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Making a Reality: Inclusive Wedding Vendors and Extramarket Morality

In recent years, and especially since the legalization of so-called "same-sex" marriage in much of the Global North, North America especially has seen a burgeoning inclusive wedding sector, consisting of wedding vendors and media seeking to counter the cis-heteronormative history of the wedding industry with services for and representations of queer-identifying and gender-diverse people – and people of color, fat people, and disabled people – all of whom are marginalized within the conventional wedding industry. Given the gendered and heterosexist culture of weddings, the attempt to reengineer the "wedding imaginary"[1] is particularly novel and deserving of scrutiny by feminist and queer analysts.

As scholars of fashion and dress, we are attuned to the significance of dress for both subjects' experience of embodying values, attitudes, and moods, and communicating them to others.[2] Given queer critiques of the wedding industry, including its unalloyed consumerism, we wondered what role wedding attire might play in refiguring the wedding industry as LGBTQ+ people increasingly began to interact with it. We began with the aim of identifying elements of the wedding imaginary that queer-positive wedding style vendors bring to their work and have concluded that the particularities of the wedding as a social form allow for these businesses to gesture at and even provisionally instantiate what Wendy Brown has called "extramarket morality." Brown notes that, under neoliberalism, "all dimensions of human life are cast in terms of a market rationality," which "entails… the production of all human and institutional action as rational entrepreneurial action."[3] The result has been the evisceration of "nonmarket" or "extramarket" morality, or forms of ethical reasoning and relationship that are not reducible to

the marketplace. Could the LGBTQ+-positive wedding sector be one site where a nonmarket morality continues to flourish?

Unlikely as this seems from a queer political perspective, we note that the feminized domains of fashion, dress, and personal style have already been identified by some critical fashion scholars as sites for the production of extramarket forms of relation. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, for instance, traces the forms of sociality enabled by Asian American fashion production practices, which "reassert the relevance of moral authority" and "require… that actors see themselves not only as individuals but as members of a social body… who can see each other if not as kin, then at least as allies."[4] Similarly, Minh-ha T. Pham, in her work on Asian diasporic fashion bloggers, claims that their blogs' sentimentalism "introduces an 'extramarket morality' into an exemplary consumer capitalist system, the fashion media complex."[5] Of course, dress is well-positioned to do this work because of its embodied and affective dimensions. As a rich archive of personal-theoretical writing about dress and fashion demonstrates, the form's closeness to the body and connections to expressive capacities produce knowledge and ways of being that sometimes sit at odds with the market logics that seem, at first glance, to define fashion all the way down.[6] Erin J. Rand writes, of masculine-of-center clothing for queer subjects, that "while it is impossible to overstate neoliberalism's commodifying reach… the live affects circulating through desired and desiring objects resist complete capture."[7] Though Rand's argument emerges from a study of representations and wearers, our interviews showed that vendors, too, are keenly aware of the enlivening qualities of dress, and conceive of their work in ways that harness them. Their work reflects a sense of fashion production as a site of social possibility.

What is most surprising for us is that this queer, fashion-related intervention is taking place in that most seemingly normative of sectors, the wedding industry. Our consideration of wedding culture is indebted to Chrys Ingraham's analysis of heteronormative wedding culture, which shows how it is sutured to what she describes as "the heterosexual imaginary," which "naturalizes the regulation of gender and sexuality through the institution of marriage."[8] While we share Ingraham's critique of institutionalized heterosexuality and the wedding industry's role in upholding it, we simultaneously locate in the wedding-as-event a performative potential that we want to disentangle from marriage. Notwithstanding the well-documented normative dimensions of marriage and the movement for "marriage equality," the wedding – which we conceive, along with queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman, as a queerly performative event that must be disentangled from marriage[9] – is, like clothing, a powerful affective node. Extricating weddings from what Ingraham and others call the wedding-industrial complex, of course, is not possible; they are imbricated, impure sites. Yet we detect in the vendors we spoke to a vision of a different world. Vendors' accounts of their professional work and relationships with their marrying clients indicated a sense of inaugurating the world both they and their clients wanted to experience. This occurred through processes of consideration and relationality that were enacted within the professional relationship between vendor and clients, as well as through vendors' active stance against practices within the wedding industry that reinforce marginalization and heteronormativity. Interestingly, reference to the transformative potential of the wedding itself was often entirely absent from these accounts, perhaps due to the temporality of when and why these professional relationships were being enacted – as part of the ritual's preparatory phase. Accordingly, here the transformative, restorative work took place before (and in many ways beyond) the wedding itself. Perhaps this can be understood as an instance of the "fantasy zone"

invoked by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, produced by "ideologies and institutions of intimacy" that offer a site at which an imagined, yet-to-be-realised "vision of the good life… might be thought and willed."[10] Yet these accounts demonstrate an instantiation of this "good life" that is not produced "away from the confusing and unsettling distractions and contradictions of capitalism and politics" but in response to and imbricated with these dynamics. What we encountered were accounts of relations between vendor and client in which processes of Othering and marginalization within consumer culture were replaced by practices that sought not only to foreground human dignity, joy and relationality but also often sought to actively reconfigure the wedding industry. For this reason, vendors' vision of what they do, remarkably consistent as it is, is worth sharing. In anchoring their vision to their current practice, the vendors we interviewed are in fact inaugurating some of the possibility of wedding-as-event, showing how it seeps out of the theatre of the wedding and connects with other spheres of social life.

While the feelings circulating around the wedding are steeped in heteronormative convention, vendors illuminated the deeply social nature of these feelings – including, importantly, negative affects arising in queer and trans people in response to a deeply heteronormative culture whose pervasiveness is only intensified in wedding planning. Wedding vendors are well positioned to navigate this terrain of feelings because of the affectively saturated terrain in which they are already working. Their sustained, intentional self-positioning as inclusive, combined with their businesses' very modest scale, leads to a sense of intimacy – a word used by many of the participants – that is distinct in a commercial field and lies at the heart of the unusual relationship the vendors have with their businesses and their clients. Altogether, our interviews revealed that the sector the vendors are working in opens easily onto a host of

affects and dynamics that are not typically accommodated in commercial enterprises, and that are suggestive of non-market forms of relational engagement that have queer worldmaking potential. Beginning from our interest in extramarket morality and its connections to dress and fashion, we suggest that the inclusive wedding sector is an ambiguous space, one that accommodates deeply normative impulses in relation to LGBTQ+ people and incubates new possibilities through its relational and affective dimensions. These possibilities are predicated on a caring relationality that counters the material and symbolic violence faced by many queer and trans people as they navigate a hostile industry that reflects a dominant cis-heteronormative social world. These insights contribute to an interdisciplinary conversation about the anti-normative (and in this case, nonmarket) and worldmaking potential latent in queer weddings as performative events.[11] Most such literature treats the wedding (or wedding-adjacent event) in itself, a discrete occasion. In considering the role of vendors, which is enabled by but precedes the event of the wedding, we suggest that the affiliative potential on display in the wedding is not limited to the occasion, but is temporally expansive, spilling into the time before and after the wedding and thereby becoming much more potent.

The Vendors

In early 2021, we interviewed twelve people who own or run microenterprises that are wholly or in large part devoted to style and self-fashioning for weddings. They provide apparel, custom wedding jewelry, or, in one case, hair and makeup services for weddings. Of these twelve, eight were based in the US, two in the UK, one in Canada, and one in Australia. They were recruited through direct emails to their businesses, which had been identified because they were positioning themselves as LGBTQ+-inclusive, which will be discussed in more detail

below. Those who followed up sat for a semi-structured interview via videoconference. Five participants identify as people of color. Three are men, eight are women, and one is non-binary. The majority of the vendors host a physical storefront or studio space where they welcome clients in person – the three exceptions either do virtual fittings online or meet clients where they are. The three vendors who specialize exclusively in bridal gowns are the only vendors who necessarily limit their business to styling clients for their weddings; for most of the others, while they offer clothing or jewelry for other occasions, weddings account for the majority of their business. Their marketing predominantly features images of people marrying and is often published in inclusive wedding media. For more on the vendors, see Table 1.

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What does queer 'inclusion' look like, in this sector? Although the majority of vendors we spoke with were not themselves LGBTQ-identified, it appears they integrate inclusion as more than a marketing buzzword. Most prominently feature LGBTQ inclusion in statements of values on their websites and integrate images of gender-non-conforming people and LGBT couples consistently and regularly in their marketing, not confining their engagement to, for example, Pride Month. In many cases, the businesses' clientele consists mainly of LGBTQ people and marketing is targeted exclusively to this population. Several advertise exclusively in LGBTQ-focused wedding media. Multiple businesses have established long-running partnerships or sponsorships with queer public figures. Some participate in the DapperQ queer fashion showcase at New York Fashion Week.

Evidence of businesses' commitment to inclusion goes beyond visibility efforts, though. One participant has completed a certification in LGBTQ inclusion for wedding vendors, through the LGBTQ wedding media hub, Equally Wed. Another has facilitated anti-bias training, with a specific focus on queer inclusion, for her small team. A third has started an online network for LGBTQ-positive wedding vendors in her geographic area and is emerging as a leader in this sector. Further, most of the vendors we spoke with indicate through their marketing that they integrate queer inclusion with attention to other forms of inclusion, most notably along the axes of size and race, and all spoke about these intersections in their interviews.

Indeed, the business imaginary of our research participants is in many ways at odds with the primacy of commerce in the wedding industry and the apparel and beauty/style sectors more generally. Notably, all of the business owners we spoke with run very small businesses that fit the definition of microenterprise, employing only themselves or just a handful of others (although it must be noted that seven of the eleven who sell products sub-contract some or all production to others, including, in four cases, overseas made-to-measure tailoring facilities). Only one spoke of grand aspirations; the others seemed content with the small scale of their businesses. When growth was invoked, it was modest, on the order of one or a handful of additional staff. One vendor hopes to transform their business into a social enterprise, with the goal of training immigrant women. The scale of the businesses, together with how participants described their approach to their work, are very different from what we generally associate with garment and accessory production. This is in large part a question of distinction: by keeping their companies small, vendors are able to occupy a niche in the overwhelmingly standardized world of wedding apparel and accessories. Jewelers invoked Tiffany and Cartier and bridalwear designers spoke of US behemoth David's Bridal with distaste as the typical wedding industry

players against which they were positioning their work. Though this undoubtedly functions to ensure their distinction and shore up their business, much as Bourdieu theorized was typical of the fashion industry,[12] in the case of the inclusive wedding sector, the modes of working it produced are ideally suited to the development of a relational business model with queer and other minoritized clients. As they are working in a capitalist system, our vendors rely on the success of their businesses for their livelihoods. One possible reading of their work could view their facilitation of intimate, ethical relationships with clients as nothing more than a selling point, one that ensures that they capture adequate market share. Our interviews and the vendors' business practices suggest a much more finely grained commitment to inclusion than this, however, as they make choices – like advertising exclusively in LGBTQ-focused wedding media, for example – that reveal a set of political commitments and limit the potential profitability of their work. There is no doubt that this itself can act as a signal that increases their sales, but it does so in heavily circumscribed ways that ensure the businesses can stay open but do not facilitate great expansion. Perhaps most importantly, what this shows is that – as Tu's and Pham's work on extramarket morality and fashion also makes clear – the seemingly all-consuming nature of capital under neoliberalism can incubate *within* itself other possibilities, nascent though they might be.

Intimate Relations

One of the most notable elements of this model of inclusive vending was our participants' implicit construction of the relationship they have with their clients. Vendors described experiencing – and desiring to experience – a more intimate relationship with their clients than is commonly imagined, one that exceeds the transactional.

On the most basic level, vendors' longing to connect with their clients was palpable.

Some had a vision of an ideal client. For example, Sonia, who runs a Canadian dress company, said:

> the people that we're looking for are… [people] who you would want to be
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> friends with because they're so down to earth … they want to make things easy
>
> for themselves but also they're wanting to help people, other people be happy and
>
> that kind of thing.

Often, for wedding vendors, the ideal that they longed for was set against an imagined "mainstream" or "typical" client. For example, Ashley, a wedding hair and makeup stylist in the US, explained that she started her business – which is based on LGBTQ+ and racial inclusivity and cruelty-free products – after working for another business owner and being dissatisfied with the clientele. She explained her frustration with couples planning weddings with entirely aesthetic goals in mind, namely the aim of being featured in mainstream wedding media. She framed her search for a "more down-to-earth and authentic" client who shared her political values. Narrating her history with one client with whom she has stayed in contact, she framed it as "a really authentic connection versus just 'we can do your hair.'" Similarly, US bridalwear designer Marteal said, "I think I get a very specific style of bride. And they come here and they just get it [the values of her business]." Both Ashley and Marteal describe the business as a site for connection over shared visions, defying its reduction to a transactional site.

This values-led approach to relationships involves, for both vendors, explicitness about their ethos, in ways they understand as overtly political. As Marteal explained, "When I started out it was, like, 2015. So still the Obama era… and I was… not going to be political. I wanted to have stores all over the place. But then in four short years it was, like, you can't not state your

values. Especially for me when I'm so strongly aligned with them and I want that to be clear."

Ashley described her desire, in the wake of the right-wing insurrection at the US Capitol building

in early January 2021, to only align herself with others with whom she shares a justice

orientation. Both she and Marteal explicitly noted that their desire for "authentic" connections

with people who "get it" might alienate clients or other vendors and erode the market for their

work, again subsuming profit to nonmarket considerations of political values, in order to

facilitate the sense of authentic relationship they crave.

The question of relationship with clients came up in almost all of the interviews,

unbidden. There are varied dimensions to these relationships. Deb and Merrie, who both work in

the US creating niche bridalwear, both explained that they are energized by the creativity of their

clients, and spoke of them with love and admiration. As Merrie said,

> You love to work with your clients. You love the opportunity to collaborate with
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> them on the designs, their visions, things I didn't even think of. Some of my
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> clients will come up with stuff; I'm like, 'That is awesome'… They've just done
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> beautiful things that even I haven't thought of. I love that opportunity that it's all
>
> very unique every time. I'm grateful for that opportunity.

In this framing of relational encounter with clients, what is notable is the designers dispensing

with mastery and opening themselves to an exchange that enhances their creativity. Sometimes

this is framed as an honoring of the client's uniqueness, as with Michael, a US wedding jewelry

designer who described letting himself be led by the client: "Tell me who you are. What do you

like to do? Who are you?" While this verges on the kind of individualist rhetoric that

distinguishes market logics under neoliberalism, the end goal is described as the "authentic"

connection invoked by Ashley. For example, after posing this series of rhetorical questions to the

imagined client, Michael explained, "Being able to just have a candid friendship-type of a conversation with someone and get who they are and be able to come back to them with design ideas, and they're like, "That feels like me." Then I've done my job. Feels like you? We are in the best place possible." The uniqueness of the client is invoked in order to facilitate relationship, not as a value in itself.

Significantly, the relationships forged in these encounters are distinguished by their longevity. Shao, proprietor of a US suiting company for people of all genders, which caters especially to queer women and non-binary people, said, "we get a lot of clients that send us wedding photos after." Denise, with a similar business in the UK, said that she and her partner are often invited to the weddings of lesbian clients, because their welcoming approach to tailoring is so meaningful in what is an otherwise alienating and hostile retail landscape for masculine-of-center women. And Peter, who runs an Australian suiting company for women, sends his wedding clients anniversary cards. All frame this kind of longevity as indicative of a connection that transcends the market transaction.

We suggest that it is the particularity of the wedding occasion that provides this platform to move toward non-market relationships. When asked what was unique about bringing an inclusive ethos to the wedding sector specifically, vendors overwhelmingly identified the occasion as one that should prioritize some sense of authenticity, which also provided grounds for them to connect with clients. Denise said that a wedding is important because it is an opportunity, in starting a new chapter, to redefine oneself – so being able to instantiate that self through clothing, and through the help of a clothing vendor, becomes critically important. There is also the fact that a wedding presents a rare, if not for most people the only, opportunity, to

acquire a custom suit or garment. This is key in the development of rapport between vendor and

client. Shao, of the US custom suiting company, explained,

> We love our clients. I always say they're more than clients. I feel like because
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> we're building such a bond with them, they become like friends because the
>
> process isn't short, right? […] It takes six weeks. First of all, we're spending an
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> hour with you in a private, small space that we purposely curated to be small so
>
> that it's intimate and you can feel free to be yourself. So, that's an hour spent with
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> you and then an hour spent to do the fittings, and then in between that comes
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> some giving advice... So, we're kind of building that rapport, and by the time the
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> wedding rolls around […] I feel like we're friends.

This stands in contrast to the imperative to rapid production that defines most of the

fashion industry and is afforded by the specific context of creating wedding apparel. Thuy, who

also runs a US custom suiting business, emphasized the question of time when she explained that

her initial consultations with clients are three hours long, and that,

> there've been times where it's gone over. I think the longest consult to date was
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> eight hours. It was enjoyable because we were just sitting there chatting and
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> talking and sharing stories and just relating. I wanted to be sure that when my
>
> client left, that they were going to feel good about the whole experience and about
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> my process with them. So, that, to me, is part of the love and the passion in doing
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> what I get to do.

Time spent with clients becomes its own form of relationship, and even of love, defying the

instrumentalization of time in the service of profit.

Ultimately, what is facilitated by the relational ethos described by participants is an experience of "intimacy," a word used by so many of the vendors. As Thuy said, describing the process of consultation and fitting with masculine-of-center clients, "it feels like a very intimate thing to do." Recall, too, that Shao notes that the intimacy of the consultation has been intentionally designed. Here, intimacy is imagined as co-extensive with the authenticity ("being yourself") that is both expected at a wedding and idealized by the vendors as they imagine their relationships with clients. An anecdote shared by US jewelry designer Michael extends the way this intimate connection can be conceptualized. In speaking of a client he had a particular bond with, Michael recalled, "she actually texted me a couple weeks ago. I did her ring a good two years ago almost. She's like, "Every time I look down at my ring, I think of you, and I smile." Here, the vendor is, in a sense, incorporated into the client's material being.

In exploring vendors' consistent invocations of intimacy, we are returned to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's foundational queer theoretical work on intimacy. Berlant and Warner warn us against the fetishization of intimacy, arguing that heteronormativity "achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy."[13] They write that "the normativity of heterosexual culture links intimacy only to the institutions of personal life, making them the privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation and transfer of capital, and self-development… by making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal, heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual culture."[14] Over two decades later, the landscape of sexual culture is very different, given the acceleration and maturing of the relationship between queers and markets that has ensued. The language of intimacy, through both the political engagement over marriage rights and the monetization of LGBTQ+ identity, has acceded to the public sphere. The results

were not, of course, anti-normative, and were in fact a case study in the co-optation of a potentially powerful construct – intimacy – in the service of convention. Our interviews, however, suggest a burgeoning complexification of the meaning of intimacy as it meets this rarified and distinctive corner of the public sphere, the inclusive wedding apparel market. It does so because it opens up and momentarily triangulates the "marrying couple" that is at the heart of the wedding industry to include the vendor. Indeed, in our interviews, the vendor-client relationship temporarily superseded that of the two marriers, as during the period of wedding preparation, the forms of intimacy that surfaced were enacted beyond the marrying couple, as the vendor's contribution and the client's identity intersection with the professional service on offer. In *The Wedding Complex*, Elizabeth Freeman shows how weddings, as queer occasions, instantiate forms of relation that exceed the dyad, the couple, and bear within them the potential for "a mode of public, collective identification."[15] Our participants, with their invocations of intimacy, are, as vendors, public, non-couple actors involved in the intimate relations at the heart of the wedding, including the affects of the marriers. This raises questions about what new social forms – and transformative possibilities – are incubated within the market forms of the wedding apparel and style industry. In turn, it offers a new way of understanding the role of microenterprises with intentional, social-justice-oriented visions, in creating and sustaining nonmarket forms of relationship.

Fashion Therapy

In addition to valuing and effectively 'theorizing' intimacy, the vendors frequently spoke of playing a therapeutic role with clients. This was most evident with those providing suiting to queer women, non-binary, and transmasculine people, who have often had historically painful

and even traumatic experiences with dress; five of our twelve vendors work in this suiting sector. The notion of fashion as a kind of therapy surfaced most explicitly in Thuy's description of her work with clients:

> Through my consultations, it started becoming very therapeutic. It started becoming what I call "fashion therapy," and… finding more and more of like experiences of my clients as a whole, especially masculine-presenting or butch-identified or queer or non-binary individuals who have such a loathing of going shopping in the men's section because of the way that they're treated or not treated or not seen or disregarded as a consumer, where it's like, 'I'm here to shop, and you're not even seeing me.'

This resonated with the accounts of other vendors, who also spoke from an empathic recognition of the negative encounters that their clients have had with the fashion system. Jake, whose UK-based company specializes in suits for women, described the anxiety that clients bring to a suiting consultation: "But when you're making that booking via email or on the phone, you're thinking, oh my god, what's going to happen to me? Do I have to take my clothes off? Which is a common misconception, that you have to take your clothes off to get measured. I don't want to talk about my body. I don't like the way I look." He sees education as playing a key role in allaying these anxieties: the website of Jake's business provides a video of what to expect in a consultation, and when a new client makes a booking, he sends an email that outlines the process. Both initiatives offer "clear guidance about what's going to happen, what's not going to happen [… In the video, there's] someone getting measured so they can see, it's done from the side. It's very discreet […] we don't have hands on body." These are conceived as measures that will help mitigate the anxiety clients might bring to an unfamiliar process and to counteract the

pain or exclusion clients may have experienced when shopping for, or wearing, clothes in the past.

Many of the vendors who create wedding apparel spoke in this way of how they address the complicated feelings about the body that often arise for clients, whether related to how they present or parts of the body that they feel are "problem areas." Vendors often spoke of their efforts to create a comfortable environment for clients to communicate these complicated feelings, and to handle them with care – note Thuy's description of how her work seeks to "[help clients] accept the vision of themselves as we see them, as they can see themselves."

The metaphor of seeing and being seen recurred throughout Thuy's interview, underlining the vulnerability that can come with being seen, especially by strangers, and from having desires for yourself that are not usually met. Seeing interfaces closely with clothing, as garments are that which others apprehend when they look at us, as well as sensory materials that reshape our experience of our own corporeality – as Nicki Gregson and Louise Crewe state, clothing "becomes us".[16] The need to locate clothing that makes visible one's self is also of paramount importance in contemporary wedding culture, with its attendant discourses of embodying one's "best self" on one's wedding day.[17] Understandably, this cultural expectation directly feeds into the frustration, anxiety and disappointment marriers have recounted to vendors over their attempts to find clothes that materialize them the way they desire. The experiences of Thuy's "masculine-presenting or butch identified or queer or non-binary" clients not being seen by staff in the men's sections where they have shopped in the past was compounded by an anecdote that Peter shared, in which a past client, a woman, felt un-accommodated by the bespoke suit she'd had made by a men's tailoring company. During that process, she could tell "the person measuring her had no idea what he was doing. He was used to

doing men [… but] there are more subtleties in women's bodies, and more variation […] As a result when the suit came back, it just fit very poorly." The symbolism of the poorly made suit here is hard to miss. Just as well-fitting clothing has the capacity of materializing a sense of literal and metaphoric fit in oneself, poorly fitting clothes can powerfully convey a sense of not belonging, which is only exacerbated when receiving service that communicates that one is not welcome, whether actively or implicitly, because one's needs and desires are not catered to by a business.

To return to the work vendors do to counteract their marriers' painful or frustrating past experiences with clothes shopping, Thuy creates a space for clients to see their bodies and understand how clothes can, and should, fit:

> There's this exercise I've started doing with my clients where, especially when they start talking about body, I'm like, 'Let's just stand in front of this mirror, and I'm just going to show you […] I'm going to explain to you how, if you're going to get a suit […] I want to show you how it's going to drape on your body.

She directly related this exercise to the negative experiences she expects other gender non-conforming people have had while shopping – "so many of us are used to going and buying men's clothes that aren't made for our bodies. So, we get used to this feeling [of clothes being too long and wide]. It just looks and feels awful, right?" She described a gesture some clients make, of trying to tug their cuffs over the backs of their hands because they're used to the shirts they buy being too long, and explaining that it will take "a little time to get used to something that fits them, and they're no longer like, 'oh, is it too short? Is something missing?' No, actually, that's how the suit jacket should fall on you." Coming as it did in the midst of her discussion of ensuring safety for the client, Thuy's description of the process of fitting shows

how the technical fit of suit on body is a material metaphor for how the subject fits in the world. As scholar-tailor Philip Sparks writes of his process of developing tailoring principles that accommodate a range of bodies, "mechanical fit influences psychological fit."[18] Thuy demonstrated a keen understanding of this principle and understood her role as in part to reeducate the client on what a "loving" fit might look like, one that prioritizes the wellbeing and dignity of the client in relation to their embodiment.

This returns us to the distinction between the ethos underpinning these vendors' businesses and that which is normalized in neoliberal capitalism, in which, as Brown argues, what is at stake is "maximizing corporate profits".[19] Instead of market values underpinning their work, values of care and relationality structure vendors' attitude to clients, even when it is, in market terms, an inefficient use of their resources. The profit vendors make from offering their services to clients is disproportionate to the considerable investment of labor and time they devote to educating clients, offering extended consultations to ensure their comfort, or engaging in additional training and certification to better accommodate clients' needs. We see a clear distinction here between the capitalist drive to conduct "all human and institutional action […] according to a calculus of utility, benefit or satisfaction, against a microeconomic grid of scarcity, supply and demand, and moral value-neutrality"[20] and these wedding vendors' inclusive praxis. While a transaction is obviously still taking place, that transaction is not designed according to the precepts of market rationality, in which human relations are calculated to maximize profit. Here, we see extramarket values enacted through the "fashion therapy" uniquely facilitated by the services these vendors' businesses offer.

Another way in which this work is visible is in the ways the vendor-client relationship invoked the therapeutic through dialogue. Shao, from the US, noted that: "I feel it's definitely

like a little therapy session, you know… Some people are coming to terms with their gender expression. They don't really know what that is yet. So, just come in and be able to kind of talk it through with us." The stated aim of these encounters is suit-buying, but Shao implicitly constructs "talking it through" as having a clarifying benefit in regard to the client's identity. Thuy explained more about what is at stake in this therapeutic encounter:

> when I talk about fashion therapy and also when we get down to the more tough conversations of body and how each person sees their body, what their image of their body is, it feels good when I can end a consultation and they're like, 'Wow, I did not expect this, and I actually feel better', especially with someone who has had issues with their bodies, going shopping and just feeling awful.

Likewise, Denise, who runs the UK suiting business, said, "I'm good at talking and listening. I'm good at listening and drawing out from people what they're not saying." The unsaid that she is referring to here is the difficult clothing history that masculine of center women and transmasculine people often bring to the suit design process. Denise characterized the aim as cutting through anxieties about embodiment that clients might bring to the appointments; she sees her therapeutic role as "helping people to appreciate their fabulous bodies." Peter, from the Australian suiting company, spoke of the implicitly affective dimension built into the process, which leads clients from anxious affects to joy, mirroring the trajectory of a client who's been successful in therapy.

Moreover, just as vendors sought to counteract clients' previous poor experiences, they also sought to actively avoid reproducing damaging encounters through the assumptions and provisions underlying their approach. For example, bridalwear designer Merrie stocks samples in bigger sizes so that fat marriers can try on gowns during their consultations: "I would work with

size 0 just like I would work with 24 because I could always clip a dress down. I could put a size 18 sample on a size 6. I couldn't put a size 6 sample on an 18, though." Similarly, Marteal refuses to use "nude netting" in her bridal gowns as it only works for clients with lighter skin tones. How Merrie and Marteal use language is fundamental to their attitude: Merrie does not define her business as "plus-size" bridalwear, because she wants to accommodate all customers regardless of their dress size; and Marteal described never assuming anything about her clients and using gender-neutral language when asking about their partner. The importance of this, especially for queer-identified people, is underlined by a story Emily, a jeweler, recounted, that she heard at a conference where couples were interviewed about their wedding planning experience. One of the speakers was lesbian and, in Emily's telling,

> [she] said it felt like [she] had to come out all over again because of the number
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> of times that [vendors] said to her, 'How'd he ask?', or 'What's he wearing?', or
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> 'What does your boyfriend want?' She said that it was really triggering for her to
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> have to come out to perfect strangers. So I think that's one of the stories that I just
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> keep in my mind. [Your] wedding is supposed to be a very significant time in
>
> your life. You do it once. That is the last time you should have to come out all
>
> over again. That [should] be the last place that you should have to experience
>
> that.

The implication here of the importance of clients feeling comfortable in consultations mirrors other forms of comfort central to weddings: to feel comfortable in one's clothes and to feel comfortable on the wedding day. As Thuy explains,

> Clothing has so much to do with how you are actually going to experience that event
>
> [...] if you wear something that you're already uncomfortable with, that's how

you're going to focus. That's how you're gong to feel all night […] But if you can

wear something where you're like, 'Yes this feels good.' [It feels like] 'oh my gosh,

I'm ready to get myself out there. I want everybody to see me.'

This recalls the potential of clothes that Findlay describes elsewhere as entwining "perception, imagination, desire and materiality" as, in encountering clothes, we "[imagine] a future self who will wear them, and then [experience] that self as manifest in their wearing".[21] The direct relationship between wearing clothes that feel comfortable and being comfortable in one's self was echoed by Marteal, who has found that being comfortable is her clients' "number one" desire on their wedding day. This seemed not to only relate to being physically comfortable in the gown, although that played a part ("I don't do anything that's super heavy or super crunch or corseted") – it also related to the experience of self one would have on their wedding day: "You don't want to be someone you're not on a day that is so personal to you." Her design process follows the shape of her clients, rather than expecting them to "[try] to transform [themselves] to fit this dress that only looks good on this body type", reversing an orientation common in contemporary consumer culture, in which the client's body must be made to fit into clothing.

Many of the vendors described this effort of creating a therapeutic, comfortable experience, and by extension, garments that did not engender bodily discomfort, in relation to the "horror stories" their clients had shared: of choosing dresses before being told at the register that it doesn't come in their size, being read as heterosexual, or simply being ignored by shop staff. In this way, the vendors we interviewed create a considerate, welcoming experience that renders intelligible the bodies and identities of individuals who have been excluded from mainstream wedding culture. Their businesses operate as sites where the constant awareness of one's marginalized status can be put down, along with the work of managing the feelings arising from

being reminded of one's un-belonging within heterosexed spaces and places, allowing other emotions and experiences of the body to surface. In other words, for these vendors, creating a space that is inclusive means not only that a diverse range of people are catered to by their business, but that these people *fit*.

Although there are superficial echoes here of other discourses of fashion as healing, articulations by suiting designers differ from those approaches. A contemporary iteration, "the fashion psychology" field associated with Dawnn Karen, for instance, emphasizes individual empowerment and confidence as the goals of fashion therapy; Karen's book is framed as teaching the consumer "how to use fashion psychology to take your look – and your life – to the next level."[22] Renate Stauss traces a more established – and sinister – version of fashion therapy in the mid-twentieth century, when "Therapy of Fashion" was "employed as a normalizing and disciplining technology of the self" to produce appropriately gendered, feminine subjects from female psychiatric patients.[23] Both models focus on the alignment of the individual subject with institutional and ideological structures. Our participants' operative concept of dress as therapeutic, by contrast, begins from recognition of the violence of institutions – in this case, the fashion industry – in relation to their trans and gender-non-conforming clientele. Their therapeutic labour consists of depathologizing the client and engaging in a co-created vision of the client's embodied selfhood as an act of sartorial reclamation. It is an approach that resonates well with Eric Darnell Pritchard's theorization of fashion as a literacy performance, which "includes the creation and affirmation of self, the construction and sharing of knowledge, and critically questioning, resisting, and disrupting regimes of power, domination, and literal and symbolic violence in everyday life."[24] In this case, the wedding as an extraordinary occasion unexpectedly provides the occasion for vendors to mentor clients in the cultivation of non-

violent relationships to their bodies, through a loving exploration of fit of the suit. By extension, their businesses operate as lacunae in the wedding industry, offering sites where capitalism and politics co-exist in a "commonly accessible world".[25] In the words of Denise, a bespoke tailor, "what we're trying to do with every client that comes in is to open up the realms of what's possible for them and make it a reality."

Conclusion: Extramarket Morality as Intercorporeality

Beyond their small-scale worldmaking impulse, Denise's words – in reflecting an orientation toward the wellbeing of her clients – are indicative of a generosity we detected in our participants' discussions of their clients and the vendor-client relationship, a generosity we hope to have illuminated here. It is an affect that returns us to the question of extramarket morality, and the paradoxical potential of fashion to preserve forms of relation that are not reducible to market-driven rationality. To conclude, we consider what our participants illuminate about dress that fosters such an ethical orientation.

We suggest that the intersubjective dimension that is prioritized in vendors' narratives is key to the persistence of an extramarket morality in their work. Vendors articulated their understanding of clothing clients for their weddings in a way that seemed to recognize their embeddedness in what Peter Stallybrass has called a cloth society: "In a cloth society… cloth is both a currency and a means of incorporation. As it changes hands, it binds people in networks of obligation."[26] These networks of obligation strike at the heart of perceptions that dress and fashion are purely self-focused and help us identify why extramarket morality is frequently locatable in the fashion system. Networks of obligation not only suggest that people are intersubjectively connected to one another through dress and style, but foreground the ethical

dimensions of these relationships. The term implies that the actors in these cloth networks have a duty of care to one another, which is an apt description of what we see in the vendor-client relation as narrated by our vendor participants.

Stallybrass's formulation of the cloth society also includes an important material dimension. He goes on to write, "[t]he particular power of cloth to effect these kinds of networks is closely associated with two almost contradictory aspects of its materiality: its ability to be permeated and transformed by maker and wearer alike; its ability to endure over time."[27] This insight is developed in an essay exploring the ways that living subjects connect with the dead through their material traces on cloth or garments. That is, the relationships produced in a cloth society are undeniably embodied. More than just an intersubjective terrain, what the vendors are describing is an intercorporeal one; this is about bodily encounter. This is most evident, of course, in their discussions of how they navigate the technical fit of clothing on body. These encounters are characterized by an empathic witnessing of their clients' embodied experience of "mis-fitting." Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that, "a misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it." [28] When vendors describe their witnessing and responding to clients' painful histories of mis-fitting and their responses through the fashioning of well-fitting clothes – they are, as Garland-Thomson is, recognizing the individual pain experienced by the client in their body and simultaneously de-individualizing it by pointing to its structural underpinnings. Vendors' considered, processual work with clients, it seems to us, is effective precisely because it provides empathic intercorporeal witness and relates corporeal experience to systemic heterosexism and cissexism.

Further, our participants' awareness of the social dimension of individual embodiment extended to their understanding, as fashion and style professionals, of intercorporeality in the

cloth society as in part about self-presentation; that is, about visually representing the embodied

self to others. Luna Dolezal draws on Erving Goffman to argue that our understandings of

intercorporeality need to account for the reality "that the embodied subject is continuously – and

constitutionally – engaged in implicit and explicit strategies to manage how the body is presented

to others."[29] Vendors brought to their work an understanding that "our exposure to others… and

concerns around self-presentation underpin certain modes of bodily expression."[30] They

implicitly express an understanding of intercorporeality as, in part, a navigation of visibility and,

as such, a subjection of the body to violent modes of looking. They thus conceive of themselves

as reorienting clients' self-understandings around lived embodiment – through what it feels like

to wear clothing that fits well, or jewelry they aesthetically appreciate, for example – as a

counterpoint to the relentlessness of surveillance. The aim seems to be not to extract their clients

from the intercorporeal relations in which they are embedded – that is not possible – but to use

their own loving gaze at clients' bodies alongside their expertise in facilitating bodily

experiences that go beyond the visible, to reorient clients' experience of their embodiment away

from the surveillant gaze and into other sensory dimensions, most notably tactility. The vendors

seem to instantiate what Todd Robinson has theorized as a design 'empathy' in their interactions

with clients: they "integrates a sensitivity to the ways in which fashion produces viscerally felt

sensations, in other words a sense of being-dressed."[31] They gesture toward intersubjectivity and

intercorporeality on multiple levels, then: they harness their empathy as a repertoire built from

their knowledge of prior clients and their struggles, and they use this to help the client develop a

new relation to their body, one that does not eschew the situatedness of the body in the world but

opens up new expressive capacities. It is in these linked qualities that we can trace the

maintenance of an extramarket morality even in encounters that might be written off as purely

commercial. The function of dress and style as communicative instruments that bind subjects to one another is precisely what enables this persistence of non-market forms of relation inside the marketplace.

While the wedding itself seemed incidental to the ways the relationships between vendors and clients were conceived, as we suggested in the beginning, we conclude by returning to it as the conditioning *context* of the intercorporeal encounter between wedding style vendor and queer or otherwise minoritized client. Like clothing, a wedding provides both a showcase for individual expression and a communal binding – of the marrying dyad, yes, but also of those present at the wedding. First-person narrations of queer weddings, in particular, are often characterized by their references to a wider community and to the work of recognition that this community does in the particular, state-entangled context of the wedding; often wedding narratives are about the ways that "chosen family" and other supports contribute to the marriers' wellbeing. Thus, there is a way in which a communal and capacious fellow-feeling is already circulating around the occasion of the wedding, and vendors slip into a kind of intimate affective landscape to do the at once reparative and generative work they do with clients. Recognizing this – that queer worldmaking potential emerges from the wedding context – flies in the face of typical queer readings of weddings. But the case of the wedding vendor complicates the wholesale dismissal of the form. The wedding provides a kind of affective substratum that is suggestive – as Elizabeth Freeman's queer reading in *The Wedding Complex* makes clear – of modes of 'being otherwise,' which are then given material and embodied form in the encounter with those who help to style marriers for their weddings. The nonmarket forms of relation that are prioritized are, in turn, suggestive of a world in which minoritized subjects' fitting – or mis-fitting – are honoured.

[1] Renee Sgroi, "Consuming the Reality TV Wedding," *Ethnologies* 28, no. 2 (2006): 113-31.

[2] See Ilya Parkins, "'You'll Never Regret Going Bold': The Moods of Wedding Apparel on *A Practical Wedding*," *Fashion Theory* 25, no. 6 (2021): 799-817; Rosie Findlay, "Fashion as Mood, Style as Atmosphere: Literary Non-Fiction Fashion Writing on *SSENSE* and in *London Review of Looks*", in *Insights on Fashion Journalism*, ed. Rosie Findlay and Johannes Reponen (London: Routledge, 2022).

[3] Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy," in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40.

[4] Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu, *The Beautiful Generation: Asian Americans and the Cultural Economy of Fashion* (Durham, NJ: Duke University Press, 2010), 94.

[5] Minh-ha T. Pham, "Blog Ambition: Fashion, Feelings, and the Political Economy of the Raced Body," *Camera Obscura* 76 (2011), 17.

[6] See Peter Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning, and the Life of Things," *Yale Review* 81, no. 2 (1993): 35-50; Rosie Findlay, "'Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On': Encountering Clothes, Imagining Selves," *Cultural Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (2016): 78-94; Tanisha C. Ford, *Dressed in Dreams: A Black Girl's Love Letter to the Power of Fashion* (New York: St Martin's, 2019).

[7] Erin J. Rand, "The Right to be Handsome: The Queer Sartorial Objects of Masculine of Center Fashion," *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 4, no. 3 (2017), 33.

[8] Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 27.

[9] Elizabeth Freeman, *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in American Culture* (Durham, NC: 2002).

[10] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998), 553

[11] See Freeman, *The Wedding Complex*; Rand, "The Right to be Handsome." Though it is not about a wedding per se, Dustin Goltz and Jason Zingsheim's work on their "gayla" explores the performative potential in a wedding-adjacent event: "It's Not a Wedding, It's a Gayla: Queer Resistance and Normative Recuperation," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (2010): 290-312. Dustin Bradley Goltz and Jason Zingsheim, ed. *Queer Praxis: Questions for LGBTQ Worldmaking* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015).

[12] Pierre Bourdieu, "Le couturier et sa griffe: contribution a une théorie de la magie," *Actes de la rcherche en sciences sociales* 1, no. 1 (1975): 7-36; Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); see also Agnès Rocamora, "Fields of Fashion: Critical Insight into Bourdieu's Sociology of Culture," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 2.3 (2002): 341-62.

[13] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 553.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Freeman, *The Wedding Complex*, 52.

[16] Nicki Gregson and Louise Crewe, *Second-hand Cultures* (Oxford and New York: Berg. 2003), 147.

[17] See Ilya Parkins and Rosie Findlay, "Commodity Feminism and Dressing the 'Best Self' on *A Practical Wedding*', *Australian Feminist Studies* 36, no. 109 (2021): 297-312.

[18] Philip Sparks, "Missed Fit," *Fashion Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020), 19.

[19] Brown, *Edgework*, 39.

[20] Ibid., 41.

[21] Rosie Findlay, '"Such Stuff as Dreams are Made On': Encountering Clothes, Imagining Selves', *Cultural Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (2016), 80.

[22] Dawnn Karen, cover, *Dress Your Best Life* (New York: Little, Brown, 2020).

[23] Renate Stauss, "Passing as Fashionable, Feminine and Sane: "Therapy of Fashion" and the Normalization of Psychiatric Patients in 1960s US," *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 4 (2020), 604.

[24] Eric Darnell Pritchard, "Black Girls Queer (Re)Dress: Fashion as Literacy Performance in *Pariah*," *QED: Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 4, no. 3 (2017), 129.

[25] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 551.

[26] Stallybrass, "Worn Worlds," 38.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Garland-Thomson's intervention is situated in critical disability studies and might prompt some important insights about the intersections of disability and sexual/gender identity as these pertain to dress.

[29] Luna Dolezal, "The Phenomenology of Self-Presentation: Describing the Structures of Intercorporeality with Erving Goffman," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 16 (2017), 239.

[30] Ibid., 253.

[31] Todd Robinson, "Body Styles: Redirecting Ethics and the Question of Embodied Empathy in Fashion Design," *Fashion Practice*, Ahead-of-print (2022), 3.