

EMPOWERED AMBIVALENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST WEDDING
PLANNING

by

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A Thesis

Submitted to the

Graduate Faculty

of

George Mason University

in Partial Fulfillment of

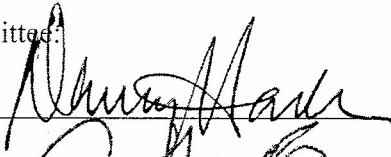
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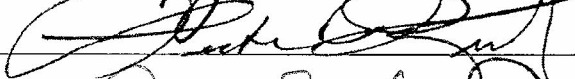
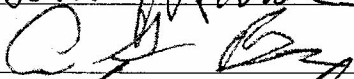
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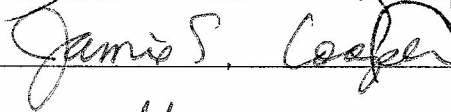
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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

Empowered Ambivalence: An Analysis of Feminist Wedding Planning

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Sociology at George Mason University

by

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Bachelor of Arts
George Mason University, 2010

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Spring Semester 2014
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA



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DEDICATION

To my parents, without whom none of this would be at all possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I would like to thank Nancy Hanrahan, whose sharp intellect, high expectations, probing questions and unfailing kindness have transformed me into both the scholar and human being I am today. I hope that one day I am a tenth of the sociologist and person you are. Thanks to the other members of my committee, Amy Best and Denise Albanese, for having carefully considered this project and helping to refine it. I would also like to thank Johanna Bockman and John Dale for their instruction and insights over the years and to the GMU SOAN administrative staff who have calmly replied to my frantic, confused emails for years.

A deep thanks to my dear friends Josh Tuttle and Robert Fenton, who have been vital to my intellectual development and sanity the last couple of years.

All my love and thanks to Kyle Koeppe, who has done for more for me I the last year than I could ever say.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS OR SYMBOLS

A Practical Wedding	APW
Off Beat Bride	OBB
The Knot	TK
Wedding Industrial Complex	WIC
Do It Yourself	DIY
Do It Together	DIT

ABSTRACT

EMPOWERED AMBIVALENCE: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST WEDDING PLANNING

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George Mason University, 2014

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What does the contemporary feminist weddings look like? What kind of resources are available for people who identify as feminists and, for varied reasons, also want to enter into the institution of marriage? Through an analysis of two self-described feminist wedding planning guidebooks and their corresponding websites, I analyze how feminism has entered the wedding industry and how young women grapple with the anxiety and ambivalence of planning the wedding while also trying to stay true to their political and social values. The findings suggest that it is not so much *what* goes into a wedding that defines it as feminist in these spaces, but *how* weddings are framed through the lens of self-help that defines the terms and limitations of political and cultural critique. The result is a rose-tinted version of feminism based on consumer logic that reproduces many of the vary inequalities it seeks to address.

Key Words: Wedding, Feminism, Consumption, Internet, Critical Theory

INTRODUCTION

This project examines self-described feminist weddings planning resources that arise as a response to what might be deemed as a crisis in the social structure of affect, which can be briefly understood as the widespread conflict that has arisen due to the breakdown of traditional forms of intimate relationships. This breakdown has been a deliberate project for many who deem themselves politically or socially progressive, feminists chief among them, but has had unintended results including widespread cynicism, anxiety and apathy towards romance. It has also, I would argue after Illouz (2012), conversely created a form of romance that combines an egalitarian ethos with a market ethic of self-gratification. The event of the wedding has thus, for many, become a moment not only to express personal commitments, but also political ones. What kind of wedding planning resources are there for a generation of socially conscious people trying to balance their critical perspectives with romance and marriage? What can they tell us about the emotional landscape facing these young couples? What are these resources' proposed strategies to alleviate misgivings about weddings or marriage? What is excluded from this well intentioned advice?

To answer these questions, I conducted content analysis on two popular feminist wedding planning websites, A Practical Wedding (APW) and Off Beat Bride (OBB). In addition to my day-to-day observations of users and the editorial staffs' interactions on

these websites, I read their accompanying best-selling paperback guide books as well as the current flagship advice book from the most popular wedding planning website in the United States, theknot.com

Research Question

My interest in weddings in general, and the notion of a feminist wedding specifically, is rooted in a long standing interest in the implications of compulsory individualism on liberatory social and political movements. I borrow the phrase ‘compulsory individualism’ from Thomas Osborne (2003), who characterizes contemporary creative expression as being complicit with the market’s obsession towards innovation and productiveness. Though I ultimately disagree with his Deleuzian response to this problem, I believe his diagnosis of the contemporary situation is correct.

In addition to the ideology of compulsory individualism, I situate this analysis in the context of feminist movements that have become untethered from collective orientation since the heavily fraught discourses surrounding gender politics since the 1990s. The result has transformed gender politics into yet another form of self-monitoring. My observations suggests that for many young feminists online, the idea that the personal is political has transformed from a lens from which to view the structural underpinnings of the intimate (and vice versa) into a mechanism of personal scrutiny with little normative grounding. This impels women to both yearn for cathartic release, which in this case is supposed to be experienced through an egalitarian wedding, while fretting endlessly about their utopian yearnings and the minutia of intimate praxis. I believe that

the alternative wedding can be most fruitfully understood as a mobilization of these two ideologies in response to the crisis in the structure of affect.

My interest in weddings comes at a vital moment, not only in its legal transformation with the increasing enfranchisement of same-sex couples in the eyes of the law, but in terms of the larger instability of contemporary political economy. Young people, even the educated, are facing lives where there are fewer occupational opportunities or social safety nets for them. Romantic cohabitation and marriage are important strategies for material survival. Yet the vast majority of young people hold an ideal of romance much like Giddens' "pure relationships", where relationships should be unfettered by material necessity and exist entirely for individual gratification through egalitarianism.

I chose apracticalwedding.com (APW) and offbeatbride.com (OBB) because I am interested in what kind of advice young women, pulled between the ideal of egalitarian romance and their material realities, receive and what happens when they are provided a space by a for-profit entity to discuss the logistical, emotional and intellectual problems associated with their weddings. How different are these feminist wedding planning resourced from other forms of contemporary wedding advice, especially in how they deal with tradition and personalization? How do users of these sites actually confront the stress, pain and anxiety of wedding planning in these locations? Where is the space for dissent from the prescribed advice on these sites? What role does photography play in the usability and ideological reproduction of OBB and APW? What can this analysis tell us about the role of feminism as a marketing strategy more generally?

Literature Review

I understand this project as a dialectical evaluation and fusion of a few different but related bodies of literatures: works that cover the social or cultural components of consumption and production, critical theories on the transformation of the structure of affect through the course of modernity, and ethnographic and historical works on romance and weddings. This project is also framed by my understanding of the long tradition of critical theory as articulated first by the Frankfurt School. Central to this is the influence of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on my understanding of dialectics as a theoretical imperative and methodology.

The emphasis on negative critique that is perhaps most pronounced in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) and *Traditional Theory and Critical Theory* (1932) guide my mode of analytical scrutiny. Adorno and Horkheimer posit critical theory, with its emphasis on the negative, against positivist theory that is an explanation of function to be utilized towards productive application. This is a problematic orientation because the supposed 'straightforwardness' of positivism does not ask to what ends the production of knowledge is geared towards, for knowledge is an end in itself. By abdicating this interrogation, positivist knowledge becomes the tool maker for systems of power that already have ends in mind. Critical theory, in contrast, is not merely an explanation but an evaluation of problems that is explicit about its value judgments. Positivist theory, even in denying value judgments, implicitly makes them through what it defines as problematic or, in a more tangible sense, through the applications of abstraction to 'solve' concrete problems.

I believe that to the extent a theorist wishes to move their work to the realm of critique, they must be dialectical in their approach and push towards disclosing possibilities for the future without crafting their knowledge towards the bend of instrumentalization. A dialectical approach points to the cracks of dysfunction where the surface seems smoothest or, as in the work of Frederic Jameson, teases out the largely unconscious utopian aspirations embedded *within* products of mass culture in an attempt to demystify how capitalist ideology invisibly reproduces itself even in terrain that might seem most hostile to its incubation. Dialectical work is fragmentary in its attempt to trace the constellation of social relations while acknowledging that they are in constant movement. In my analysis, I take seriously the utopian energy invested in the wedding on the part of users. By utopian energy, I simply mean the earnest desire to foster a better world. Part of the purpose of this project is to evaluate the terms under which this hope for a better world is being articulated in the wedding planning process and to provide a critical response to it.

Romance, Production and Consumption

Most classical political economy tended to privilege production over consumption as the site of intense scrutiny, leaving explanations of the supposed explosion of consumption as secondary. Most historical accounts located the 'consumer revolution' a hefty century after that of production and focused almost exclusively on the explosion of advertising and the process of top-down social emulation as described by Thorstein Veblen and Georg Simmel in their respective accounts of fashion (Campbell 1987).

Despite this fixation on production on the part of other early theorists, it should be noted that Karl Marx understood production and consumption as intrinsically dialectical.

In the section, “Simple Reproduction” of *Capital, Volume One* (1990), Marx describes how in the process of production the worker transforms raw materials into goods, which is a form of consumption in itself. Marx distinguishes this productive consumption from individual consumption, which is the consumption taken on by both capitalists and workers to reproduce themselves. However, the surplus value derived by the capitalist from production is predicated on the reproduction of workers’ labor power via their individual consumption. Whether they enjoy their individual consumption is not necessarily structurally important as “[t]he consumption of food by a beast of burden does not become any less a necessary aspect of the production process because the beast enjoys what he eats (718)”. This is an important point to highlight moving forward; simply because individual consumption might bring comfort or pleasure to people does not absolve this activity from its reproductive function. What pleasure individual consumption produces or reproduces and for whom is an essential component of the task of critique.

More recent accounts highlight how production and consumption has changed from a strictly top-down enterprise that produces wholly standardized goods and services to dispersed enterprises that incorporate more diverse activity, trafficking in goods previously outside the commodity sphere. Boltanski and Chiapello (2004), contend that capitalism addressed the questions of the inauthenticity of massification so reviled by the Frankfurt School, among others, largely by absorbing it—that is to say, by offering a

mind blowing variety of commodities and experiences through a mode of production articulated as 'the network' that accommodates (for a select few) the desire for flexibility and creativity in the work place. The result is new modes of production and consumption that are more aesthetically pleasing and emotionally potent to the point where interaction with specialized goods becomes a seemingly indispensable attribute of producing the self.

This absorption has had several effects relevant to this project. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) point to a new dynamic in the dialectic of consumption and production online, whereby a great deal of the content consumed is actually made by users. However, "...[c]onsumer-generated content does not simply empower the consumer. It also creates opportunities for corporations to offload labor onto consumers in the name of democratic openness...[which] contribute to the profitability of corporate brands, the commodification of cultural identity, the marketization of political dissent and so on (2012:14)." Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012) further argue that people increasingly understand themselves and present their private lives publically as brands. That is to say, not only do people understand a substantial portion of their personal biography and ability to articulate political or cultural dissent as represented by how and what they do or do not consume, but that their presentation of self is articulated as a unified lifestyle that can potentially mobilized for profit (2012: 23-33). Further, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that brands are not simply one-sided campaigns on the part of corporations, but rather jointly created cultural spaces where both consumers and producers create, augment and contest the meaning of commodities. Moving forward, it is important to remember that when I discuss APW and OBB as brands in this analysis, I

am talking about a process of meaning making where the editorial staffs, advertisers and users all have a stake in game but have differing levels of power with which to advance their particular ideas of feminism.

In terms of specifically romance-oriented production and consumption, Illouz (1997) argues that class plays a substantial role in how different people 'do' love; middle and upper class people who are educated and/ or have high cultural competence have the most flexibility in how they produce romance through consumption for themselves and their partner. This is because they are the ones who both have the most access to the traditional tropes of romance pushed by pop culture and are those most able to deny that romantic clichés have any influence on the way they conduct their relationships. Their linguistic sophistication imbues even the most standard market-based romantic experience with an aura of uniqueness and allows them to play with romantic symbols in a pseudo-subversive way while still consuming them. Working class people, on the other hand, do not have the same access to the material or cultural resources that facilitate the production of romance due to a lack of time and money. To be clear, Illouz does not argue that working class people feel love any less fully or sincerely as middle and upper class people, rather she points out that the terms upon which one understand expressions of romance are heavily regulated by class norms and, as such, opportunities to consume romance largely exclude working class people.

The Structure of Affect

In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992) Giddens' emphasizes the liberatory and equitable spirit of modern romance. He describes how the "pure relationship", a union entered and exited at will by people that exists entirely for psychological benefit and

pleasure, has become normative. He understands the move from unions based on rigid patriarchal gender roles and economic dependence to relationships based on egalitarian emotional reciprocity as a push to democratize the private sphere that has been largely pioneered by both heterosexual women and the gay community through an appropriation of a public-political ethos of personal responsibility and autonomy. While acknowledging the riskiness of each individual romantic endeavor, Giddens paints a picture of intimate relationships that highlights the way they ideally help fulfill the need to express autonomy.

Illouz, on the other hand, points out in *Why Love Hurts: a Sociological Explanation* (2012) that the normative 'pure relationship' is burdened by several forms of structural inequality centering on the disjunction of sexuality and romance that has been exacerbated by market rationality and new technologies. The ability to abstractly choose from endless partners for the sake of maximum self-fulfillment has made many people, men in particular, unable to actually commit. Illouz emphasizes that this is not because of an inherent deficiency in the psyches of men, but rather is rooted in a wide-spread conception of romantic love where the only end goal is individual gratification. The majority of the fallout from this dysfunction is felt by the very sort of women who, in Giddens' account, advocate for an intimate form of politically-informed autonomy. This breeds a mood of wider suspicion and malaise towards romance in general at a time when other havens of psychological and material security are eroding.

Both authors take as their point of departure that intimate relationships are a sort of laboratory for the articulation of new ethics that have wider social implications.

Paraphrasing Giddens (1992), every new romantic relationship is a social experiment. It contains both the seeds of hope and despair and is an experience rife with ambivalence and anxiety at every turn. In this light, weddings can be seen as an attempt to encapsulate the joyful or utopian aspects of the romantic experiment in a good faith public commitment.

Weddings

The first important sociological work on contemporary weddings is Ingraham's *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Pop Culture* (1999). It is actually less about the practice of actual weddings and more about how the acceptable parameters of hegemonic heteronormativity are established in popular culture through wedding themes that permeate entertainment and advertising. Ingraham (1999) also points to the mind boggling revenue generated by the wedding industry as a whole due in large part to tremendously exploitative labor practices of the gown, diamond, and wedding décor sub-industries.

Labor is a prominent theme in other accounts as well. Both Boden (2003) and Sniezek (2005) describe the wedding as a labor intensive event on the parts of the actual couple getting married. In particular, both ethnographies highlighted the way in which the labor done by women in heterosexual couples for their weddings is undervalued and obscured. Sniezek likens wedding labor to housework (2005:215) in that it is a vital component for the reproduction of the family unit which has been naturalized and internalized by women as their duty but is also devalued as not *really* work.

Boden (2003) makes similar claims that situates this form of devalued labor through the course of the wedding process. Central to her thesis is Colin Campbell's *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987). Here, Campbell proposes that, much in the same way the protestant ethic was the spirit that spurred the productive force of capitalism, the romantic ethic, with its historical root in the Romantic movement, was the spirit that inspired the capacity to consume. Central to this is the idea of self-illusory hedonism or the condition under which the yearning for the *thing* takes on a psychological life of its own to the point that it steers the energies of the consumer in to the realm of loftier imaginative anticipation through which they attempt to more fully realize themselves. It is propelled by expansive day dreaming "characterized by a longing to experience in reality those pleasures created and enjoyed in the imagination, a longing which results in the ceaseless consumption of novelty (Campbell 1987: 203)."

Boden argues that Campbell's articulation of self-illusory hedonism is problematic because it describes a fully autonomous desire for novelty based on purely individual invention that is bogged down in an unchecked andocentric expression of heroic individualism that is entirely ahistorical. The other problem with this account is that it is fixated on the conditions surrounding obsessive anticipation which are supposed to make us amenable to the act of consumption. While this is certainly a large aspect of people's relationships with consumer goods and experiences, what happens after the attainment of the fantasy is left unaddressed.

Despite these limitations, Boden's (2003) ethnographic work does a good job of conceptualizing this theory in a grounded historical context. By tracing the self-illusory

hedonism of the brides she studied through their desire's material fruition, she demonstrated that the concept lends itself well to addressing at least a portion of the affective aspect of the bride relationship to her wedding package through an interrogation of what *could have been* there as oppose to what actually materialized.

The internet exists as an oracle to the manifold possibilities of objects you can make and own. The material package of weddings are now heavily supplemented with the immaterial 'coulda shouda woulda' not just of film, television and the glossy magazines, but in ceaseless parade on our assorted web-enabled screens. By conducting my research on websites that actively deemphasize the importance of the consumer aspects of the wedding to their users while also relying on advertising for wedding products to stay afloat, I believe the following analysis provides valuable insight not only on the topics of affective, politics and consumption, but how these areas are now routinely negotiated online.

Methodology

A Practical Wedding (APW) began as a solo blogging effort by self-described frustrated bride named Meg Keene in 2009 and has since morphed into a larger community with staff contributors and enthusiastic users who voluntarily comment and seek advice on the myriad intricacies involved in the wedding planning process. The site boasts about 1.25 million views a month with a total of more than 400,000 users. As the publisher and executive editor of APW, Keene has also offered her expertise in 'down to earth' wedding planning to such notable media outlets as The Huffington Post, The New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal and Martha Stewart Radio. APW also features

posts about juggling family life with career in the section called Reclaiming Wife. For the purposes of this project, I only analyzed blog posts specifically about weddings, wedding planning as well as static portions of the site that had to do with its operations and business.

Offbeat Bride (OBB) was launched in January, 2007 as a promotional site for the corresponding book by Ariel Meadow Stallings. Its evolution into an all-encompassing wedding community came after the book's publication. OBB has a million visitors every month and also has two offshoot blogs, Offbeat Home and Life with features related to specialty lifestyle domestic products and activities and Offbeat Empire, a blog that features behind the scenes news and business development articles for wedding vendors and other internet startups. OBB also has a private forum called Offbeat Bride Tribes which is explicitly designed for people in the midst of active wedding planning. To maintain the integrity of the private forum, OBB requires user fill out a relatively lengthy application to join so that moderators can screen out vendors, window shoppers and journalist—and, by extension, academic researchers. For the purposes of this analysis, I have restricted my observations to the main Offbeat Bride site, with supplementary observations at the Empire blog for a more in-depth understanding of the business side of OBB.

In addition to the websites, I read *A Practical Wedding: Creative Ideas for Planning a Beautiful, Affordable and Meaningful Celebration* (Keene 2012) and *Offbeat Bride: Creative Solutions for Independent Brides* (Stallings 2010) to understand the particular philosophies that steer both of their sites' respective editorial lines. I also read

The Knot Guide to Weddings: the Ultimate Source of Wedding Ideas, Advice, and Relief for Brides and Grooms and Those Who Love Them (2012) by Carly Roney, the editor-in-chief of The Knot (TK) to understand the kind of materials OBB and APW attempt to subvert.

For the majority of my analysis, I will discuss OBB and APW jointly because they share so much in common in terms of what kind of alternatives they pose to the mainstream wedding industry and what kind of feminism is being offered in both locations. With this in mind, it is also important to point out what differences they have with one another. On the surface, both websites are as different as black and white—literally, AWP’s website background is white and OBB’s is black. Understanding what makes them distinct from one another is important to understanding why I will highlight their similarities throughout this analysis.

OBB’s web design reinforces its brand message as a destination for couples interested in tailoring their wedding to their particular niche consumer subcultural interests. Themes present on the site include variations on ‘geeky’ interests including video gaming, science fiction and fantasy fan culture, science, literature and retro kitsch. The banner at the top of the page includes a revolving cast of wide-eyed cartoon brides with different names and personas that encapsulate an aspect of OBB users’ interests, all illustrated by independent web designer Iris Chamberlain. Geeky is a black woman representing the nerd contingent of OBB in a steampunk corset dress and leather harness ensemble that is paired with long black gloves, top hat and a toy gun with a flag that says “YAY!” poking out of it. Dapper represents users who are not traditionally feminine with

spikey cropped hair, a white button down, dark gray slacks, suspenders and a lime green bowtie. She is purposefully androgynous and could be the avatar of users who identify as tomboys, butch lesbians, queer or transgender. Lite is a tan woman with a few pink streaks and a koi tattoo wearing a white wedding dress and veil. She represents brides with more mainstream tastes who still manage to maintain their individual flare. Betty was drawn specifically in response to users who asked for a fat bride in the banner. She is indeed a large woman with blonde hair, a hot pink a-line rockabilly style dress and matching hairnet, set off by teal retro fingerless gloves. She represents a funky vintage femininity that many bigger users embrace for their wedding style. Fierce, the most recently introduced character, is a gothic black woman wearing a long, dark green dress and her hair in dreadlocks. She was purposefully drawn with a visibly disability, symbolized by the skull-topped cane she rests her hand on. The Offbeat Bride paperback guide features a bride similar to Lite on the cover with a pink streak in her hair and tattoos, though with a lighter complexion and in a flatter animation style. These banner characters allow passing viewers a condensed view of what OBB hopes to project about itself: it's a space that celebrates niche subcultures but is also welcoming and inclusive of anyone, no matter their appearance or origin. It is a lighthearted, whimsical space and very much *of the internet*.

In contrast, APW's appearance is much more minimalist, mixing flat design with subtle feminine touches, like fuchsia text highlighting. High definition professional photography dominates the visual content of the otherwise minimalist website. When a user clicks on a specific section of the site like "Logistics", the default display of the

articles in that section are large tiles of brilliantly lit pictures, often cropped into dynamic compositions. Users must go out of their way to click on “full content” to read the title and description that the picture tiles are actually linked to. The overall aesthetic focus of APW is more understated hip than niche subculture and a lot of the shopping advice and do-it-yourself tutorials look like they draw their inspiration from equal parts mid-brow pop culture like the HBO series, *Girls*, and methodically constructed yet simple looking Martha Stewart-esque crafts. The Practical Wedding book features a picture of a smiling bride sitting in a well-lit room, cropped at from the nose down, and wearing coordinated red shoes and lipstick to symbolize a commitment to personal style, even while wearing a simple white gown. The cover photo looks like it could be interchangeable with any of the photo tiles described above. APW’s aim is to appeal to urbanites who think of themselves as people with good taste but who do not think of themselves as particularly materialistic. The overall feel is subtle, reinforcing APW’s emphasis of thoughtfulness, joy and, of course, practicality.

OBB and APW attempt to appeal to people with two different, though sometimes overlapping, consumer preferences. OBB focuses on otherwise hard-to-find and off-the-wall item, including features like Etsy shops peddling shotgun shell boutonnieres for groomsman, Sailor Moon inspired bridesmaids gifts, and tutorials on how to make 8-bit wedding cake toppers from Legos. APW focuses on vendors, product and do-it-yourself recommendations that are simple-seeming yet hip, often drawing on resources that would be easy to find for the middle class people that make up the majority of their users in urban centers like Seattle, New York or Washington, DC. This including tutorials on how

to make blank cakes from Whole Foods more wedding appropriate, how to make bridal bouquets from inexpensive flowers from Trader Joe's, and a no-makeup makeup tutorial sponsored by Procter & Gamble. Despite their different aesthetic slants, I decided to analyze these sites together because both brands espouse authenticity, creativity, and individuality as their core values and tailor their advice to reflect a specifically feminist take on negotiating those values with the difficult logistic and emotional strain of wedding planning.

I conducted the observations of offbeatbride.com and apracticalwedding.com between November 2013 and April 2014. In chapter one, I look at the paperback guide books to establish the over-arching philosophy of the mainstream wedding industry and the supposed feminist alternative established by these resources. In chapter two, I draw from blog posts and user comments on OBB and APW specifically about the topics of feminism, politics, social inequality and diversity to establish what constitutes the concept of feminism and politics of the wedding in these spaces. In chapter three, I look at advice and user comments about wedding consumption, do-it-yourself projects and budget from both the websites and books. I also draw from vendor sponsored and business development blog posts as well as the vendor information sections to understand what role advertising plays in these spaces and how they monetize their content. In chapter four, I look specifically at the "Real Weddings" sections of both sites which feature user submitted wedding photographs, stories and vendor lists to understand the role photography plays on in these website's function on an ideological level.

Throughout my observations, I captured each webpage I visited with the citation tool, Zotero. While I did my utmost to be thorough in my observations and analysis, and actively sought out posts and user comments that complicated my account, these are still very active websites with active communities and vast archives— I have also limited my observations to the main websites themselves, and did not actively check their other social media accounts. While Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest or Instagram accounts are an important way for web-based business to connect and service even more users beyond the means of their main website, this content was outside of the scope of this current project.

CHAPTER ONE: THE FANTASY OF THE FEMINIST WEDDING

As stated in the introduction, this project is an investigation of feminist wedding planning resources that go out of their way to distinguish themselves from the rest of the wedding industry. But how exactly do Off-Beat Bride (OBB) and A Practical Wedding (APW) differentiate themselves from more mainstream sources like The Knot (TK)?

The Profundity and Plasticity of Tradition and the Wedding Industrial Complex

APW's purpose might be best understood as a crusade to rescue the romantic heart of the wedding against the emptiness of commercialization. The way in which Keene problematizes tradition and sets her advice apart from others in the wedding industry is by walking readers through a brief timeline of the origins of many of the supposedly obligatory 'traditions' that have accumulated during the growth of the wedding industry through the twentieth century. The backdrop of the encroachment of the impersonal, greedy wedding industry is framed by a characterization of weddings before the turn of the last century as humble affairs, predominantly performed in family parlors without professional help or fuss:

Let's start in the early 1800s in the United States. Most weddings during this period took place at home (meaning your at-home or backyard wedding is perhaps the most traditional wedding you could possibly throw). There were a variety of different reasons that weddings took place in the front parlor. For middle-class Protestants, the feeling was that the ritual of marriage should not be fussy and glorified, but simple and held in a place with emotional significance to the parties involved[...]

By the mid-nineteenth century, life in America had started to become slightly more ritualize. Weddings began moving to churches, making them both more formal and more expensive[...]. It's important to note that at this point in our cultural history, weddings were not parties thrown by professionals. The women in the family were still doing it all: the cooking, the decorating, and

often even the sewing of the wedding dress. In fact, most women would have been horrified at the idea of hiring help to do something that was seen as a labor of love. These days we talk about DIY weddings as if they were a newfangled wedding trend, but the fact of the matter is that weddings historically were do-it-together events. Weddings were viewed as deeply personal celebrations, not to be mucked about by professionals[...] (2012:56-57)

Keene's reverence for what she characterizes as 'real' tradition goes beyond nostalgic or sentimental, it fuses the contemporary stress on emotionality with a profound sense of the 'age-old'. She characterizes the pre-industrial white protestant American wedding as stressing 'emotional significance' and being essentially mother-daughter 'labors-of-love'. By linking the modern focus on romance and familial togetherness with a hazy harkening to the ancient past, she naturalizes the contemporary structure of feeling and creates a powerful justification for and mystification of the labor undertaken by the brides that she addresses today. She aggressively distances herself from the wedding industry and allies herself on the side of 'real' tradition in a way that swaddles the historical wedding process (and, implicitly, the marriage that came thereafter) with uncritical sentiment. Beginning her story in the 1800s enables her to imply that there was indeed a simpler time where people were deeply in touch with their emotions before obligatory wedding consumption detached people from what 'really' matters, i.e., family, community and love. Keene believes that brides should return to the weddings like those of their grandmothers, when World War II forced people to grab bouquets and head to the courthouse before the boy shipped off.

The central problem of contemporary weddings for Keene is not the troubling legacy of patriarchy inherent in the wedding event (a description she would likely reject), but rather the industrialization of the wedding. This account makes the problem essentially one centered on the production and consumption of the wedding package.

More precisely, the task that she has laid out for herself is to empower brides to be able to sanely navigate all of the dizzying consumer, civil and religious options that contemporary couples have for their wedding in a way that extracts the highest emotional yield for the couple and their community. To be clear, Keene does not advocate for mechanistically genuflecting towards the altar: “The real key is discovering what traditions means to you and your family...[it] is malleable and varied, and what’s important is that you make it yours (2012:63).” In Keene’s view, tradition’s role in the contemporary wedding is to reflect the values that are important to the couple and allows them to take ownership of their ceremony.

This belief in the both the importance and malleability of tradition is best articulated in her advice on how to construct the wedding ceremony. She stresses to her audience that there is a timelessness to the wedding ceremony that should be revered. This sense of ancientness complements her historical accounts and yet is actually rather ahistorical in the way that it glosses over the diversity of ceremonies that have taken place over time and space:

Here is a closely guarded secret of writing a wedding service: you don’t need to write your ceremony from scratch. After all, you’re choosing to join an institution with a history that spans thousands of years. Chances are, you’re not going to reinvent the wheel. So realize that part of what’s beautiful about marriage is its universality, and take some pressure of yourself to create the perfect, personalized service. You’re just trying to create something that’s honest.

[...]When you’re working within the confines of a more traditional service, think of the age-old structure as a vessel. It’s something you’re going to fill up with emotions, with your personalities, with family and with the love you have for each other. And the older the service, the stronger the vessel.

[...]By saying the same words that generations and generations before you have said, you tie yourself to the strength of an intuition that has stood the test of time, helped people survive great hardships, and helped them embrace enormous joy. Like a traditional ceremony, your vows will have emotion and meaning if you think about them, and discuss them, and know what you’re saying and why. The timelessness of the words you say will only add power. (2012:173-177)

Keene repeatedly stresses that the ancientness and universality of the institution of marriage is both the source of its sacredness and evidence that it is how people through the ages have ‘survived hardship’ and ‘embraced joy’. This naturalizes the benevolent nature of marriage by creating an affinity between the durability of an institution and its positive impact in people’s lives.

Stallings also believes in both the importance and plasticity of tradition. She emphasizes that taking ‘ownership’ of tradition is what matters, even if it means using customs from other cultures:

It’s easy to confuse “untraditional” with “unreligious,” but they aren’t mutually exclusive. You can be untraditionally religious or part of an untraditional religion. Or you could just be like us and blend components you like from various religions.

Our wedding wasn’t overly religious, but it certainly had spiritual components, including my father-in-law ringing the Buddhist meditation bell[...]Best of all was how we decided to be Jewish for about fifteen minutes of our wedding. Is it blasphemous to borrow someone’s metaphorical yarmulke for our own purposes? We just thought yichud [or the custom observed by some Jewish sects of secluding the newly married couple for a few minutes] was a great way to take a little private post-vow time to ourselves.

My feelings about religious traditions in weddings are pretty much the same as my feelings about the rest of wedding planning: if it honestly and genuinely reflects the couple getting married, then awesome.

[...]While building your wedding, it’s easy to wrap yourself into emotional pretzels thinking about others’ expectations and reactions. My theory is that this is an event you are planning as a celebration of yourself and your partner and as a reflection of your relationship. There will always be those who will criticize a wedding just as there are those who bad-mouth certain relationships that don’t adhere to their politics, ideologies, or faith. Just as you’d ignore those who nay-say the relationship you’ve committed yourself to, so should you ignore those who grumble about the wedding ceremony you envision for yourself.

Make peace with the fact that there will be those who bitch no matter what you do. You might as well do what makes you happy, so at least when you hear the bitching, you’ll know that the event they’re griping about was exactly the one you wanted...(2010:120-124)

This passage points out another important theme that runs through both OBB and APW: the difficulty of balancing others’ expectations and finding self-fulfillment through the wedding. Stallings tells the bride not to worry about pleasing others because she assumes

that the bride has already twisted herself into an ‘emotional pretzel’ trying to appease family members while ‘staying true to herself’.

Both OBB and APW wish to emphasize that the wedding is not just the bride’s day, but an experience that is supposed to be shared by the couple equally. It is also supposed to bring families two together and renew community bonds. They point towards the wedding industry as the source that turned the wedding into the bridal extravaganza. Yet, they also emphasize that the couple should take ownership of the event, making even its traditional elements an honest celebration of their unique personalities and love. The accounts of traditions by Keene and Stallings is a projection of their wedding ideal overall.

The Professional or the Confidante

Beyond their specific takes on tradition, OBB and APW agree with mainstream planning resource TK in the way that they advocate for flexible, budget-conscious approaches to the consumption of the wedding package. All three books take the time to point out that brides don’t have to wear a white gown, be walked down the aisle by their father or change their last name. The significant difference across these books is actually revealed by their particular formats and styles of writing. If much of their actual advice about the technicalities of wedding planning is remarkably similar, what really constitutes the ‘alternative’ that OBB and APW posit against the ‘Wedding Industrial Complex’?

Even though XO Group Inc., the owner of TK, has grown to become the single largest wedding planning resource in the United States, with dozens of subsidiary websites, regional bridal magazines and web-based planning apps, it began as an

‘alternative to the white-gloved, outdated advice of the available etiquette experts...’ (theknot.com). That is to say, it began in an effort to be the fresh, down-to-earth voice for modern couples much the same way OBB and APW now strive to be. This is interesting to note as Stalling and others in the midst of feminist wedding planning see TK’s website as the epicenter of all that is wrong with the Wedding Industrial Complex (WIC), a phrase based on the idea of the military industrial complex that is supposed to playfully encapsulate the vast scale and sinister coerciveness of the wedding industry. “This site makes many offbeat brides taste bile in the back of their throats. These are not your people...(2010:39)” says Stallings. Indeed the rancor against TK is so strong that users will bring it up by name to vilify the rest of the wedding industry (and praise the alternative sites), even when the content of the actual blog post doesn’t name it. “...[I]t really took Offbeat Bride to back up the choices that I wanted to make, but wasn’t sure how I could defend them...if I have learned anything from OBB that was never the message on The Knot and the five million bridal mags I have read, [it is] making the day about my FH [future husband] and me and those we love is number one” says OBB user Sara in response to the post *Is having an offbeat wedding any different than having a traditional wedding?* (Stallings 2009a). If all three resources advocate for many of the same things in terms of actually getting the wedding off the ground, where does this hostility come from?

My analysis suggests that the difference in tone and functionality influences how users understand the underlying values that drive these brands. TK’s paperback guide book functions essentially as an encyclopedia of the vast options available to engaged

couples. As such, it is not meant to be read cover-to-cover but rather to be referred to over the course of the planning process when the bride needs quick details on how to negotiate a vendor contract or a vocabulary to communicate to a seamstress a modification on a flower girl dress. To give a few examples of the level of painstaking detail that Roney provides, there are twenty-five chapters covering the stages of the wedding planning from engagement to post-honeymoon. Out of the 434 pages, fifteen pages are devoted to florists, flower varieties and arrangements with an additional eight page glossy inserted in the middle on how to choose a wedding palette which includes a refresher course on rudimentary color theory (color wheel included), thirty-nine pages are devoted to wedding dress shopping with detailed breakdowns of cut, fabric, embellishment and tailoring, and twenty-five pages are devoted to wedding stationary including save the dates, invitations and ceremony programs.

Roney's tone throughout is that of a friendly professional; encouraging yet authoritative. She rattles off 'traditional' etiquette on such subjects as wedding announcements and the receiving line without mentioning the problematic origins of these customs. But she is also quick to remind her readers that 'modern' couples have a lot of latitude in what level of formality they actually adhere to throughout their engagement and during their wedding. One of the major criticism that OBB and APW have for resources like TK is that they make expensive add-ons seem non-negotiable. This is, to an extent, true. For example, in the fourteen pages devoted to ceremony and reception music, Roney only gives suggestions for costly professional options, implicitly suggesting that hooking up an iPod to a decent set of speakers is insufficient for such an

important occasion. TK also does not shy away from suggesting luxury options like renting a Rolls Royce or stretch Hummer limo to ferry the wedding party to the service and reception alongside more budget friendly options like driving your own car. She also provides suggestions for cost-saving do-it-yourself options with the caveat that doing your own hair and makeup or making 200 crafty party favors takes a level of skill many people lack and should only be taken on with sufficient preparation and support from family and friends. It is worth noting that this is pretty much the same advice given in OBB and APW about DIY projects, though Keene and Stalling take pains to remind the bride that she does not have to do it all herself and if she asks for help from her groom/family/friends she must treat them with gracious respect.

Though Roney does speak to some extent about how to manage budgets and intimate relationship dynamics to minimize stress, she does not interrogate the depths of these emotions and leaves the role of ‘shoulder to cry on’ or ‘cheerleader’ to bride’s wedding party, friends or families. The emotional wellbeing of the bride is not the central focus of TK; Roney assumes that the wedding is a self-justifying affair for her readers and that the hard stuff of feelings and intellectual discomfort is best left for the bride and her intimates to sort out themselves. She never, as the caricature of the Wedding Industrial Complex would suggest, demands impoverished brides drive themselves into debt by ordering two thousand hand-gilded lilies to line the aisles of a rented cathedral but she does prescribe endless to-do lists with relatively rigid timetables with only passing acknowledgement that the majority of the things to be bought and organized are strictly optional.

In contrast to Roney's friendly yet professional demeanor, Keene and Stallings both take on the role of level-headed confidant to brides struggling to craft a wedding that reflects their unique tastes, values and communities. Though each has their own distinct stylistic flare, both OBB and APW are designed to draw a more substantially intellectual and emotional response from the reader than the encyclopedic TK. Like TK, both books also begin at the engagement and conclude after the honeymoon but unlike TK they are supposed to be read straight through. They were not published for reference but rather for therapeutic self-help and that, much more than the actual content of wedding planning advice, is what distinguishes OBB and APW from TK.

The Bride

All three books make formal statements early on that recently engaged straight women are not necessarily the only ones who would find the book helpful. Indeed all three books are celebratory of the fact that straight men are taking more active interest in the wedding planning process and that gay couples are increasingly legally able to have their unions recognized. From there forward, however, all three go on to predominantly address the bride. In the section called Ceremony Types (2012: 86-189) Roney briefly explains the different legal and religious options same-sex couples have for their weddings or civil unions including religious and cultural associations that provide officiants for the ceremony, information that Keene and Stalling do not provide in their books. In their respective books, Keene and Stalling do feature the 'voices' of straight grooms in special sections to give an account of 'the other side of the story' as well as planning anecdotes from gay couples, but their address is still primarily focused on the

bride through the course of the narrative. Throughout the websites, unless the post is specifically addressing the particular concerns of grooms or gay couples, the bride's needs are still the primary selling point. OBB editors took pains to include the disclaimer "...we firmly believe that 'bride' is a state of mind, not a set of genitals (2014)" in a recent post called *So You Want to Craft a Processional...* written by a guest author. In her site's FAQ section, Stalling explains why the word bride remains so prevalent:

My book was published by a women's press, and so they were very clear about the book's target market. I totally appreciate and understand all the reasons why people might prefer "Offbeat Weddings," but there are numerous business, technical, and legal reasons why Offbeat Bride's name will not be changing.

Regardless, my editors work hard to make Offbeat Bride one of the most inclusive wedding websites on the web — we cater to all genders and identities, including of course a whole category dedicated to grooms, but also extensive archives of transgender and gender-queer weddings.

Stalling acknowledges and celebrates that her users occupy what she characterizes as a wide variety of identities but for the sake of "business reasons" and brand cohesion, the Bride remains. Bride then is perhaps not necessarily supposed to address just straight women (who are, despite the inclusion of others, still the majority users) but a sort of ethos of emotional transformation. Or, perhaps to be more precise, the bridal address expands the emotional transformation most commonly associated with the straight women who are the heaviest users of OBB and APW, making it available to potentially anyone planning a wedding in such a way that affirms the bridal experience as being essentially positive, if fleeting:

If you're reading this book, chances are very good that you've been called a bride for months and months. But you're not a bride. Not yet, anyway.

For most of us, the liminal state of bride-dom lasts about ten hours. It's long enough to put on the dress, say the vows, transform yourself from a single person to a part of a brand-new family, and party like it's going out of style. Then it's over, and that's a good thing. So, rather than lament the end of our short-lived moments as brides, the question is: How do we take those ten hours and

experience them to their fullest? How do we get what we need out of this transitional moment and move forward with minimal regrets and a lifetime of memories? (Keene 2012: 181-182)

Being a bride is a temporary role, with a temporality marked in these spaces by profound emotions that are predominantly positive and reflect the personal transformation that is supposed to come in creating a “brand-new family”. In saying that anyone, regardless of their sex, can enter into this state opens up the super-charged emotional bridal experience for more people and also, importantly, affirms that it is a deeply desirable role to inhabit. To Keene and Stalling, the wedding holds a particular place of honor in the emotional lives of families and wider communities. Indeed, both authors take the time to de-emphasize the idea that the wedding is the bride’s day alone, pointing to sources like TK that reinforce what they believe to be blatantly narcissistic consumerism.

Practically Offbeat: Two Sides of the Same Self-Help Coin

Despite their similarities, it’s important to remember that OBB and APW have two very distinct brand personas. Keene’s and Stallings’ respective voices extend through their books and into the style of writing of their editorial staffs and even the guest posts on their websites. Stallings bills herself as a subculture aficionado; an earlier adopter of the internet and a former rave journalist. What distinguishes the actual content of the OBB book is not only her brash, irreverent tone but her focus on addressing etiquette issues around more taboo topics like how to deal with wedding guests that are high and/or how to encourage them to hook up with each other after the party is over. In contrast, the topics Keene broaches and her turn of phrase are much less ‘edgy’. Indeed, it might be best described as aggressively sane. She is writing from a position where she

assumes that the bride has already been driven insane by the whole wedding planning process and needs someone to repeatedly tell her 'it's ok'. Despite these differences, OBB and APW appear to hold no hostility toward one another. Keene and Stallings both positively acknowledge the work of the other in their respective books; old posts on OBB's site even contains dialogue between the two. This affinity underscores what is fundamentally important for this analysis: that these two are best understood as two very successful examples of the same genre: feminist self-help.

Eva Illouz (2008) argues that, while many believe that psychology and feminism are inherently at odds with one another because many academic feminists have vehemently rejected Freudian psychology as naturalizing misogyny, second-wave and subsequent strands of feminism were only possible after the family became the site of scientific knowledge and psychological critique. Self-help and feminism in popular culture grew more prominent during the 1960s and 70s and drew from each other's vocabulary to advocate for women's sexual satisfaction, emotional empowerment and independence both at home and increasingly in the work place. Illouz argues that feminism was not sinisterly co-opted by self-help discourses to make them more appealing to an increasingly powerful female consumer demographic but rather developed in tandem with the self-help genre. Illouz Argues that for many prominent feminists the definition of their political task was and still is, at its heart, to promote individual wellbeing. In the following, Illouz quotes feminist scholar Angela McRobbie and elaborates on the significance of her description: "'feminism is about being who you want to be—and finding out who you are in the first place.'" In this definition, political

and psychological categories are completely enmeshed (2008:131).” It is this particular intersection of personal psychology and political praxis where we find OBB and APW emerging.

The Cycle of Remystification

Even though Keene and Stallings have radically different voices in their writing that extends beyond their books and into their brand presentation as a whole, they are both still part of the same distinct genre of feminist self-help. Why is this important and how does their placement in the genre of self-help matter? My analysis suggests that there is a distinct cycle that weaves through OBB and APW, which is common in self-help in general. It begins by naming a potential source of conflict that disrupts the emotional ideal, in this case the image of the happy bride or the magical wedding, then goes on to analyze the source of conflict in order to deal with it and reestablish a stronger, more refined version of the emotional ideal. A central component to the criticism both OBB And APW have towards popular culture in general and the wedding industry in particular is the way that weddings are represented as predominantly pre-packaged fairytales that involve no work, stress or conflict for the bride or, less frequently but no less troublingly, affairs that only reflect the narcissism of the “bridezilla” who terrorizes her vendors and loved ones with impossible demands. As Keene so aptly observes, most of the wedding industry makes you crazy, then calls you crazy (2012:151). Part of the allure of OBB and APW is that they tell brides that they aren’t crazy...Or if they do feel that way, it is a perfectly reasonable way to feel *but it will all be worth it in the end.*

The key here is that by making a problem out of wedding planning through this specifically therapeutic kind of in-depth analysis, Keene and Stallings actually reinforce the venerable magic of the wedding. They address as many conceivable problems that brides might face in order to prepare them to be able to reinvest in the transformative emotions weddings are ideally supposed to offer. To demonstrate how the full cycle is achieved, it is worth quoting Keene at length:

A Labor of Love

Let's be honest. For most of us, DIY is hard work undertaken by necessity. It involves lifting boxes, poring over spreadsheets, painstakingly crafting playlists, stripping thorns off roses, and cooking for hours and hours. Most of us don't undertake major wedding DIY because we love crating but because we have a wedding to throw, and this is how we can actually make it happen. So, if you're feeling overwhelmed by DIY, that is a perfectly reasonable reaction. Ask for help (and lots of it). Figure out what your capacity is, and try not to exceed it. Decide when you let projects go, or hire someone to help you out with them. And then ask for more help.

Finally, a word of warning: DIY wedding guilt has a way of catching up to you no matter what choices you end up making. If you make a lot of things for your wedding, you can be swept up in the anxiety that your wedding is going to look cheap. If you made some things for your wedding, you may feel like you should have made more. If you hire professionals for most of your wedding tasks, you can get caught up in worrying that your wedding won't be meaningful or personal enough, or that people will judge you for not being really involved in the planning process. Guilt about wedding DIY can hit you no matter which way you turn, but the truth is, wedding DIY doesn't matter much, other than being a means to an end. What will matter is saying your vows and celebrating with those nearest and dearest to you. And those are the things that you will certainly do together.

In the end, your wedding is not just a day, it's the accumulation of all the moments that went into creating it. Enjoy the time you spend making your wedding happen with people you love. Try to savor the time spent cooking, or playing with flowers, or figuring out how to sew a wedding dress. Weddings are labors of love, when we allow people around us to share that, sometimes we're lucky enough to create something magical (sweaty, tired, and a little bit stressed, but magical) (2012:141-142).

Keene is upfront about the fact that DIY wedding projects come from a place of material necessity for the vast majority of brides. From there, she moves on to deconstruct the facets of DIY that cause stress and, importantly, affirms that a stressed out in this situation is "perfectly reasonable". She then goes on to name a broad spectrum of actions that might cause guilt, signaling that she thinks that wedding production and consumption

are inevitability marked by anxiety. To counter this, she points to the ‘truth’ of the matter, which is that all the work of the wedding, no matter how it is done, is merely a way of attaining the final act of experiencing the wedding day. This allows her to redirect the misgivings that brides feel about the landmines that are inherent in intellectually and ethically conscious wedding planning back towards the potential rewards that arise from it.

The cycle of remystification is more easily demarcated in Keene’s style, the above quote is characteristic of the neatness of its arch due to an intentionally calming tone. Stallings’ writing, on the other hand, is more lively and chaotic, the spiral of the cycle loops less evenly but it is, nonetheless, distinctly present:

Make your peace with the fact that you are not going to escape a few moments of full-frontal freak-out. Even the studiously laid-back can find themselves on a tooth-grinding roller coaster of anxiety when planning a wedding. Seriously, it happens to everyone.

The weight of bucking cultural traditions takes a lot of energy and brainpower—and usually all on top of a job and friends and family and remembering to flush the toilet[...]. Making your peace with the fact that your wedding will not be some sort of perfect fantasy day does wonders for bridal sanity. Accept the fact that things won’t go exactly as you expect. Life, weddings, relationships, road trips, gardening, making out, haircuts: few of the fun things in life always go as expect. Let go of whatever dream world your wedding takes place in and remember that it’s going to happen here on Earth, where there are tantalizing unknowns around every corner.

Greta Christian used this mantra throughout her wedding planning: It doesn’t have to be perfect. She said, “There’s no way everything’s going to be perfect. It’s a big, complicated emotionally fraught party with a lot of unpredictable factors, and things are going to go wrong. Letting go of it being perfect made it possible to make decisions—difficult decisions, trivial decisions, any decisions—without tearing ourselves up about whether it was exactly the right decisions. And it let us enjoy the day itself, even when little things did go wrong. Besides, if everything goes perfectly according to a micromanaged plan, there’s no room for surprises.”
...Remember surprises? They can be good sometimes!

There also seems to be one constant about wedding anxiety: No matter how much time you give yourself to plan (six weeks, six months, six years), there will inevitably be a crunch near the end. Plan for it. Expect to have a couple of nightmares. And then prepare to be surprised when maybe it works out better than you expect. (2010:136-138)

By highlighting the supposed universality of wedding stress, Stallings hopes to head it off at the pass so to speak, allowing brides ample time to prepare themselves emotionally for the onslaught of decisions making, frustration and anxiety that comes with wedding planning. By warning brides to prepare themselves for the worst, Stallings is able to reshift the focus to potential happy surprises. This does not, however, give open-ended possibility for the wedding day. Rather it prepares the bride emotionally to ignore bumps in the road to a day that she meticulously prepared for smooth sailing or to find joy in moment she would have otherwise found frustrating. Both Keene and Stallings emphasize that weddings do not have to be 'perfect' to be valuable experiences which is another way they are distinct from TK, which does not necessarily advocate for perfection but, rather, confronts the bride with mountains of details to be taken care of without giving her any comfort.

The following comment from APW user dc_kat in the post *Fuck You and The WIC Too: I Care About the Flowers. Deal With It.* by guest poster Libby Hazzard (2014) demonstrates a description of wedding planning that has not undergone the cycle of remystification:

I think I started planning my wedding and perhaps am still grasping to the idea that I too am, "You're still laid back, you don't care! You only care about the important things." but failing miserably. I got the big stuff: venue, food, etc mostly arranged early on thinking that the last few months I would have time to enjoy figuring out the details of making things pretty and nice and personalized. But now I am one month away and mostly just feel really lonely and want the whole thing to be over with already. I can't find the joy that is supposed to be embedded in this time. The parents on both sides have plenty of ideas, often differing, and plenty of people that they want and continue to invite, and while they are paying for portions of the wedding which has now turned into 4 days of events that they want, yet they aren't willing to pitch in on actual tasks like following up with their own friends who have not yet rsvp'd or arranging the decorations for the rehearsal dinner that they want and feel is important. I feel like I am the only one trying to keep things on track and within the budget. My parents snub my few requests for help while at the same time tell me I "just need to relax" "everything will come together" "you just need to delegate". My friends have started criticizing choices that I make implying I am not giving enough consideration

to "how important" things are for the actual day and that I will regret not spending more money (that I don't have.) And while my fiance is wonderful, loving and supportive his work situation has taken an uptick to the point where he is operating on an average of four hours of sleep a night to get things taken care of so he can be gone for the time we have booked for our wedding and honeymoon. I am just wondering if anyone else reached a point of loneliness that feels so opposite of the inclusive celebration we set out to have, that made them just want to walk away from the whole thing? How do you find the boundaries of what is important to you versus other people?

As you can see, dc_kat is in the midst of wedding planning and feels so stressed out she simply wants to give up on her wedding. She is facing harsh scrutiny from loved ones who are also unwilling to help her and who are implying that her frustration is irrational. As opposed to the spirit of joy and inclusion that is the ideal on OBB and APW, she feels isolation and sadness which she cannot penetrate the meaning of yet because the wedding has not redeemed the stress. We do not know if dc_kat's situation improved or if she was happy with her wedding. This is one of the very few instances of a narrative of any detail or length on OBB or APW that allowed the strings of misgiving and doubt to remain untied at the end and shows a bride that could not even muster proper hope for the future.

The cycle of remystification is important to understand because it allows for the cathartic release of stress, frustration, anger and pain so that they can be cannibalized by the bride to reinforce the overall emotional significance of her wedding. While this kind of therapeutic technique allows the labor and conflict of the wedding process to become visible, it does so through rose-tinted glasses. It is a snapshot of honesty that elicits a strong emotional response from users because they can immediately identify with the spiraling roller coaster of enchantment-disenchantment-reenchantment within their own weddings as they live it. Unlike TK which hands them very detailed instructions and sends them off, OBB and APW validate the frustration of the bride and take care to remind her why she's doing it all in the first place. The cycle of remystification dredges

up the many potential sources of misgivings and apprehensions potential brides may have toward the wedding in order to dispel them and strengthen the utopian promise of the wedding and egalitarian marriage. It also propels the brides out of the inertia of being overwhelmed by the torrential downpour of consumer choices and potential family conflict back into decision-making mode, which is where OBB and APW's advertisers need them to be.

CHAPTER TWO: WHAT CONSTITUTES THE POLITICS OF FEMINIST WEDDING PLANNING?

One of the main sources of apprehension towards the wedding that online users of OBB and APW feel springs from the myriad conflicts that arise when trying to negotiate the tension between wedding planning and the social expectations and political ideals rooted in feminism and commitments to alleviating social inequality. But what exactly does *feminism* mean on OBB and APW? How do the owners, editorial staffs and users conceptualize and mobilize it to address questions of political ideals and everyday praxis? How does the vernacular of self-help influence this conception of politics? What are some limitations or problems with the definition and grounded action surrounding the form of feminism that happens here?

A Feminism of Choice and Intent

Perhaps the best description of the definition of feminist politics that operates on OBB and APW is a form of choice feminism. In the post *Letter from the Editor: Feminism* (2013a), Keene states that she does not identify personally as a choice feminist but she has purposefully managed her site to function under the banner of choice feminism to allow more women to feel comfortable engaging with the idea of gender politics:

For years, APW has functioned as a more-or-less choice feminist site. To break things down a bit, choice feminism is based in the idea that the women's movement's goal was to allow women to

have choices, and hence, any choice a woman makes is a feminist one. Running APW this way has been an editorial decision on my part. [...] I say this because I'm very specifically a non-litmus-test feminist. While I am pro-choice, I don't think that you have to be personally comfortable with abortion to be a feminist. I've worked hard to hire APW staff and contributors accordingly. Do I want APW writers to consider themselves to be feminists? Fuck yes. Do I have specific ideas about what that has to look like? Fuck no. But, at the end of the day, I'm not a choice feminist. I'm not anywhere close. I think feminists can hold a wide variety of personal and political beliefs. I think that feminists can make a wide variety of personal decisions. But I don't think that all women's decisions and beliefs are feminist ones, and I think that's perfectly okay.

Why has APW functioned over the years with a choice feminist editorial model? Primarily, because as someone who does not think feminism has to look a particular way, I'm not comfortable setting myself up as a feminist gatekeeper. We regularly publish feminist articles that I wildly disagree with, and we do it on purpose. While I don't believe in choice feminism, I do believe that you can make different choices than I have and still be a feminist (and I absolutely do not believe in feminist circular firing squads). It may be a subtle distinction, but it's an important one.

While Keene refutes the idea that every choice a feminist makes is inherently a feminist choice, she does not say what her criterion for what constitutes a feminist choice for her is, instead leaving it up to users to decide for themselves. While she distances herself personally from choice feminism she still allows her site to operate within that sphere of logic. This maintains the idea that feminism is something you enact through autonomous choices, even if not every decision is a feminist one.

With this in mind, it makes sense that a fundamental aspect of how feminism circulates on both these sites is a discourse of non-judgment of any and all relationship and consumer choices made by self-designated 'intelligent, thoughtful' feminists. The oft-cited definition of what it 'really' means to be a feminist centers around the logic that since women are equal to men, they are capable of making rational decisions about their personal and consumer lives on their own without the outside voice of society, patriarchy, tradition, etc., perverting their individual reason. OBB commenter, Laney, summarizes this view:

It's not about choosing Option A instead of Option B all the time or avoiding Situation X in favor of Situation Y. It's about CHOICES in every single part of your life from the choice of whether or not to shave your legs, to being a working or a stay-at-home mom, to keeping your maiden name, and all the other things that happen in our lives. So what if your choices happen to fall in line with what's "acceptable?" Wearing a white gown or getting married in a chapel doesn't strip me of my "feminist card." *I chose these things because they're beautiful, not because the Big Bad Patriarchy expects me to.* (2009a) (italic emphasis mine)

This operating definition is rooted in a sincere commitment by the editorial staffs and users to support each other in attaining the autonomy historically denied to women and other marginalized people. Abstaining from judgment also promotes a notion of a democratized space; it is an ethos that espouses that ‘we may all be different but no one here is morally superior because she didn’t change her name/didn’t serve meat at her reception/ calculated her overall carbon footprint and paid to offset it with wind energy’.

There is also a deep pragmatism that runs through the idea of feminism as non-judgmental empowerment of choice which does, at least, rhetorically resolve some of the strain involved in attempting to live a life dedicated to autonomy and egalitarianism in a deeply unequal world: “Believing in feminism while picking your battles based on what you need to do to survive and thrive, is a paradox that characterizes modern feminism to me in so many ways (Miller 2014a).” The operating definition of feminism here can be ideally understood as a way of finding tools for individual survival that meet personal needs while also supporting others as they find their individual means to “survive and thrive”.

What is implicit in this definition is that the means to achieve personal well-being is through empowerment on the market. There is a strong affinity here between feminism and career, especially high prestige professions and/or entrepreneurialism. While I cannot

quantify the amount of women on these sites who have advanced degrees, it is striking that two nonacademic websites have so many users making casual reference to balancing graduate work with their personal life, often on the doctoral level. Professionalism is not strictly relegated to the obviously intellectual, however. For instance, in the post *Nude Wedding Shoes *When You're Biracial* (Miller 2014b) Keene and Miller trade light-hearted comments on how much they admire singer-turned-mogul Jessica Simpson because she has created a fashion empire when everyone underestimated her due to her ditzy persona. Keene also frames posts about proactive decision-making and the struggle to 'having it all' around the challenges of 'being a boss', a theme which resonates with many users on the site. OBB and APW are not necessarily selling hip or wacky wedding packages (though, importantly, they do facilitate attaining those too); they're selling users the psychological comfort necessary to deftly maneuver the vast and perilous wedding industry and consumer activities thereafter. Speaking as an emotionally secure, authoritative owner of a small business is yet another way Keene and Stallings bolster their credibility. In the chapter *I Am Woman, Hear Me Order Monogrammed Napkins: Is "Feminist Wedding Planning" an Oxymoron? How to Deal with Your Impending Bridentity Crisis*, Stallings makes the link between feminism, anxiety and entrepreneurship explicit:

...In my dream world, these ["commanding princesses"] realize that they secretly want to be organizing board meetings or starting their own small businesses. After the wedding is over, they pour that energy into founding their own LLC...If you're inclined to, think of your wedding as a chance to teach yourself some business skills. Project management, event coordination, conflict mediation—these are aptitude MBAs pay big bucks for! (2010:65-67).

These comments are obviously intended to be lighthearted, though the humor is *not* generated through the implausibility of a bride becoming a business woman. Actually, gaining transferable professional skills is suggested as an attractive strategy for bridging the disparities between a users' feminism and their 'Bridentity'. Perhaps the punch line is at the expense of brides who cannot transfer their newly found management skills into other, more lucrative, spheres.

Transferable professional skills acquired through a traditionally feminine activity are appealing to users of OBB and APW, many of whom are trapped in the social and career cycle of 'damned if you do, damned if you don't', where women with any kind of authority or ambition are scrutinized for being either too 'traditionally' feminine in her demeanor and life choices or not feminine enough. This social and economic conflict can become an individual, psychological source of guilt and anxiety over 'not being a good enough feminist/ partner/ professional/friend/ daughter/ consumer.' Not only is it deeply internalized, but this social and psychological conflict becomes publicly pronounced through the entire course of the wedding planning process. OBB user Surfandlipgloss articulates how this kind of internal struggle can become difficult external conflict in the guest post *Marriage as an act of freedom vs. conformity* (2010):

But there is still this tug-of-war that so many of us deal with — all the heavy Baggage of Marriage. The tension of needs and demands — ours, our partner's, our family's, our culture, our finances, our religion, etc — and we're stuck right in the middle of it. The process is fraught with a million potential mis-steps and there often doesn't seem to be the Magical Path by which all parties are satisfied. Many traditionalists would say that we (brides) need to suck it up and make everyone happy. When we assert our needs/wants we get labeled Bridezillas. But I thought this day was supposed to be all about us? Or was that just a marketing slogan?

Surfandlipgloss points to the internal “tug-of-war” that brides feel stuck in trying to meet their own needs while making other people happy during the process of their own wedding. The wedding industry at large has promised the bride that this is supposed to be her day, but she is vilified and feels deep guilt when she attempts to assert her own needs in the midst of the delicate balance between her, her partner and their community.

In this articulation of feminism, life and consumer choices must become vigilantly guarded against criticism because that negativity can be easily internalized and thus become debilitating. Illouz (2007, 2008) suggests that by putting an abstract and constantly shifting idea of ‘mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’ at the center of therapeutic discourses at largely, mental health professionals as well as pop psychologists inadvertently create cultural narratives that center around ever-expanding categories of emotional disorder and disease. Following this, I posit that because personal empowerment is the fulcrum that moves the logic of this particular manifestation of feminist self-help, it has inadvertently created a psychological and social environment where the signals of external coercion and disempowerment may reveal themselves through a wide variety of previously unexamined thoughts and behaviors. Any and all choices surrounding the wedding can suddenly reveal the limitations of one’s personal empowerment. These limitations in the lives of brides, in turn, can then be spun into almost endless content on OBB and APW that centers on intense, reflexive discussion in order to ameliorate the process of emotional management during the wedding planning process. The following excerpt from the OBB guest post *Reconciling marriage as a feminist: Does everything about the wedding have to be a feminist battle?* (2014) by user

Ladylabrat demonstrates that while all wedding decisions can potentially be held up to potential feminist scrutiny, it is through a combination of introspection and clear communication with loved ones and *not* necessarily through the rejection or changing of standard wedding tropes that one can restore a feeling of control to an otherwise fraught, debilitating process. She claims that:

[...]Although a proud feminist, I have always envisioned myself spending my life with a male-bodied person, and I view marriage as a legal acknowledgement of a deeply emotional and personal choice that is in no way contradictory to my feminist identity. I consider myself unendingly lucky to have found a partner in life who also calls himself a feminist, and views our relationship as one of equals — equals who bring different talents and shortcomings to the table.

Nonetheless, when E and I first began to talk about the wedding, I found myself more than a little overwhelmed with a squicky feeling.

Weddings are inherently seeped in a tradition of patriarchy — don't let anyone tell you differently. Historically, weddings were about property transfer and sexual rights. Even today, in our "enlightened" world, weddings are filled with reminders of this past, some subtle, some not. From our conception of the wedding as "the bride's day", to our focus on the bride's outfit, to the "giving away" of the bride, to the un-ending wedding day "humor" ("ball and chain", bachelor parties, "bridezilla," the un-ending refrain that sex dies after the wedding).

There are reminders everywhere that a wedding, apparently, should mean very different things to the male-bodied and female-bodied participants (and that's completely ignoring the possibilities of same-sex marriage, polyamorous relationships, etc.). Place all of these ideas in the context of a wedding industry that is forever telling you that you absolutely must have organza chair ties, and cherub-cheeked flower girls, and a 40-foot veil, and it's enough to make even the most mild-mannered feminist begin to hyperventilate. As we began to plan our wedding, we had long talks about what traditions mean something to us and what didn't. Some were easy to decide... We were vehemently against me taking E's last name[...] We dislike the idea of a bouquet toss and a garter toss, and the idea of any "obeying" never needed to be mentioned[...]

Now, there's something beautiful to be said about tradition. It's comforting. It feels timeless (regardless of whether that's true). It feels... respectable. And respectful[...]

But today, I feel that each of the choices we make for our wedding need to be conscious choices. We need to weigh the comfort of tradition against the statement (overt or otherwise) that it may make. Not every feminist wedding is going to look the same — and certainly one can be a feminist and have a more "traditional" wedding. I don't decide who is a feminist and who is not — I only get to determine how my feminism manifests itself.

I was asked (more than once) if EVERYTHING about our wedding had to be a feminist battle (I was also accused of being ashamed to get married because I'm ambivalent about wearing a ring). And the answer, I think... is yes. And no.

Yes, because I am a feminist, my partner is a feminist, and we want our wedding (and our marriage) to be representative of us as a couple — a joining of equal individuals working towards

a common goal. And no, because sometimes in life (as in relationships), we have to choose our battles.

And so while I will always fight for a woman to keep her last name in marriage, on our wedding day I will be in white because it will make the colored crinoline really stand out. And while we both wear engagement rings, only I am going to carry a bouquet because I like to have something to do with my hands. And while I may elect to be escorted by both parents, I will process in last to my waiting partner, because that's a "moment" he very much wants.

I'd like to think we've considered every decision we've made, but not doubt there are constructs of which even we have been oblivious. Nonetheless, we both believe that we have created a day that is reflective of us and our relationship — one that works within the circumstances of our historical perspective, is created through conscious decision making, is decided upon after long discussion and many compromises, and, most importantly, is the celebration of two people and their mutual love and respect. And that makes my feminist self proud.

Ladylabrat's feminist self is a distinct part of her, with its own separate (and at times competing) rationalizations and desires. This post also demonstrates how harmoniously the concept of feminism and romantic love are intermeshed on these sites. The legacy of feminist critique against romantic love is occasionally alluded to but never seriously taken up as a point of discussion. Users on OBB and APW apparently feel empowered enough to feel as if they can distinguish their own personal romantic relationships from abstract structural inequality.

The emphasis on personal empowerment is also how even external feminist political critique can be perceived as simply *yet another* voice telling individual women what they can and cannot do. This oft-cited feminist policing seems to be most visible in descriptions of the very real anxiety, frustration and pain feminist brides go through when having to decide what to do with their last name. The heavy-handed emphasis on non-judgment and jubilant celebration of other users' choices in these spaces online betrays the fact that users face harsh scrutiny both in their immediate sphere of intimacy as well as in other spaces online. Or, as Andrea, a woman who had never considered herself a feminist until she actively met resistance from friends and family upon making what she

considered the personal choice to keep her hyphenated maiden name, commented on the post *On Name Changing and Weddings* (Keene 2009) put it:

...I have often felt that this is such a heated debate and have (unfortunately) seen comment threads that are hostile and often threatening. I have often felt like I am some social pariah for not wanting to change my last name...I think that it is a hard decision - regardless of what you choose. You get criticized for changing it (not being a feminist), criticized for hyphenating it (indecisive and confusing), or criticized for not changing it (crazy feminist who is not committed to her relationship). Can we ever really win? (2012)

OBB and APW are successful largely because they advertise themselves as safe spaces, separate from the demands of loved ones, the judgment of the rest of the wedding industry and other more hostile feminist websites.

But if the actual choices made by brides about their consumer or intimate lives is evacuated from the criterion of what actually constitutes feminist politics, what becomes vitally important is *intent*. This means that the *process* of coming to decisions and articulating what subjective meaning those decisions hold supersedes in importance the actual end result. The following quote from the OBB post *Is having an offbeat wedding any different than having a traditional wedding?* (Stallings 2009a) demonstrates how the logic of intent plays out:

It seems like the root of the issue is that for some folks, there's still a lot of guilt/judgment around "caring about wedding = victim of patriarchy and/or wedding industry."

To me, this feels like it assumes that as women we're not able to think through decisions or control ourselves when faced with wedding fluff. It assumes that once you start planning a wedding, you're clearly on the slippery slope to suddenly wanting chairs with ruffles and monogrammed everything! You're blinded by the cupcakes and ribbons and suddenly you forget your own (last) name and just want MORE PERSONAL DETAILS! MORE SPECIAL FAVORS! MORE MORE MORE!!"

...I want to empower women to go into this process with the ability to make their own decisions outside of both religious/traditional expectations and consumer/industry pressures.

But when you assume that anyone enthusiastically planning a wedding is automatically a victim of outside forces, you're asserting that women can't think for themselves and are powerless against the lures of taffeta and tiaras. That once we see something sparkly, it's all white blindness GIVE

ME MATCHING GARTER bridezilla bullshit...Some people like big parties and are drawn toward extravagant weddings, offbeat or not. Some people hate big parties, and therefore plan a beautiful simple wedding. As long as it's an honest reflection of the couple getting married (and that includes an honest reflection of their budget!) I'm all for both ends of the simple/extravagant spectrum[...]

So, my final answer to the question: Yes, [offbeat weddings are different than normal weddings] — because of instead of asking "How can I keep up with expectations?" you're asking "How can I create a wedding that's authentic to what I actually want?" It's all about the intent."

By Stalling's account, we can understand the role of consumption here as expressing users' individuality and reflexive feminist capacities. The act of divulging the individual process of choice and rejection is how the editorial staff and users engage each other and is thereby the terms from which the feminist politics of these spaces emerge. But because intent is an internal process it must be performed; to be successfully performed in these sites, intent must be articulated with a high degree of linguistic skill and literacy in self-help frames. As I will argue in the fourth chapter, photographic evidence that is all at once astonishingly beautiful, seemingly effortless and full of sincere joy is also vital to this display. While this kind of performance is naturalized on these sites, I suggest that it is through the language surrounding intent we can begin to understand how social inequality can both be a prevalent topic of conversation on these sites while also simultaneously being reproduced here.

Diversity

Both Keene and Stallings are sincerely interested in including "diversity" on their sites. But what does "diversity" mean on OBB and APW? This is a complicated question but my analysis suggests that it is tied to two distinct, though related, broad themes: One: the emphasis on representing a wider variety of subcultures (goths, steampunks, games, folk rockers, hipsters etc.) and people from different geographic locations and two: a

desire to celebrate and affirm the worth of different forms of social difference like race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to unpacking how social difference operates on these sites. While I have done my best to be thorough, reading through the vast majority of the archival posts with tags that cluster around race/ethnicity and LGBTQ topics, I can only offer a provisional analysis on what discussing and representing social difference means on OBB and APW, highlighting a few select trends that are most pertinent to this project as a whole.

One of the things most striking about both OBB and APW is the relative prominence of LGBTQ weddings and commitment ceremonies. I say relative because they are still a minority that one must go out of their way to look for—which actually is easily done via clicking on associated tags like “marriage equality” and “lesbian” that lead to archives of LGBTQ Real Wedding or advice about issues broadly surrounding that community. The advice sections include things as straight forward as ‘look books’ for femme and butch lesbian brides to more complicated, emotionally driven open forum posts which discuss difficult topics such as how to tell extended family about a transgender partner’s transition before the wedding.

Gay marriage, as it were, is essentially universally accepted by users and emphasized as a basic human right by the editorial staff—in fact, we can understand the mission of these sites as an effort to normalize same-sex or other queer unions to a wider (though already receptive) audience. An entire dissertation could be written about the transformation of the wedding industry after the (obviously still contested) mainstreaming of gay marriage in law and popular culture, but that is outside the scope of

the current project. If I were to offer a speculative analysis on the LGBTQ presence on OBB and AWP, it is that, across the board, they affirm the universality of the utopian promise of egalitarian marriage. The thought process here is, much in the same way that 'bride' is not strictly tied to biological sex, affirming life-long commitment to one's beloved should not be limited to heterosexual men and women but should ideally be open to all consenting adults. This presents an interesting conflict within these sites that could point to broader issues: essentially that the pressure to be married is still extremely strong for material reasons (as Stallings admits in her book, she married for health insurance and to more easily buy a house) and social reasons (Keene suggests in her book that marriage is an important transition into full adulthood because it signals a new phase of seriousness and responsibility). It is a strong utopian promise, as Keene says:

Married life, and the family that the two of you just made together, does not have to look any one way. Married life is what you create; it's about what you dream up together...When marriage goes right, it allows us to be stronger people together than we would be apart. Shortly after her marriage, Catherine Sly said, "Our dear friend stood up at our wedding and confidently proclaimed, 'Marriage makes you free.' And I have no idea how he knew it, but he was right." Marriage allows us to support our partners to become the people they were meant to be. To empower them to pursue their dreams, and to live bravely and honestly. It allows us to live bravely and honestly ourselves. Marriage gives us the strength to continue to say yes to what is right for us. It gives us a foundation on which to build and the strength to dream big dreams (2012:208).

Extending the promise of married life to *whomever*, regardless of their sex or gender expression, simultaneously may erode many of the heteronormative tenants of patriarchy embedded within marriage while also reinforcing committed romantic love as the most easily accessible and acceptable way for individuals to gain both the safety and autonomy necessary to live fulfilling lives. LGBTQ unions on these sites might further call into question the naturalization of the gender division of labor during the wedding planning process and on into the marriage. This is something that, despite the vast majority of

users still being women, is one of the official reasons these sites exist in the first place and further reinforces the overall appeal to straight users.

Representation and inclusive participation of people of color is something both Keene and Stallings strive for. Yet, both are aware that people of color are underrepresented on both OBB and APW and have repeatedly addressed this topic in blog posts and comments. A quick look at the ‘Couples of Color’ tag on both of the Real Wedding sections of OBB reveals that about 24% of “real weddings” are submitted by couples who self-identify as being people of color, which is inclusive of all race and ethnicities that aren’t ‘white’ Americans, including some international couples. Finding a similar percentage for APW was impeded at the time of analysis by a coding error that made post tags function improperly, though upon last inspection in January 2014 it was about 13%. While these (admittedly rough) numbers show more inclusion than the majority of the wedding industry, which has been noted for aggressively underrepresenting people of color (Boden 2003), I am more interested in what the content on posts specifically addressing race and ethnicity reveal about what kind of ‘diversity’ work is being done APW and OBB.

In 2010 Stallings addressed emails she had received from several OBB users accusing the predominantly white editorial staff of tokenism when they applied the Couples of Color tag to advertising and user submitted posts without the discretion or consent of the party that submitted it. To address this issue, OBB conducted a user survey and found that the majority of responding users (86.5%) had a favorable or neutral opinion of the tag. It was not the tag itself that was causing the issue, but rather the fact

that the editorial staff took it upon themselves to label people, often only using visual cues:

Based on comments, it feels clear that the issue is not the tag itself, but whether or not we as editors are applying it to people without their knowledge or consent. Everyone seems to agree: people can call themselves whatever they want, but it's inappropriate for Offbeat Bride editors to visually identify people as "of color." This in mind, we're committing to only applying the tag to wedding profiles where the submitter has either A) checked the "couples of color tag" when they submitted their wedding or B) mentions their race/ethnic background in their wedding story. In this way, we ensure that the tag is only applied to folks who identify (2010b).

The majority of replies to the post were supportive of the idea of self-identification as being sufficient criteria for maintaining the tag, some even going so far as to insinuate that the only people that would have problems with the tag are themselves likely misguided by liberal white guilt. However, user Crystal dissented from this general positive consensus by expressing concern and frustration over the very concept of People of Color because she believed that is still inherently measured against whiteness:

As a so-called "person of color," I completely abhor the term "people of color." I feel that this term reinforces a binary mode of viewing race as simply white vs. non-white, when in reality, white is also a color and race/ethnicity is much more complicated than looking at whether or not someone is white. Furthermore, the moniker "people of color" lumps all non-whites together as if the most salient aspect of their race/ethnicity is simply that they are not white. Black, Asian, Latino, etc. are not the same just because they are not white.

While I certainly enjoy seeing non-white couples and non-white weddings highlighted on OBB in general and would like to be able to search for these weddings, I think it is more respectful and more accurate to tag things exactly as they are, such as "black wedding" or "African wedding," "Chinese wedding" or "East Asian wedding," "Mexican wedding" or "Latino wedding." "People of color" is far too nebulous and encourages all people to continue viewing race solely through the lens of whiteness (2010b).

The editorial staff decided against allowing individual tags for specific ethnicities because "we're a wedding blog, not the census!" However, it is worth pointing out that OBB has an abundance of hyper-specific tags clustering around the topic of niche 'geek' subcultures, which help users find décor, attire and other advertising-driven content. It remains an open question why maintaining something like a 'Latino wedding' tag (even

if supplementary to the Couples of Color tag) would be any more difficult than maintaining 1,400 posts relating to “steampunk”.

APW has recently been pushing to visibly include the issue of race and ethnicity in their editorial posts and open forums in response to the perceived lack of diversity. In this effort, they recruited Rachel Miller as their “resident (half) black feminist” to their editorial staff in 2013. Most of Miller’s posts are about things other than race and ethnicity and include other salient issues for APW users like managing career burnout, ending turbulent friendships and negotiating housework. Most of Miller’s posts about race and ethnicity begin as first person narratives which relate her own experience navigating the wedding world as a racial minority and connects those experiences with more structurally driven analysis.

In the post *Nude Wedding Shoes* When You’re Biracial* (2014b), Miller tackles the sensitive issue of white privilege by describing her struggle to find ‘nude’ colored wedding shoes that actually match her own skin tone. She describes how she searched high and low for a little over a year to find an adequate pair and also how finally finding them filled her with inordinate excitement:

It’s hard to explain why I was so excited about this. They’re just shoes, right? Well, no, they’re not. When you have spent months saying to the designers of the world, “Here, take my money!” and essentially heard them say, “Er...no thanks, we’d rather not,” then they are more than just shoes. They are validation that you exist. We’ve all looked for those unicorn-esque clothes or accessories that just don’t seem to exist outside of our heads or at our price point, but it’s different when you know that the reason you cannot find them is because you’re “Other.”

[...]When we talk about 'white privilege,' this is what we’re talking about. Shoes. Bras. Hair stylists when you’re having a morning wedding three hours from the only person you let touch your hair. Foundation. Goddamn Band-Aids. 'Privilege' is something complicated enough for miles of academic essays, but also as simple as this: nude shoes. Flesh color. Feeling like the capitalists out there know you exist (2013).

The last line is perhaps more telling than Miller intended it to be because it was probably meant to be flippant. The fact that everyday activities of minorities are demoralizingly impeded by a material world designed by people who do not have them in mind produces potent feelings, even in something as 'trivial' as the experience of shoe shopping. Yet her comment points to the fact that the under riding solution these sites pose to the roadblocks that minorities experience when simply trying to carry on with their lives is to make capitalism more efficient by incorporating the needs and desires of more people and not to question if capitalism's selective exclusion, even if inadvertently, works towards other ends antithetical to the interests of minorities progressive businesses wish to incorporate.

APW user KC complimented Miller on how relatable she made the topic of white privilege and thanked her for opening her eyes to the inequality that had previously been imperceptible to her:

Until this morning, the limitations provided by retailers in the range of "nude" items has never crossed my mind. I've never thought of "white privilege" in these terms and at this scope. I suppose that because I do fall into one of those "50 shades of white girl," I've never been forced to notice. What an eye opening article this is!

The day-to-day scope of white privilege had not occurred to KC because she had not experienced this variety of exclusion herself.

Despite the attention I have paid to this specific topic, the actual coverage of the issue of race and ethnicity on APW and OBB has been sporadic, with the comments section still predominantly attracting majority white users. While I cannot say definitively why there is an apparent lack of racial and ethnic diversity on these websites, the content I have observed suggests that this is not necessarily a 'race problem' per se, but rather a

racialized class problem that is imperceptible to the editorial staff and users because, frankly, there are a lot of lower income and extremely budget conscious white users on OBB and APW. That is to say, the relative lack of users of color and infrequency of user-submitted posts featuring people of color is not necessarily because OBB and APW are hostile towards people of color. Rather, this apparently lack may stem from wider social and economic gaps that are a result of unequal distribution of cultural capital. This may affect racial minority disproportionately, but it also has a substantial impact on lower earning white people.

The mixture of low-earning users with users already established in their professional career, as well as the educational debt load many users of all stripes carry, gives the appearance of class diversity. However, there is an invisible bar to enter into the conversation at OBB and APW, which is based in a specific kind of linguistic prowess that comes from education and comfort in middle-class emotional sensibilities. To be clear, I am not suggesting that poor minorities do not possess the faculties of introspection or critical reasoning, nor am I suggesting that they are unable to articulate political ideas. What I am saying is that, because the vernacular of politics in these spaces is that of self-help, discussion here requires a high degree of literacy in psychological forms of hyper-reflexivity in a way that is so seemingly approachable that it appears natural. Illouz (2008, 2012) argues that one of the predominant ways in which class is being both subtly transformed and reproduced is through the emotional styles deployed by people with differing varieties of cultural and material power. She suggests that the 'new' middle class, or those whose material positions are less secure but who also

possess a great deal of cultural capital are those most likely to deploy psychological frames. When employment was listed along with the names of people getting married under the ‘Couples of Color’ tag on OBB, there was a predominant number of occupations that require college degrees, with many pooling around careers in technology, education and the arts. This would suggest that the racial and ethnic diversity on these sites represents similar class contingents as the predominant white counterparts.

The naturalization of class reproduction via marriage is only disrupted when users are marrying across class. In the February 2014 guest post, *Marrying Up: How Getting Married Forced Me to Face My Class Privilege* Liz Sullivan describes how marrying into a family of millionaires made her realize the relative material comfort of her own childhood. Here are some select quotes from that post:

[...]The first time I felt our class difference acutely was when we decided to try to plan a trip to Ireland with his family. I was invited along, but when I saw the plane tickets were \$1300, I explained that I just didn’t have the money to make that happen. After much discussion, his parents offered to pay for my plane ticket. I was thankful and overwhelmed and excited about visiting a new country. *I also felt guilty as fuck. It somehow felt like a betrayal of my family to accept such a gift, since they would have given it to me if they could have.*

Growing up, there were some instances of “no that’s too expensive,” but there were many more of “sure, we can do that.” I had an allowance, my dad turned over his 1987 Mustang when I turned sixteen, I didn’t have to work in college, and I graduated with relatively minimal debt. Our family was solidly, and as far as I remember, happily, middle class. And while I knew there were people that had more than us, and people that had less, the concept of class was outside my realm of thinking[...]

[...]But despite having a grand old time, we butted up against class issues in awkward and weird ways. We had different ideas of what was “expensive.” Visiting with his family often included an international flight and a weeklong vacation, whereas visiting mine meant visiting suburbia for the weekend and playing cards. With his parent’s help, we eventually bought a house in San Francisco. I should say, he bought a house because I couldn’t significantly contribute enough to be included on the paperwork. I simultaneously wanted to celebrate and throw up. I still have trouble verbalizing most of the time that we own our home.

On top of feeling out of my element, it felt ridiculous and insensitive to be complaining about vacations and buying a house and not having to watch my cash flow like a hawk. I felt pressure to feel grateful and excited, instead of uncomfortable and undeserving. I had no framing for how to

think about class or class differences. When I tried to talk about feeling like I was straddling two worlds, people looked at me like I was insane[...]

[...]Most of the tension stemmed from the expectations and internalized feelings I had about what it meant to be wealthy. And I felt (and continue to feel) conflicted about enjoying luxuries that weren't available to my family and friends. I also started to realize that my class privilege, while expanded by my relationship with Alex, wasn't new. I had grown up with a ton of privilege and opportunities that I hadn't recognized. Which also meant I had been living in a bubble where I didn't realize how that privilege was influencing my way of being in the world...

[...]My relationship with Alex blew my relationship with class, wealth, and privilege out of the water. I'm so thankful for it, and it's also overwhelming and messy and sometimes exhausting. Once I started digging into my class privilege, my eyes were opened to my white privilege. I started exploring my feminism more deeply and intentionally. This new lens has made me literally question my life's purpose, and the decisions I make every day...So many people say, "marry rich," like it's all gold plated hummingbirds and rainbows. Like it will solve all your problems. Instead, I found that marrying rich brought up a lot more shit than it solved. It's made me more acutely aware of the privilege I've held my whole life and has made me commit my life to fighting for justice in a way that I never would have otherwise.

In the context of this particular post, discussion of the intersection of white privilege and class privilege becomes a frame through which to understand and give meaning to psychological pain. Class only becomes perceptible through intimate contact with someone of a different class. The comments users left made clear that the majority of cross-class intimate contact began in college which suggests upward mobility for those coming from less well-off families (and the debt load incurred in attempting to move up via education) and secure class reproduction for those coming from families with more means. This discussion of class is oriented towards giving users a ways of talking across the gap in expectations that arise when people come from very different backgrounds in order to manage guilt, anxiety and anger. It also acknowledges that, since marriage is the institution of class reproduction par excellence, the wedding is an event for people crossing the class divide to recognize the gap in expectations that would otherwise go interrogated if it were not for the eruption of conflict over seemingly trivial details.

It's important to note that structural frames are deployed in this instance for the sake of emotional management. The concept of structural privileges becomes a tool to name and articulate more precisely what is emotionally wrong, so as to be able to more accurately discuss the well-spring of bad feelings that may inhibit the utopian pleasure of the wedding or egalitarian domestic partnership. To be clear, I do not wish to diminish the painful and confusing grounded experience people have in their daily lives when confronted by situations that make them realize their own structural fortune or lack thereof. Nor do I wish to deny the deep ambivalence that arises in the midst of even the most seemingly mundane decision making with this new knowledge floating around in the back of the mind. My point is that this specific post, given its context within the rest of the website, setting the parameters of a tolerable class consciousness; it gives users an immediately useful way of thinking about their own heretofore unnamed confusion or hurt without expanding their horizon of action beyond clearer communication with their partner and family. This reorients the culpability of the perpetuation of inequality into something essentially emotional as opposed to material.

It is telling that Sullivan concludes her post with the fact that, even now securely within her marriage, her name is not on the deed to the house in San Francisco she calls home and that, if something went wrong in her otherwise happy, egalitarian partnership, she would be locked out of her husband's trust fund and earnings due to the prenuptial agreement that she had signed before her lovely wedding. While her conclusion follows the cycle of remystification characteristic of the genre, the internal inequality that is still imbedded within her own marriage lingers past her words.

Meeting Them Where they are and Leading them Back Around

There is no denying that OBB and APW do indeed ‘raise awareness’ and bring some ‘diverse’ perspectives to a ‘wider’ (predominantly straight, white and professional) audience. There is also no denying the validation that brides of color feel seeing themselves included in the wedding fantasy and having their specific emotional and logistical concerns addressed. This affirmative representation takes care to recognize the varied consumer preferences and ways of life that people of color have, which have been largely ignored by the wider wedding industry. The participation of people of color in niche subcultures, the very existence of LGBTQ people of color, even the simple acknowledgement that many black brides do not want to chemically process or manually straighten their hair for their wedding still largely remains beyond the purview of the rest of the industry. These spaces also provide ‘normalization’ and celebration of LGBTQ unions and a vocabulary for users unfamiliar with how to engage those particular communities to respectfully ask questions and show their support.

Many would argue, the editorial staff and users of OBB and APW included, that expanding the wedding industry to incorporate the tastes of marginalized brides and allow them to feel the transformative joy of the wedding is an important feminist task because it extends (a particular vision of) the utopian promise of egalitarian partnership to more people and empowers them to live the change they want to see in the world. However, following Gilian Howie in **Between Feminism and Materialism: a Question of Method** (2010), I would argue that it is important to keep in mind that incorporating previously underserved and marginalized populations into a market as sprawling and

bloated as the wedding industry is also an important strategy for staving off profit decline. As Keene admits in her own book, the wedding industry expanded rapidly even through The Great Depression. Despite the fact that people are apparently currently pulling back on wedding spending, the industry as a whole still appears to be recession proof (2012:58-59). Addressing marginalized people is a way for vanguards of the wedding industry like OBB and APW to carve out a space for themselves and then expand their products and services to a more general audience. It also gives a template for more established wedding resources like TK to expand their own offerings. The feminist critique of the wedding industry that circulates on these sites is not out to abolish it, but is rather about making it more efficiently meet more people's needs. Yet, extending markets to incorporate previously ignored populations without confronting the problematic logic of capitalist accumulation is only a half solution at best. This is because, through the inevitable cycle of financial crises, the newly incorporated will be the first to be jettisoned from whatever sphere of accumulation they have previously made 'progress' in:

Indifferent to the extra-economic identities—except insofar as they enable the extraction of surplus value and promote the circulation of commodities—capitalism, if we can anthropomorphize for a moment, also exacerbates cultural differences. Differentiated markets and differentiated labor forces facilitate the extraction of surplus value and increase the range of consumption. This presumes a history of social practices, habits, and values, which may or may not come into tension with the (uneven) efficient extraction of surplus value. Indifference to extra-economic identities, combined with the exacerbation and entrenchment of hierarchical cultural differences, creates additional conflict and tension: absorbed, managed or reconciled often within the cultural realm[...]. In response to the global economic crises, these tensions and conflicts will become amplified, and history shows us that conservative retrenchment will reinforce hierarchies, stereotypes, and political and social asymmetries (Howie 2010:204).

Instead of steamrolling diversity or pushing people to culturally homogenize, capitalism needs diversity to expand. Even if the editorial staffs and users of OBB and AWP are

actually sincere about their commitment to alleviating social inequality, the for-profit means they use to raise awareness are antithetical to their cause because the market imperative for profitability is actually indifferent to questions of justice. It is still important to pay attention to things like OBB and APW because, with their emphasis on empowerment, celebration and normalization they provide a snapshot at how the work of capitalist incorporation is being done on the ground.

Part of the reason discussions of diversity on OBB and APW are so successful is because they are done in an intentionally non-threatening way that meets people where they are; with the assumption of only passing familiarity with the grounded experience of marginalization (the obvious expectation being, of course, womanhood broadly understood). If the writer of blog posts found on these sites, be they a member of the editorial staff or a guest poster, expresses anger at all it is toward an abstracted notion of society at large and never at OBB and APW users, who are supposed to be their allies and fellow social skeptics. OBB and AWP gently raises the issue of things like white privilege so as to engage in further dialogue that lets all readers share their opinions and experiences without alienating the core audience. The strategy of gentleness is worthy of inspection because it itself is symptomatic of the very privilege it seeks to alleviate via awareness-raising discussion. On the countless occasions women of color are reminded of the material and social barriers that reinforce their structural disadvantage and cultural degradation, it is never gentle or not alienating.

The ability to meet people where they are is an important strategy for activist and critical theorists to have if we are serious about expanding critical consciousness within

our communities and far beyond. Yet, it is important to remember that these are not organic communities or anything remotely similar to a conception of the public sphere as described by Habermas. Perhaps the latter half of that statement is obvious but I also want to take the time to assert that the kind of discussion that occurs on OBB and APW should also not be conceptualized as a kind of counterpublic posited by Fraser "...where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (1990:67)" and, in fact, it would be dangerous to do so. Rather, these 'communities' are, borrowing a phrase from Illouz, primarily *aggregates of private consumers* in the midst of assembling the presentation of themselves as feminist brides or grappling to understand themselves as feminist wives/partners. These sites rest on the radical laurels of feminism and are rewarded by consumers for fearlessly confronting difficult social issues without them having to give particularly radical strategies to confront structural problems beyond professional advancement, psychological introspection and talking it out.

The line between public and private is fuzzy and a source of ambivalence. The wedding as an event is so fraught precisely because it directly rides the tension between people's private choices and their public lives. But these sites are not weddings in themselves, they are interactive representations of weddings and wedding planning. They are for-profit, heavily moderated lifestyle websites that take as their subject matter 'progressive' social change and politics to supplement their primary mission of facilitating that production and consumption of weddings. Much in the same way that, like Weber observed, a true believer taking up politics in the name of reform must, at

some point, grapple with the violence that gave him legitimacy and might have to use it against the very people he sought to advocate for, entering the market with a political and social agenda is like making a Faustian deal with the devil. At some point, the ‘progressive’ work of OBB and APW must confront the market imperative for profitability. Understood in this light, the decision to function as choice feminist website and publish (a limited ranged of) dissenting viewpoints might have as much to do with appealing to a broader consumer base as it does with the editorial staffs’ discomfort with being ‘feminist gatekeepers’.

Both Keene and Stallings insist that the profit generating part of the sites is secondary to their core mission of facilitating discussion and helping couples achieve peace and joy through their wedding planning process. The emphatic insistence on APW’s advertising recruitment page that “**We’re not in this to make as much money as possible.** (I know. Seriously.) (*emphasis theirs*)” is a popular sentiment echoed by both OBB and APW’s editorial staffs. But this sentiment obscures the fact that profit is still being made at someone’s expense.

With this in mind, perhaps what is absent from the site is as telling as what actually appears. It is remarkable how civil user’s interactions are towards each other. After all, these interactions happen on the internet; a place not well known for fostering discussions where people can respectfully disagree. This level of pleasant sociability probably has less to do with the friendly and tactful nature of OBB and APW users and more to do with the fact that all posts are actively moderated by the editorial staff. This is, of course, to some extent necessary: anyone who has been online, especially to content

that has any kind of progressive political or social message, knows that discussions are often impossible to maintain because of the influx of anonymous hateful comments, to say nothing of third parties advertising spam links. However, I want to suggest that this moderation also could potentially justify the exclusion of certain points of view that are not profitable to the site, no matter their intellectual validity. To wit, a portion of APW's comment policy demonstrates this possibility:

Don't leave critical comments on reader wedding posts. This is not the place to start a critical discussion. People who are being brave enough to share one of the most important and emotional moments of their lives deserve your respect. A mean (or even intellectually critical) comment on a Wedding Graduate post is like peeing in their guest book.

In this view, respect for another user requires bracketing intellectually legitimate criticism from comments about their wedding. Being at all negative about another bride's wedding is apparently tantamount to urinating on it. There is a 'time and place' for criticism and those spaces where dissent is tolerated are predesignated by the owners of the sites and not by their users. This forecloses the possibility of dissenting viewpoints really becoming disruptive to mechanics of the site. Rather, OBB and APW incorporate critical introspective pieces from guest posts and the editorial staff like those quoted through the chapter along with open forum posts on specific themes that solicit user response several times a week. These foster a warm sense of community and absorb dissent so that it does not contaminate the more frequent post oriented towards consumption, be it a vendor spotlight, a DIY décor tutorial, or featured weddings. The enforced chorus of praise in the comments section goes a long way towards making users feel comfortable about showing off their weddings to strangers online. As I will argue in

the next chapter, the very profitability of OBB and APW hinge on users feeling comfortable sharing intimate details of their wedding experience freely.

OBB and APW often point out how open they are to publishing dissenting view points and how important it is for users to be critical of the wedding media they consume, actively inviting scrutiny onto themselves. But this invitation for scrutiny actually functions as a way to deflect it because the posts established to hash out pressing issues are so thoroughly saturated with the language and logic of self-help in the market context that the possibilities for action beyond discussion usually still remain in the realm of emotional management and professional advancement. Psychological introspection is an indispensable aspect of feminist activism and critique but in these spaces the specific emphasis on it allows the majority of straight, white users to confront their own misgivings about social inequality in a way that affirms that they are fundamentally well-intentioned, and therefore avoids any personal implication in the perpetuation of social inequality. Yet, this does not change the fact that the intimate sphere of marriage and the family is one of the most important spaces where class inequality is culturally and materially reproduced.

CHAPTER THREE: BUYING AND MAKING THE WEDDING

So far, I have described what alternative OBB and APW posit to the mainstream wedding industry and what constitutes the feminist political and social work that these sites offer, paying specific attention to how they articulate choice, diversity, and social inequality. This chapter deals with the main mission of these sites; how they facilitate and proscribe advice about the production and consumption of feminist weddings. What kind of advice are OBB and APW giving users about how to navigate the many consumer choices they are faced with? How does this relate to the often strained financial positions of the majority of their users? How does their relationship with advertisers and vendors impact the advice they give and shape the user experience more generally?

Making it Your Own: Personalization, Ambivalence and Ownership

There is a distinct ambivalence about consumption, money and authenticity that runs through both APW and OBB. Both Keene and Stallings reject the banal ‘personalization’ of the bloated, standard industrial wedding. In both of their paperback guide books, they reserve particular vitriol for monogrammed napkins because they are the paragon of what they reject: cost inflating, disposable minutia that is so ubiquitous that their gilded presence seem obligatory, yet the napkins ultimately hold little meaning for the couple being married. This umbrage towards the banal personalization of the wedding package is not necessarily rooted in a rejection of the utopian promise of

consumerism. Rather, it is an internalization of it because it only rejects the imperfect commodities that promise pleasure and meaningfulness and not the very idea that commodities can bring authentic pleasure and meaning to one's life. The big white wedding espoused by the WIC is impersonal; monogrammed napkins don't say anything about you except the first letter of your name. It is not necessarily that monogrammed napkins are inherently evil, it is the idea that you are obligated to have them, and that your initials are sufficiently meaningful, that seems problematic. OBB and APW's editorial staffs and users agree: wanting nice things for your wedding is not a bad thing (that's why these sites exist, after all) but only so long as it is done with consciousness and intent and *not* to meet anyone else's expectation of what a wedding 'should' look like or to 'keep up' with anyone else's wedding. APW user Kestrel spoke to this sentiment when commented on the post *Your Wedding is Not Timeless: You Cannot Escape the Zeitgeist* (Keene 2013b), which specifically addressed users' fear of making risky wedding choices that might potentially date them in photos in the coming decades:

I think there is a way to make things timeless though - to make them absolutely true to yourself.

Now, granted, this supposes that you won't change all that much throughout your life which is obviously false, but there are some things about me that haven't changed since I was old enough to remember!

[...]That's what I hope our wedding will show - that it suits us and that we'll likely keep doing the same things. Neither of us are terribly trendy, so we do tend to choose things that are more 'classics'.

And while certain things about our wedding will certainly be dated (we're having an Up! [a Disney-Pixar's 2009 film] themed wedding so obviously that will date it!) I think that the overall day won't scream 2014!!!! but rather LOOK IT'S US!!

Krestrel associates an essentialist view of the authentic self with a sense of timelessness that will be recognizable in retrospect, even if her Disney-Pixar themed details might look of a certain time period in the photos for years to come.

The things users make and buy for their weddings should ideally be feel-good reflections of the couple being married, according to these sites. It should not only reflect their taste, interests and budget, but should ultimately reinforce the joyful spirit of the occasion. Essentially, the stuff of the wedding should be meaningful and enjoyable but take a backseat to the emotional gravity of the wedding day. The emphasis on the idea that the décor, dress, refreshments and food should melt easily into the background to foreground the love of the couple and the connectedness of the community is also one of the main ways that OBB and APW use to distinguish themselves from the rest of the wedding industry, which they characterize as being pathologically materialistic and image-obsessed. In the post *The Wedding Industrial Complex, As It Were* (Keene 2009) user accordionsandlace describes how the expectations set by the industry translates to real emotional struggle within people and among their loved ones:

[...][E]ven [those] us of who want floofy dresses and a fancy day still, still, get an enormous amount of flack over not doing everything just. so. To exact standards. And that is, at the end of the day, supremely fucked up. And I think a lot of us are hanging out here, saying "hey, I want to 'opt in' but how do I do that without losing myself?" and it kills me that this industry is basically designed to make one lose oneself.

And sure, I'm not anti-business in general, and I like blogging about shoes and dresses, but I still think that the commodification of the sacred and of love is a really problematic thing. I think if we look at how riled up women can get over minute details on wedding websites around the internet, the success of that commodification is obvious, and it has made something very special very vulgar.

But you are right that we have agency when we "opt in". Absolutely. And I've been thinking a lot lately about how even those of us who talk about doing things our way, being indie or alternative or offbeat, we're part of the machine as well. It's easy for us to pretend like we are above it all, but the truth is that, a) it's a matter of scale (we just don't go AS nuts about weddings as the Industry asks us to), and b) our aesthetic is often a bit different. And I agree that that's not necessarily a

"huge problem" in that we just need to be thoughtful about our choices and, again, not lose ourselves in it. But I don't think that most of us are nearly as subversive as we think we are sometimes[...]

This comment voices the uncertainties inherent in trying to navigate the offerings of the wedding industry, including 'alternative' offerings, with a clear conscience and intellectual honesty without descending into obvious materialism. Ultimately, accordianandlace seems at peace with the fact that she is not as subversive as she characterizes others believe themselves to be, but ultimately she is still troubled by the commodification of 'sacred love'.

The idea that the accoutrement of the wedding should fall seamlessly in to the background to foreground the love of the couple, the joy of the community and the strengthened bonds of all seems, at first glance, to at least partially abolish the aspects of commodity fetishism that the WIC reinforces by making the wedding all about things like Swarovski crystal place cards and 4-tier imported orchid center pieces. Yet, this ethos actually further obscures the exploitative objective social relationships that it took to produce the food, favors, dress, invitations, etc., that are supposed to be the effortlessly happy backdrop from which genuine human bonds emerge. The effort paid to make the wedding less about the material objects that prop it up and more about the positive relationships that are forged and reproduced attempts to reinject transparency and immediacy into the murky and fraught enterprise that is contemporary consumption. But this emphasis on experiential feeling actually further obfuscates the material reality of social relationships. The bride's frustration at not being able to achieve authenticity in her wedding without incurring undue emotional, financial or ethical penalty reflects the larger impossibility of all consumers with any degree of conscience to know without a

shadow of doubt that they have chosen correctly. This overhanging doubt is not a personal failure on the part of the bride, but rather is a result of the social totality which is predicated on the transformation of social relationships into commodity relations.

This impossibility of being an authentic subject free from the constraints of a social world built on exploitation might be the very reason users enthusiastically take this idea of consumption for the sake of self-expression, rather than obligation, to heart. It gives an air of democratic legitimacy to the tired trope of consumer individualism, where the idea that no decision is better or worse than any other so long as it is ‘right for you’ becomes the compass rose that joins pragmatism and sentimentality, orienting users through an otherwise uncertain process. Yet, this emphasis on making the wedding day your own produces its own problems too. Or, as OBB user Emmy commented:

I think this belief that all things have to Mean Something—and the related fear that OMG, my wedding is not offbeat enough!!—is an unintended and unfortunate side effect of resisting the Wedding Industrial Complex. Like we get this idea in our heads that because we don't like the WIC, we have to do a 180 and be totally different. And then some brides have the same issues they'd have if they were having a WIC-y wedding, trying to attain this "perfect" thing that doesn't actually exist.

I definitely went through this. I actually found myself wondering if maybe we shouldn't get married because we couldn't build this production where everything had sentimental value. Maybe that meant we didn't know each other well enough to get married. And I realized that's crazy.

So my new wedding motto is "Do You." Have the wedding that you want. Whether it's totally by the book, totally different, super meaningful, just random, something you threw together in two weeks (what my parents did!) or whatever. Just Do You. (2013)

Emmy locates the source of stress as being rooted in the desire to subvert all the expectations associated with the standard weddings and posits the solution of “do you”, or do what intuitively feels right, as the solution to the hand-wringing over meaningfulness of small details. To successfully “do you” in these spaces seems to

require actively choosing to let go of doubt-based fear that was set in motion because of this emphasis on intent. Demonstrating that you have gotten over the very apprehension that wedding critical thinking entails means that you're doing it right because it is not *what* one chooses but *how* one choose that ultimately determines that the wedding was a success. Getting to that place, though, seems to *require* the period of hyper-reflexive hand-wringing in order to successfully recognize and appreciate the fact that you have attained the necessary intuition. Users who themselves admit to having never reached the moment of cathartic intuition, or realizing the pleasures of wedding planning too late, are often those the most adamantly advising others to not sweat the small stuff.

For users, achieving the feeling that they and their partner are throwing a wedding on *their* terms, no matter what that actually looks like, is *the* singular most important marker of success on OBB and APW. Despite the fact that OBB advertises itself as an enclave for many niche consumer subcultures, it welcomes with open arms 'Offbeat Lite' brides, or those whose aesthetic runs more in line with the standard tropes of the rest of the wedding industry, to use their resource, participate in discussion and share their special day via guest posts and submissions to the Real Wedding sections. The inclusion of Offbeat Lite brides reinforces the idea that being offbeat is not actually defined by the content of consumer choices, but the ethos with which individuals navigate the many options that confront them. User Little Red Lupine expressed what this ethos of consumer intent meant to her in the post, *Battle Cry of Offbeat Lite*, by guestposter Ang (2010):

[...]I fell in love with OBB and OBT [Off Beat Tribe] because it's a place I can contemplate the choices that are right for me and my dude at our wedding. As long as we're true to ourselves, that (depressingly) makes us offbeat in the grand scheme of weddings out there. OBB is all about thinking about why you make choices for your wedding rather than just checking items off a list just because it's what you're supposed to do. It's about finding the right traditions to continue and

the right ones to drop. I'd never heard of an anniversary box, and never contemplated a civil ceremony before I came to OBB. I'm not doing anything at my wedding to be offbeat. It's all about having the best party to celebrate finding the guy I want to spend my life with.

Little Red Lupine credits OBB with empowering her with new options she would have otherwise not have encountered as well as a positive attitude to be able to decide for herself what is right for her celebration. She also expresses dismay over the fact that the majority of wedding planning resources out there encourages people to be mechanistic about their choices, to the detriment of the meaningfulness of the whole event. Encouraging the participation of people that lean towards more conventional tastes is, of course, also a deeply pragmatic business move because it expands OBB's potential audience beyond people strictly interested in things like black and neon goth-chic wedding dresses, Alice in Wonderland themed invitations or miniature Dr. Who Tardis party favors.

The Budget

But taste is not the only, or perhaps even the most important, factor that influences what OBB and APW users actually end up buying or making for their wedding. In reality, the amount of money that the couple and their loved ones have to spend on the wedding has a substantial impact on what actually manifests on the day of and, as a result, what kind of advice OBB and APW dole out about buying and making wedding items. What kind of advice does OBB and APW proscribe about the budget? How does this reflect the needs of their users? Are there any other factors that influence this advice?

The wedding budget is a deeply emotional and often volatile topic on these sites because it is often a topic that compounds the piled up familial, romantic and material

conflicts and make users realize the gap between their wedding fantasies and realities. On top of the trying to reduce stress associated with negotiating intimate relationships and finances, the editorial staffs feel as if it is important to emphasize that budgets are not a *moral* issue. An editor's note attached to a wedding from the How We Did It subsection of APW's Real Weddings section sums up the emphasis on budgetary non-judgment nicely:

Talking about costs can be tricky, since we're all working with different budgets in various locations across the world, and our cultural narrative does its best to shame anyone that tries to talk about numbers that fall outside its norm. (And heck, sometimes even the numbers that fall within it.) So one of our goals of this series is to showcase a diverse range of weddings and budgets, which means we want to see your \$2K weddings just as much as your \$200K weddings (and obviously everything in between). In short, we want to make APW a safe space to talk about money and weddings where all budgets are honored, since y'all know there isn't enough of that online... (2013) (italic emphasis theirs)

The APW editorial staff characterizes financial shaming as an over-arching cultural trait after acknowledging that different regions have different norms about how much to spend on a wedding. This editor's note also demonstrates that budgetary difference is incorporated into the larger idea of what constitutes diversity here, which could be interpreted as an attempt to get at larger class diversity.

On an ideological level, budgetary non-judgment stems from the emphasis that OBB and APW have on non-comparison and non-competition between brides. In the same way that users are encouraged to craft the wedding that is right for them, they are also encouraged to remember that 'my wedding is not your wedding' and, hence, save themselves from the sadness and anxiety that can come with comparison. Budgetary non-judgment is also an attempt at deescalating the scale of gloating commonly associated with financial discussions—this includes the concepts of 'luxury shaming,' or making

people feel bad for having spent too much money on something unnecessary lavish, and ‘one-lowmanship,’ the inversion of one-upmanship where people brag about how little money and effort they put into something. In the post *One-Lowman and Luxury Shame: One More Way your Supposed to Feel Bad about your Stupid Wedding* (Stallings 2013a), OBB user Meg commented on how budgetary judgment was hurting her relationships offline:

This post made me feel so much better. I am getting married in two months, and a close friend of mine is getting married next year. She goes on and on about how budget-conscious she is, how she'd never spend as much as I am on a wedding, how I shouldn't prioritize keeping my family happy over keeping the wedding low-cost...

She's very in-my-face about the fact that she's spending less than \$10k for a wedding of 30 people. We're in the \$20k bracket, but that's because we have two receptions on two continents, each about 80 people, so that his Scottish friends and family don't have to bear the expense of attending a U.S. wedding and vice versa. I've never shared my budget with her, but when I do a dance-of-excitement about booking an amazing and affordable museum-venue in Glasgow, I'm greeted with this nasty comment about how SHE would NEVER spend money on something like that. It's been hard to bite my tongue and not run the numbers for her.

As you can see, Meg feels the brunt of one-lowmanship and luxury shaming in her own life, and credits OBB for validating her hurt feelings and comforting her about the choices she made for her wedding.

On a pragmatic level, this emphasis on non-judgment keeps the peace among users during discussions and also potentially expands APW and OBB's audience to more affluent users who have more money to spend on advertising vendors. Despite this attempt to woo more affluent brides, the majority of users turning to these resources are still extremely budget-minded. As I argued in chapter one, part of their success is because they provide potent emotional and intellectual justification for smaller, humbler weddings to a generation of young women socialized into the expectations that weddings should be ostentatious and expensive. The numbers describing the ‘average’ cost of weddings in the

United States that are most often circulated in the news media are almost always from resources like TK, whose surveys are rife with selection bias and do not account for the fact that a single million dollar wedding is going to skew the ‘average’ upward. Oremill (2013) notes that the most widely circulated number from the 2012 edition of TK’s Real Weddings Survey was the national average of \$27, 427, which is almost a full ten thousand dollars higher than the national median of \$18,086 found, but not publicly reported, by the same study. While this median is still a rough representation of what wedding budgets look like nationally and does not incorporate regional variation, what it points to is the fact that tighter budgets are indeed the norm.

I could not find the exact numbers that broke down what kind of budgets APW users are working with. One might expect a ‘practical’ approach to wedding budgets would include meticulously keeping track of expenses but actually Keene feels strongly about the fact that she does not necessarily ‘believe’ in exact budgets. She argues that holding onto a specific, often arbitrary number, brings undue frustration and guilt from the bride and sucks the joy out of purchases that would otherwise be ‘so right’ for the couple (Keene 2012). She, of course, clarifies that she isn’t advocating budgetary irresponsibility and wants users to keep realistic expectations of what they can actually have, given what they can really afford. Just because a wedding photograph looks shabby chic does not, in fact, mean that it was at all thrifty to cobble together. Instead of a lackadaisical approach, she posits that it is rather a more forgiving financial ethos, especially since most weddings run over budget to some extent anyway. In the post *Open Thread: Real Wedding Budgets This isn’t Fight Club People. Lets Chat* (Keene 2013c),

the majority of users who volunteered concrete numbers for their wedding seem to pool between five and fifteen thousand dollars, with those living in extensive urban areas paying more and a few weddings over the thirty thousand dollar mark. As of 2013 63.1% of OBB users who responded to the website's budget survey were working with budgets clocking in at or under ten thousand dollars, with an additional 22.1% reporting budgets between ten and twenty thousand dollars. In both cases, those at the higher end of the spectrum often mentioned getting financial assistance from family.

With this in mind, I think it is important to point out that the effort to incorporate consumer recommendations at a variety of (read: more expensive) price points and accommodate more affluent users intellectually and emotionally demonstrates the fact that, despite being in the minority, those with more means are still able to command a great deal of attention from these businesses. At the same time OBB and APW are able to make a name for themselves as the advocates of the budget conscious who are marginalized by other publications even though they are, in fact, closer to the 'norm'. As the tagline to the OBB Shopping section demonstrates, it actually benefits these sites to play into the inflated numbers game too:

The average American wedding costs over \$25,000. I encourage brides to find innovative, thoughtful ways to reduce their bridal budgets, and if you do choose to spend money, spend it on independent vendors and thoughtfully-made merch like the stuff below...

By evoking the high bar set externally by the rest of the industry, the OBB editorial staff is able to win trust from users by empowering them to stay critical about their wedding expenditures and encouraging them to spend their money on 'thoughtfully made' wedding items like those featured in their sponsored posts on their website.

Do-It-Yourself / Do-It-Together

Because budgets are tight for users, Do-It-Yourself (DIY) is a hot topic on OBB and APW. Throughout APW and in the paperback guide book, Keene and the editorial staff suggests that the wedding industry at large expects brides to take up too much of the actual work of making her dream wedding a reality all by her lonesome and suggests instead the alternative idea of Do-It-Together (DIT), or enlisting helpers like family, friends and professionals to aid in sewing aisle runners, icing miniature cupcakes, stamping place cards, sending out invitations, wiring a pavilion in a public park with rented amplifiers, etc., as a way to cut costs, bring people together and add some personal flair to the wedding package. OBB's editorial staff shares this emphasis on not going it alone, even if they do not necessarily use the phrase do-it-together. Indeed, Stalling's account of her own wedding has a very DIT ethos about it, with members of her "freakfest" community coming together to do her makeup, take her portraits, collect ugly mugs for party favors and set up a rave tent on her mother's vast property.

DIT is a response to a recent wave of DIY handy-craft culture that has gained traction as a wedding trend due, in no small part, to the intersection of the economic downturn of the later part of the last decade and the rise of social media. While hand making wedding items is absolutely nothing new, this current manifestation is driven by the beautiful photographs and deceptively simple step-by-step instruction uploaded by 'regular' people on their blogs and circulated via sites like Pinterest, along with promises of money saving, easy personalization and individual expression. Contemporary DIY culture has a strong utopian undercurrent that promises an end product of style and substance that is the result of ethical, unalienated labor. To their credit, OBB and APW

fully acknowledge that DIY/DIT projects are usually taken on by necessity and have the potential to drive brides, grooms and their loved ones crazy, especially if those involved are not necessarily the most adept at crafting to begin with. However, users' desire to engage in DIY/DIT might also have other motives that could potentially cause them additional anxiety or frustration:

For our wedding, I had an overwhelming need to create things that reflected who we were, not how we shopped. So while we built our chuppah to reflect our taste, the real point of point was that it was ours. We'd made it with our own hands. It didn't make our wedding better, but it let us feel more ownership over it.

[...]But having a wedding that looks handcrafted does not mean it is more authentic, grounded or somehow better. DIY Because you need to; DIY to keep your hands busy; DIY because it's fun. But don't DIY because it's [ethically] better. It's not better. It's just more time consuming (Keene 2012).

Keene describes her need to make her own chuppah, the customary canopy that the couple stands under during Jewish wedding ceremonies, as stemming from a desire to take ownership of her wedding and for the décor to reflect something deeper than who she was as a consumer. But she also stresses that making the wedding package, as opposed to buying it, does not make a wedding more ethical or authentic. This contradiction expresses a larger ambivalence on both OBB and APW about the productive aspect of DIY/DIT: making elements of your wedding can make users feel more fully invested in the process, as if it is 'their own' yet it is time consuming and often extremely stressful to manage. Wedding DIY/DIT is also another way brides could potentially try to competitively one-up each other, something these sites actively try to discourage. The tension between necessity, ethics and authenticity that comes to the fore in the midst of figuring out which elements can and should be made by hand by the

couple and their community is yet another layer of conflict feminist brides are confronted with, and given little normative grounding to navigate.

Rebuking the ethical promise of contemporary DIY culture is a pragmatic business move that both OBB and APW make because declaring hand-made weddings superior to ones fully purchased would go against the ethos of non-judgment they both espouse. Endorsing DIY for its own sake could also potentially alienate more affluent users who can afford to outsource their entire wedding and vendors who would potentially spending their money on advertising.

DIT ideally allows the couple and their loved ones to divide and conquer while play on their strengths, reducing the overall level of frustration and fatigue. Or, as APW user Amy M said on the open thread post *How to Delegating Wedding Tasks to Your Friends: Ask and Ye Shall Receive* (2014):

I think the big ideas regarding asking friends to help are 1) Choose a task that fits the person's personality/talents/time commitment available. 2) Communicate very clearly what you want this person to do. Deadlines/timelines are helpful, as are expressing your expectations of what doing a good job at it looks like. 3) Thank them in a way they find meaningful (shoutout during the toasts? Heartfelt thank-you note? Small gift?) 4) Be comfortable delegating. If you're just going to freak out about whether someone is doing something right, either they aren't the right person for the job or you should be doing it yourself. I have helped set up and clean up after friend's weddings many times and when these four elements are involved, my work always feels like a labor of love that I am glad to provide on their special day.

Amy M points out another important point about DIT: for the situation to remain relatively conflict-free, those who are aiding in the wedding effort must be given clear tasks that they would actually be good at and feel adequately appreciated for helping with, which requires adept management skills on the part of the person delegating tasks.

While the idea of DIT allows for a more even distribution of work, the reinforcement of family and community bonds and a less stressed out engaged couple, it

is worth noting that the vast majority of users on OBB and APW are *women* talking about how they are coping with budgets, delegating (or not) craft projects and organizing helpers for the day of the ceremony. While the equal participation of grooms seems to be an expectation in the types of egalitarian relationships users on OBB and APW strive for, guest posts and comments from heterosexual men that are not vendors are few and far between. Even in posts specifically addressing the role of the groom, the authors and commenters are still almost always female users talking about her male partner's experience. Even in the section of the OBB website specifically for grooms, the majority of those participating in the discussion are straight women. This suggests that the female users in heterosexual relationships who make up the vast majority of the site are still spearheading a disproportionate amount of work associated with the wedding, despite being urged to DIT.

This might be for several reasons. Despite the emphasis on equality, grooms may have less genuine interest in the wedding, or still feel as if it is not their place to delegate or intervene. Also, even if OBB and APW are telling them otherwise, brides may still feel as if the majority of the responsibility rests on her shoulders because of social pressure in their offline life from family, friends, or other wedding media. Indeed, DIT has currency as a helpful advice because the contemporary wedding is largely a bride-driven enterprise and being 'given permission' by these sites to seek out help seems almost revolutionary.

Yet, OBB and APW posts sometimes acknowledge that, despite everyone's best efforts, DIY/DIT is sometimes not even worth the trouble. A project might not be worth it because it becomes too much of an inadvertent monetary burden, cause undue stress or

conflict or will simply go unnoticed by wedding guests. OBB guest poster Kristen

Hansen sums this up:

Sometimes projects are just not worth an insane amount of work. Some projects do not deserve to be priorities. For some people, that means the whole damn wedding.

Yes, you heard me.

Maybe your wedding does not deserve the amount of attention you're giving it because you could be doing something more important. Like what, you ask? Living your life[...]

I've been there, actually. My poor husband ended up pulling two all-nighters to do the art for our wedding invitations — a first one doing an amazing digital image, and a second after I pointed out that the first image would not work with the invitation I'd designed. Grand scheme of things, not really worth all the lost sleep and frustration on his part. I'm betting the custom labels I put on all the Jones Soda bottles count, too.

I've seen a lot of posts on the Offbeat Bride Tribe about trying to get all these amazing projects done, finding out things are more expensive or time-heavy than expected, and yet still pulling through with it — only to lament it later[...]

What I'm trying to say is that it really is worth thinking about how important certain projects are to you. Or, to help you evaluate this better, how important is it going to be a month after your wedding? One month after your wedding, when you're starting to settle down, are you going to care about that? Will you wish you'd spent your time and energy on something else? If certain projects really matter, awesome. Do it! If not, then don't. Or just do a quick job of it. Get it done to a level that it deserves. It does not all need to be Martha Stewart-perfect[...] (emphasis mine)

It's important to note that Hansen's description is retrospective advice and, though several users comment about how thankful they were that someone 'gave them permission' to stop in the middle of projects that became too costly or stressful, users do not necessarily know what elements of their wedding will be the most memorable or bring them the most happiness until after the fact. Yet this variety of 'calm down, it doesn't need to be done perfectly—or even at all!' advice crops up in some manifestation again and again on OBB and APW because wedding minutia-induced tunnel vision is so strong while in the trenches of wedding planning that the editorial staff must insure that users do not get overwhelmed by the details and become disenchanted with the process as a whole. Providing cathartic advice that rails against DIY/DIT while still reinforcing the

main message that making stuff for your wedding is supposed to facilitate the fun and togetherness of the wedding allows the misgivings that users feel to be recycled into content designed to recommit them to the task—even if the specific problematic project ends up modified or dropped all together.

On the flip side, users also express remorse for not savoring the moments of producing something hugely important to them and those they love nearly enough. OBB guest poster, mcgillilnancy, discussed how her wedding, much akin to a piece of art someone had been obsessing over for a long period of time, had taken on a vital life of its own:

Now that we are days, mere days, away from the wedding, I cannot help but feel a strange tension. As a friend of mine told me I was the "most intense bride" she'd ever seen, traditional or otherwise, and I wasn't quite sure if I was insulted or proud. My wedding IS intense. I'm going to rent a chainsaw in a few hours to make a project for it. It's a living, breathing entity that has grown out from me and is me. My wedding is a part of who I am, and being a bride is part of who I am now, and both of those are about to go away. Forever.

I think this is the dark side, or the reverse pay off for having a wedding that is uniquely tailored to who you are, DIYed by you and, let's just say it, birthed out of your amazing brain creativity goddess. I've done a lot for my wedding ("I" being me and my partner, I'm just being selfish). I've written and designed the entire ceremony, hand made countless items, created unique seating arrangements, filled everything with beautiful little details that are JUST. SO. US.

So why do I feel so sad?

Why, when I see ads for veils, or new ideas on Offbeat Bride, do I get the pang that those fields are closed to me now and my choices (beloved and perfect choices) have been made and are following an inevitable hurtle towards the finish line? Why do I feel a strange sense of mourning, of loss for this thing I have created, when it hasn't even come to be yet? Why does one of the happiest, and most anticipated events of my life, make me cry just to talk about it.

In some ways, a wedding is a lot like a book, or film. You get all these ideas, shop around for the perfect people, places, and things to fulfill what matches in your head, write it, design it, edit it, comfort it in its birth pains, scream at it in hatred sometimes and eventually, you finish it. But unlike a book or a film, a wedding doesn't hang around in the ether forever (at least, not for most of us). There are pictures, videos, and memories but really, it was a one shot deal, like a shooting star, and now it's over. And it hurts. It hurts to have something that you poured your soul into, your very human spirit, which is to say your fundamental desire to create, finished. Don't get me wrong — I LOVE my wedding! I can't wait for my wedding, I can't wait to be married to my mate, and I think all of it will be wonderful. But in some ways too, it will be painful for me in ways that I can already feel, like the itch of a limb that's gone missing. (2010)

Through the support of OBB and her own creative power mcgillilnancy, who introduced herself as previously uncomfortable with the idea of becoming a bride, felt invigorated by the creativity that she poured into the role. So much so, in fact, that as the wedding drew nearer she was overwhelmed by sadness because it was curtailing the pleasure that she received from discovering and making things, which she felt beautifully reflected her feelings and taste.

DIY/DIT projects are a source of ambivalence for users because they often begin with grand visions reinforced by the very photography that circulates on these sites, but often devolve into stressful hassles that sometimes do not even pan out. Yet, just as often, users get so caught up in the pleasure of creative preparation that they feel as if something is lacking after the wedding is over. OBB user Sonya M sums up the mixed feelings that come with DIY nicely:

I'm 2 months 13 days out from the date, and I'm in hectic hell. I find myself compromising on many small things just so that I can cross them off my list. But at the same time, I don't want our wedding day to come. What will I do when I'm no longer folding book art, or designing my girls bouquets, or weighing how much medieval geek I can throw in without terrifying my poor grandmother. I honestly don't know what I'll do with myself after all the thank you cards are out, and we've processed our Tokyo honeymoon pics for the family.

Sonya M feels in disarray over the many small decisions she must grapple with and yet is also so taken with the pleasure of planning she cannot imagine what she will do with herself once the wedding has actually come and gone.

Vendors and Advertising

How OBB and APW's editorial staff and users understand the role of personalization, the budget and DIY/DIT is vital to understanding how these sites shape the discussion of consumption and production in the wedding. But there's another aspect

to these sites that's worth exploring in these terms: the business aspect. Over the course of this analysis, I have stressed that these are *for-profit business*. How do vendors and advertising influence the content on OBB and APW?

Building strong vendor relationships is something that is very important on both sites. On an ideological level, they believe one of their main missions is to support independent designers, artists and craftspeople for whom weddings make up a great deal of their business. On a pragmatic level, wedding vendor sponsored advertising is how OBB and APW make their money. For their part, users recognize that these are for-profit businesses and are not perturbed by the advertising on these sites because they appreciate the intellectual, emotional, consumer and logistical services they facilitate and the sense of community and affirmation they receive while interacting in these spaces. Or, as OBB user Hannah put it in the post *A Sticky WIC-ket: Off Beat Bride is Part of the Wedding Industrial Complex* (Stallings 2013c):

I've been engaged for almost a year now (and I read wedding blogs for a good year before that). I've saturated myself pretty intensely in wedding media, both traditional and alternative. And know what? Offbeat Bride is one of the only two wedding blogs I still read (the other being East Side Bride). It's because OBB is authentic and thoughtful, but without coming off as try-hards. You post weddings/media from such a variety of couples that it always makes me feel welcome, because I really *believe* that your number one priority is helping me plan a thoughtful and joyous wedding. And your advertisers are a part of that. This is always the place I go to first when I'm looking for a new vendor, because I trust this blog and I trust that you will point me in the right direction. You certainly are a part of the WIC, but in a good way – you are changing it from the inside. You are our mole! And by reading OBB I've become a better consumer in the WIC. Together it makes for change in the industry, and that's a good thing!

APW and OBB are trusted sources for vendor recommendations because users truly believe these businesses around out to change the industry as a whole.

This kind of trust translates to real revenue for vendors and the sites themselves.

The following is an excerpt from APW's call for vendors, and it demonstrates that this trust generates substantial revenue for myriad businesses:

Why APW?

With a zillion wedding blogs out there, why advertise with APW? The two-word answer: reader response. In other words: Bookings. Actual clients that you love. Most wedding blogs are filled with pretty pictures. When readers visit these sites, they're looking for wedding inspiration, pinning pictures to their Pinterest boards, and planning craft projects. When readers visit APW, it's a whole different ballgame. Here, our readers are talking about ideas (100+ comment posts are just the day-to-day over here). Our readers are engaging with the core mission of the site, talking to each other, and investing their time. They genuinely want to support the site, the community surrounding it, and you—our advertisers. Plus, APWers are looking for something specific: vendors that believe in the APW Sanity Pledge. They're not just here to look at pictures; they're here to talk to each other and to find vendors they click with. So you can advertise with that blog with all those readers who are not paying very much attention. Or you can advertise with APW, where all those readers are paying lots of attention. We have 1.25 million pageviews a month, and 400,000+ unique readers a month who really, truly give a shit, and who want to hire you[...]

What Makes Us So Different?

It's not just that APW readers are unique and engaged. The way we run our advertising program is different too.

We're not in this to make as much money as possible. (I know. Seriously.) We only take advertisers that we think are a fit for the site (we won't waste your money otherwise). Plus, our front-page ad numbers are capped by geography, meaning that you'll never be the twentieth photographer in a city with three-hundred readers.

At the heart of our site is a vendor community that is committed to supporting each other. Our advertisers refer clients to one another, help each other out of tight spots, and offer each other advice freely, all in the name of making our community awesome.

Our readers make the best clients. Period. APW readers have a reputation for being the most down-to-earth, laid-back, artist-supporting couples in the world. In addition to being awesome, they've made a commitment to treating wedding vendors like people (and most of the time, like friends). (emphasis theirs)

This call for advertisers is then followed by a long list of testimonials, of which the following are typical:

“The APW reader is looking for more than just pretty pictures to scroll through. They're taking their time to read the blog, looking for guidance, stories, and advice. Actual content. In return, when APW stands behind a vendor in a sponsored post, it carries far more weight to the reader than the wallpaper of your average pretty picture wedding blog. **I ran a single sponsored post which brought in over \$15,000 worth of bookings for the year.** It was one of the best decisions I've made for my business so far.” —Jonas Seaman Photography

“Advertising with APW took my business from part time to far-more-than-full time. Less than a year after I started advertising here I’d dropped all of my other freelance work and had to hire an employee to keep up with the volume. What I really love about the clients who come to me through APW is that while **their weddings vary wildly—everything from food-truck catered picnics to weekend-long wine country affairs**—the vast majority of them are the kind of people I consider to be ‘my people.’ When given the option, most of them pick dive bars over coffee shops for meetings, which is obviously a win.” —Lowe House Events

APW didn’t help me get my wedding photography business off the ground, it actually got it off the ground. Advertising with Meg and her team is a dream, and **the quality of the clients is remarkable.** Not every business client relationship is the right fit, so APW helps make the process easier for both parties by recognizing exactly the kind of business you are and want to be, and helping the right clients find their way to you.—calin+bisous (emphasis theirs)

As you can see, user’s loyalty and high level of engagement are selling points to vendors to spend their advertising dollars at APW because the zealous participation translates to tangible dollars and cents. Not only are advertisers promised good returns on their investment, but also pleasant clients to work with, a sense of community with other independent business owners and development help from the APW staff to aid in the strategic expansion of their brands. By emphasizing that ‘they are not out to make as much money as possible’ APW also highlights that they value quality over quantity in terms of their advertisers and always intend to look out for the best interests of their users. This, in turn, bolsters the trustworthiness of their brand and reinforces to users that APW is a safe place to find other businesses to spend their money on. APW isn’t actually selling anything themselves, but facilitating these transactions through their advertising.

However, paid advertising and posts highlighting specific vendors also create problems for independent business. Essentially, since images of independent artists’ work circulate freely, mingling with other kinds of wedding inspiration photos that make up so much of the content on these sites, many users feel free to copy the original work of art without permission and incorporate them into their weddings without credit or monetary

compensation to the original artist. Some even go so far as to commission the manufacturing of cheaper versions of original designs of dresses and favors, often to anonymous producers in Asia. In a plea to OBB users to reconsider any plans to plagiarizing designs from sponsored vendors, Stallings recognizes her own ambivalence when it comes to the slippery slope of taking inspiration from the internet:

I fully recognize the grey area and my own weird inconsistencies. I don't have a problem with ripping off a \$10,000 couture gown ... but it strikes me as downright icky to rip off a \$500 wedding invitation produced by an artist living in a studio apartment. I fully recognize that this opinion is indefensible, but I guess I'm saying I'm all for piracy, as long as you're ripping off The Big Guys. For me personally, it feels fucked up when folks start ripping off The Little Guys. (2010).

Stallings sets herself up as the advocate of ‘the little guys’ who make up the bulk of her advertising base, while admitting to being fine with plagiarizing designs from more opulent regions of the wedding industry.

While the majority of their sponsors are small businesses, it is important to point out that both OBB and APW make advertising revenue from companies well outside the community of independent artists and crafts people they foreground to gain trust and legitimacy from users. OBB’s sponsors include a partnership with the honeymoon registry website travelersjoy.com, the wedding website hosting and planning service mywedding.com and Brilliant Earth, purveyors of conflict-free diamonds and other ‘ethically sourced’ fine jewelry. APW’s corporate partnerships include Amtrak’s sponsorship of Keene’s 2012 book tour, a makeup tutorials series from Procter & Gamble and APW’s *Ultimate Guide to Wedding Dress Shopping*, written as part of Ford Motor Company’s style guide that accompanied the launch of the 2014 Fiesta hatchback. These corporate sponsors are presented with the same casual friendliness as indie designers

receive, including a note of gratitude for the opportunity these partnerships present and a cheerful reminder to users that sponsorship is how these sites can further their ‘real’ mission of helping couples in love achieve meaningful weddings. This style of advertising is supposed to keep sponsored content in harmony with the editorial offerings and maintain the genuine engagement of users:

Offbeat Bride is an advertiser-supported site — although we're quite picky about who we chose to feature as sponsors and tend towards indie businesses that specifically cater to nontraditional needs. We make a point to ensure that all of our sponsored content is clearly marked as such, both on the site and on our social media feeds. We believe that, like weddings, advertising can be done with intent and respect — it doesn't have to be about flashing banners and PUNCH THE MONKEY!!! any more than a wedding has to be about flouncy chair covers and \$100,000 floral budgets.

The intent of an advertisement is equated with the flashiness of its appearance. To be respectful to users, advertisements are subtly incorporated into the content so that users can interact with them like they would emotionally or intellectually driven content.

As I've said, this interaction is a vital component to what drives the profitability of these sites. As Banet-Wiesser (2012) argues, the formation of a brand identity is a collaborative effort between those who own and design the brand and those who consume and make additional meaning out of it. A brand does not simply mean what its creators originally intend, but rather, its meaning can be augmented or contested by the consumers who interact with it. The internet has made it possible for regular people to easily circulate descriptions, opinions and photographs of the things they have made and purchased farther and wider than their immediate relationships like never before. The interaction consumers have with brands is deeply integrated into the daily leisure activities people engaged in online. However, this is not a leisure activity done in a neutral setting where everyone has equal say in how the content is used or distributed.

With this in mind, it's important to point out that OBB and APW directly benefit from the free labor that users voluntarily engage in when they write comments, guest posts and submit personal narratives and photographs about their own weddings. The kind of devotion users feel for APW and OBB is the reason that they are happy to spend hours of time consuming and producing content for them. This is because the editorial staff facilitate a sense of community that users find real emotional support in.

Despite the fact that their engagement is what makes these sites extremely attractive for advertisers, APW's Terms of Use page makes clear that users are not entitled to any revenue generated from the content they produce for the site, even if they do technically retain ownership of it to reproduce elsewhere:

...We do not claim ownership of the UGC [User Generated Content], however, by posting, transmitting, sharing or otherwise making available UGC on the site, you automatically grant, or warrant that the owner of such UGC has expressly granted to us the royalty-free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive right and license to use, reproduce, adapt, translate and distribute such UGC (in whole or in part) worldwide and/or to incorporate it in other works in any form, media or technology now known or hereafter developed for the full term of any copyright that may exist in such UGC. You also permit any other user to access, view, store or reproduce the UGC for that user's personal use only. You hereby grant us the right to copy and distribute any UGC made available on the site by you. You represent and warrant that you are the sole creator and owner of or have all the necessary licenses, rights, consents, releases and permissions to post the UGC submitted through your Account or otherwise posted, transmitted or shared by you on or through the site. Additionally, you represent and warrant that no element of your UGC will violate or infringe upon the rights of any third party, including, without limitation, copyright, trademark, privacy rights, right of publicity or other personal or proprietary rights. By using the site, you further represent and warrant that you (and any licensor of content that you post on the site), have waived any "moral rights" in connection with your UGC and that you will be solely responsible for paying all royalties and other fees that might be due to any person or entity by reason of any UGC posted by you on or through the site. You are not entitled to any compensation for any UGC you post on the site.

While disclaimers of this nature are standard practice on a commercial website to guard against legal liability, it points to how APW is protecting its expanding financial interests at the expense of those who actually produced the most riveting content. Even if users do not feel exploited and there was no intention by the editorial staffs to deceive or coerce

them, the fact remains that the profitability of these sites is predicated on the work of people who are not monetarily compensated. It's important to remember that this is not a unique situation to OBB and APW by any means. This analysis could be applied to any number of web-based publishers who rely a great deal on user participation to augment its content to attract advertisers.

But by consistently reminding users that advertising is necessary to support the main therapeutic mission of these sites, it reinforced the idea that attaining wellbeing necessarily involved engaging in feel-good activities oriented around capitalist consumption. The foregrounding of the emotional experience of navigating wedding consumption does not change the objective social relationships that produced the fondly regarded commodities advertised on these sites and, indeed, obscures the labor of the very users that make these sites profitable.

CHAPTER FOUR: PHOTOGRAPHY

Taken as a whole, these sites present a paradox. While there is a great emphasis on the hard work of the wedding planning process, OBB and APW also simultaneously obscures the very labor which through actual way they discuss it and often obliterate it all together in the photographs themselves. How is this possible?

This section focuses on the Real Weddings sections of OBB and APW, which feature user submitted wedding photographs along with, music, answers to a standard questionnaire or more free-form narratives about the wedding planning process and the day itself and links to (often site sponsored) vendors that helped the couple amass the wedding package on display.

The pictures themselves are almost universally HD professional images with brilliant lighting, striking composition, and pleasing contrast. The few photographs that deviate from the sheer brilliance of this commercial-grade beauty are generally scans of Polaroids or a similar kitschy vintage photo technology that add to the overall pleasant quirkiness many couples are putting on display. Scrolling down through the webpage, the photographs unfold through the standard temporal trajectory of the wedding day: a few shots of the wedding party dressing and transporting themselves to the ceremony venue, shots of the ceremony itself focusing on the couple transfixed by one another and the emotional reactions of the guests, the easy, buoyant joy of the reception and often ending

with wild, dynamic shots of dancing. Interspersed throughout these action shots of gleeful people are detailed shots of the high profile wedding objects: sweeping shots of the venue, details of the couple's outfits, rings, cakes (or alternative dessert), personalized favors, and stationary. When weddings deviate from these standards, the personal narrative justifies this as a profound personal choice. The differences in the trajectory of the day in the photographic representation on OBB and APW are generally only cosmetic. Even if the day itself felt to the couple and their guests (or, in the case of elopements, lack thereof) to be radically different than the standard wedding day, it is through the nonverbal ordering of wedding photographs to meet the normal expectation of how a wedding day *should* unfold that even the most idiosyncratic, nontraditional weddings are translated into intelligibility, making it amenable for the consumption of strangers.

The personal narratives in the Real Wedding sections most often reflect the cycle of remystification that spirals through the prescribed advice given by the editorial staff.

The following is a quote from Ashley, a featured bride on APW, on the DIY she undertook for her wedding:

...Since I have the summers off as a college professor, I was able to design, illustrate, and produce all of the printed materials, signage, and gift items. I also hand-painted our cupcake toppers, ring bearer box, note card box, and a few of the table decor items. My mom and I had some bonding time while assembling and mailing RSVP cards and invitations, making program fans and ribbon wands, and putting gift bags together. Yes, all of this was a ton of work, but it was SO worth it. All of those personal touches helped to make the wedding a true reflection of my husband and me (2014).

Notice how it reflects the DIY advice in the Keene quote from Chapter I? The theme of a 'labor of love' is a refrain that echoes through the narratives attached to the Real Weddings and are very important to how they are framed and understood because it

contribute to contextualizing the images and are supposed to aid users in the task of interpretation. Walter Benjamin argues that captions are vital to photography because the pictorial content of the individual photo does not have a self-evident meaning. One of the goals that runs through the corpus of Benjamin's work is how to find the spaces of open-ended revolutionary potential within the dysfunction of cultural objects and political forms. For him, the caption served as a way of making the singular photograph intelligible enough to open it to transformative use in varied context. Photographs have so much potential to disrupt peoples' understanding of the world because they can be reproduced and transported to radically different places than their origin. This phenomenon is perhaps most deeply pronounced online.

Yet, the pictures in the Real Weddings sections do not have open-ended possibility because their orientation is so fully directed by the cycle of remystification towards wedding consumption. Even when the narratives include conflict, frustration, setbacks, or regret these descriptions are bracketed by the flow of the narrative. For example, in the standard Q&A couples fill out to accompany their photos in the Real Weddings section of OBB, the query "Our biggest challenge" is then immediately followed with "Our Favorite Moment". This layout creates the sense that the struggles, which run the gamut from logistical hassles, budget short falls, the dissolution of old friendships, vocally unsupportive family members, all the way to the occasional sudden and tragic death of a loved one, all eventually contributed to the profound emotional importance and worth of the day. Stephanie and Morgan's response to the questionnaire

about their wildflower and whiskey themed wedding demonstrates how the order of the questions help reinforces the cycle of the remystification:

Our biggest challenge: A week before my wedding, my grandfather passed away. He was very old and we were lucky to get as much time with him as we did, but I think that I had convinced myself a few months before that he would definitely be there. Because he was in a wheelchair, one of my requirements was a handicapped friendly location. I had even reserved a special seat for him at the table closest to the dance floor so he wouldn't miss a minute of the party. I would be lying if I said I didn't feel anger, regret and even at times wished that the wedding had been scheduled a week earlier. In the end, though, my grandfather was there in so many ways. He was the one who addressed the invitations for my bridal shower[...]

My favorite moment: Honestly, it was all the little things we didn't/couldn't have planned for. Seeing all of our friends and family come together to help us make sure everything went off, Morgan's reaction to my gift (working compass cufflinks for him to wear), and dancing with an old friend's new(ish) baby — things like this[...]

My advice for Offbeat Brides: Ask for help! I was so caught up in making sure the wedding was everything we wanted that I forgot to ask for help. I was also convinced that if I asked my friends or family for too much help, I'd be burdening them. I found out after the wedding that they would have been happy to do a lot more[...]

What was the most important lesson you learned from your wedding? The most important lesson I learned was figuring out how to compromise while still maintaining your sense of self[...]
(2012)

As you can see, Stephanie and Morgan faced the painful loss of a beloved family member right before their wedding. The presence of that loss in the narrative highlights the positive attributes of the wedding day by giving them gravity; the joyful experience of uniting two families is given a greater significance within the context of recent loss. The shadow that could have been cast by the stark inevitability of death was illuminated by the serendipity of having unfamiliar people interact in a way that produced pleasant surprise. While Stephanie admits to having anger and regret, she does not dwell on them. Rather, she tells other brides to absorb OBB's core message: with good intentions and clear communications, you can not only assemble a truly meaningful wedding, but learn how to assert your autonomy and stay true to yourself. Even though the editorial staffs on both sites maintain that weddings will not fundamentally change you from, say, a

completely unartistic person to a crafting guru, they believe that wedding planning is a process that allows users to rise to an occasion like never before, by discovering new things about themselves and honing skills they already.

The cycle of remystification works its magic even when the Real Weddings section is supposed to be more instructive than sentimental. In the “How We Did It” subsection of APW’s Real Weddings, which is supposed to function as an itemized blow-by-blow of exactly how featured couples made their wedding days come to fruition, including their real budget and the logic behind how they allocated funds, the responses to the query “What was totally not [worth it]” fall into three categories: mild irritation at miscalculating something somewhat costly, like party favors guests ignored, regrets over being stressed out during the planning process because the wedding turned out so well and *nothing!* Everything involving the wedding was absolutely worthwhile. These would-be regrets are then then swept back into upbeat advice they would tell their past planning self, which is, again, actually directed towards currently planning users. In the words of featured couple, Megan and Marlee: “Trust your instincts to stop planning or talking about the wedding together if it stops being fun. Keeping the planning process enjoyable helped the whole fifteen months of being engaged go much, much better (2013).” It is important to remember that these emotionally potent narratives are then capped off with a full list of the vendors that helped make the whole wedding possible, many of which are OBB and APW sponsors. These narratives not only promise that the hard work of making the wedding possible is all worth it in the end, but also direct users explicitly towards attaining the very magic they promise. Sometimes the people being featured in the Real

Weddings are also advertising their own services, as is the case with Marlee who shared links to her handmade jewelry shop on Etsy along with the pictures of her Episcopalian ceremony.

If the narrative orientation that frames the wedding photos casts a rose tinted lens on the work being done, then the actual content of the photographs obliterate the work entirely. Susan Sontags assertion that “[t]he problem is not that people remember through photographs, but they remember only the photographs. This remembering through photographs eclipse other forms of understanding and remembering...To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to be able to call up a picture (2003: 88-89).” Balancing that with the Benjamin’s claims about captions, I argue that in the contexts of these sites, the text surrounding the real wedding photos affects how the image is perceived by creating a deeply synthesized harmony. The words sugar coat the labor of wedding production in such a way that the content of the photographs hush them entirely.

None of the Real Weddings include any photographs of the planning and building leading up to the wedding; there are no shots of the mother of the bride carefully stacking rainbow-colored gluten free cake tiers, no shots of brides shifting between laughing and crying as she folds one of a thousand paper cranes while watching Xena on Netflix, no puzzled and half-drunk grooms trying to figure out how to arrange a bunch of oversized twigs into a chuppah. While this exclusion seems natural because most contemporary physical wedding albums people keep in their homes also do not contain planning or set-up photos, I want to suggest that the omission of the labor in the photographic

representation of the Real Weddings on these sites helps erase the fact that these captured moments, so full of spontaneous eruptions of profound joy, did not simply emerge through serendipitous thin air. In her discussion of war photography, Sontag comments that “[h]arrowing photographs do not inevitably lose their power to shock. But they do not much help if the task is to understand. Narrative can make us understand. Photographs do something else: they haunt us. (2003: 89).” If harrowing photographs haunt, than joyful photographs seduce. A quote from a bride named Lizzie, articulates this fully: “Feel like things could still end up to be a bit of a hot mess? Your photographer will manage to capture the most fun, beautiful, tender moments of a wonderful day, and convince you that you wouldn’t have changed a single thing.” By this bride’s own account, it was the photographic representation of her own experience that finally convinced her of how “wonderful” the wedding she actually lived through was.

Despite the fact that Keene vocally advocates for a wedding ethos that is about being fully emotionally present on the day of and only producing and consuming wedding objects that will bring emotional resonance and joy to the couple and their guests, she also knows the power of good photography: “Here’s is a dirty little secret: a good photographer...can make any wedding look stylish. A bad photographer can make the world’s most expensive and chic wedding look like a hot mess. If you want to remember your wedding day as tremendously hip hire your photographer carefully...(2012:114).” This comment is especially telling if you consider the fact that both Keene and Stallings very livelihood is predicated on showcasing other people’s “tremendously hip” weddings that were most often painstakingly produced on extremely

tight budgets. These sites proclaim far and wide that with five thousand dollars and a little elbow grease, you too can have a day as enchanted as those who spend five times that—welcomed news for many educated young women who were fed a steady diet of princess fantasies as a child but have since grown up, gotten strapped down with student loans but still yearn for their (albeit now feminist and egalitarian) happy ending. As I described above, APW and OBB’s respective editorial staffs also emphasize that wedding budgets are not a moral issue and regularly feature far more expensive Real Weddings alongside more budget conscious ones. However, the universal professionalism and beauty of the photographs, (not to mention the aggressively image heavy layouts of the sites themselves), makes it difficult to tell at a passing glance the budget of any one wedding without a thorough investigation.

It is worth noting that Stallings and the rest of her editorial staff playfully call the images on OBB’s Real Weddings section “wedding porn”. Now, to be clear, this is meant to be tongue in cheek —there are no actual images of couples in the midst of coitus on OBB. But this does make vividly clear that the pictures of real weddings are explicitly supposed to seduce users into a fit of feverish fantasizing. What I want to suggest is that, with her characteristically brash humor, Stallings also points to the dysfunction that these images also cause precisely because of their potent seductiveness. In the same way that pornography stimulates desire, in such a way that it can cause lived experiences to seem lackluster in comparison or creates crippling anxiety that your performance will not live up to those of others, or guilt at longing for something you know you or your partner cannot provide, the Real Weddings not only obscures wedding planning labor and helps

recommit people to the task, but also produces new aspirations and disappointments, which can then be mobilized into yet still more emotionally driven content which OBB and APW thrive on. Not only can they make users feel bad about how shabby they think their weddings are going to look in comparison, but the editorial staff can also engage users and regain their trust with long blog posts about how to manage their expectations vis a vis the exact images that circulate on their sites—all while generating good will from users and advertising revenue from vendors. Expectation management posts such as *When to stop looking at wedding porn* (Stallings 2009) are essential to grease the wheels of good intentions:

I don't want Offbeat Bride to be the place where you come to feel bad about the decisions you've already made about your wedding. I don't want it to be the place where, as you plan your simple outdoor gathering you start feeling like "omg, that girl painted her shoes and they look amazing. why don't I paint my shoes? what's wrong with me that I'm just wearing a pair of pumps that I bought on ebay? OH MY GOD!

To me this is just as unfortunate as someone watching porn and thinking, "Hmm, those hairless pink plasticky genitals look way cuter than my partner's package ... maybe I should ask them to wax it all off, shine it up, and powder it with some glitter even though they're kind of more the granola bush type?"

Sorry: no more porn theory, but what I'm talking about here is fetishization — when things slip over from inspiration to fixation. I don't want wedding porn to be the unattainable weird fantasies that keep you up at night with frustrated longing. I don't want people to scrap their perfectly lovely plans because they saw something else, something better, something MORE on my silly wedding website.

My goal with this site has always been to focus on general inspiration. This isn't a shopping blog where every day there's a new link to click to buy some wedding accessory that will make your special daaaaaay more perfect and tasteful. *It's just a collection of real folks doing their real best to cobble together weddings that reflect who they really are.*

If looking at Offbeat Bride ever makes you feel disappointed in yourself, or like your wedding doesn't quite stack up, or like you're not offbeat enough — please, please PLEASE, remind yourself that your wedding is not a contest. No fetishes necessary. Turn off your computer and go hug your partner and tell them how much you love them and how excited you are to celebrate that with your family and friend. (italic emphasis mine)

While I do not believe that the editorial staffs of either site intend to interject new dysfunction into brides who already have a full emotional and logistical plate and I believe that they are sincere in their mission to make wedding planning as joyful and

pain-free as possible, the very profitability of their business is predicated on the simultaneous stimulation and management of consumer desire. As Stallings admits brides “get it from both sides”, they feel like whatever wedding they’re having is too weird when looking at ‘normal’ big white wedding they’re bombarded with in pop culture but they also feel like their wedding is too straight laced when they look at steampunk wiccan handfastings on Offbeat Bride. Some even feel guilty about not being ‘laid back’ enough through the stress of wedding planning because they want to live up to the image of the ‘practical bride’ who rejects obsessive micromanagement for authentic emotion.

Replying to the expectation management post quoted above, OBB user april said:

Ariel, that the was brilliance. And I SO needed to read it today.
I'm feeling overwhelmed with planning and while I luuuuuurve looking at wedding planning blogs and seeing photos of other fun, funky, lovely couples that had equally fun, funky and lovely weddings, it DOES start to make me feel a little, well, wiggled out quite frankly.
Are me and the boy doing too much? Too little? Should I hire that straight-outta-college media student to videotape our wedding knowing the end result could either be complete crap or, quite possibly, complete magic? Or should I go for the tried and trusted vendor that has loads of satisfied testimonials on his website? Should I buy my wedding jewelry from Etsy? Or maybe I should just borrow from friends? But I saw a gorgeous, sparkly pair of earrings at MACY'S for an ungodly amount of \$\$\$\$ bu[t] they're sparkly. =/
You see where I'm going.
So, thank you for the Wednesday morning slap upside the head. I needed it. And how. (2009)

April not only addressed Stallings with friendly familiarity, even though it is safe to assume that two had never actually met, she is thankful that Stallings acknowledged and put into perspective the consumer anxiety which her site helped create.

The unintentional creation of new needs *and* the emotional and financial fallout it creates in consumers’ lives is actually precisely what is at stake when progressive politics and feminism become marketing strategies. When Stallings says “Offbeat Bride's wedding porn is here to inspire and delight — not ever to make you feel dissatisfied, unworthy, or disappointed in yourself (2009),” she demonstrates that she does not feel

responsible for potentially causing more longing and anxiety for her users. Indeed, users on OBB and APW appear to take in good faith that these resources have their best intentions in mind, and so even if looking at the visual inspiration they offer is contributing to their stress, they still feel good will towards these sites because of their supposed good intentions. In fact, it makes for a remarkably efficient, if inadvertent, process of cannibalizing users' potential misgivings back into profitable brand loyalty. Or, as commenter Vee said "There are just so many ideas and so much inspiration. The number of beautiful things to make/do/buy is endless. I love eye candy and I love the visual feast that is at my disposal 24 hours a day, 7 days a week through blogs like OBB[...]But I've discovered that blogs like this are here to help, not hinder."

This is partly due to the emphasis placed on personal growth, learning life lessons, and finding your own personal truth through the wedding planning process. It's as if the editorial staff is saying 'Oops that's not what we meant to do! But you're smart and tough, and you can learn big life lessons from the feelings of inadequacy we accidentally placed on you. Actually, you'll learn so much about how to become your authentic self through partially rejecting us that you'll end up thanking us for it later!' This description makes the process sound far more straight-forward than it actually is when playing out in users' everyday lives, but I think it is actually through an initially simplistic description of the circular logic of this vein of feminist wedding planning that the ideological underpinnings becomes perceptible at all.

Part of the power of the images that circulate via the Real Weddings section is in no small part due to the fact that they are universally positive. This is not to say they are

perfect—indeed the emphasis on capturing fleeting moments of seemingly unmanicured intimacy and spontaneous journalistic shots of action and the scorn many users and sponsor vendors feel towards posed portraits, which are standard in the rest of the wedding industry, reinforces the emphasis on ‘perfectly imperfect’ weddings that are about high emotional impact, community togetherness and fun. There are plenty of images of happily tipsy party goers but no one looking particularly out of it. The only tears are tears of joy; the only ones caught shouting are those in the midst of a high powered sing-a-long. A photographic account is not merely a task of documentation, but also of omission. It is striking that, for two sites that differentiate themselves from the rest of the wedding industry by tackling head-on the stress, frustration and pain that are inherent to wedding planning, what they have to offer in terms of photographic evidence of Real Weddings of their own users are, to the critical eye, rather narrow.

It is striking that the Real Weddings are almost entirely comprised of professionally shot photography, especially given the tech-savviness of most OBB and APW users and the rampant availability of relatively high quality image capturing technology on even the cheapest smartphone, which is easy to edit, upload and distribute. The lack of links to Instagram hashtag feeds, a regular feature of many contemporary weddings, or the inclusion of guest captured images in addition to the professional display is curious. Why would two websites that advocate for finding budget friendly alternatives, and even feature several planning articles on how to DIY and crowd source wedding photography, still rely on professional photography to represent their ideal weddings? It may be because they are subtly advertising the importance of professional

photography *per se*. Over half of APW's vendor directory is comprised of regional wedding photographers and OBB has 15 pages worth of photographers in their vendor directory, by far the largest section by a margin of over 10 pages.

I am not suggesting that the couples in these real weddings are not sincerely happy or do not actually believe that all their work was worth it the end. Rather, I'm asserting that the context of these images matter. When these very same pictures are hung in people's homes, as no doubt many of them are, they serve a radically different purposes that are imbedded in the daily lives of the people who lived the experiences they reflect. They know vividly the work it took to get that one blissful moment and through time they feel many different ways towards the same image. But the Real Weddings on OBB and APW are rather unreal, not because they were staged or phony, but because they have become reified; taking people's lived experiences and encapsulating them in a giddy textual stability and then mobilizing them towards abstract fantasy for the sake of profit and the expansion of the wedding industry with an air of seamlessness and ease.

CONCLUSION

Feminist wedding planning is a fraught enterprise, to say the least. Despite the celebratory nature of the event they are trying to piece together, feminist brides are faced with many layers of potential frustration and conflict. My analysis suggests that this is, in part, because these brides feel deeply responsible for articulating an authentic sense of themselves and their political and social allegiances, on top of the usual stress of orchestrating what is, for many, the largest party they will throw in their lives. This desire to express oneself through the wedding is a deeply positive and life-affirming process, but it is not without its sources of conflict that manifest internally within these brides and externally between the brides and their loved ones.

Internally, feminist brides might feel that their desire to have a wedding at all is in conflict with their progressive political sensibilities. They might feel anxious over not measuring up to other people's beautiful weddings and then feel ashamed for wanting a better wedding. They might also feel guilt over not fulfilling their various social roles well enough or when they make choices to please themselves, rather than others. Externally, feminist brides could potentially be fighting with a partner or family member that has a different vision for their wedding day. They will also likely have to endure the scrutiny of other members of their community that dislike specific aspects of their décor or ceremony, especially if it deviates significantly from what is deemed traditional in

their circle. Finally, budgetary restraints may loom heavily above every choice the feminist brides make, potentially hampering the fun of what is supposed to be a joyous day.

With this in mind, it makes sense that the kind of feminist self-help OBB and APW provide is taken up enthusiastically by many people because it offers a pragmatic approach to quell disruptive internal emotions, manage external conflicts with loved ones and get on with the task of planning a wedding. I have argued that it is the emotional and intellectual framing of the wedding planning process, as opposed to any of the specific deviations in the content of how weddings should be conducted, that distinguished the alternative OBB and APW posit to mainstream resources like TK. Through the cycle of remystification, OBB and APW tackle the full gamut of potential wedding planning problems in order to allow their users to correct themselves mentally and emotionally and become enchanted by their wedding once more.

The variety of choice feminism espoused by APW and OBB allow them to reach a wider audience with their upbeat message. However, as I have pointed out, their emphasis on diversity actually obscures the fact that many of the people who respond enthusiastically to the advice these resources give are primarily young women who are members of similar class contingents. Furthermore, this variety of feminism takes for granted the idea that it is through enfranchisement in capitalist markets that all women will attain individual fulfillment. As such, much of APW and OBB's political task centers around expanding the wedding industry to meet the consumer desires of people previously excluded from it.

This emphasis on inclusivity is why both sites emphasize an ethos of non-judgment of personal and consumer choices between their users. This ethos of non-judgment makes users feel as if these sites are safe spaces to vent their frustrations, to engage in discussions on challenging social and political topics, and to freely explore options for their wedding that they would not have otherwise encountered. However, this emphasis also makes it so that the content of choices is evacuated from how people evaluate the success of each other's wedding and makes intent the paramount criterion of judgment. To successfully articulate intent, users must be adept at expressing themselves with a high degree of linguistic sophistication, reinforcing the invisible aspects of class reproduction at work on APW and OBB.

Another way APW and OBB argue that they distinguish themselves from the rest of the wedding industry is through an emphasis on the emotional gravity of the day, as opposed to just its appearance. They emphasize that users should take ownership of their wedding through whatever means feels most authentic to them. This means that wedding consumption and do-it-yourself/do-it-together projects should only be done if it contributes to the genuine joy of the event for the couple being married and not to meet external approval. Far from achieving the goal of making wedding planning a more transparent and joyful process, this emphasis on the immediate emotional impact of the wedding further obfuscates the myriad forms of exploitation that are inherent in contemporary consumption, creating an additional layer of stress for feminist brides to navigate.

The ideal wedding on APW and OBB is one that reflects the positive attributes of social relations, while mitigating the negative. A feminist bride's wedding should be both a genuine reflection of her relationship and circumstance while being extricated from coercive social forces:

There's nothing to prove here. Having a weird wedding just for the sake of making a statement is just as inauthentic as forcing yourself into a traditional ceremony to keep your parents happy. Your wedding should reflect the reality of you and your partner's life together. If you're using your wedding to prove a point about anything other than your commitment to each other, it's worth step back a bit to reconsider your motivations....Your wedding is not a race, and there's no need to win — the only prize you need is the commitment of your partner (aww) and you get that regardless of how far you chose to walk off the beaten aisle.

Despite its approachability, it's important to point out that this is a deeply ideological statement. While the sentiment might be highlighting the core ideal, upon close scrutiny it is apparent that Stallings is obscuring the fact that there are tangible social (and for some, economic) benefits to hosting a successful wedding. For most, it means creating or renewing social bonds with family and a wider community. For many, it also means positive notoriety and the ability to lay claims to, even if fleetingly, an ideal projection of self through wider social media. I think this it is important to point out that it is no less true even though the ideal projection of the self on OBB and APW is defined by imperfect authenticity because, as I argue, the way this authenticity is judged is through its skillful performance via narrative and photography. For some, these benefits directly impact their livelihood, creating transferable skills and new professional contacts. Indeed, for Keene and Stallings, they not only 'won' lifelong commitment to their partners, but book deals and lucrative businesses.

Taken as a whole, both APW and OBB problematize the image of the perfect white wedding supposedly espoused by the rest of the wedding industry only to replace it

with its own sanitized ideal through the chorus of wedding planning triumph narratives attached to thousands upon thousands of beautiful professional wedding photographs. The dysfunction inherent in wedding planning is conjured up only to be better managed and swept under the rug. Under the particular logic of feminist self-help that operates here, the management of dysfunction is necessary to empower more people to enter and navigate the wedding industry more deftly.

Yet I believe that it is actually by paying attention to the moments of dysfunction inherent in wedding planning that the feminist wedding can be salvaged from collapsing into merely aiding and abetting the expansion of an already bloated wedding industry or reinforcing the very inequalities that the couple being married seeks to alleviate through their union. My interest in this project has been rooted in a belief that intimate life is one of the most potent places that people can actively live the change they want to see in the rest of the world. Yet, in these for-profit spaces, the critical facets that are supposed to undergird the transformation of intimate life are turned into consumer platitudes and the actual work taken up by people to reproduce their own relationships is lost entirely in a happy haze of photographic reification. What we are left with is a slightly modified version of the standard commercial tropes of utopian romance—made, perhaps, more terrifyingly efficient than we thought possible because it is better able to bring otherwise critical people back into the fold.

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BIOGRAPHY

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