

# “Saying ‘I Do’ All Over Again”: The Throwaway Ornamentalism of Promises Weddings Vow to Break

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**Abstract:** This article details a project that involved collecting the necessary items to produce a set of wedding pictures. While photographs have long been understood as indexical signs, the process of collecting the items via trips to thrift stores reveals a host of additional indexical signs through the set of underlying contextual cultural constraints surrounding the difference between the rituals of the marriage rite and the wedding as a public, performative practice. Indeed, the second hand items leave indexical and material traces of the excess and the disposability of weddings, while the pictures offer the material connection to the ostentation of the event. Ultimately, the pictures and the disposability of the host of single-use items reveal weddings as a kind of packaging, to be discarded after use. Even so, for the witnesses of the event, the pictures offer a material attachment that is sustained in and through their indexicality.

**Keywords:** weddings; material culture; consumerism; photography; index

## Introduction

Michelle and I have been married twice, but we never had a wedding. It’s not us. It wasn’t convenient. We couldn’t afford it. It didn’t make sense in terms of our families. We had a civil ceremony with a pinch-hitting Presbyterian—we weren’t aware of stunt doubles for city hall recitations—and we repeated the vows with a priest. Still, we never had a wedding, at least not according to the rules. Whereas the actual performance of the marriage as a ritually effective, *performative* act (Austin 1962, Tambiah 1985) requires only around five people, the couple, the witnesses and the celebrant, along with a license—as

ours did, even in its later Catholic version of the rite—the wedding is a shared, public ritual with its own set of equally ritualized subsets of performances: cutting the cake, the first dance, throwing the bouquet, and posing for pictures. Indeed, the pictures become an indexical record of the event, indexing the guests, the celebrant and celebration, the decorations, the gifts, and even the era of the event. As Manning states, “Any ritual has a conventionalized performative dimension that is constant for all instances of it (all weddings are effective, performative, in that they marry people, for example, regardless of whether they take place in Las Vegas or not) (2012:155, summarizing Tambiah 1985). However, the variation in the material elaboration of a ritual produces a set of indexical features that are also performative”. Not surprisingly, then, the lack of a wedding in the latter, material sense, and resultant wedding photographs, has been a sticking point with some friends and relatives, even after more than a decade has passed.<sup>1</sup> In both versions of the wedding rite, we performed what J.L. Austin would call the “the outward and visible sign, for convenience or other record or for information, of an inward and spiritual act” (1962:9).

However, this was insufficient for our family who wanted to share in the process and have a material artefact of the event, one with the material correspondence that derives from the indexical signs--such as the photographs, identified by Peirce as indexical signs *par excellence* (Pierce 1894, Pinney 1997:20)--carried by that artefact. Though we didn't know it at the time, the project that follows would resonate with Crossland and Bauer's (2016) exhortation to produce work that “expands ‘interpretation’ out from the terrain of the subject, and into the world of things and practices, human and non-human alike.” Not only does our wedding have multiple and simultaneous realms of existence, through its two performances and the pictures, the clothes themselves have histories, stories and material connections to their previous owners. All of these index the duality of weddings as ritual and as performance.

The wedding license indexed the performative event, including the performative utterance of “I do”, we were legally married. But there was nothing to *point to* the ritual, the performance of it and their participation in it; that is, their connection to both parts of the ritual had been denied them, even though it was ostensibly our wedding. Writing of the centrality of the wedding ritual sociologist Chrys Ingraham observes, “While marriage is not specific to capitalism, the particular way it is organized through rules of conduct and inheritance is reinforced by the wedding industry, particularly in relation to the accumulation of property” (2008:146). Worse, we had no wedding pictures. I wish I could say that the Cultural Studies student/scholar in me that somehow came up with the scheme that we would enact. We discovered that many couples now have their pictures taken ahead of time or reshoot them in the hope of avoiding a wedding washout (Mead 2008:188). So, to coincide as closely as possible with our tenth anniversary we decided to

have our wedding pictures done instead of having a party or renewing our vows. Thus, we drew on years of experience of (necessary) thrift shopping to accumulate the attire to at least construct the appearance of a wedding for a set of photographs.<sup>2</sup> I would defend my dissertation a mere eighteen days before that anniversary and with years of paying student loans ahead—even now—we could not afford a party and we had already said our vows twice.

Ultimately, the academic did appear and in the process—including writing and revising this article—I became more sympathetic to the friends and family who feel the need to fulfill the cultural imperative of the second, indexical and material features of the ritual performance. Simply put, I did not initially grasp the full importance of the material attachment to the event and the ways that attachment is sustained in and through the indexicality of the pictures. Here, I am reminded that Peirce (1931-1958) refers to the indexicality of photographs as “very instructive” because they point not only to a material correspondence between the image and its objects, but also to the underlying correspondence with the perceptual codes that establish the available readings (2.281). Indeed, these two layers of the photographs map onto the two layers of performativity involved in the wedding itself. There is a straightforward performativity in the recitation of the vows, the saying of the performative utterance “I do”, just as there is a straightforward indexical and iconic correspondence between the image of the bride and groom and the people in the outfits. However, there is also a broader indexicality to the performance of the cultural codes of the wedding ritual. In Tambiah’s own words, “the longer a rite is staged and the grander the scale of the ritual’s outlay and adornment, the more efficacious the ceremony is deemed to be” (1985:153). But our renewed engagement with materiality of the wedding did not end there. Collecting the necessary items also became a process of ethnographic discovery about the status and the functions of each component in the signifying chain. The very contingency of ethnography, as George Marcus elaborates, “is to discover new paths of connection and association by which traditional ethnographic concerns with agency, symbols, and everyday practices can continue to be expressed” (1995:98).

As I eventually recognized, we encountered a series of related and interconnected indexical signs (the cast-off material relicts of other people’s weddings) in the process of creating another set of indexical signs (our own wedding photographs), particularly through the process of acquiring the items in thrift stores. The pictures assuredly point to an individual wedding and the ceremony, but the vast quantity of material in thrift stores also indexes the scale of the industry and especially the waste. The second-hand clothing becomes a set of artefactual traces of other people’s expenditures and experiences. The thrift items reveal an industry built on disposable, single-use items. Tracing the indexical chain of signifiers further, through the underlying contexts of the material goods as indices

of status, wealth, or just the fantasy, promise, or even reality of marital bliss, shows that the effect is analogous to what Berger (1972:131) calls the “publicity” effect of advertising images. That said, the fact that so much of the material goods—flowers, ornamental cakes, decorations, bridesmaid dresses, etc.—required for the “white wedding” are discarded, sometimes as soon as they are removed, makes them a kind of packaging, a wrapper for the actual event. Yet, the packaging extends not just to the wedding to the self, as well, particularly for the bride since it is “her” day and every bride wants to look her best (Mead 2008:42). Just as the wrapping on the presents points to their status as gifts, often specifically as wedding gifts, the overall wrapping of the wedding points to its status and function as a cultural imperative. These effects are only enhanced by the planned, often pre-packaged professional photographs that are carefully crafted to seem candid, and real. Although there is a material indexical correspondence -- the photographs index something--the image they present is constructed and composed according to cultural codes.

The pictures, in their function as advertising for the event, then serve as a way of identifying and tracking the amount of disposable packaging—especially the dress—and their role in producing the form of the contemporary “white wedding.” Although the signifier and the signified for weddings have long since been irretrievably detached as the event becomes more about consumer practice (Engstrom 2008:68), recent picture practice increases the detachment. The labour masked by the wedding pictures only enhances the detachment effects. Indeed, the role of the pictures as an advertisement, promising an idealized future through contradictory images of the past (Mead 2008:42, 59), confirms Ingraham’s suspicion that in contemporary North American culture the inevitable outcome of any romantic coupling is “the expensive white wedding” (2008:184). If the wedding is the signifier of the marriage, then the pictures become the signifier of the wedding, pointing ahead while looking back and indexing the performance of the ritual. Moreover, the pictures index the prior act of the recitation and subsequent celebration of that act.

The critic of consumer culture knows that when meanings become detached from their traditional inscriptions in cultural productions, they offer the possibility of being used and re-used in a variety of ways, to suit a variety of purposes. In studying freegan culture, Joan Gross (2012:72) observes that discarded, but still useful items offer “evidence of multiple economic forms existing within capitalism”. Indeed, consumer culture critic Susan Willis (2005:342) highlights this potential as one of the advantages of considering the consequences of over-production from the perspective of waste rather than the commonplace of consumption. This includes the contradictory aspects—the dependence of second-order practices, such as thrifting and dumpster-diving, on capitalism—in a given cultural practice. Admittedly, in our collection process we depend on and reproduce

the basic formula, which runs the risk of recuperating meanings, even as we question them. For Willis, the dichotomy serves as a reminder that much of Cultural Studies, even good Cultural Studies, “assumes the commodity as an unavoidable fact of mass culture, but does not question the consequences of fetishism on the meanings made” (2005:342).

In her conclusion, Willis wonders about the possibility of aberrant consumption based on metaphors of anorexia and bulimia because of the cycles of over-consumption and purging. Elizabeth Chin (2016:103) likewise recognizes that anorexia is “a disease born of capitalism”.<sup>3</sup> In the latter regard, since bulimic consumption eliminates much of the added cost caused by commodity fetishism it essentially serves as an economic leveler because it “flattens the distinction between exchange value and use value, by rendering all value equal to consumption” (Willis 2005:348). Willis draws this insight because in first-order consumption, the price or exchange value, derives from the brand and its status, not the usefulness of the item. Thus, it indexes not only the cost, but the value added by the brand. However, this value erodes once an item is tossed into a bin. Would that Willis had considered practices of second-order shopping for goods donated for resale, and/or dumpster-diving, the practice of scouring garbage bags and bins for potentially useful items. The value of items in thrift stores relates to the usefulness, or use value, of the item. In a very material sense, items at a thrift store tend to have very similar, if not uniform prices, based on their use, not their brand, label, or style. For cultural geographer George Henderson (2011:144), “a key strand of contemporary critique the question of what trash is, in its materiality, let alone in its connection to systems of value, has become especially urgent”. The urgency exists at least in part because second-order consumption is a parasitic practice which is contingent upon an always already bulimic form of capitalism. Thus, the discarded items map onto the indexicality of the wedding ritual through the material traces. Both the items and ritual exist in and through consumer practices, both point to the future and to the past, and both destabilize the present.

Weddings are all about bulimic consumer practices. Simply put, weddings entail a purchasing binge. Yet, as the collection process reveals, many of the most expensive items in a wedding, including and especially the clothes, are discarded. Indeed, shopping at thrift stores offers an index of trends as well as of weddings. Given both our scholarly and practical knowledge of the processes involved, why not, then, begin the project of gathering the necessary items solely from thrift shops, with the goal of having our wedding pictures done in time for our tenth anniversary. Cultural analyses of marriage abound and remain a staple of certain critical fields. Here, the goal is somewhat different because, despite their importance in popular culture, weddings are relatively under-explored in critical practice (Engstrom 2008:60; Humble, Zvonkovic, and Walker 2007:6; Ingraham 2008:3).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the emphasis in the few studies has been the content; that is, the arrangement of signs, particularly as they reproduce normative gender. In contrast, in

writing about the experience, the focus rests squarely on the form; that is, the generic construction and what the genre is revealing through the texts. In Marcus's (1995:96) terms, the study occurs at the moment the auto-ethnography "moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space". To put it bluntly, the ritual production of weddings as an elaborate form of wrapping and advertisements results in the dominant cultural paradigm actually being even more pernicious than previously assumed. Thrift stores provide an index of the waste. Moreover, rather than trading on a version of femininity, contemporary weddings turn the bride into the very object being traded (Currie 1993:404). The pictures, then, offer an index not of the value of the wedding, but of the value of the bride.

The items reflect two of thrift's most poignant reminders. First, that economic models based on scarcity hardly apply given a culture that cannot deal with its waste and in which a good deal of the selling only promises an endless deferral of happiness (Tinkcom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo 2002:460). Second, thrift shops parasitically depend on that very model of consumerism. Indeed, for those with time and even those who need to save money, thrift shops provide many of the same pleasures as first-order ones (Franklin 2011:162; Williams and Paddock 2003a:144). This offers a reminder that, as Gross (2012:74) observes, "one of the biggest social transformations brought in by capitalism concerns how we view time". During grad school, time operates around one's studies, in fits and spurts, but remains focused on present needs. Weddings, perhaps more than any other narrativized ritual of consumer culture, circumscribe these propositions. Weddings paradoxically promise the future but rely on single-use, throwaway items to achieve ostensible aims. As Marcus (1995:106-7) explains, "tracing the circulation through different contexts of a manifestly material object of study (at least as initially conceived), such as commodities, gifts, money, works of art, and intellectual property. This is perhaps the most common approach to the ethnographic study of processes in the capitalist world system". As a reminder that the original definition of use value should consider the incumbent human cost, people number among the discarded objects. Sadly, we noted certain items in the display cases which suggest that the marriage dissolved before the wedding occurred. Gloves and purses might have been used, but hosiery, intimates and the "traditional" leg garter can only be resold if unused. Among the many unused items were photo albums; empty photo albums, still in their wrappers. At the very least, every one of these items reflects surplus consumption, more so if the items are discarded because they are extras, and the seeming inevitability of that consumption.<sup>6</sup>

While this is not necessarily a new perspective, it is rather the consideration of the means through which the commodification of the bride is accomplished that has shifted in and through the consumerism associated with weddings. This perspective, too, follows from

Marcus's (1995:96) precepts regarding multi-sited ethnographies: "Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites". In fact, advertising professors Cele Otnes and Linda Scott (1996) recognize the connection between advertising and ritualized practices, particularly weddings. However, their piece, aptly titled "Something Old, Something New," does not include the next step of recognizing that the best and most frequent advertising for weddings are the weddings themselves. As Marcus (2015:109) observes, "narratives and plots are a rich source of connections, associations, and suggested relationships for shaping multi-sited objects of research". Given their speciality, it is not surprising that Otnes and Scott (1996) focus on advertising as ritual not ritual as advertising, which is precisely what I discovered during the course of the project. Still, Otnes and Scott (1996:37) do recognize the ways in which advertising shifts rituals in and through consumer practice. Indeed, this has happened as the "celebrity for a day" motif has turned weddings into mass media spectacles of hyperconsumption and self-promotion.

To be sure, though, even the studies that do consider consumer practice do so in terms of the (re)production of gender, particularly through the Cinderella myth.<sup>7</sup> Waste simply is not considered. This is not altogether surprising, for as Willis (2005:336) observes, none of the traditional themes of cultural critique "really scrutinizes packaging as a dimension of the commodity form itself". Similarly, David Giles (2014:97) notes that there are few studies apart from "studies of waste that have focused on consumption". Indeed, Giles elaborates that while anthropologists have looked at detritus in terms of modes of production, their "insights have not lent themselves to the intimate, qualitative cultural economy" (2014:97). Thus, the wedding picture project was based on the unstated assumption that wedding culture is not just throwaway culture, but that the associated accoutrement functions as little more than elaborate packaging. For Willis (2005:336), the packaging separates the consumer from the "realization of use value and heightens his or her anticipation of having and using a particular commodity". In other words, the packaging is one of the selling features of a given product. This is important because the concept of packaging as a form of advertising for a given product is almost a given practice in lifestyle marketing (Rundh 2009:989; Underwood 2003:63; Underwood, Klein & Burke 2001:403). Moreover, Marianne Klimchuk and Sandra Krasovec's (2013:17) textbook on packaging design and product branding notes not only the advertising function of packaging but also the importance of women's role in the overall process because women have been the primary consumers for household products since the post-World War I advertising boom. Here, it is worth noting that John Berger's (1972:131) classic study of "the gaze" refers to this form of advertising as "publicity," and stresses the way the form displays women not only as objects but as the means of transmitting the impression that "you are what you have". This seemingly anticipates the rise of the so-called "celebrity for a day" imperative of the contemporary

white wedding in which consumption is rationale and outcome for the celebration (Fetner and Heath 2016:721; Mead 2008:48; Stephens 2004:201). For the couple living in the present, the pictures are a nostalgic reminder of a “perfect,” or idealized, past and a future which was—quite paradoxically—once equally idealized (Mead 2008:176-81).

## Put Asunder: Weddings and Second Order Consumption

In other words, when combined with the packaging, the pictures to the advertising function of wedding consumption. More specifically, the pictures simultaneously affirm and confirm that the couple’s expenditure is justified (Mead 2008:182). Thus, the pictures are their own rationale and outcome, both for the wedding and for the couple themselves. However, this alone offers little satisfaction beyond the academic’s smug certainty of superior morals or greater insight. Indeed, as material culture scholars Matthew Tinkcom, Joy Van Fuqua and Amy Villarego (2002:461-2) note, Cultural Studies focuses almost exclusively on first-order consumption. Even when the attention turns to the commodity itself—in this case, wedding kit—the emphasis is on initial consumption practices. Despite the opportunity to investigate a number of established central issues in Cultural Studies—distribution, consumption, gender, the making of meanings, artefacts, cultural rituals—second-hand consumption remains under-examined (Evans 2011:550; Franklin 2011:157, 161; Tinkom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo 2002:462; Williams and Windebank 2005:318). In terms of weddings, it is non-existent. In fact, most of the information on second-hand consumption comes from cultural geographers and anthropologists, who encounter the practice while researching sustainability or ethical consumption (Evans 2011; Franklin 2011; Giles 2014; Henderson 2011; Newholm and Shaw 2007), community (Brace-Govan and Binay 2010; Gross 2012; Krøijer 2015; Williams and Paddock 2003a; Williams and Windebank 2005), and slow-living (Parkins and Craig 2006). As a result, there is no direct contact with the effects of weddings on second-hand consumption or, what second-hand consumption reveals about weddings.

Even so, there is some literature on the ethics of second-hand consumption (Franklin 2011; Gregson and Crewe 2003) and the pleasures of second-hand consumption, even for those in need (Gregson and Crewe 2003; Williams and Windebank 2005). This is significant because these studies do offer a perspective on the ways consumers make meanings through negotiated practices, and, more importantly, in the process problematize the determinism of studies that focus solely on first-hand consumption. In the last regard, such work will never account for the impacts passed on by and the effects of disposal. As Henderson (2011:157) observes, “it is commonplace to regard trash in opposition to that which is useful and to see it as the matter that remains after use. Such a notion presumes a certain purity to the object when in use; it is only trash after being used”. That said, while some of the studies of second-hand consumption consider material waste—one measures the impact by the pound—there is nothing on the cultural

impacts of disposal or a consideration of what second-hand consumption reveals about first-hand consumption. Here, Giles (2014:94-95) questions why “some people throw perfectly good things away, and what can we learn about our society from their trash [because] sometimes the value of things is determined not by what we keep, but by what we’ve thrown away”. In keeping with the ethnographic practice of tracing the circulation of objects, cultural geographers Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin (2015:148) note that even discarded items can “find new life in novel contexts of consumption”. In this case, the new life and new context is a study of the original life of the objects. However, there is the recognition throughout the studies of goods as contributors to the (perceived) status of the bearer, as well as second-hand consumption as a consequence of surplus production and contingent consumption. Here, it is surprising that the “trash the dress” phenomenon, in which brides destroy the dress to prevent their re-use in an effort to index, or establish their own uniqueness, is not more widely studied.

In introducing myself to students, I usually tell them that Cultural Studies is what I do, not just what I study or teach. In other words, there is an emphasis on lived practice as well as theoretical considerations. Thus, I remain mindful that as Marcus (1995:100) explains, scholars need to locate not only the sites of their study but should also “posit their relationships on the basis of first-hand ethnographic research in both is the important contribution of this kind of ethnography, regardless of the variability of the quality and accessibility of that research at different sites”. Here, we had already learned through necessity that, “thrifting,” as Tinkcom, Fuqua, and Villarejo (2002:460) call second-hand consumption, exposes the shopper to myriad races, ethnicities, classes, genders, etc. For that reason, we never took any pictures inside the stores. Quite simply, the presence of a camera could cause discomfort among the shoppers. In addition, the differences between and among shoppers become apparent even as the exchange value becomes leveled. Thrifting, then, provides an opportunity to put theory into practice. This is important because thrifting also offers a mechanism for us not only to interrogate the culture, but to engage in a potentially resistant behaviour and to derive pleasure at the same time (Gregson and Crewe 2003:162; Williams and Paddock 2003a:137). We freely admit to having fun at times during the course of the project. In fact, time stands out as one of the key unmeasured but highly valuable commodities in second-hand shopping. The amount of searching for and trying on goods requires a lot of time and this is clearly an affect of our relative privilege—that is a performance, a consequence, and a perception, all based a collection of indexes related to culture, ritual, and consumption one that remains tenuous and still somewhat troubling. Even on our tenth anniversary, we did not have the money for a party, a trip, a ring or any of the usual rituals associated with the event. While our skills at thrifting might have been enhanced by a researcher’s eye, they were definitely honed through necessity and opportunism during our student days.<sup>5</sup> In this regard, a trip to a pair of conference locations in the United States taught us another lesson: tourist

destinations sometimes have incredibly well-stocked second-hand or thrift stores owing to items lost and left behind or leftover from events. Thus, the choice for ethical consumption clearly reflects the privilege to be able to do so.

Similarly, living in the Toronto, Ontario area means having access to a host of thrift shops within a relatively short radius. We saw hundreds of wedding dresses, bridesmaids' dresses and assorted other one-use paraphernalia. After observing the consumption practices of anti-globalization activists, Stine Krøijer (2015:89) notes: "Both dumpster diving and protesting rest on the ability to persuade others to come along, and thereby on the ability to set examples for the actions of oneself and others. The persuasive power depends in part on the stories circulating about 'hunters' luck' and bragging about where and how to make a 'good find'". Beyond the knowledge we gleaned in thrifting, we also benefitted from years spent in Waterloo, Ontario, which had clothing and baked good plants in the city. We found their outlets and learned how to comb through seconds and samples. While Tinkcom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo (2002) offer one of the few cultural studies examinations of second-hand consumption, the practice does have a substantial following, with "zines" and guides having been produced, one of which we found at the checkout of an outlet. Tinkcom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo (2002) include tips and a guide, which our experience would tend to confirm. Likewise, Gross (2012:78-80) highlights the importance of passing on methods and techniques. We would add a few things to their list of tips. The first would be what we call "thrift store roulette," in which we wait for the half-price sale and take our chances that someone else will scoop it before us. As well, we recommend shopping on the auction night that some Salvation Army and Goodwill stores feature, not only for the auction items but also because there will be more people picking through the shelves and racks. The latter is significant because shopping the racks next to the change rooms, or the carts of final rejects—that is, the things people decided not to buy at the very last minute—at the check out, for good items that did not fit the finder can be a time-saver. Always carry a pocket multi-tool to help in determining whether things, like a bicycle, work or can be fixed, a cloth tape measure, and a magnet—sometimes in the multi-tool if it has a compass—for checking metal content. Wearing shoes that slip off easily and that you can stand on while changing—the floors can be covered with pins and assorted filth—also helps a lot. Women can wear a leotard, a bodysuit or a swim suit under a wrap or button front skirt and/or with leggings so that items can be tried on in the aisles rather than waiting for one of the few (and sometimes very dirty) change rooms. Finding useful items also involves a sort of detective work in determining just how much use an item has had. These offer traces of the garment's past and its user. Crossland and Bauer (2016) suggest that while "the iconicity of fingerprints is perhaps most evident, what gives the evidence its power to convince is the indexical relation with its object." For example, pant cuffs have to be flattened to find wear on the crease. We also look for clothes with cleaners' tags still attached. While indexical signs in their own right, the tags

also point to items tend to be in better shape because the items were either forgotten at the cleaners' or they lost a button or two in the cleaning process. More than once we found an entire swath of items—e.g., a collection of monogrammed shirts—that come from a single donor. Not only do these items reveal something about the owner, they also offer a chance to learn about the life and the value of the goods themselves.<sup>8</sup>

So, with the start of a new calendar year, we set about collecting the necessary items—something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue—determined to have pictures taken of two people decked out in full wedding kit; that is, wedding pictures. We gave ourselves a full year based on our experiences with thrift and knowing that it would not be easy and that we had limited resources. More than that, I started to think about what the form would reveal about the content. If anything, form becomes and echoes content. As Tambiah (1995:129) stresses, rituals are densely semiotically patterned forms, both verbally and materially, “constituted of patterned and ordered sequences of words and acts, often expressed in multiple media, whose content and arrangement are characterized [. . .] by formality (conventionality), stereotypy (rigidity), condensation (fusion), and redundancy (repetition)”. As much as the process of gathering items would be haphazard, each of the last four categories applies. Moreover, the multiple media are not just reflective of the pictures, but also the figures of the bride and the groom as well as their apparel and accessories. Indeed, when scholars have looked at wedding items and in particular wedding pictures, they have considered the content directly, primarily to look at the ways heteronormativity and/or femininity are constructed (Otnes and Scott 1993; Otnes and Pleck 2003). For example, communication scholar Michele Strano (2006:37), herself a former photographer, stops just short of recognizing wedding pictures as a genre when she explains the paradox of mass customization leaving all pictures “remarkably similar”. Still, she looks at the specific iconography of the hallmark items: the dress, the veil, the bouquet, etc. (Strano 2006:38).

It did not take long to recognize that the cumulative effect of the items we acquired constitute a kind of packaging for wedding and that the pictures are a material measure of the indexical sum of the items and of the event. Indeed, as journalist Rebecca Mead (2008:185) explains in her study of the wedding ritual, pictures constitute proof that the day happened. James Moran (1996:365) explains—from the perspective of photographer and academic—that this occurs because the bride and groom “remember less about it than anyone else”. In addition, since weddings are part of the advertising for weddings, the pictures become part of that recursive operation. The bride (especially) and the groom become the advertising for their own consumption in a clear cause-effect reversal. They are being sold a packaged version of themselves. And, we only acquired the essential items to outfit a bride and a groom. We acquired none of the food, cakes, floral arrangements, stationary, etc. that would be bought and thrown away in an actual event.

In other words, these would be added to the cost of the product and to the cost of the waste, as well.

## Your love won't pay my bill: Collecting the Cultural Capital for a Wedding

The hardest item to find was not the wedding dress. That came first and best. Despite its single-use status, the wedding dress is one of the most expensive items acquired for the day. It accounts for roughly \$1,300 of the average wedding's cost of slightly over \$31,000 (Smith 2015). The largest local Salvation Army regularly receives dresses sample dress donated by a designer from Toronto. The tags are cut or removed to prevent store or catalogue returns and to limit resale online. By the time they reach the store, the dresses have been tried on many times and have dragged the floor a bit. Yet in keeping with thrift store pricing practice, they usually are priced at less than 5% of the original retail price. Here, it is worth noting that gender scholars Tina Fetner and Melanie Heath (2016:722) find that a roughly equal number of heterosexual and same-sex couples find weddings to be costly and wasteful, though they do not consider the implications. Indeed, thrift stores tend to adopt completely different criteria in determining an item's price and this may not necessarily reflect particular cultural codings for a given item (Tinkcom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo 2002:462, 466; Williams and Paddock 2003a:144).

Generally, value is fixed by two conditions: what you are willing to pay or the price the store generically applies to all garments of a particular type. As Henderson (2011:150) concludes, "exchange value forces obsolescence and trashing of use value, and does so before use value is finished". Wedding dresses, however, slightly defy these rules and, along with furniture, are among the most expensive items at thrift stores. The dress that we picked out was only \$120 and this was about average in the thrift store.<sup>9</sup> Even so, thrift stores definitely do participate in the ways consumers construct identities through their purchases (Gregson and Crewe 2003:11; Williams and Paddock 2003b:318; Williams and Windebank 2005:318). With this in mind, we played thrift store roulette and waited until the bi-monthly 50% off sale. Our premise is that something is only a deal if it is a deal. In other words, we do not buy items based on price, on pleasure in consumption or on desirability, but rather based on all relevant criteria. In this regard, our practice differs not only from first-order consumption but from a good deal of second-order consumption, particularly in terms of the idea of the consumerist making of self through the indexical symbols of conspicuous consumption (Gregson and Crewe 2003:162; Franklin 2011:160, 165; Williams and Paddock 2003a:137, 144). As might be expected, the lure of a designer dress brought a crowd to the store. For gender scholar Elizabeth Freeman (2002), the consumerist making of self through the wedding is a dominant feature of the contemporary ritual (31). Mead (2008:22,118) takes it one step further in arguing that contemporary brides see the wedding as an opportunity for self improvement. This is

significant because it reveals the extent to which dominant ideologies regarding consumption are accepted and internalized even by those who can least afford. Weddings, quite simply, represent an extreme version of that scenario.

Just as we were gathering the dress to take it to the front, the store manager announced “Special for one hour: all wedding dresses \$35.00.” This moment very much confirmed—for both of us—the Cinderella myth and the “celebrity for a day” construction (Ingraham 2008:102; Mead 2008:48). The store manager knew every dress would be sold by the end of that sale because the wedding dress is the most iconic and most inescapable of any wedding’s packaging. Moreover, it is the bride being packaged and sold just as much as the dress in this economy. Cleaning the dress cost \$85.00, even with a teacher’s discount from the local dry cleaner. Alterations, at \$40.00, also cost more than the dress. As an aside, all of our big sewing jobs went to Ursula, a recent immigrant from Poland. To supplement her family’s income, she took in sewing. Moreover, she was local and cheaper than the shops. This mattered to us when we were students and to Ursula because she wants repeat customers. In fact, the first thing we brought to her, a figure skater’s bodysuit, led to Ursula becoming the *de facto* seamstress for the local precision skating team and the local jazz dance company. It also mattered to Ursula that we were both educators. In her culture, unlike ours, teachers are valued. Though not strictly thrifting, Ursula’s cottage industry recalls a time when, both nostalgically and practically, “the production and exchange of useful objects was the tangible basis for the way people defined themselves in community with others” (Willis 2005:343). In such a society, each item bears the skill and care of the maker so that there is a connection between the raw material and the labour that goes into making the finished product. In contrast, weddings serve as the ultimate example of consumerist making because all of the expense goes into one single day only to be discarded at the end of that day. Not to be under-estimated was the practical upside of all of it. The total cost of the dress went from two days of supply teaching at the local high school to one, for this is how the project was funded. Michelle had only started teaching full time and I was still in grad school. After rent, student loans, etc. and trying to save a little, half of my supply teaching income was put to “fun.” This offers a further reminder of the detachment between labour and use value as well as the ways time is viewed in a capitalist society.

Another contrast was the difficulty in finding a tuxedo compared to the ease of finding a dress. Simply put, men do not give things away, nor do they turnover their clothing as frequently as women, even with the rise of fashion’s “New Man” and “metrosexuals” (Wernick 1987).<sup>10</sup> The absence of men’s clothes reflects the still greater demand on women to keep up with trends. The absence of tuxedos reflects the myth of wedding being the bride’s day. Thus, there were few, if any, tuxedos and most were threadbare because most came from rental shops. Shirts, which are actually purchased more

frequently, were either the wrong style, stained or both. In fact, tuxedo shirts are among the few items that reflect the whimsy of fashion and its meager influence on men. The pictures would reflect this, indexing the whimsy of fashion, changing modes of masculinity and the dissatisfaction that follows the “big day.” It was decided that long gloves would go with the dress and this purchase led to the tie, at least. We know a liquidation store in an *actual* outlet mall, complete with a basement flea market, that carries watches, purses, wallets, hosiery, ties, knapsacks, etc. Outlets malls once held a certain thrift appeal but they are now stock with ready-made items specifically produced for them (Forbes 2012). This is yet another reminder that over-production is as central to consumerism as over-consumption. The shop also carries gloves for proms or weddings and tie/cummerbund sets. The owner also expects customers to haggle because that’s how they do it in his hometown, Hong Kong. This store goes some way towards confirming popular culture critic Antony Easthope’s (1990:22) suggestion that “a main feature of the masculine myth [is] a social order relying on the endless negotiation of conflict”. This often occurs through banter and wordplay which then become ritualized. That is the case with this particular store. Curiously, the owner’s wife is much less courteous and she never haggles. We’d been to this store before and knew the drill. We asked, “How much for a pair of these gloves and that tie?” He pulled the gloves and tie out of the case and immediately asked “Cummerbund too? Need a purse?” We said, “No, thank you. Just these.” Without missing a beat, he smiled and said “How much would you pay for that?” I said “No more than fifteen dollars.” “Hmm,” he said, “More like twenty.” The gloves and tie cost \$18. I still don’t know if I got away with anything, but I was at least able to have a say in the ultimate exchange value.

The next few items trickled in as we travelled during our summer vacation. Suspenders come from a thrift store in North Bay, ON. The London, ON store provided the “something old” to go with the “somethings new” we had previously purchased. For some strange reason, they had bags of ancient nylon stockings of the sort worn until the mid-1950s. “Nylons” embody, if you will, the spirit of the exercise. Stockings are made to disintegrate quickly, to be discarded and replaced frequently. The discovery and the age of the item also made us contemplate our project in comparison with the time when they were produced (Willis 2005:345). This became one of the positive aspects of the nostalgic pleasures of thrift shopping and the variability of certain signs. In this case, women’s garters have become fetish objects with the advent of the mini skirt and women’s greater sexual awareness in the 60s. Yet, stockings and garters remain part of the anachronistic “trousseau” of the contemporary bride, an example of a manufactured part of the cultural dimension of the wedding tradition that ensures extra spending (Mead 2008:42). Indeed, Strano (2006:39) remarks on the frequency of pre-arranged “candid” shots and lingerie-clad shots in her photographic practice. The form of these is part pin-up and part planned impromptu. Not surprisingly, then, psychologists Jennifer Sedgewick, Meghan Flath, and

Lorin Elias (2017:5) find that as the practice of taking selfies progressed, those taking the omnipresent pictures of themselves increasingly adopt the practices of wedding photographers. Regardless, their function is at once an advertisement, and yet a part of the packaging of the wedding and the bride herself. Strano (2006:39) also remarks that the “boudoir” pictures “resemble a Victoria’s Secret catalog”. Surprisingly, she then claims that this is a form of resistance because it signals a sexual being instead of the myth of the virgin bride. However, this overlooks the wider, generic dimension of the lingerie catalog as part of a system selling women their own objectification by masking it as empowerment. This builds on the myth of self-making through consumer choices and contingent lifestyle marketing. Regardless, the anachronism of the garter should be seen as one indexical symbol within the larger signifying system of the wedding—indeed, it could be argued that the garter, like the bouquet could serve as a synecdoche for the event—which revolves entirely around the production of tradition in and through regressive fantasies based on an imagined past (Fetner and Heath 2016:723; Kimport 2012:875; Tambiah 1995:156). In any case, the stockings were priced at 99¢ per pair, which may well have been the original price, and a grab-grab-bag of six cost us \$2.49. The return trip yielded another, a box of monogrammed handkerchiefs at the same store, which are now largely symbolic and have been replaced by disposable items.

An auction night at the Goodwill we frequent most often led to the discovery of a perfect tuxedo jacket. I mention the auction because sometimes that is the best night to shop. Everyone is pre-occupied by the excitement and by the spectacle of it. Moreover, the auction provides perhaps the most democratic shopping experience. The price is purportedly determined by the people. That said, it can still degrade into a competition of a masculine sort and participants often refer to having out-bid an opponent as “winning” despite the loss of their funds. In any case, the jacket needed a dry clean but its main defect was merely a paucity of buttons. This crime frequently results in a garment’s banishment to a thrift shop. In replacing the buttons, we discovered that all of the jacket’s pockets were still stitched shut. This is a common practice which is intended to prevent people from losing or hiding items in the jackets they try on for size. Many tailors rip the seam when the jacket is sold, or when the owner realizes his pockets are inaccessible. In the typical case, an intact pocket seam on a secondhand jacket indicates a lack of use. Admittedly, I cannot say I planned to get much more use out of it than its first owner did.

The Burlington, ON branch of a thrift store chain had my cuff links. The Mississauga, ON store had Michelle’s garter and purse; the former, the “something blue,” still in its plastic wrapping, the latter still with its original tags. That store had also sold me a shirt. For \$1.50 on half-price day, or roughly 1% of its off-the-rack price, let alone the bespoke price, we found a Hardy Amies custom dinner shirt. Naturally, it had monogrammed cuffs but it was also a perfect fit, so I did not really mind that it took an entire weekend to

carefully pick out all of the embroidery without damaging the shirt. The pants were the last and hardest thing we found. Fortunately a rental shop in the area cleared out some excess, unpopular or oddly sized models. Even so, they needed alteration for length. Intriguingly, they have a plastic apparatus that moves the waist size up or down in lieu of full alterations. Still, they had probably been altered dozens of times, reflecting both the supposed utility of men's clothing and yet invoking the illusion of the uniqueness of the wedding dress by comparison and/or analogy. Regardless, the plastic mechanism helps explain why many grooms look uncomfortable.

This left us with only bits and pieces to find or match with our ensembles. Michelle had some faux pearl earrings and a necklace that completed her look. She had only worn them once before because they didn't really go with much else. That shouldn't be a surprise because they were meant to go with a bridesmaid's dress Michelle had also only worn once. That wedding was two weeks after our original ceremony. The dress was a two-piece satin thing with "meringues" on the shoulders. It was a hideous teal colour. That was, however, the big colour at the time. The day we went to that wedding there were at least two others in the same church. The one before and the one that followed both featured bridesmaids in teal. We have since met half a dozen other women who were stuck with teal dresses; one poor woman has two. Like the parts of the tuxedo, the bridesmaids' items, including the hundreds of pastel dresses we have seen, and "unlike the new commodity, which conceals these relations in its fetish-character, the thrift item reminds us of its past" (Tinkom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo 2002:465). Here, it is worth noting that one of the teaching assistants for my large pop culture class had seven bridesmaid dresses, only one of which had been worn a second time and that was to an "awful dress" rather than "fancy dress" party.

## **'I smiled 'cause I know I tried': Taking the Wedding Pictures**

All that was left for us was to schedule the photo session. Performing this ritual might have been the smartest thing we did because it was the least haphazard. Prior to the photo session we made an appointment at the local mall's "glamour" cosmetic store. The day before the photo shoot panic set in. First, Michelle's dress was too long for the shoes she planned to wear and there was not enough time to have it shortened. Second, she did not have a bouquet. This is a crucial item because the flowers signify fertility and because the toss, with the myth that the catcher is the next to marry, is part of the continuation of, and therefore one of the advertisements for, the ritual. For the shoes went to the only store we knew would solve the problem of the shoes: the shoe liquidation outlet with an ambulance out front. It carries one of everything: from orthopedic shoes to thigh-high boots with six-inch heels. Indeed, they had shoes with enough heel for the dress. The "something borrowed" problem was solved with parts picked up at a big-box crafts store to recuperate a blunder I made exactly one year earlier. I always buy flowers on the first

day of school in September. However, that year I was in a particular hurry and made a bit of a mistake. The local florist keeps his bunches of silk flowers in pails, with water in the bottom, along with the real ones. I can only conclude that it is a form of sales tactic: “See if you can pick out the fakes.” I did not. I grabbed the best looking bouquet of lavender roses and the florist wrapped them up. Although even academics often have trouble understanding it, the florist makes a living on the simulacrum (as well as the reification of time). It was not until I heard the flowers were unwrapped and I heard the giggles that I realized they were silk. They even have droplets of fake water. The lavender roses were borrowed from the vase on our dresser and placed into the gaps on the cheapest pre-fab bouquet we could find. It was fitting, then, that our larger simulacrum project included a smaller simulacrum of its own, one that interrupts the economy of disposable items through their replacement with semi-disposable ones.

The photo sessions took nearly six hours. The poses are taken from a repertoire of about twenty stock and presumably proven poses, but also a series of shots that are designed to look unplanned (Mead 2008:176-8; Strano 2006:40) (Figure 1). In keeping with the need to economize, we waited for a sale on the photograph packages.



**Figure 1. From the “glamour” photos**

The intention is manufacture a sense of intimacy and serves as yet another reminder that the day is part of the larger circuit of production, distribution, consumption and waste

rather than being about love or any other actual intimate feeling. Here, I would disagree with feminist scholar Michele White's (2011, 2012) argument that "trash the dress" photographs represent resistance to the system, particularly on the bride's part (647; 116). Quite, the contrary these flout the expense and the fact that everything is meant to be discarded immediately. Moreover, like the staged impromptu photographs, these add another layer of production and simulation in that they offer an enhanced reality (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Planned impromptu picture**

By indexing all of the required elements of the performance of the wedding, the pictures produce and package the bride—via the prints, videos, and trailers—as she would like to be and, more importantly, as she would like to be seen. That is to say, they offer multiple and simultaneous indices but also point to the material goods and the physical performance of the various parts of the (cultural) rite. As mentioned earlier, the emphasis on unique and individualized features of the wedding (day) paradoxically produces conventionalized and generic results through the ritualized performance of the day. Ultimately, dress trashing has evolved into a pre-packaged process in precisely this fashion. Since the profit comes from the sale of photos, all of the poses must be photographed in the hope that customers will like more than one. Indeed, the photographer and the prints, videos, and other items can cost as much as one-third of the entire wedding budget (Mead 2008:176). The various documents serve as a significant

justification for the wedding and its overall expense. In other words, in a cause-effect reversal, they become the promotional tool for the event they were meant to record. In other words, the photographs are their own rationale and outcome.

We also had several poses in the various “going away” outfits. This meant several changes into and out of the dress, which also meant doing up all forty-five buttons on the back. In fact, we learned that it is quite usual for brides to be unable to go to the bathroom unaided, let alone get into and out of the dress on their own. The outfits and the requirement for help both reflect the celebrity for a day aspect, the disposability of the dress—and the going away outfits—and the ways the pictures serve as an advertisement for the day. Mead (2008:185) explains that one of the key functions of the pictures is to present the bride not as she is, but as she would like to be seen. Furthermore, without the pictures, the day “never happened” for the pictures are indexical icons pointing to the day and its importance (Mead 2008:185). In other words, the enhanced reality of the day and of the bride must be captured and preserved in to advertise the fact that for one day she was a star. While this is supposed to be enjoyed as part of the celebrity for a day mythos, that construction merely obfuscates the reality that the bride is reduced to an elaborately packaged item. Moreover, she is packaged by others and for others. Ultimately, she becomes a packaged version of herself, one that is sold back to her. But, like everything else, that status is never meant to last.

After the professional sessions were done, we took Michelle and the dress on tour. For the whole trip, Michelle had to sit alone in the back, with the passenger seat pushed as far forward as it would go.

The dress and *Michelle* would not fit otherwise (Figure 3). There were also shots of Michelle in her parents’ home—the required “expectant bride” shots (Figure 4). Again, these are part of the ritualized, planned and mandated shots that are manufactured to look unstaged and intimate.



**Figure 3. The bride and the dress barely fit**



**Figure 4. The bride in her parents home, one last time**

No exercise in myth making is complete without an Edenic setting. Ours was no different and included several pictures in the requisite garden setting to invoke the simulacrum of tradition. The evergreens in the background doubling as symbols of eternity (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Symbols of eternity**

In this regard, we also made sure to include the necessary garden shots. Dundurn Castle, a landmark in Hamilton, ON, frequently serves as the setting for wedding parties because Cinderella needs her castle (Figure 6). Our chosen Saturday was no different.



**Figure 6. Waiting for her prince**

Each of these symbols, however, belongs to a larger generic construction so that the white wedding actually constitutes a genre of genres. The parking lot was filled with several limousines reminding us of the conflation of modernity and tradition upon which the contemporary wedding ritual is built (Mead 2008; Strano 2006). Though not likely to turn into pumpkins, the contemporary coaches would disappear following the ball's last dance. There were two other parties with pictures in progress when we arrived. It was not going well for either of them. The families were feuding over the poses, the background, and which family or friends would be in each shot. We were the only ones around with smiles. What amazed us, though, were the reactions of passers-by. I had managed to find a couple of places from which to position the cameras for timed shots. Interestingly, several people stopped and offered to take pictures for us. They asked, "Where's everyone else?" We explained that we had skipped out between the ceremony and the reception; just a little time for the two of us. Those who were married generally said this was a good idea and wished that they had done the same. Everyone congratulated us. We just smiled and thanked them. As we returned to our car, several passing vehicles honked their horns at the newlyweds, in the local congratulatory custom, and at us. We smiled

and waved. In the car, we acknowledged how normalized and accepted the ritual and the convention had become (and remain) given how easily we passed for newlyweds.

After our trip to the picturesque estate, we headed to one of our favourite spots, a nearby beach. It was late in the day, but we knew we wouldn't get a sunset; it faces east. If we're home in the summer, we usually go to this beach several times and we had seen a few wedding parties stop there. We did the traditional "get your feet wet" version of the symbolic baptism, though we stopped short of trashing the dress, and a few of the remaining beach-goers stopped to congratulate us and wonder aloud how we were lucky enough to evade the usual gaggle of gathered guests. We politely told them the same story: "We bailed on them first chance we got" and everyone agreed that we were very wise for such a young, new couple. We did not feel we had lied to anyone. We did avoid the wedding party, the reception line, the relatives squabbling over this or that photograph, the interrupted dinner and the spectacularized happiness of a "traditional" wedding. Nobody we talked to enjoyed those aspects of the wedding. However, they acceded because the ritual is unquestioned. Though we had the record of the expense and the effort, we had not just thrown away \$31,000, nor had we justified that expense by virtue of the most expensive portion of that expenditure. This is important because we established a sense of the disparity between use value and exchange value for the day, the vast waste, and the cost and the effectiveness of wedding advertisements. Ultimately, as Strano (2006:39) observes, (future) brides seeing other brides remains the best promotional tool for weddings. The very contingency of the bridesmaids, their dress, and the bouquet toss all confirm the order of the capitalist system in this regard. The ritual is not an event; rather, it is training for other events in an endless recursion.

## And they lived: Conclusions

The dress was not thrown out or sent to a thrift store—yet. We had children shortly after the wedding picture day and our children—a girl and a boy—now delight in playing princess tea party dress up, particularly during hockey games on Saturday nights. Occasionally, their mother dons the dress and joins them. Yes, there are pictures. As I watch (and help) these moments, I cannot help but conclude that cultural critics do not fully detail the processes through which hegemonic power operates, even as they cite its occurrence in weddings (Engstrom 2008; Otnes and Pleck 2003). Everyone agrees that consent rather than coercion is the method, but the ways in which consent is given are not always interrogated. The nebulous concept of consent allows us to obviate agency in order to absolve each other of responsibility. Chrys Ingraham (2008:38-41) coins the phase, the "*wedding industrial complex*" to describe not only the global economic power of the wedding industry but also the generalized acquiescence to it. Specifically, I feel that apathy, indifference and acquiescence toward the "taken-for-granted beliefs" are all forms of consent; forms which cannot be characterized as passive or unconscious. While

scholars like Strano (2006) and White (2011, 2012) argue that moments like the lingerie pictures or the dress trashing constitute some form of subversion, this ignores the wider aspect of the ritualized consumption, the sexualized packaging of the bride, and the generalized imbrication (and even celebration) of the waste generated by over-consumption. Except for the last, these are the very reasons Kimport (2012), as well as Fetner and Heath (2016), consider the possibility that same-sex weddings might defer to, reinscribe or adopt the very same symbols and rituals even as they resist and reshape them. As many of us would agree, weddings are part of the advertising for weddings. In this regard, they are their own rationale and outcome. That some cars honked at us as we piled back in our car offers a further reminder that in our cultural common sense the wedding is an unquestioned ritual despite its anachronisms and regressive tendencies.

That said, what we also discovered was that the form of that the expression of the wedding complex takes is as important to its perpetuation as its content. I mention the new pictures of dress up play because they offer indices of the growth of our children and the years of our marriage. As mentioned earlier, this points to the cumulative effect of the multiple and simultaneous layers of the ritual and of the indexical signs. In researching the topic, I found that gender scholars from Currie, in 1993, to Fetner and Heath, in 2016, predominately consider the content instead of the form. Indeed, this might a product of just how taken-for-granted the wedding ritual has become. While I cannot disagree with the overwhelming evidence that the wedding, and especially the bride, is constructed through a collection of items and signs that centre on the reproduction of heteronormativity (Engstrom 2008) or that an entire industry is built around it (Ingraham 2008; Mead 2008), I also feel that the form—confirming but also promoting heteronormative success through conspicuous consumption, with the consumption being part of the packaging and the promotion of that success—is a significant part of the project. In short, the focus on specific objects and parts of the ritual misses the fact that weddings are actually even more insidious and pernicious events. This was not an expectation let alone a goal of the project. Thus, it offers a reminder that as Marcus (1995:96) recounts, “mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system”. It is no mistake, then, that the vast majority of the pictures are of the bride. It is supposedly the “bride’s day.” Part of the cultural common sense is that women “are taught from early childhood to plan for ‘the happiest day of their lives’” (Ingraham 2008:118). Of course, this is an entirely unrealistic expectation which sets up the bride (and by association, the groom) for a lifetime of disappointment since no other day can compare.

In this regard, Bachen and Illouz (1996), Segrin and Nabi (2002), and Stephens 2004) find that idealistic marital expectations are shaped by the effects of representations in the

popular media, not the form of them. Freeman (2002), Ingraham (2008), Kimport (2012), and Fetner and Heath (2016) emphasize the construction of heteronormativity in and through the elements of weddings. Likewise, Mead (2008) and Strano (2006) consider the elements of the photographs, but not the genre to which they belong. In this regard, White (2011, 2012) argues that the trash the dress fad represents resistance to the cultural mandate on white weddings even though it is just another form of discarding the dress, of differently packaging and unpackaging the bride, of setting her up for display, and comes at the end of the day of excess. In other words, the trash the dress photographs not only record, but rather advertise the fact that the day is done and everything can now be thrown away. In this way, it serves as the best reminder that the array of disposable items, in particular those purchased for the bride, represent nothing more than elaborate packaging and the photographs, which serve as the rationale and the outcome for their own expense, offer the justification for the event itself. In other words, the packaging is also part of its own advertising, in a terrifyingly circular indexical sign. This is not at all uncommon in lifestyle marketing. In fact, it is an intrinsic part of it. The converse is also true insofar as it is the *raison d'être* for plain packaging on cigarettes in many jurisdictions. The bridesmaids' dresses make this abundantly clear. These are a preparatory prelude to the inevitable event.

What becomes important, then, is the function and role of women within the generic form articulated by the photographs and their content. Here, wedding photographs offer a stark reminder that Berger's analysis of the ways the gaze is constructed still apply. Beyond panoptic patriarchal peering, I cannot help but notice that the entire process of producing wedding pictures has little to do with the groom *qua* male viewer, and much to do with making the bride the envy of those around her, especially all of the other women. As well, Berger (1972) observes that the initial purpose of oil paintings, like wedding pictures, was to provide a permanent record of the present for future generations. Similarly, Freeman (2002:196) ties the wedding spectacle to "the 'burden' that all marriages have to be a public example to others". This is another way of saying that weddings are advertisements for weddings. Like packaging that is its own advertising, weddings are one of the most important advertisements for more weddings. In fact, a contemporary trend features the couple in a "wedding trailer" as a promotional device for the event. However, these are produced after the actual day unlike the movie trailers to which the title of the new form alludes. This clearly adds another layer of indexing the performance of the "celebrity for a day" construction of weddings, but also reminds viewers of the imbrication of weddings with (self)promotion. Moreover, another of Berger's (1972:130) categories, "publicity images," more aptly applies to wedding pictures because of the way they refer to an imagined past and promise an idealized future, but render the present as something that is endlessly deferred so that it must be renewed, replaced or renounced. For Berger, the fantasy world advertised in publicity images promises that we can make ourselves

something more by buying something more. Indeed, Mead (2008) observes that one of the goals of contemporary brides is self-improvement not for the wedding but through the wedding. Thus, the very contingency of advertising becomes the heart of wedding pictures. They are the sum total of the indexical signs that comprise the ritual and its performance. However, the effect is one that leaves me profoundly ambivalent for the product being sold is the bride. As much as the pictures offer a material connection to the event for family and friends, one also could argue that when taken as a whole, the series of indexical signs—which catalogue the value of the dress, the bouquet, the rings, the flowers, the wedding itself and the work done to collect and to prepare all of those items—but the material embodiment of ritual and of those indices is the bride herself. More significantly, she is being sold to herself at an average cost of more than \$31,000, most of which is merely packaging to be unwrapped and tossed in a bin when the day is done.

In going through the discards in thrift stores, we reached this conclusion long before the first picture was taken. As mentioned earlier, many of the items we found had been unused when they were donated to the thrift store. Clearly, some of them were simply unused and this points to over-consumption as an affect of over-production. However, it was also disturbing to note the number of items that were unused because the wedding had been cancelled. On more than one occasion we met someone who was dumping such items. Even more disturbing, though, were the number of items we found that clearly indicate that the bride had changed sizes several times in the months prior to the wedding. These were discernable by price tags, groupings of items, and sometimes by the names on them. Stitching always offers a very material index. Each serves as a reminder of the goal of self-improvement through the wedding so that the pictures become a summation of the indices of self-improvement. Yet, the promise of the future (happiness) will inevitably be broken because the purpose of publicity is to remind us that the present is entirely unsatisfactory. In this regard it is well worth recalling that Willis (2005:337) stresses, “commodity packaging defines the anticipation of use value as the commodity’s most gratifying characteristic. No commodity ever lives up to its buyer’s expectations or desires. This is because in commodity capitalism, use value cannot be fully realized”. In such an economy, then, the anticipation of use value becomes one of the objects for sale and offers a key index of the commodity fetish.

Here, I am reminded that having time to shop in thrift stores was a considerable aspect of our privilege—one that is well worth further study—even as our experience and expertise in thrifting derives from years of living in student (and student loan) poverty. Time, another of Peirce’s signature indexical signs, is one of the hidden costs and yet one that heightens the anticipation. The effect is twofold: first, there is an initial use value; second, and more important, is the *appearance* of use value; that is, a second index of cost and sometimes efforts. Moreover, the appearance of use value is detached from the object itself. In the

case of wedding pictures, appearance is all. This applies most pointedly to the bride, for she is the principal item being packaged and publicized. That is to say, the wedding pictures are most centrally an index of the bride. However, as we found, this one index is itself the summative effect of a host of other indexical signs which speak to the duality of the wedding ritual and its performance. Thus, the wedding pictures function as part of an intertextual web which includes all of the associated paraphernalia and which clearly crosses media boundaries. They become indexical reminders of many lackings, including the fact that we still haven't had a wedding. Unlike the new beauty soap or body spray, we cannot purchase a new set to suture the lack created by the wedding pictures. One cannot break genres; one can only manipulate them.

## Acknowledgements

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## Endnotes

1. Obviously, Michelle participated in the collection of the various items and in the pictures. While that experience was a shared one, I did not start writing about it until a few years had passed, after encountering Tinkom, Van Fuqua, and Villarejo's (2002) article on thrift shopping, along with Willis's (2005) article on packaging and use value, while preparing to teach a course on consumerism. Michelle has checked that my recollections are accurate, that my insights are my own, and approved of my title. A note to this effect has been submitted to the editors.↔

2. Indeed, for our friends and family, the wedding and especially the pictures echo Crossland and Bauer's (2016) reminder that the emphasis on the ability of material things to demand attention has been a common theme through all the formulations of the challenge of materiality: the stone that trips you, the door that bars entrance, the traces of past human action that last and endure into the present. This amounts to an acknowledgement of the capacity of the material to intervene into human representational and discursive worlds, of the ability of the material world to shape and form representations shifts the locus of interpretation, away from a question of mind-based cognition, and into the world more widely, including into bodies and things. For it is not only through the body that we interpret, but also through material culture. Our recent move to Virginia and making new friends has again proven that our wedding(s) and pictures are stones that trips us as we find ourselves explaining the process anew.↔

3. Indeed, in her auto-ethnography, *My Life with Things*, Chin remarks that she transferred her own anorectic past to "the world of things." Similarly, anthropologist Kath Kilroy-Marac (2016) writes, "there exists a strong moralizing discourse about the merits of moderation, self-regulation, and self-discipline amid endless

possibilities for acquisition and accumulation" (446). This tendency may be in keeping with taste and conspicuous consumption, which are competing and contradictory discourses within the rubric of late capitalism. The effect, as Kilroy-Marac puts it, is that "material excess or disorder can cause mental or emotional distress" (447). It is, she suggests, a disease of our time. ↪

4. Chrys Ingraham (2008) explains that the "glaring omission [is] particularly stunning in relation to the pervasiveness of both the practice and its presence in popular culture" (3). Like Ingraham, Elizabeth Freeman (2002) considers the wedding as a manifestation of "America's terrible case of heterosexual exhibitionism" (2). Both critique America's white, middle-class heteronormativity from an (often) outsider perspective. ↪

5. Likewise, Elizabeth Chin (2016) acknowledges that she started thrift shopping because of need and continues to do so for several reasons, including her knowledge as a scholar, the skills she has obtained, and the thrill of the good find. ↪

6. Indeed, in examining the consumption practices of hoarders and those who offer them therapy, Kilroy-Marac (2016) notes the importance of studying material objects for cultural anthropologists, not only for what they mean, but also for the ways they shape behaviour and experience. ↪

7. As Otnes and Pleck (2003) detail, after WWII, "the belief that every bride could be Cinderella became a girlhood fantasy, a democratic right, and the central preoccupation of the wedding" (54). In fact, Ingraham (2008) enumerates the ways that Disney, especially, capitalizes on this created cultural imperative through its movies, toys, and now through its resorts and cruise lines so that they have the wedding market covered from childhood through to the honeymoon (Ingraham 2008:87-89). ↪

8. Likewise, Chin (2016) cites the "rabbit holes" of her shopping adventures and the opportunities for auto-ethnography that result from them (129). ↪

9. Adding to the disturbing cost of the wedding dress is the fact that nearly "80% of all wedding gowns are produced [ . . . ] in subcontracted factories where labor standards are nowhere near what they are in the U.S. and no unions or regulators keep watch" (Ingraham 2008:45). ↪

10. These trends are having something of an impact in terms of consumption patterns but not in terms of gender relations. As early as 1987, Andrew Wernick cautioned that an increased focus on men's appearance means that men, "like women are encouraged to focus their energies not on realizing themselves as self-activating subjects, but on maximizing their value as tokens of exchange" (295). In other words, gendered

inequalities are merely masked because actual social change does not coincide with changing consumer practices. ↵

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