this is why the Cinderella narrative also gained particular popularity during this same period.

median ages for newlyweds dipped to the lowest they had been in a century,[15] which contributed to the significance of the wedding ceremony as a marker of transition into adulthood (Otnes and Pleck 5). The increase in wedding participation correlates with social attitudes that marked marriage as practically compulsory (Jellison 21). Marriage was furthermore considered essential because the symbolic "giving away" of the bride by her father to her husband marked her literal transition from one provider to another, and these two men were believed to be her only real options for middle-class financial security (Jellison 16). The real-life "Cinderella" story of Grace Kelly's marriage to Prince Rainier of Monaco was idealized: "For many Americans, Grace Kelly, born in Philadelphia to Irish immigrant parents, represented the merging of the Hollywood fairy-tale happy ending and the American dream of possibility and wealth" (Ingraham 61). Women of the 1950s looked for their own "princes," who may not have turned them into princesses, but at least took them out of their childhood homes. Since a marital union was regarded by many as the sole means of cementing a young woman's place on the social ladder, the wedding that inaugurated this union was an important site for the bride and her family to telegraph their social prestige. The extensive consumption that accompanied ceremony was justified as a once-in-a-lifetime expenditure (Otnes and Pleck 84) and of course, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the bride's parents to communicate their social standing (6). Otnes and Pleck suggest that the wedding was a prime opportunity for the bride's family to "illustrate not only that they can afford to give the bride and groom the send-off they deserve but also that they have arrived socially themselves and enjoy comparable status with, or even higher status than,

[15] The median age for first marriages in 1950 was 20.3 years for women and 22.7 years for men (Jellison 20).

their new in-laws" (6).[16] Weddings today are still communicants of social standing, but they no longer function in quite the same way, due in large part to an increased number of wage-earning women who can find financial security outside of marriage and older newlyweds who can pay for their own ceremony. Whereas weddings were previously indicative of the status of the bride's parents and family, today's weddings are increasingly markers of the couple's own financial well-being as fewer couples seek monetary support from their parents on the "big day."

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, counterculture movements emerged that offered serious critiques of wedding culture and the institution of marriage, but instead of dismantling the practice of lavish weddings, the wedding industry co-opted these movements in one fashion or another. One clear-cut example of co-optation is the "hippie" dress that Bergdorf Goodman sold in the 1960s for $500—which, after adjustments for inflation, would cost around $2,421 today (Jellison 28). Another example is the bridal publications of the late 1960s, such as *Bride's*, which made occasional, limited acknowledgements of brides from minority groups or lower socioeconomic groups, but ultimately stressed a white, Protestant, middle- to upper-middle-class ideal.[17] Furthermore, many feminists vehemently opposed the institution of marriage, and saw the feminist movement impacting ideas about marital arrangements without actually changing wedding practices. Many classic second-wave feminist texts were published throughout the

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[16] Interestingly, Katherine Jellison posits that the bride's family may not have been as interested in displays of status if they were wealthier than their in-laws, as Otnes and Pleck have suggested. Jellison notes that the parents of brides who married "up" were the most likely to spend extravagantly on a wedding ceremony (17).

[17] Jellison specifically mentions *Bride's* magazine, a perennial top-selling bridal publication. During the 1960s, the magazine featured a few black models wearing African-inspired garb, ran an article about Orthodox Jewish wedding services, and contained advice for decorating a mobile home. Jellison asserts that these articles marked a superficial attempt at inclusion and that the magazine remained primarily targeted at members of the upper-middle class. As evidence of this, she points out that in 1969, the magazine offered a sample wedding budget that exceeded what many Americans made in a year (29).

1970s,[18] leading Katherine Jellison to hypothesize that although most Americans did not read these texts, they were exposed to feminist ideas through media coverage of the movement (29-30). In some ways, the wedding became even more lavish during this time period, in spite of the cultural and political undercurrents that sought to curb or check the lavish wedding and the institution of marriage. Carol McD. Wallace notes that in 1971, *Bride's* magazine proposed that brides provide their guests with modest favors or even simply "warm memories," but by 1979 the magazine was no longer suggesting that favors were optional and in fact proposed more lavish gifts such as Champagne or silk flowers (233). Nevertheless, newlywed couples of the 1970s seemed to have absorbed some of feminist and counter-cultural ideas and an increasing number of couples stated their desire for a marriage of equal partners.

The wedding ceremony itself failed to reflect the participants' increased desire for equality: statistics indicate that an overwhelming majority of 1970s couples chose to marry in a formal ceremony without making changes to the wedding script (Jellison 36). The change in marital ideals without a corresponding change in matrimonial practice seemed to arise in part from a belief that women would function differently as brides and as wives: "For young women in particular, the apparently dependent role that the bride played in the ceremony as she passed from the arm of her father to the arm of her groom was not automatically the one she would play in her marriage" (Jellison 42). In stark contrast to the white wedding of the 1950s, where the symbolism of the ceremony was closely related to couples' marital reality, ceremonies in the 1970s retained the "traditional" form of a white wedding without the expectation that a "traditional" marriage would follow.

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[18] "The year 1970 alone saw the publication of […] Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, and editor Robin Morgan's anthology of liberationist writings entitled *Sisterhood is Powerful*" (Jellison 29).

Despite paying lip service to a union of equal partners, most married couples still lived in a modified version of the male provider/female domestic arrangement popular in the 1950s. The 1970s saw more and more middle-class, married women choosing (and needing) to enter the workforce, but due to the wage gap, men remained the primary breadwinners, and women still tended to do most of the housework, albeit now as a "second shift" following their day of paid labor (Jellison 42). Gender inequity actually increased through the feminization of poverty in the 1970s as a result of the no-fault divorce, which was first put into law in California in 1970 and had spread to all but three states by 1977 (Jellison 31). The no-fault divorce meant no alimony payments, even though many women were still partially or fully dependent upon their husband's income. Although many women may have believed that their subordinate roles as brides did not directly relate to their role as wives (as it had for brides of decades past), the financial reality for many couples in the 1970s suggests otherwise: within the institution of marriage (and without it through divorce) women remained in positions of economic disadvantage relative to their male partners.

The traditional white wedding clearly remained popular throughout the 1970s, but the decade was plagued with a troubled national economy that served to limit extensive spending on wedding celebrations. However, the 1980s ushered in an era of increased nuptial extravagance. The average cost of a wedding quadrupled between 1984 and 1994 (Otnes and Pleck 2). The increase in price interestingly coincides with a decrease in the number of weddings (Jellison 49), indicating that the wedding industry relied on increasingly extravagant ceremonies to compensate for what industry retailers may have lost in volume: "The 1980s […] saw dramatic expansion of the wedding industry and increased adherence to the industry message that bigger

weddings were better weddings" (Jellison 48-49). Yet the expansion of the white wedding in the 1980s was not solely the result of industry campaigning.

The American fascination with lavish weddings was fueled by their opportunity to witness a fairy-tale fantasy brought to life in the 1981 marriage of Lady Diana Spencer to Prince Charles. Seven hundred and fifty million people worldwide watched the televised wedding, which allowed viewers to vicariously experience the Cinderella fairy-tale brought to life (Ingraham 61). Although she was of the nobility, Diana's circumstances were relatively modest: she was a dropout, working as a kindergarten aide and sharing an apartment with friends before her prince came (Otnes and Pleck 50). Diana's upward mobility was not the only factor that invited Cinderella comparisons. Much like the animated Disney character, Diana was a blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty who wore a big, white wedding dress with a bouffant skirt. Diana did not have a magical pumpkin coach, but she did arrive at her wedding in a horse-drawn carriage (Ingraham 64). It is well known by now that Diana's story did not end "happily ever after"—Diana and Charles's marriage ended in divorce after infidelity on both sides and Diana's life was cut tragically short by a car accident—but her wedding remained idealized in popular imagination, aided by the glowing praise of the press (Otnes and Pleck 53-54). A British newspaper hailed the wedding as "PERFECT" and *People* magazine gushed about the royal nuptials (62). Otnes and Pleck argue that Diana's wedding served not only as an pageant but as an inspiration for 1980s weddings: "What the spectacle of a royal wedding in 1981 did was provide a model of how to spend new wealth once the eighties turned prosperous" (Otnes and Pleck 51).

The political climate of the 1980s also contributed to the embrace of the lavish weddings. Ronald Reagan—a former Hollywood actor—became president in 1980, and his political

message and policies contributed to an embrace of conspicuous consumption that characterized the decade. The Reagan administration cited government spending as a source of economic woe; looking to cut social welfare funding, the image of the "welfare queen"[19] was used to suggest that impoverished women were a burden to state because they were single (Ingraham 65). Reagan's tax policies put money back in the hands of wealthier Americans, and his message to them was to "celebrate and display consumption, luxury, pleasure, and excess" (Ingraham 65). The combination of the amelioration of lavish spending and Reagan's misleading conflation of being unwed and being poor supported the expanse of commodified wedding culture. American etiquette authority Emily Post cautioned couples against overspending (Otnes and Pleck 51), but given the aforementioned political message and the dramatic increase in wedding expenditure during this time period, Post's words seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

In the 1980s, the belief that bigger was better applied to more than just wedding spending—it applied to bridal fashions too. Many older brides did not agree with the "bigger is better" mentality, and felt frustrated by the pouffy, lacy, age-inappropriate garments that littered bridal salons (Jellison 54). Fortunately for other women in the 1990s, one bride who experienced fashion frustration decided to do something about it. Katherine Jellison tells us that in 1989, Vera Wang was a forty-year-old bride, and was dismayed to find that bridal salons did not offer the look she wanted. After donning a $10,000, custom-made gown to her own wedding, Wang began designing dresses in 1990. Wang's gowns were and are still too expensive for most brides to consider, but her sleek designs impacted trends, creating alternatives at many price levels to

[19] "It is the image of the welfare mother as African-American, unmarried, urban, probably under eighteen, caught in a life-long cycle of poverty, and a single parent to many small children born 'out of *wed***lock.**' This stereotype prevails despite the fact that the average welfare recipient is white, has been on welfare for less than two years, has fewer than two children, and collects benefits for less than two years" [emphasis orginal] (Ingraham 23).

the huge "froufrou" dress that had dominated before (Jellison 50-51). Fashion was not the only thing to change for brides of the nineties. In 1997, Congress overwhelmingly voted in favor of the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as a "legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife"—making a national issue out of something that had previously been left to the discretion of individual states (Ingraham 107). Although this didn't necessarily change many wedding ceremonies themselves, the wedding became a marker of entry into an exclusionary institution that granted over a thousand federal rights; marital status impacts Social Security, taxation, employment benefits, and immigration and naturalization laws, among others (107). The participants in the institution themselves were also changing: a survey conducted in the late 1990s (and commissioned by the publisher of *Modern Bride*) found that the average nineties bride was 26, had graduated from college, had a career, and had significant earning power that she was willing to put towards her own ceremony (Jellison 55). The career women of the 1990s[20] were a far cry from the housewives-to-be of the 1950s, yet their consumption of lavish weddings spoke to their desire to live out romantic fantasies.

Chapter Two. *Contemporary Weddings and The Cinderella Fantasy*

Given that the wedding is so widespread and longstanding, the ritual's cultural endurance is clearly the result of complex factors. The wedding industry's direct and indirect marketing have certainly encouraged couples to carry on the tradition of extravagant wedding consumption, but without the romantic wedding fantasy, marketers would not have much to cash in on. Furthermore, Chrys Ingraham sees the "bigger is better" trend from the 1980s continuing into the present, so that the wedding industry can continue to enjoy fiscal success, saying, "With 43

[20] N.B.: The literature that I am using was published at various points throughout the last decade (2000s). As a result, in these works, the nineties is the last decade to be characterized as a whole.

percent of all marriages ending in divorce, the number of marriages declining by 31 percent, and the historical necessity of marriage diminishing, the wedding market 'needs' the fantasy of a once-in-a-lifetime extravaganza/spectacle or it would cease to exist" (113). This fantasy plays to the notion that every woman can be a princess for a day, and that perfection can be attained, if only for this short ceremony. The fantasy is the idea that the wedding is the "bride's day" and the happiest day of her life. The wedding ritual has shown its ability to disentangle itself from a particular social context (or to be disentangled by marketers) while consistently adhering to this romantic fantasy. Granted, this is a fantasy that the wedding industry continually reconstructs with more and more of the latest products, but the desire for a bridal transformation akin to Cinderella remains intact.

It has been thirty years since Princess Diana's wedding, which is perhaps part of the reason that Chrys Ingraham believes the Cinderella fantasy may be waning: "In bridal magazines and in children's toys, references to fairy tales and princesses dominate, although less so today than in the 1980s" (141). However, in the absence of royal weddings, American popular culture has turned to another source of extravagant wedding spectacle—celebrities. Although the "celebrity" label may be affixed to everyone from bona fide movie stars—like Tom Cruise—to notorious reality television personalities—such as Heidi Montag—the term carries a vague but considerable prestige. Celebrities, and in particular the elaborate conspicuous consumption of celebrity weddings, have an important function in wedding culture:

> Represented as the 'real,' celebrity weddings appeal to readers as actual manifestations of the fairy tale or storybook romance […The celebrity spectacle] works ideologically, conveying to the observer/reader what they *should* believe about romance, weddings, marriage and heterosexuality. Celebrity spectacles become the vehicles through which the masses not only imagine the possibility of wealth and fame but seek to emulate it as well, thereby legitmating the accumulation practices of the rich and famous" [emphasis original] (Ingraham 148-151).

Although, at least in terms of disposable income, celebrities are far from average Americans, they are certainly more "real" than animated Disney heroines, making their weddings seem more within the realm of possibility. While most couples cannot afford to have an exact replica of a celebrity wedding, many couples do turn to celebrities as sources for inspiration. For example, after ABC aired the "Trista and Ryan's Wedding" special (featuring the stars of the previous season of the popular reality series *The Bachelorette*), many people made calls to their florists and requested "dripping roses" like the ones that had been featured on the multi-million dollar televised wedding (Sgroi 124).

Even though celebrity weddings have certainly stepped into the spotlight occupied by Diana thirty years ago, garnering our attention with extravagance, celebrities have not replaced or eclipsed the American public's fascination with royal weddings. The recent engagement of Kate Middleton to Diana's son Prince William suggests a public that is eager to witness another real-life, Cinderella-esque wedding spectacle. The December 6, 2010 issue of *People* magazine featured Middleton on the cover and hailed her as "A PERFECT PRINCESS!" Within the magazine, *People* grants Kate a ten-page spread that constructs her as a modern-day Cinderella. Although she stands to be the first Queen of England with a university degree, *People* features an array of photos under the heading "Kate before William," as if Middleton spent her youth singing "Someday My Prince Will Come" and has only truly become herself through her romantic relationship with royalty. Middleton's parents are members of the *nouveau riche*,[21] so her engagement does not quite function in the rags-to-riches fashion of the Perrault Cinderella tale, but the article still provides readers with a tale of transformation, telling us that Kate was "shy and awkward" as a teenager and "blossomed into a princess-in-waiting" (Tauber 68).

[21] *People* informs us that Michael and Carol Middleton met while working as an airline pilot and a stewardess [sic], respectively, but are now millionaires (Tauber 70).

Cinderella is explicitly evoked when readers are reassured, "All those close to her say Kate's glass slippers are firmly on the ground" (Tauber 68). Also, much like the Disney version of the tale, Kate is presented as a woman who must be deemed suitable by her prince. A blurb at the beginning of the article makes it sound as though Prince William came pre-approved, but Kate needed to prove herself as marriageable material: "Over an eight-year courtship, friends say, her warmth, humor, and grace under pressure *convinced him she was the one*" [emphasis added] (Tauber 67). In what seems to be further affirmation of William's superiority, we learn that, "While Kate has maintained some close school friends, she has also taken on William's chums as her own" (Tauber 71), as if even the prince's taste in friends must be better than hers. *People* magazine is just one among many media outlets that have covered the royal couple's engagement, but it is indicative of the ways in which some of the more sexist elements of the Cinderella fantasy are alive and well today.

The Cinderella fantasy clearly contains powerful gender norms, but it is perhaps more importantly (and more problematically) a classed fantasy. While class clearly functions differently in the UK and the US, Kate Middleton serves as a workable and thought-provoking example of the complicated class implications of the Cinderella fantasy. The lavish wedding is clearly about more than what one can afford, in multiple senses. Whether the marrying couple is "average American" dropping twenty-odd thousand dollars on their ceremony and reception, or Kate and Prince William, the expenditure for weddings exceeds normal consumption habits. The need to spend excessively remains curious, though, especially for privileged marrying couples: Middleton's parents are millionaires, so (unlike Cinderella), it's not as if marrying a prince is the only avenue for Middleton to consume a lavish wedding, or as if a wedding is the only opportunity in her life to telegraph wealth and power. However, the wedding clearly remains an

important, even singular, site for consumption and fantasies of class transcendence. While this transcendence is achieved through by the purchase of requisite wedding goods and services, the fantasy also seems to desire the achievement of a classed transformation that money can't buy, or at least not directly.

Lavish weddings have always been a marker of status and have required a degree of consumption that necessarily excludes portions of the population. Yet the status symbol of wedding consumption has become complicated as class in America has become a slippery concept to grasp. Even though there is currently drastic wealth inequality in the United States, even greater than there was even during the Great Depression—with the wealthiest quintile of Americans possessing 84% of all wealth, and the poorest two quintiles possessing only 0.2% and 0.1% (Norton 10)[22]—social class can no longer be understood as it once was:

> With the late-capitalist transformation of the global economy, it has become increasingly impossible to maintain the structured totality of income, lifestyle, cultural capital, and occupational status that has up to now defined and sutured together the category of the middle class, insofar as these constitutive elements of middle-class identity no long operate in sync to create a unified, coherent social position. (Conroy 64)

What does this mean for our understanding of weddings? Despite growing wealth inequality in the United States, class is not easily identifiable through occupation or possessions. A social class clearly constitutes a group of people, but the explosion of old markers of class that were once in sync means that we must evaluate class on an individual basis—we must interpret the occupation, assets, consumption, and lifestyle, etc. of a particular person to determine what social category they belong in. Generalizations are obviously still possible to a certain extent, but they may be more difficult to make with so many different combinations of indices of class.

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[22] For the purposes of this study, wealth was defined, "The total value of everything someone owns minus any debt that he or she owes. A person's net worth includes his or her bank account savings plus the value of other things such as property, stocks, bonds, art, collections, etc., minus the value of things like loans and mortgages" (Norton 9).

Although class may be more difficult to quickly identify or easily define, it does not mean that class has become less important, or that American weddings have become more egalitarian—though they may appear that way.

Marianne Conroy explains that outlet retail has rapidly expanded throughout the United States since the 1980s (66), which, along with access to credit cards, enabled more Americans to purchase luxury goods—but at a discount price—even as wealth inequality increased. Though this seems a symptom of the "democratization" of shopping that Otnes and Pleck chronicle in *Cinderella Dreams*, access to discounted goods appears to serve as a false equalizer. Perhaps we may not longer be able to assess a person's social class from their attire, or even from the goods at that person's wedding, but everyone's seemingly increased purchasing power belies the rampant inequity of our current society. Although, as I have stated, the poorest 40% of Americans own a paltry 0.3% of the wealth, most Americans significantly underestimate the degree of wealth inequality (Norton). Conspicuous consumption of clothing and cars and lavish weddings provides Americans with a false sense of equity.

The so-called "democratization" of shopping may also provide an unspoken imperative for Americans of a variety of classes to "keep up" with everyone else. It can also pathologize or provide stress to those individuals who struggle to keep up with others' consumption. Conroy even entertains the bleak "possibility that to be middle class in the United States at the end of the twentieth century is by definition to aspire to a consumption lifestyle that cannot be supported by a middle-class occupation, given […] narrowed economic opportunities" (78). This may be especially stressful in an age of advanced information technology and celebrity idolization. Whereas mid-twentieth-century Americans may have felt compelled to keep pace with the consumption of their neighbors (those nefarious Joneses), we now live in a time when we are

encouraged to celebrate and emulate the lifestyles of celebrities, or as sociologist Juliet Shor says, we are no longer keeping up with the Jonses—we are keeping up with the Gateses (Steinhauer).

While social class in present-day America may not be easily understood or simply defined, I believe that using Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital may help us unpack class in America more broadly, and in regards to wedding culture in particular. In "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu argued that the distribution of capital represented the structure of society, but he was not referring solely to money or economic capital. Bourdieu additionally argued that other, non-monetary, advantages/assets (or lack thereof) could be considered capital, such as social capital, which is essentially one's social networks. Bourdieu also argued that cultural capital was a valuable resource. Bourdieu then furthermore divided cultural capital into three subgroups: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized capital.

Bourdieu described embodied capital as "external wealth converted into an integral part of the person, into a habitus." Embodied capital includes an individual's taste level, participation in cultural traditions, mannerisms, and command of language. Objectified capital includes the ownership of cultural goods, such as an art collection. Although these cultural goods may be converted to economic capital, an appreciation and understanding of the value of these goods requires that an individual possess cultural capital. Bourdieu defined institutionalized capital as academic qualifications, arguing that a qualification granted by an institution (such as a university degree) enabled comparisons between qualifications, and thus enabled assignation of relative value.

Taste is critical to an understanding of social class because of the meaning people imbue in the goods they purchase:

> The conscious chosen meaning in most people's lives comes much more from what they consume than what they produce. Clothes, interiors, furniture, record, knick-knacks, all the things that we buy involve decisions, and the exercise of our own judgment, choice, 'taste.' Obviously we don't choose what is available for us to choose between in the first place. […] Consumerism is often represented as a supremely individualistic act – yet it is also very social: shopping is a socially endorsed event, a form of social cement. […] Buying and owning, in our society, offer a sense of control. (Williamson 230)

Thus, taste is not just a matter of personal preference—it is a bid for power, an attempt at control, even though individuals may lack the power to shape their lives in many other ways. If consumption in general offers individuals a sense of control, the wedding seems to offer this even more so, providing brides with the opportunity to micromanage every detail, having the ribbon on the invitations match the fabric of the napkins at the reception. And yet: "While brides and grooms may pride themselves on their expressions of nuptial unconventionality, a wedding nonetheless prompts in its participants—the guests as well as the marrying couple—a desire to enact a role that has been scripted by some source more authoritative than their own powers of invention" (Mead 9). Paradoxically, even though weddings offer a powerfully normative and conformist script for consumption, the wedding may be the site where women feel the most in control, the ceremony that they feel is most imbued with meaning, most reflective of their individuality. Perhaps it is precisely the predetermined nature of the wedding that inspires women to make it "individualistic," but whatever the reason, it is important to understand the tensions between the cultural and market forces that influence what we purchase and the desire for meaning and individuality that drive our consumption.

The use of Bourdieu enables us to expand our consideration of classed wedding consumption beyond monetary terms, but considering other forms of capital does not mean that we should neglect to consider the importance of the almighty dollar. In fact, Bourdieu argues that forms of capital can be exchanged, meaning that possession of economic capital can be translated into the possession of other non-monetary forms of capital (i.e., by paying tuition at a

prestigious private university to accrue institutional capital). And while an individual might possess the cultural capital to appreciate fine art, without economic capital or wealth, he or she cannot acquire a fine art collection. Conversely, some of the wealthiest men in America—corporate CEOs like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg, famously forgo power suits favored by many other executives and consistently sport casual, plain clothing. In the same vein, a bride may be have excellent taste in haute couture wedding gowns, but unless she has a means of purchasing one, she may end up purchasing a discount dress at David's Bridal. Understanding the important but inconsistent relationship between economic and cultural capital—and the desire of the "middle class," whatever nebulous group that may constitute, to telegraph the possession of adequate amounts of both kinds of capital, through a wedding and throughout their lives—can help us explore the allure of wedding culture.

Interestingly, though the Cinderella fantasy seems to have kept the wedding ceremony alive, **it** has not preserved the institution a wedding is meant to inaugurate: marriage. The connection between wedding ceremonies and marriages is becoming increasingly tenuous and complicated: "The white wedding that the bride of 2000 organized indeed looked very much like the one her grandmother held fifty years earlier. The major props remained the same, although their symbolic meaning likely altered" (Jellison 61). Their symbolic meaning seems altered because weddings are no longer necessarily a precursor to marriage.[23] This is evidenced by Chrys Ingraham's astute observation, "In this historical moment when the American public grapples with who should be to allowed marry, we are not talking about who should be allowed

[23] Contemporary weddings are clearly not the only ceremonies without a link to a formally recognized marriage. For example, Chrys Ingrham quotes bell hooks on weddings between slaves in antebellum America: "Although there were never any legally acknowledged marriages between slaves, they wanted the same marriage rituals their white owners enacted" (142-143). However, I mean to say that the contemporary wedding is distinct from the mid-twentieth century wedding, which *did* have a close connection to marriage.

to have a wedding" (5). Weddings can occur as a commitment ceremony for homosexual couples who are not legally granted the right to marry, or as vow renewal ceremonies for couples who are already married. However, even though many weddings may not actually mark the beginning of a legally recognized (heterosexual) marriage, the two remain intimately linked in many people's minds, and may even be conflated. Case in point: a recent issue of TIME ran a survey on marriage as its cover story. The cover boldly asks in bright, red letters, "Who Needs Marriage?" and the image is tellingly one of a bride (in a white dress and long veil) and groom (in a tuxedo) (Luscombe). Although many weddings do mark the beginning of a marriage, and conversely, many marriages do begin with weddings, it is important to remember marriage and weddings do not *always* go hand-in-hand, and in fact, the pair is more easily separated now than it was in the past. Elizabeth Pleck has argued that the disconnect between weddings and marriages stems from the fact that "every woman wants to be a bride, but not every woman wants to be a wife." There seems to be a strong continuing appeal to indulgence in the bridal fantasy (after all, who would not want to participate in a ritual where one has been promised perfection and happiness?) even as the role of "wife" is being rejected or redefined by increasing numbers of women.

Although perhaps not *every* woman wants to be a bride, it would seem that most do: "Many women have commented in bridal magazines and other sites that even though they typically don't participate in traditionally feminine behavior, they will deviate from this norm in order to have the wedding day they've been imagining and preparing for since they were children" (Ingraham 144). These statements were echoed by women in Patricia Arend's study of wedding dress acquisition. Arend's sample was small (seven women), but multiple study participants described themselves as feminists and still chose to wear a white dress—one woman

specifically said she did not want to be political on her wedding day. Although all of the women in her study described wanting a simple dress, a few women were surprised by how "bridey" (their word) their ultimate gown selections were. As another unlikely "bridey" candidate, Lisa Walker confesses in her essay "Feminists in Brideland" that losing her opportunity to become a bride was her only regret about coming out as a lesbian (220). She explains, "In spite of the problematic aspects of bridal fashion and beauty, many women, including feminists, lesbians and women of color, dream about transforming themselves into that most fantastic creature, the bride" (Walker 222). Walker ultimately decides that she can become a bride, and a traditionally feminine one at that. She wears the white dress, gets effeminizing hair extensions, and even walks down the aisle to a tuxedo-clad partner. It's abundantly clear Walker and many other women like her are not interested in being traditional wives—or even traditionally feminine—in the rest of their lives, but the notion of being a "bridey" bride obviously has a powerful allure.

Interestingly, despite strong evidence suggesting that weddings are not necessarily linked to marriage, this is exactly how some people justify their wedding spending. Otnes and Pleck say that some people explain the popularity of big weddings by the supposition, "Rituals become more elaborate when the public perceives the social institution being celebrated (in this case, marriage) as being tenuous and vulnerable" (7). Thus, it is believed that a commitment to the wedding will indicate a commitment to the union that follows. Chrys Ingraham cites another adherent to this hypothesis:

> On a New York radio talk show a father called in to say that he had three daughters, spent $40,000 on each of their weddings and would do it again because they are still married and he has beautiful grandchildren. What are the assumptions here? […] Does this man really believe he 'bought' successful marriage for his daughters? Does he really think this is what 'guaranteed' grandchildren, beautiful ones at that? (Ingraham 222)

Currently, there is no data to prove or disprove the connection between an elaborate wedding and the success of a marriage (indicated by divorce or lack thereof), although curiously the lavish

wedding has become popular in parts of the world where the divorce rate is relatively low (Otnes and Pleck 8). They believe this suggests that the lavish wedding is more closely linked to prosperity than to a protection of marriage (8), a theory that I believe is furthermore supported by the increase in nuptial ceremonies that are not directly linked to marriages (such as through non-legally recognized commitments and vow renewals).

While the romantic fantasy may have a strained connection with the institution of marriage, it remains intimately linked with consumerism. Chrys Ingraham interviewed a young woman, who had plans to marry her partner but claimed to be unable to afford it at the moment. When asked why she could not opt for a less expensive ceremony, she answered, "Because […] this is the most important day of my life and I have to do it right" (222). For the contemporary bride, "doing it right" involves spending tens of thousands of dollars. Although some women opt out of the lavish wedding ceremony and are proud of it,[24] most couples cannot or do not resist the pressure to consume. In her study of British newlyweds, Sharon Boden found that couples felt anxious about nuptial frugality—they were afraid that a lack of financial investment would communicate a lack of emotional investment in the occasion (89). It can be difficult for couples to keep lavish weddings in check because the ceremony has to meet high standards: it is supposed to be perfect, the actualization of the bride's life-long fantasy. This makes frugality a challenge because, as Otnes and Pleck point out, "people do not search for perfection on a budget" (19).

The tension between the desire for perfection and the desire to spend within reason may be partially reconciled through the categorization of wedding objects as sacred or profane. In

[24] A particularly remarkable deviation from lavish wedding spending can be found in the narrative of one bride who proudly described her $150 wedding in a Newsweek article (Baptiste).

another study, Cele Otnes and Tina Lowrey found that brides make distinctions between objects that are important or unimportant to the success of the wedding ritual. Thus, if an object is deemed profane or relatively unimportant,[25] it follows that the bride may save money on these objects without risking her wedding-day bliss. Sacred objects, on the other hand, remained critical to the wedding ceremony. Sacred objects were defined as "that which is regarded as more significant, powerful and extraordinary than the self" (Otnes and Lowrey 325). It is important to remember that while brides may have been able to save some money on the profane objects, sacred objects are still held up to standards of perfection. These are the items that women are not supposed to be looking for on a budget. This can become problematic when the sacred items are the big-ticket items, like the wedding dress (the only item that every single bride in Otnes and Lowrey's study regarded as sacred). Otnes and Pleck describe the romantic fantasy as "democratic" (54), but the ability to achieve the romantic fantasy and meet standards of wedding perfection is far from universally accessible.

Due in large part to the power of the romantic fantasy that fuels consumer desires, the wedding industry has been touted as "recession-proof," but the economic downturn of the past few years has proven this statement partially false. The size of the average wedding has significantly decreased,[26] but spending still remains significant: the national average cost of 2008 wedding ceremony was $21,814 (Oliviero). Americans participate in lavish wedding ceremonies regardless of the nation's economic health on the whole, but the degree of extravagance in wedding spending is definitely reflective of the current financial climate. Yet Elizabeth Pleck

[25] In this study, profane items included shoes, tuxedos, and invitations (Otnes and Lowrey 327).
[26] Elizabeth Pleck says that the average wedding decreased by 32 percent between 2007 and 2009; the Wedding Report indicates a 25 percent decrease between 2007 and 2008.

suspects that with a return to prosperity, there will be a corresponding return to bigger wedding spending, much as there was in the postwar era.

The lavish wedding in some ways is American in a broad, national sense—the wedding ideological complex[27] has imbued our country—and indeed the rest of the world[28]—with problematic notions that the lavish wedding is the ideal and also the norm. Otnes and Pleck point out that the white wedding has become accessible to more people because of the advent of credit cards. They explain that, whereas the 1950s wedding was usually paid for by a bride's parents out of their "savings, earnings, and small loans" (44), the newlywed couple of today has relatively easy access to credit cards, which they may feel comfortable using because of a decreased stigma associated with debt. Yet in spite of the apparent ubiquity of lavish weddings and seemingly easy access to a means of consumption, this ritual is participated in unequally across America. While the desire for a white wedding may be pervasive, and popular culture portrays the ritual as nearly universal, many couples do not have access to the resources to throw a lavish wedding—or sometimes even a wedding of any scale.

Chrys Ingraham notes that all too often the inequities rampant in wedding culture are masked: "In researching data on the wedding industry, a striking pattern emerges. Almost without exception, most state and industry analysts have overlooked the effects of race and class on consumption. In other words, they have focused mainly on the *white* wedding market—those

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[27] Chrys Ingraham defines: "[The] *wedding-ideological complex* is made of those sites in American popular culture […] that *work as an ensemble in creating many taken-for-granted beliefs, values and assumptions within social texts and practices about weddings*" [emphasis original] (119).

[28] Westernized lavish white weddings are spreading across the world, and in some places the ceremonies are even more extravagant than their American inspiration. Japan on average has the most expensive weddings in the world, with a price tag that had reached a startling $66,000 by 1996 (Otnes and Pleck 199). Even though only 1.4% of Japanese people are Christian, 75% of Japanese weddings are Christian-style ceremonies (Ingraham 57).

patterns attributable primarily to middle-to-upper-middle-class whites" [emphasis original] (Ingraham 48). As a group, blacks are less likely to marry than whites or Asians, and they tend to spend less money when they do get married (49). Ingraham says that comparing marriage spending to socioeconomic status can account for many of the racial differences, although these statistics do not explain why blacks are less likely to choose marriage in the first place (49). However, her allegation that the wedding industry focuses primarily on the *white* wedding market certainly seems a plausible explanation for at least some of the racial inequity in wedding participation. Advertisers and popular culture are the two major factors that explain continued lavish wedding spending: as a member of a minority group, seeing a white bride in an Estee Lauder ad and a white brides in romantic comedies may not inspire wedding fantasies and consumer desires because they do not see women like themselves.

In the United States, wealth is—of course—unevenly distributed not only along racial, but also geographical lines. Chrys Ingraham catalogs regional differences in the average 2007 wedding. Although the national average was $27,852, that average soared to $38,852 in the New York metro area and dropped to $18,624 in the south (44).[29] The public nature of wedding ceremonies and the comparison that invites may serve to perpetuate wedding inequalities: if all of one's neighbors had large weddings, one may feel obliged to follow suit. These statistics serve as a clear-cut, quantifiable example of the material inequities that arise among various attempts to achieve the ubiquitous lavish wedding fantasy, to say nothing of inequalities that exist

[29] Also to this end, the Wedding Report, Inc. (a wedding industry research company currently sponsored by We^{TV}) offers a website—costofwedding.com—where potential newlyweds can enter their zip code and receive estimates on how much their wedding (or certain elements of their wedding) might cost based on their location. This site is freely accessible, but most of the Wedding Report's data is only available if an individual is willing to pay a minimum of $49 for a membership.

between the people who have weddings and the people who do not participate in the ceremony at all.

In surveying a condensed history of the wedding and including a succinct overview of contemporary American nuptial standards, I have provided a foundation for close examination of particular weddings as portrayed in reality television shows. I have briefly discussed the unequal access that Americans have to the wedding ritual, but I will delve into this matter further through a critical analysis of reality programs. The romantic fantasy associated with weddings is a meaningful site imbued with normative messages about race, gender, and class. Attempting to pull apart all of these meanings from the fantasy in its broadest, most collective sense would not be fruitful, but in a close viewing of a specific program it is possible to understand how the bride's or couple's intersectional identity interacts with the ideals set forth by popular culture and the wedding industry. Furthermore, in examining these programs I will consider the extent to which wedding scholarship reflects couple's nuptial realities (or at least, their reality as edited for television). Conversely, I will also consider the extent to which the couples on reality television shows are representative of the newlywed population as a whole.

Chapter Three. *Reality Television and Weddings – A Match Made in Heaven?*

Today, wedding reality television constitutes a significant portion of television programming as a whole. At the time of this writing, the following programs are currently on the air: *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Amazing Wedding Cakes*, *Bridalplasty*, *My Big Friggin' Wedding*, *My Fair Wedding with David Tutera*, *Rich Bride Poor Bride*, *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?*, *Platinum Weddings*, *Bridezillas*—and this list is not even exhaustive, or inclusive of the bevy of now-defunct wedding programs. TLC (formerly The Learning Channel), Style and WEtv are the networks that have traditionally provided a home to most wedding programming

and still do today. WEtv has an especially wedding-heavy programming lineup; the network has enough content to feature a "Wedding Sunday" and launch another cable network, Wedding Central, which will exclusively feature wedding content. But wedding reality television is also expanding its horizons, with shows currently on VH1 and E!, and an upcoming show slated to air on the CW. Interestingly, even though wedding reality programs have done well on cable (some current programs, such as *Bridezillas* and *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* have been on the air since 2003), wedding-oriented reality shows are markedly absent from major networks.[30] Their absence is a curiosity, especially given the success of matrimonially oriented shows such as *The Bachelor/ette* on ABC and the "Trista and Ryan's Wedding" special that arose from the series in 2003.

Putting wedding television's puzzling absence from broadcast networks aside, this subgenre of reality programming has an incredibly successful track record on cable television and the genre's popularity shows no signs of waning. In this chapter, I will explain why reality television is an important component of American wedding culture and explore the reasons why wedding culture and reality television programming have formed such a successful and lasting union. To tease out the relationship between weddings and reality TV, I will begin with a brief discussion of the reality format before examining wedding programs specifically. In doing a close reading of these shows, I will uncover the ways in which reality programming normalizes the lavish wedding and the classed and gendered requisites of the wedding ceremony and the contestants in these programs. I want to show how these programs form a part of the wedding

[30] The notable exception to this is the short-lived program *The Real Wedding Crashers*, a prank wedding show inspired by the comedic film *Wedding Crashers*. The program was on NBC in 2007, but was pulled after a mere four episodes ("About: *The Real Wedding Crashers*").

ideological complex and how they at once reflect a pre-existing wedding fantasy and perpetuate the desire for future wedding consumption.

Defining what qualifies as "reality" programming can prove a tricky endeavor—Richard M. Huff embarks on an entire book about reality television (aptly named *Reality Television*) without bothering to clarify what exactly reality programming *is*, and Jonathan Bignell presages his own definition of the genre with an acknowledgment of its inadequacy.[31] Reality television is a genre of programming that is distinct, or certainly billed as distinct, from scripted television, game shows, and traditional documentaries, but may contain elements of all three. Mark Andrejevic hesitantly claims, "Perhaps the hallmark of the reality format is its incorporation of a variety of genres: fiction, soap opera, and documentary" (69). Reality TV's hybridity may be what makes it so difficult to define; it seems impossible to simply or concisely describe what qualifies as reality TV but would not qualify as another genre of television.

Although a firm delineation between reality television and other kinds of programming may be impossible, for the purposes of this study, I think there are two important hallmarks of reality programming to consider. The first marker of reality television is that the "reality" is *supposed* to come from the contestants (the premise of the show itself is not held to the same standard of authenticity). Consider, for example, the popular reality dating program *The Bachelor*. Each season of the show features twenty-five women competitively dating one man—hardly a common courtship scenario.[32] Yet out of this contrived dating setup, the contestants claim to form meaningful feelings for each other—many seasons of the show end in a proposal

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[31] Bignell defines reality television as "programmes where the unscripted behaviour of 'ordinary people' is the focus of interest" (7), but acknowledges that this definition could be applied to programs that many would *not* consider reality TV. Additionally, this definition would seem to exclude reality programs that do not feature "ordinary" people, namely celebrity- or actor-oriented programs such as VH1's *The Surreal Life*.

[32] There have also been several seasons of *The Bachelorette*, where men vie for one woman.

of marriage. Thus, the constructed environment of competitive dating produces "authentic" emotions from the contestants (and, of course, divulgence of these emotions for the camera), making it "reality" TV. Popular television scholar Robert Thompson makes this distinction with what is arguably America's reality television's progenitor, MTV's *The Real World*: "[The purpose of] *The Real World* was not to do a reality documentary, but to create this entirely artificial, contrived world… with rules, and then put people in this contrived world without scripts" (Huff 13). This distinction is not meant to imply that every reality program relies on contrived environments,[33] but to assert that, despite their surroundings, it is important for the contestants to be seen as authentic.

The second important element of reality television is the accessibility of the contestants to the viewers. Huff argues, "In many ways, the appeal of the of reality television has been that it could be the viewer, or the viewer's neighbor, right there on the small screen" (ix). Andrejevic concurs: "The advent of the reality drama takes place when documentary techniques are used not to document the daily life of geographically and culturally remote people but to study the lives of proximal, contemporary figures as representatives of typical—hence real—people" (65). Andrejevic furthermore points out that long before reality television became popular, many successful scripted television shows (such as *I Love Lucy*) were "realistic" in the sense that they followed the quotidian rhythm of ordinary people's lives (66). Although the success of such programs indicates an appeal in watching scripted television featuring "realistic" people, knowing that the people on the screen actually are "real" adds a certain *je ne sais quoi* to a reality program. While watching drama unfold on a scripted program such as *Grey's Anatomy* may be

[33] Consider, for example, *Say Yes to the Dress*, which follows women shopping for their wedding dresses at Kleinfeld, a bridal salon in Brooklyn. While the presence of cameras may alter the behavior of the brides-to-be to a certain extent, the program records an independently occurring scenario rather than artificially constructed one.

compelling, the knowledge that the program is fictional elicits a different audience response; seeing similar action unfold with real people would make for a very different viewing experience.

However, both the authenticity and accessibility of reality show contestants can be called into question. For example, many wedding programs will ask couples to reenact portions of their wedding planning that occurred before filming began (Livesay). The programs, of course, fail to mention that the couple has already picked their linens or venue, leading viewers to assume that they are witnessing an authentic or un-staged reaction to the planning process. The ostensible ordinariness of contestants is also misleading. Huff chronicles the calculated casting process that reality television producers conduct to find the desirable blend of contestants for a particular show, sometimes actively soliciting people in certain professions or making use of professional or aspiring actors. He says, "Although the whole notion of reality television is built around regular people doing extraordinary things or living in unusual situations, the people appearing on reality shows are often far from regular […] The point is that they're often not the people next door, but just playing them" (32). Paradoxically, it seems that appearances are more important than veracity on reality television programs. Reality television shows may not be as authentic as the show's producers would have their audiences believe, but this does not weaken their ideological potency. Television producer Stuart Krasnow argues that a show's success and impact is not based on its authenticity, whether it's scripted or unscripted, but is evaluated based on its ability to evoke emotion from its audience (Huff 25). Thus, veracity becomes secondary to the semblance of truth, if appearances help the program resonate with its viewers. Using ratings as a barometer for success, reality television has fared well in the last decade: the top ten most-watched programs of 2000-2009 are the domain of multiple seasons of only two shows, both

reality-based: *American Idol* and *Survivor* ("Decade's Top"). However, a glance slightly further down the list[34] reveals a relatively even mix of both scripted and unscripted television. Although reality television has certainly captured audiences' attention, particularly since the American premier of *Survivor* in 2000, it is clearly not to the exclusion of scripted programming. As Krasnow argues, a successful show is one that will cause the audience to feel something, and perhaps even talk about it around the proverbial water cooler, regardless of format.

Chrys Ingraham's notion of a wedding ideological complex (which, to briefly reiterate, are the sites of American popular culture that create beliefs, values, and assumptions about weddings) is particularly useful for understanding reality television's role in wedding culture (Ingraham 119). Americans, and particularly American women, are exposed to wedding norms in everything from childhood dolls to toothpaste ads to scripted television and popular films. Reality television forms just one part of the wedding ideological complex, but it forms a potent part because of viewers' ability to identify with the contestants. Wedding reality programs (or at least the good ones) succeed in evoking emotion because they tap into the romantic fantasy that is central to notions of bridehood and the wedding ideological complex: "The real-life wedding […] stories played out on these TLC […] shows offer viewers a vision of a 'fantasy' world that is, in fact, possible within the diegesis of the reality programmes" (Sgroi 115). In other words, viewers feel an emotional connection to wedding reality shows because they see other women "just like them" in search of (and attaining) a bridal transformation that they also desire.

Interestingly, wedding reality television actually predates the program that is accredited with the start of the reality craze—*Survivor*. When CBS aired the premier of its smash hit in the summer of 2000, TLC's program *A Wedding Story* had already been running for several years.

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[34] I am referring to shows ranked 11th-50th.

Of course, if one *really* wanted to, one could trace the origins of wedding reality television close to the origins of television itself—NBC featured a program called *The Bride and Groom Show* in the 1950s, where couples were given weddings (Otnes and Pleck 1). However, the current lineup of wedding programming seems less indebted to *The Bride and Groom Show* than it is to the popularity of *A Wedding Story* (the first foray into televised "real-life" weddings), and *Survivor* (which popularized reality programming for the next decade and foreseeable future).[35] The multitude of shows with the same basic premise (real-life weddings) can furthermore be explained by reality television's tendency to spawn copies and look-alike programs if the original series concept is a hit. Huff explains, "Once a successful program hits the airwaves, rival networks seek to duplicate success with similar, though not identical, concepts" (95). Imitation may be more rampant among reality television than scripted programs in the United States because of a legal precedent that makes it possible for "similar, though not identical" shows to skirt copyright laws.[36] Wedding reality programs as a collective may seem similar enough to qualify as copies, but some programs are *really* two-of-a-kind. For example, WEtv seems to have taken a page from TLC's book; their new program *Girl Meets Gown* (women shopping for wedding dresses at a boutique in Texas) is remarkably similar to the popular TLC show *Say Yes to the Dress* (women shopping for wedding dresses at a boutique in New York).

In addition to reality television's general penchant for imitation, another reason that wedding reality television is such a popular genre is because weddings fit neatly with the

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[35] Mark Andrejevic says, "In the wake of *Survivor*'s runaway success, reality TV was rapidly transformed from a cheap form of niche programming to the hot programming trend of the new millennium and eventually into a genre of its own" (1-2).

[36] CBS claimed that the program *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!* was too similar to *Survivor* and sought legal redress. Huff says, "To the average viewer, it would be very easy to describe the ABC show as *Survivor* with celebrities. But the courts disagreed. In January 2003, a Manhattan U.S. District Court judge ruled for ABC and producer Granada that *I'm a Celebrity* was different from *Survivor*" (97).

makeover theme found in reality programming as a whole. The wedding industry's focus on commodified bridal transformation is in keeping with the message of other makeover shows such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, The Swan* and *What Not to Wear*:

> In a significant way, [reality television] takes up the mantle left by the ancient function of the *fairy tale*. […] The fairy tale was, in its essence, about the powers of transformation. […] Second, and more importantly, the fairy tale's social function was not primarily representational. The narratives had an ethical function—namely to transform the recipients of the stories. [… Reality television], in its reshaping of subjects, operates as a fairy tale or wonder tale. Many shows […] make the transformation of their protagonists (contestants, participants) central. Even the "narrative" goals are often similar to fairy tales (success, marriage, survival). The attainment of wisdom today comes in form of learning about oneself (Bratich 17-19).

In watching the transformation of contestants on wedding reality television shows (which can be as explicit as a plastic surgery makeover or more implicit, such as the shift from a Bridezilla to a content wife), viewers are also learning about how they may transform themselves. This change is unsurprisingly one that is accompanied by accumulation and consumption; the commodified wedding industry fits well with the trend of commodified personal transformation: "Today's televisual makeovers emphasize physical change and material/service acquisition as the paths to genuine expression of one's inner self and better nature" (Heller 2).The ability of reality television shows to change their recipients (as wonder tales were intended to affect their audiences) grows when multiple programs are imparting the same messages, and wedding programs do, functioning as a cohesive part of the wedding ideological complex.

From this broader understanding of reality television and the wedding programming subgenre, I would like to closely read particular wedding programs and decipher the messages contained within each program. Although, as I have mentioned, there are a plethora of wedding programs to choose from, I have narrowed the focus of my discussion to seven programs: *Bridalplasty*; *Bridezillas*; *Four Weddings*; *My Fair Wedding with David Tutera*; *Platinum Weddings*; *Say Yes to the Dress*; and *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* I have selected these shows

because I believe they represent a good cross-section of wedding programming as a whole; collectively, they feature a substantial variety of content and format.

Most wedding reality programs are highly formulaic and feature contestants for only one or two episodes; each episode is self-contained, and foreknowledge of other episodes will not enhance a viewer's understanding of a particular installment of the program. For each of the programs that follow this self-contained format, I will primarily examine solitary episodes because they adequately represent the show as a whole. However, before examining particular episodes I will explain the format of the shows as a whole and provide other relevant background information. After examining each of the episodes individually, I will analyze them collectively and discuss any recurrent themes or cross-show contradictions. I plan to introduce the shows in roughly chronological order, although the chronology is based on the origin of the series rather than the air date of the particular episode.

Although it is not the oldest wedding reality program (that honor goes to TLC's *A Wedding Story*), WEtv's *Bridezillas* is one of the oldest wedding programs still on the air. *Bridezillas* is a documentary-style program that features brides-to-be behaving badly. Unlike most other wedding shows, which feature standalone episodes, *Bridezillas* episodes are linked sequentially. Each bride's story is told over the course of two hour-long[37] episodes, meaning that every episode features the culmination of one bride's tale and the commencement of another. However, seeing only half of a bride's story does not prevent viewers from understanding the narrative, and reruns are aired non-sequentially.

[37] When providing the length of each television program, I am referring to the time allotted for the program to air (including commercials). Without commercials, a half-hour program usually runs for about twenty-two minutes, whereas an hour-long program usually lasts around forty-four or -five minutes.

Bridezillas has markedly evolved from its origins as a 2003 eight-part documentary series initially entitled *Manhattan Brides* (Traister). The women who participated in the first season were told, "the project was to chronicle the pre-wedding lives of couples living in high-priced, high-octane, high-strung New York City," and only to learn later that the show had been retitled *Bridezillas* and the women had been labeled "matrimonial monsters" (Traister). Perhaps because one of the first season's participants brought a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the production company (Traister), subsequent participants on *Bridezillas* have answered the casting call from WEtv knowing what they were getting into. The current casting call for *Bridezillas* on WEtv's website asks women to submit photos, explain what kind of Bridezilla they will be, and describe their stress level. Lest one wonder why women would choose to go on a television program determined to show them in the worst possible light, the casting call emphasizes in all capitalized and bolded letters, "BRIDES WILL BE GENEROUSLY COMPENSATED" ("WEtv Casting"). Although *Bridezillas* began as a television show about wealthy brides from New York, Bridezillas now come from every corner of the country, and a minimum expenditure on a Bridezilla wedding (previously, contestants were limited to women spending $25,000 or more on their weddings) is no longer specified in the casting call (Engstrom 7).[38]

The Style Network's *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* also dates back to 2003 and remains on the air. Each hour-long episode of *Whose?* features two couples seeking the help of wedding planners to coordinate their nuptials. The episode usually highlights some obstacle in the wedding preparations, such as a difficult theme, bad weather or a budgetary constraint, but these obstacles are usually overcome or ultimately disregarded, as newlywed couples frequently express content after their ceremonies. There are an array of wedding planners featured

[38] Older seasons of *Bridezillas* explicitly mentioned the cost of the wedding during the episode (Engstrom 7), but this is no longer a feature of the program.

recurrently on the program, and some participants even find their planners through watching previous episodes of *Whose?* ("Three's Company"). At the end of each episode, viewers are informed that the participants in the program have been gifted a honeymoon, which would ostensibly incentivize viewers to become future candidates for the show.

Next we turn our attention to *Platinum Weddings*, a documentary-style gaze into the weddings of the wealthy. WEtv, the network that hosts *Platinum Weddings*, describes the program as "the ultimate wedding show that captures the drama and decadence of wedding planning on an extraordinary budget!" ("Platinum Weddings"). Within each half-hour episode, audiences are introduced to a couple planning an opulent ceremony. The episodes commence with the voice-over of a perky-sounding female narrator, who informs us, "*Most* little girls dream about the day they'll marry, but some little girls dream *big*!" Viewers are then told just how much this particular wedding will cost—usually well into six figures—and then our narrator returns to gleefully announce, "…and that's where a platinum wedding comes in!" The episode then provides viewers with a detailed run-down of the wedding ceremony and reception, with the prices of the various wedding accouterments appearing at the bottom of the screen.

Say Yes to the Dress is a documentary-style program that captures women's experiences shopping for wedding gowns at Kleinfeld, an upscale wedding salon in New York City. Each half-hour episode features two women purchasing wedding dresses and briefly includes a third woman who is returning to the store for alterations; the third bride's wedding is momentarily shown at the end of the episode. In addition to interviewing the bride and her guests, the program also provides statements from the store's consultants as they attempt to please their clients. A narrator thematically links the women featured in each episode by providing voice-overs at the beginning and end of the program.

My Fair Wedding is an hour-long makeover reality program that follows "celebrity wedding planner" David Tutera as he changes a bride's wedding plans three weeks before the ceremony. The tagline for the program is, "Every bride has a vision. He has revisions." In each episode, Tutera plans a single wedding. He meets with the bride at the beginning of each episode to discuss what she has already planned for the wedding—and then proceeds to alter most major components of the ceremony. Tutera usually allows the bride's idea for a wedding "theme" to remain intact,[39] but changes the décor, the food, the wedding party's attire (including the wedding dress), and sometimes the venue. With every element of the wedding he changes, Tutera presents the bride with options (usually three). Although the bride is allowed to indicate her preference, Tutera has the final word on which of the options is actually used for the wedding, and the bride does not find out his choice until the day of her ceremony.

Four Weddings is a competitive wedding show on TLC that began airing in December 2009. In every hour-long episode, four brides agree to attend each other's weddings and evaluate each other's ceremonies, providing an overall score from one to ten and rankings for certain wedding elements like the food and the dress. Whichever bride receives the highest score wins a "dream" honeymoon in a surprise location.

The aforementioned programs clearly represent diversity in wedding programming—while some shows narrow their focus to one element of the wedding, such as the dress or the bride's bad behavior, others choose to incorporate a more comprehensive view of wedding planning. Most shows heavily feature preparations for the nuptials, but *Four Weddings* shows the ceremonies and receptions, with minimal mention to the planning that preceded them. While the

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[39] In the first season of *My Fair Wedding*, each episode simply bore the name of the bride featured as its title. In subsequent seasons, however, each episode labeled the bride based on her theme and bore a title such as, "Purple Princess Bride" or "Zen Bride," perhaps to indicate that Tutera is working within the constraints bride's thematic preference.

wedding remains a common feature and central element in each of these programs, the ritual occupies a different place in each show's format.

I would like to examine one show separately, because it deviates from the formula of the other wedding programs (although it still closely adheres to the competitive format of *Survivor*) while simultaneously promoting many of the same values found throughout wedding reality TV. That program is none other than the aforementioned *Bridalplasty*. *Bridalplasty* is, in many ways, the culmination of the most extreme and sustained versions of the messages found throughout wedding television and indeed wedding media as a whole, focusing on class, perfection, transformation and femininity. I hope that in examining the commonalities that exist between *Bridalplasty* and the other programs, and by highlighting important differences related to the show's content and serialized format, I will illuminate how wedding programs deploy certain messages individually and more powerful messages collectively.

Chapter Four. *Reading Wedding Reality Television Programs*

Each season on the weight-loss reality program *The Biggest Loser*, the obese contestants meet with a doctor who details the deleterious effects of their corpulence. Turning up the shock factor, the doctor predicts exactly when some of the contestants will die if they do not alter their habits. On the current (eleventh) season, Dan—learning from the doctor that he is predicted to die in 2020—laments the future that he could lose with his young daughter: "I *might* be able to see her graduate high school, but I'll never see her go to college, I'll never see her get married, I'll never have grandchildren" ("Week 2"). Dan's lament about missing out on "the most important things" in his daughter's life includes assumptions that his daughter will go to college and get married ("Week 2"). These assumptions may not strike most viewers as odd, but since

Dan and his family reside in Oklahoma – a state where recent data indicate that only 22.4% of the population over 25 holds Bachelor's degrees, much lower than the national average of 27.5% (U.S. Census Bureau) – he's actually predicting that his daughter will probably be different from his neighbors, and even the average American. As for Dan's other prediction, matrimony remains a statistically normal expectation for Americans—2010 Census data indicates that 70% of the adult population has been married at least once (Luscombe 50)—but marriage is also becoming increasingly scarce among less-educated and less financially stable Americans, making marriage a marker of relative privilege (Luscombe 52). While this data suggests that Dan has somewhat lofty aspirations for his offspring, the program does not portray Dan as an elitist—his lament is constructed to invite viewers to empathize with his concerns.

As I have already mentioned, successful reality programming evokes emotion from its audiences, which is achieved in part by casting likeable, "ordinary" people and featuring stories viewers can relate to, such as on *The Biggest Loser*. Although these programs ostensibly portray ordinary people accurately, we know that reality show producers carefully select participants and that each program has been edited to form what producers believe will be the most compelling or exciting narrative. Thus, instead of seeking to record what pre-exists as "ordinary" or average, reality programs frequently feature privileged lifestyles and above-average consumption habits and then present these as the norm. With Dan's reflections on his impending mortality, *The Biggest Loser* serves as an excellent example of the way in which class realities can be obscured or avoided by reality programming in a way that naturalizes privilege. *The Biggest Loser* is not the only show that obscures or elides a discussion of class. In this chapter, I hope to explore how wedding programs navigate issues of social class and consumerism. In examining a handful of episodes from wedding reality programs, I ask: When is class discussed? Is it ever discussed in

non-monetary terms? How is wedding consumption portrayed, and do the programs ever examine the relationship between class and consumption? How does each program handle class differently, and are there messages that run throughout multiple shows?

I have already described the ways access to and consumption of white wedding ceremonies is strongly determined by social class, but reality programs do not emphasize the role of social class in wedding planning and wedding consumption. Like *The Biggest Loser*, most wedding programs that strive to be relatable also naturalize privilege and consumption. Of course, reality programs can also evoke emotion by showing the extraordinary, such as the disgusting stunts on *Fear Factor* or the ludicrous antics of celebrities on *The Surreal Life*. Wedding programs function in this way as well—we can see brides behaving badly in *Bridezillas* and the uber-wealthy hosting half-million dollar receptions on *Platinum Weddings*. However, while viewers may mock the Bridezillas or look on at the bride-zillionaires in awe, even in these programs wedding consumption itself remains uncritiqued.

While most wedding reality programs do not explicitly emphasize class or critique consumption, it does not mean that they provide narratives in which class is absent. Social class is frequently equated with money, sometimes to the exclusion of any other determinant of rank, but to understand the role of class in wedding reality television, we must look beyond monetary markers. Money is certainly important—indeed, wedding culture is heavily commodified and rests on cash-driven consumption of matrimonial goods—but it is also important to how these programs communicate class through taste and behaviors. In this vein, it is useful to use Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic and cultural capital.[40] Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural

[40] Bourdieu also talked about social capital—or an individual's social networks and group memberships—but this form of capital is not especially pertinent to wedding reality programs, and thus will not be discussed here.

capital can be incredibly useful for deciphering classed messages within wedding programs. For example, when we see brides purchasing their wedding gowns, examining her selection process can illuminate her possession (or lack thereof) of cultural capital and economic capital, giving viewers a more nuanced understanding of her class. How much is a bride willing to spend on a gown? Does she conflate cost and value? What styles does she prefer? Does she have an eye for detail or care about designer labels? Can she appreciate the fabric of the dress, or its stitching? By evaluating the ways that class is expressed in both financial and cultural terms, it becomes possible to reach a richer and fuller understanding of how class and privilege is presented or obscured.

In addition to class, it is also important to consider which gender roles are privileged and particularly what sort of femininity is naturalized within and across these programs. As I have already explained, many women will participate in a traditional, bridal femininity, even if they are not especially feminine on a regular basis. Do we see this narrative affirmed and repeated within the shows? What kinds of femininity are exalted, and what kinds are criticized? How is criticism of deviant or undesirable gendered behavior presented? While shows certainly approach their subjects differently, it is still possible to see how they operate together within the wedding ideological complex, paying particular attention to the programs' treatment of class and gender.

Let us commence our analysis with Bridezilla Martina (featured in the seventh season *Bridezilla* episodes "Natalie/Martina" and "Martina/Michelle"), who hails from Memphis, TN and is introduced by the show's narrator as a southern belle ("Natalie/Martina"). After a narrator introduces us to Martina and her fiancé Eddie, we learn the story of their courtship: apparently it was *not* love at first sight because Eddie did not hold the door open for Martina. Things have

changed since their first meeting, and Martina tells us, "Eddie gets the door every time now" ("Natalie/Martina"). The discussion then turns to wedding planning—Eddie says that Martina's stress level is probably an eleven or twelve (on a scale of one to ten). Martina attributes this stress to her attention to detail: "I like things to be a certain way, but at the same time it does cause a lot of stress … before you know it you're freaking out and having a bridezilla moment" ("Natalie/Martina"). The narrator asks a variation of the same question that is posed for each participant on the show: "So, will Martina make it to the altar with all of her friendships intact, … or will she become [ticking noise] … a bridezilla?" Although viewers can probably guess the answer before seeing the rest of the episode, the narrator quickly leaps in to comment on the bride's disregard for everyone else's time as she slowly prepares for her bridal shower. Martina believes that it's appropriate to be late since the bridal shower is hers, and late she is—showing up three hours after the shower was supposed to start. Martina then criticizes the food her guests have been hungrily waiting to eat (she struggles to eat finger foods with the long gloves she's wearing and refuses to take off) and begins to cry when her guests' questions leave her feeling stressed about how much is left to prepare for the wedding. Martina's mother confides that her daughter's emotional outbursts have become quite frequent lately.

After cutting away to the other bride's story, the narrator brings us back to Martina's narrative by sarcastically saying, "With only three days until the wedding, Martina gets some news that has her beside herself with grief" ("Natalie/Martina"). It is revealed that one of Martina's bridesmaids has lost an aunt, and will need to attend the funeral instead of the wedding. Martina makes brief acknowledgement of her bridesmaid's loss, but is really upset that her friend wants to back out of the wedding. Martina wonders aloud to her fiancé if it would be rude to request a change in the date of the funeral. She is surprised when her friend is insulted by

her text messages and questions her ability to remain friends with the now-ex-bridesmaid. Martina asks for Eddie's advice, and he equivocates, seeming to disagree with his bride but not wanting to offend her. In a solo interview, Eddie concedes that Martina is "definitely not handling things emotionally as well as she could and I will definitely be glad when the wedding is over and things return to normal, whatever that may be" ("Natalie/Martina").

In the next episode, we are re-introduced to Martina and Eddie, who emphasize the "opposites attract" cliché to explain their compatibility, but also mention that they share socially conservative and religious values. Martina says that when she thinks of a dream wedding, "I think of Celine Dion, her big wedding, her huge dress, lots of glamour and just elegant, and everything being shiny and just beautiful," a statement that is followed by the sound effect of a record scratching and the bride's admission that she is *not* Celine Dion, but she thinks her wedding will still be beautiful ("Martina/Michelle").[41] Eddie confesses that he thinks Martina has an "ingrained" bridezilla, and the wedding is only serving to amplify that.

The narrator expresses shock when Martina arrives on time to her final dress fitting, but warns us that she cannot say the same Martina's mother, who is having stitches removed and will be late for the dress fitting. Martina is frustrated that her mother will be late for the fitting when she has a lot to do as a bride, but the narrator wryly comments that no matter how busy, Martina has time for a rant. We also learn that Martina has purchased two wedding dresses—a white one for the ceremony, and an ivory one for the reception. Thankfully, her sisters come as backup to the final fitting, so Martina is not alone, but she makes her sisters wait while she spends a long time examining herself in the mirror in each dress. Her mother shows up an hour late, which

[41] "Celine Dion needed 'a month to plan' her hairdo and '1,000 hours to make her pearl-encrusted gown.' Wed in Notre Dame Basilica in Montreal, Dion and her groom Rene Angelil had some nine hundred people 'working for [their] wedding to happen.' Emulating the attire of a queen, Dion wore a tiara that weighed twenty pounds" (Ingraham 152).

only serves to sour Martina's mood and lead her mother to once again label her a bridezilla. When Martina's bachelorette party rolls around, she is less than enthused to attend the event. In spite of her sister Candace's patience (waiting in her car for almost an hour) and attempts to appease her with a crown and veil, Martina remains underwhelmed at the prospect of the party. Her friends attempt to feed her jello shots, but nothing seems to brighten Martina's mood.

We next see Martina running characteristically late to her wedding rehearsal, due in part to a hangover from the bachelorette party. In spite of her fiancé's attempts to hurry her along, Martina and Eddie arrive an hour late. However, the couple are not the last to arrive—no one from Martina's family or bridal party makes it to the wedding rehearsal, despite further waiting and phone calls from the bride to her family. On the day of her wedding, Martina once again runs behind schedule, making a last-minute makeup appointment and heading down the aisle ninety minutes late. We see a brief clip of the bride and groom's vows and then the couple is granted a post-wedding interview that is interspersed with video from their reception. After having made it through the wedding, it would seem that Martina's inner bridezilla has calmed down, and we are left with a shot of her kissing Eddie after proclaiming her love.

An explicit discussion of class is noticeably absent from this episode *Bridezillas*, even though earlier seasons of the show made the bride's budget known. Although we learn that Martina has purchased two wedding gowns (and wedding gowns tend to be one of the most expensive items associated with the cost of a wedding), we are not given any concrete information about how much her dresses or any other component of the wedding cost, and don't hear about any wedding-related financial concerns, if they exist—the show is edited to pretty exclusively highlight Martina's bridezilla-esque behaviors. However, to a certain extent, "bridezilla" behavior can be considered class indicators. Although clearly money and manners

do not go hand-in-hand, many people hold the misconception that they do, Bourdieu included. Embodied cultural capital includes modes of behavior, and Bourdieu argued that this form of capital cannot be immediately transferred or exchanged, as other forms of capital. His theory suggests that behavior (manners) are linked to class and are not easily altered. The linkages between class and manners are especially interesting to consider with *Bridezillas*, since the program originally featured wealthy, Manhattan brides. However, clearer connections to class do not exist in the program, especially the episode at hand.

Also absent from the episode is any discussion of race, even though Martina and Eddie are an interracial couple (Martina is African-American; Eddie is Caucasian). The couple is twice interviewed about how they met and fell in love, but there is no discussion of what role, if any, race has played in their relationship. Again, perhaps this is attributable to the focus of *Bridezillas* as a whole—the program rather narrowly views weddings through the lens of dramatic (bad) bridal behavior. However, the absence of any discussion of race seems important, given the whitewashing of wedding culture as a whole; although *Bridezillas* features a woman of color as a contestant, there is no consideration of the ways in which her racial difference might inform any bridal difference.

While *Bridezillas* does not necessarily explore other issues, the program certainly focuses its attention on appropriate femininity. The program is clearly edited to highlight women at their worst; sound effects and a snarky narrator underscore the critical gaze of the camera. Unlike most other wedding programs, the format and content suggests that viewers are supposed to mock these women, distance themselves from Bridezilla behavior they witness. Bad bridal behavior, although obviously a frequent enough phenomenon to give the program enough material to last eight years (and more), is presented as aberrant. Women are supposed to have

been planning their weddings since birth, which suggests bridehood and wedding planning should come "naturally." When instead wedding planning comes with frustration and a short temper, the bride is deviant, and is compared to a monster. However, "Bridezilla" is presented as a condition that can be overcome—once she is a wife (and no longer a bride), Martina is presented as happy and content. Although viewers may mock Bridezillas on their way to the aisle, the show nevertheless promotes the notion that the wedding ceremony itself will make even the most finicky women happy.

Although the show sometimes features demanding clients, the brides of *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* pale in comparison to *Bridezillas*, perhaps because the show is driven by the wedding planners more than the brides themselves. However, the ninth-season episode "Money Matters" *does* feature difficult brides—but not because the women are lashing out at their friends, families, and frightened fiancés. The two couples featured in this particular episode both present their wedding planners with financial challenges, which makes for an interesting takeaway at the end of the hour-long episode about who deserves to have what at their wedding.

To begin the episode, viewers are introduced to wedding planner Julie Conley, and her clients, Bill Fair and Rosemarie Marino. After learning about how Conley entered the wedding planning business and how the couple met, viewers are provided with a tragic twist—bride Rosemarie lost her longtime boyfriend on September 11, 2001. Rosemarie has struggled to find acceptance of her sustained feelings of loss from subsequent boyfriends, but claims that Bill understands and accepts her past. About a year after Rosemarie and Bill began dating, Bill was hospitalized following an accident, and they realized that they could not live without each other. After getting engaged, the couple moved in together—to the chagrin of Rosemarie's Italian family. Rosemarie explains, "In Italian families, you're technically supposed to be married

before you move out of the house, so we were frowned upon." Familial pressure has led the couple to wed in haste, and to enlist the help of their wedding planner two weeks before the ceremony. Although planning a wedding in a mere fortnight will be a monumental challenge for Julie, she accepts it because she also lost loved ones on September 11 and the couple's story moves her. After hearing that the couple's budget is only $10,000, Julie decides that she would like to give Rosemarie a "nicer" wedding than she can afford.

Viewers are next introduced to planner Shawn Rabideau, who we learn will serve as a mediator for his clients, Ginger O'Toole and Nick Hearn. After the planner alludes to the couple as potentially undesirable clients (Ginger wants it all, while Nick wants to stick to their drastically reduced budget), we learn about how they met: Ginger was working at the pharmacy where Nick came every month to pick up prescriptions for his diabetes. The couple hit it off, but their story has a dramatic twist as well. Ginger shares that she has a nerve disease that causes her to frequently rely upon help from others, even to walk. Although this has placed a strain on their relationship, the couple believes that Ginger's health problems have ultimately made them stronger. However, the cost of Ginger's medicine (around $500 a month) have led the couple to cut their $45,000 wedding budget in half. Nick says, "We want to have a platinum wedding [perhaps an allusion to the television show?], but on a budget." To fulfill their wedding fantasies within their financial constraints, the couple decided to seek the help of Shawn Rabideau, a wedding planner who they learned about from previous episodes of the show.

Returning to Bill and Rosemarie, Julie shows the couple a wedding venue, which they cautiously say they like, but recognize that they cannot afford. Julie tells the couple not to worry about it, but confesses to the camera that she is unsure of how she will pull off this wedding. However, Julie talks to the wedding vendors, and they collectively agree to gift the wedding to

Rosemarie and Bill, putting their small budget where it needs to go and doing the rest for free. Rosemarie begins to cry, telling Julie, "You're really making our dreams come true."

Meanwhile, Ginger and Nick are also worried about what they can afford—but Shawn is ready to help out. Although the couple's décor budget is "slightly more than zero," Shawn offers donate decorations, because this is his area of wedding planning expertise. Adding to their list of wedding concerns, Ginger reveals to Shawn that she has a wedding dress, but does not like it. At her last fitting, her dress was too tight—she claims to have felt like a sausage in the garment, and does not want to return to the dress shop. Rabideau reveals that Ginger has gained weight because of her medicine, legitimating her dress-related anxieties; a narrator describes her "$2500 gown" as "ill-fitted, to say the least" ("Money Matters"). Although an ill-fitting wedding dress is ostensibly a dilemma that many brides face, the show seems eager to clarify that Ginger is only heavy because of her medicine, almost suggesting that other reasons for weight gain would be unacceptable or unsympathetic. Thankfully, regardless of the reasons for her weight gain, Ginger's dress is successfully altered, and she's glowing at her final fitting, describing the gown as, "Simple, elegant, perfect" ("Money Matters").

Adding to Nick and Ginger's wedding worries, we also learn of a cake kerfuffle: Nick is vehemently opposed to having a round cake at the reception, because Ginger was married once before and had a round cake at her previous wedding. Although this seems like a relatively minor detail, Ginger is not ready to concede to a square cake, claiming there are more cake options in a round shape. Ultimately, the couple decides to compromise: they will have both square and round layers on their cake. Interestingly, although Ginger has been portrayed as rather demanding throughout the episode, Nick reflects on their cake compromise and says he figures he'd let her win, since she has given up so much of her wedding dreams because of their

budgetary constraints. This is a curious moment, giving rise to questions: Has the show merely been edited to make Ginger look bad, or does Nick's love for Ginger blind him to her petulant demands?

Although the episode may have featured obstacles to both weddings, viewers are left with sentiments of triumph: For Nick and Ginger, Rabideau admits the couple fought during wedding planning, but says they seem happy on the day of the ceremony. An interview with Rosemarie and Bill features the bride happily saying, "This is the beginning of something wonderful." The happiness of the couples' wedding days is further underscored by the portrayal of both couples (but especially the brides) as worthy underdogs. The narrator even goes so far as to label Rosemarie and Bill as a "couple with a tragic backstory, big wedding dreams, but a small wedding budget" ("Money Matters"). Ginger and Rosemarie are like many other women who face budgetary issues in their wedding planning, but Ginger's illness and Rosemarie's tragedy make them sympathetic figures, and their wedding planners gift them significant portions of the ceremony—with the cameras rolling, of course. Hypothetically, the episode could have taken an entirely different turn: Ginger and Rosemarie both face budgetary contrainsts, but with the help of resourceful wedding planners, they manage to have a wonderful wedding without breaking the bank. The couples do not actually dig any deeper into their own pockets, but the show presents big spending as the path to nuptial bliss, even if it is not the couple doing the spending.

In examining the next program, we shift from couples who cannot afford their own weddings to couples who can afford their weddings—and then some. In the fourth season *Platinum Weddings* episode "Alexis & Noah," viewers are introduced to bride Alexis Baker, a business owner, and groom Noah Kaye, a solar technology specialist. The couple is hosting a half-million dollar "green" wedding in Washington, D.C., funded by both sets of their parents.

The wedding and four-part reception will all take place in the same space, which will reduce transportation, making it eco-friendly and also, (in the words of their wedding planner), "unique and different" ("Alexis"). Touring the space, the bride predicts that the wedding will be, "The most magical thing I could have ever imagined" ("Alexis").

In the next scene, we are told the couples' back-story. We learn that they met online and decided to meet for darts on their first date. The bride hit a bull's-eye and afterwards the couple spent "the rest of their time together" ("Alexis"). After the sentimental narrative, viewers follow the bride on her way to examine the table design, at which point the program begins to tally the cost of various wedding elements. Prices appear at the bottom of the screen as we see the bride and groom go through various stages of wedding planning and pre-wedding celebration—we learn that the table designs include $2950 custom linens and menus custom printed on recycled paper products for $7150. The bride feels like "a kid in a candy store" when she goes to a jewelry store to acquire a $47,000 necklace and $10,000 pair of earrings to accompany her "priceless" family heirloom—a sapphire ring her mother will lend her for the ceremony ("Alexis").

At a pre-wedding "welcome party" for friends and family, we learn that the ice sculptures in the shapes of D.C. monuments cost $10,000, and the food and drinks for the event cost a whopping $80,000. Lest the lavish spending overwhelm or repulse the audience, we hear the bride say that the couple is "just excited to see friends and family" ("Alexis"). To remind us of her priorities, Alexis says, "The most important thing to me about this wedding is that at the end of it all, I get to be Mrs. Noah Kaye" ("Alexis").

We then get to see the wedding itself—we are briefly shown the couple's Jewish ceremony, but much more attention is paid to their four-part reception, which begins with a

$24,000 Asian-themed cocktail hour and is followed up by an $85,000 dinner for the couples' 215 guests. Different musicians are employed at the ceremony and three of the four receptions (their own guests provide the entertainment during dinner in keeping with a cultural tradition), but by far the most extravagant musical act is a fifteen-piece band during dessert. The couple winds up their night at a disco after-party, where the bride changes out of her $15,000 custom-made wedding gown into a $3000 white Zac Posen dress.

Amidst the number crunching of the wedding's extremely high cost, we are once again reminded of the couple's love at the end of the episode. Providing a voice-over to a video clip of the couple dancing at the disco, groom Noah says of his newly minted wife, "Lexi has renewed my belief in the fairy-tale of love, and I hope that our guests leave believing that two people can really find each other, fall in love, and live happily ever after" ("Alexis"). The final scene of the episode is a brief exchange between the couple, where the bride says to her husband, "Really love is the most important thing in this world, and I love you so much." He succinctly responds, "I love you" ("Alexis").

Class is an especially delicate issue for *Platinum Weddings*. Although the class background of the show's subjects is unambiguous—the entire premise of the show is a voyeuristic peek into the weddings of the supremely wealthy—participants' lavish spending habits have to be presented carefully so that the weddings come across as desirable rather than alienating distant or decadent. In "Alexis & Noah," the show's producers strategically place sentimental statements from the engaged couple throughout the episode, which serves as a buffer between the shocking news that the couple is spending $10,000 on *ice sculptures* (you know, the ones that melt) and the cocktail hour alone costs as much an average couple's entire wedding. Ending the episode with statements from the couple about how much they love each other and

how important their love is also allows audiences to leave the episode with romance, rather than consumerism, fresh in their minds. However, viewers should not totally forget the extravagant consumption of *Platinum Weddings*—that is, after all, the driving force of the program. *Platinum Weddings* seems to cater to the same appetite that makes the American public gobble up news of celebrity weddings. People seem to enjoy witnessing an expensive wedding spectacle, but there should also be an element of the "real" and the relatable, to make the audience feel that, millions of dollars aside, these celebrities/*Platinum Weddings* contestants are "just like us." This relatability is achieved in this episode through Alexis and Noah's sentiments of love and romance, and their hope that their wedding will spread a belief in love to their guests and viewers.

Almost as if to support of their sentiments of fairy tale love, Noah and Alexis are shown together for a significant portion of the episode. While weddings are frequently constructed as the bride's day, *Platinum Weddings* does not seem interested in emphasizing the bride. Truthfully, they do not seem that interested in the groom either—the wedding and the spending are really what take center stage. However, it is interesting to see Noah portrayed as a full participant in wedding planning—with the exception of Alexi's dress fitting and trip to the jewelry store, Noah seems just as involved as Alexis. Granted, the wedding "planning" that we see in the episode is really a reenactment of the planning that began long before shooting, and so Noah may or may not have been just as involved before the cameras began rolling. Nevertheless, it is an interesting (and different) decision of behalf of *Platinum Weddings* to choose to portray the bride and groom as equal participants in wedding planning.

Much like *Platinum Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress* follows privileged brides.[42] Kleinfeld, the bridal boutique where the show takes place, carries a wide array of designer gowns and the prices are equally varied, although none are inexpensive: the owners describe their prices as "starting at $1,500 all the way up to dreamland" ("Ask"). Given the diversity of garments offered by the store, price is a factor in every bridal appointment. Every bride's budget is announced on *Say Yes to the Dress*, although it is frequently mentioned at the beginning of an episode and never revisited because the budget does not complicate the bride's search for her wedding gown. However, one episode, entitled "The Price of Beauty," focuses almost entirely on budget. Willing to spend $4500 and $5000, respectively, both of the brides featured in this episode have budgets that at least triple the highest national average I could find ($1553) and yet both women struggle to find their "perfect" dress within their price range (Ingraham 9).

During interviews with the bridal consultants throughout the episode, the Kleinfeld staff claims that the struggle arises from the brides' tastes (cultural capital) exceeding their budget (economic capital). Presumably, the struggle to find the right dress at the right price also arises in part from the tempting proximity of designer dresses at Kleinfeld (a store that boasts on their website, "the largest selection of wedding dresses in the world!"). In general, women who choose to shop at wedding boutiques come into their appointments with bridal consultants having perused the internet and bridal magazines to formulate an idea of what dresses and styles they prefer; many have printed images of designer gowns to bring to their appointments (Arend). However, women who come into Kleinfeld don't just have the printed image of the designer dress—they have the opportunity to actually try it on, which can provide considerable temptation

[42] Parts of my discussion of *Say Yes to the Dress* and my conclusion also appeared in another paper of mine.

for brides to spend beyond their price points. Of course, that's exactly what happens in this episode.

The episode opens with a Kleinfeld staff meeting that sets the stage for the tension to follow, where the bridal consultants are advised to adhere to brides' style requests, but to also pay attention to their budget. Director of sales Nicole artfully confesses, "Some brides' taste level exceeds their budget but it's really up to the consultant to decipher which one is going to take precedence in the appointment" ("Price"). Viewers are then introduced to the two brides whose shopping narratives will dominate the episode.

Jessica is visiting Kleinfeld as a second-time bride with her fiancé in tow all the way from Orlando, Florida. We learn that at her first wedding, Jessica wore a dress that her mother picked out for around $100; she feels that *this* is her opportunity for a dream wedding. Jessica tries on dresses that fall well within her price range (to reiterate, she is willing to spend up to $4500), but they don't appeal to her. She has been fantasizing about a gown that is double her budget, and once she tries it on, there is no turning back. The bride tells her fiancé, "I was willing to settle for a less expensive dress, but now the other dresses just don't make me happy." Although the dress is financially out of her reach at the moment, the bride resolves to return to the store in six months to purchase it.

The other bride, Courtney, undergoes a similar dilemma when she tries on her own perfect dress—only attached to it is a not-so-perfect price tag. Courtney worries about the cost of the dress—her godmother has already offered to help pay for it—saying, "Everyone is helping so much, I don't want to ask for more" ("Price"). However, Courtney is not *so* worried that she won't try on the dress, even though the consultant warns her that the dress is well outside of her budget. The garment is more than $2000 over the bride's budget, but an aunt offers to chip in and

makes the dream dress a reality. Both of the brides acknowledge the impracticality of the dresses they desire, but Courtney's commitment to the perfect dress is presented as a triumph of fantasy fulfillment over financial practicality. Bridal consultant Dianne acknowledges that Courtney went over her budget but emphasizes that she's walking away with the dress of her dreams. On the other hand, Jessica's commitment to her own dream dress does not result in a purchase by the end of the episode and is not as celebrated. The director of sales, Nicole, equivocates, "Every bride deserves the dress of her dreams but I mean sometimes reality's gotta set in and it's gotta be what you can afford" ("Price").

Economic capital clearly plays a large role in *Say Yes to the Dress*, but the concept of "value" seems curiously absent from the brides' wedding dress acquisition. Although ostensibly an increase in price would also represent an increase in quality, the two do not always increase at the same rate. Neither of these women expresses any concerns about "paying for the label" (perhaps they assume at Kleinfeld, everything has a label) or makes note of qualities of the dress: their decisions seem based on price and personal preference. This stands in stark contrast to Patricia Arend's study of wedding dress acquisition, where she found that the women who spent the most on their wedding dresses were also the most likely to make note of the dress's quality, emphasizing its fabric or stitching (Arend).

Of all the wedding programs I am discussing, *Say Yes to the Dress* has the narrowest focus, recording brides making a single purchase.[43] However, the show has zeroed in on what is arguably the most important purchase associated with the wedding—the bridal costume. As we saw with *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?*, wedding dress acquisition is paramount to bridal

[43] Other similarly single-minded wedding shows also exist, such as *Girl Meets Gown*—which I do not discuss because it has the same basic premise as *Say Yes to the Dress*—and *Amazing Wedding Cakes*—which I do not discuss because cakes form only a minor part of wedding culture (although cake-baking has become a reality television trend).

happiness. The gateway to bridal happiness—the "perfect" dress—is almost always very traditionally feminine. This is an especially powerful message on *Say Yes to the Dress*, because we are literally shown women buying into a hegemonic femininity and buying their happiness. Although the notion that happiness can be purchased through the accumulation of wedding goods runs throughout wedding reality television, and indeed wedding culture at large, this show prominently features a shopping experience that affirms that notion. We see women's faces light up as they try on the gown of their dreams, or cry from the intense emotional experience of fully seeing oneself as a bride for the first time. As we see particularly with this episode, *Say Yes to the Dress* implicitly tells its viewers, "Yes, wedding gowns are expensive, and they might not even be your 'style,' but look at how *happy* you'll be when you buy one!" The decision to feature women in alterations at the end of each episode serves to suggest that this happiness will not wear off (at least in the months between the purchase of the dress and the wedding).

Say Yes to the Dress is very comfortable discussing the often-uncomfortable topic of money, but race is noticeably glossed over, even though two of the three women shown during this particular episode are women of color.[44] Perhaps the universal treatment of women by the program is attributable to Kleinfeld's treatment of their customers, which is unerringly courteous, no matter the bride's budget or background. However, if Kleinfeld and TLC believe brides are brides are brides, then why did they cordon fat women off into a separate season of the show, *Say Yes to the Dress: Big Bliss*? An interview with the store's fashion director, Randy Fenoli, says that the separate season would serve to delve into the difficult shopping experiences that many plus-size brides undergo (Fitzpatrick "Say"). Fenoli does not (and I would argue,

[44] The bride featured at the end of the program, who I did not discuss simply because her presence on the show was so limited, is Indian. We learn that she was featured on another episode of *Say Yes*, however, searching for a red wedding gown to wear to her traditional Indian wedding ("Price").

cannot) offer a satisfying explanation for why these experiences must be delved into during a separate season, especially since the original *Say Yes to the Dress* series featured an episode that may as well have been on *Big Bliss*, entitled "Cinderellas Come in All Sizes." However, even if they have handled size difference problematically, at least the program is acknowledging that it may be more difficult for larger women to shop for wedding dresses: they look through magazines filled with images of women with bodies radically unlike theirs, they must attempt to try on dresses that are far too small and imagine what it would like in the proper size (Fitzpatrick "Say"). The presence of *Big Bliss* begs the question, if Kleinfeld and TLC are willing to acknowledge that shopping for a wedding dress is different when the bride does not fit the thin wedding ideal, why are they unwilling to explore the difficulties of other brides who are not young, white, thin, blond, heterosexual?

We once again broaden our scope with *My Fair Wedding*, where "celebrity" wedding planner David Tutera meets brides three weeks before their weddings and changes almost all of their wedding plans. The episode that I will discuss is entitled "Swamp Bride" and follows Tutera's makeover of bride Courtney Thaxton's "outdoor swamp oasis" themed wedding. After the title card is shown, the episode begins with an interview of the affianced couple, wherein the pair shares the story of the groom's proposal and the bride expresses hopes for the upcoming nuptials.

Next, David Tutera arrives at the couple's home. After briefly introducing himself to Tutera, groom Ken Conjura leaves so that the bride can discuss her wedding plans with Tutera (the groom will not reappear in the episode until the wedding ceremony itself). Thaxton reveals that she has been engaged for two years, and during this time has gone through three themes for her wedding. Tutera reads this a symptom of Thaxton's fickle nature and believes that this will

work to his advantage because he will be able to persuade the bride to change again. After cataloging her first two themes, Thaxton shares that her third and final theme is an outdoor swamp oasis. The program quickly cuts to Tutera's interview, where he expresses confusion and incredulity at the swamp theme. Thaxton goes on to share her current plans for centerpieces, bouquets and other wedding accoutrements, and Tutera continues to express snarky disapproval. Tutera's litany of criticism is briefly stopped when the bride reveals that she would like to incorporate a memorial to her dead mother and that her brother, currently stationed in Iraq, will not be able to attend the ceremony.

However, it seems that Tutera's incredulousness cannot be held off for long, especially not after he see the bridesmaids' dresses. The dresses are full-length and bright green, with a train that the bride claims, "looks like a lily pad" when spread out properly. Tutera is surprised because he does not feel that the swamp theme is very formal, although the bridesmaids' dresses clearly are. While he finds the dresses and the swamp concept incompatible, he is happy that Thaxton wants her ceremony to be a black-tie affair because he "understands" it. The bride's gown is just as formal as her bridesmaids' dresses, and since Tutera just cannot see her wearing it in a swamp, he decides to lure her to a bridal salon to select a new gown under the pretense of "checking out the venue."

Although the bride balks at the idea of changing her wedding gown, Thaxton quickly warms up to the idea of a replacement—she prefers the first dress she tries on to her original gown selection. Thaxton then likes the third dress she tries on even better than the first—but she won't know if she gets to don the gown of her preference until the day of the ceremony. Thaxton similarly resists the notion of changing her bridesmaids' dresses, although she once again comes around to the alternatives that Tutera offers her. Tutera also makes several uncontroversial

changes, such as a change in venue and the decision to provide guests with wedding favors. Tutera and Thaxton quibble once more, this time over food—when Tutera learns that the bride's favorite food is pizza, he insists that they will *not* be serving pizza at the reception.

The day of the wedding arrives, and the narrator announces, "David Tutera has taken the bride's unusual wedding theme from primitive to proper" ("Swamp Bride"). Although Thaxton's attire and makeup are not what she requested, she does not seem unhappy with Tutera's selections. Thaxton even cries at the sight of the reception space, and she confesses to Tutera, "David you made me cry, not many people can do that" ("Swamp Bride"). Tutera goes beyond creating a tear-inducing reception space and surprises wedding guests with a video message from Thaxton's brother in Iraq, displayed on a big screen at the reception. Thaxton once more sings the praises of Tutera, this time into a microphone for all her wedding guests to hear. Emotionally addressing Tutera, Thaxton says, "You have taken this child and turned her into a beautiful beautiful woman. You have done what no one else could do" ("Swamp Bride"). This is followed up by yet another lavish surprise—a fireworks display. At the end of the night, the groom also expresses his happiness, saying that David Tutera made much more possible than the couple had originally planned.

My Fair Wedding does a remarkable job of avoiding explicit class discussion. For example, the arrangement of the show is not discussed—viewers are merely told that David Tutera will change a bride's wedding three weeks beforehand without any mention of why the brides or Tutera himself would feel compelled to play out this scenario. So what's in it for Tutera? WEtv neglects to mention whether or not Tutera is paid for his services by the network (although presumably he is), but at the very least he gets positive press, which is motivation enough for the vendors on the program. Tutera says that the weddings on the show have a high

cost, but it is defrayed because wedding vendors provide many elements for free in exchange for free advertising through the show (Scott). He gushes, "The couples pay nothing. It's a fantasy. By the time I'm done, their weddings are valued at three-, four-, five-hundred thousand. But the experience, honestly, is priceless" (Tutera in Scott). Brides request to be on the show, and while the idea of relinquishing control over their wedding may hinder some women, Tutera clearly provides his clients with a lavish ceremony at no cost to them, which the groom in this episode acknowledges is more than the couple could have provided for themselves.

Since the couples do not pay for the weddings themselves, the question of what they can afford does not figure largely into the program (aside from the groom's concession that *this* would not be it). However, taste plays a huge role in the series, with Tutera clearly functioning as the arbiter of good taste and the brides representing varying degrees of inferior taste. Tutera's "celebrity" status (interviews with Tutera usually include a laundry list of major celebrities he's worked with, such as Jennifer Lopez and Elton John) seems to validate his preferences, but the superiority of Tutera's is affirmed within the show by the happy brides. With her swamp theme, Thaxton possesses particularly aberrant preferences, which Tutera seeks to rein in for her wedding day. Although she resists Tutera's initial (and harsh) criticisms of her wedding plans, the wedding that Tutera pulls together brings her to tears—Thaxton is completely satisfied, even though Tutera made radical changes and at times ignored her requests. Curiously, in an interview, Tutera claims, "I never judge the girls and I always make sure it's never about me, it's always about the brides. I just take their concept and, as the tag line says, 'They have a vision, I have a revision.' But it's still about who they are" (Villarreal).

Tutera's claims ring false, and one blogger, Tracy, isn't buying it either—she has significant problems with David Tutera as a tastemaker. She writes:

> Now, my problem is not with his taste (I've already implied that it's excellent), but with his seemingly narrow vision of what weddings should have and be. […] It's fine for David Tutera to prefer what he prefers. It's quite another matter entirely for him to label something wrong simply because it is not what he prefers. […] Most couples will never be able to afford the kind of wedding David Tutera plans. [… And t]he wedding trappings a couple can afford are not tacky simply because they are not the wedding trappings David Tutera likes. (Tracy)

While Tutera does, to a certain extent, try to work with who the bride "is" (he keeps the bride's theme, even if he thinks it's "whacky," such as the swamp or a pirate theme), the entire show rests upon his judgment of the brides and as Tracy aptly points out, Tutera turns the wedding into the kind of ceremony that he prefers, which has a pretty narrow definition. For Tutera, "tasteful" and "wonderful" is traditional—the bride wears a white dress to her ceremony, the bridesmaids wear coordinating dresses, and after a walk down the aisle an ornately decorated reception follows. Tutera can add individualized touches to these weddings, such as the video from Thaxton's brother who could not attend the ceremony, but he does not radically alter any major wedding elements. Tracy finds this problematic because she believes that viewers will be swayed by Tutera's narrow definition of what constitutes a good or a classy wedding, but will not be able to afford to meet the standards Tutera lays out.

While, to this viewer, *My Fair Wedding* does not seem to imply that members of its audience should have weddings on the scale that Tutera can stage them (remember, some of these ceremonies are worth half a million dollars!), certain preferences of Tutera's are clearly expressed in ways that instruct viewers. For example, from the episode of "Swamp Bride," we learn that pizza is *not* acceptable for a reception menu (even if the wedding theme is not fancy), and that one's attire and one's theme should "go." While viewers may not walk away from the episode feeling that they must have a fireworks display or their wedding won't be special, Tutera *does* clearly mark off some wedding behaviors as inappropriate, and viewers who have faith in Tutera's judgment may attempt to apply his rules to their own ceremonies. Tutera's access to the

rich and the famous clearly indicate that his taste is formed in a place of privilege, and the fact that his less-privileged makeover subjects readily embrace his standards creates an implicit message about the value of expensive taste. While, as Tracy suggests, the show is a proponent of lavish spending normally reserved for the elite, the fact that the brides enjoy the finer things on their wedding day suggests that more money can buy you better goods, but it also makes the more egalitarian implication that if everyone could simply have the means to access the finer things, we could all appreciate them.

Because it serves as a vehicle for the very opinionated David Tutera, *My Fair Wedding* privileges a certain kind of bridal femininity. All of the women featured on Tutera's program are clearly aberrant or lacking in some way, falling short of Tutera's ideal. Although the bridal look is supposed to be a reflection of the bride's personal taste, Tutera must step in because the bride's taste is ostensibly insufficient. However, as the angry blogger suggests, Tutera has a sort of one-size-fits-all mentality for brides and weddings, and so it would seem the bounds of "good" taste are rather narrow, because they are simply his tastes. The women on *My Fair Wedding* usually thank Tutera profusely, accepting his taste with smiles or happy tears, but it is rather curious when one considers that they are thanking him for stripping away their individuality and fitting them into a generic bridal mode. The bridal transformations on *My Fair Wedding* harken back to the Cinderella fantasy and the male-determined worth of the bride, although in a new twist, it is not the groom who must deem the bride acceptable, but her wedding planner. To be fair, these women ask Tutera to catalog their inadequacies and change their weddings, but it is certainly a thought-provoking power dynamic.

In turning away from *My Fair Wedding*, we eschew wedding planning to focus solely on the finished product with *Four Weddings*. The second-season episode I am going to discuss,

"And a Love Hike," features four women from various parts of the Mid-Atlantic region. As is common on the program, the women are planning to have four very different ceremonies. The first bride is Nyle, a 39-year-old actress living in New York City. She will host her low-budget (under $5,000) wedding in Central Park, a decision she says saved her about $10,000. The next bride is Emily, 28, from Philadelphia, who will be having her $45,000 wedding at a mansion in the suburb of Doylestown. The third bride, Chelsea, describes herself as traditional and hails from New Jersey. The 25-year-old plans to wed in the church where her parents and grandparents were also married. We learn that the bride's budget began at $20,000 but ended up around $30,000. Finally, we are introduced to Shayla, a 32-year-old New Yorker hosting a $25,000 Caribbean-themed wedding in honor of her fiance's heritage.

Nyle's outdoor wedding is shown first. After struggling to find the pavilion where the ceremony is being held, the other brides can't take the heat as they wait for Nyle, who's an hour late. Although the ceremony only has thirty guests, the other brides feel that the intimacy was compromised because strangers could cut through the ceremony, with or without shirts. After once again waiting in the heat for the bridal party to take photographs, the wedding guests go on a "love walk" that ends in the restaurant where Nyle is hosting her reception. The other brides express criticism of the small dinner space and disappointed surprise at the lack of alcohol. They are further disappointed by the lack of DJ and dancing, but the food is a redeeming element. After seeing Nyle's wedding, we learn her scores for overall experience—which are low to middling. The other brides give Nyle a five, a three and a six.

Next is Chelsea's "traditional" wedding. As she walks down the aisle, Emily describes her as "feminine and pretty" ("And a Love Hike"). After the ceremony, wedding guests are offered the option of going to the matron of honor's house while the wedding party takes

photographs. The other three brides take up this opportunity—but out of 150 guests, they are the only ones to go there. The brides then go to the reception, being held at a suburban country club. Although the brides offer some criticisms, they love the dancing at the reception and her scores significantly higher than Nyle's—two eights and a seven.

Emily's wedding is third, with a non-denominational outdoor ceremony and reception following in the mansion. The brides seem generally pleased with the cocktail hour (including a candy table) and dinner, but are unhappy with the band, which did not provide good dancing music. She gets an eight, a seven and a six.

Shayla's Caribbean-themed wedding is last. She also has an outdoor ceremony, although hers is Christian and incorporates the couple's African heritage with jumping the broom. The cocktail hour provides guests with ample food and fruity cocktails. The food keeps coming at dinner, which some of the brides find to be too much. The reception is redeemed by African dancers and dancing for the guests themselves. The other brides score Shayla favorably, giving her a seven, a nine and a six.

Having gone to everyone's weddings, the brides now rank the dress, the venue, and the food from the other weddings, which prevents the women from being able to low-score the others in hopes of improving her own chances to win. We then hear the brides express a few of their choices: Emily liked Chelsea's venue the best, Nyle like Shayla's food, etc. After ranking each other, the brides come together to await the competition's results. The winning bride's husband will arrive in a limousine with an envelope containing the honeymoon's location.

Chelsea's husband Phil steps out of the limo to cheers from all four brides. The narrator then tells us every woman's score—Chelsea came first, with 91 points out of 120. Shayla comes in second place by just two points, with a score of 89. Emily is third, with 77 points. Nyle comes

last, scoring a mere 51 points. Chelsea learns that she will be traveling to the island of St. Thomas, and the other three women share their views on losing. Emily and Shayla are disappointed, but Nyle attempts to find the silver lining: "I think the most important thing is that you find the person you love. Diamond rings and all that stuff are fabulous if you have the money, but you don't have to have it to get married." We finally return to Chelsea, excitedly saying that she deserved to win and getting into the limo with her husband to bring the episode to a close.

Four Weddings is an especially interesting wedding show because the competitive aspect of the program clearly rewards some weddings (and especially one wedding) over the others. Since each wedding's panel of judges is comprised of women who have just planned "perfect" weddings of their own, the judgment is not just of the wedding as a standalone ceremony, but a judgment of the wedding in comparison to others, especially the bride's own. This is evident in Emily's recurring comments about the decorations at the three other receptions; clearly décor was a priority in her own wedding and her own wedding was clearly a yardstick for every other bride's reception.

The socioeconomic class of the brides is not the focus of *Four Weddings*, although we are aware of each bride's wedding budget. The brides' ages seem to be of greater importance than their careers, given the frequency with which those numbers are appended to their name and appear at the bottom of the screen. We do not even learn the occupations of two of the brides, Emily and Shayla. Yet even though the audience remains largely unaware of the class backgrounds of the brides outside of their weddings, their weddings are clearly indicative of their desire and most likely ability to spend.

Although Nyle says that you don't need diamond rings to get married, the other brides would seem to disagree with her: Nyle received the lowest scores by far for her low-budget ceremony. Even though Nyle is at peace with her low-budget ceremony (in contrast to some participants in Sharon Boden's British wedding study, who were anxious that their lack of financial investment indicated a lack of emotional commitment), the other brides judge her harshly, indicating the powerful external criticism of Nyle's attempt to resist lavish consumption (Boden 89). Interestingly, although the least expensive wedding scored the lowest, the converse was not true. Chelsea's wedding was not the most expensive of the four, but her $30,000 budget placed her wedding substantially (but not exponentially) above the national average. Another episode of *Four Weddings* seems to confirm that big is better, but that biggest is not necessarily best. In another episode of the show, bride Limor hosted a $100,000 affair, replete with fireworks, but the other brides felt that her ceremony was too lavish (perhaps because her budget was at least triple anyone else's). Firefighter Cathy won the honeymoon with her $30,000 "romantic" ceremony ("And Fireworks").

Four Weddings stands out from the other wedding programs in this aspect, because no other program is remotely critical of the desire to spend more and have a more lavish wedding. However, I think that *Four Weddings* winners tend to have "big, but not too big" weddings because being closest to the norm will have the most appeal for the other brides because they may identify more strongly with a ceremony that is similar to their own and score accordingly. Chelsea, who exceeded her original budget by more than Nyle's entire wedding budget, is unlikely to reward the other bride for her frugality since she clearly does not prioritize that in her own ceremony. However, brides conversely seem unwilling to reward someone whose wedding

budget is so clearly beyond their own means, perhaps in part because they felt they found perfection at a much lower cost and do not appreciate excessive spending beyond that.

I should also emphasize that while the show provides an explicit budget for each bride's wedding, marking it as a feature of the wedding that the show's producers find relevant or important, the brides do not discuss each other's budgets. When they are evaluating each other, they speak in terms of preference or taste without regard to cost. When Emily expresses her desire for alcohol at Nyle's wedding reception, she says "I was kind of surprised there wasn't alcohol at the event. I think of it as a time of celebration, and you want your guests to be as comfortable as possible…" ("And a Love Hike"). While it may be surprising that Nyle would not *want* alcohol at her reception, since she clearly drinks at the other women's weddings, it is not surprising that alcohol is absent because of her remarkably low budget. However, I would also acknowledge that it may be "surprising" to many brides that a woman would value frugality over perfection (or what they see as requisite for perfection) on her wedding day.

Gender certainly seems to take a backseat to class in *Four Weddings*; although the show clearly promotes hegemonic femininity by focusing on "traditional" brides,[45] there is not the same sort of comparison amongst the contestants regarding gender. However, even though gendered comparisons are not as prominent in the program, there are still present—the brides *do* evaluate each other's wedding costumes. Nyle is the only one of the four brides to choose to wear a shorter wedding gown, opting for a knee-length white dress instead of a full-length garment. The three other brides all acknowledge that Nyle's wedding seems very reflective of her personality, which certainly sounds like a compliment, but really serves as a buffer for their criticism. Nyle's short dress does not win points from the other contestants, suggesting that while

[45] They are traditional in the sense that every woman on the show is having a lavish wedding and wearing a white dress to her ceremony.

bridal attire that reflects one's personality is valued, it is valued even more if one's personality leads one to the "right" sort of bridal attire.

The other major message about gender in *Four Weddings* is not actually *within* the episode, but concerns those who are largely left out of the program—the grooms. Before the program aired on TLC in America, *Four Weddings* was originally on the UK channel Living TV. Although the American and British versions are almost exactly the same, in the original series, the grooms also went to all four weddings and participated in ranking the other ceremonies ("Living"). In the American version, grooms only attend their own ceremonies, and show up in a limo at the end of the program if they are wed to the winner. A blog announcing the British series suggests that, even with the presence of grooms, the brides still remain the more prominent: they describe weddings from upcoming episodes as the bride's ("Living"). The American *Four Weddings* does not exactly leave the viewer with the feeling that there's a gaping hole in the program where the grooms should be, but one wonders—why were grooms cut from the American version? Perhaps it saved on production costs? Whatever the reason, it certainly reinforces the popular notion that weddings are really about brides, and seems to suggest that grooms may be rather expendable.

Although each of the wedding programs talked about or elided discussions of class in different ways, none of them engaged class specifically—the socioeconomic backgrounds of the participants on these reality shows may be inferred from their occupations, or the size of their wedding budgets, and some shows include shots of the exterior of their house, but by and large, wedding reality programming chooses not to confront class head-on. The closest that any of the shows come to explicitly discussing class is a frank discussion about budget, although this is a rather limited (purely monetary) lens through which we can view social class. The other way

that shows indirectly touched upon class was taste, which is especially prevalent in *Say Yes to the Dress*, *My Fair Wedding*, and *Four Weddings*. However, the shows' lack of explicit engagement about class does not negate the potency of the implicit class messages contained within each program. To begin with, these shows only represent contestants who have chosen to consume a lavish wedding—regardless of the scale or taste level of the contestant's wedding, participation in a formal wedding rules out many of the poorest Americans, and many members of minority groups, despite their class. Wedding reality television shows render these non-participants invisible, silencing narratives of wedding exclusion and resistance and presenting the wedding as ubiquitous.

Furthermore, these programs frequently conflate expense with value, implying the most expensive wedding goods are the "classiest," the best, the most desirable. Taste may differ in terms of wedding theme—some brides may prefer to wed in a rustic, country setting, whereas others prefer urbane glitz—but good taste does not seem to include frugality. This marks the wedding as a distinct consumption experience: while in other circumstances, searching for and finding bargains may be a source of excitement or even pride, in wedding culture (or wedding reality television) discounts are deviant. This seems in keeping with the Cinderella fantasy of class transcendence—brides may spend the rest of their lives clipping coupons, waiting for sales, and shopping at discount stores such as Wal-Mart, but their wedding is the one time in their lives when they are not meant to be (or seem) bargain-conscious.

Although Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of economic and cultural capital may help us understand how class is presented through the budget and the taste level of the brides, I believe Bourdieu is useful in a limited capacity, because Bourdieu viewed class as very fixed and transformation is critical to understanding wedding narratives. However, acknowledging the

limitations of Bourdieu's outlook does not negate the usefulness of his concepts of capital—but viewing these reality television programs (especially shows with an explicit "makeover," such as *My Fair Wedding*), perhaps we should be open to taste level being more flexible over the course of a person's lifetime. I would agree with Bourdieu that cultural capital cannot be acquired in the same instantaneous fashion as economic capital, but it is possible for taste to change, to some degree. Consider the "swamp bride," Courtney Thaxton: while it is unlikely that David Tutera radically altered her tastes through her experience on *My Fair Wedding*, she may have gained an appreciation or acquired a taste for some of things she was exposed to while filming the program. Perhaps, for example, she has expanded her culinary horizons as a result of the new foods David Tutera introduced for her wedding reception, after her favorite food—pizza—was deemed an unfit entrée. Clearly a makeover does not render someone a *carte blanche* that may be entirely remodeled to inhabit a different class mentality, but I think it is important to consider how class, in terms of possession of taste and economic capital, may not be fixed for life. I additionally encourage the consideration of the degree to which class may change (even temporarily) through consumption of a wedding fantasy.

Even though class and participation in wedding ceremonies are clearly linked, perhaps the elision of class matters in wedding reality television should not be surprising—after all, these programs are not looking to analyze or critique the wedding ceremony, but aim to provide enjoyable programming that will be popular with viewers. Similarly, it is unsurprisingly that these shows do not hold up a critical lens to gender or race while they nevertheless send implicit messages about both. As I explored in the first chapter, the fantasy element of wedding culture possesses a strong appeal for many women, and the appeal of this fantasy may be sullied with the harsh reality of class difference and unequal participation in the wedding ritual. Explicitly

engaging with financial woes does not seem to ruin the bridal fantasy, so long as the fantasy is ultimately satisfactorily fulfilled—and in each of the episodes discussed above, it is.

Chapter Five. *Bridalplasty*

The premier of *Bridalplasty* opens with a voice-over from host Shanna Moakler, claiming, "Every bride wants to look perfect on her wedding day…" as viewers are shown images from celebrity weddings.[46] Then the show cuts to images of the show's contestants and Moakler concedes, "…but some may need some extra help." After introducing clips of a plastic surgeon drawing on the contestants' bodies in purple marker, Moakler continues, "Now there's a place where they can come to complete their quest for ultimate perfection," and finally says, "…this is *Bridalplasty*" as an image of a contestant from the upcoming season recovering from a nose job is shown standing in a bridal gown.

The first thirty seconds of this show clearly mark its emphasis on celebrity and perfection, which play a prominent role in wedding culture as a whole. What makes *Bridalplasty* so radical—especially relative to other wedding reality television programs—is the premise that to achieve perfection, brides must undergo extreme plastic surgery makeovers. *Bridalplasty* attracted attention, criticism and controversy months before it even aired on the E! network in late November 2010. While one blogger proclaimed it, "the final TV show ever make before mankind slips quietly into the dust" (Gabe), a writer for *Salon.com* referred to the show as "reality TV's latest nightmare," before going on to catalog the fear, loathing and criticism that news of the program inspired across the world wide web (Williams). The extremity of physical

[46] We are shown images from host Shanna Moakler's wedding to former blink-182 drummer Travis Barker, actress Katie Holmes's wedding with actor Tom Cruise, musicians Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale, reality television stars Heidi Montag and Spencer Pratt, and finally E! news host Giuliana Rancic (nee DePandi) with entrepreneur Bill Rancic.

changes desired by the contestants gave cause to health professionals to speculate whether or not the contestants might have Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD), a psychiatric condition where individuals are obsessed with perceived imperfections that can never be fixed (Hutchison). I am unqualified to make a diagnosis, but these concerns seem grounded given contestants like Cheyenne, a conventionally attractive, young, tan and slender woman who claims that the only part of her body she *doesn't* hate is her stomach ("Falling to Pieces").[47]

While the program's radical premise would have attracted attention on its own, it didn't help that *Bridalplasty* chose to employ Dr. Terry Dubrow, a plastic surgeon who had already gained notoriety for his role on *The Swan*, another surgery-driven program that topped *Entertainment Weekly*'s list of "Ten Worst Reality-TV Shows Ever" ("Ten Worst.")[48] *Bridalplasty* pushes the already-questionable ethical boundaries of extreme plastic surgery by giving the procedures away as a prize. This in principle violates the American Society of Plastic Surgeons' code of ethics, but the show gets around it on a technicality because Dr. Dubrow consulted with all of the contestants about their desired procedures before the competition began (Hutchison).

Although the plastic surgery component alone makes *Bridalplasty* stand out from other wedding shows, it is also distinct in other ways, which is why the show warrants independent analysis. For one thing, unlike many other wedding shows, *Bridalplasty* is serialized—although a viewer could plausibly watch any single episode of the show and understand its content, the

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[47] Further supporting the suspicion that contestants may have serious psychological issues related to their body image, one of Cheyenne's desired procedures is the shortening of her second toe ("Cheyenne Aikens").

[48] *The Swan* beat out *Britney and Kevin: Chaotic* for the top spot on the list of worst shows. *EW* quips, "What good is watching a sad woman with a warped sense of self nip and tuck her face and body into oblivion if the results aren't compared and judged before a national audience?" ("Ten Worst.") [After receiving extreme plastic surgery makeovers, contestants on *The Swan* competed against each other in a beauty pageant].

show does follow the same group of contestants for the entire season. As has become evident from my previous discussion, most other shows feature a bride for only one (or in the case of *Bridezillas*, two) episode(s).

Another distinct element of *Bridalplasty* is its prominent and paradoxical competitive aspect. As I have mentioned, the show hinges upon the assumption that these women will not be perfect brides unless they undergo drastic physical transformations—yet to "earn" these transformations, they must prove their pre-existing worth as brides in wedding-related challenges, such as vow-writing and bouquet arranging. The women who do win these challenges receive one surgery (of their choice) as a prize, with the ultimate prize being every (remaining) surgery on the winner's wish list and the dream wedding. The brides who do the worst in these challenges (and would therefore seem the most in need of a transformation) are deemed "bottom brides" and become vulnerable to elimination. A considerable portion of each episode is allotted to the contestants discussing (or fighting) amongst themselves who will be eliminated and plotting ways to stay in the game longer. Although *Four Weddings* is also a competitive program, the brides do not directly confront one another—they (rather politely) provide and justify their scores during an individual interview and the woman with the highest score emerges the victor. *Bridalplasty* places much greater emphasis on the women's (frequently catty) interactions with each other, highlighting their ultimately selfish alliances and bitchy backstabbing as the contestants attempt to claw their way to the top, where liposuction and a "celebrity" wedding cake await. Paradoxically, although these women are clearly eager to buy into the Cinderella-inspired fantasy of wedding transformation and perfection, they themselves are a far cry from good and demure Cinderella character—they will not patiently wait for a fairy godmother in the face of backstabbing stepsisters; they will tear the stepsisters apart on the way

into the carriage. The competition on *Four Weddings* is much tamer, but it is also distinct because it features contestants who have already completed their bridal transformation on their own and are evaluated on the finished bridal and nuptial products. In *Bridalplasty*, women are competing for the opportunity to make the bridal transformation in the first place, to have the wedding at all. Thus, *Bridalplasty* not only emphasizes extreme standards for wedding perfection, but it also highlights the bad behavior the women exhibit in attempts to reach that perfection.

In the first episode, we are introduced to the twelve *Bridalplasty* contestants and their fiancés. It is curious what biographical information merits mention in these introductions: all women mention their hometown, some share their age, but, with the exception of bride Allyson, who notes that both she and her fiancé have lost their jobs, the careers of these women and their partners are not mentioned. The contestants also share why they should be on the show, which is framed in one of two ways by each of the women: either by explaining why they will make "good" contestants,[49] or why they *deserve* to be contestants.[50] Throughout the show, the contestants must continue to prove their worth, as "bottom brides" face eliminations each week and are at the mercy of the other women who cast their votes to determine who will stay. Women who are up for elimination frequently share their sob stories with the other contestants, in hopes of winning their sympathy and consequently their votes. However, this attempt is not always successful, which is proven by the second-round elimination of bride Jessica, who (for health reasons) has had large portions of her breasts removed, leaving them uneven in size and severely

[49] This justification is typified by Kristen's comment that she has "a lot of experience competing with other women" as a beauty pageant participant.
[50] Bride Jaimie, who was wed in a courthouse so that her dying mother could attend the ceremony, typifies this justification. She says of her presence on *Bridalplasty,* "I feel as though it's my time and I deserve to celebrate and just be happy and have something to be happy about."

scarred. Even though many other brides are moved by her story (some even to tears), Jessica is eliminated because she is seen as a competitive threat; she may, in a sense, have been deemed too worthy. Thus, some other brides choose not to emphasize their worth, but instead choose to downplay their roles as competitors.

The concept of worth is present throughout the entire first season of *Bridalplasty* and it is implicitly and explicitly linked to considerations of gender and class within the program. As I have already mentioned, the women have paradoxical notions of self-worth; they have an incredibly depressed self-esteem, yet feel that they deserve to be (literally) cut free of their shameful bodies and transformed into perfect brides. Furthermore, women feel that they deserve not just to be brides (in fact, two of the contestants on the show have already been married), but they also deserve to have a lavish wedding, even though they do not personally have the funds required for such an event. Surprisingly, the discussion surrounding weddings on the program does not feature the same mixture of shame and righteousness found in the contestants' discussion of their body images. Many women freely discuss the financial constraints on their wedding planning and their lack of the requisite economic capital for such an affair is not a source of embarrassment, but rather, seems to bolster their justification for receiving a wedding from *Bridalplasty*. Although the contestants' shame about their bodies and their eagerness for a wedding they cannot afford may be extreme examples, they reflect broader societal attitudes about proper female bodies and wedding culture.

Class is clearly present in *Bridalplasty*, both through the contestants' narratives of how they arrived on the program and in many of the challenges, although it does not always have an explicit function in the program. Although it functions as an implicit and inconsistent marker of class, the attire of the contestants telegraphs their taste/class level to a certain extent:

unemployed bride Allyson frequently wears baggy t-shirts (although she also sports acrylic nails, fully-done makeup and dyed hair), whereas the show's "villain," Jenessa, chooses to wear nicer knit tops and cardigans. In terms of economic capital, not all of the women choose to plainly disclose their financial situations, but they all seem to have come to *Bridalplasty* hoping to win something—be it the wedding, the surgeries, or both—that they could not otherwise afford. While class, particularly in America, can be a taboo subject and a lack of economic resources can be a source of particular shame, the contestants may feel comfortable airing their financial woes specifically because they are tied to wedding culture. Many Americans may not see the value in funding universal health care or free school lunches, but Otnes and Pleck point out, "The decision to plan and execute elaborate weddings is rarely questioned, and seems now to be considered not only a rite but a right in North American culture" (Otnes and Pleck 3).

Although some of the challenges on the show are relatively straightforward and have no ostensible connection to social class (such as the brides' ability to match their vows to their fiancés', or their speed in moving crash test dummies into sex positions), several of the challenges hinged upon the show's (or guest judge's) idea of good taste, which does carry class connotations. Much like David Tutera on *My Fair Wedding*, the authority of the judges (and the host) seems to come from their "celebrity," although many judges on the show have feeble claims to fame—many have simply worked for famous people (such as "celebrity florist" Kevin Lee), or are minor television personalities (such as *E!*'s Guiliana Rancic). Regardless of their degree of proximity, the guest judges are clearly much nearer to celebrity tastemakers than the contestants. There are usually at least a few women each week who perform woefully in the challenges, receiving low scores on their wedding dress selections (and snarky commentary on their tattoos) or failing a lie-detector test while all the other contestants (and members of the

American public) look on. The consistent shortcomings of various contestants underscore the superior taste (and more valuable cultural capital) of the "celebrity" guest judges. While class and taste clearly factor into the challenges where the women must select their bridal attire and floral bouquets, class serves an especially explicit function in the fourth episode, entitled "The Finer Choice." For this week's challenge, the contestants are brought five pairs of food and drink. In each pair, one item is high quality, and the other item is low quality. The women must select which item they believe is best, and will receive points for correctly identifying the higher-quality products. Before the competition begins, Moakler asks the contestants to place napkins on their laps. When Allyson, who is enthused at the prospect of a food-oriented challenge, tucks her napkin into her collar, Moakler stifles a laugh and insists that Allyson place the napkin in her lap.

Cheyenne, who is still recovering from rhinoplasty, is visibly fighting back tears before any of the dishes are even brought out, well aware that she will be at a disadvantage with impaired senses of smell and taste. Allyson's initial enthusiasm also quickly wanes when the first course is brought out: champagne. Allyson concedes that this is not her area of expertise, saying, "I'm accustomed to the generic version of things and the discount store things." Interestingly, although Moakler introduced the challenge in terms of quality, the champagnes (and most of the other courses) are introduced in terms of price. Viewers are obviously meant to infer that the bottle of champagne that cost almost $500 is worthier than the other one (which runs for $3.78 a bottle), but the conflation of expense and quality is important to note. Jenessa has a curious take on the challenge, saying that she's been exposed to finer things: "I live near New York, I go to New York a lot, but some of the other girls, they're just not classy" ("The Finer Choice").

After the brides attempt to deduce which cracker holds foie gras and which provides a base for cheap deli liverwurst, the third course is wine. One glass contains expensive wine from the Bordeaux region of France, the other is a cheap jug wine that was contaminated with dirt. Jenessa says of this round, "OK the pressure's on, because I do *not* want to look like I don't have any class." She is then one of two contestants to pick the dirt wine. The brides are then given side-by-side tastings of Alaskan king crab and imitation "krab." For their final course, the brides are presented with burgers; one beef patty is made from Kobe beef that retails for $100/lb, the other is made from discount beef that was marked down to $1.87/lb. Allyson's love of food serves her well after all; she not only correctly identifies the finer beef patty, but proceeds to return her napkin to her neck and eat the rest of it. Moakler, with a wry and judgmental smile, asks Allyson if she would like some ketchup with that ("The Finer Choice").

This particular challenge is illustrative of *Bridalplasty*'s values and priorities. Although many engaged couples claim to desire a wedding that will reflect their personalities as a couple (and especially reflect the bride's individuality), nowhere in *Bridalplasty* is a personalized ceremony or reception touted.[51] Before embarking on the taste-test challenge, Moakler reminds the contestants that they want their reception to be tasteful. Even though most of the contestants guess incorrectly on at least one course (and several miss two or more), the (dollar) value placed on the finer choice remains unquestioned. Yet, would all of these women really care about having a $500 bottle of champagne at their receptions if they cannot distinguish it from a $4 bottle? Even some of the women who correctly identify the pricier food and drinks admit that they do not regularly consume these products, and in spite of that, these contestants never seem

[51] A quasi-exception to this rule occurs in the second episode, where the brides compete in the wedding vow challenge. Although the brides meet with "experts" to discuss the exchange of personalized vows, they quickly move into a challenge where most grooms sarcastically demand vows for foot rubs and football games.

to doubt that they should desire what the show has packaged for them as "tasteful" or—better yet—"celebrity-style." Even Jenessa, one of the shrewder contestants on *Bridalplasty*, blindly accepts that the (in)ability to discern which food products are expensive will (dis)prove that she is "classy."

The standard of wedding perfection has been made monolithic and depersonalized on *Bridalplasty*, and perhaps this is why the contestants must prove their worth to become eligible to become worthy. If perfection is a one-size-fits-all affair at *Bridalplasty*, then the show must eliminate inappropriate contestants who will never reach perfection, lest the producers attempt to fit a proverbial square peg into a circle. Given the emphasis on wedding perfection, and with celebrities as the standard-bearers for said ideals, it should not come as a surprise that a hegemonic, bridal femininity is promoted throughout the program. Even though the contestants are in committed relationships with men—and have thus already accomplished what many women would hope to achieve through becoming hegemonically beautiful: to be considered attractive and thus attract a partner—they claim they won't be able to feel good about themselves unless they receive new noses and breasts and smaller stomachs and thighs. As health officials have already speculated, perhaps the insecurities and self-loathing of the contestants is the result of a psychological condition. However, viewers should consider the possibility that these women do not feel very good about themselves because their fiancés seem to be under the impression that they need plastic surgery as well. In the home videos shown in the series' first episode, most fiancés concurred with their brides over which plastic surgeries they should receive. One groom-to-be, Antoine, even suggested a procedure that his fiancée, Alexandra, had not considered:

> ANTOINE. Boob job?
> ALEXANDRA. What's wrong with my boobs?
> ANTOINE. I mean, nothing's wrong with 'em, but I mean… ("Falling to Pieces")

Although many of the contestants later give their fiancés credit for loving them no matter what they look like, only one groom explicitly expresses this sentiment to the camera. When Ashley's fiancé and partner of eight years, Sevino, says, "She's fine the way she is," Ashley responds with a guffaw, as if Sevino had said something ridiculous. While even the most supportive of partners cannot remedy the contestants'—or indeed any other individual's—*self*-esteem (case-in-point: Ashley), the grooms' enthusiasm for their partner's radical physical transformation is troublesome. All but one of the contestants on the show will return to their partners without a total-body makeover; many went home without any plastic surgery at all. The program does not provide us with any follow-up information on the contestants after they have been eliminated, so viewers are left to wonder how the women feel returning, unchanged, to the partners who were so in favor of a transformation. In spite of Shanna Moakler's send-off, some viewers may harbor serious doubts if, indeed, the weddings *will* go on as these brides return to their fiancés as less-than-perfect.

Wanting to look particularly good on one's wedding day is not a phenomenon unique to *Bridalplasty*. In a study on bridal weight management behaviors, Neighbors and Sobal note, "Previous research suggests that the wedding day serves as a reference point in the life course, particularly for body weight, because appearance is permanently memorialized in photographs and memories […] Many people recall what they weighed at their wedding and use it as a standard for comparison later in life" (Neighbors and Sobal). Plastic surgeons even note that it is not uncommon for brides-to-be to have a procedure or two performed before their wedding (Hutchison). Yet the desire for perfection that permeates wedding culture as a whole seems like more than a preference to look especially attractive on a special day; rather, it seems like an

extension of the demands for feminine beauty that women face throughout their lifetimes. Feminist Sandra Lee Bartky explores the difficulties and discipline associated with feminity:

> The disciplinary project of femininity is a 'set-up': it requires such radical and extensive measure of bodily transformation that virtually every woman who gives herself to it is destined in some degree to fail. Thus, a measure of shame is added to a woman's sense that the body she inhabits is deficient: she ought to take better care of herself; she might after all have jogged that last mile. (Bartky 100)

The never-ending, never-good-enough quest for feminine beauty is manifested it its more extreme forms by many of the *Bridalplasty* contestants. While the women on the show (and, additionally, at least their fiancés) feel that they fail to meet requisite requirements for feminine beauty, they will be viewed by many outside the Bridalplasty mansion with distaste and scorn for relying upon plastic surgery to attain these beauty norms. While many contestants do want liposuction and could presumably achieve an analogous (albeit imperfect) affect from other weight-loss methods, most of the women also want procedures to alter elements of their appearance that cannot be changed without surgery, such as their noses or facial scars.

Unfortunately, it seems that many of the contestants are damned-if-they-do and damned-if-they-don't when it comes to altering their appearance with plastic surgery. Alexandra shares that she was a contestant on the weight-loss reality competition *The Biggest Loser*, and in spite of being sent home the first week, she lost ninety-one pounds ("Falling to Pieces"). Alexandra has ostensibly complied with the social constructs of proper feminine behavior—she's lost weight, and furthermore did it at home, on her own—but that's not enough. This is in part because Alexandra has more weight to lose (at over two hundred pounds, she is by far the heaviest contestant on *Bridalplasty*), but also because Alexandra now has excess skin due to her dramatic weight loss. In an interview with *The Early Show* co-host Erica Hill less than a week after the *Bridalplasty* premier, Shanna Moakler and Dr. Dubrow faced criticism for their

controversial program. Hill asked the pair if they were surprised by anything on the show, because many of the contestants were very attractive. Moakler defends the contestants, arguing that for women like Alexandra, and for indeed for women like herself (a svelte woman after three pregnancies), sometimes weight loss is accompanied by loose skin that cannot be fixed without surgery (Hill). What are these women to do: remain unattractive or become vilified for their means of beautification?

Although in her article (quoted above) "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," Sandra Lee Bartky details the various modes of discipline (diet, makeup, body language) that produce a recognizable and desirable femininity, she does not explore the notion that there may be socially unacceptable means to achieve the same feminized ends. The contestants on *Bridalplasty* repeatedly espouse the belief that many other women want or have already undergone plastic surgery, but do not discuss it. Since their suppositions are premised on secrecy and denial, it is difficult to prove or disprove the contestants' claims, but the women of *Bridalplasty* may be onto something. The shock and furor that greeted *Bridalplasty* before it even aired is evidence that cosmetic surgery, or at least extreme cosmetic surgery, remains unpalatable or taboo to many Americans. This may be due in part to the high price tag on cosmetic procedures, which many Americans would find cost-prohibitive.[52] However, Americans also frequently turn to a surgery-prone population (celebrities) as arbiters of beauty, taste, and style. There seem to be conflicting messages in American popular culture about what or who is beautiful and what means are acceptable (for which people) to achieve beauty.

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[52] In a post-*Bridalplasty* interview, Allyson explains that part of her reason for joining the show was to compete for what "a lot of women that are in their thirties that have had children want," and the chance to do it for free: "Come on!" she says, "Does anyone know how much veneers cost?" (Fitzpatrick "Bridalplasty").

To give the show a small degree of credit, it does not gloss over the contestants' recovery from their plastic surgery procedures. We see the surgeries themselves, in such graphic detail that this particular viewer often felt compelled to look away, and the camera retains its unflinching stare, as women are rolled on a gurney, sobbing and disoriented, from the operating table into a recovery room. We see the contestants wheelchair-bound after nose jobs and witness them sob in pain as Dr. Dubrow removes their bandages. Of course, the credit remains small, because as Dubrow is treating his patients, he gleefully responds to their tears and reminds the women that their pain will be worthwhile: they will look good on their wedding days. "She's gonna fill out her wedding dress!" he crows from the operating table, where Kristen has just received breast augmentation ("Unveiled"). Thus, while the program continues to glorify the results of plastic surgery procedures, they do not sugarcoat the pain associated with recovery or downplay the severity of undergoing major surgery.

In addition to valuing normative beauty standards, the show also implicitly endorses negative stereotypes of women by highlighting the contestants' normatively feminine "bad" behavior. About half of the time allotted for each episode focuses on the remaining contestants discussing who should be allowed to stay. Although these scenes are briefly interspersed with footage of the top bride receiving her procedure of choice, a large portion of each episode's content remains gossiping, fighting, and pleading. The contestants frequently whisper behind each other's backs, lie to each other's faces, and complain to the cameras. Jenessa quickly emerges as the show's villain, forming an alliance early in the season with Melissa, Dominique and Lisa Marie. Although Melissa is sent home in the fourth week when she faces elimination at the same time as Lisa Marie, Jenessa's alliance seems to pay off—she makes it all the way to the

finale. Throughout the season, she acts as a self-described "puppet master," manipulating and deceiving her fellow contestants.

Of course, Jenessa's scheming failed to account for any possible repercussions from the eliminated players, although perhaps she should have: it was, after all, a feature of American reality television's progenitor, *Survivor*. At the beginning of the finale, Jenessa confidently prepares to give a speech to a panel of "*Bridalplasty* experts," only to fight back tears when she learns that the panel is composed of the women she plotted against all season. The final two contestants must, once more, make a case for their worthiness to become perfect brides, this time to a group of women who have bade farewell to their erstwhile *Bridalplasty* dreams. Although Jenessa angrily attempts to undermine Allyson,[53] it becomes evident (after a bevvy of snarky questions and comments) that she has burned too many bridges to secure the spot as top bride and victor.

One could argue that the amount of time devoted to the ins and outs of elimination does not promote negative stereotypes of women, but perhaps merely showcases the behavior of people on reality shows. After all, mixed-gender reality competitions like *Survivor* also feature alliances, strategies and backstabbing a-plenty. Yet it is difficult to separate the gendered nature of the competition from the behavior of its single-gender participants. Jenessa may have been just as conniving on another program, but she is on *Bridalplasty*, and the goal is not a million dollars, but bridal perfection. Jenessa's plotting and scheming are feminized, as evidenced in the show's finale, where she faces a panel of eliminated contestants. Alexandra, while giving

[53] In one of the more intense interchanges of the finale, Jenessa attempts to argue that Allyson has not been taking her liposuction seriously, because she ate Hot Pockets after her surgery. Allyson defensively retorts that she was in fact eating *Lean* Pockets, and furthermore, she has lost "*eleven* pounds." Jenessa counters that she has lost ten, but Allyson hotly claims that this is only because she starves herself ("The Perfect Bride").

Allyson the vote that will secure her *Bridalplasty* victory, also gives Jenessa a biting send-off: "Karma's a bitch and so are you!" ("The Perfect Bride").

Interestingly, resident plastic surgeon Dr. Dubrow and host Shanna Moakler defended the program on CBS's *The Early Show* by claiming that *Bridalplasty* was merely a reflection of pre-existing trends in the United States. In spite of interviewer Erica Hill's repeated and dubious questions about the "message" of the program, Dubrow and Moakler insist that they are not sending out the "wrong message" to their (female) viewers, they are not in fact sending any message at all. Dr. Dubrow claims that pre-wedding plastic surgery has been a growing trend for more than a decade, and rather than inculcate viewers with rhinoplasty dreams, *Bridalplasty* is holding up a mirror and examining (albeit in a sensationalized way) what women are doing anyway. Moakler also dismissed the potential influence of the program because of its genre: "I also think when it comes to reality television, the biggest thing I get thrown back by, it's *reality TV*. You know, this is supposed to be fun, it's supposed to be entertaining, we're not supposed to be getting, like, a scope onto society from the reality television we're watching" (Hill). Although to a certain extent, Moakler is right—a show's producers are going to edit a program into what they believe will make "good" (read: entertaining, popular, "fun") television, rather than edit a program to be "realistic" or representative of society as a whole—perhaps she should not be so quick to dismiss *Bridalplasty* as "message-less."

Yes, *Bridalplasty* is over-the-top and no, most women probably don't think they need fifteen plastic surgery procedures (or more) before they can feel good about themselves, as Lisa Marie does ("Falling to Pieces"). However, *Bridalplasty* is not creating entertainment out of a vacuum. Although Dr. Dubrow may not have much credible ground to stand on, his claim that the show is reflecting current trends is worth consideration. I would argue that *Bridalplasty* holds

up more of a magnifying glass than a mirror—exaggerating and amplifying pre-existing phenomena, rather than faithfully recording them—but the show's obsession with celebrity, its conflation of expense and value/taste, its upper-middle-class norms and its standards for feminine beauty all exist elsewhere in our culture, and particularly our wedding culture. What, then, are the implications of a program that takes our cultural obsession with beauty and celebrity to an extreme? I think the program would be more easily disregarded if it were only played for laughs and shock value, but *Bridalplasty* peppers its outrageous moments with heartfelt confessions from the contestants. Alexandra's weight loss, Jessica's health issues, Allyson's financial troubles—these women all share sympathetic stories, humanizing their otherwise horrifying desire to become caricatures of themselves through plastic surgery. Although the viewers of *Bridalplasty* may not turn off their television sets and schedule a consultation for breast augmentation, I do believe that this show advances the idea that plastic surgery can make an individual happy in ways that she could never be otherwise, and furthermore that she deserves this happiness (surgery) *because* she is going to be a bride, which is not to be dismissed lightly as harmless.

Conclusion.

Over the course of the twentieth century, weddings have become increasingly commodified, thanks in large part to seductive marketing campaigns and an elusive wedding fantasy perpetuated by popular culture. In spite of the growing cost of weddings, couples (and particularly brides) not only wish for a lavish wedding, but also feel entitled to one and may even feel *obliged* to have one. Wedding reality television functions as a critical piece of the wedding ideological complex, which continues to circulate the idea that more spending leads to a better wedding, greater happiness, and even the attainment of perfection. Despite the fact that many

reality programs highlight difficulties in the wedding planning process—budgetary constraints, body image issues, bad bridal behavior—they also ultimately present the consumption of the white wedding (or wedding related goods, such as the bridal costume) as a triumph, worth all the worry and expense. This triumph can resonate powerfully with viewers, because it is presented as the "real," not just the desirable, but also the attainable. Examining wedding culture past and present, it is clear that the desire for lavish weddings will not soon disappear from our cultural landscape. Additionally, examining wedding reality programming makes it clear that reality television may have carved out an even larger space for the wedding ideological complex in popular culture and an even stronger desire for large weddings.

Despite an awareness of the wedding ideological complex and the history of lavish weddings, the desire for a lavish may still seem exceptional, but perhaps it should not. Although weddings are touted as a once-in-a-lifetime experience (and indeed, in some ways they are), they may be rather ordinary in some ways, fitting neatly into our lives as consumers. In the last decade of the twentieth century, consumption of luxury goods expanded more than any other kind of spending (Otnes and Pleck 274), and has spread throughout many individuals' lifetimes—from bat mitvahs, to "sweet sixteen" parties, to prom, to vow renewals or extravagant anniversary parties. Yet, while lavish consumption may have spread throughout the middle and lower classes and a person's life cycle, weddings do still retain a degree of their exceptionality, because the ritual is singularly celebrated in popular culture and society at large.

The expansion of the wedding ideological complex through reality television is important to consider, as the wedding seems to become increasingly inescapable. Thus, whether one chooses the lavish wedding, an alternative, or not to have a wedding at all, the specter of the formal white wedding is present, and ceremonies are measured by their adherence to or deviance

from the expected norm. The societal expectation for most romantically linked heterosexual couples is a marriage marked by a wedding—Chrys Ingraham points out that celebrities who choose not to marry (such as Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie) are subject to significant tabloid scrutiny and are expected to justify their decision. The pressure, of course, does not just fall on celebrities, although tabloids are a highly visible manifestation of the pressure to wed. If a couple (or woman) does decide to participate in a wedding, then the standard of the lavish white wedding inevitably looms large, no matter what sort of ceremony they have/she has. In fact, lavish weddings may ultimately subsume "alternative" weddings; with Otnes and Pleck claiming that, "Today's barefoot bride on a beach in Maui is yesterday's hippie" (277). In reality television, we witnessed this very phenomenon with the "green" platinum wedding. Considering the almost-omnipresence of wedding norms problematizes the commonly held understanding of the ceremony as a marker of individuality and it certainly challenges the extent to which "taste" operates as a modicum of control or choice in wedding planning. Obviously, brides are not automatons who mindlessly respond to media messages, but their "choices" are clearly shaped by what is presented to them, and increasingly, weddings (and lavish weddings, at that) are presented as the only acceptable "choice."

Wedding reality programs have strong normative messages on everything from the bridal costume to what constitutes a "tasteful" reception, their coverage of wedding culture stops on the day of the ceremony. After the vows have been exchanged and the honeymoon is over, does wedding consumption retain its significance? The aftermath of wedding spending seems entirely absent from popular culture. Perhaps this absence can be explained by the tendency of reality television programs to present wedding spending as a triumph. The wedding ceremony and reception serve as a neat stopping point, allowing the show to end the narrative before delivering

on the promise of happily ever after. Even within academic scholarship, where the wedding industry is thoroughly critiqued and analyzed, most authors stop short of considering what happens after a couple says, "We do." However, the limited scholarship that does exist on post-wedding reflection suggests that couples are happy with their weddings in retrospect.

While investigating the aftermath of wedding consumption, Sharon Boden found that recently married couples had criticisms of the wedding industry at large, but ultimately they "reinforce[d] the meaningful nature of their wedding" (146). Otnes and Pleck also found that couples had happy memories of their weddings, which they attributed to wedding relics, such as photographs and videos. They say, "Wedding photographs, originally intended to prove status and formality, have become ways for a couple to encapsulate or enshrine their romantic feelings for each other, preserving the magic for all time" (Otnes and Pleck 16). A photographic record of a wedding is highly unlikely to contain images of unpleasant occurrences that may have transpired during the ceremony or reception, so revisiting wedding memories through a photo album is likely to lead to positive (albeit possibly inaccurate) recollections of the day (16-17).

In a related vein of investigation, Susanne Friese specifically researched post-wedding attitudes towards wedding dresses, and her article reaffirms the satisfactions expressed by couples more generally about their weddings: "After the wedding day, great efforts were made to clean and store the precious dress. … For most [study participants] the dress had gained such a high emotional value that it became un-sellable" (Friese 65-66). Friese furthermore cites other research that suggests the emotional value attached to a wedding dress endures for decades; affection for the dress can even outlast a woman's affection for the man she married in it (66). Perhaps the purchase of an expensive dress that will only be worn for a few hours seems less excessive considering the lifelong meaning it can convey to the woman who wore it.

This scholarship may seem to place a silver lining around wedding consumption, but the television programs I have just discussed provide anecdotal evidence to refute these claims to happiness. Consider Jessica, in *Say Yes to the Dress*, who was dissatisfied with the dress that her mother selected for her first wedding, or Jaime, who has already been married but hopes to re-wed the same man on *Bridalplasty* because her courthouse wedding was insufficient. Both of these brides expressed post-wedding discontent—but they also did not meet wedding culture standards. Perhaps these brides even uphold others' post-wedding satisfaction by regretting their decision to opt for less expensive wedding alternatives. Jessica and Jaime's discontent also speaks to the power of a wedding fantasy and the difficulties brides may face in resisting the fantasy or failing to consume it.

To some, it may seem ludicrous that so many couples (and especially women) are willing to invest months, even years of their life and tens of thousands of dollars in service of a ritual that will last no more than a few hours. The considerable forfeiture of time and money aside, the wedding remains problematic, because the wedding ideological complex has imbued the ritual with powerful and disconcerting normative messages. The wedding is an exclusionary ritual, whitewashed and elitist. Although individuals who lack race and class privilege do still participate in weddings, they do not participate at the same rate or on the same scale. Wedding reality television forms an especially important part of the wedding ideological complex, because images of "real" women participating in lavish weddings makes the consumption of the romantic fantasy associated with wedding culture seem more feasible, more natural and more imperative. Wedding reality television shows not only tell women that they can buy their happiness, but that they should look a certain way while making their purchase—thus wedding shows camouflage difference and naturalize the ideals set forth by wedding culture. In the face of the troubling

messages of the wedding ideological complex, does the post-nuptial satisfaction expressed by married couples serve to neutralize the problematic implications of consuming a lavish wedding?

Wedding culture should not be impervious to criticism, but the knowledge that many couples are content with their decision to have a lavish wedding makes it difficult to outright condemn participation in the ritual. The message that brides can buy their happiness is certainly troubling, but the message seems accurate, at least for a certain group of people. However, we should continue to investigate how this message is packaged, asking: who is the wedding ideological complex targeting, and what are brides being told is requisite for their happiness? Although we should not attempt to strip wedding participants of their happiness, we should continue to critique industries that capitalize on that desire for happiness by obscuring some inequalities and differences, heightening others, naturalizing privilege and demonizing resistance to or aberrance from established wedding norms.

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