The Dirt on “Trash the Dress”
Resistance: Photographers, Brides, and the Mess of Post-wedding Imaging Sessions

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Photographers, heterosexual brides, and news reporters associate “trash the dress,” or TTD post-wedding photography sessions, with resistance. According to them, TTD changes cultural conceptions of weddings and the visual position of married women. In these sessions, women wear white wedding dresses while strolling in unconventional surrounds, jumping into the water, smearing mud on themselves, and acting like zombies. This detailed study of the ways TTD is associated with resistance, with an emphasis on photographers’ practices, contributes to resistance studies and feminist literature by considering how opposition is promised and marketed. For instance, photographers promote TTD images as creative, alternative, and better than wedding photography in promotional blogs and other forums. Claims that TTD politically transforms weddings and women’s experiences are in need of critique. Resistance, pleasure, and prestige are intertwined in this cultural activity. It is not completely apt to relate this practice to photographers’ utter control of images and brides or women’s absolute refusal of traditional wedding cultures. TTD sessions are reliant on the norm producing aspects of Western weddings and photographers promote and manage the oppositional functions of TTD in order to maintain their creative position. Yet, women trouble feminine roles when staining gowns and appearing to slide beyond social control.

Keywords: Abjection; Clean and proper body; Feminism; Heterosexuality; Photography; Resistance studies; Wedding

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Introduction

Photographers, heterosexual brides, and reporters relate “trash the dress,” or TTD dress post-wedding photography sessions, with changing wedding cultures and the visual position of wedded women. They associate TTD with resistance. In these sessions, heterosexual brides work with photographers and wear wedding dresses again while posing in unusual environments, rolling in ocean surf, wiping dirt on themselves, and self-presenting as zombies. Photographers regularly market these images as artistic, unconventional, and distinct from wedding photography in their promotional blogs as well as in internet wedding forums and news reports. In these venues, TTD sessions are identified as representing bridal rage, facilitating resistance, and critiquing the limiting roles and scripts established by traditional weddings. TTD is described as defiant and unconventional, but my study, which focuses on photographers, shows how these practices also support traditional notions of heterosexuality and femininity. For instance, the Trash the Dress! internet site offers a “gallery of extraordinary brides” whose non-normative features are troubled by the ways women, most of whom are white, passively snuggle into the bodies of male partners and seductively pose so they can be admired (2009b). Women also actively trash dresses with mud and other fluids in ways that are antithetical to the stable body and proper femininity. The claims from photographers, participants, and reporters that all TTD sessions politically transform wedding photography and women’s experiences are in need of critique. Resistance, pleasure, and prestige are combined in this cultural activity. It is not completely appropriate to associate this practice with photographers’ complete control of images and brides or women’s absolute refusal of traditional wedding cultures.

In order to understand TTD, I use the humanities methods of close textual and theoretical analysis to study more than three thousand internet posts and describe the similar notions of this phenomenon that appear in photographers’ blogs, the Trash the Dress! internet sites, wedding forums, and news reports. These texts indicate how photographers use TTD resistance as a marketing strategy, way of aligning photographers with critiques of wedding cultures, and method of contesting their association with conventional wedding photographers. I critically consider resistance studies, the cultural politics of weddings, the development of TTD, the means through which photographers distinguish themselves, accounts of resistance, and the ways TTD can compromise conventional weddings and identity positions. TTD is reliant on the norm producing aspects of Western wedding culture and photographers manage TTD’s oppositional functions. However, representations of fury in zombie sessions and the excessive staining of gowns trouble women’s regulated and feminine role. All of this makes TTD a useful research site from which to modify resistance studies, including an acknowledgment of how resistance is marketed, and further reflect on the diverse enactments of gender and sexuality that are part of wedding cultures.
Resistance Studies

Resistance is of interest to a variety of scholars. Early organizational communication researchers describe the ways resisters affect companies and lead to economic losses, breaks in organizational control, and further alienate workers. These academics identify resisters as deviants and their actions as something that needs to be dealt with and controlled (e.g. Mayo, 1933). Marxist research also examines the ways resistance challenges corporations. However, Marxist investigators identify the transformative potential and politically positive aspects of resistance (Hargreaves, 1982; Miller, 1997; Munro, 1996; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Current work in this area, as Kathleen Knight Abowitz argues, recognizes resistance as more than a “mere opposition to authority” (2000, p. 878). It is “understood to contribute, in some way, to progressive transformation of the environment” by attempting to eliminate oppressive societal structures, relations, and identities (Abowitz, 2000, p. 878). Recent researchers in resistance studies, including academics in Anthropology, Communication, Education, and Sociology, also contest the binary of powerful and powerless that is often established in earlier studies (Munro, 1996). Scholars interrogate the dyadic thinking and tendency to identify domination as “a relatively fixed and institutionalized form of power” and resistance as “organized opposition to power” (Ortner, 1995, p. 174). They describe the multiple forms of domination that are present in any work or social situation, daily and micro forms of resistance, conceptions of political transformation, the critical possibilities of muteness, and the ways resisters in oppressed groups may be both powerful and resisted (Fleming, 2005; Jermier, Knights, & Nord, 1994; Prasad & Prasad, 2000; Scott, 1985).

Feminist literature also provides detailed accounts of resistance and analysis of how everyday acts may destabilize social norms (e.g., Butler, 1990; Diamond & Quinby, 1988; hooks, 1981). “Rather than focusing on revolution,” writes Robyn Thomas and Annette Davies, “the forms of resistance portrayed in poststructuralist feminisms are of a more localized and small-scale nature, centring on the destabilizing of truths, challenging subjectivities and normalizing discourses” (2005, p. 720). Such interrogations are useful for my analysis because TTD photographers claim to challenge the truths and subjectivities of wedding cultures, including the emphasis on cleanliness, while working to support some wedding norms. Feminist considerations of abjection and fluid bodies, including literature by Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and Julia Kristeva (1982), offer critical models for interrogating the conceptions of body that support gender, race, and sexuality norms. According to Kristeva, abjection is caused by “what disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, p. 4). This literature identifies abjection as a possible model for resisting the clean and proper body—the kind of solid, autonomous, and heteronormative subject that is constituted in traditional Western wedding cultures. The clean and proper body is an “obedient, law-abiding, social body” that emerges through its articulation and differentiation from abjection (Grosz, 1994, p. 192). It is developed through “the child’s negotiations with the demands of toilet training and the
regulation of body fluids” (Grosz, 1994, p. 207). These forms of socialization are continued in directives to brides, such as “Don’t step on the dress; don’t get dirt on the dress” (Adalsteinsson, as cited in Tam, 2007).

Feminist investigations of daily behaviors include research on the normalizing and oppositional aspects of photography (e.g., Bright, 1998; Hirsch, 1999). Since its invention, photography has been used for family portraiture and to establish the importance of the normative white family (Smith, 1998). Conventional families keep using photography and digital imaging as methods of representing themselves and in doing this often privilege heteronormativity and its relationship to binary gender, heterosexual marriages, and familial reproduction. In a related manner, cultural conceptions of photography frequently associate artists and creativity with masculinity and virility (Bergstein, 1995). Mainstream media forms such as advertising express conventional views of creativity, gender, race, sexuality, and the family through photography. At the same time, photographers, subjects, and viewers can resist and restructure these conceptions and portrayals. Feminists point to such methods of resistance as depicting unconventional subjects and less visible populations, staring and otherwise refusing the objectification of photographers and viewers, interrogating the hierarchical relationship between authors and depicted subjects, and reading images in ways that are not intended by producers (e.g., Eileraas, 2003; Hirsch, 1999).

Internet and new media studies researchers are also interested in methods of empowerment and resistance. Some of these scholars indicate that the internet empowers individuals and provides ways of resisting the state, corporations, and mass media outlets (Jenkins, 2002; Landow, 2006; Kahn & Kellner, 2004). For instance, Yochai Benkler looks to open source and “nonmarket production” as “radically decentralized, collaborative, and non-proprietary; based on sharing resources and outputs among widely distributed, loosely connected individuals who cooperate with each other without relying on either market signals or managerial commands” (2006, p. 60). Nevertheless, as my study of the TTD phenomenon suggests, resistance is often commodified in these settings. The liberating potential of technologies and sites are as likely to provide advantages to corporations and traditionally recognized producers, such as photographers. The critical aspects of these diverse literatures are also restricted because they examine conceptions of resistance but do not focus on the ways resistance is promised and marketed within particular cultures.

The Cultural Politics of Weddings and TTD Sessions

There are many reasons for people to resist and critique weddings, wedding dresses, and the industry that produces and perpetuates them. TheKnot’s (2010) estimate of the cost of a wedding is 27,800 USD. Average spending in the U.S. in 2009, which was less than in previous years because of the economy, was 19,581 USD (The Wedding Report, 2010). During the same time period, the average wedding and honeymoon in Australia cost 49,202 AUD (Saurine, 2009). Wedding spending in the U.K. averaged
21,089 GBP per event (The Independent, 2009). As these numbers begin to convey, weddings are expensive consumption rites that shape society in numerous ways (Otnes & Lowrey, 1993). For instance, Ramona Faith Oswald describes how heterosexual weddings “link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious benefits” (2003, p. 108). These presumed rights and privileges are conveyed through wedding ceremonies, photography, invitations, dresses, and additional artifacts.

TTD sessions present brides with opportunities to continue the heterosexual assertions of weddings while dismissing the costs by self-presenting in less opulent settings and disavowing dresses. However, this requires that women are able to afford, or at least risk, ruining gowns. Stores such as David’s Bridal and Filene’s Basement offer sale dresses that start in the 100 USD range but many brides on internet wedding forums describe paying more than 1,000 USD for gowns. Due to these costs, it is now common for women to sell wedding dresses on sites such as eBay to recoup part of the cost, although the resale process is not easy and final prices are usually low. Women with great affection for gowns tend to buy additional dresses, an often-recommended solution on women’s wedding forums. This preserves the “original” wedding dress and can add to the compilation of memorable wedding items and costs. There are also TTD photographers’ booking fees, which start at around 100 USD (Ellis, 2010), but most photographers charge much more. Photographers now sell more expensive photography packages because wedding-day photography has been extended to engagement, boudoir, TTD, anniversary, and pregnancy sessions. All of this suggests that TTD resistance has a price and the wedding industry benefits from aspects of this practice.

TTD photographers modify wedding cultures and classify these changes as important. Society also tends to identify a widespread series of positive changes in Western women’s roles since the second wave of the women’s movement. However, as Sherril Horowitz Schuster (1997) argues, the increase in bridal magazines (and now websites), consumer shows, and wedding-themed films and advertising sustain traditional bridal rituals. These wedding texts are directed at women and assert that the wedding is the most significant event in their lives rather than portraying it as an important occasion for the couple, family, and social network, or presenting it as one of many life occurrences. Wedding photographs are an essential part of this normalizing structure and instruct women in how to enact the portrayed roles of bride and wife. Feminine beauty, grace, delicateness, and slimness are constructed and perpetuated through wedding photographs. Jeffery Sobal, Caron Bove, and Barbara Rauschenbach describe how professional photographers “manage their subjects’ presentations of their weight” (1999, p. 131). Personal and family remembrances of weddings, which are aided by photographic “documentation,” include recollections of the bride’s weight. Faced by this knowledge and social encouragements to fit into small-sized wedding dresses, women often dutifully diet for months (Patterson, 2005). TTD sessions contribute to this patrolling and measurement. For example, Renlish was “strapped” into her “lovely wedding dress” for a TTD session and relieved that she “wasn’t too fat” (2009). If cris “can ever fit
into” her “dress again,” she wants to do a TTD session” (2009). These women remain engaged with their wedding dresses and the ways these objects assess their size and femininity because of TTD photography. In such cases, the promise of resistance enforces norms.

Women also resist the conventions of heterosexual unions, where women are supposed to be paired with men, when doing TTD sessions with other women and describing their erotic interests in the women depicted in TDD photographs. Alicia Robichaud Photography (2010a) identifies two light-skinned female participants in a TTD session as “friends” but a more intimate relationship is suggested by their visual coupling (Alicia Robichaud Photography, 2010c). The two women wear wedding dresses while contemplatively looking at each other and thus appear to be getting married. In “Mud Fight!” the women sit in a pond, buoyant skirts mesh, and their playful touching is recorded in the muck on their faces, breasts, and torsos (Alicia Robichaud Photography, 2010b). Female internet wedding-forum participants also provide detailed commentary about the breasts, buttocks, and other sexually coded features of women in TTD sessions. For instance, MommyLynda (2009) imagines that another participant would look “sexy if that $25 dress got wet!! With” her “ta tas??OmG!” For athena85 (2010), a “girl with the back of her dress undone” is “Smokin’!” Other sexual wedding behaviors include pole-dancing classes for women. These bachelorette party events are contrarily described as empowering, body strengthening, and providing instructions in how to be sexier for male partners (Bubbly Bride, 2009). All of these practices are marketed as unconventional, encourage women to be visually available and direct themselves towards men, and lead to flirtatious exchanges and same-sex erotic spheres that are contrary to the heterosexual scripts of normative weddings.

Developing TTD

TTD photographers suggest that their practices exceed heterosexual wedding cultures and the associated photographs. The wedding photographer John Michael Cooper introduced the term “trash the dress” and associated sessions with resistance in an internet essay in 2006. Cooper (2006) entitled the article “Show Off! a.k.a. Trashing the Dress,” posted it to Wed Shooter blog, and engaged wedding photographers who read the site. In the essay, he describes meetings with wedding clients as an opportunity to “show off what you are best at or what you love to do,” which in his case includes depicting “dashboards of classic cars,” “the backs of flowers rather than the front,” “portraits down on the ground, in the dirt, mud, grass, trees, water, whatever,” because he loves “to trash the dress.” Cooper represents his aesthetic as oppositional, and resistant, to traditional photographic views and the normative state of wedding dresses. He also describes his initial problems with resistant female clients. Cooper “called 3 brides” when trying to market the idea, “told them the concept,” “told them the dress would get dirty,” and had “3 flat turn downs.” He “bought a dress, put a friend in it, and did” his “ideal anyway.” He now shows off the resultant image and tells women “it’s not a real bride ‘cause the real ones turned me
In doing this, Cooper suggests brides have missed being at the forefront of a photographic and cultural phenomenon, asserts his artistry, and encourages new wedding clients to dismiss the sentiments of women TTD resisters.

Cooper portrays the brides who refused his TTD proposal as uninformed, unwise, and child-like. Technology manufactures and internet sites also tend to represent women as unskilled and unwilling users and white men as employers of advanced equipment and computers (White, 2006). According to Cooper, brides misrecognize wedding rituals when indicating that they are “saving the dress for” a “daughter,” even though most women “flatly refuse to wear their mothers dresses,” and enjoy “Playing Dress Up again.” Cooper asserts that his TTD concept was innovative and important because women now ask, “pretty please style” for sessions. Of course, TTD is presently established by photographers, brides, and reporters as a significant aspect of contemporary weddings. Cooper’s articulation of his aesthetic as oppositional to women’s knowledge is a reminder that, as Gloria Filax argues, “resistance cannot be understood strictly to describe attempts to achieve social equality” because some people contest parity (1997, p. 262). Filax considers struggles over sexual citizenship and how gays and lesbians are “not the only resistors. Those who disagree with gay rights or with the notion that rights for gays and lesbians is a social equality issues at all are also resistors.” In a similar manner, Cooper and his clients constitute different forms of resistance. Cooper’s gendered narratives establish him as the once misunderstood artist whose talents are now recognized.

The photographer Mark Eric helped to create this TTD lineage. He read Cooper’s essay; convinced Shana Strawcutter to participate; posted images from their TTD session; and turned trashthedress.wordpress.com, trashthedress.com, and free-to-flaunt.com into promotional venues for photographers’ related imaging practices. When photographers and reporters identify Cooper as the “godfather” of TTD (markeric, 2007b), they assign the phenomenon a patriarchal and photographic ancestry and continue to masculinize photography. Otherwise, the large number of women TTD practitioners and feminization of this form could trouble the gender coding of wedding photography and photographers. Cooper, Eric, and reporters avoid this feminization by asserting a series of binary gender distinctions—using women resisters and representations of TTD brides to articulate the masculinity of artistic identity. This is similar to Lynda Nead’s (1995) description of how representations of women, and the correlation of women models with canvases and other objects, are used to associate art production and subjectivity with men. Eric further links female representations and male TTD artistry by posting a few of Cooper’s images on his TTD sites (markeric, 2007b). There is a representation of a white woman in a wedding dress engulfed in flames, an extremely pale woman in a wedding dress immersed in blue-green cloudy water, and a woman’s grayish feet jutting from the trunk of a car. A man with a shovel stands next to the car and looks ready to bury the bride. In all of these depictions, the brides are dead or dying. For instance, Cooper (2008) identifies the woman in the water as Ophelia and as therefore drowned.
These images aestheticize violence against women. However, Eric uses the Trash the Dress! sites to identify Cooper's photographs and processes as pioneering “a new creative, artistic, movement in the world of wedding photography” (markeric, 2007b), and as a form of resistance to previous conventions. In a similar manner, Cooper claims he wrote the “article to inspire photographers to show off their creativity and encourage (brides and grooms) to do something different” (as cited in The Daily News, 2008). Cooper’s images do resist the clean and proper body of women, their coherence and the purity of wedding dresses. However, he accomplishes this by encouraging hostility towards women, in the form of burning, drowning, and burying them, rather than just sabotaging traditional feminine positions. The masculine roles associated with these arrangements remain unchallenged, or even elevated, because evaluative distinctions are made between male photographers and female clients. Eric and Cooper identify TTD processes and the photographs as artistic and pleasurable but these early images are not positive model for women’s resistance or empowerment. All of this is a reminder, as Filax argues, that just “as power is not owned and exerted by those in charge, resistance is not owned by those who are oppressed” (1997, p. 262). These photographers’ accounts and images work to structure rather than empower brides. Even more than the usual gender hierarchy of associating male artists with activity and female models and representations with passivity (Bergstein, 1995), these images associate artists with life and brides with death.

Cooper and Eric’s claims about resisting conventions and generating a new trend should also be called into question. Such assertions are related to the cultural association of Scientific and technological developments with men, a tendency that feminist Science studies scholars critique (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003; Wajcman, 1991). In some of the TTD literature, such as Izzy Grinspan’s (2007) article on TTD, Eric indicates that the idea of wearing wedding dresses in unconventional surrounds and getting them wet has long been a feature of destination wedding photography. At the same time, he supports Cooper’s narratives about establishing the form. Photographers still bring island and resort wedding clients to the beach for “newlywed sessions” or “day-afters.” Grinspan connects these names and some TTD enactments with the film From Here to Eternity (Zinnemann, 1953) where the couple erotically rolls in the ocean surf. Individuals also cover their bodies with sticky and wet materials in “fetish” magazines such as Splosh! and internet representations. A few photographers combine these erotics and identify images as TTD even though they depict almost naked brides in the mud (Theo, 2007). The marketing intentions and heteronormative features of TTD also start to be disturbed by The Swimming Fully Clothed Blog (2011), which highlights the times men (but not women) appear in TTD videos.

Positioning TTD Photographers

Photographers employ TTD as a means of elevating their practices, since wedding photography is often associated with the banal, conventional, and low. Cooper
indicates his love for shooting the backs of flowers and portraits in the dirt and differentiates his practice from wedding photographs that depict bouquets of blooms and carefully arranged and pristine women. Yet, TTD often perpetuates feminine stereotypes about women’s visual and erotic availability. In an Infinity Studios image (2008), the light-skinned bride reclines in water, rests arms above her head, is surrounded by the tactile white dress, and looks sensually away so that she appears open to individuals’ looks and touches. This pose also emphasizes her thin waist and prominent bust. The skirt belles, elides her legs, and makes her into a kind of feminine flower rather than mobile subject. With such depictions, TTD continues the features of traditional wedding photography and associates women with whiteness, delicateness, and passivity.

TTD proponents code wedding photography as limiting and low so they can designate their practices as innovative and artistic. As Tony Corbell writes, “Wedding photographers used to get no respect, either from customers or other pros” (2007). The wedding photographer Joel Wiebner differentiates between Cooper’s “anti-bridal” images and the “cheesey guy who cracks jokes at your wedding,” “carries enough schtick in his pocket to beat a horse dead,” and “uses the same tired 5 poses every wedding that he has been using since 1972” (2007). According to photographer Matt Adcock, clients identify “this stigma that is attached to their parents’ wedding photos—the setting up of the shots, the perfect dress and so forth” and try to “escape” this tradition (as cited in Roney, 2009). Photographers and participants use the conventional to construct the TTD form. They render wedding photography as a kind of stiff and regimented clean and proper body while TTD sessions are depicted as somewhat abject. Although such rejections of borders, systems, and rules are a standard artistic move, the in-between and ambiguous can also challenge unique artistic identities and therefore need to be carefully managed.

These TTD photographers dismiss wedding photography for its overt and staid poses while encouraging performances for the camera. The “Trash the Dress Tips” article advises participants to bring “improv skills! You need to kiss on command and create laughter even if something hilarious didn’t happen right at that moment” (Weddingbee, 2009). The Trash the Dress! sites include many images of staged sessions with models and “trash bashes” where groups of photographers take pictures of invited women. Of course, trash bashes also figure homosocial couplings because women are engaging with each other and modeling their wedding dresses. Photographers then use these constructed, and potentially queer, images to market TTD sessions to clients. There are also numerous conventional images, like the Denise Neufeld (2008) photograph of a bride posing with a whole crew of photographers and assistants gathered around her. An individual holds the bride’s train so that it appears to blow in the wind. Other people use large disk reflectors to control the light. Once such individuals realize they are “observed by the lens,” as Roland Barthes argues, they constitute themselves “in the process of ‘posing,’” “make another body” for themselves, and “transform” themselves “in advance into an image” (1981, p. 10). Such TTD images are stilled and staged versions of activity.
TTD photographers perform a version of the resistance Amy Koerber describes and “seize elements from the discourses that they find unsuitable and attempt to remake these into something suitable” (2001, p. 227). Wedding photography is depicted as “cheesy,” conventional, and static, so TTD can be new and dynamic, or render activity. For instance, Eric’s stated goal is to “continue promoting creative photography, so brides don’t just end up with the old, boring pose in front of an oak tree with their hands clasped” (as cited in Megna, 2008). Photographer Sol Tamargo believes that “TTD Sessions are free reign for creativity” (soltamargo, 2007).

By employing a discourse about creativity, TTD photographers associate themselves with art rather than a debased business. They also offer TTD participants the opportunity to help produce, buy, and own art—thereby reshaping weddings into something even more personal and valuable. These claims about creativity are more important for photographers than other producers because their images are often understood as a trace of the real rather than artistically determined, practices involve other individuals (including brides, assistants, and technicians), and products are multiple rather than being one of a kind. Such interrogations of the “meanings of creation and ownership,” as Karina Eileraas suggests, occurred with the development of photography (2003, p. 808). These quandaries have increased because digital images are easy to change and circulate.

Other forms of resistance and notions of creativity appear on the part of the TTD site that features Cooper’s images of a bride set on fire, drowning, and shoved in the trunk of a car. By including TTD images in internet settings, Cooper and Eric provide a networked representation of their resistance and encourage other people to admire and support their project. These settings also offer some opportunities to critique TTD practices. ksl writes, “Women on fire interesting, women drowning haunting (but maybe a little disturbing), women stuffed into a trunk of a car? that is just disgusting, brutal and yes perhaps misogynistic” (2007). Jessica invokes art values when declaring that this “isn’t creative or artistic, it is vile” (2007). Cooper quickly replied to these messages, managed his reputation, and made fun of the inquiries by arguing that posters were too sensitive, “the ladies are always try’n to confuse” him “with the long words,” and their language was insufficient and unclear (johnmichaelcooper, 2007).

Eric also uses this site to explain Cooper’s images and imply that viewers need art instruction. According to him, the image of the woman in the trunk has “generated a fair share of debate, causing some people to comment without understanding the whole story” (markeric, 2007c). Eric associates TTD with women’s desires and thereby tries to displace accusations of misogyny: The “idea for the shot was Dalisa’s, John’s wife;” “She is a huge CSI fan;” “It was not meant to demean anyone, or promote violence;” and “was a concept shot taken in Vegas (Yes- where the original CSI is filmed).” In Cooper’s “Show Off” origin story, he describes having to coax resistant clients into the TTD phenomenon, and brides initially resisting. However, Eric indicates that TTD is about pleasing female clients. He argues, “If one of my clients was a CSI fan, and wanted something in her pictures that related to that, I would love to help her illustrate that with a fun, creative, conceptual shot.” Eric tries
to persuade readers to change their opinion because “when the whole concept is explained— it sort of adds a different light, don’t you think?” In these accounts, Cooper and Eric are misunderstood photographers who work against conventions and a public who refuses to understand new art. Similar accounts of being unappreciated appear in artists’ autobiographies and histories.

Cooper and Eric establish their opposition in a similar manner to what resistance studies scholars describe. They “attempt to construct oppositional meanings and identities” (Mumby, 2005, p. 36). Yet, Cooper and Eric incorrectly believe that reworking aesthetic conventions, conceptualizing unique forms of production, and meeting female clients’ requests prevents them from rendering limiting views of women. For instance, Laura L. Miller describes how “some Army men use strategies against women similar to the ‘weapons of the weak’ described in the resistance literature,” and sabotage women’s work and careers because they “believe that women are the powerful gender within the military” and men are “an oppressed group” (1997, 32). This cohort, like TTD photographers, resists another group of resisters in order to find some power of their own. Cooper, Eric, and a related series of photographers resist some wedding conventions, women who do not want to trash their dresses, and women who resist acknowledging the merits of their work.

TTD Resistance and Heterosexuality

A group of photographers, brides, and news reporters support Cooper and Eric’s formulations and suggest that TTD allows women to oppose wedding norms and being mannered. Robin Summerfield reports that TTD is a “New anti-wedding trend” that “sees brides getting down with their bad selves” (2007). For Grinspan, “coining a phrase that focuses on the gown instead of the woman inside it,” allows Cooper, “to turn an element of pleasant (if racy) travel photography into an act of rebellion” and TTD represents “bride rage” (2007). Nevertheless, Grinspan also argues that women are performing subversion as opposed to facilitating political change. In these cases resistance, like punk and riot grrrl movements, is also a style. Women TTD participants are described as being “anti-wedding” and exhibiting “rage,” but the ways that they resist wedding cultures and the possible political outcomes of sessions are not explained. Most women participants are pro- rather than anti-wedding because they choose to get married and engage in many of the features of traditional weddings. TTD may enable these women to work through frustrations at organizing such complicated events, dieting for months, trying to maintain the whiteness of dresses, and not enjoying their weddings. Rage is also visible in a small number of sessions where women demolish dresses or enact violence against husbands.

Photographers, participants, and reporters ordinarily identify TTD as both a form of resistance and method of committing to husbands. Clara Nguyen got married and loves the message, “You’re trashing your dress because you believe there’s no reason you’ll need it again” (as cited in Bernhard, 2007). Eric encourages women to trash their dress because “You’ve made a commitment to your husband,” “He’s your one
and only true love;” “you’ll never need the dress again,” and you can “Show your husband how committed you are by trashing the dress” (markeric, 2007a). Photographer Kate Austin echoes Eric’s proposal and informs women, “You’re married, you’re in it for the long run, so why not show the ultimate commitment to your husband by trashing the dress?” (2008). The encouragement for brides to sacrifice dresses is similar to the idea that married women will give things up for husbands. Of course, reusing wedding dresses when marrying a different partner is already culturally proscribed against. When women buy other dresses for sessions, they follow marketing directives that “the” wedding dress should be worn once and preserved. These photographers and brides employ TTD narratives to emphasize cultural conceptions of “the one” partner and importance of heterosexuality. However, the circulation of wedding dresses on eBay and women who use TTD as a means of wearing wedding dresses again propose different futures and forms of use for these garments.

TTD promises resistance but representations still produce some version of the traditional narrative where women are virginal before the wedding, and are clean and proper bodies. Brides are then initiated into womanhood and some form of eroticism by wedding-night sex, or the metaphorical enactment of it in “day after” sessions, and enter a more fluid state. Less challenging versions of this fluidity are figured by brides’ immersion in salt water but images of women in algae-covered lakes and mud tend to reference such abject substances as pus, vomit, and shit. Blythe Bernhard evokes sexual and material transformation when describing how TTD “gives blushing brides the chance to say goodbye to their pretty princess fairy tale and get grungy” (2007). TTD poses the conclusion of the wedding, sex with a man, wearing the wedding dress again, and images as liberating. This freedom does not extend to gay and lesbian visibility. During my study of numerous TTD sessions posted on internet sites, I only saw three that clearly portrayed same-sex couples. Photographers’ websites try to equate TTD to heterosexual unions. In these cases, TTD photography is a continuation rather than a break from photography’s long association with and perpetuation of the normative family (Smith, 1998). Without the queer eroticism of women’s wedding forums and other practices, TTD tends to connect resistance and marriages and position heteronormativity as politically enabling. This articulation of heterosexual resistance is particularly disturbing at a time when gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer, or GLBTQ, individuals are fighting for legal marriage rights in the U.S and some other places.

**Brides’ TTD Rage and Resistance**

Photographers use the term “trash” to resist norms and the staid aspects of wedding cultures. Yet, TTD photographers need to prevent women from feeling their weddings, wedding dresses, and TTD sessions are garbage. The term “trash” designates what needs to be culturally cast out, which includes wedding photography and the constraints of wedding cultures but also such positions as sex workers, who are marked as dirty. Dirt, according to Grosz, “signals a site of possible danger to
social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability” and thus offers a form of resistance (1994, p. 192). Due to these connotations, photographers supervise cultural conceptions of TTD, particularly the forms of dirt and resistance that get coupled to this practice. For instance, Trash the Dress! promises that the “site is about creating beautiful images of brides, it is not about destroying wedding dresses” (2009a). There “may only be a tiny bit of dirt (similar to after the reception) on the hem which a dry cleaner can get out,” writes photographer Stacy Able (2009). Artists can evoke a limited amount of mess because of their bohemian status. However, dirt and mess are more destabilizing to normative femininity.

Zombie TTD sessions extend these disruptions and suggest methods of feminist resistance by celebrating dirt; the permanent dissolution of the dress; and enraged brides who tear at the bodies, sexuality, and consumerism associated with weddings. These sessions consider social issues in similar ways to contemporary zombie films and, as Peter Dendle notes, represent a society that is “enraged, feral, frantic, and insatiable” (1994, p. 54). For instance, Abby’s zombie TTD session by photographer Jenn LeBlanc (Jenn, 2011) depicts her snarling, holding blood-drenched fingers to her gory mouth, and reaching out for the spectator’s flesh. LeBlanc shifts Abby’s welcoming appearance, and the bridal chorus of “here comes the bride, all dressed in white,” into a warning that viewers should “WATCH OUT because HERE COMES THE BRIDE.” Abby’s white, clean, and proper body is undone by the ruby red drips and sienna blooms on her once white gown, the organ that appears to be emerging from a gash in her side, and the lime green and magenta lights that change her skin tone. While TTD images tend to portray Caucasian brides, zombie sessions deploy abjection as a method of resisting the whiteness and purity associated with wedding cultures. Zombie sessions emphasize the bloodiness of bodies and too-whiteness of zombies and, like contemporary zombie films, raise questions about the race of these culturally constructed and viscerally felt figures.

Zombie sessions also trouble the consumerism of wedding cultures and disturb some aspects of the marketed resistance associated with TTD. The products and mandates of consumer culture have limited meaning for the living dead. For instance, in George A. Romero’s Dawn of the Dead film (1978), humans and zombies move towards the mall but they cannot remain in this consumer structure or take advantage of its values and hierarchies. This problematization of consumerism carries over into Candice and Greg’s zombie session. The light-skinned couple rejected the timeline and costs of traditional weddings and planned their marriage in two weeks, “executed everything on a miniscule budget,” and were married at a “zombie walk” where people self-present as the living dead in public (Candice, as cited in Offbeat Intern, 2009). Candice’s favorite part of the event was showing up with her “tattered, torn, stained and blood-drenched groom,” seeing the “crowd of strangers stop and stare,” and looking into her groom’s “eyes filled with love (and a few tears).” Weddings usually connect the doctrines of consumer cultures and romantic love (e.g. Otnes & Pleck, 2003) but Candice and Greg disassociate these experiences and make the wedding over into a TTD session.
Candice also disturbs the purportedly coherent and solid body. Her dress sags and blood-smeared breasts unevenly fall from the structure and associate her with the leaking and abject female body. This is significant because the wedding dress ordinarily acts as a kind of brace against destabilization, shapes the woman’s body, directs her comportment, mandates a distance from dirt and body fluids, and normalizes her identity. Candice’s bloodstains, in a similar manner to Abby’s session, emphasize that the body is open because body fluids trace the “paths of entry or exit, the routes of interchange or traffic with the world” (Grosz, 1994, p. 195). Yet, it is Greg rather than Candice who is passive and on the ground. Greg’s hips are twisted and legs spread and bowed. Due to the dark and low-resolution image, lines of grain dissolve his body and connect him to the vegetation. He is “torn” by the photograph in a manner that echoes the rips in his suit and shirt. At these moments, “the one” partner and underlying conceptions of heteronormativity are killed.

Abby, Candice, and some other brides in zombie sessions are cannibalistically polyamorous because they find pleasure in eating everyone, and thereby resist social expectations that brides will be monogamous and enact passive and normed femininity. Additional representations of negative wedding outcomes, as illustrated by Nicci Nelson’s and Sara’s photographs, also point to the possibilities and problems with marketing TTD as part of women’s unending commitments to husbands. In Nelson’s image, the Caucasian bride is sitting against the bathroom toilet and her husband is sprawled on the floor (Igo, 2009). Her position associates her torn, burned, and red stained dress with the open, unsettled, and leaking body. Yet, it is her expression and the heavy fire extinguisher that suggest she killed her husband. Sara’s pictures from the day her “divorce was finalized” (as cited in Wedinator, 2010) also challenge the marketing of TTD as a form of heterosexual commitment. In these photographs, which are part of the small TTD divorce genre, the extremely pale Sara appears in a wrecked home with bloody handprints all over her gown. She clutches a (beef) heart; screams; and seems to be destroying the union, its consumerist structures, and her ex-husband. Photographer Jeremy Igo (2009) contains Nelson’s feral actions by offering a “Big thanks to Nicci and her husband for having the guts to go along with it,” indicating he has “plenty of ideas” for other brides, and continuing the narratives about male TTD authorship established by Cooper and Eric. However, Sara’s images of bridal rage exceed the visual functions of TTD because some viewers find them “almost too nightmarish” to “look at” (Wedinator, 2010). By resisting her feminine position as an appealing object, Sara contributes to feminist methods of refusing the empowered gaze.

Conclusion: The Promises and Limits of TTD

Photographers, brides, and journalists market TTD by making sessions into a form of resistance and participants into resisters. Their practices suggest that an interrogation of the economic and social value of resistance, how resistance codes participants, the ways resistance helps extend traditional roles, and the relationship between promised forms of resistance and enacted behaviors should be further incorporated into
resistance studies. It is also worth considering how addressed subjects take up, extend, and oppose marketed forms of resistance. Since TTD is marketed to brides who are getting or recently married, this practice usually conveys positive sentiments about participants’ marriages, although it can resist or reshape some aspects of wedding cultures. This points to the limits placed on resistance, and those who are accepted as resisters, when it is part of a marketing strategy. For instance, it is unlikely that Sara will be used as a stand-in for prospective TTD customers because her relationship did not work and she is celebrating her divorce. TTD can image a monstrous afterward for the dress but it is more dangerous, and may threaten photographers’ sales, when it relates sessions to failed relationships. This is why TTD photographers so rarely market divorce sessions.

TTD sessions point to the centrality of resistance in contemporary practices and the diverse ways these forms of defiance can situate participants. Cooper and Eric market TTD resistance as a means of establishing their male artistry but fluid and feral forms of this practice indicate a broader array of gender, sexuality, and racial positions. These TTD images of zombie and divorced women are not typical. However, women who choose to destroy dresses and what they stand for, particularly the demolition of marriages and husbands, set photographers to do such potentially identity disrupting work as depicting women’s unruly, polyamorous, and erotic pleasures. At these moments, photographers have to engage with dirt, women’s roles, and the ways these states affect their marketing intentions. They cannot use narratives about resistance and sessions to facilitate their prestige and economic success. However, the repeated normalization of representations and authorship, like Igo’s narratives, suggest the ways resistance is always in danger of being marketed and changed. Additional studies and interventions, including the queering of TTD representations and theorization of resistance, are needed to prevent TTD from furthering traditional wedding cultures, heteronormativity, and masculinist notions of artistry.

References

In these references, the unconventional spellings and capitalizations of websites have not been altered. Some of the sites listed are no longer available. Others have changed and do not offer the text or images described. Some versions of referenced sites may be viewed by using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine (2010).


