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Commodity Feminism and Dressing the 'Best Self' on *A Practical Wedding*

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ABSTRACT

Fashion as a cultural industry, with its interface between self and social, is laden with potential for interventions in systems of power. Yet its changemaking potential is susceptible to co-optation by neoliberal discourses that harness politics with a commodified, perfectible individuality that superficially counteracts hegemony even as it subtly reinforces it. So much is evident in nominally feminist wedding website *A Practical Wedding*, which provides an alternative media space for people who are marginalized by or politically opposed to the politics and commercial logics of the mainstream wedding industry. While many of its posts critique the 'wedding industrial complex' and provide meaningful spaces for queer and feminist people to discuss and plan their weddings, the posts relating to fashion and dress are largely emptied of feminist politics. While these posts gesture towards inclusivity and resistance, by harnessing these messages to commodity feminism and neoliberal concepts of self-perfection, these posts ultimately reinforce the heteropatriarchal messages in the industry that *APW* is ostensibly trying to resist. This article asks: what is at stake in the blog's excision of fashion from politics? What insights does this cleavage between apparel and the feminist political scene offer for scholars of feminism's digital ecosystem?

In a series of posts on her personal wedding blog, *A Practical Wedding* (*APW*), Meg Keene – now the Executive Editor of the popular, nominally feminist wedding blog that *APW* became – expresses the significance of wedding attire: 'Looking for a wedding dress was hard for me. I would go so far to say that at some points it was painful. What I wore on my body really mattered to me. It mattered to me more than I would have ever expected' (2009). In a culture in which women are expected to heavily invest in their 'bridal' appearance and yet excoriated for doing so, Keene charts a divergent path. It starts from the recognition of the intimate relationship between body and clothing and acknowledges how the performative dimensions of a wedding intensify these ties. The series takes seriously the ways that clothing emplaces people in the social, while acknowledging that getting dressed functions as a theatre for personal desires. It

has echoes of the political character that defines *APW*, which identifies itself as intersectional feminist media and contains extensive meditations on the politics of equity and inclusion in the wedding industry.

Since its origin in 2009 as Keene's personal wedding blog, though, *APW* has transformed. It is now a fully-fledged media brand, occupying an important space in the alternative wedding media sector yet managing to have crossover appeal to users interested only in its planning content. In addition to providing resources such as a vendor guide and spreadsheets, *APW* publishes pragmatic, cheerful content that ranges from advice on how to navigate interpersonal tension within a bridal party to DIY tutorials on arranging wedding flowers. It has also come to produce coverage of wedding style and personal adornment that is saddled with appealing to a mainstream readership. With some exceptions – such as the occasional post about attire for non-gender-conforming people and for 'plus-size' brides – coverage of wedding apparel is strikingly empty of connections to the larger issues that the blog addresses and that were hinted at in the original dress posts.

As feminist fashion scholars, we are keenly aware that the close link between clothing and the body makes apparel a primary site for the consolidation of identity – in particular, of women's identities (Woodward 2007; Guy and Banim 2000; McDowell 2019), a link foregrounded in Keene's initial posts. There are many instances in which clothing has been mobilized by women and other minoritised people to resist or reframe the signification of their bodies (see, for example, Rolley 1990; McMillan 2017; Tulloch 2019), and indeed the early fashion blogosphere often functioned as a site for discursive resistance to heteronormativity and hyper-consumption by bloggers often excluded from the pleasures of fashion due to their age, race or size (see Connell 2013; Pham 2015; Findlay 2017). Yet the potential of *APW*'s sartorial content to function as a virtual counterpublic in which its bloggers and their readers could 'rest, regroup, and strategize new interventions into mainstream discourse' (Connell 2013, 216) has largely gone unrealized, as the site encourages readers to identify with aesthetics and practices closely bound with consumer feminism and the 'wedding industrial complex' (hereafter, WIC). This maneuver raises insights into the processes by which commodities – here, wedding apparel – are harnessed to the ongoing project of self encouraged by a heavily mediated version of feminism resurgent since the early 2010s. As much of *APW*'s non-sartorial content reflects a left-leaning political commitment, including non-wedding-related posts that critique contemporary American politics and offer detailed real wedding stories of racialised and non-heterosexual couples, it is striking that the content devoted to apparel is evacuated of this commitment. As such, we question how *APW* navigates its dual investments in the feminist possibilities afforded by wedding apparel's fusion with identity and the commercial dimensions of the WIC, inflected as they are by conservatism and heteronormativity. Of particular interest is the process by which clothing is made to signify a position of alterity and resistance to the WIC even as *APW* encourages readers to invest in the neoliberal imaginary of a perfectible self.

To understand what is at stake in this double bind, we have closely analyzed *APW*'s wedding apparel coverage to argue that *APW* serves as a case study in how nominally feminist media can serve to ultimately reinforce hegemony even as it attempts to resist it. Our focus here is the work the website does, rather than the complex ways *APW*'s readers navigate feminist politics through dress. Other work emerging from this project

foregrounds those complex negotiations by interviewing dozens of queer and feminist subjects about their wedding attire (see Parkins and Gutteridge 2021). Indeed, we note that the rhetorical register of *APW*'s sartorial posts forecloses the affective and deeply political terms in which many people are approaching wedding clothing, suggesting an intriguing lacuna. To this end, we examined every blogpost related to dress, style or shopping for wedding apparel from the blog's inception to November 2020 (188 posts in total), including sponsored posts, posts by *APW*'s core team and by guest bloggers. Of particular interest in our analysis were questions of how posts on dress relate to the commitments to inclusiveness and equity that animate *APW* more broadly.

Ultimately, we argue that although the blog positions itself as distinct from the WIC, *APW*'s sartorial coverage reveals its accommodation of the mainstream wedding industry. Here, the possibilities of clothing (and digital communities organized around dress) to function as a 'tool of resistance and social justice' (Connell 2013, 210) go unrealized, as *APW* instead showcases clothing as a means of self-optimization and personal branding, thereby aligning with a neoliberal feminist ethos. Apparel is particularly suited to materialize this strain of feminism because of its malleability, its polyvocality: as Joanne Finkelstein has written, 'fashion is preservative of the status quo while appearing to make claims of being the opposite' (1999, 364). Our examination of *APW*'s sartorial posts, therefore, demonstrates how readily dress can be discursively employed to reproduce the logics of neoliberal feminism, as what appears to be nominally counterdiscursive— personally retooling hegemonic traditions to reflect a feminist political commitment— is readily recuperated into a neoliberal imaginary of a 'best self' constructed through consumption. Clothing, with its capacious signifying qualities, here allows *APW*'s feminist subject to rest somehow above the polarity between feminism and a neo-traditionalist 'good life,' appealing to both sides while challenging neither.

APW as Feminist Media

The capacity of clothing to play both sides, as it were, echoes the positioning of *APW* itself, because the brand is able to appeal to two distinct readerships. Its name, for instance, gives no hints of the feminist ethos that underpins the site, and readers might find themselves there through searches for 'alternative,' 'budget' or 'practical' wedding ideas. A glimpse at the landing page of the blog does not give away anything of its feminist politics, nor does the tagline on its Instagram page. The site's Facebook and Pinterest accounts identify it up front as 'Feminist Weddings and Glitter and Fun' and Twitter shortens this to 'Glitter and Feminism.' Notably, though, Facebook is a much less used platform for the brand and Pinterest's content is focused exclusively on photographs and affords no elaboration of this fun feminist ethos.

Yet there is no doubt that feminism is a significant part of *APW*'s mission. The blog's 'About' page begins by defining *APW* as a feminist brand – 'Bold and unapologetic, it's made by smart, feminist womxn' – and elaborates on the avoidance of gendered language and stereotypes, creation of conversations around 'egalitarian households,' and support for women, LGBTQ+, and BIPOC-owned businesses. The brand's Facebook About page says: '*APW* is focused on creating a culture that supports laid-back, feminist weddings […w]e're working to build a positive egalitarian idea of what marriage can be in society.' Indeed, the site does feature content that is unusual for a wedding brand,

including discussions of gendered divisions of labour in relationships; enraged commentary on issues such as sexual violence, the detention of migrant children and police brutality; and frequent references to electoral politics. In all such cases, the brand is clear about its left and feminist political leanings. *APW* thus occupies an ambiguous space in the wedding mediascape, balancing its commitments to a variety of potential readers. What is clear, though, is that this balancing is accomplished at least in part through a foregrounding of pleasure ('glitter' and 'fun') as a feeling that links multiple constituencies of readers – a feeling that has long been mobilized by the mainstream wedding industry.

The Pleasures and Pains of the Wedding Imaginary

An important set of queer and feminist critiques of the wedding industry and the 'marriage equality' movement gained force in the 2000s (see Franke 2017; Barker 2012; Stein 2013). Racialized queer scholars and activists in particular have powerfully articulated the ways that the push for 'same-sex' marriage rights foreclosed radical queer political agendas in its reliance on assimilation and respectability, an effective 'whitening' of LGBT politics that diverted attention from poverty, white supremacy, and neoliberalization (Farrow 2006; Sueyoshi 2013; Nair 2014; Robinson 2014). Chrys Ingraham gestures toward the twining of heteropatriarchy and pleasure in her critique of wedding culture more generally, writing: '*the heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking that relies on romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality in order to create and maintain the illusion of well-being and oneness*' (Ingraham 2008, 26; italics in original). Thus, she argues, weddings rely on the circulation of positive feelings in ways that obscure their naturalization and reproduction of ruling relations through heterosexuality. Ingraham and others have explored how the circulation of pleasure and other positive emotions around the wedding relies on consumption of commodities ranging from engagement rings to bridal gowns, which are 'all products that have been sold to consumers interested in taking part in a culturally established ritual that works to organize and institutionalize heterosexuality and reward those who participate' (Ingraham 2017, 42; see also: Boden 2003 and 2007; Arend 2014; Wilkes 2016).

Wedding media is an important site for the reproduction of inequitable social arrangements via the conventional constructions of heterosexual, white femininity. Wedding media, Karen Wilkes argues, trade in 'the elaborate white wedding [as] a visual display of traditional femininity … which gives the feminine subject legitimacy and social acceptance' (2013, 40). Scholars such as Erika Engstrom (2011), Ewa Glapka (2014) and Sharon Boden (2003; 2007) have explored the ways that bridal magazines circulate twinned rhetorics of consumption and pleasure as they reinforce a spectacle of white femininity with ties to the good life. As Boden's work shows, the linking of wedding-related consumption with fantasy in conventional wedding media depends on pleasure linked to bridal acquisition. Her analysis clarifies how pleasures derived from consumption obscure the wedding's key role in the maintenance of heteropatriarchal social relations. This is a critique that is shared by *APW* and reflected in its mission: it does not shy away from the *pains* associated with weddings and their planning. And yet, in its apparel coverage specifically, we witness the convergence of *APW* with the wedding industry's ideologies of romance, consumption, and pleasure.

A number of factors position *APW* in line with the codified gendered traditions of mainstream wedding culture, in spite of its gestures of opposition. In a pop-up video that populates for first-time visitors to *APW*, Meg Keene introduces herself and the site, saying: 'I started *APW* at my kitchen table, crying because there was nothing that spoke to me and nothing that honoured the feminist wedding we were trying to plan as two actual people, not just one person' (*A Practical Wedding*). The assumption that both marriers would plan a feminist wedding, however, is not reflected in the majority of the sartorial posts, which overwhelmingly address an imagined female-identifying reader. This reader, who is presumed to be looking for her own wedding clothes, is offered posts featuring attire that is either straight-up womenswear or that adapts the codes of menswear for a 'tomboy' or 'masculine of center' bride. Almost all of *APW*'s sartorial posts are written by cisgender women bloggers, including posts on menswear for grooms, which serves to reinforce the assumption that knowledge about fashion and dress is a woman's concern.

That these posts mostly presume a female-identifying reader also suggests either that *APW* assumes the reader who is planning their wedding is a woman in the marrying couple (which is at odds with Keene's welcome video). This seems strangely conventional for *APW*, especially in light of the widespread interest in clothing and grooming among men, evidenced by the success of men's fashion magazines since the turn of the century and steady global growth in market share of menswear. While Keene describes *APW*'s mission as 'to help all kinds of people see themselves in the wedding industry' (2019), male-identifying people are rarely addressed by the site. Many of the sartorial posts that do feature menswear invoke the stereotype of men's lack of knowledge of or interest in clothing, again reinforcing the cultural association of fashion with femininity. For example, Maddie Eisenhart invokes this stereotype in reference to her husband, sharing that:

> When planning our wedding, one of the things that surprised me most was how *into* his outfit Michael got. I mean, this is a man who has to be told that steel-toed boots are not meant to be worn with tube socks and cargo shorts and whose normal wardrobe is a rotating collection of tagless Hanes t-shirts. (2013c)

Further supporting the marginalization of men in this domain is that suit rental companies sponsor most of the most of the site's posts on menswear. So, while *APW* provides an alternative space to rethink some aspects of wedding apparel, it does not offer ways for male-identifying people to reimagine how they might dress for the occasion, despite critiquing that: 'when it comes to wedding suits for men … the wedding industry is basically like, "We're sure you'll figure it out!"' (Eisenhart 2016).

While *APW appears* to step away from a wedding imaginary that promotes the derivation of pleasure from conventional nuptial aesthetics when scrutinized, its content emphasizes pleasure and consumption within the discourse of self-enhancement characteristic of neoliberal feminism. The site's visuals are notably similar to conventional media: there is a preponderance of white dresses, cisgender, ostensibly heterosexual marrying couples, and identically clad wedding parties, as well as images that reproduce mainstream conventions in wedding photography. It is in textual coverage of wedding apparel that an individualist alternative becomes apparent: 'Be yourself.'

In a 2008 article, Angela McRobbie writes that, 'a consumer ethic is being addressed to young women with unprecedented force by means of mobilizing feminine pleasures and

inscribing these with a sprinkling of selective … feminist values' (544). Over ten years later, the same might be said to apply with renewed force for women of all ages, since the reappearance of feminism has been a definitive feature of the popular cultural landscape of the past decade. *APW* updates the wedding industry's conjoining of pleasure, romance and consumption by making the wedding a site for the uniting of these qualities with an ill-defined feminism. It thus functions as an exemplary site for the elaboration of commodity feminism. In Jemima Repo's discussion of feminist activism as the commodification of feminism, she suggests 'companies engage with this imperative to self-brand by offering feminist identity to women as what Sara Ahmed calls a "happy object" – something through which good feelings about oneself can be cultivated' (2020, 226). *APW* facilitates such a 'rebranding' of feminism as happy object by attaching it to wedding attire. As Repo says of the feminist t-shirt, this has the effect of displacing activism with sartorial display. That clothing is worn on the body is particularly salient here: attire functions as a join between body and those 'good feelings' that the happy object generates, ensuring that the individualist values circulating in commodity feminism are not abstract, but embodied by the subject. As historians of the women's suffrage movement have taught us, where embodied spectacle has been an effective tactic of feminist resistance, its efficacy is historically tied to mass mobilization. On the other hand, commodity feminism, as a pillar of the convergence of feminism with the market logics of neoliberalism, imagines a feminist subject with 'full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care' (Rottenberg 2018, 55). Personal branding becomes a critical means to achieve this, which divorces feminist purpose from the structural underpinnings of inequality that are otherwise recognized on the site. This is in fact only an updating of a conventional, post-WWII American vision of the wedding as 'a celebration of [the marriers'] personal interests and expectations,' which meant they 'imbued the ceremony with idiosyncrasies and personal touches, even as they aimed to match an idealized style' (Dunak 2013, 29). The difference is that feminism becomes part of a couple's personal 'brand.'

Many of *APW*'s sartorial posts suggest that it is by tailoring conventional wedding aesthetics that brides realize an alternative, individual, and vaguely political subject position. In a post titled, 'This is your permission to ditch the formal wedding gown,' Meg Keene (2018) reassures brides-to-be looking for a short wedding dress that although 'the wedding industry loves to push this idea that you need to make sure your dress is "bridal," whatever that means,' such dresses are still appropriate for the occasion: 'it's easy to get the idea that your dress needs to be EXTRA [*sic*], even if that's really not your jam. So rest assured, even if your dress is short, it's bridal.' There follow 50 images of gowns organized into recognizable bridal dress categories: vintage style; bohemian; modern; and so on. The 'nontraditional' category is introduced with text that suggests a departure from such comfortable territory: 'The only thing that makes a wedding dress a wedding dress is that you wear it to your wedding' (Keene 2018). Yet each of the four featured garments are white dresses; two are made of lace and one has a long, embroidered train. A posture of resistance and alterity is textually constructed while the logics and aesthetics of bridal consumption remain unchallenged in practice. By encouraging readers to articulate their feminist interpretation of wedding culture through pleasurable consumption, *APW* invites them to prune heteropatriarchal traditions into a shape that sits more comfortably with their sense of self rather than to

resist or reimagine them entirely, thereby remaining entangled in and complicit with the wedding industrial complex it performatively rejects.

The *APW* Persona

That *APW* began as a personal blog before transforming into a multi-authored, for-profit media platform is worth considering further. One of the key factors that initially made personal blogs compelling to readers was the perceived authenticity of their content, a quality fostered by their status as sole-authored independent media and the fact that their content was often embedded in the narration of a blogger's life or perspective on the topic at hand (see Findlay 2017). Over time, the independence of personal blogs became troubled as various industries started working with bloggers to monetize their content through a range of strategies that were adopted across various blogging genres. Many of these are evident on *APW*: sponsored posts, sidebar ads, affiliate links. One aspect of this development, which serves to minimize the potential alienation of *APW*'s readers due to the encroachment of commerce into a space heretofore imbued with a sense of the personal, is the maintenance of a stable narrative persona, initially established by Meg Keene, and emulated especially by *APW*'s staff writers. The *APW* persona is friendly, at times self-deprecating, and performatively assumes a feminist position of resistance to the WIC. This persona is constructed through a number of linguistic conventions found on the personal blogosphere and feminist alternative media more broadly, including an informal tone marked with dry asides and sudden bursts of exuberant enthusiasm, and the retelling of personal anecdotes that, rather than present an encompassing narrative of a blogger's life, add touches of 'biographical authenticity but as a mediated and objectified form of self-reference' (Titton 2015, 205). As Anthony Giddens has noted of self-reflexive identity in late modernity, a blogged persona requires 'the capacity to keep a particular narrative going' (1991, 53), a capacity sustained by these discursive strategies, which position the bloggers of these posts as a proxy for *APW*'s readers: the women who have been there, done that, and lived to pass on their advice.

The frequently re-told bridal experiences of *APW*'s staff writers, most notably Meg Keene and Maddie Eisenhart, position them as experienced but relatably so, enhancing their posts' qualities of trustworthiness and 'authenticity'. As has been documented in literature on branding on social media, it is crucial for media founded on the perception of personal connection between blogger/ influencer/ brand and reader to appear authentic to avoid the taint of strategy, which would undermine the intimacy that lends this media its unique selling point. Yet in her work on fashion bloggers, Brooke Erin Duffy (2013, 106) explains that, 'the ideal of blogger authenticity serves as a productive myth,' invoked by bloggers to 'conceal the fact that they are often embedded in the same commercial milieu as those institutional sites from which they distance themselves.' On *APW*, the relatability of Keene or Eisenhart relaying their own mishaps and struggles in planning feminist weddings authenticates posts promoting consumption, including sponsored content, so that even the perception of brands situated firmly within the mainstream wedding industry is redefined to cohere with *APW*'s vaguely feminist ethos.

Indeed, *APW*'s sponsored sartorial posts show how the *APW* persona reconciles the tension that presumably should arise from a feminist alternative wedding media platform promoting mainstream apparel brands. Such content is often framed in mock critique,

subverting its promotional dimension with dry, ironic detachment (blogpost titles include: 'BHLDN's New Wedding Dress Collection Really Doesn't Suck' [Eisenhart 2015] and 'When We Weren't Looking, David's Bridal Got Really Cool' [Eisenhart 2018]) or surprise that the mass-produced is, actually, quite nice. The skepticism this circulates of mega-bridal brands supports the imperative for those getting married to articulate their individuality through clothing on their wedding day. The threat of generic-ness, however, is defused as the size, scope and ubiquity of these brands is reframed as inclusive: of plus-size brides, for example, or brides on a budget. At the same time, by couching the impersonal – sponsored products – in the personal – Eisenhart and Keene's recollections of searching for their own dresses and, occasionally, blogging photographs of them trying on a sponsor's products – the bloggers become sites for the reconciliation of personal politics and discourses of commodity feminism.

So much is evident in staff writer Maddie Eisenhart's sponsored blogposts on US megachain David's Bridal, the brand where she found her own wedding dress. After searching fruitlessly for a dress that fit, satisfied her aesthetic preferences and was within her budget, Maddie 'swallowed [her] pride' (Eisenhart 2013b) and visited a David's Bridal boutique: 'color me surprised when I walked away with a $500 dress that I really liked, that didn't need to be altered, and was available in a petite. I literally carried it home on the Metro North that day' (Eisenhart 2015b).

In one telling of this story, Eisenhart models the difficulty in finding wedding apparel that avoids 'buying into the big wedding industry business'. She writes that she discovered that 'cool indie shit takes *work* [… and] sometimes the WIC does actually provide things to you that make life easier,' momentarily recuperating the WIC and reassuring the reader that 'having a wedding that's authentic to you and your partner means that you can participate in WIC-approved stuff without feeling guilty or suffering accusations of selling out' (Eisenhart 2013a). Also evident is that Maddie's story of finding her wedding dress functions here to incorporate what is not-*APW* approved—the wedding industry complex and businesses that promote it— into the corpus of *APW*, through Maddie herself embodying the *APW* persona. Positioned by her role at *APW* and the expertise conferred by her own experience, Maddie legitimizes David's Bridal by revaluing it as a desirable, indeed egalitarian, option for *APW* readers and imbues the brand with the affective charge of her own drama overcome. Maddie thus provides a path for readers to follow, giving them permission to cherry-pick from the WIC without troubling their belief in their opposition to it. At the same time, her personal connection to the company resituates it as trustworthy, the only place to go 'if you're shopping with a sub-$1,000 budget or wear (god forbid) a plus size' and want to 'find something that's stylish, fits well, and has some structure to it' (Eisenhart 2015b).

Being Your 'Best Self'

APW's approach to fashion and dress might best be summarized with the injunction, 'be yourself.' As one post argues, 'saying yes to the dress does not mean you have to say no to yourself' (Eisenhart 2019). Sometimes this ethic emerges in relation to challenging the marginalizing norms of the wedding industry, such as a series of posts on what motivated *APW* to partner with a woman-owned boutique in the creation of a line of plus-size wedding dresses. Or, in a post featuring a queer woman who wore a tuxedo-inspired

suit at her wedding, 'I really just wanted to feel like myself on that special day' (Eisenhart 2015c). In these posts, 'being yourself' is framed as a critical intervention, and the wedding becomes a forum for the full expression of aspects of the self that are minoritized or socially invisible. As a post on undergarments for gender non-conforming people says, '[y]ou shouldn't feel like you're wearing a costume or forcing yourself to be someone you're not. It's your day and you deserve to be fully present and fully yourself' (Harrington 2018). What is notable here is the way that *APW*'s feminism is reduced to self-expression in these posts, in keeping with a feminist politic that is exclusively focused on personal labour to the exclusion of structural analysis.

Such posts about sartorial self-expression as a quasi-political imperative, though, are in the minority. More typical is content that presents 'being you' as an end in itself. 'The best bridesmaid-dresses-turned-wedding-dresses are the ones that leave enough room for you to DIY your wedding style … simple base, but amped up with your personal style by way of accessorizing' (Eisenhart 2013b), one post notes. Another argues that '[t]he real secret to making a $350 dress feel special is just to bring yourself to it' (Levy 2017).

Many celebrations of the power of 'being yourself' are sponsored posts, and they give us a sense of what else is at stake in the vaunted sartorial authenticity on offer. In another sponsored post about David's Bridal, we find this formulation: 'David's believes in inclusivity, authenticity and empowerment, and it is their mission to help every woman find the bridal gown that will allow her to be the best, most genuine version of herself on her wedding day' (Eisenhart 2017). Indeed, the power of sponsors' clothing to make the self visible to the wearer is frequently lauded. Maddie Eisenhart (2015b), discussing trying on gowns at David's in another sponsored post, writes, 'as soon as I tried this one on with my leopard print shoes, I was like, "Oh hey Maddie, there you are!"' The posts exhort readers to buy clothing as a means not only to express, but to *know* the self.

There are conflicting models of the interface between selfhood and clothing operating here. First, consider a piece about wedding veils, in which the writer explains she thought they indexed a range of range of sexist and patriarchal values. She came around, though: 'Over time, I became more comfortable with the fact that I got to define what kind of bride I wanted to be; I wasn't defined by what I put on my head' (Rawlings 2014). Here, rather than have an egalitarian meeting between self and apparel, the wearer becomes the master of the garment. The clothing becomes an inert technology that she can appropriate. But if the goal is to do things anew, a veil seems out of place. We witness the development of a rhetorical strategy that allows women to enfold patriarchal traditions into their feminist lives. By exerting their individual power over the garment, they will be able to resignify it, emptying it of its 'unfeminist' meanings. Here an 'empowered' woman has infinite reach, even the ability to remake the material world. It establishes the primacy of the individual over the collective representational lexicon, suggesting that meanings can be created and recreated in heroic, solo acts of will, ignoring the workings of meaning-making as a social – and unmasterable – process.

On the other hand, there is the vision of a smooth continuity between this 'best self' and the wedding garments, in which the wearer is enabled by the garment to express who she is. This model suggests that the clothing is able to make visible something that most wedding garments obscure as they submit the bride to the dictates of the WIC. These clothes help her overcome the noise of the industry to make a statement that is more aligned with that 'everyday' self. Here again, however, what is remarkable

is that the bride – this time together with the clothes – is able to rise above the representational politics of conventional wedding attire. It is not that the wearer masters the clothing, but that she masters an entire industry and set of conventions, simply by rejecting the meanings that the industry attaches to attire. Since, as Finkelstein (1999, 376) advises us, 'fashions are legible, they are also polysemic,' they afford an ambiguity that permits *APW*'s brides to reframe these highly signifying garments and redefine them at will. This is perhaps best evidenced by the concluding sentences of a post titled 'The Feminist Case for Wearing a White Dress When You Get Married' that reads as if the guest blogger is convincing herself of her position in real-time:

> The more I think about it, the more I believe reclaiming the white wedding dress can be a fabulous feminist act […] I'm going to wear a white freaking dress to my freaking wedding, and it doesn't make me any less of a feminist. (Sahagian 2016)

In both models, there is a strong emphasis on the wilfulness of the subject. Sara Ahmed reads wilfulness as feminist troublemaking, a 'wander[ing] away from the path of the willing subject' (2014, 9). On the face of it, the narratives of will in *APW* wedding attire posts seem to follow Ahmed's thinking: here are women refusing elements of the narrative structures attached to the modern wedding. And yet the story told on *APW* about women and clothes is an inversion of what Ahmed describes, because here, women use will to conform to social conventions. Will involves a rebellion against the *feminist* voice in their heads. In discussing general versus particular will, Ahmed notes that '[a] rebellion is a rebellion of a part. The rebel is the one who compromises the whole, that is, the body of which she is a part (2014, 100). That is, will requires dissent from the social; it requires that 'some parts fail in their duty to carry and support the whole body' (Ahmed 2014, 105). For the readers of *APW*, though, feminist wilfulness requires extraction from feminism as a larger body and frames as heroic the refusal to conform not to patriarchal society, but to political critiques of that society. The will that emerges is entirely individual, following the logic of willpower Ahmed identifies: 'When a structural problem becomes diagnosed in terms of the will, the individuals become the problem' (2014, 7). Wrestling with the dictates of the WIC becomes an individual problem, one that will be solved not by refusing the dictates themselves but the framework of structural analysis that feminism provides.

This vision of wilfulness crystallizes in relation to wedding attire. Elsewhere on *APW*, invocations of rebellion or wilfulness more often refer to refusing social norms and so align (though imperfectly) with Ahmed's formulation of wilfulness as feminist disobedience. In non-sartorial coverage on *APW*, writers often call on collective wilfulness in order to make change, with wilfulness becoming a sort of social project. Yet in the domain of wedding clothing, conformity is prized, suggesting that fashion is somehow able to seamlessly accommodate an individual's conformity to wedding traditions whilst materializing their feminist subjectivity.

The 'best self' that *APW* suggests will be revealed by the right clothing deserves a fuller examination. Though the blog pushes against the dominance of a conventional feminine beauty ideal, it suggests that wedding attire enables the emergence of a perfected subject. Heather Widdows traces how the achievement of beauty has become an 'ethical ideal – providing values and standards against which we judge ourselves and others morally good or bad.' (2018, 30) Widdows reads language like '"your best self",

"it's still you, but the best version of you", and "the real you"' as 'directly invoking moral requirements and demands … Appearance becomes a proxy for, and intimation of, character and value' (30). If beauty is authentic selfhood, then the emergence of the 'best self' is the physical manifestation of an ethical imperative; in this case, a feminist value framework. What is more, devoting labour to its emergence is agency: as Jia Tolentino puts it, beauty as ethical ideal 'asks you to understand your physical body as a source of power and control. It provides a tangible way to exert power' (2018, 81). We can see how appearing as one's 'best self' in wedding garb conjoins a feminist orientation (power) with the performative femininity that the wedding ritual highlights. Clothing as a performative canvas both draws attention to the 'best self' as performed, and enfolds it back into normative ideals.

Understanding the self as perfectible gives us new insight into the stakes of *APW*'s sartorial logics. Angela McRobbie's theorization of perfectible subjectivity as a pillar of neoliberal sensibility outlines how 'the perfect relies … on restoring traditional femininity' (2015, 7). Though her piece traces this figure as part of neoliberal feminism's reach toward 'horizons of value relating to husbands, work partners and boyfriends, motherhood and maternity' McRobbie notes that 'feminism can be made entirely compatible with the search for the good life' (2015, 7). The logic of perfectible selves within feminism is extended by Akane Kanai, who demonstrates how a commitment to intersectional feminism among mostly white young women is haunted by the spectre of perfection: learning to be a 'good' feminist is framed by participants as an exercise in perfectibility, the end point of an individual journey of personal growth. Kanai writes that such an investment in monitoring growth and actualization means that 'feminist energies might be diverted into a project of the self' (2020, 31). McRobbie's and Kanai's understandings of the perfect are useful in interpreting the appearance of the 'best self' on *APW*. This new mode of perfection, in fact, gives us some sense of how to reconcile the blog's feminist leanings with the apparent evacuation of collectivist feminism from its sartorial coverage. When the emphasis on feminist perfection re-orients the work of transformation toward 'personal growth,' learning to love yourself, your body, becomes the end goal (Favaro 2017; Gill and Orgad 2015; Gill 2018). Clothing plays a key role facilitating this comfort with the self, but reduces feminist labour to confidence-building consumption and 'authentic' representation.

Self, Ritual and Transformation

The exhaustive search for clothing that materializes the 'best self' suggests a direct correspondence between selfhood and the surface. Clothes are used as expressive instruments, in a model of subjectivity that assumes that personhood is directly legible from the clothing worn (see Sennett 2007; Gaines 1990). According to Finkelstein, '[t]his promotes the disturbing idea that appearances can be read as if they were unambiguously legible, as if reliable meanings could be extracted from visual messages. Such causal thinking is highly seductive; but it is also reductive and trivializing' (1999, 378). *APW*'s celebration of David's Bridal, in a sponsored post, for its support of the bride's quest to be 'the best, most genuine version on her wedding day' (Eisenhart 2017) crystallizes this philosophy. But it also bears a significant tension: Why should the self on display at this spectacularly performative occasion be contiguous with the 'everyday' self? Indeed, *APW*'s use of the model of fashion as directly expressive of selfhood sidesteps the reality that a

wedding is a performative event, one that provides an especially spectacular theatre for women. Indeed, as the twentieth century progressed, 'the wedding became a more and more lush means for both the remaking of the female body and for feminine expressivity' (Freeman 2002, 32). Certainly, given *APW*'s political positioning and foundational critiques of the WIC, a step away from the vision of the bride as sublime aesthetic object is to be expected. Yet to entirely abandon the performative dimensions of the occasion sidesteps the reality that, as a marked ritual event, the wedding is *not* everyday life. Furthermore, marriers undergo transformation at a wedding, which performatively initiates this social and legal change of status. Indeed, the sparse scholarly writing about wedding attire has stressed the centrality of apparel in consolidating the process of transformation for brides (Friese 1997; Nash 2013; Sykes and Brace-Govan 2015). To expect attire to convey a legible sense of subjectivity is to evade both the mutability of selfhood and the transformational qualities of the wedding.

This constellation of apparently stable self and transformation deserves further scrutiny. For transformation's materialization of change complements the emphasis on social change that ostensibly animates *APW*. Yet the ethos of legible material manifestation of selfhood in dress undermines the possibility of transformation, remaining fixed on a static vision of interiority. The work of the wedding, as it implicitly emerges on *APW*, is to freeze the perfected vision of the marriers so that it becomes a touchpoint to return to. What results is not so different from mainstream wedding culture. Implicit in this figuring is not just the assumption that the self can be perfected in the first place, but that it is at a wedding where this achievement is properly realized: the transformation of two single people into a consolidated unit, perfected by realizing their potential and transforming their bodies into completed aesthetic objects.

In the fixity of this realization, the implied temporality of *APW* becomes repetitive. This sits in opposition to the time signature of transformation, which implies mobility and liveness – and which is also the time signature of the feminism that *APW* claims. Witness, in particular, the aforementioned recycling of Meg Keene's and Maddie Eisenhart's wedding stories. Both bloggers begin most of their sartorial posts with recollections of their own wedding planning processes, stories that acquire a hardened gloss by the frequency of their retelling. Polished to brittle perfection, they lose any anecdotal liveliness through their constant reiteration, their familiarity stripping them of elements of revelation or unpredictability that provide narrative mobility. The repetition of these stories helps to establish a tone for the blog that is more grounded in reminiscence than the production of new stories, new possibilities. Transformative possibility – which we might call a linchpin of the uneasy relationship between wedding culture and social justice projects – is surprisingly absent from the blog's coverage of wedding apparel, even as the promise of transformation marks many of the other wedding elements discussed on *APW*.

Conclusion

Fashion's labile character allows *APW* to use the form to recuperate an audience potentially indifferent to the blog's feminist political commitments, while still signalling a commitment to individual 'empowerment' that can, if we squint, stand in for feminism. In so doing, the site circumvents the potential of fashion as a cultural industry, which lies in its interface between self and social. Oddly, given *APW*'s professed commitments to

feminism as a social justice project, fashion becomes a means to reprioritize the individual. *APW* in fact reveals what might be at stake in the meeting of fashion and nominally feminist digital media: fashion is famously positioned in the space between conformity and distinction. Here, textual distinction – which is indexed to feminist politics – is countered by enclothed conformity, suggesting a split between lived enactments of political values in cultural forms like the wedding, and their representation through clothing. Our analysis suggests that this split is related to commodity feminism, in which the sartorial comes to stand in for ideals and values that are enacted nowhere but in individual self-fashioning. While we are committed to the potential of the sartorial to do collective, political work, *APW* ultimately circulates only a mirage of fashion's potential intervention.

Finally, we wish to extrapolate from this identification of a fantasy of feminist change to the tools we bring to work in fashion studies, because we detect in corners of fashion studies some of the impulses we have identified in *APW*. Fashion scholarship has been deeply invested both in the self-making potential of fashion – often in ways that implicitly extract self from social – and in the notion that fashion has the potential to make a revolutionary intervention in systems of power: dual investments that sound very similar to those evident in *APW*. But these are capacities in tension with each other; transformative interventions involve more than individual selves. If, in consolidating around a more deeply intersectional analysis, as it is presently doing, fashion studies fails to grapple deeply with the structural dimensions of marginalization alongside the possibilities for expression and joy enabled by the sartorial, the field risks undermining its *own* potential intervention. *APW* prompts us to some necessary interrogation of the *affects* brought to bear in making sense of fashion – both in fashion media and in academic accounts. It is our hope that attention to the liveliness and sensuality at play in fashion is always counter-balanced by a critical vigilance that is alert to the misappropriation of the form's changemaking potential.

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