

Traditional Inequalities and Inequalities of Tradition: Gender, Weddings, and Whiteness

Sociological Research Online
2022, Vol. 27(1) 60–76
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DOI: 10.1177/1360780421990021
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Abstract

The (British) white wedding offers a unique lens for studying a number of social and cultural phenomena from practices of intimacy, consumption, and romance to macro level studies of economics, value, and exchange. The wedding also represents an ideal focus for studying the intersection of intimacies and inequalities as it acts as a location for the practice and performance of intimacy which simultaneously encapsulates historical and contemporary gender, race, and class inequalities. These inequalities are often upheld, celebrated even, in the name of ‘tradition’ in relationships, marriage, and weddings. This article aims to interrogate this notion of tradition to understand how, rather than being a neutral concept, it is used to reproduce and reinforce existing gender inequalities, middle-class values, and privileging of Whiteness. The argument in this article draws on 3 years of research on weddings including interviews and ethnographic observations. I conclude that while wedding traditions may have become increasingly reflective of democratic choices, they retain traditional inequalities in their representation and conceptualisation.

Keywords

Bridezilla, gender, inequalities, tradition, weddings, Whiteness

Introduction

Central to debates around the de- or re-traditionalisation of intimate life is, ironically, the notion of ‘tradition’. The aim of this article is to interrogate this term through its contextual use in British weddings in order to better understand how ‘tradition’ can be both static and fluid and how it can inspire both radical change and stagnating norms. Contrary to theorists of detraditionalisation and individualisation (such as Giddens, 1992), many family researchers now agree that continuity in family practices (including gendered

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inequalities) marks the contemporary state of intimate life rather than wholesale change towards family breakdown, demoralisation, or democratisation (e.g. Carter and Duncan, 2018; Duncan and Phillips, 2008; Gillies, 2003). Indeed Gross (2005) points to the continued importance of certain ‘meaning constitutive traditions’ (which concern culture and identity) and which continue to be passed down between generations. Examples of this are evident in contemporary British wedding practices where ‘traditions’ continue to abound, such as the ‘giving away’ of the bride by the father. Charsley (1992) argues that such wedding traditions are ‘marooned’; that is freed from their original meaning and free-floating. Many of these traditions, however, remain embedded in imaginations, structures, and communities of practice which operate to maintain gendered inequalities as well as social divisions through class, wealth, and race.

While weddings, as markers of the start of a marriage, represent a continuity of intimate practice, the meaning of certain ‘traditions’ involved within marriage events have lost some connection with their origin. The wedding cake no longer serves the function of providing a meal for the newly married couple; giving away the bride from father to husband no long reflects the transfer of property from one man to another. These traditions are, nevertheless, drawn upon by wedding couples and are, therefore, reproduced or ‘re-invented’, giving the practices new meaning (even if this new meaning is a tautology – they are enacted *because* they are traditions). At the same time, new wedding ‘traditions’ become invented to serve new purposes. The diamond engagement ring, for example, now a part of a traditional proposal and engagement, was invented in the 1940s by jewellers to encourage a new consumption practice as disposable incomes were increasing (see Hobsbawm, 1983 for other such examples). In this article, I want to explore how using the notion of ‘tradition’ in connection with weddings legitimates wedding orthodoxy, upholding inequalities and obscuring the (re)production of heteronormative gender roles, middle-class respectability, and racialised Whiteness. This argument proceeds by exploring the division of wedding labour and the placement of traditional femininity firmly within the private and domestic sphere. This discussion is extended with a focus on the ‘bridezilla’ label which simultaneously disciplines domesticated women and reproduces notions of middle-class respectability. The argument closes with a consideration of traditions of Whiteness and the ways in which White (middle-class) women lay claims to an appropriate ethnic bridal identity. In this way, the argument moves from negotiations within the private sphere, through to social bridal identity-making and finally considers the spaces in which meaning-making occurs. This analysis involves a focus on both practice and meaning. The next section provides an introduction to wedding research and highlights some important conceptual frameworks.

The British White wedding

Weddings are a staple feature of British society and yet they are no longer an essential part of adult life for the non-religious. Where in the past, weddings conferred adult status, entry into family life, and social acceptability, now a secular wedding is self-constituting, following set actions, rules, and procedures. The standard (heterosexual) wedding format is often replicated by same-sex couples who only recently have been granted equal access to marriage (Heaphy, 2018). Despite a long-term decline, between 2009 and

2016, the marriage rate in England and Wales remained relatively stable (ONS, 2019). Thus, while alternative relationships are available – cohabitation, living apart together (LAT) – and singlehood becomes increasingly acceptable into adulthood, marriage remains a key relationship status in Britain and one a majority of the population will undertake. Weddings can cost as little as £156, yet most wedding couples desire a ‘proper wedding’ (Leonard, 1980), with a recent survey estimating the average cost of weddings to be £30,355 (or just £17,913 if the most costly suppliers are excluded; Hosie, 2018). While these figures are likely skewed (as they are often collected by bridal websites who necessarily exclude those who are not engaged with the bridal industry), nevertheless, for weddings to cost thousands instead of hundreds of pounds is indicative of the symbolic power of weddings (as well as the wedding industry) in the British imagination and beyond.

A frequent observation in weddings research is the gendered imbalance of representation in wedding media and literature – these are exclusively directed towards (White, middle-class) women (brides, bridesmaids, mothers-of-the-bride; Besel et al., 2009). According to Ingraham (1999: 75), weddings and the wedding industry are structured through the heterosexual imaginary which masks the way in which they secure racial, class, and sexual hierarchies. For example, images in wedding media tend to be of White brides, securing ‘the consent of white women in participating in the commodification of weddings [and contributing] to the production of white heterosexual privilege’ (Ingraham, 1999: 97). By extension, bridal media assumes that women are responsible for the wedding labour – the planning, organisation, and management of wedding events. As such, ‘wedding work serves as a voluntary means by which women themselves continue to do domestic, unpaid work that prevents their own progress in the wider world, that outside the realm of the feminine’ (Engstrom, 2012: 187). Boden (2003) found that this division of labour was articulated as ‘common-sense’ or ‘normal’ and the groom was assumed to act as a rational ‘check’ on the bride’s emotional and desire-driven consumption. Accordingly, this ‘enabled the corresponding “emotional” and “rational” consuming roles of the couple to become viewed as both constitutive of, and productive to, the successful construction of the wedding’ (Boden, 2003: 154), thus reproducing hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity and appropriately gendered wedding roles.

There is, however, a disjuncture between literature which has focused on the wedding as a cultural practice – research largely focusing on consumption and the wedding industry (e.g. Boden, 2003; Dunak, 2016; Engstrom, 2012; Geller, 2001; Ingraham, 1999; Ruggiero, 2014) and that which deals with the wedding as a social practice – speaking to wedding (or civil partnering) couples (Arend, 2016; Carter and Duncan, 2018; Heaphy, 2017; Smart, 2007). While the former points out the various gendered, sexual, racial, and classed inequalities in weddings, the power of the wedding industry, wedding media, the invention of traditions through business interests, and the mystique and myths of weddings and marriage, the latter highlights the very real and personal meaning involved in the ritual for those undertaking it. Focusing only on the former produces a highly critical view of weddings while the latter perhaps not critical enough. While cultural artefacts such as bridal magazines, films and wedding shows may point to dominant discourses of inequality, it is through talking to people that the impact of such discourses is revealed.

As Arend (2016) notes, most women report little influence of the wedding media that others have found so persuasive (e.g. Ingraham, 1999).

Research that is more concerned with practices highlights the use of ‘tradition’ in weddings, where even the most civil of ceremony’s draws on a ‘vaguely articulated notion of “tradition”’ to provide the event with ‘structure, gravitas and formality’ (Walliss, 2002, 4.1). Often these traditions are actively chosen by wedding couples and thus become ‘reinvented’: they are chosen *because* they are traditional. This reinvention legitimises new practices through the appearance of social continuity with some suitable historic past (Carter and Duncan, 2018). Moreover, what is considered ‘traditional’ changes over time: in the 1970s, a traditional wedding was held in a church and included a veil and a honeymoon in London (Leonard, 1980). What is considered traditional now (at least by White, middle-class standards) may include a wedding in a hotel with a tiered cake made out of cheese.

Weddings need not, therefore, be fixed by tradition and others have shown that weddings are an especially versatile occasion where ‘cultures’ can mix and traditions can be drawn from different religious rituals or national practices (Khan, 2011; Ramdya, 2010). This ‘bricolage’ means weddings can be created out of a piecemeal of historic, religious, cultural, and modern practices and traditions to create both unique individual and highly homogenised rituals (Carter and Duncan, 2018). While bricolage allows flexibility and is accessible to those with the most and the least resources (whether financial, cultural, gendered, etc.), it is not assured and such practices have to be accepted as legitimate by others. In this way, bricolage can be, and has been, applied to weddings in a neutral way, that is, weddings can be made out of a process of bricolage which depends on the social, political, economic, and cultural position of those involved. As Boden (2003) notes, however, the playing with traditions associated with weddings offers no escape from the binds of fixed scripts – particularly around gender – which often extend into married life. While appearing to offer invention and innovation, the dominant wedding model instead provides little room for manoeuvre or resistance: ‘women remain objectified and manipulated’ (Boden, 2003: 158), middle-class respectable femininity is upheld (Skeggs, 1997), and weddings remain ‘white’ (Ingraham, 1999). This is the focus of this article: how do British weddings reproduce intersecting inequalities and what is the role of ‘tradition’ in this?

In order to answer this question in the following sections, I draw upon empirical material collected between 2014 and 2017. This is used to illustrate the overall arguments made in this article but this is not an empirical paper with the purpose of reporting on findings, and each section draws more or less on this material (Hall and Smith, 2015). The data presented emerged from over 3 years of studying weddings using a variety of inductive methods including semi-structured interviews with marrying couples, observations at weddings shows, micro interviews with stall holders, and bridal magazine analysis. Tradition was not a key theme in the studies prior to data collection but emerged in a grounded way. In interviews, ‘tradition’ was frequently used by wedding couples to describe and discuss their weddings. Likewise, in wedding media (bridal magazines and at weddings shows), tradition was used to refer to wedding practices, many of which were only recently invented. Yet, tradition appeared to be used often as sole justification for a practice, negating the need for any further reasoning. In this regard, it was

reminiscent of the use of ‘choice’ in choice feminism where justifying action through the ‘choice narrative’ produces stagnation of political debate because censure of ‘choices’ – and therefore, women’s agency – is prohibited (Thwaites, 2017). Tradition appeared to be used in a similar vein as a self-legitimizing concept, the censure of which could only produce approbation. Once traditions become choices, they operate in the same way, reproducing inequalities and preventing open debate, discussion and disagreement. This is evident not only in participant narratives but also in the enormous wedding industry media which offers very little alternative or resistance to the normative white wedding orthodoxy.

For this article, I have concentrated on semi-structured interviews and ethnographic data. These highlight the ways of talking about traditional divisions of gendered labour; discourses of ‘bridezillas’ which convey meaning about traditional White middle-class femininity; and observations at wedding shows where the wedding industry evidences its reliance on ideas of traditional forms of racialised Whiteness. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit 15 interviewees in Kent and Yorkshire, all of whom were either recently married or about to wed. This represented 10 different weddings and participants all identified as White, British, and heterosexual. The ethnographic observations were collected at three national wedding shows across England in 2017. I attended the wedding events with my research colleague and collaborator who originates from India. The observations recorded here reflect my position as a White researcher, but my experience of these places was informed by the co-presence of a non-White researcher. This shared experience – and our later discussions – formed not only my reflections and observations but also the subsequent analysis of the material (for more on this process and the methodology of the ethnographic study, see Carter and Chatterjee, 2018). My recordings here are an attempt to individually interpret data derived from shared experiences and interactions. This article proceeds with a discussion of wedding labour and specifically how the gendering of wedding work in practice creates gendered narratives about weddings more broadly.

Gendered wedding labour

‘Tradition’ was used repeatedly when talking to couples, referring to a desire for both ‘traditional’ weddings and ‘traditional’ marriages. Tradition here operated, at least partly, as a shorthand for security, stability, and a connection with an imagined past when these elements were believed to be inherent in society and family bonds (Carter and Duncan, 2018). In order to make these discursive appeals to tradition, there must be something recognisably ‘traditional’ in terms of the physical manifestation of the wedding itself. In this section, therefore, the focus is less on the ways in which participants themselves used ‘tradition’ and more on its *invisible* presence in discussions of wedding labour. In other words, how are traditional gender roles, exemplified by the gendered division of labour, taken-for-granted (or not) in wedding preparations?

Wedding labour continues to go unnoticed despite the work being not inconsiderable in terms of time-allocation and emotional resources. Due to its situation within the realm of ‘emotions’ and ‘relationships’, however, it is firmly considered to be ‘women’s work’ and an extension of household labour (Boden, 2003; Ingraham, 1999). Despite small

steps towards more egalitarian coupling (Giddens, 1992), women still carry out an overall average of 60% more unpaid work than men (including childcare, housework, and cooking; ONS, 2016). The feminisation of wedding labour is evident in wedding media, which is directed almost exclusively at brides, as well as in studies with wedding couples (Boden, 2003). In my own research, women were more likely than men to undertake wedding labour, although men occasionally ‘helped’ and in one exception, the groom planned the wedding with some input from the bride. It should be noted that there was some discrepancy within couples when bride and groom were interviewed separately; Steve,¹ for example, claimed wedding work was shared equally, while his wife-to-be Grace explained in detail the extensive planning and organisation she had undertaken alone. While there is some discrepancy between bridal magazines which speak exclusively to women and the reality of wedding labour which tends to be shared to a greater or lesser extent, wedding work appears to mirror domestic labour which remains largely the domain of women.

This inequality is presented both by bridal media and wedding couples as a given, a taken-for-granted split of work. But far from being ‘natural’, the association of wedding work with women is a social product arising from our situating of weddings in the realm of the feminine. As Jane (aged 30), for example, explained about why her partner was not more involved in the wedding planning:

Because he’s a man. Urm . . . because it’s just not a done thing is it? Men just don’t help. And I said to him ‘we need to pick the wedding song’. He’s like ‘yeah whatever you want dear’. And his reply is ‘do you know what Jane? It’s your day’. [. . .] It’s just not a manly thing.

Similarly, Marilyn (aged 54) who was organising her second wedding replied when asked whether she was organising it: ‘Yes. Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, that’s our relationship [laughs]’. For Emily (aged 32), her partner had slightly more involvement but this encompassed the ‘final check’ role that Boden (2003) refers to in the traditional gender division of wedding labour. Thus, for Emily when asked whether she had planned the wedding: ‘More or less. My . . . so, my other half is . . . he’s interested. He kind of signed off the processes. He understands the concept’.

Where certain activities could legitimately be associated with masculinity, men were more likely to be involved. This included, for example, the oversight and final check role mentioned earlier, as well as being productive and in charge of the financial planning of the wedding. Maria (aged 28), for example, described a slightly complicated division of responsibility when asked who had planned their wedding:

Erm I think me and James, but I’d say probably James is different to probably most guys and took over quite a lot of it. Erm, a lot of the sort of fiddly bits with like making the boxes, the favours, because I’m a bit sort of impatient so he pretty much done a lot of that. And obviously the money side of it he sort of organized that part of it, but I did a lot of ringing around as well. So probably about fifty/fifty.

For Kevin (aged 22), the activities he would undertake for his wedding included the following: ‘Just erm, picking what car I have. Picking the suits and that. And I think that’s as far as I’m going’. While Jess (aged 23), his fiancée, added that he’d choose his

ring, have an input on the menu, 'and he's paying for it'. These couples illustrate the taken-for-granted feminine nature of wedding work, allowing for the masculine role only of providing a final check, signing off on activities and controlling the financial aspects. This is not dissimilar to the division of wedding labour found by Boden (2003) among her couples, as well as the narratives found by others in bridal magazines and other wedding media (Besel et al., 2009; Ingraham, 1999).

There is, however, an exception to the housewife-bride-to-be and this happens when the wedding planning can be removed from the feminine realm of romance and the domestic, and placed instead into the masculine field of organisation and management. When this is successful, the wedding labour is no longer an extension of domestic labour but instead is an extension of paid labour. Darren (aged 33) explains thus,

Well, really because of . . . as I mentioned my role, because of my job, I find it quite easy to plan the whole wedding. But, well what we've done is, is I've kind of like been planning it and she's been telling me things [. . .] I've been quite lucky, like I mentioned, with my job. So, organising it . . . I've organised large-scale events. I've kind of managed it from start to finish. So, just being organised in that manner, kind of setting out what we need, what we don't need, you know, what, when do we do stuff. It's all been quite easy but, kind of preparing [my partner], giving her that insight, so kind of making it easy for herself, so I've got everything planned out. So, she can see and then visualise it. It's helped her.

Darren articulates an acceptable role under traditional masculinity within wedding planning – associated with his managerial job-role. Darren emphasises his distance from the traditional feminine wedding-planner who is considered to be overly emotional, consumed by the wedding, and romance of the day (see discussion below on the 'Bridezillas' section). For example, he stresses, 'because of my job', 'I find it quite easy to plan the whole wedding', 'with my job', 'I've organised large-scale events', 'I've managed it' and so on. Darren also talks about managing his partner and her expectations of the day – his managerial position thus extends beyond the wedding and into their relationship. Crucially, he draws upon his managerial position in order to do 'domestic' labour but reframe it as an extension of his professional and public competence.

Another exception to the housewife-bride-to-be could occur in the deliberate attempt to disrupt the taken-for-granted association of wedding work and the feminine. While Cathy's (aged 27) partner was not interviewed, she indicated a very deliberate even split of labour involved in planning her feminist 'non-wedding'. The work was,

Joint . . . absolutely joint. He sorted like the venue. It was all shared so I sent the first e-mail about the venue but then he called in and had a pint and checked on it. I had the conversation with the staff at [the venue]. We both went for a meal at [. . .], a restaurant in [the city] who supplied the pizzas. So we both went for a meal there and had a chat face to face with them about it both together. I wrote the pizza order and we sent it, he went around to pay on the day. So it's absolutely joint; everything was joined. The only thing I did individually was change my name and buy my dress without him there and everything else we did together.

What these two exceptions demonstrate is that for standard or 'traditional' white weddings, the wedding labour is deemed feminine and is therefore unvalued. Here,

the hierarchy of gender operates to position women and their work as trivial – and an extension of domestic labour – unless it can be successfully revalued as an extension of the masculine job-role. Even in the absence of discursive uses of ‘tradition’, traditional patterns of gendered work and gendered relating are reproduced in wedding preparations.

Bridezillas²: appropriate middle-class femininity

While men’s involvement in weddings was often restricted to appropriately masculine roles or responsibilities, the feminine role of bride-to-be required more careful navigation. Boden (2003) discussed a ‘superbride’ identity in her research on wedding media, which combined traditional feminine emotionality with rational project-manager qualities. This is also the ideal bridal identity in bridal magazines which emphasise perfection achieved both through controlled emotion and extreme organisation. If this balance is not achieved by women (or not seen to be achieved), they are liable to become ‘bridezillas’. This label operates as a cautionary measure on women’s behaviour, which was illustrated in a couple of the interviews with brides-to-be. In discussing her hairstyle for her wedding, Jane (aged 30) explains that this was not her choice:

That’s the hair stylists’ choice! [Laughs] It’s not my choice. She was like ‘your hair would look amazing if we just did you a side fringe’. I was like ‘okay love, I’ll grow it’. There’s no bridezilla over here.

Similarly, Grace (aged 30) used the ‘bridezilla’ in her rationale for having a large expensive wedding (although at £9000 this was one of the least expensive weddings in the sample). She said she wanted to give herself the gift of the wedding:

Give yourself this, give yourself this gift of this memory and this event, you know. Urm, yeah. I’m not thinking of it as like . . . I haven’t turned ‘bridezilla’ or anything [laughs].

Both Jane and Grace go to lengths to distance themselves from the mythical ‘bridezilla’ in efforts to position themselves as rational and not ‘too’ emotional. The contexts of the use of bridezilla here are important. For Jane, her distancing from any ‘bridezilla’ behaviour extends as far as foregoing choice over her own hairstyle for her wedding – to avoid being seen as a ‘bridezilla’, Jane relinquishes her agency to her hairstylist. For Grace, the image of a ‘bridezilla’ is invoked when she is trying to explain what her wedding means to her. Part of the meaning of her wedding is the amount of money she is spending on it – money that she has never spent on expensive holidays or other self-gifts. In the context of romantic consumption – associated with femininity – Grace does not want to appear irrational or indulgent (Boden, 2003). Instead, she distances herself from both by distancing herself from the irrational, indulgent, and overly emotional ‘bridezilla’. The question is, what is a ‘bridezilla’ and why has this figure become so powerful in the wedding imaginary?

First used by Diane White in a Boston Globe article – and literally a portmanteau of ‘bride’ and ‘Godzilla’ – ‘bridezilla’ refers to ‘out of control’ brides (Engstrom, 2012;

Moorhead, 2018). ‘Out of control’ referring to overly emotional or overly organised, the bridezilla is the monstrous version of the demure, fictional bride walking the tightrope of emotion/reason characterised in vast media depictions of virginal, hyperfeminised brides. She is ‘out-of-control’ as well as ‘controlling’, fierce, stubborn, and military-like as well as over-emotional; she is entitled and demands perfection on ‘her day’ (Engstrom, 2012). While a ‘bridezilla’ could be seen as representing strong female independence, power, and agency, the term is not one of empowerment but rather inspires negative judgement, derision, and heteropatriarchal anxiety (Samek, 2014).

The bridezilla imaginary, therefore, reveals the contradictions of wedding culture and the wedding industry, the latter of which pretends to empower women through consumption, while it simultaneously upholds ‘the hegemonic hetero-patriarchal structures’ (Samek, 2014: 11) which seek to discipline women – there is after all, no ‘groomzilla’. It is wedding culture, through wedding media, that both produces the ideal bridal identity and its monstrous double – the bridezilla. The bridezilla is, therefore, the monstrous-feminine, uncontrollable femininity, a threat to male power in her deviance and strength, both defying and reinforcing sexist notions of femininity (Samek, 2014: 15). Brides are allowed control over weddings because of their unique positioning – the bridal identity is temporary and remains within the realm of the ‘home’. Thus, the bridezilla is allowed to emerge ultimately *because* she has limited and transitory power (Samek, 2014: 19). Once the problematic bridezilla (and bridal) identity is resolved through the wedding (and ultimately through re-domestication), she ‘must rejoin the still-patriarchal world where she returns to the secondary status her gender still holds’ (Engstrom, 2012: 180). Bridezilla women are ‘tamed’ through domestication and wedding consumption.

The expectations made of brides align with traditional femininity as well as traditional middle-class values: the requirement for displaying ‘appropriate femininity’ conforms to middle-class expectations of respectability. The domesticity of bridal work and the reincorporation of brides into the domestic field after marriage is no coincidence and instead operates to position ‘good’ brides as middle-class and defined by their roles as domesticated wives and mothers (Skeggs, 1997). ‘Proper’ femininity is defined in opposition to White working-classness (Lawler, 2005), and thus, bridezillas may result from (working class) breaches in codes of respectability or appropriately feminine or domesticated behaviour. Women and weddings represent a key site of economic consumption and so are a prime target for the reinvention of class differences between the middle-class and working-class bride (e.g. ‘tacky’ vs ‘classy’ brides). The wedding is an excessive event. Within this context, the bride has to toe the line of respectability in the face of excessive consumption. The bridezilla is drawn upon discursively in order to manage this excessiveness, to prevent weddings becoming ‘too much’, excessive, or ‘tacky’ – the opposite of ‘classy’ or ‘traditional’. In this respect, ‘bridezilla’ comes to stand for the opposite of ‘tradition’ and, therefore, to fix what is traditional.

Consumption is a significant part of weddings and important, therefore, in how inequalities are perpetuated through the wedding ritual. It is women who are encouraged to consume for weddings (Grace was trying on wedding dresses just 2 weeks after her engagement) and it is through romanticised consumption that women are encouraged to keep within the realms of middle-class femininity and domesticity (Illouz, 1997; Purbrick, 2007). These consumption practices allow women to construct an appropriate

bridal identity, encompassing core features of White femininity: demure, soft, feminine, and disciplined in bodily appearance and behaviour (Carter, 2018). This disciplining applies both to her embodiment of bridal femininity: dieting, taking care of her skin and hair, beauty regimes – and she must be kept disciplined by wedding culture – bridal magazines, wedding dress fitters, wedding shows, and so on, which educate her in the former. Josie (aged 33) described in her interview a constant expectation in wedding dress shops that she would lose weight for her wedding – this expectation even resulted in her wedding dress supplier ordering her dress in a size smaller than the one she requested.

The bride is over-loaded with expectations: to be ultra-feminine, bodily managed, super-organised (women often organise wedding events alongside full-time work), excited, in control of her emotions and demure. When a woman fails in ‘bridal femininity’, she becomes the ‘bridezilla’. This label gains traction in an era of ‘postfeminism’ (McRobbie, 2008) or ‘enlightened sexism’ (Douglas, 2010), where sexism and gendered inequalities are allowed to continue and even flourish because gender equality has supposedly been achieved. Moreover, as women are increasingly individualised and required to (re)invent themselves (as brides), class makes a ‘decisive re-appearance in and through the vectors of transformed gendered individualization’ (McRobbie, 2004: 100). In such circumstances, it is not only women’s responsibility to consume in order to reinvent themselves and the bridal role, this process also re-embeds women into particular classed positions. The result is a re-entrenchment of gender and class inequalities and moral repudiation for supposedly inappropriately gendered- and/or classed-behaviour. Without a language of feminism, women not only lack the resources needed for complaint but are also led to believe this is what they ‘want’ (Pomerantz et al., 2013).

Traditional scripts of gendered labour and classed display, therefore, discipline women into responding appropriately to weddings. The construction of gender and class narratives is, however, also bound up with race. As Skeggs (1997) argues, the respectable values of the middle-class are central to the development of the notion of Englishness: being worthy, White, and non-working class. This coding of the middle-classes produces and constructs categorisations of race through the coding of the undesirable ‘other’. Arguably, wedding shows are designed to protect against the threat of the (White) working class masses, to provide a space for their expulsion and exclusivity for the White middle-classes (Lawler, 2005). While the discussion so far has focused on the ways in which traditional notions of gender re-embed brides into the domestic sphere, and how in social life women are disciplined through the bridezilla label to conform to middle-class expectations of femininity, the next section, therefore, considers how wedding spaces operate to produce ideas of Whiteness and to provide White women with spaces where they can claim appropriate ethnic bridal identity.

Whitening the wedding

With consumption acting on bridezillas to re-embed them into appropriately feminine and domesticated roles, the conservative nature of consuming is revealed (Berger, 2008). Moreover, wedding shows are a prime site for the reproduction and reinvention of traditional ‘white wedding femininity’: a middle-class, White ideal of femininity. Thus, the

bride figure created by the wedding industry is not a neutral figure but one which is racialised and classed. As Ingraham notes, the wedding market is primarily targeted at White middle-class women since they are the most frequent consumers. Bridal magazines, adverts, and wedding shows overlook women of colour meaning the wedding 'is primarily a ritual by, and for, and about the white middle to upper classes. Truly, the *white wedding*' (Ingraham, 1999: 33).

Functioning in this way, Whiteness is a habit – a bad habit – as Ahmed (2007) says and one that is perpetuated through White spaces where bodies become racialised. This Whiteness becomes most visible when a non-White body is present within the space (Ahmed, 2007). As part of putting forward a 'phenomenology of whiteness', Ahmed uses a family analogy to explain how Whiteness is reproduced. Whiteness is an orientation which puts things in reach and the 'reachability' of objects is inherited. As part of a 'family' of Whiteness, we inherit 'proximities', which in turn generate 'likeness' between 'family' members. This likeness is then used as a sign of inheritance. Likeness is not just an outcome of proximity (of sharing space), it is an effect of contiguity – of what it means to share space. Likeness is, therefore, facilitated by shared spaces and proximities. As a 'family', White people inherit 'likeness' not just through the physical proximity of living together (e.g. in a nation) but through what this proximity means (e.g. national identity). Extending this argument, it could be suggested that wedding shows in Britain provide 'White spaces' where proximity to alike others produces and reproduces shared values and meanings of Whiteness (and middle-classness). White wedding traditions are inherited in Ahmed's terms – wedding traditions which form a likeness between (White) people and (White) weddings, and which emerge from 'proximity' characterised by shared spaces. Thus, Whiteness (and white weddings) are inherited through the 'very placement of things' – in this case traditions.

The wedding shows visited in 2017 were predominantly attended by White British women, in groups, with parents or friends. While my observations do record some presence of women of colour, these are exceptional because of their rarity. Thus, as a White researcher, I recorded the following in my fieldnotes: 'despite discomfort at being a researcher and outsider in that I am not having a wedding, the space did not intimidate me. I felt in the presence of "my own" and empowered. I would not be called out [as not belonging] unless I outed myself' (personal reflection, 17 February 2017). While I was made to feel included by the space, people, and products on offer, the same cannot be said of my Indian colleague and collaborator. On several occasions, Aria³ was made to feel 'other', whether this was a food stall holder replying on asking her name 'Oh I'll forget that I'm afraid' (having remembered mine easily enough) or general disbelief that Aria could be 'the bride'. The following extract presents just one incident of many recorded in my notes:

Aria presents herself as the bride. At one bridal gown stall [the stall holder] asked me who was the bride, I indicated Aria, who said it was her, and then the stall holder asked *me* what the date was! This clearly breached her expectations but also clearly was uncomfortable in engaging Aria in conversation. When I asked Aria the date and she said 'this summer', then the stall holder began chiding her saying that she needed to have a dress already, they hand-make all their dresses – educating Aria about English weddings and customs assuming she doesn't know. [The stall holder] lost interest in us very quickly. (personal observation, 3 March 2017)

If we think of the world of weddings as a world that is inhabited by bodies, the ‘available space for action’ within this world is very limited for women who do not fit. The ‘body-at-home’ in the world of weddings is ‘one that can inhabit whiteness’ (Ahmed, 2007: 153; Fanon, 1986).

As noted earlier, our cultural constructions of class, race, and gender are interrelated, with each relying on aspects of the other (Lawler, 2005; Skeggs, 1997). For example, our constructions and stereotypes of White, working class women are dependent upon intersecting notions of Whiteness (often read as English- or Britishness), what it means to be working-class and a woman. Likewise, our image of the ‘British bride’ is embedded in notions of White, middle-class feminine womanhood. Britishness and Whiteness also become conflated since ‘discourses of nation and people are saturated with racial connotations’ (Gilroy, 2002: 60). Gilroy highlights this coming together of race and nation in the continuous presence of the royal family in the media, in sports reporting and in coverage of immigration and deportations. Essig (2019) suggests that the royal family – and in particular, royal weddings – play a key role in obscuring the operation of Whiteness in maintaining the status of ruling elites. The royal family like nothing else, evokes a sense of nationalism that erases the violence and exploitation upon which it rests. In turn, royal weddings produce a romantic ideology that privileges Whiteness and wealth (Essig, 2019). One of the functions of the white wedding, therefore, is to provide security and safety for White people in a cushion of frivolity from the dark and underclass other; to create in-group status and reinforce *likeness* and notions of family, wealth, status, privilege, and nationhood.

Evidence of this reliance on shared notions of British nationalism could be seen in various forms at the wedding shows. These ranged from the obvious and direct symbolism of Union Jacks appearing on wedding dress stalls, sofas, and wall hangings, to metonyms such as the ubiquitous English rose, afternoon tea, and London buses (images included in Carter, 2018). While these images are not necessarily direct representations of English or British identity, they do the work of creating links to the original. They serve to represent a specific form of *traditional* White Britishness, associated with purity (English rose), wealth and privilege (afternoon tea), and cosmopolitanism (London buses), thus operating as metonyms both for Britishness (or Englishness) and for Whiteness. In this way, these symbols of nationalism and national identity operate to make invisible representations of the racialised ‘other’ through making Whiteness ubiquitous. At the same time, the racialised body is made to stand out in a space where its representation is conspicuously absent.

White wedding shows, therefore, offer spaces for White racial authenticity, at least partly achieved through consumption. Pitcher (2014) explains that through consuming certain products and brands, we express a claim to particular racial identities. In other words, ‘racial meanings are generated through practices of consumption’ (Pitcher, 2014: 4), where consumption is not passive or neutral but a site for reading culture and making claims to racial authenticity. Thus, by consuming a brand such as The White Company or Nordic Noir style, White people are actively making claims to authentic White racial identity. This is ethnically appropriate consumption; while The White Company and Nordic Noir are not directly associated with Whiteness, they are a metonym for Whiteness: they have come to symbolise White values, tastes, and styles. Likewise, with

white wedding consumption, this offers a place to make claims to authentic English or British traditions, in turn, securing an ethnically safe-space and reproducing notions of Whiteness. At the wedding shows, for example, many stalls offered honeymoons to 'exotic' locations, often including safaris or trips to the Caribbean. A notable feature of these stalls was, however, the absence of people of colour in the advertising materials, either as purchasers of the honeymoons or as indigenous populations of the destination presented. Wilkes (2016) identified a similar phenomenon in tourist brochures for (White) honeymoons in 'paradise', Jamaica; ultimately producing a site where Whiteness can consume (invisible) black labour as luxury.

As a cultural ritual, weddings offer the opportunity to display cultural traditions and appeals to authentic cultural and national identities. As Ramdya (2010) demonstrates in her work on Hindu-American weddings, drawing on traditional cultural practices from one culture reinforces a sense of authenticity and belonging to that culture. Ramdya's couples combined Hindu with American traditions in order to validate their belonging to both cultures: reinforcing their 'authentic' (Hindu) cultural heritage as well as their sense of belonging to American society. It can be argued that the use of 'traditional cultural practices' would have no less meaning for White British wedding couples who, through their wedding ceremonies, express their 'authentic' cultural heritage to conjure an aura of collective nostalgia and belonging.

This consumption of race works to reinforce racial hierarchy as well as the *likeness* of White people through their claims to White ethnic identity. Consumption spaces – like wedding shows – provide *proximity* for this likeness to be operationalised and for White spaces to emerge. This allows the continuation of the inheritance of Whiteness, White power, and privilege. While Whiteness, therefore, remains an invisible privilege for many White people, racial metonyms are at work to provide White Britons with norms, values and *traditions* around which they can collect and organise, ethnically appropriately – those they have inherited and those that go on to produce an inheritance for future generations, enhancing both proximity and likeness in turn. In this way, many wedding shows in Britain are creating spaces for White women to consume Whiteness and to be White – to claim likeness and to become more like themselves (Ahmed, 2007; Pitcher, 2014). Wedding shows are not designed to transform women into brides, rather they allow already middle-class White women to become the embodied epitome of middle-class Whiteness. Essentially, these are spaces where racial and class hierarchies are subtly but forcefully reproduced.

Conclusion: connecting tradition, gender, class, and race

Weddings are rituals, performances, events which include practices, behaviours, and actions that carry meaning and value for individuals, families, groups, institutions, and states. These meanings and values, in turn, become normative and norms inform performances and rituals. At each stage of this total social fact (Mauss, 1990), meanings are being produced and reproduced about the value of gender, race, class, and sexuality; weddings are complicit in upholding dominant gendered, racial, classed, and sexual regimes. Yet, unlike other total social facts, the facets of inequality within weddings are too often overlooked because of the obscuring ideology of love and romance (Essig,

2019; Ingraham, 1999). Through the obfuscation of romance, the wedding provides another site, another opportunity, for the production and reproduction of traditional gendered roles, leading to gender inequalities. For as we have seen from this discussion and the evidence, inequalities in wedding preparation reflect and bleed into inequalities in romantic relationships more broadly. Weddings and wedding work remain largely unquestioned and unrecognised. As a still largely invisible site of women's labour and the reproduction of inequalities in intimate relationships, alongside the romanticisation of everything associated with weddings, the inequalities these events create and perpetuate are hard to recognise and work against.

In a similar way, hierarchies of class and race go largely unchallenged in the operation of weddings. Through the disciplinary device of the 'bridezilla', women are formed into appropriately respectable and feminine brides, eschewing working-class traits and embracing the modern individualised enterprising womanhood of middle-class standards. These standards become the required wedding 'traditions' achieved through ethnically- and class-appropriate consumption. Wedding shows provide the physical space for this consumption practice, creating places for alike people (White, middle-class women) to congregate exclusively without fear of the undesirable 'masses'. In these spaces, tradition – appearing as metonyms of Britishness, symbols of nationalism, or simply as 'wedding traditions' – manifests to provide comfort and legitimacy for consuming and partaking in a cultural practice that ultimately reproduces racial, class, and gendered hierarchies.

Tradition is invoked (like Heaphy's (2018) 'ordinary') to obscure the power and hierarchy in the practice to which that tradition refers. I have talked about tradition before as providing an easy, reliable, stable justification both for marriage and for unequal divisions of labour in the household, which negates interrogation of these decisions (Carter, 2019a). What I have attempted to illustrate in this article is that 'tradition' does not refer to anything fixed or solid; it can be, and is, used to justify uninterrogated decisions, behaviours, actions or practices. Used in this way, 'tradition' has the potential to be anything – flexible, changeable, and transient. Yet, the ways in which we see it used in the context of weddings is to support the reigning indices of inequalities. 'Tradition' can be a positive force – being used to root people into cultures, communities and families, providing place, space, and belonging (Ramdya, 2010). However, this can also fix 'traditional' practices within a hierarchy of inequality. Where we see recourse made to traditional gender roles or classed consumption practices, for example, tradition is sticky and reinforces these inequalities.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: Partial funding for this research was provided by Canterbury Christ Church University.

Notes

1. All participant names are pseudonyms.
2. An earlier version of this section appears in Carter (2019b).
3. Name has been changed to protect anonymity.

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Date submitted 15 October 2019

Date accepted 11 December 2020