

Concerns about Being Visible and Expressions of Pleasure: Women's Internet Wedding Forum Considerations of Boudoir Photography Sessions

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Western heterosexual women usually work with photographers when producing erotic boudoir images as gifts for future husbands. These women wear lingerie, lounge in beds, bend over to reveal breasts or emphasize buttocks, and recline with legs stretched in the air pinup-style. They also script scenes, compose costumes, and select and arrange photographs. The resultant images and experiences are regularly considered in female-focused Internet wedding forums. Self-identifying heterosexual women use these forums to collaboratively conceptualize boudoir photography. They communicate with other women about this practice, search for photographers, imagine how pleased male partners will be with these gifts, worry about being intimately depicted, identify boudoir sessions as a means of self-empowerment and personal documentation, provide examples of boudoir pictures, and compliment and flirt with the women who post photographs. Through these sessions and Internet wedding forum engagements, women pleasurably experience their visual accessibility, especially their openness to other female participants, and some of them express concern about how male partners will react to their being seen by photographers. Their negotiation of visibility and invisibility, especially their control of the means through which men will see their boudoir photography, are different than society's more usual positioning of women as visual and objects of the "male gaze."

Women's participation in boudoir sessions is an expression of their desire to be erotically evident. At the same time, a large number of participants are nervous about how partners will react to their being seen by male photographers, and society more broadly. A cohort of men contributes to women's anxiety by prohibiting their partners from being portrayed by men. Sometimes they rule against these women being viewed and portrayed by anyone. Confronted by these concerns about being seen, some women choose to do less explicit photography sessions or even decide not to participate. These perspectives can further articulate women as controllable possessions. Yet women's uneasy relationship to the visual features of boudoir photography also offers some critical possibilities because their more expected positions as visual and viewable are compromised. This is intensified since visual documentation is an important aspect of weddings and associated rituals. Attendees and photographers usually focus on brides. Thus, concerns about boudoir sessions point to different visual positions for women than the situations that are usually produced by traditional Western wedding cultures and theorized in some feminist film and media theory, art

history, and visual culture studies. Posts about boudoir sessions point to ways of further negotiating the visual field, women's cultural positions, and theories about how women and their representations are seen.

Trepidations about female visibility have shaped the boudoir form and the processes through which women make themselves visible. Women work with their partners' interests in them being less visible, or at least mediating the ways they are seen and who sees them. They produce self-depictions with cameras and timers, get female friends to take the pictures, bring female friends to sessions, and hire female photographers. At the same time, and ordinarily without noting the conflict, women share boudoir images on wedding forums where posts can be found through search engines and where female participants (and sometimes the male photographers their partners are concerned about) see them. In these settings, women emphasize and comment on the breasts, buttocks, and other erotically coded features of the women in boudoir sessions. Through these processes and proscriptions, women are constructed as visually and erotically available (particularly to women), their objectification is compromised, and their heterosexual relationships and positions are highlighted and challenged. Consequently, Internet wedding forums, with their focus on heterosexual unions and seemingly contrary facilitation of sensual communication between women, offer a site in which to consider the functions of normative heterosexuality and some of the ways the regulating, marginalizing, and sanctioning aspects of heterosexuality might be rethought.¹

As a method of comprehending how participants, photographers, and reporters constitute, and disrupt, heterosexuality and gendered visibility, I study their narratives about boudoir sessions and women's textual engagements in forums. Feminist theories of the gaze, including studies of the ways fashion magazines position female readers to view and desire other women by Diana Fuss and Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, provide methods of understanding boudoir practices.² The brides who decide to have boudoir sessions participate in an erotic visual practice that is supposed to be designed and available to only one man. However, they direct their images to women and constitute, and even exceed, what Lewis

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- 1 Stevi Jackson, "Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality: The Complexity (and Limits) of Heteronormativity," *Feminist Theory* 7:1 (2006), 105–21. In the citations in this article, detailed information about website references is included. The constant reconfiguration of Internet representations and changes in Internet service providers make it difficult to find previously quoted material and important to chronicle the kinds of depictions that happen in Internet settings. The quoted texts include unconventional spellings and capitalizations. Some of the sites listed in these citations are no longer available. Others have changed and do not offer the text or images that I describe. In the references, the date listed before the URL is the "publication" date or the last time the site was viewed in the indicated format. In instances where two dates are included, the first date points to when the current configuration of the site was initially available and the second date is the last access date. Some versions of referenced sites may be viewed by using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. Internet Archive, "Internet Archive: Wayback Machine," 27 July 2013, available at: <http://www.archive.org/web/web.php>.
 - 2 Diana Fuss, "Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look," *Critical Inquiry* 18:4 (1992), 713–37; Reina Lewis and Katrina Rolley, "Ad(dressing) the Dyke: Lesbian Looks and Lesbian Looking," in *Outlooks: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities and Visual Cultures*, ed., Peter Horne and Reina Lewis, New York: Routledge (1996), 178–90.

and Rolley identify as a “lesbian response” to women.³ These female forum participants erotically react to boudoir images, actively construct same-sex looks and desires, share their same-sex interests with other participants, and continue to mention their future husbands. Studying women’s considerations of boudoir sessions thus provides opportunities to reassess conceptions of the gaze, sexual objectification and subjectification, and the relationship between viewing and participants’ sexuality and commitments.

This article is based on my study of more than two thousand wedding forum posts about boudoir photography. Since these posts can be seen by anyone and a login is not required to read texts, participants tend to note the accessible aspects of forums and have reduced expectations about the privacy of posts. I also consult photographers’ blog entries about boudoir sessions, which function as a form of advertising, and news stories. My method is to read widely available Internet texts about boudoir sessions rather than engage with sites or posters through intervention or interaction. Many U.S. institutional review boards, as well as the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) that educates researchers on human subjects issues, indicate that these methods are not human subjects research. Thus, I identify this article as a study of women’s written and visual texts. I understand such screen-based texts as constructed representations that are produced by individuals, institutions, technologies, and social forces rather than being unmediated people. In my work, I also consider how people’s bodies come into contact with, shape, and are shaped by these texts and technologies.⁴ I recognize the debates over Internet research ethics and the need to be sensitive to the investments individuals have in these kinds of renderings.⁵ Boudoir sessions have a value and meaning for participants that I try to acknowledge. I also believe that critical examinations of Internet texts and technologies help us to evaluate social categories and the ways these structures enable and invalidate people’s lives. These roles and structures are articulated, extended, and undermined by technological practices.

Boudoir Sessions

Boudoir sessions and the related technological processes support, broaden, and challenge Western heterosexual wedding cultures. Boudoir practices are part of an expanding number of photographic conventions that are associated with weddings.

3 Lewis and Rolley, “Ad(dressing) the Dyke,” 179.

4 Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship*, Cambridge: MIT Press (2006); Michele White, “Representations or People,” *Ethics and Information Technology* 4:3 (2002), 249–66.

5 For proposals about Internet research ethics, see Elizabeth A. Buchanan, *Readings in Virtual Research Ethics: Issues and Controversies*, Hershey, PA: Idea Group (2004); Charles Ess and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee, “Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee,” 27 November 2002, 27 July 2013, available at: <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>; Soraj Hongladarom and Charles Ess, eds. *Information Technology Ethics: Cultural Perspectives*, Hershey: Idea Group Reference (2007); Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan with contributions from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee, “Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research 2.0: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee,” 2012, 27 July 2013, available at: <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>.

While women are the focus of such representations, men are a key figure in many of these genres. It is now quiet common for heterosexual couples in Western countries, and many other parts of the world, to schedule engagement sessions, wedding photographs, trash the dress sessions where couples wear wedding clothing again (although women are more likely to do these images without their husbands), and anniversary pictures.⁶ Couples also book photography sessions to record pregnancies and “bumps,” babies, and children’s birthday parties. The increasing documentation of these rituals, even if digitally facilitated, enhances photography’s relationship to normative heterosexuality and the consumerism of weddings. Shawn Michelle Smith considers the role of photography in society and argues that “the photographic image has been conceptualized as a means of preserving family history and of documenting family genealogy.”⁷ From its invention, photography has been used to record the events associated with heterosexual families, including births, marriages, and deaths. Given the importance of these sorts of images, changes in photographic practices and in the ways these depictions circulate can also disturb the associated cultural structures and beliefs, including heterosexuality and traditional gender roles.

Boudoir images connect photography, the family, and heterosexuality because they are identified as wedding gifts that brides present to their fiancés. There is a general cultural expectation that Western brides and grooms will give each other presents. These gifts commemorate the event, extend the consumerism of weddings, stand in for heterosexual relationships, and structure the gender and sexual roles of participants. Women combine personal and gendered gestures when giving men such gifts as love notes and books chronicling the relationship, technological gadgets, personalized watches and cuff links, sports tickets and paraphernalia, and boudoir albums and photographs. These presents are items that women think their partners want and understand as masculine (and this gender mandate often makes them hesitate about giving personalized writings). Photographers encourage these connections between boudoir sessions, weddings, and heterosexuality. According to photographer Robin Owen, “Lots of women are giving gifts of boudoir photos to their man on their wedding day.”⁸ KNP Boudoir advertises that these images are “a great gift for a bride to be to give her husband on their wedding night.”⁹ Men are imagined as recipients of these gifts and viewers of the images but rarely portrayed in sessions. There is a much smaller cohort of photographers who offer couple or male boudoir sessions. On photographers’ sites and in wedding forums, there are few references to lesbians or gay men booking

6 Michele White, “Dirty Brides and Internet Settings: The Affective Pleasures and Troubles with Trash the Dress Photography Sessions,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110:3 (Summer 2011), 645–72.

7 Shawn Michelle Smith, “‘Baby’s Picture is Always Treasured’ Eugenics and the Reproduction of Whiteness in the Family Photograph Album,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 11:1 (1998), 200.

8 Robin Owen, “Bridal Boudoir in Maryland Ooo La La!” Maryland wedding and boudoir photographer Robin Owen, 4 May 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://marylandweddingandboudoir.blogspot.com/2009/05/bridal-boudoir-in-maryland-ooo-la-la.html>.

9 KNP Boudoir, “KNP Boudoir—Photography Blog: Philadelphia’s Boudoir Studio,” 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.knpboudoir.com/blog>.

boudoir sessions. When male boudoir photography, which is also called “dudeoir,” is mentioned in wedding forums, most women respond with amusement or repulsion and indicate that they do not want partners to engage in sessions. These cultural notions and the existent compendium of images keep heterosexual women in front of boudoir photographers’ cameras rather than encouraging other subjects. Women tend to experience marketing, social, and personal pressures to do boudoir sessions for future husbands and themselves.

Boudoir sessions are associated with pin-ups and other erotica designed for male audiences, although some women have reprieved pin-ups.¹⁰ Boudoir photographers often choose the term “pin-up” as part of their companies’ names, categorize certain images as “pin-up,” and reference Alberto Vargas and other classic pin-up artists. However, boudoir photography may be conceptualized as one of the less male-focused wedding gifts. Women participants are interested in getting records of their exercise and diet produced bodies. This weight management is intensified by expectations about brides’ appearance at weddings. They also use images as a way of accepting themselves and have fun dressing up and doing sessions with friends. Participants organize many aspects of sessions and conceptually focus the camera on themselves. This can foil the idea that women give these gifts, and thus their bodies and agency, to future husbands. Combes2Be thinks boudoir sessions are “something every woman should do, more for herself than for anyone else.”¹¹ You “should do it for your guy but more so for yourself,” writes ShortieGbride, because “looking back when you are old and wrinkly” and knowing “that you were hot and confident enough to pull these pics off, it will be worth it.”¹² For photographer Jennifer Skog, sessions are wedding gifts that are “all about glamour and female empowerment.”¹³ Such comments efface the costs of booking photographers and the class expectations that women will have the kinds of clothing and imaging equipment that are needed to organize do-it-yourself sessions. The visual aspects of women’s identity are often intensified in these narratives about doing boudoir sessions, but this culture is articulated and supported by women.

Women’s indications that they want to self-present through boudoir photography sessions and sexually subjectify themselves are related to the technologies of sexiness, including the mainstreaming of pole dancing and sexting, and postfeminist declarations that women freely choose their roles and actions in contemporary society. While there is no agreed upon definition of postfeminism, it

10 Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press (2006).

11 Combes2Be, “PLUS SIZE: boudoirs,” Project Wedding, 3 February 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/plus-size-boudoirs?page=2>.

12 ShortieGbride, “Boudoir Photography,” Project Wedding, 16 December 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/boudoir-photography-2>.

13 Jennifer Skog, “Boudoir: The ‘How To’ Behind the Flirtatious Trend for Brides!” Project Wedding, 24 January 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/wedding-ideas/boudoir-the-glamour-trend-for-brides>.

is often understood as women's and society's acceptance and even celebration of normative femininity.¹⁴ Rosalind Gill interrogates such cultural positions and how "sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency" have "replaced 'innocence' or 'virtue' as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace."¹⁵ She also points to the ways sexualization is hierarchically structured along with other identity positions and extends multiple kinds of inequality. Stéphanie Genz describes how postfeminists construct new femininities based upon conceptions of "autonomy and agency."¹⁶ However, the women who engage in boudoir photography have much more ambivalent relationships to visibility and choice, including their negotiation of the proscriptions of partners, and continue rather than break from previous cultures of sexual objectification and subjectification.

Boudoir images have historical antecedents and are associated with an array of erotic visual forms. For instance, boudoir sessions continue many of the gender and sexuality conventions from painting and other fine art portrayals of female nudes. These art forms tend to depict women in intimate spaces, wearing undergarments, undressed without explanation, reclining and otherwise rendered as passive and available (or seemingly accessible) to the gaze and possession of viewers. This practice of depicting women in a state of undress in bedrooms and dressing rooms persisted with photography. As reporter Sylvia Rubin notes, "Any search of a flea market snapshot bin unearths tiny black and white pictures of Victorian-era women in their corsets."¹⁷ In a related trend, newspaper accounts from the early twentieth century describe the "Astonishing French Fad for Being Photographed in Bed" and women deciding that a "fluffy negligee gown would be kind of cute for a couple of boudoir" photographs.¹⁸ These histories are effaced when journalist Mike Royko argues that Stuart Naideth developed boudoir photography in the 1980s and reporter Dave Larsen identifies Steve Palen as the "popularizer of boudoir photography."¹⁹ Certainly, there was a reemergence of boudoir photography during this period. For instance, Janet K. Wesley reports in 1988 that boudoir portraits are "something women are doing for their husbands or boyfriends, or even to indulge themselves."²⁰ This is similar to contemporary

14 Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change*, Los Angeles: Sage (2009); Diane Negra, *What A Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism* New York: Routledge (2009).

15 Rosalind C. Gill, "Critical Respect: The Difficulties and Dilemmas of Agency and 'Choice' for Feminism," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 14:1 (2007), 72.

16 Stéphanie Genz, "Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism," *Feminist Theory* 7:2 (2006), 345.

17 Sylvia Rubin, "Beauty and the boudoir Feeling liberated through a lens," *SFGate*, 16 April 2006, 26 July 2013, available at: http://articles.sfgate.com/2006-04-16/living/17289653_1_body-image-boudoir-photography-special-day.

18 *The Atlanta Constitution*, "The Astonishing French Fad for Being Photographed in Bed," 14 November 1915, B18; Alma Woodward, "To Take Pictures Successfully, One Should Know How," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, 9 January 1914.

19 Mike Royko, "Boudoir Photography Latest Fad from—Where Else?—California," *The Spokesman-Review*, 15 January 1984, A18; Dave Larsen, "Miss, Ms. or Mrs. America for an Hour," *Los Angeles Times*, 7 December 1984, J1.

20 Janet K. Wesley, "Fantasy on Film," *The Pittsburgh Press*, 4 February 1988, E6.

explanations of this practice. For instance, some of Skog's boudoir sessions include a hair and makeup stylist because she wants her clients to "completely indulge, be pampered and most importantly look and feel fabulous!"²¹ Skog connects women's physiognomy and visual accessibility to their sentiments, and perhaps contrarily their femininity and self-confidence, but she also emphasizes women's centrality in developing and sustaining this form.

Viewing Positions

A wide variety of academic texts offer histories and critical interrogations of the female nude, including such erotica as pin-ups.²² In addition, feminist film theory, art history, and visual culture studies provide methods for understanding how women are constituted as visual objects, looked at, and experience seeing and being seen. Abigail Solomon-Godeau's study of the "feminine image" demonstrates that, starting in the nineteenth century and especially with non-elite forms like photography, representations of women increasingly operated as "a conduit and mirror of desire."²³ Such images figure women as viewable, consumable, and designed for men's pleasures. Solomon-Godeau's study of the Countess de Castiglione, who hired a photographer and staged several hundred detailed images of her body in the nineteenth-century when these types of erotic depictions were uncommon for her class, also raises questions about women's roles as designers of their representations and facilitators of culture's construction and containment of them.²⁴ Carol Duncan describes the important role that images of women play in constituting high art in museums. Yet these depictions offer little variety and poor identification models for women. They are "simply female bodies or parts of bodies, with no identity beyond their female anatomy—those ever-present 'Women' or 'Seated Women' or 'Reclining Nudes.'"²⁵ Duncan interrogates the stereotyped and constraining aspects of these kinds of representations, but the people engaged in boudoir photography, in a similar manner to postfeminist narratives, often find similar poses to be empowering.

Laura Mulvey articulates a related series of concerns about the ways women are represented in her widely cited critique of visual pleasure in classical Hollywood film. She connects the "erotic pleasure in film, its meaning and, in particular, the central place of the image of woman."²⁶ Women's role in such forms

21 Skog, "Boudoir."

22 Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730–1970*, New York: Newsweek (1972); Helen McDonald, *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art*, London and New York: Routledge (2001); Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, London and New York: Routledge (1992).

23 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Other Side of Venus: The Visual Economy of Feminine Display," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, Berkeley: University of California Press (1996), 113.

24 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October* 39 (Winter 1986), 65–108.

25 Carol Duncan, "The MoMA's Hot Mamas," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, New York: HarperCollins (1992), 348.

26 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington: Indiana

as the pin-up, striptease, and Busby Berkeley films is as an object that “holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire.”²⁷ These feminists point to the ways women are used to articulate normative masculine desire and function as “to-be-looked-at-ness” rather than having particularities and motives of their own.²⁸ However, women also choose to do boudoir sessions, a process that evokes Castiglione’s hiring of a photographer and production of erotic images. They find pleasure in their and other boudoir images while preventing their representations from being seen by most men. Mulvey’s call for the undoing of visual pleasure because of its objectifying processes has a corollary in the many boudoir sessions where women highlight the physical discomfort that accompanies posing. I develop this inquiry about visual pleasure and theorize the productivity of being uncomfortable at the conclusion of this article.

Feminist film theorists also address women’s expressions of pleasure in their own visual images and the ways other women act as a kind of reflection of them. Related studies interrogate how women participate in the male gaze. Feminist film critics, according to E. Ann Kaplan, enjoy the structures of Hollywood film, and thus being rendered as objects of the male gaze, because they are fascinated with these images even as they assess them.²⁹ Kaplan proposes that feminist film theorists rethink their own visual pleasure, but she does not address the ways these women look sensually at filmic depictions of women and at and through each other. Chris Straayer reflects on Kaplan and other feminists’ psychoanalytically informed considerations of the male gaze and argues that these theories need “to be combined with the equally pertinent question ‘Is the gaze heterosexual’” and do viewers need to comply with texts’ “heterosexual positioning.”³⁰ Her inquiry about the sexuality and erotic experiences of viewers is particularly apt when considering the means through which women engage with boudoir photographs in wedding forums. These kinds of investigations might also address the functions and limits of the gaze within monogamous heterosexuality.

Straayer inquires about the sexuality of the gaze because some feminist film theorists understand these texts as always producing heterosexual viewing positions. Discussions about boudoir sessions in wedding forums point to some of the instances, and countless other examples exist, in which the gaze is not heterosexual and foils the very operations of heterosexuality. These instances should be carefully considered along with the ways that the gaze is rendered as heterosexual and functions as an important part of heterosexuality. Kent G. Drummond indicates that the combination of camera, audience, and characters in mainstream film structure viewers to “assume the perspective of the heterosexual male protagonist.”³¹ Terrell Carver rightly replaces the term “male gaze” with

University Press (1989), 16.

27 Ibid., 19.

28 Ibid.

29 E. Ann Kaplan, *Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera*, New York: Methuen (1983).

30 Chris Straayer, *Deviant Eyes, Deviant Bodies*, New York: Columbia University Press (1996), 3.

31 Kent G. Drummond, “The Queering of *Swan Lake*,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 45:2 (2003), 246.

“heterosexual male gaze” because of the desires and identity usually linked to this viewing position.³² Mulvey’s explanation of film spectatorship, and the application of her argument to other instances of viewing, indicates how the text and cinematic apparatus work to produce heterosexual identifications and desires (although she does not specifically label this as an operation of heterosexuality). Many forms of looking relationships occur in contemporary society, but the normative heterosexual male gaze is an important process of heterosexuality and a kind of social structure. It establishes such things as movement, egress, tolerable spatial relationships between bodies (and more general ideas about acceptability), the right to view, and the qualities and visual accessibility of women. In other words, the gaze helps to establish what bodies mean, how they are arranged, and what they can do. Thus, the means through which alternative gazes support and resist these structures and research on these issues is critically important.

Jackie Stacey addresses alternative viewing positions in her study of British women’s identification with and desire for female Hollywood stars.³³ Her research points to instances in which heterosexual viewing positions are compromised. Without suggesting that all forms of identification are sensual, Stacey describes the pleasures women experience in recognizing themselves in female stars and connecting to other femininities on the screen. For Stacey, the kinds of ‘love’ and ‘devotion’ that are expressed by these British female fans “do not suggest an overt lesbian desire, but neither can they be described as mere expressions of ‘identification’ devoid of erotic pleasure.”³⁴ Female fans derive pleasure from dressing, styling themselves, and acting in ways that connect them to stars’ more ideal forms of femininity. Their love, as contemporary fan practices and aversions suggest, may also create commitments to texts and stars and articulate how individuals view, and who and what they watch.

Stacey’s argument has a great deal in common with feminist and lesbian analysis of fashion magazines. Fuss theorizes the ways women’s fashion photography and magazines pose “models as sexually irresistible subjects,” invite “female viewers to consume the product by (over)identifying with the image,” and design erotic representations of women so that they can be appreciated and consumed by women.³⁵ Annamari Vänskä engages with this argument and asserts that fashion magazines “tutor adolescent girls and young women to consume the female body and appearance through gazing.”³⁶ This may be understood as a process of passively identifying with women. However, Lewis and Rolley argue that “it is difficult, if not impossible, fully to separate admiration from desiring to

32 Terrell Carver, “Sex, Gender and Heteronormativity: Seeing ‘Some Like It Hot’ as a Heterosexual Dystopia,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 8:2 (2009), 136.

33 Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*, Routledge: London and New York (1994).

34 *Ibid.*, 173.

35 Fuss, “Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look,” 713.

36 Annamari Vänskä, “Why Are There No Lesbian Advertisements?” *Feminist Theory* 6:1 (2005), 70.

be and from desiring to have.”³⁷ Women are also taught to desire women. Fuss indicates heterosexual norms are conveyed along with fashion magazines’ structuring of lesbian viewing positions. Nevertheless, she also argues that these structures present some problems for normative positions because to “look straight at women, it appears, straight women must look as lesbians.”³⁸ Fashion magazines, according to Lewis and Rolley, “educate” the “reader into something very close to a lesbian response” and gaze.³⁹

Boudoir images, which feature women’s clothing and moody and eroticized looks, quote fashion photography. They seem to render female subjects who address and want to be desired by male partners. However, wedding forums, as I suggest in more detail later in this article, provide a structure in which women admire and even crave boudoir sessions and the associated women. For instance, yurpa responds to a participant’s images with a “hot pics, lady!”⁴⁰ She becomes a supporter and fan that loves “the pink bra/purple heels combo!” hisblueyedoll presents a more agentive position than her avatar name when discovering a “b-pic photo shoot” and sharing “some of the yummy details.”⁴¹ Internet wedding forum participants, as my research on boudoir and trash-the-dress photography sessions indicates, extend the lesbian looks scripted in fashion magazines, film, and new media fan practices by facilitating an archive of erotic images of women and a community of women who share same-sex admirations and desires.⁴²

Women pleurably view and comment on boudoir sessions, the clothing and other accoutrements in images, and women’s bodies. They identify with representations and specific women when imagining being the subject of posted images and having the breasts, buttocks, and other body parts of depicted individuals. They therefore adopt the position of object of the gaze. They also establish themselves as centered and empowered subjects who view other women participants when they admire and express desire for the associated women. This combination of identification and sensual interest allows women to support their own and other people’s appeal. Thus, Lewis and Rolley’s concept of “lesbian response” only begins to suggest the same-sex erotic engagements that happen in discussions about boudoir sessions. These female forum participants do more than react to images that are delivered by the mainstream media. They actively construct same-sex looks and desires and articulate lesbian interests in other viewers. Yet these interests are textually crafted rather than corporeally expressed.

37 Lewis and Rolley, “Ad(dressing) the Dyke,” 179.

38 Fuss, “Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look,” 714.

39 Lewis and Rolley, “Ad(dressing) the Dyke,” 181.

40 yurpa, “AW: **jenniferdavid923** BIO UPDATE! {B-PICS},” Project Wedding, 5 May 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/aw-jenniferdavid923-bio-update-b-pics>.

41 hisblueyedoll, “Romantic b-pics inspiration, Project Wedding, 4 May 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/romantic-b-pics-inspiration>.

42 White, “Dirty Brides and Internet Settings.”

Research on Internet settings also points to the ways desires are expanded or queered.⁴³ Feminist studies of Internet fan cultures, especially slash fiction where authors articulate sexual relationships between “same sex” media characters, indicate how individuals have expanded the interests and erotic possibilities of mass media texts.⁴⁴ Fan producers use these texts as ways of considering and recrafting their sexualities in Internet settings and being visible in different ways, although not all the individuals who flirtatiously engage would politically identify as GLBTQ.⁴⁵ Women are also directed to be visually available in some Internet settings. For instance, women in male-oriented forums like 4Chan who indicate their gender are bullied with demands for photographic proof of this position in the form of “Tits or GTFO” (get the fuck out).⁴⁶ At the same time, women webcam operators and other producers control their visibility by managing technologies, refusing to reveal their bodies, parodying harassing desires, and nurturing cohorts of supportive fans.⁴⁷ Women’s considerations of boudoir photography are distinct from these other practices because they engage with other women and visibility as part of heterosexuality and their wedding rituals.

Women’s Visibility and Invisibility

The wedding forums where many boudoir images appear address women and suggest women are the primary viewers. For instance, on the opening parts of Weddingbee, women are greeted by an illustration of a woman in a wedding dress and veil.⁴⁸ This figure stands in for readers and codes participants as women. WeddingWire uses a bridal bouquet as its URL bar icon, or favicon, and indicates brides (rather than grooms or other members of the wedding party) do the work of finding wedding vendors.⁴⁹ In a similar manner to Weddingbee, the WeddingWire viewer is depicted in a white wedding dress and veil. Easy Weddings codes the setting as feminine through the use of a bright pink background; pink, raspberry, and turquoise links; and mention of “Wedding Dresses” (but not tuxedos) in the

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- 43 Ken Hillis, *Online a Lot of the Time: Ritual, Fetish, Sign*, Durham: Duke University Press (2009); Kate O’Riordan and David J. Phillips, eds. *Queer Online: Media Technology and Sexuality*, New York: Peter Lang (2007); Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper, eds. *LGBT Identity and Online New Media*, London: Routledge (2010).
- 44 Sharon Cumberland, “Private Uses of Cyberspace: Women, Desire, and Fan Culture,” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics Of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn, Henry Jenkins, and Brad Seawell, Cambridge: MIT Press (2004), 261–79; Frederik Dhaenens, “Slashing the Fiction of Queer Theory: Slash Fiction, Queer Reading, and Transgressing the Boundaries of Screen Studies, Representations, and Audiences,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 32:4 (October 2008), 335–47; Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds. *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, Jefferson: McFarland and Company (2006).
- 45 Kristina Busse, “My Life is a WIP on My LJ: Slashing the Slasher and the Reality of Celebrity and Internet Performances,” in *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, Jefferson: McFarland and Company (2006), 207–24.
- 46 Brad, “Tits or GTFO,” Know Your Meme, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/tits-or-gtfo>.
- 47 Teresa Senft, *Camgirls: Celebrity and Community in the Age of Social Networks*, New York: Peter Lang (2008); Michele White, “Too Close to See: Men, Women, and Webcams,” *New Media & Society* 5:1 (2003), 7–27.
- 48 Weddingbee, “Wedding Blog by Weddingbee, 23 December 2012, available at: www.weddingbee.com.
- 49 WeddingWire, “Weddings, Wedding Venues—WeddingWire.com,” 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingwire.com>.

browser title.⁵⁰ These settings render women as subjects and objects. Participants are expected to end up in heterosexual marriages and heterosexuality is referenced in numerous ways, but these sites support female, rather than male, forms of looking and evaluative gazing. Women assess the beauty of other brides and dresses, the economic and social value of material aspects of weddings, and viability of venues and ceremonies. In addition, almost all of the sensual and flirtatious engagements in these forums occur between self-identified women.

Wedding forums, with their many depictions of brides and tips about being depicted, emphasize women's position as to-be-looked-at-ness. Women are encouraged to support this by posting self-depictions and providing advice about being portrayed. Women who are getting married are likely to be especially influenced by notions of female visibility and sexual objectification and subjectification because they are structured as the axis of interest during the wedding and related rituals.⁵¹ According to research on weight and weddings by Jeffery Sobal, Caron Bove, and Barbara Rauschenbach, the "role of the bride especially involves observation and scrutiny in the central spotlight of the wedding."⁵² The increasing photographic documentation of brides, including photographers' posting of images on studio sites, extends the time of observation and the number of people examining participating women. The women who post about boudoir sessions support such extensions of female visibility. They use the mandating term "should" when directing women to enjoy being seen, function as erotic objects, and embrace their corporeal presence. bridezilla09 thinks "every women should do Boudoir pictures!"⁵³ All women "should do this," writes YoungBride21, "shape, size, age no matter what!"⁵⁴ oxfordblondebride2b feels "so much less self conscious about" her body "after seeing how good it can look."⁵⁵ She recommends, "all of you who are thinking about it—go for it!!!" These women propose that being seen and depicted by photographers is a positive experience. They advise that these methods and visual positions should be aspects of women's lives. They evoke postfeminist conceptions of female agency but the indications that women "should" be visible challenge their narratives about choice.

Posts about boudoir images, like the opening representations of wedding sites,

50 Easy Weddings, "Weddings Australia, Wedding Dresses Invitations Gowns Cakes Venues—Easy Weddings," 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.easyweddings.com.au>.

51 Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture*, Durham: Duke University Press (2002).

52 Jeffery Sobal, Caron Bove, and Barbara Rauschenbach, "Weight and Weddings: The Social Construction of Beautiful Brides," in *Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*, ed. Jeffery Sobal and Donna Maurer, New York: Aldine de Gruyter (1999), 113.

53 bridezilla09, "I did Boudoir Pictures...Turned out really GOOD!" Weddingbee, 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/i-did-boudoir-pictureturned-out-really-good>.

54 YoungBride21, "I'll share my b-pics to convince you to do them!!!" Project Wedding, 23 February 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/i-ll-share-my-b-pics-to-convince-you-to-do-them?page=7>.

55 oxfordblondebride2b, "HAD MY BOUDOIR SHOOT TODAY!!!" You & Your Wedding, 26 May 2008, 26 May 2010, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/community/forums/thread/140709>.

figure a version of readers. They also describe sessions so other women can identify with the posters and imagine doing them. Mrs. Bunny “didn’t know anything about boudoir photos until” she “saw Mrs. Hydrangea’s post,” “was further encouraged by Mrs. Cherry Pie’s post,” felt that the represented book of boudoir images “was just perfect,” and “wanted so badly to make one of” her “own!”⁵⁶ Mrs. Bunny and other women identify with posters and experience themselves *as* images and *through* representations. They are informed that boudoir sessions, including the gaze of photographers and features of images, allow them to see and accept themselves. Steph.N.Brad identifies boudoir sessions as “the most confident boosting thing anyone can do” because the “photographers make you feel absolutely beautiful.”⁵⁷ For Mrs.Sprinkle, seeing her “photos was suuuuuch a huge confidence boost.”⁵⁸ Any time that she is “having a super unconfident” day she looks at her boudoir images and feels better. These women indicate that boudoir images exceed their self-perceptions and that they more fully appreciate themselves when constituted as representations and seen through images. In these cases, the self is understood through external representations, views, and evaluations. Yet these posted sessions also allow female viewers to shift between being and having the depicted women. This produces a version of Fuss’ homospectatorial gaze and Lewis and Rolley’s lesbian response and highlights the queer sexual possibilities and desires that are part of Western heterosexual wedding cultures.⁵⁹

This elaboration of participants’ sexuality is encouraged by the ways people produce and extend themselves in Internet settings. People are increasingly offered varied texts and visuals to stand in for themselves in Internet settings and expected to write themselves into “being” in social networking sites.⁶⁰ They may also be forced to identify with pre-produced images and categories. Women forum participants create user names, use images of themselves as icons, post “inspiration” images from mainstream sources and other women’s sessions, include personal photos on forums and profiles, select from pre-designed avatars, are categorized as “Mrs.” and other heterogender identifiers, and ask women to post their personal representations.⁶¹ While these women are involved with settings and practices that encourage their visual accessibility, they also express

56 Mrs. Bunny, “Bunny Bridal Countdown: Bunny goes ‘Playboy’ (21 days),” Weddingbee, 12 September 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2009/09/12/bunny-bridal-countdown-bunny-goes-playboy-21-days>.

57 Steph.N.Brad, “B-PICS Inspiration,” Project Wedding, 26 February 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-inspiration?page=3.

58 Mrs.Sprinkle, “Regarding Boudoir Photos,” Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: boards.weddingbee.com/topic/regarding-boudoir-photos.

59 Freeman, *The Wedding Complex*.

60 The social network research of danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison identifies the production of individuals through profiles as an important feature of these settings. danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13:1 (2007), available at: <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html>.

61 Heterogender is a gender system that asserts heterosexuality because of its coupling of male with female. Jackson, “Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality.”

concerns about how they are understood and who will see them. For instance, serabell is planning a DIY session because she “would feel super awkward in front of a stranger” and asks, “Anyone have any boudoir pics they can post/share for inspiration?”⁶² When she notes, “Ok so maybe no one wants to post themselves on here, completely understandable,” she is rewarded with personal images. Some women provide self-portrayals that serabell can view, but she resists the visual mandates of contemporary culture and expresses concerns about the representational processes of boudoir photography.

Many women conceptualize photographers’ gazes differently than boudoir participants’ views. Miss Candy Corn describes “immediately shuddering when” she first heard about boudoir photography and “imagined [...] trying to be sexy in front of a photographer.”⁶³ She saw herself “striking a George Costanza-like pose on a chaise, in” her “socks and underwear. The idea of wearing lingerie in front of a stranger, or even a friend, gave” her “the heebie jeebies.” Corn affectively responds to the possibility that she will not be the ideal erotic object and will attract a less approving and sexually acceptable gaze. In her account, there is a gap between gender ideals and her performance, which is associated with masculinity and improper props like socks. While Corn is concerned about her relationship to photographers and certain kinds of images, she also posts DIY boudoir pictures in which she lounges on the bed, touches herself, and reveals her underwear. Her engagements in boudoir sessions point to the larger conflicts in boudoir practices and the ways women perform as visible and invisible.

Women often reject the gaze of male photographers and identify this experience as being between strangers, while conceptualizing forum participants as friends, and encouraging an expanded sensual engagement with them. Photographers in such cases are connected to perverted and improper looking and extend Corn’s experiences of repulsion. This is overtly stated when teris identifies most boudoir photographers as “creepy and pornographic.”⁶⁴ COFPhoto warns women to “be careful about who you choose” because the poster has “seen more than one case of some pervert pretending to be a Photographer, offering cheap” sessions.⁶⁵ In these instances, photographers are imagined to threaten women’s safety and chaste position as coupled and about to be married, although erotic wedding forum and boudoir engagements point to a more exploratory sexuality.

Some women worry about the consequences of being seen by male photographers. hocuspocus813 would like to do a boudoir session but fears that

62 serabell, “Post your boudoir photos or inspiration please!” Weddingbee, 23 December 2012, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/post-your-boudoir-photos-or-inspiration-please>.

63 Miss Candy Corn, “My DIY Boudoir Photos,” Weddingbee, 26 August 2008, 23 December 2012, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2008/08/26/my-diy-boudoir-photos>.

64 teris, “boudoir photos,” Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/boudoir-photos>.

65 COFPhoto, “Boudoir prices,” Best Destination Wedding, 16 June 2008, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.bestdestinationwedding.com/forum/thread/21637/boudoir-prices>.

she would “be uncomfortable with the photographer” and her FI would not “enjoy the pictures knowing that another guy took them.”⁶⁶ She would “definitely want to find a girl photographer.” Emma151108 is “really interested in doing a boudoir shoot” as a present but thinks her fiancé would wonder about “who took the pics and whether it was a guy.”⁶⁷ She would “be really disappointed if” she “can’t find a female photographer because” otherwise she would not be able to do it. These women articulate gendered gazes and forms of visual safety. They are positioned between cultural mandates for female visibility and monogamous heterosexuality’s erotic but contained female stance. This can be understood as a flickering between availability and concealment. In these cases, the view of male photographers becomes a form of unacceptable sexual activity. This is emphasized by Marie Claire’s indication that boudoir photography “sounds a little creepy but fear not, grooms, you’ll be presented with the fruits of their labor—the boudoir book—on your wedding night, a constant reminder that your wifey got naked in front of another man right before she said, ‘I do.’”⁶⁸ In such narratives, the possible erotic engagements shared between women participants and female photographers are not considered. Participants and viewers ordinarily assume everyone’s heterosexuality. Yet the positioning of photographs, as well as brides standing in front of photographers, as a form of indiscretion points to the array of objects incorporated into heterosexuality.

Women distinguish between the problems of being seen by men and the purportedly safer and more assuring look of female photographers. When Mrs. Onion posts about her boudoir session, she is asked if she was “comfortable with the photographer” because “he’s a 24 yr old guy.”⁶⁹ The thing ChaCha and her friend “refuse to compromise on is having a female photographer.”⁷⁰ She “can’t imagine how uncomfortable” she “would be posing like that in front of a man, no matter how great his photos are!” The reason FunLovinLynz “was so comfortable doing it was because” it is “an all female team so no men spying at you in your underwear!”⁷¹ In these accounts, women are concerned about being “comfortable.”

Women use the term “comfortable” to refer to their safety, the acceptable level of visibility, and the visual success of images. For instance, Jenn notes that she “would never have been comfortable with a male photographer” because you “need

66 hocuspocus813, “What exactly are B-Pics??” Project Wedding, 11 August 2008, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/what-exactly-are-b-pics>.

67 Emma151108, “Boudoir Shoot advise!” You & Your Wedding, 11 December 2007, 23 December 2012, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/community/forums/thread/102280?theme=print>.

68 Marie Claire, “9 Craziest Wedding Trends,” Yahoo!, 20 July 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://shine.yahoo.com/channel/sex/9-craziest-wedding-trends-2078546>.

69 Mrs. Onion, “Tony’s Girls,” Weddingbee, 17 August 2007, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2007/08/17/tonys-girls/>; Kate, “Tony’s Girls,” Weddingbee, 17 August 2007, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2007/08/17/tonys-girls>.

70 ChaCha, “Boudoir Photo Sessions—Are you doing them?” Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/boudoir-photo-sessions-are-you-doing-them>.

71 FunLovinLynz, “I have just booked my Boudoir shoot!!” You & Your Wedding, 26 November 2009, 23 December 2012, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/community/forums/thread/296353?startnum=61>.

to be relaxed to take a good BD session, so if you aren't going to be completely comfortable, go with a woman."⁷² She equates comfort to being at ease and conveying a relaxed sentiment in the images. The photographer Marina associates comfort with women's sexual freedom. She advises, "You can wear anything that fits your comfort level, if you are into red lacy lingerie, then wear that, if you want to wear a shirt and a tie, go for it."⁷³ Marina encourages an array of erotic possibilities, but the narratives about ease elide the labor women perform in shopping for outfits and props, booking sessions, constituting themselves as erotic objects, and choosing and arranging images. They make women's behavior and roles seem intuitive and natural. This renders the corollary suggestions of being uncomfortable politically useful. Indications of discomfort, as I indicate in more detail at the end of this article, provide ways of interrogating the cultural construction of women as visual objects, heterosexually oriented, and inherently addressed to men.

Men further constrain the boudoir form by placing limits on how their partners are seen. MissCremeBrulee's "FI" said "absolutely not."⁷⁴ He hates the idea of someone else seeing her "partially nude." sofielion's "FI is a bit wary about others taking pictures of" her while she is "partially or mostly nude" and is "very protective" of her body.⁷⁵ She has "always wanted to pose for the camera, but" still does not "know how he'll feel about it." In a related manner MV07SMV, who identifies as a "Groom to be," would want the boudoir photographs to be a "little secret" that he shared with his wife-to-be because "this is totally a personal thing and something very private."⁷⁶ onewaystreetproduction advises women forum participants that "No one else should get to see your body but your husband-to-be, whether male or female photographer."⁷⁷ Such statements are supported by an alternative name for boudoir photography, which is "for his eyes only." Of course, this title is a misnomer because women are still visible to photographers and other studio workers during the production of these images.

Women begin to be figured as controllable objects and possessions when their boudoir practices are constrained by male partners, and men more generally. There is no evidence that men interrogate the political implications of boudoir sessions or the ways these processes extend expectations that women should be

72 Jenn, "Re: Male vs. Female Boudoir Photographer?" Best Destination Wedding, 13 July 2008, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://bestdestinationwedding.com/forum/f55/male-vs-female-boudoir-photographer-25073>.

73 Marina, "Boudoir Photography Session," WeddingWire, 12 March 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingwire.com/wedding-forums/boudoir-photography-session/94d355b273526ae9.html>.

74 MissCremeBrulee, "Did anyone's FI NOT like their boudoir pics?" Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/did-anyones-fi-not-like-their-boudoir-pics>.

75 sofielion, "bpics..." Project Wedding, 23 February 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/bpics-3>.

76 MV07SMV, "Gift for groom, Boudoir photograph album!!!" You & Your Wedding, 18 May 2007, 17 July 2013, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/forum/for-the-groom/gift-for-groom-boudoir-photograph-album/17749-4.html>.

77 onewaystreetproduction, "Did anyone's FI NOT like their boudoir pics?" Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/did-anyones-fi-not-like-their-boudoir-pics>.

visible. Yet men's proscriptions still offer some unintentional critical possibilities. They create instances in which heterosexuality's link to visibility and the accompanying gender roles, where women are scripted as objects and men as subjects, are challenged. Shifting directives about visibility and invisibility leave boudoir participants and normative forms of heterosexuality conflicted. Most women participants in wedding forums want to engage in this experience, which is widely promoted in these settings, and are worried that it will alienate, rather than erotically please partners. Women turn to wedding forum participants for visual approval and generate same-sex engagements and responses.

Seeing Women

The boudoir images that women post in wedding forums prompt many readers to do sessions and constitute an archive of same-sex desires. While women also erotically engage with women over other aspects of wedding cultures, boudoir photography sessions are distinct because the women self-present in very little clothing (as opposed to big white wedding dresses) and participants worry about how partners' will respond to their being seen by photographers.⁷⁸ When shown other women's collections of boudoir images, participants describe their compilations; post examples; and express their pleasure in images, body parts, and particular women. Women's interest in doing boudoir sessions may encourage them to save "inspiration pictures," which is a typical forum practice for many wedding items and photographic genres, but participants also exceed this when expressing their erotic fascination with the depicted women. For instance, bellabride merges her admiration for images and interest in performing in a boudoir session.⁷⁹ She has "saved a bunch since all these ladies are so gorgeous," cannot "wait to do some of these shots," and hopes women will not mind her posting images because she just loves "looking at them!!" bellabride responds to the visual aspects of boudoir sessions and, as Fuss and Lewis and Rolley propose, learns to enjoy the process of looking at women.

The common practice of posting personal and other people's images provides women with expanded opportunities to see boudoir sessions, share their admiration for particular bodies and images, validate other women's self-portrayals, and have their depictions seen. When beatie announces "here's my booty," she spurs women to share images and connect over their similar interests.⁸⁰ MrsRaz and other posters respond that they "love booty pics," add images from their compendium, and suggest the ways images and desires circulate in the forums.⁸¹ These women exceed the more isolated process of looking at magazines

78 White, "Dirty Brides and Internet Settings."

79 bellabride, "B-PICS Inspiration," Project Wedding, 21 November 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-inspiration?page=9>.

80 beatie, "B-pics, need booty shots!!!!" Project Wedding, 6 March 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-need-booty-shots>.

81 MrsRaz, "B-pics, need booty shots!!!!" Project Wedding, 6 March 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-need-booty-shots>.

and textually engage with other forum posters over their enthusiasm for certain images, people, and body parts.

Women blend their interests in being featured in boudoir sessions, sensual engagements with images, and desire to sexually possess. Such sentiments expand Fuss and other feminists' theories of how individuals identify with particular subjects *and* desire the people who inhabit these roles. Readers ask Mrs JerseyBride!!!!!!!!!!!!!! to repost images after she mentions her boudoir pictures.⁸² She describes the process of posting images of her bare breasts and then removing them as a "Quick FLASH," "Booblies" are "put away now!" and "boobies gone...again!" and renders the engagement as a form of striptease. Women forum participants flirtatiously respond to these views. For instance, mrsmacysmum is married! has "to say.....nice tits!"⁸³ Viewing is articulated as a form of sex when completelyrandomsally feels as if she needs "a cigarette after looking."⁸⁴ In many of these posts, women emphasize their heterosexual marriages through forum names and other indicators, while erotically engaging with women through forum texts and occupying a form of lesbian positionality.

Women imagine wedding forums as women only spheres and sites that are distinguished from male visual and viewing cultures. In a conflicted manner, women describe the intimate features of boudoir sessions, indicate images are only shared with partners, and display them for forum participants. abattyref's boudoir images were "a very personal gift that stayed between" her, "him (...and PW)"—one of the wedding forums.⁸⁵ Mrs. Dolphin is concerned about groomsmen seeing her boudoir pictures but she also knows that "you all are waiting for" her "to show you a sneak peek."⁸⁶ While "these pictures are for Mr. Dolphin's eyes only" she "can't help but give a little cropped image" to Weddingbee readers. Mrs. Bunny identifies the boudoir album as being "for Mr. Bunny's eyes only. Well, OK, maybe just ONE picture ... It'll be our little secret."⁸⁷ In these instances, women repeat the idea that boudoir images are for his eyes only and that boudoir photography is a function of monogamous heterosexuality. Women's visibility is purportedly narrowed to the "appropriate" male subject. Nevertheless, women also share these "personal" images and information with other forum readers and further construct their female relationships as intimate. When they figure the engagement as

82 Mrs JerseyBride!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!, You & Your Wedding, 1 August 2009, 26 May 2010, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/community/forums/thread/263906?page=4>.

83 mrsmacysmum is married!, "AAAHHHH! Just got my boudoir pics back! :D," You & Your Wedding, 1 August 2009, 26 May 2010, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/community/forums/thread/263906>.

84 completelyrandomsally, "Shhhh! It's a secret :) Boudoir Photo shoot," Weddingbee, 3 December 2012, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/shhhh-its-a-secret-boudoir-photo-shoot/page/2>.

85 abattyref, "B Pics??" Project Wedding, 17 November 2008, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-7?page=2>.

86 Mrs. Dolphin, "Oh My! Your Boudoir is Showing!" Weddingbee, 2 April 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2010/04/02/oh-my-your-boudoir-is-showing>.

87 Mrs. Bunny, "Bunny Bridal Countdown: Bunny goes 'Playboy' (21 days)," Weddingbee, 12 September 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.weddingbee.com/2009/09/12/bunny-bridal-countdown-bunny-goes-playboy-21-days>.

comprising the woman, man, and wedding forum readers, they reference polyamory. In these cases, they do not actively critique contemporary social roles, but their descriptions also do not correlate with Western heterosexual weddings. They undermine the usual wedding thematic of traditional monogamy, with its accompanying structuration of gender and sexuality positions.

Boudoir participants work with photographers to produce images that focus on their breasts, legs, and buttocks, and then sometimes further crop these representations before posting them on forums. Feminist film theorists understandably express concern about the media tendency to chop up and objectify women's bodies through such processes as the close-up. Duncan and other feminist art historians also consider the trouble with partial images of women that are featured in museums and the ways these depictions excise women's agency. In a discussion on the feministing site, which offers feminist-oriented forums and other options, alixiana expresses concern about a friend's boudoir session.⁸⁸ alixiana "went to the photographer's website and was horrified to discover that very few of the pictures displayed the woman straight on so that she's recognizable, almost all of them are emphasizing the body without the head." Women like profound sarcasm support her critique and interrogate the "decapitated boobie shots" in boudoir images.⁸⁹ They wonder why women want to present faceless images to partners.

Faceless images allow viewers, who are ordinarily coded as heterosexual men, to focus on pleasurable parts without meeting the gaze or having to think about animate women who have their own needs and desires. Images without faces also allow viewers, who are likely to be women, to more easily "step into" pictures and imagine themselves affectively incorporated into scenarios. These headless depictions intensify the experiences of being the image as well as having the depicted bodies. Stacey describes female fans identifying, and perhaps collapsing, with Hollywood stars by buying marketed versions of their clothing and cosmetics.⁹⁰ They make themselves up as beloved stars and images and encourage the gaze of other female fans. Women boudoir participants also buy particular scenarios, if not bodies, by hiring the same photographers and purchasing the lingerie that they admire from sessions. This perpetuates boudoir photography's motifs and the lesbian responses embedded in images and forum discussions. These sorts of options are possible because boudoir participants advertise goods by mentioning favored photographers, lingerie designers, and clothing shops in forums.

Women forum members use fragmented images, their identification with women, and their eroticization of boudoir participants to playfully propose

88 alixiana, "Wedding boudoir pictures – yikes," feministing, 22 October 2008, 26 May 2010, available at: <http://community.feministing.com/2008/10/wedding-boudoir-pictures---yik.html>.

89 profound sarcasm, "Wedding boudoir pictures – yikes," feministing, 22 October 2008, 26 May 2010, available at: <http://community.feministing.com/2008/10/wedding-boudoir-pictures---yik.html>.

90 Stacey, *Star Gazing*.

composite bodies. Jubilee77 responds to some boudoir images and indicates that she “would give” her “left arm to look as good,” starts to wonder if she is “actually heterosexual,” and notes that there “is no way” her “boobs would look as great.”⁹¹ She intermingles wanting to be and wanting to have. Sarahinwonderland incorporates the image and forms a hybrid body by declaring that she is “going to BUY BOOBIES for a shot like that!!!”⁹² Ledy imagines a more low-tech method of reshaping herself.⁹³ She is planning to “find some magic tape or something to help make” her “boobies look like that one picture.” While participating women identify other forum members as having more ideal and desirable bodies, a process that can lead to self-sabotaging narratives about feminine inadequacy, they also mischievously collapse their bodies with that of other women through comparison and fantastical conflation. These participants incorporate and declare their physical and sensual attachment to women’s bodies rather than supporting contemporary norms and remaining individual heterosexual subjects. This revisioning, through a kind of elastic conception of embodiment, produces a more body-centered version of morphing than what is usually associated with the Internet and digital technologies.⁹⁴

Conclusion: When Heterosexuality Is Uncomfortable

Women’s boudoir practices, including reformations of the visual and embodied conceptions associated with women, challenge normative heterosexuality. Their descriptions of discomfort offer ways of interrogating women’s positions as visual objects, heterosexually oriented, and addressed to men. In most instances, women want to look comfortable and relaxed in images. Their affective performances of ease support women’s visual availability and seamless viewing. With such actions, the gaze is “welcomed,” women appear “open,” and heterosexual men’s visual pleasure is not complicated by women’s desires or limits. According to Elle, women have to accept their bodies in order to be visually appealing.⁹⁵ The “best advice” she “can give is to be COMFORTABLE in your own skin. If you shy away from the camera or try and hide some part of your body, it will only come off as uncomfortable and that is NOT sexy.” She references the cultural criteria for women’s bodies and contrarily advises women to overcome these mandates. They

91 Jubilee77, “Gift for groom, Boudoir photograph album!!!” You & Your Wedding, 27 January 2008, 23 December 2012, available at: <http://www.youandyourwedding.co.uk/forum/for-the-groom/gift-for-groom-boudoir-photograph-album/17749-5.html>.

92 Sarahinwonderland, “B-PICS Inspiration,” Project Wedding, 25 February 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-inspiration>.

93 Ledy, “B-PICS Inspiration,” Project Wedding, 25 February 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-inspiration?page=2>.

94 For discussions of how morphing and other kinds of refashioning of objects and images are part of the ontology of digital technologies, see Anna Munster, *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, Hanover: Dartmouth College Press (2006); Vivian Sobchack, ed. *Meta-morphing: Visual Transformation and the Culture of Quick-Change*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (2000); Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls: Feminism, Popular Culture and the Posthuman Body*, London and New York: I. B. Tauris (2007); Bernadette Wegenstein, *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press (2006).

95 Elle, “Boudoir Pictures Inspiration,” Project Wedding, 15 April 2009, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/blog/2009/04/15/boudoir-pictures-inspiration>.

must accept the camera and constitute themselves as to-be-looked-at-ness. However, women indicate that it is difficult to pose comfortably, be bodies (rather than have bodies), and function as objects of the gaze. They become distressed and want to, but usually do not, lose weight before sessions and otherwise change their bodies. jessiepilot knows the “feeling of being not comfortable with yourself and not knowing what to do with your face.”⁹⁶ For jessiepilot, imagining the process of becoming an image makes her feel detached from her body. She becomes an “other” to herself and distanced from women’s usual visual availability. These accounts indicate that women have to be comfortable in order to garner good pictures and produce an appropriate stand in for heterosexual desire. Photography and heterosexuality are also associated with unease because of these mandates.

Boudoir images are conceptualized as deeply pleasurable but some forms of disagreeable pain are integral to these practices. The physical discomfort that women experience when posing for boudoir sessions troubles claims that they are a conduit to heterosexual ease and enjoyment. These narratives identify the pain that accompanies many kinds of women’s visibility. After all, women are often advised that beauty is painful and that they should accept these experiences. According to ejs4y8, boudoir images “are very awkward to take because you do all this weird sexy moving like arching your back and pushing your shoulders back so far it feels uncomfortable, etc. But LOOKS great!”⁹⁷ She distinguishes between feeling and looking. trugem compliments nblondie on her pictures.⁹⁸ However nblondie indicates that it “hurt like hell” to produce them because the ledge where she was posing “was not very wide and trying to suck in” her “tummy,” “keep balanced,” and put her hands where told “was tough.”⁹⁹ Incorporating these narratives about corporeal transformation and pain into images and settings encourages viewers to think about the implications of looking at women and the positions depicted. For heterosexual men and other people who expect undisrupted views, this is likely to produce visual displeasure.

Women readers are even more likely to attend to the troubling aspects of representations. After all, they situate themselves in relationship to these images and imagine the embodied and emotive experiences of engaging in sessions. If the gaze is an operation of heterosexuality, as feminist film theorists begin to suggest, then foiling it and producing male heterosexual visual displeasure provides some critical possibilities. Mulvey’s call to destroy visual pleasure, as critiques of her model indicate, threatens to produce problems for everyone engaged in aesthetic practices but there are reasons to make some forms of visual pleasure less

96 jessiepilot, “B PICS,” Project Wedding, 23 November 2008, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.projectwedding.com/post/list/b-pics-8>.

97 ejs4y8, “Boudoir Photos,” Weddingbee, 17 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/boudoir-photos-4>.

98 trugem, “Post your boudoir photos or inspiration please!” Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/post-your-boudoir-photos-or-inspiration-please>.

99 nblondie, “Post your boudoir photos or inspiration please!” Weddingbee, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://boards.weddingbee.com/topic/post-your-boudoir-photos-or-inspiration-please>.

comfortable and to consider the political possibilities of displeasure.¹⁰⁰ People already experience discomfort when using the Internet and computer because they sit for long periods of time and repetitively deploy hand-held controls. They also become annoyed because of crashes, data losses, surveillance, breaches of anonymity, and uncontrollable spamming and pop-ups. Computer use has often been associated with masculinity and empowerment, but many of these features, including the spam marketing of erectile dysfunction products, also unsettle gender and sexuality stereotypes and discomfort male readers.¹⁰¹

Losing control of personal representations is a form of visual displeasure, especially in cases where women see themselves being seen and understand their identities through images. OneWed.com asks, “What happens if you and your beloved ever part ways? While most boudoir shoots are tasteful, very few people are comfortable with the idea of photos of themselves in a bra being circulated by a disgruntled ex.”¹⁰² OneWed.com points to instances where the male gaze is reconceptualized and images code women in unexpected and unwelcome erotic manners. “This is one new wedding custom” that Heather822 does not get because of “all the photo / tape scandals.”¹⁰³ She knows “everyone *thinks* they will be together forever, and even if they were to divorce, of course it would be amicable..... Sorry, but no.” These posters indicate instances in which heterosexuality and its rituals become uncomfortable. This unease is based on women’s visual availability, and thus on mainstream cultural notions of women. While OneWed.com’s name points to investments in lifelong monogamy, the poster’s comments articulate the failures and gaps in such envisioned lifestyles. Intimacy and boudoir session conventions, which stand in for heteronormative unions, become threats.

The circulation of boudoir images, including erotic engagements with pictures on wedding forums and the possibility that angry ex-partners will present them on other sites, highlights how normative heterosexuality is disassociated from lasting monogamy. These positions are otherwise imagined as interlocked.¹⁰⁴ With this circulation, the processes and practices of heterosexuality, rather than just the bodies of women, can become visible. Otherwise, heterosexuality is stable and presumed. This raises questions about the behaviors and positionalities that operate under the category of normative heterosexuality and the means through which they are used to code and constrain bodies. Heterosexual brides, or at least

100 Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”

101 For considerations of how agentive Internet use is associated with heterosexual masculinity, see Austin Booth, “Women’s Cyberfiction: An Introduction,” in *Reload: Rethinking Women + Cyberculture*, ed. Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth, Cambridge: MIT Press (2002), 25–41; Judy Wacjman, *TechnoFeminism*, Cambridge: Polity (2004).

102 OneWed.com, “Should you do a boudoir photo shoot?” SheKnows, 15 June 2010, 26 July 2013, available at: <http://www.sheknows.com/articles/815291/the-boudoir-photo-shoot-1>.

103 Heather822, “Re: B-pics,” WeddingChannel, 13 June 2010, 23 December 2012, available at: http://forums.weddingchannel.com/main.aspx/local-wedding-boards_new-jersey_b-pics-2?plckFindPostKey=Cat:Local%20Wedding%20BoardsForum:90Discussion:614c16f1-9f00-49c3-9cd3-4e0c5a87ffe2Post:0c8f6996-f81f-41e5-982f-3af0d73b8a14&plckPostSort=TimeStampAscending.

104 Jackson, “Gender, Sexuality and Heterosexuality.”

cultural renderings of this figure, are key to constructing and maintaining normative heterosexuality and the family. Yet brides post boudoir photography on wedding forums and exceed heterosexual practices, enact its limits, and occupy some form of heterosexuality as brides and newlyweds. Further considerations of the ways such behaviors can be made more discernible would be useful. Currently, contemporary culture and the processes of heterosexuality manage to seal over many such conflicts and diffuse their potential significance. This suggests that heterosexuality is more mutable, and in some manners less normative, than ordinarily theorized and that the actions that are organized under conceptions of heterosexuality can be deployed and expanded to support other lived practices. In the case of Western heterosexual boudoir photography, heterosexual practices contain and expose their own critiques and revisions.

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