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Getting Hitched: Weddings and Reality Television

When I was little, I wanted to marry my father. In my eyes, he was perfect. He loved me unconditionally, made me laugh, and supported me through tough times. I was very young, but I didn't ever want him to leave my life, so, I figured we'd just get married. I never voiced this to him or my mother, and I wonder now if other children thought the same things. After that phase, it gets weirder. I wanted to marry my teddy bear. Voiced through my mother, Bear was the best friend anyone could ever have. He never left my side for most of my childhood, and he still sits on my bed at home. He was the perfect gentleman. He always knew what to say to cheer me up, he was a whiz with medicines (Dr Bear, don't ask me how he got his PhD), and he and the other stuffed animals were a constant in my life. He was friendly, funny, trustworthy, and loving, and so I wanted to marry him.

At first glance, you might think I didn't quite understand what marriage really meant. However, I think I completely understood. To me, as a child, marriage meant spending the rest of my life with someone I loved dearly. As I grew older, I came to realize that marriage could have diverse meanings for other people. My first year of college, I had a philosophy professor ask the class, "How many of you want to get married?" All fifteen students raised their hands. Then she asked, "Now, how many of you know the person you're going to marry?" There was silence, and then one senior's

hand went up. That day has always stuck with me. In our society, we all *know* that we want to get married, but my professor's point was that marriage is something that should be considered depending on the person you are with, not as a given event in your life. It holds such monumental meaning, and yet, we are all ready to commit to marriage before we have even met the person we want to marry. But when you look at it another way, marriage just reflects our desire to be loved. Everyone wants love in their lives, and by believing that we will marry someday, we acknowledge our desire to be loved and to love deeply. As Chrys Ingraham writes in her work, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (1999), "The promise of a relationship that will provide unconditional love, shore up self-esteem, meet every affective and physical need, and make one feel worthy and fulfilled is compelling" (162). This is a valid statement, for sure, but what I have a hard time understanding is why marriage has become so centered around the wedding. When two people decide to make such a vow to each other, a celebration is due, of course. How this desire to live and love someone with full commitment for your entire life translates into a lavish wedding with 300 guests, champagne, a band, tulle and diamonds is beyond me. Is a wedding a sacrament, or is it a party? Is it a moment for private emotion, or an opportunity for exuberant display? (Wallace 29)

I wanted to write about marriage and weddings because, quite simply, they fascinate me. I'm talking about grandiose weddings, big production-type weddings, weddings where a lot of people come for a long ceremony and a fancy party. The amount of time and money that goes into such an extravagant event baffles me. From

watching reality shows like *A Wedding Story* on TLC, I have learned that planning a wedding is stressful, kills friendships, and is generally not fun. In my opinion, I think it's crazy. So why do people do this? What is the allure of this madness? In addition to the general insanity of weddings, the institute of marriage has been shown to be deeply flawed and quite unequal, but we are still tuning in to watch *Engaged & Underage* and *Perfect Proposal*. The fantasy shows that we watch and the glossy magazines we read seem to cover up the fact that the institution of marriage has problems. I want to find out why we are obsessed with getting married, even though many of us won't actually carry through with the event or will end our marriages in divorce. Is it just the pageantry? The attention one receives as a bride and a new wife? To me, the huge attention paid to marriage in the media these days brings out some really interesting questions.

Why have weddings become such good fodder for reality television? What used to be a small ceremony and a private gathering has now turned into an elaborate public performance. While it has never been enough for a couple – in any kind of society, anywhere – to pledge permanent fidelity and commitment to each other in seclusion, it has only in past hundred years or so that weddings have become as large as they are today (Wallace 2). The longstanding tradition of marriage has survived this historical and societal shift, however, and we still value it quite highly and have given it all sorts of meaning when meaning is not necessarily there. Though marriage has shifted in frequency over the years, the core values of the ceremony remain. “When a social practice changes as little over the years as weddings have done, those alterations are

significant. The way we get married in America shows us what we think – about marriage, about family, and about love itself” (Wallace 8). Divorce is much more common these days, as is remarriage. We have all heard the term “starter marriage” in reference to a union that lasts five years or less. I find this shift to be telling: we don’t value marriage as much as we used to. A bond that used to mean forever is now temporary and can be applied to more than one person over your lifetime.

As Carol Wallace discusses in her book, *All Dressed in White* (1999), consumerism and media access helped make weddings more visible. Dresses and other wedding finery became easier to produce, transportation and communication improved, and photography became easily available. “Mid twentieth century, there was a cultural shift that made the press a much more significant feature in Americans’ daily lives, and photos injected into the wedding proceedings an ingredient that had hitherto been considered with some ambivalence – publicity” (123). When weddings became tabloid fodder, average citizens became celebrities, and brides had ample sources of fantasy (124). Almost everyone likes to feel like a celebrity now and then, and a huge wedding will definitely help in that endeavor. As photography has become more and more advanced, the chance to feel like you’re the star of the day has increased dramatically. Disposable cameras are often placed on guests’ tables so that candid shots can be taken to capture the “real” essence of the reception/party after the wedding. Though it’s nice to have a lot of pictures from different points of view, I also see this as a bit desperate. Capture *everything*! Don’t miss a minute! Let’s savor this forever! I love pictures, but I think photography has made us a little crazy because we’re always looking for the

perfect shot instead of enjoying the actual moment. Taking pictures can also be connected to the “we’re always watching” aspect of reality television, as well, since you never know when someone might be taking a picture at your reception, so you’d better look like you’re having a good time.

Consumerism is a huge part of today’s world. We have learned that citizenship can be bought and that participation in society at higher levels requires a certain amount of money. Therefore, weddings are a way to show your wealth and prove to larger society that you deserve to partake in the rituals associated with the upper echelons. In this respect, weddings are socially dividing and hierarchical. Why does something so divisive persist so securely? Do they maintain order in society? Any institution that works to restrict its members can’t be a good one. As Ingraham states, “marriage only privileges those who already have the earnings to stay out of poverty.” (320) How true. Most couples have a very difficult time financing a wedding, and yet, they make it happen. Why is this? “Every bride sees her wedding day as the culmination of her dreams, and every wedding is a celebration of that...” (Ingraham 47) Who wouldn’t shell out big bucks in order to make her dreams come true? Maintaining status quo and proving to the world that you are a worthy participant is no small feat when it comes to weddings. One day to “prove” your love for another and gain recognition from society seems a rather silly reason to break the bank. So this brings me back to my question: why do people get married and have elaborate weddings?

In this culture, socialization is everything. “Women didn’t enter this world knowing that they wanted to wear a prom dress, practice something called ‘dating,’ buy a white wedding gown, or play with a ‘My Size Bride Barbie.’ Likewise, men did not exit the womb knowing they would one day have to buy a date a corsage or spend two months’ income to buy an engagement ring” (Ingraham 4). However, that doesn’t stop us from wanting them. Chrys Ingraham is very critical of the social meanings surrounding weddings. “Weddings work as a form of ideological control to signal membership in relations of ruling, as well as to signify that the couple is normal, moral, productive, family-centered, upstanding and, most importantly, properly gendered” (18). Television is a powerful force in American society. Marriage and weddings are a powerful force in American society. It only makes sense that the two should be together to regulate how we view and live in the world.

Americans watch a lot of television. In fact, the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day,¹ which means that we are constantly getting messages about how to live. From trashy talk shows to make-over shows to travel shows and 30 minute meals, we are learning how to be proper social citizens. Shows that ridicule certain members of society teach us how *not* to act, while destination shows teach us where we should desire to go, and cooking shows tell us what we want to eat. Americans are obsessed with how they present themselves, in my opinion, and I think that we learn how to do so largely through television. It is an excellent media-delivery system and is easily accessible across class lines in this country. Television is also largely about fantasy, which is what makes it so popular. “The romantic illusions

¹ http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html#tv_stats

created by media weddings construct desire to such an extent that, without realizing it, we place these illusions above reality.” (Ingraham 126) When you watch a television show, you can insert yourself directly into the story and live vicariously through the people presented. It makes sense, then, that traditions and fantasies, such as weddings, are passed on through television. These are important events in people’s lives anyway, and to see them on television as a giant to-do reinforces their importance.

Our culture has a huge fixation on romance. We romanticize *everything*. Books, movies, magazines, the love dichotomy is replicated everywhere. “Today, it’s practically impossible to walk through any grocery store or by any checkout counter without being inundated with romance novels, magazines and tabloids on various celebrity or soap opera weddings, or wedding how-to and fashion magazines” (Ingraham 8). And it’s not just weddings. The fairy tale of a woman being swept off her feet by her handsome prince/knight/tall, dark and handsome lover is ever pervasive and is reinforced every day in popular media and advertising. Ingraham writes, the task of the mass media “is to provide the public with information and materials that help shape how we view the world, ourselves, and the values we live by. They provide the symbols, myths, images, and ideas by which we constitute dominant culture” (72). And oh, what a good job they do. Culturally speaking, the media owns us all. We live and die in a media-created culture, I think, and the need to meet the standards set by the media drive us to perfection regarding weddings. With the rise of reality television, especially, there is always the chance that someone is watching you, filming you from right behind that door. And there is always the opportunity to write in to a show and

ask to be featured in an episode. How romantic is it to share your wedding with the world? Then everyone will know how much you love each other! The union of a man and a woman as presented through television reality shows gives us a very narrow view of how to show our love and commitment in this culture.

Why are weddings even necessary? One could say that there is no need for a public ceremony or any sort of declaration that two people are “together,” that weddings serve no real purpose. Public affirmation of a relationship is always desirable, though. From that thought follows the question that I asked earlier, why is a wedding expected when two people are in love? I have a problem with this course of events. As marriage has become less about a man owning his wife and more about two people in a relationship they choose, I believe that the changing meanings of marriage should lead to changing practices of marriage. I believe marriage to be inherently flawed, not only because not everyone in the population can *be* married, but also because it is heterosexist and still positions women as inferior to men. Fathers still “give away” their daughters, and we tend to see this as a quaint tradition instead of maintenance of a hierarchal, patriarchal system. In a twisted way, marriage seems to privilege women with all the wedding planning, but what sort of power is that? Wedding planning as your domain? It still restricts women to the domestic sphere, while men (stereotypically) have little to do with making the actual event happen. “Clearly, weddings have become the most watched yet ‘unnoticed’ phenomenon in popular culture,” says Ingraham, and I agree wholeheartedly (8). When something becomes so normalized that it is rarely questioned, that’s dangerous, especially when

it's something like marriage which maintains a heterosexist, classist and racist privilege. Ingraham continues: "The social, political, and economic investment in heterosexuality as it is currently organized holds great consequence for much of what we've come to hold sacred and personal" (8). We love an institution that is, at its core, unequal. So what do we do? I don't see weddings going anywhere any time soon, but maybe they should. In America, where it has become easy and acceptable to get married and divorced repeatedly, which way do we go? Do we go backwards and try to make marriage a more serious commitment, something akin to what it was maybe 50 years ago, do we make some sort of new kinship system that is similar to marriage, but means more, or do we get rid of it altogether? I don't know the answer to this question, but I would be interested to see how abolishing marriage would go over with the general public. I think there would be a poor reaction, but I also think it's something we really need to think about right now.

Reality television is an interesting format for shows. Different shows serve different purposes, but each is a very persuasive way to transmit ideals about weddings and getting hitched. Let's walk through a few episodes to see what I mean.

In January of 2007, MTV launched a show called *Engaged & Underage*. It's pretty straightforward, but this gem of a show follows a young couple – one or both of whom are not yet 21 – on their progress to the altar. Generally, there is resistance from one or both sets of parents, the couple has a major fight to endure (but always overcomes), and the show culminates in a wedding. There is often a brief "after show" to see how the couples are coping as married folk. Sometimes an episode will touch on

issues of race and/or class, but usually it just focuses on young people “following their dreams.” As one tagline for the show says, “Are you ready to live life the way you planned it?”²

In my opinion, the suggestion that one would have a life planned out as a 19 year old seems a bit preposterous, but not necessarily surprising. Since most of this generation has grown up with Disney movies that idealize romance and heterosexual couple-hood, it seems almost logical that most young women would have a fantasy wedding well-formulated by the age of 18 or 19 (I don’t mean to say that young men don’t have these fantasies, but I have found in my personal life that women, more often than men, think of life in Disney-like terms). I find myself confused with the purpose of *Engaged & Underage*, though. Is this glorifying weddings or showing us how weird it is for kids to get married when they can’t drink champagne at their own wedding? The show always has a happy ending, so I would wager that this is a pro-wedding show. It makes sense to promote weddings when people are choosing not to marry in the first place or are getting married much later in life than they used to (US Census Bureau, 1992). One problem I have with this show is that the target audience is teenagers. More than one episode discusses sex as something to be had solely after marriage. While I understand that encouraging teens not to have sex is usually a good idea, I think that advertising marriage as a way to get sex is a faulty message. Sex sells, though, and when these young couples talk about how hard it is to stay pure but how *awesome* the wedding night is going to be, who can resist that? I fear that it sends the wrong message to teens.

² http://www.mtv.com/ontv/dyn/engaged_and_underage/series.jhtml#bio

TLC's *A Wedding Story* is a bit different. Though the general plot is essentially the same, the couples and audience are typically older, in their late 20s to early 30s, and have already established lives outside their parents' homes. This show goes more into the nitty-gritty details of wedding planning since the focus is not on how young the bride and groom are. There is little resistance in *A Wedding Story*, just the trials and tribulations of planning a wedding and the mishaps along the way. Ultimately, though, the wedding goes off almost as perfectly as planned, and the couple marries happily.

TLC has three other wedding shows, *Perfect Proposal*, *Wild Weddings*, and *For Better or For Worse*. The first documents men proposing to their girlfriends, the second focuses on weddings that are a bit out of the ordinary, and the third is all about the preparation that goes into a wedding, with a twist: the couple's friends get a budget from TLC and have to put together some theme for the wedding in a certain amount of time. These shows are not "reality" shows in the fact that they are filmed in live time, but for the fact that they follow real people planning their real weddings. There is also *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* on the Style Network: "Each week, our cameras follow these top event experts and many more as they attempt to create nuptial nirvana."³ And of course, *The Bachelor* on ABC, which is more of a pageant than anything else, where a man gets to choose his bride from a pool of women (the matches on this show are rarely successful, yet we watch). The tagline for *Bridezilla*, on WE is, "She's Engaged. Enraged. And about to be committed!"⁴ CBS has a new show, *CUPID*, which is the brainchild of *American Idol*'s scathing host, Simon Cowell, which "challenges America

³ <http://www.stylenetwork.com/ssms-site/style.do?showId=6140>

⁴ <http://www.we.tv/uploads/Bridezillas2006/factzillas.html#episode18>

to find the perfect mate for one eligible young woman.”⁵ This show is very similar to *The Bachelor*, except that the audience gets to vote off a man every week. Each show has a unique focus, but what do we learn from each episode?

First things first: weddings are for straight white people. I should give a few shows some credit, though. *Bridezilla* features the wedding of Jon and Isaac, but Jon is clearly in a feminine role and acknowledges that he has a “bridezilla” attitude. TLC never goes there, though. All of their participants are straight people, and most are white, middle- to upper-class. I don’t find this surprising in the least. When you’re trying to maintain an ideal and uphold fantasy, it is always best to place the dominant culture in the teaching manual. *Whose Wedding is it Anyway?* has the most diversity of all the shows, but since these weddings are generally very expensive, the focus is on couples who have plenty of money to spend on a wedding.

Secondly: YOU TOO can participate in this wonderful world of TV cameras and professing your love publicly! Each show also has a section on its website about “How to be on our show!” TLC asks, “Are you and your fiancé planning a fabulous wedding? If so, we want you! We are looking for couples who will be willing to share the experience of their one-of-a-kind wedding for a new show.”⁶ Style asks, “Are you and your fiancé fun and fabulous, but drowning in details? Then let us hook you up with a top-notch wedding planner, to help organize the wedding of your dreams and take you down the aisle in style.”⁷ They all follow the same pattern: We want you! Ordinary people who want fabulous weddings – we can help! By granting this awesome wish to a chosen few, these shows are unwittingly teaching us that the perfect

⁵ <http://www.cbs.com/primetime/cupid/show/about.shtml>

⁶ <http://tlc.discovery.com/fansites/apply/getontlc.html>

⁷ <http://www.stylenetwork.com/BeonTV/WhoseWedding/index.html>

wedding is only available to some of us. For many people, weddings like this are a complete impossibility. Through the magic of TV, though, many people can watch these shows and daydream about having a glamorous, classy wedding like the ones they see on TLC and other channels. The accessibility of television allows us to all share in the fantasy of a perfect wedding. As George Lipsitz writes in *Time Passages* (1991), “Cultural forms create conditions of possibility, they expand the present by informing it with memories of the past and hopes for the future; but they also engender accommodation with prevailing power realities, separating art from life, and internalizing the dominant culture’s norms and values as necessary and inevitable” (16). What he means here is that while wedding shows seem to expand the options that are available, they are really quite restrictive since these fantasy weddings aren’t really that out of the ordinary and are just reinforcing the dominant ideal of what a wedding should be. “Even though most of us are able to separate fantasy from reality, we still experience these stories and the emotions they evoke on the level of both the conscious and the unconscious” (Ingraham 126). Television is really good at what it does. It glorifies weddings and makes them seem like something everyone can have, while at the same time showing a limited and idealized range of what a wedding should be. In addition, these are classic “happy ending” stories that fail to show the hardships couples often endure post-wedding. This skewed view contributes to the fantasy aspect of wedding shows. On television, the focus is on the wedding, not matrimony. We never find out what happens after the wedding, except when there is a special episode on “where they are now,” which will either show the couples in wedded bliss or despair, but rarely the in-between that is most probable. By making these shows,

weddings are belittled: If they're not to be taken seriously and are purely for spectatorship, it doesn't matter how the couple fares post-wedding. This makes me wonder if couples on these shows – or in general – ever experience post-wedding blues. The build-up to the actual event is so intense; what happens after that? The abrupt ending that comes along with wedding shows leaves us hanging, wanting more. Is this why we watch?

One could also argue that these shows are pure entertainment. The participants look ridiculous a lot of the time and *Bridezilla's* entire premise is that these women are so wrapped up with wedding planning that they go insane. People know enough to separate fantasy and reality, they know that these weddings are on TV *because* they are unattainable, they know that their lives will not be this exciting, probably (how depressing!). However, we can't do that, because people *make* weddings like this happen every day. Even when it causes stress on emotions, friendships and the bank account, people go to great lengths to get the wedding they desire. There are creative ways to plan a wedding on a budget; many of these shows even have tips on how to do so while making it look like you paid a ton. We are a thrifty people, Americans, and oddly enough, we pride ourselves on making things look fancy on a dime (there's a whole show about that, too). The wedding industry knows that there are two sides to the planning coin: all out or economical. They have profited from both sides. There is great money to be made by making a low-priced picture-perfect wedding, and conversely, in gowns that cost thousands of dollars. People are often willing to spend more money than they should on a wedding, since it is such a special day. You only get

married once, right? Well, that's the idea, anyway. Weddings make women feel like princesses. Disney has taught us well about the white wedding, as have movies, magazines and popular literature.

So what have we learned here? Marriage keeps women down, weddings encourage consumerism and hetero-normativity, and TV is bad for you? Yes, but that's not all. The fact that there is a large contingency of wedding-focused shows on television these days really leads me to believe that there is a greater discourse of crisis surrounding weddings. We live in an insecure society, and I think that all of these shows point a huge finger at weddings and the changing meaning of marriage. It would seem to me that these shows are broadcast because there is something wrong with weddings. What is it? The "threat" posed by gay marriage? The fact that more people are choosing to marry later, or not at all? A return to simplicity because extravagant weddings are ridiculously time-consuming and expensive? I think all of these things are true, but I also think that weddings and how much we watch them will not be changing any time soon. Looking at weddings via reality television does not yield any surprising or deep answers about our culture. Instead, it has reinforced my belief that we Americans are obsessed with seeing, being seen, and being perfectly normal. Wedding shows reify old beliefs about what it means to be married, the proper way to get married, and all the expectations in between.

I agree with Ingraham's claim that we are not watching weddings closely enough. What happens on our television screens indicates larger changes within the

culture, but at the same time, can hide the very changes that are occurring at that time. Bonnie Adrian phrases it perfectly: “women’s preoccupation with romance discourages us from engaging critically with the inequities of marriage” (110). When we are busy watching the multitude of idealized wedding shows on television, we are distracted from the problems within marriage: the unequal benefits for different members of society, the hierarchal and patriarchal rigidity of the ceremony, the fact that marriages aren’t entirely necessary in order to show commitment and love for another person, and that we never see anything after a wedding – we always see a happy ending, and that’s definitely not a true story with every beautiful wedding. Are these reality shows really opiate of the masses? In my opinion, yes, they are. I think we need to turn off the TV and look around to see why so many people are willing to put their life savings into a celebration that will last a day, but are unwilling to put effort into a bond that is supposed to last a lifetime.

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