

No White Wedding

THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE A COLORFUL WEDDING DRESS

When I tell people that I will not wear white for my wedding (if ever and whenever that may be) I'm usually greeted with puzzled looks. Even my pragmatic, progressive Dutch South African mother flat-out told me I was being silly. "Well, why not?" she asks, baffled.

I tick off two lists of reasons I have collected over the past ten years.

There is the aesthetic, sensible list: I love color; If I'm going to spend a significant sum of money on a dress, why limit myself to white? And because of spending said significant sum of money, I want the opportunity to wear it again. I spill on everything I wear; it's cheaper to buy a really nice gown than a white wedding dress. I don't want to look like every other bride. Then there is the symbolic list: I'm not a virgin. I'm wary of the societal and gendered implications.

My mother listens, nodding. "I don't know, Alexandra," she says when I'm done. "White is just so pretty and traditional." My mother is not alone. In an informal Facebook poll of friends and acquaintances (and a lifetime of anecdotal evidence), women of all ages responded, largely citing "cultural traditions" and a way to signify to the community why this day is special. The answers were generally thoughtful and lovely. So why then, do I not share this view? The answer, which only became truly clear after researching the origins of the white wedding dress and how it has progressed, has to do with societal signifiers and the signified.

As many Western traditions do, the white wedding dress finds its origins in the British monarchy, or to be more specific, Queen Victoria's wedding to Prince Albert in 1840. The queen was smitten with Honiton lace, which traditionally came in white, and thus enshrouded herself with the delicate fabric. Up until that point in Western society, grey and black had both been deemed suitable for weddings and during medieval times, rich jewel tones, yards of fabric and furs were prized for brides as they signified wealth. But images of the queen in the white, lacy, voluminous gown circulated widely and the trend soon became *de rigueur* in middle class and affluent

circles. As sociology professor Chrys Ingraham cites in his book *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, white "was hard to keep clean, and cleanliness was becoming more valued as a sign of privilege ... The queen herself, and the era she lived in, valued the ideal of female sexual purity and associated this trait with the color white. In Western culture, there were only two kinds of women, good ones (mothers or virgins) and evil ones (whores) ... At her wedding, the pure woman wore a white veil and gown to signify her virginity."

Ah, privilege and sexual purity, two concepts that have never fallen gently on the backs of women throughout history. There's more. Scholar Erika Buckley writes in "A Cross-Cultural Study of Weddings through Media and Ritual," "One of the most important and most expensive rituals in the wedding is the wearing of a white wedding dress. This dress usually is only worn by the purchaser once." She continues, "Only with wealth, or the concept of having wealth, can a person wear an article of clothing, which cost them several hundreds or thousands of dollars, for one day and then have it sit in storage or give it away." That just doesn't make much sense to my thrifty side.

Tracing the history of one of the most iconic images that make up the "American Dream" (or perhaps more appropriately here, the "American Fairy Tale") — the white wedding dress — was a reminder that for me, the political is personal and the personal is political. However, that is not true for everyone. Society looks upon the same signifiers, but individuals interpret the meaning, or the signified, individually, especially in a time when traditional notions of marriage are challenged and changing frequently. Whereas I see outdated gender and class roles, many people see joy, lightness, love and "purity of intent" — all beautiful notions that I admire.

But the biggest concern of mine is that women have the freedom to choose, whether that's white, black or tie-dye. So I choose a new tradition and will enshroud myself in the aquamarine blues, saturated fuchsias or mint greens that make my heart sing. And who knows? Maybe I'll make everyone else wear white. — Alex Notman



QUEEN VICTORIA, 1840

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