The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress:

A Collaborative, Studio-based Dissertation

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Abstract

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress

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Concordia University, 2016

A multi-faceted, collaborative studio-based project of doctoral research-creation, this thesis uses art, text, textiles, photographs and the body to explore how visual culture participates through dress in the creation of female stereotypes and, as an informal educative practice, contributes to the definition of feminine identities. It is centred on the participation of 19 women who guided the artistic transformation of wedding dresses to represent their different notions of marriage. This project allowed participants to experience the research-creation inquiry in both personal and social contexts, responding creatively through visual, material and embodied thinking. Conceptualizing and representing our experiences through dress and text, we developed new understandings about close relationships and community through imagination and intellect. Brides function here as representative stereotypes of femininity, while wedding dresses work as a metaphor for marriage in exploring the restraining symbolisms hidden in the form of tradition that certain current cultural and social rituals have for women. Based on collaborative research-creation processes and supported by inclusive ethnographic methods, this thesis intends to develop new understandings and awareness about the connection of fashion and popular visual culture to the ways women learn and generate meaning. The project was inspired by "Trash the Dress" (TTD) wedding photography, a relatively new and increasingly popular practice in North America which shows brides wearing their white dress in an environment outside of the traditional wedding context, damaging or destroying it, or even exposing themselves during the session—a cultural phenomenon just now beginning to attract the attention of theorists, scholars and

artists. Through collaborative artistic processes, this project explores how femininity is influenced by popular and media representations of women as brides, considering personal issues related to love, commitment, family, tradition, and religion, and also the social challenges, responsibilities and negotiations that women face in conjugal relationships. Based on visual and textual analyses of participants' transformed and embodied dresses and their responses to survey questions, the thesis concludes that working in collaboration with others can provide a context for personal learning and social growth, allowing participants to creatively explore their experiences together and to discuss and develop new ideas. Thus, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* considers close relationships and love both as our subject of study and as a strategy to create new knowledge and ways of knowing through art-education in ways that allow for compassion, awareness and humanization.

Keywords: collaborative artmaking, feminist art education, research-creation, wedding dress, women's informal learning.

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Chapter One
Introduction:
Discovering the Dress that Burst into Flames

[…] the dress that burst into flames. I am the mockingjay. The one that survived despite the Capitol's plans. The symbol of the rebellion.
Susan Collins (2009)

This project started when—while searching online for images of women 'out of place,' as a reference for another artistic project I was working on in the spring of 2011—I discovered a picture of a bride burning her dress while wearing it. I found this image quite disturbing, as it was both attractive and terrible: beautifully brutal. What was really disconcerting to me, more than the burning white dress, was the joy that this woman shows while being consumed by the flames.

Figure 1. *Trash the Dress*, Photo by John Michael Cooper (n.d.)
Image from Altf Photography (www.altf.com)

I eventually found out that this image was part of the "Trash the Dress" (TTD) wedding photography phenomenon, which "contrasts elegant clothing with an environment in which it is completely out of place." (James Hodgins Photography, 2012). In a glamorous style usually shot after the wedding, trashing the gown "is seen as an alternative to storing the dress away, never to be seen

again" (Ibid.). When I looked on the Internet for more pictures like this, I found hundreds of images of brides "trashing" their dresses by swimming in the ocean, rolling in mud, throwing paint at, cutting, or ripping their dresses, or even exposing themselves during the process, at times taking part in situations in which they became vulnerable, harmed by the context of an image or even abused by their grooms.

I felt completely fascinated and horrified with this phenomenon. I immediately knew I wanted to do something about it, responding to it in some creative way. Although these pictures are visually attractive and striking, their lack of a clear intention in regards to the photographed brides—besides that of following a current fashion in popular visual culture—makes them quite ambiguous, too, and even contradictory. It was then when, based on my previous practice as a textile artist (elaborated below, on page 15), along with my personal experience in a couple relationship, I decided to respond to these images. I chose to make my own series of transformed dresses that, instead of promoting approaches which involve violence and aggression towards women, would help to explore and creatively produce awareness about them.

Shortly after discovering the TTD phenomenon, I came across another image of a burning bride. It was in *Catching Fire*[1] (2009), the second book in *The Hunger Games* trilogy by American author Susan Collins, which has been a tremendous success, becoming Amazon's best-selling series, and has also been adapted into a series of films (Bosman, 2012). In the book, Katniss Everdeen, a young woman who lives in a dystopian future in North America, wears a burning wedding dress in front of thousands of people. This is in the context of 'The Hunger Games,' a tournament organized by The Capitol (the metropolis of a fictional and highly oppressive nation) in order to maintain control over people, for

[1] *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* film was released in 2013, based on Suzanne Collins' novel (http://www.thehungergames.co.uk). According to Time Magazine, the "big dazzle moment" in the film is when "outfitted in a spectacular white chiffon wedding dress with silver metal wings, Katniss strides down the runway and commences to spin." Giving more merit to the dressmaker than to the director, the film perfectly merges "a political declaration and a fashion statement" when the gown bursts into flames and morphs into a slinky black outfit with wings, representing the mockingjay (Corliss, 2013).

which a group of teens is selected each year to fight to the death in a widely mediatized event. The story is centered on Katniss, whose wardrobe symbolizes her defiant attitude towards the Capitol, and who leads a rebellion that ends a 75-year-long oppression. Her wedding dress, like many of her outfits, is designed to burn (based on her home district industry, which is coal mining). She was turned "into a mockingjay[2]" (Ibid. p. 252). This association between Katniss and fire gives her the epithet "the girl who was on fire" (Collins, 2009, p. 67), becoming a symbol of the revolution, despite her own lack of agency and unawareness of the rich symbolism of her wardrobe.

I find it very interesting that in a relatively short time I found two separate images of brides whose dresses were burning as a symbol of rebellion against established social norms (in two different phenomena which also happen to be a huge media success). These impressive images of burning brides have been held as symbolic acts of provocation where the oppressed rise against unequal power structures that support unfair treatments based on ideas of supremacy, founded on people's gender, social class, or race. However, I think that more than freeing these brides, such images restrain them, attacking them for being women and promoting violence toward them. It is not a coincidence that in both cases the mastermind behind the act of burning the bride's dress was a man: the wedding photographer for TTD and the fictional designer of *The Hunger Games* outfits (although the books' author is a woman).

Based on these thoughts and concerns, I decided to develop a project that would consider and represent women's ideas and experiences in the process of using their dresses to make a statement. For me, brides function as representative stereotypes of femininity while wedding dresses can be seen as a metaphor for marriage, and can be used in art to explore the restraining symbolisms hidden in the form of tradition that certain current cultural and social rituals have for women. The necessity of making this

[2] In the novel, mockingjays—which are the result of the genetically created Capitol species—become a symbol of rebellion, because they were never intended to exist. Katniss wears a mockingjay-inspired costume which symbolizes her defiance towards The Capitol and everything it represents.

a collaborative project was clear to me from the beginning. I knew that in order to talk about marriage as a social practice—and not only a personal experience—I needed to include more voices, making the work a collective dialogue among women. As a counterpoint to the various series of TTD images that I found on the Internet, I wanted to include the voices of a group of women for whom marriage is a choice and personal reality, and not just what I believe to be the accomplishment of a social requisite or an enforced performing of a postmodern fairy tale. I wanted to transform a series of wedding dresses in meaningful ways based on personal experiences to develop a collective process for exploring our feelings and ideas about marriage. Together, my 18 participants and I reflect on our own realities and conditions as women in a relationship, exploring the challenges and contradictions that we face every day while representing what happens to us after the socially enforced "happy ending."

Taking into account my art practice and the participation of women significant to my life in Montreal, I decided use collaborative research-creation and to borrow inclusive ethnographic methods to make an academic investigation of this artistic project. My final goal was to explore feminine stereotypes and women's self-understanding in couple relationships through textile art, looking at the challenges that we might face when trying to play all the diverse roles socially assigned to us, along with our own individual desires. Through the transformed wedding dresses we were going to talk about familiar and cultural traditions, with an emphasis on the feminine restraining symbolisms and restrictive implications of current social rituals involved in weddings. In this regard, I was interested in exploring the information that we receive everyday not only through formal education, but mostly through informal learning closely related to socialization processes via media and popular culture.

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress explores, then, the way that wedding dresses in visual culture, especially in fashion and trends like TTD, participate in the legitimation and assimilation of traditional feminine roles—historically related to sociability, domesticity and motherhood (Crane, 2000, 2012; Dekel, 2011; Lynch, 2010)—offering a creative way to collectively

explore, understand and negotiate some of these repressive structures. Moreover, this project intends to explore—through creative practices, self-reflective texts, exchanges within the community of participants, and academic writing—the ways in which gender defines what and how we are taught, aiming to increase self-knowledge and meaningful collaboration through art.

Research Questions:

1. How can art help us understand the roles wedding dresses play in shaping women's identities as wives and female individuals today?
2. How can collaborative art-making generate learning experiences related to our personal and social circumstances as women?

Methodology and Practices

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress is based on the dual research methods of a) research-creation (SSHRC, 2015) linked to my own professional creative practice and b) ethnography of a group of 19 female participants, including myself. An inclusive ethnographic process complemented this collaborative research-creation project to create new understandings about the connection of visual culture and bridal fashion to the ways women generate meaning. I am using my own artistic practice as a collaborative research process and as a product, involving creative action and critical reflection to give form to individual and collective understandings. I have always seen art practices as a form of personal investigation. In this project they function as a research tool that—through the incorporation of theoretical, structural, interpretive and critical traditions—can help me to recognize, produce and present new meaning related to a diverse range of social and cultural phenomena (Leavy, 2015; McNiff, 2008; Rose, 2011, 2014; Sullivan, 2006, 2010). The central use of visual and material texts in this research-creation is closely related to their growing significance in social sciences as research

methods, based on their increasing importance in contemporary cultural and social practices (Rose, 2014).

Collaborative Art Practices

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress involves collaborative strategies intended to generate new understandings regarding women's social roles and creative ways of knowing. This study is not only about, but also based on, personal relations. It involves the engagement and feedback of 19 female participants, who while "being together," (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 15) created art "taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context" (Ibid. p. 3). Collaboration in the arts involves a collective creative process that, through shared understandings and goals, aims to achieve a common purpose (Barbour et al., 2007). Collaborative art practices are commonly understood as open-ended processes involving participation (Bishop, 2011; Lind, 2009, p. 54). In collaborative art practices, notions of authorship and collectivity become intertwined, as the boundaries between artwork and experience are unclear (Helguera, 2011, Location No. 768). Collective art practices may also be referred to as relational, socially engaged, community-based, dialogic, interventionist, research-based art or participatory (Bishop, 2011). Collaborative art practices, as collective processes, are specifically structured to involve others in creative projects, and have an enormous potential to produce a form of knowledge determined by the participants' unique exchanges (Kester, 2011). Some authors differentiate collaboration from participation. To them, the former involves cooperation from others to generate art, while the latter usually requires assistance to complete an artist's pre-defined project (Atkins, 2008; Lind, 2009). I, however, am referring to this project as collaborative and the women as participants. I develop these two concepts further in Chapter Six, where I discuss the participation and collaboration of my friends. Collaborative art practices can be used as artistic strategies, or even academic methods, to actively involve others in the shared process of

producing knowledge (Barbour et al., 2007), offering effective means of understanding the role and purpose of art as a possible alternative to linguistic-based research (O Donoghue, 2009). As pedagogy, many artistic collaborations can function not only as instructive but constructive practices as well (Helguera, 2011).

Ethnographic Methods

Like many other artists conducting research through creative processes, I am integrating methods traditionally belonging to the social sciences into my artwork as a way of exploring and creating local and flexible meanings in which the social context can become a site for artistic investigation (Foster, 1996; Desai, 2002; Sullivan, 2010; Helguera, 2011). Adopting an inclusive approach to ethnography (Pole & Morrison, 2003), I gathered data directly through informal conversations with participants as well as through semi-structured surveys (See Appendix 1). By integrating ethnographic methods into this research-creation project, I take into consideration each participant's intentions and context in the transformation of her dress. Ethnographic methods have been commonly used in the social sciences to study how people use dress in a particular context, and to explore the meaning and symbolism of clothes (Kawamura, 2011, p.46). By telling stories about a group of people, ethnography is also understood as a process "used to study how human beings act and why they act in the way they do" (Kawamura, 2011, p. 45). The artistic component of this research-creation project is complemented by informal conversations and semi-structured surveys that clarify the intended meaning of each wedding dress, which symbolism today has few fixed connotations. In contrast with more traditional ethnographic approaches, this study drew upon a pre-existing friendship with the majority of participants. This collaboration with friends brought a special dimension to the research process that allowed us to develop supportive interactions while contributing to the exploration of previous knowledge and power relationships (Harris, 2002). In this sense, friendship can be considered as a

method through which ethnographers "move from studying 'them' to studying us"(Tillmann, 2015, p. 9). This, in turn, brings new possibilities to research process that allow us to learn together in new ways. As I have explained earlier, this project lends itself to multiple interpretations that are “unstable, contradictory, and incessantly changing” (Kawamura, 2011, p. 122). Thus, the participants’ written reflections inform their creative responses, helping me gather more resources with which to understand the dresses and how their pictures acquire and transmit meaning. In a way, I see the original white wedding dress as the question and each woman’s transformation as an answer. Together, they form a meaningful and dynamic dialogue.

As art, the transformed wedding dresses represented in the photographs offer multiple open and flexible meanings. However, to successfully evaluate the participants’ ideas and experiences in marriage as accurate academic research, I am using a mixed methods approach, combining different qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2009). The ethnographic aspect borrowed for this research-creation project is important because it allowed me to understand the personal and social contexts in which the participants transformed their wedding dresses as well as the meanings that these culturally charged garments have acquired today (Kawamura, 2011). I am evaluating the participants’ thoughts and ideas with an ethnographic focus in order to bring about a better understanding of the intentions behind their dresses’ transformations and final pictures. While the transformed wedding dresses symbolically represent each participant’s understanding of what it means to be a wife today, the majority of their testimonies clarify how this experience afforded them a better understanding of marriage. Their written reflections give consideration to how this understanding has changed through extended and multimodal engagement with creative work, the experience of collaborating with an artist, the conversations with the other participant women, and what this process of learning suggests about the role that collaborative art-making can play to generate new understandings and ways of knowing about our personal and social circumstances as women.

Research-Creation

Although there are several terms that can be used to refer to research conducted through the arts, such as arts-based research (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 2008; Leavy, 2015), arts-informed research (Cole & Knowles, 2008), A/r/t/ography (Irwin & Sinner, 2012), practice as research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007) and practice-based research (Gray & Malins, 2004; Sullivan, 2010), I use the term “research-creation” (SSHRC, 2015) because it is the most common way of referring to art practice as research in Canada. According to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), research-creation is:

> An approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation. The creation process is situated within the research activity and produces critically informed work in a variety of media (art forms). Research-creation cannot be limited to the interpretation or analysis of a creator’s work, conventional works of technological development, or work that focuses on the creation of curricula. The research-creation process and the resulting artistic work are judged according to SSHRC’s established merit review criteria.
> Fields that may involve research-creation may include, but are not limited to: architecture, design, creative writing, visual arts (e.g., painting, drawing, sculpture, ceramics, textiles), performing arts (e.g., dance, music, theatre), film, video, performance art, interdisciplinary arts, media and electronic arts, and new artistic practices. (SSHRC, 2015)

Research-creation projects are usually non-verbal explorations that integrate a creative process or an artistic work as an central part of the study. Research-creation projects involve interdisciplinarity approaches that interweave artistic practice, academic research and pedagogical interests, motivating new knowledge and ways of knowing. Having a strong potential to reveal new insights and understandings, art practices like research-creation are “a profound form of human engagement that offer important ways to inquire into issues and ideas of personal, social and cultural importance. This practice is creative and critical; features complex forms of imagination and intellect; and makes use of processes and procedures that draw from many traditions of inquiry” (Sullivan, 2006, p. 32-33).

Definition of Key Concepts

Embodiment

Embodiment in this research-creation allowed us to understand the norms, symbols and practices inscribed in our dressed bodies (Perry & Medina, 2011). Though it is an inclusive term with diverse implications, embodiment is commonly used to describe the entire experience of living in a body. Embodied knowledge incorporates life experiences which are dependent upon the context of the body. These embodied practices can involve dress, body image and personal practices (Moje, 2000). Clothes can be used to study the "body as communication" (Barney, 2007, p. 79). As habitus, dress can be used to embody our social location, including class, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality and gender (Bourdieu, 1984). It allows us to embody acquired perceptions and understandings while giving them new meaning. Thus, dress, as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle, 2000, p. 11), is shaped by social and cultural norms concerning the negotiation and presentation of self in everyday interactions. Embodiment in creative inquiries can function as "a way of knowing that goes beyond the intellectual, logical and rational mode of thinking that has traditionally been defined as knowledge. It includes emotions, culture, physical sensation and life experiences" (Derry, 2005). By creatively exploring and performing through dress how bridehood, wifehood and womanhood are understood, participants acknowledge their bodies "as both a representation of self (a 'text') as well as a mode of creation in progress (a 'tool')" (Perry & Medina, 2011, p. 63).

Feminist Pedagogy

This research considers feminist art education, an area of art education related to the teaching, research and practice of art, based mostly on women's interests and necessities. It is linked to feminist pedagogy which, informed by feminist theory and practices, usually defines gender as a social construction (Beauvoir, 1989; Crane, 2000; Kennelly et al., 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Entwistle, 2010).

Regarding the teaching, research and practice of art, the beginning of feminist art education is closely related to second-wave feminism, a movement that dealt with the cultural, social and political inequalities of women and their role in society during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, or in hooks' words "the movement to end women's oppression" (2000, p. 26). Feminist approaches to art usually involve equity:

> by calling attention to the work of all women artists, art educators (mainstream and hiddenstream), and art that depicts women […]; investigating personal issues of women in detail, including aging, sexual orientation, family, and motherhood, among others[…]; investigating and researching in detail the lived experiences of women and girls[…]; analyzing texts from a feminist perspective[…]; exploring the construction of identity, especially as related to visual culture images[…]; pedagogical strategies related to feminism[…]; and across all these themes pushing methodologies, ways of knowing, and ways of conducting research toward an acceptance of narratives and more personal ways of knowing. (Buffington & Lai, 2011)

Today's feminist pedagogy is shaped by what many scholars call third wave feminism, which is simultaneously informed by, and critical of, previous feminist movements. Despite its ambivalent connotations, third wave feminism aims to generate conditions of freedom, equality and justice for everyone, focusing on issues related to gender in particular. Largely informed and shaped by postmodern theory, third wave feminists focus on issues of identity, lifestyle and difference, denying the notion that all women's experiences are the same (Snyder, 2008). Within feminist pedagogy, which is constantly changing and evolving (like feminism itself), I am interested in the inclusive, collaborative, experiential, empowering and common processes that it employs (Campbell, 2003). Based on the participants' personal experiences, this project includes several perspectives, respecting diversity and constructing community to make them active participants in their own learning and creating knowledge in a flexible, fluid, collaborative and transformative way (Church, 2010).

Women's Informal Learning

This project involves personal artmaking processes, collaborative explorations and creative representations of the information that women receive every day through formal education and—to a greater degree—informal pedagogical processes. While on the one hand most of the participants were

raised by their parents to become professional and independent women, on the other hand popular visual culture[3] has informally taught us since childhood to plan (and plan early) for the "happiest day" of our lives (Berry et al., 2002). Women are informally taught to become wives, and how to do so, through a socialization process of romance. According to the on-line *Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, informal learning takes place during daily activities related to work, family or leisure; it is not structured and it tends to be involuntary on the part of the learner (www.infed.org). Visual culture—which refers to the images that surround and inform us—plays an important role in the way we learn and produce meaning (Duncum, 2009; Freedman, 2003). It is deeply involved in the construction of gender identities, affecting women's ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986; Berry et al., 2002). Through dress, fashion has become an inherent part of today's visual culture (Smelik, 2006), playing a central role in the socialization process of sexual and gender roles (Barnard, 1996; Crane, 2000; Entwistle, 2010). Examining the ways in which gender defines what and how we are taught, this work acknowledges but also challenges the "intense socialization effort that the wedding-ideological complex has undertaken in constructing femininity, heterosexuality, and the importance of weddings and wedding consumption to a woman's identity" (Ingraham, 2008a, p.175).

Québec as my Context:

Québec has offered me a rich context for conducting this kind of research, as it has the lowest proportion of married couples in Canada, while common-law[4] families are one of the highest of the

[3] See, for example, the long list of movies about weddings, such as "The Princess Bride" (1987), "Father of the Bride" (1991), "Four Weddings and a Funeral" (1994), "My Best Friend's Wedding" (1997), "Runaway Bride" (1999), "Meet the Parents" (2000), "My Big Fat Greek Wedding" (2002), "License to Wed" (2007), "Made of Honor" (2008), "27 Dresses" (2008), "Bride Wars" (2009), and "The Wedding Ringer" (2015) among many others (IMDb, 2015). Also*,* when you google-search "wedding television shows", Wikipedia, for example, comes up with a list of 26 sites, including "Say yes to the dress" (TLC, 2012), Canadian "Wedding SOS" (Slice Network), and "Bridezillas" (We TV), between many others.

[4] It is worth mentioning that according to Justice Québec, couples living in a common-law or de facto union do not have the same rights and responsibilities that married couples have under the Civil Code of Québec, regardless of the number of years of cohabitation. While certain laws governing employment (social) assistance, legal aid, income tax and the Québec Pension Plan and workers' compensation treat common-law spouses of the same or opposite sex as a couple, they don't have access to other social protections that usually benefit women, such as having a right to a division of their property if they separate or a right to a compensatory allowance for work done by one person that benefited the other person while they were together.

country, showing a certain level of awareness and critique towards the institution of marriage and its implications. According to the 2006 Census data, married-couple families make up 69% of all families in Canada[5], while 16% are represented by common-law couples and 16% are single parents. First marriages in Canada have about a 50% chance of ending in divorce, and that possibility increases with each successive marriage (about 72% for second and 85% for third marriages). Almost 75% of divorces are initiated by women (Divorce Rates in Canada, 2012). Québec has the lowest proportion of married couples with only 37.5 % of adults falling in this category, while common-law families have risen to 29%. The number of common-law-couple families in Québec accounts for 44.4% of the national total. About one-quarter of all common-law-couple families in Canada live in Montreal and Québec City. According to Statistics Canada (2008), the changes in marital patterns in Québec started in the 1960s:

> There were 21,100 marriages in this province in 2003, less than half of the 1972 peak (53,800 marriages). The recent changing nuptiality patterns in Québec has its roots in the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s when people began rejecting marriage, a religious institution, and more and more people began choosing common-law unions. Consequently, Québec had the lowest crude marriage rate of all the provinces (2.8 marriages per 1,000 population) in 2003. (p. 69)

This caused Québec to not only have the lowest marriage rate of all the provinces in Canada, but also to introduce the legal concept of civil unions in 2002, allowing for the legal and social recognition of both same-sex and opposite-sex couples (Statistics Canada, 2008; McDaniel & Tepperman, 2010).

> Québec is also unique in its introduction of the legal concept of civil unions in June, 2002, which allow for the legal and social recognition of same-sex and opposite sex couples. In 2003, there were 342 civil unions, with the majority between same-sex persons (80%), probably reflecting the fact that same-sex marriages were not legalized in Québec until the following year. In 2004 the number of civil unions fell to 178 and dropped further to 169 in

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Besides, one partner can not ask for support payments from the other partner, even if she needs it, and the partners don't inherit from each other if one dies without a will or if one was not named as an heir in the will (Justice Québec, 2013).

[5] For the first time in Canada there are slightly more couples without children at home than with them, and 18% of all children under age 15 live with a lone parent. Of those single parent families, 80% were headed by the mother, although the number of men at the head of single parent families is growing more than twice as fast as the number of women.

> 2005. However, preliminary data for 2006 indicates an increase again to 215, three-quarters of which are between opposite-sex persons. (Statistics Canada, 2008, p. 69)

The 2012 census counted 16.5% of married couples in Canada as being same-sex couples, this being the first time that they were counted. In Québec—the third province to legalize same-sex marriage, in March 2004—only 9.2% of same-sex couples were married, reflecting "the greater popularity of common-law unions in general for all couples in the province" (Statistics Canada, 2012a). In Montreal, the largest city in Québec, 54% of the total population aged 15 and over live in a couple relationship, of whom 36.8% are married and 17.4 % are living with a common-law partner. The remaining 45.9% of Montreal's population are mostly single (never married), separated, divorced or widowed (Statistics Canada, 2012a).

From the 19 participants in this project, 16 were born or raised in North America[6]: five were born in Canada (four in Québec and one in Nova Scotia); 11 were born in Mexico (seven of them married to Canadians), and the remaining collaborators are from Chile, Iran and the USA. I find this to be quite symbolic, as Montreal contains 12.5% of all immigrants[7] in Canada, representing 22.6% of its total population. It also has the second largest Latin American community in the country, the majority of which are recent immigrants arriving in the late 20th century. In Montreal, where 63.3% of the population speaks French, 11.6% speaks only English and 22% speaks a 'non-official' language, Spanish is currently the fifth most spoken language (3.1%) (Statistics Canada, 2012a).

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[6] Although North America is officially formed by 23 countries, including all Caribbean and Central American countries, Bermuda, Mexico, the United States of America, and Canada, in this research I will use this term to refer only to Mexico, the United States and Canada (Schaetzl, R.J., 2014).

[7] Statistics Canada (2012) considers the immigrant population to be the foreign-born population of Canada: "Immigrant is a person who is or has ever been a landed immigrant/permanent resident. This person has been granted the right to live in Canada permanently by immigration authorities". The term 'immigrants', for them, excludes the foreign-born population who are non-permanent residents. People from another country, who have a work or study permit or who are refugee claimants, and any non-Canadian born family members living in Canada with them, like my family and myself, are not considered in the latest statistic information that I found for this research.

Using my Art as Research:

Despite the fact that I developed this participative textile and photographic project as an artist, I am writing this dissertation as an art educator. When I started my PhD at Concordia University I had been an art professor for more than a decade, working mainly as a sculpture and textiles instructor in Mexico. I came to Montreal in August of 2010, with Pedro, my common-law partner since 2001, and our two children, Matías and Eugenia (then 5 and 3 years old) to pursue doctoral studies. I write this thesis as a graduate student, but also as an immigrant, an artist, a professor, a mother and an unmarried wife.

Because I am doing this research within a Canadian university with explicit academic specifications and restrictions, I will use the term “research-creation” to refer to my methodological approach. It is the most common way of referring to a methodology based on research through art practices in Canadian academic institutions (SSHRC, 2015). As an artist I have always considered my artistic creation as a kind of research, as my own creative processes involve a textile artistic production for exploring and challenging normative restraining structures, looking at social labels and frequently questioning traditional female stereotypes. I strongly believe that art can be applied as an active practice that integrates a series of innovative creative methods, offering new pedagogical and exploratory perspectives by embodying a new kind of knowledge. For me, as an academic and a practising artist, research is an intentional, ordered and detailed process of investigation—of a subject, a concept or an object—through which information is revised for changing our understandings about certain things, or new materials are shaped for producing a different knowledge.

As an artist I work with clothes based on the idea that they reflect the prevailing ideologies of our society and are strongly connected to dominant values through a normative fashion system. I see their use in art as an effective medium to experience, expose and learn from our relation with certain social codes. Clothes are a fascinating sculptural material, with innumerable formal advantages and great interpretative strength. We all read them symbolically, connecting individual knowledge with

culturally produced ideas. I believe that I can translate and recontextualize the use that I make of clothes in my artwork to academic research, addressing not only personal but historical, political, cultural and social issues, looking for new and stimulating ways to undress some aspects of our personal and social circumstances that usually remain invisible.

Over 20 years of professional artistic practice and exhibition I have developed a series of installations, sculptures and performances with specific garments to explore the social implications that femininity has today in diverse contexts, along with the physical, emotional and cultural restrictions that exist for me as a woman. A series of projects I have done in Canada in the last few years provides examples of incorporating dress in art to experience, expose and learn from my relation to certain social codes. *Transfigurations* (Montreal, 2011) was a collective action that I performed at Concordia University in which some female graduate students of the Art Education department placed themselves against the wall of a building while I cut their garments at the seams and then pinned them, extended on the wall like trophies made out of animal skins. With this act I wanted to release us from our social skin while making evident the idea that we are trapped by cultural norms.

Figure 2. *Transfigurations* (2011)
by María Ezcurra, with the collaboration of Tatiana Koroleva
Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Scott MacLeod

Through performance art I not only explore but also subvert female stereotypes. I use garments to redefine traditional women's roles while presenting diverse and reinvented femininities. With pieces like *Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta* (The Perfect Housewife's Wardrobe, Mexico City, 2008) and *Mesera* (Waitress, Mexico City, 2010; Montreal, 2011) I exaggerated traditional feminine stereotypes to generate new understandings about their relation to personal, political, cultural and social issues. *Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta* is a series of five photographs that document several actions in which I was integrated with my house through diverse textiles, attaching my body to the furniture. *Mesera* was an action performed wearing a table-dress for serving the canapés during the opening of an art show. Both of them explore the ethic and the aesthetic possibilities of my work while looking at the fundamental operations of different social structures.

Figure 3: *Manditel.* Figure 4: *Colacha*

Figure 5. *Burral*
All from the Series *"Guardarropa del ama de casa perfecta"* (The Perfect Housewife's Wardrobe, 2008), by María Ezcurra, with the collaboration of Pedro Orozco
Photos by Gerardo Montiel Klint

Open (Montreal, 2012) was an ongoing project in the St. Catherine Street Vitrines of the FOFA Gallery at Concordia University in which I created a textile installation through a sequence of collaborative actions. Throughout the duration of the show different people from Concordia University (graduate and undergraduate students, professors, people working in the gallery) came to the vitrines wearing a garment specifically chosen to be integrated into the installation. Twice a week I cut and removed the clothes from different people, placing them on the wall. This installation was intended to be simultaneously attractive and critical, exploring through the use of clothing both personal and cultural identities. This work is a metaphor for the society we live in today, with its complexities between the social and the individual, protection and image, beauty and comfort, materials and ideas, male and female, violence and indifference. I find these paradoxes useful, as creating situations that are simultaneously enjoyable and critical can be an effective way of making otherwise unnoticed aspects of our society visible. In all these performances, clothes generated new experiences, emotional reactions

and original understandings, producing new interpersonal and responsive knowledge. Converted into art, they reflected their context and responded actively to their circumstances, functioning as a research tool and a resource to produce awareness.

Figure 6. *Open* (2011)
by María Ezcurra, with the collaboration of Jayme Schomann and Josee Lavigne.
FOFA Gallery, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Hu Jun

As an artist and researcher, I see clothes as an important aspect of fashion through popular visual culture that constantly reinforces femininity in women, teaching us feminine ways of being (Lai, 2009). Fashion and media are strong influences in the construction of gender stereotypes, ideologies and practices (Berry et al., 2011), affecting women's everyday social and learning experiences (Buffington & Lai, 2011). I use my artistic and pedagogical work to expose the consequences that these influences may have on many personal and social aspects of women's lives. As an art educator, I use the knowledge gained from my performative art experiences to explore with my students and collaborators the ways visual culture is constantly invading and affecting the way we see ourselves, relate with our contexts and interact with others. I exemplify various of these ideas through the work of diverse artists,

many of whom are influenced by feminist ideology, creating clothing-related pieces to reflect their personal complex conditions, such as Aganetha Dyck (Canada, 1937), Ann Hamilton (USA, 1956), Annette Messager (France, 1943), Brian Jungen (Canada, 1970), Chiharu Shiota (Japan, 1972), Christian Boltanski (France, 1944), Daniela Edburg (USA, 1975), Doris Salcedo (Colombia, 1958), Dulce Pinzon (Mexico, 1974), Ernesto Neto (Brazil, 1964), Hendrik Kerstens (Netherland, 1956), Jana Sterbak (Czech Republic, 1955), Janine Antoni (Bahamas, 1964), Jessica Lagunas (Nicaragua, 1971), Kaarina Kaikkonen (Finland, 1952), Kimsooja (South Korea, 1957), Louise Bourgeois (France, 1911), Lucy Orta (UK, 1966), Lygia Clark (Brazil, 1920), Regina José Galindo (Guatemala, 1974), Shirin Neshat (Iran, 1957), Sophie Calle (France, 1953), Yinka Shonibare (UK, 1962) and Yoko Ono (Japan, 1933).

The Other 18 Participants:

Paradoxically, the marital status[8] of the women participating in this project was not a limiting condition to collaborate—neither was having actually worn a white wedding dress a pre-requisite to be able to transform one. This project aims to hear different voices and to give space to diverse choices. At the time of the project, the participants who collaborated were married, divorced, separated and common-lawed heterosexual and homosexual women from North America (Canada, the U.S.A. and Mexico), Chile and Iran, whose ages ranged from 28 to 62 years old. Most of them had a formal job outside the home, many in areas related to art and/or education. I decided to limit the location of my participants to Montreal for personal, practical and theoretical reasons. I needed to be able to easily meet them to talk, to try on and see them wearing their dresses, to photograph them, but also to place the research in a specific context as a way to structure the data and organize the findings in a coherent way.

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[8] The issue of what to call a life companion (married or unmarried) is quite complex. There are non-gendered words that can be used to refer to a "partner" today, such as "spouse," "couple," "significant other," "long-time companion," and "friend with benefits." At the same time gendered terms like "husband" and "wife" are still widely accepted, not only between heterosexual married couples, but within same-sex couples as well (Petrow, 2012).

I met all the participating women in Montreal. I met them in different contexts and situations before even planning this project. Originally, some of them were friends of friends whom I have in Mexico (Carmen, Daniela, Denisse, Flavia, Nati and Paula), Concordia's classmates (Anne, Jessie and Tina), neighbours (Claudia, Desirée, Gen, Gina, Lee and Norma), or mothers of my children's friends (Rosa, Sara and Zacy). When we did the project, some of them were already good friends of mine, with an intimate knowledge of each other's lives, while others were just friendly acquaintances. Since this project is strongly oriented towards personal life and personal connections, it seemed more meaningful to invite women I already knew. There was no sense in seeking participants through anonymizing or random means, as the generalizing impulse behind those processes is not at work in this engagement. Because this is a qualitative, personal and community-based project, I wanted to work with women who belong to my personal, academic and professional contexts in Montreal.

Although initially I had intended to make only six dresses, the number of women interested in participating rapidly increased once the project was underway. Amazingly, every time I told someone about the project it generated a lot of interest and desire for collaboration. Despite comprising more work, I decided to take up the challenge, involving more participants. More dresses mean more visually compelling creations and more voices with something interesting to say. And more voices mean a stronger idea. I felt it would be much more meaningful in this way, not only artistically, but academically, too. In Chapter Six, called "Ethnographic Tendencies," I talk more about how this process reflects 'traditional' research methods of recruiting and interviewing participants.

Throughout this text I refer to some participants by their full name and others by first name only. My intent here is to acknowledge each participant's role in the planning or making of her dress, in a way that recognizes her authorship but also respects her privacy. I asked each participant how she wanted to be identified, and to revise and approve text entries about her before publication. Of the 19 original women who transformed their dresses, 18 approved the text and images related to their

participation. One woman authorized having her picture taken and displayed in the Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce exhibition, but asked later to be excluded from this dissertation. I have honored this request but—as she was the only single woman who had accepted to transform a dress for this project—it is important to mention that the absence of unmarried or unattached women from this research-creation is not representative of my own personal stance towards marriage, as I view singlehood as a conscious marital choice.

Participants' General Information

Participant	Marital Status	Duration of Cohabitation	Age	From	Profession	Partner's Gender Age Country of Origin	Children
Anne Pilon	Married (for 2nd time)	1 year (After several years of common law)	54	Montreal, Qc, Canada	High School Visual Arts Teacher	Male 54 Canada	3 (from her 1st marriage)
Carmen Giménez Cacho	Married (for 3rd time)	17 years (Married for 13 years, after 4 years of common-law)	55	Mexico City, Mexico	Film production designer and Painter	Male 70 Canada	1 (and 1 grandson)
Claudia Vega	Married	6 years (Married for4 years, after 2 years of common-law)	36	Mexico City, Mexico	Business Administration, specialized in Restaurants	Male 35 Canada	1
Daniela Ortiz	Married	5 years	31	Morelia, Michoacán, Mexico	Visual Artist	Male 33 Canada	Pregnant
Denisse Horcasitas	Married	11 years (Married for 9 months, after 10 years of common-law)	28	Mexico City, Mexico	Psychologist	Male 30 Mexico	0
Desirée Grajales	Common-Law	2 years	34	Mexico City, Mexico	Works in the coffee shop that she owns with another partner (self-employed).	Male 35 Canada	0
Flavia Hevia	Common-Law	9 years	44	Mexico City, Mexico	Set and Light Designer/Puppeteer/Visual Artist.	Male 60 Canada	0
Gen	Married (to Gina)	4 years	30	Québec, Canada	Singer	Female 33 Mexico	0
Gina	Married (to Gen)	4 years	33	Mexico City, Mexico	Sound Engineer	Female 30 Canada	0
Jessie	Divorced	Divorced 2 years ago. Married for 33 years	62	Portland, United States	Colorist/Artist /Art educator	Male 62 USA	1
Lee Lapaix	Separated	Married for 12 years before her recent separation	37	Nova Scotia, Canada	Teacher		2

Participant	Marital Status	Duration of Cohabitation	Age	From	Profession	Partner's Gender Age Country of Origin	Children
Maria Ezcurra	Common-Law	12 years	39	Buenos Aires, Argentina / Mexico City, Mexico	Artist/Art educator	Male 41 Mexico	2
María Natividad Vega Vega (Nati)	Married	25 years	50	San Luis, Mexico	Graphic Designer	Male 50 Mexico	3
Norma Vite	Married	14 years	44	Pachuca, Hidalgo, Mexico	Economist/College Teacher	Male 47 USA	2
Paula	Married	20 years	43	Mexico City, Mexico	Biologist	Male 47 Mexico	2
Rosa	Married	15 years	40	Santiago, Chile	Psychologist/ Currently coursing a PhD at the Université de Montréal	Male 41 Chile	2
Sara	Married	11 years	34	Tehran, Iran	Student at the Université de Montréal	Male 35 Iran	1
Tina	Common-Law	11 years	34	Montreal, Québec, Canada	Graduate Student at Concordia University and an Artist	Male 43 Canada	0
Zacy	Married (for 3rd time)	12 years (Married 8 years ago, after 4 years of common-law)	49	Kinston / Ottawa, Ontario	Graduate Student at Concordia University/Artist/Musician/ Teacher	Male 49 Mexico	3 (one from each marriage)

Working Process

As mentioned earlier, I believe that meaning can be generated from and through art, becoming a stimulating academic method that can be incorporated into the research process. I examined the research questions, along with my participants, through visual research methods. We collaboratively explored the meaning of wife through the transformation and embodiment of textile art. Presented in

the form of photographs printed on silk, this research-creation process is essential not only to inquiry, but to disseminate the results of my investigation as well (Rose, 2014). Involving participatory strategies to reach a broader vision of female understandings, we searched for and displayed multiple identity statements through wedding dresses. We transformed the dresses to reveal how they can affect cultural and personal conceptions of femininity in relation to marriage.

For each participant, this project involved choosing a dress, coming up with ideas for its transformation, carrying those ideas out, participating in a photo shoot and an art exhibition, and finally writing about it all. This work started with a series of friendly and informal conversations that eventually became deeply meaningful and significant. I wanted the participants to feel comfortable with this process and the ideas that would come out of it, because I know how intimidating it can be for someone who is not an artist to be asked to make an art piece, or for someone who is not an academic to think in such highly structured scholarly ways. I was aware of the important role that conversations can have in a research, along with the role that the atmosphere of a place can play when people converse (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 75). Intending to always keep these conversations comfortable and significant, most of the exchanges with my participants took place at their homes or mine, sharing tea or a beer, at a nearby café, or even in the neighborhood park while our children played. I believe that having these exchanges in domestic or otherwise informal settings was beneficial for the conversations, as their familiar and relaxed atmosphere made the exchanges more intimate, and probably more open. Because "certain settings invite certain kinds of conversations" (Ibid.), familiar places like our homes offered valuable information for research. The conversations then lost some of their initial academic heaviness and rigidity, giving confidence to the participants to relax, play and enjoy the experience.

After explaining the project and its working process to each participant, I met her again (sometimes individually and sometimes in groups), to share images of "Trash the Dress" wedding photography, either on my computer or by asking them to search for it online—as there is something

fascinating about discovering them yourself. After that, I asked each woman to think about this phenomenon and give me a proposal to transform a wedding dress. I suggested that their ideas should be based on their own experiences in relation to marriage, while somehow responding to these images, too. I gave them total freedom to design and transform a dress in a way that would represent their ideas, feelings and stances towards marriage. I initially planned to provide a dress—previously acquired by me—for each participant. But the options eventually expanded: they were able to make a dress themselves, ask me to create one out of other materials, or even to use their own if they wanted (as Claudia actually did).

I tried to be as present and supportive as possible during this process without interfering or imposing my own ideas or criteria on the other participating women. I wanted them to feel confident enough to develop their personal ideas, not worrying too much about technical, quality or judgemental matters. I was aware of the pressure they felt because this was not only "real art" but also a doctoral research project, generating a feeling of formality and rigor towards the project that initially felt constraining. It was by taking the time to talk in a comfortable atmosphere—as friends more than artists or academics, many times in groups, generating a nice feeling of belonging, sharing and trust while also having fun—that I feel that we managed to overcome this personal and collective pressure we all felt and develop meaningful and truthful ideas. I talk more about the implications of my friends' collaboration in this research-creation project in Chapter Six, called "Ethnographic Tendencies."

Figure 7. Wedding dresses acquired for *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

For almost a year, before starting the actual transformation of the dresses, I collected second hand wedding gowns at thrift shops[9]. I used to go at least once a month to the Salvation Army and Renaissance stores near my home to hunt for these rare white gowns. My criteria were both formal and economical. I would buy any dress that was in good condition (although not impeccable, as I liked the idea that it had been already used, containing its own stories) and did not cost much more than forty dollars (to keep it affordable). The participants were able to come to my place to see the dresses before giving me their final transformation proposal. During this process some participants also decided that

[9] Except for Claudia's dress (which was her real wedding gown) and the dresses that I actually made out of other fabrics (Gina's and mine), all the gowns I used for this project were acquired in second-hand shops. They had clearly been used and given away. They all had a story to tell, which we will never know. Whatever the story, they probably belonged to brides who used them for white weddings. These women, however, somehow ended up subverting the wedding industrial complex they originally supported, by giving their dress to the thrift shops. Some other women, instead of donating or "trashing" their wedding dress, choose to recycle or reuse them. WikiHow, a community online database of how-to guides, offers for example "5 Ways to Recycle a Used Wedding Gown," which includes selling it (through a consignment shop), donating it to charity (to a charitable organization with local thrift stores, to the costume department of your community theater, or to an artist!), giving the dress away (to someone who is getting married soon), altering it (into another piece of clothing) or transforming it (into a wedding quilt, a pillow, or a christening gown for children) or "trashing the dress" through a photo session (http://www.wikihow.com/Recycle-a-Used-Wedding-Gown). There are many other web sites that offer options to donate wedding dresses for good causes, such as http://myexwifesweddingdress.com/donate-a-dress/ or http://www.biggreenpurse.com/give-your-wedding-gown-a-second-life-and-grant-someone-else-a-lifelong-wish/.

they wanted to take their chosen dress home to do the transformation themselves (Carmen, Daniela, Lee and Nati). I really liked this solution because I felt the transformation would be more personal and therefore their intentions might be stronger. Other participants chose a specific dress for me to transform based on their ideas. Some of them gave me proposals with specific instructions to execute on the dress (Anne, Claudia, Rosa and Tina) while others just described a concept (or even a word) that I had to interpret to make the transformation (Desirée, Gen, Gina, Norma, Paula and Sara). A few decided to perform a symbolic transformation themselves during the photo session at Loyola Chapel (Denisse, Flavia, Jessie and Zacy).

Once I collected the proposals for the dresses that I was going to transform, I sketched them to show to and discuss with the participants. When each sketch was approved by its corresponding author, I started working on her assigned dress. Although I transformed each dress respecting as much as possible my participants' original proposals, there were several formal and material decisions that I had to make on my own. This part of the process was clearly much more introverted, personal and intuitive, supported by our previous friendship. Each transformed dress was tried on by its author to see, feel and experience before the formal and final photographic session. That was the last chance we had for making modifications, if they were still possible. During those meetings, we took some photos of each woman wearing her transformed dress so she could see herself in the pictures and keep a record of the process. These pictures were taken mostly by me or Jacqueline Fortson (Jackie), a good photographer and friend of mine. Her help in this part of the project was essential to me, as her calm and sympathetic presence was a great support during those meetings, allowing me to focus on the conversations I needed to have with each participant and on the dresses themselves while she took pictures of the process. To me, these pictures (included in Chapter Six) are an important, intimate and truthful document of the working process of this project.

Figure 8. Participants looking at TTD images at Maria's home (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 9. Participants trying some wedding dresses on at Maria's home (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

The final stage consisted of a formal photo shoot by Enrique Uranga, a Mexican-Canadian professional photographer who has lived in Montreal for more than 10 years. We took the pictures in Concordia's Loyola Chapel, on the weekend of March 23-24, 2013. I chose Loyola Chapel for both

practical and symbolic reasons. We definitely had to work in an interior space, as the session took place in winter (in Montreal!). Although some TTD pictures show brides in the snow, I felt an ethical responsibility to offer my participants and the photographers a warm and safe place to work. Loyola Chapel is a beautiful formal location, with lots of space and light, that I discovered while doing my yoga practice. Completed in 1933, the building served as a chapel for Loyola College. Since Loyola and Sir George Williams merged in 1974 to create Concordia University, Loyola Chapel has been an inclusive place of worship opened to services from many different religions, and other community events (http://www.concordia.ca). The idea of doing the photo session there came naturally to me when I was looking around the city for the ideal spot for this project. Although religion is not one of the main focuses of this research, it is important to note that Loyola Chapel has become known as more of a community building than a church. It is used to perform all kinds of activities, from multi-faith ceremonies and summer camps, to personal events, such as weddings. It still conveys some of the historical and social connotations of Catholicism, so influential still in North American marriages. It is also part of Concordia University, making it not only accessible to me as a graduate student, but also meaningful as a research-creation event.

Enrique and I went to the chapel before the photo shoot to allocate a spot for each woman's pictures, based on the characteristics of her dress and in some cases related to her assigned schedule. The photo shoot was divided into individual sessions of 30 minutes. However, the participants were allowed to stay longer to interact with the others and to see more projects. Like in a real wedding situation, during the actual photo sessions I delegated most of the formal choices to Enrique and the participants, who had to decide together how each was going to appear (as long as the original idea was represented). Prior to the photo session I had talked with each woman about the characteristics of her final photograph, to be sure that her intention was going to be clearly presented. Throughout those conversations we made formal, visual and performative decisions in relation to her original proposal,

considering not only herself and her transformed dress in this specific setting, but also some objects that would make her notion stronger, and in some cases her family.

After the photo session I selected, with the help of Enrique, two pictures of each woman. We looked for images that reflected her original idea while considering its visual effectiveness. Along with these two images, each participant received also a couple of pictures taken at a familiar space by me or Jackie (in the cases where we did so) to choose from. Each participating woman is represented in this project by the picture that she selected from these options. These final pictures were printed on silk at Hexagram, at Concordia's Centre for Research-Creation in Media Arts and Technologies, for an exhibition of this work at La Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in April of 2013. They were also uploaded to my web page, along with my participants' testimonies (at www.mariaezcurra.com). Because this project somehow originated from the Internet, where I found hundreds of images of women trashing their dresses, I wanted it to end there as well, sharing this alternative way of "trashing" a dress, which to me seems much more symbolically meaningful.

After the exhibition of the photographs, where the participants saw all the images together as a body of work, and were able to talk to each other and their families, they wrote about this experience following a loosely structured survey, providing new notions about their personal understanding of the process. I provided the questions to them in English (attached in Appendix 1), and made them available in Spanish, too, for those who required it. Despite being in Québec, I didn't include surveys in French because—as I didn't speak it at that time—I communicated with all these women either in English or Spanish. I asked them to answer the questionnaire preferably in English to avoid a translation and possible misinterpretations, but always gave them the option to do what felt more comfortable for them. I got most of the answers in English, with the exception of the texts by Nati, Paula and Rosa, which I translated to English to keep their ideas accessible and the text's fluidity, with a footnote to the original answers in Spanish. I must confess that to me, as an artist, the process was successfully

completed when we worn and performed with the transformed dresses and the pictures were done. The chance to exhibit the whole series shortly after the project's conclusion was a great way of closing this project. However, as a doctoral student I understand the need to give these images my own analysis and reach a reliable verbal conclusion.

Figure 10. Collectively transforming a wedding dress (2012)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

As a social science, art education often relies on qualitative research to produce new knowledge, which—although usually based on personal experience and intuition—involves theories that need to be supported by multiple methodologies and sustained by data. While the knowledge resulting from art practices as research is usually embodied within artworks and artistic processes, to be recognized as academic research it should involve systematic methods, documenting and presenting its processes and results. Academic research-creation processes include specific research questions which—despite being objective—usually contain subjective, personal and expressive processes, sometimes involving collaboration with other people and disciplines (Picard-Aitken & Bertrand, 2008).

Art practices have a strong potential as research to reveal new insights and understandings, also creating awareness about the processes of learning and teaching through arts in educative institutions (Sullivan, 2006; 2010). Therefore, I see this project as an art practice as well as a work of research, as it has both imaginative and cognitive capacities that embody new meanings. The significance of *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* consists of spearheading a collective creation of representations of new female roles that are linked to tradition yet propose a new version of marital engagement and different understandings about what it means to be a wife and a woman today. Furthermore, through the creation and dissemination of my research, I expect to deepen my own and others' understanding of art-making as a research practice that, involving creativity, intuition, imagination, problem formulation and solving, can be successfully used not only for learning through making, but also to communicate new ideas and to generate meaning (Leavy, 2015).

Chapter Two
Final Photographs of Threads, Trends and Threats

Anne

Figure 11. Anne (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Anne Pilon's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Carmen

Figure 12. *Carmen* (2013)
Dress transformation by Carmen Giménez Cacho
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Claudia

Figure 13. *Claudia* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Claudia Vega's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Daniela

Figure 14. *Daniela* (2013)
Dress transformation by Daniela Ortiz
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Denisse

Figure 15. *Denisse* (2013)
Dress performatively trashed by Denisse Horcasitas
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Desirée

Figure 16. *Desirée* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Desirée's proposal. Skull's decoration by Desirée Grajales
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Flavia

Figure 17. *Flavia* (2013)
Dress performatively transformed by Flavia Hevia
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

Gen

Figure 18. *Gen* (2013)
Dresses transformation by Maria, based on Gen's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Gina

Figure 19. *Gina* (2013)
Dress by Maria, based on Gina's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Jessie

Figure 20. *Jessie* (2013)
Dress performatively transformed by Jessie
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Lee

Figure 21. *Lee* (2013)
Dress transformation by Lee Lapaix
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Maria

Figure 22. *Maria* (2013)
Dress by Maria
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Nati

Figure 23. *Nati* (2013)
Dress transformation by María Natividad Vega Vega (Nati)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Norma

Figure 24. *Norma* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Norma Vite's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Paula

Figure 25. *Paula* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Paula's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Rosa

Figure 26. *Rosa* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Rosa's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Sara

Figure 27. *Sara* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Sara's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Tina

Figure 28. *Tina* (2013)
Dress transformation by Maria, based on Tina's proposal
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Zacy

Figure 29. *Zacy* (2013)
Dress transformation by Zacy
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Chapter Three
The Wedding Dress:
Marriage and Women

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, a handsome prince met a beautiful maiden, swept her off her feet, married her in a perfect white wedding ceremony, and carried her away to a land of fairy tales and dreams where they raised three gorgeous children and lived happily ever after.
Chrys Ingraham (2008)

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress is based on the artistic transformation and active use of wedding dresses to represent the marital experiences of 19 women. These transformations consider intimate issues related to love, commitment, family, tradition and beliefs, and also the social expectations and implications that marriage has for us. The purpose of this project is not to investigate marriage, weddings, or even brides as an isolated social phenomenon, but to explore through art how women[10] are socialized to desire a certain kind of marriage, and the consequences that this process has in our lives. According to Beauvoir (1989), femininity is not defined by our biological, psychological, or intellectual characteristics, but it is socially constructed. What determines the gendered role of a woman is the situation in which she learns her social roles. Gender then, is the result of culture and circumstance. It follows that if one is not born a woman (Beauvoir[11], 1989, p. 301), one is also not born to become a bride (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 4). Women are not born with natural desires for an expensive long white dress. We are socially taught to want it. Today, in popular culture, the heterosexual imaginary starts by "naturalizing gender as though it is somehow related to our biology and not the result of social processes or organized in the interests of institutionalized heterosexuality" (Ibid.). Marriage, however, is not presented to us as "a social and cultural practice produced to serve

[10] While the term 'female' usually denotes fixed sexual characteristics, 'woman' is a gender term that depends on social and cultural factors. Since being a woman is a subjective experience, there is a broad understanding among feminist scholars of what 'woman' is, as "there is no fixed, universalizing biological essence, nor are there sociocultural patterns of conduct, activities or structures of feeling that bind all women together as a group" (Gillman, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, for the purposes of this research, 'woman' is a normative term that organizes, unifies and determines the roles of social individuals. 'Woman' is a cultural interpretation of being female, constituting our gendered identity by the position we occupy in the world and from which we can act politically (Alcoff, 2006, p. 148).
[11] Unlike love or even motherhood, Beauvoir saw marriage as an 'immoral' obligation (Rowley, 2007, p. 43). Many years later, Beauvoir's criticism towards marriage[11] remains valid today as a patriarchal institution that exploits women's labor and sexuality, restricting their professional and financial ambitions

particular interests" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 166). Naturalized by romance, heteronormativity makes us believe that marriage is compulsory to accomplish "a sense of well-being, belonging, passion, morality, and love" (Ibid.).

Despite the fact that weddings—particularly those commonly referred to as "white weddings"—are a central element of Western cultural imagery, there are few scholarly texts discussing this phenomenon in relation to consumption, romance and heteronormativity. In the context of this research, the ideas of scholars like Elizabeth Freeman (2002), Jaclyn Geller (2001), Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck (2003), and Chrys Ingraham (2008, 2011) offer significant considerations on weddings in relation to gender and social inequalities. Taking into account an interesting array of literary and scholarly texts, along with Hollywood films and visual culture, Freeman differentiates marriage—as a patriarchal institution—from weddings—as feminized ceremonies. In her book *The Wedding Complex* (2002), she defines weddings as public performances that involve imagination, transformation, celebration and attachment, and which do not necessarily pursue legal marriage as their final goal (along with its respective institutional connotations of heterosexuality and traditional gender roles). The normative and commercial interests hidden behind Western weddings are exposed in Jaclyn Geller's *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique* (2001), in which she explores and denounces weddings as a bastion of patriarchy and heteronormativity. The link between consumption and romantic love in weddings is also acknowledged by Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck in *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (2003). Their understandings on the mixed messages involved in a wedding are particularly useful in this research-creation, offering an interpretation of how the wedding industry controls and shapes the bride's identity and aspirations, based mostly on its important affective dimension. Finally, Chrys Ingraham's *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (2008a) offers a significant series of ideas for this work,

based on her analysis of the ways in which weddings are used to preserve and institutionalize heterosexuality.

A professor of Sociology and Latin American Studies at Purchase College in the State University of New York, Ingraham examines the strong influence that weddings have on popular visual culture and the media, highlighting the important role they play in maintaining the romance of heterosexuality promoted by consumer culture and the myth of white supremacy (2008a). She explains how the marketing and economic ambitions of weddings have replaced the religious and moral implications that marriage used to have, where the stereotypical images and customs involved in a wedding—such as a bride in a formal white gown, a reception full of attendants, a religious ceremony and a honeymoon—have become so common in current societies that they have become the norm. Ingraham's explorations are especially significant for this research because she complements her study on weddings with an examination of contemporary art in a text called *Straightening Up: The Marriage of Conformity and Resistance in Wedding Art* (2008b), giving a powerful voice to visual texts in her analysis. Her inquiry is particularly useful in this context, because my research-creation project also gives considerable creative and critical attention to the visual culture of the wedding, as discussed in Chapter Four, called "The Art of Wearing a Dress." Ingraham sees art works as being capable of exposing, challenging, criticizing and resisting the production and dissemination of gender, racial and class inequalities legitimized by white weddings. For her, weddings function as "a mass production and sacred ritual, defying reinterpretation, resistance and creativity" which "can be experienced by some as oppressive, making it a significant seedbed for artists whose passion and imagination is aroused by resistance to conformity" (Ingraham, 2008b, p. 161).

Ingraham is not as interested in weddings themselves as she is in exposing the wedding industry as a heterosexist, racist and classist institution which weddings not only rely on, but also preserve. She sees contemporary white weddings as a homogeneous mass-marketed product controlled by the

wedding complex, a "structure [that] reflects the close association among weddings, the transnational wedding industry, labor, global economics, marriage, the state, finance, religion, media, the World Wide Web, and popular culture" (2008a, p. 38). The wedding market intends to create a series of romantic and sacred notions of heterosexuality to regulate our ideas and expectations in relation to weddings, marriage, race and class[12]. By romanticizing heterosexuality to favour capitalism, the wedding industry alienates basic social relations like love, community, commitment and family, while supporting "a heterogendered and globalized racial division of labor, white supremacy, the private sphere as women's work, and women as property" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 112).

Marriage

> *Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman, ' for she was taken out of man. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.*
> Genesis 2:22–24 (King James Version)

According to the Oxford Dictionary (2015), marriage is "the formal union of a man and a woman, typically as recognized by law, by which they become husband and wife" (http://oxforddictionaries.com). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2015) offers a broader definition of marriage as "the relationship that exists between a husband and a wife," "a similar relationship between people of the same sex," and "a ceremony in which two people are married to each other" (http://www.merriam-webster.com). In sociology, marriage is usually seen as a "socially approved sexual and economic union between two or more people that is expected to last for a long time" (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011, p. 96). Shirley A. Hill, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Kansas who investigates the implications of social inequalities on families, especially those based on social class, gender and race, explains that although the institution of marriage is not as old as family, it has

[12] While issues of race and class are critical aspects of white weddings, this research-creation is focused exclusively on questions of gender and gender roles to ensure a clear theoretical framework to guide the study.

developed in most cultures and evolved differently over time. Throughout history there have been monogamous and polygamous marriages, sexually restricted and sexually unrestricted marriages, and matriarchal and patriarchal marriages. The origin of marriage as we know it today in Western societies can be explained through religiously based theories which held that male-dominated monogamous marriages were “God-ordained and had always existed” (Hill, 2011, p. 4). For Hill, marriage has generally been defined as “a social and legal union between men and women, although a few cultures have allowed people of the same sex to marry” (2011, p. 4), presenting “gender division of labor between men and women [as its] most universal feature” (p. 5).

History of Marriage

Hill explains that originally, in early nomadic societies where all members of a group had to contribute to the production or collection of food, partnering between men and women was probably informal and secondary to group ties. Often surviving with very little resources, with no concept of private property, or even the knowledge of biological paternity, these groups functioned with a certain degree of social equality (p. 5). Later, restructured by the discovery of agriculture, marriage became a formal contractual relationship between men and women, and the center of family life in almost every culture. In this context, domestic activities such as taking care of children, gardening, cooking, weaving and pottery were considered to be female tasks, while hunting, cultivating and herding cattle became characteristically male work. This gendered division of labor can in part be explained by biological factors, as only women can give birth to and breastfeed children, naturally becoming the family’s caregivers. However, women’s reproductive roles are not the only reason for familial and social male domination (Hill, 2011). In the Middle Ages, when trade flourished due to technological and agricultural innovations, marriage began to be influenced primarily by economic factors. Matrimonies among the elite and reigning classes became a common practice to create political alliances. Societies became

highly patriarchal, as properties were transferred from father to son. Consequently, procreating male children and ensuring paternity became extremely important for the purposes of inheritance and legacy. In a context where women's bodies were treated as a male property, their rights and sexuality became restricted, especially for those women married to rich and powerful men. In ancient Western societies like Greece and Rome, women's most important role as wives was to bear a man's legitimate children while taking care of the family. Later, when celibacy was promoted as the noblest way of life, marriage and family life were disregarded by the Christian Church, encouraging people to leave their property to God and thus increasing the Church's fortune. However, around 1200 C.E., the institution of marriage was reinforced by the influence of Christianity and the law as a patriarchal formal contract, turning marriage into a sacrament of the Christian Church and an indissoluble union. Marriage was then expected to reinforce the nuclear family by supporting monogamy, pre-marital chastity and marital fidelity, but always favouring men (Hill, 2011).

Historian Karen Offen, in her *Brief History of Marriage* (2013), explains how a woman's marital status in Western societies during the early 18th century considerably influenced her capacity to control land, possessions or income. The legal existence of a woman was suspended with her marriage, being incorporated or consolidated into her husband's control. English law dispossessed married women of their property rights (with the exception of the queen), which were subjected to the financial power of their husbands, male relatives, or guardians. As a reaction to these social restrains, by the mid-19th century women in Europe—especially in England—began to fight back to gain legal rights such as the right to vote (women's suffrage) and property rights, considered today as the first (wave) feminists. This same system influenced women's status in relation to marriage and money in the early English North American colonies and in the postcolonial societies that followed. Women's struggles made some legal gains in Canada too, such as the right to have an active participation in regards to their children, the right to own and inherit property, and the right to vote which was won between 1917 and 1920

(Walters, 2005). Women's knowledge, education and better understanding of the legal restrictions that governed their access to money, jobs and land encouraged them to campaign for change in social laws, including marital regulations. These factors started the feminist campaigns of the 19th and 20th centuries in many societies, which eventually led to women's empowerment to pursue their social and economic independence (Offen, 2013; Walters, 2005).

Unlike European laws, yet still deeply patriarchal, the Spanish system that ruled Latin American colonies was socially, administratively and politically decentralized. Social and familial regulations were strongly influenced by other factors such as wealth, occupation and race. Marriage was considered a partnership in which women could actively control their own property and all the possessions of a married couple became community property (Gauderman, 2005). However, in financial matters women often needed their husband's permission to make contracts, as well as in moral and religious matters, where honour was regarded as an exclusively male virtue which could be tarnished by female 'indiscretions.' This system placed high social values on women's premarital virginity and marital fidelity. Although women were not considered 'equal' to men, they still had legal rights that broadened their ability to challenge male authority across personal and institutional lines (Gauderman, 2005). I think it is important to mention this because many of this project's participants, including myself, are from Latin American countries.

Marriage in Québec

In France, the Napoleonic Code established at the beginning of the 19th century also enforced the idea of a husband's supremacy over his wife and children, restricting married women's rights to engage in financial transactions or keep their own incomes. Governments throughout Europe adopted this code as their model for dispossessing women in marriage. According to The Clio Collective[13] (1987),

[13] The Clio Collective is formed by four historians who "have tried to write history in a different way" (The Clio Collective, 1987): Micheline Dumont, a specialist in women's history in Québec who teaches at the University of Sherbrooke; Michèle Jean, a

the Civil Code of Lower Canada (1866) was based on the Napoleonic Code, reaffirming the subordinate status of married women to their husbands in the province of Québec, which was originally colonized by the French.

While in Canada first wave feminists struggled for women's access to vote and education, and the second feminist wave of the 1960s focused on women's rights and equality, in Québec, feminists had to deal with a different reality. By the mid-19th century, women in Canada started advocating to change their status under the Married Women's Property Act, which was modified several times before the end of the century. Although at the beginning of the 20th century marriage regimes in most Canadian provinces were those of separation of property, in Québec these rights were only enjoyed by unmarried women and widows. A married woman's legal rights were still subject to her husband's authorization, as she was expected to demonstrate obedience and respect to his authority. Due to the status of married women, reforms to the Civil Code of Lower Canada became the major target for Québécois feminists near the turn of the century until its abolishment in 1994 (The Clio Collective, 1987). These reforms were closely related to the struggles faced by Canadian suffragists who, by the end of the 19th century, started meeting and exchanging ideas, believing that their vote would allow them to implement desired reforms to their legal rights. After a lengthy campaign, women in Manitoba won the right to vote provincially in 1916. In 1917, the Wartime Elections Act allowed British wives, mothers and sisters of soldiers serving in the First World War to vote nationally on behalf of their male relatives. While in 1918 this right was extended to most Canadian women of at least 21 years of age, non-white women were not allowed to vote at the provincial and federal level until the late 1940s. Women in Québec were not allowed to vote provincially until 1940 either, with the exception of First Nations women, who did not earn the right to vote until the 1960s (Ibid.).

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journalist and academic who specialises in culture and education; Marie Lavigne, formerly the director of the Regional Offices, Québec Ministry of Cultural Affairs; and Jennifer Stoddart, who is deeply involved with the Canadian Human Rights Commission and the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

In Canada, Aboriginal women often experienced challenges and discrimination that neither Western women nor Aboriginal men had to endure. Today they continue to face double discrimination, both as women and as Aboriginal people. Regardless of the socio-cultural diversity of the First Nations, balanced gender roles were a common characteristic of pre-colonial Aboriginal societies. According to Erin Hanson, in her text *A Brief History of the Marginalization of Aboriginal Women in Canada* (2009) published online by the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia, men and women were considered to have different but complementary roles, and many aboriginal groups were matrilineal, passing down their wealth, power and inheritance through the mother. Aboriginal social systems were deeply damaged by colonizers, who imposed their foreign patriarchal European value system. Aboriginal women's rights, specifically matriarchal descent patterns, were disrupted in the 1850s, when the government ruled that only Aboriginal males, their children, or their wives could be considered as 'Indians.' Therefore, women became dependent on relationships with men to determine whether or not they were 'Aboriginal,' denying the traditional system of many First Nations that had been in place for hundreds of generations (Hanson, 2009).

In 1876 the federal government created the Indian Act[14], aimed to position men as leaders and heads of households while placing wives as their dependents. It denied the right to possess land and other property to married Aboriginal women. Some amendments allowed later for a wife to inherit in her husband's will, though only if an agent determined she was of 'good moral character' (Hanson, 2009). During the 1970s, Aboriginal and women rights movements began to challenge the provisions of the Indian Act, condemning the statutory rule that forced Aboriginal women to lose their status when

[14] The Indian Act is a "Canadian federal law that governs in matters pertaining to Indian status [authorizing] the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the affairs and day-to-day lives of registered Indians and reserve communities" (Hanson, 2009). The Indian Act has also allowed the federal government to regulate the Indian reserves, and even to decide who qualifies as 'Indian' according to their own principles. It is seen by many not only as a series of laws that govern Indian life, but also as a restraining regulatory system that intends to define and control Native identity according to normalizing criteria (Ibid).

marrying a non-Indian man (even though Indian men kept their status if they married non-Indians), for being discriminatory against their identity as Aboriginal people and as women (Henderson, 2006). In this context, the Canadian government was forced to amend these provisions in the Constitution Act of 1982 through Bill C-31, which reviewed the Indian Act to be into accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Henderson, 2006). Bill C-31 amendments allowed many women and their children to reclaim “Indian” status, and, in some cases, their First Nation (band) membership, resulting in thousands of Indigenous people who had previously been denied status immediately regaining it (Henderson, 2006; O'Donnell & Wallace, 2011).

Marriage Today

Susan A. McDaniel and Lorne Tepperman talk about *Close Relations* (2011) in a Canadian context, analyzing the institution of family from a sociological perspective, discussing marriage, parenting, family violence, divorce and family policy, while considering gender issues as an important aspect of their research. According to them, people in Western countries are less inclined to marry today than in the past. The amount of married couples in Canada decreased from 91.6% in 1961 to 67% in 2011, due mostly to the growth of common-law couples, which increased by 345.2% between 1981 and 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2012b). This shows that although marriage is still a favored arrangement, cohabitation is increasingly becoming more popular, offering many of the benefits of marriage without the same social and religious constrains. Singlehood is also more accepted now as a personal choice. Until recently marriage in Western cultures was a social ritual by which young couples were expected to declare their adulthood. In the 1960s, with the sexual revolution and the women’s movement, social attitudes towards sexuality and gender roles started changing, along with marital structures and permanence. In Canada, marriages started to decline, dropping rapidly in the 1970s, and slowly since the 1980s, while couples’ ages at the time of marriage has been rising (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011,

p. 98). Two apparently contradictory tendencies characterize marriage in Canada today. One is the growth in popularity of alternatives to marriage, represented by the decline in rates of legal marriage and the other is the continuing popularity of marriage, as 90% of young people in Canada plan to marry, have children, "and stay with the same partner for the rest of their lives" (p. 93). Despite the fact that in the last two decades cohabitation has become a long-term alternative to marriage in Canada, while in Québec it has been on the rise for the last 50 years, "Canadians typically see marriage as 'natural' and believe it to be the foundation of a family" (p. 97). Nevertheless, they also "place less emphasis on marriage than they did a decade ago. The centrality of marriage seems to have weakened" (p. 97-98). Cohabitation keeps several of the benefits expected of family life, like sexual and emotional satisfaction and mutual care and support, while offering a greater degree of choices to the partners. Because the major difference between marriage and cohabitation is that marriage has an explicit legal commitment that cohabitation lacks, some couples use it to position themselves against the legal and sometimes religious restrictions of traditional marriage (p. 105). For many couples in cohabiting relationships their level of commitment and permanence is the same, if not higher, than that found in marriage. Cohabiting couples are increasingly having and raising children, validating a change in both attitude and behavior towards the formation of families.

The government of Québec has a web page that provides information on marriage, explaining the main legal aspects, the formalities of the ceremony and the rights and duties of the partners, according to matrimonial regimes in effect in this province. In this site, marriage is explained as governed by Book Two of the Civil Code of Québec, which concerns family law, "founded on two key principles: equality between the spouses, and free choice of a matrimonial regime," where the couple "must choose the family residence together; contribute toward household expenses according to their respective means; jointly assume the debts contracted for the day-to-day needs of the family; and

comply with the legal provisions governing partition of the family patrimony if the couple is legally separated or if the marriage is dissolved" (Justice Québec, 2013).

In the last century there have been drastic changes in marriage dynamics in the USA: divorce, instead of death, has become the major cause of marriage termination; remarriage has declined; marrying couples' age has augmented; cohabitation and childfree marriages are increasingly more common; and changes in gender roles have increased (Amato et al. 2007). Paul R. Amato, Alan Booth, David R. Johnson and Stacy F. Rogers (2007), all sociologists at Pennsylvania State University, investigated recent marital quality, looking for trends in happiness, satisfaction, stability and change, based on two comparable cross-sectional surveys of married couples conducted over the course of eight years in the United States. They examined social changes affecting married couples such as a declining tendency in marital duration; an increase in age and education levels at marriage; an increase in employment rates for women, along with the growth of wives' earnings; a tendency towards decision-making equality between husband and wife; and a possible rise in religiosity, along with the complex and contradictory consequences that these changes have had on marital quality during the last two decades of the 20th century. They found a strong tendency for spouses to have considerably less interaction than couples in previous decades, i.e. eating together, visiting friends or family, working on common projects, going out and shopping. However, they also observed a decline in marital problems and conflicts. The rise of economic resources, equality in decision-making, and non-traditional attitudes toward gender roles were associated with improvements in the quality of marriage, while an increase in men's housework seemed to aggravate marital quality among husbands but to improve marital quality among wives (Amato et al. 2007). Consequently, it is unclear whether the general level of marital quality has improved or declined in recent decades. I have not found such a detailed study for Québec, Canada, North America in general, or even for Mexico or Latin America, but I think this can give us a general idea of current marital trends in Western societies, or at least in Western developed countries. We can

perceive from this study that marriage is an ambiguous institution. It is an adaptable association as much as a restraining one, with a strong capacity to accommodate to its context, adjusting to the complex changes that have occurred in society over the recent past while influencing them as well.

Marriage for Women

Marriage and family are fundamental structures of society. While they are two different institutions, they have always been closely interconnected in Western cultures (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011). Historically, the main purpose of marriage has been to establish a family, but today both of these concepts are organic and complex. A family is no longer necessarily understood as a husband, a wife and two children—maybe even a pet—as it was for most of the 20th century in Western societies. Today there is a growing acceptance of more inclusive family models, such as single or homosexual parent(s). Sociologists today define family in terms of the manner in which members relate to one another more so than on a strict configuration of status roles (Ibid.). Families today can be defined as socially recognized groups that form emotional connections between their members, joined either by blood, marriage, choice or adoption. Therefore, marriage is one of the many structures that can form a family and families are one of the many reasons for marriage.

Due to the fact that gendered divisions of labour persist in contemporary heterosexual matrimonies, where women still do most of the housework even if they also work outside of their home, marriage is usually still perceived as a better institution for men than for women. Men and women often have different understandings of marriage, experiencing it in different and sometimes even opposing ways. Childcare is especially conflictive in relation to housework, as it reduces a couple's free time, but especially that of women (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011, p. 144). On average, marriage increases a woman's total work time by more than seven hours per week, while men's work time is only increased by half of that amount (p. 147). Wives not only do more household labour, but also feel

under-rewarded and undervalued while doing it, leading to marital conflicts, as there seems to be an inverse relationship between marital satisfaction and power inequality due to gender roles (p. 143). In contrast, household tasks seem to be divided more fairly and equally in same-sex marriages than in heterosexual ones (p. 144).

The diverse meanings and implications of marriage today seem to be contradictory and confusing. Rooted in complex human relationships, marriage can be sensed, lived and understood in completely different ways by different people in different contexts. The ideas that the participants of this project have about marriage are quite diverse. They are not only based on local social norms or family traditions, and influenced by a highly invasive globalized popular culture, but are also based on personal beliefs and experiences. For some of them it means "to share your life with someone else, with a mutual understanding and commitment of love, support and growth"[15] (Paula[16], 2013), being "a commitment and a process that implies growing every day with the concessions and the non-unconditional, but honest, support of the partner"[17] (Rosa, 2013), involving "great compromise and limitation" (Jessie, 2013), being a "formal and social recognition of a relationship between two people" (Carmen, 2013). Some of them see marriage as a transformation; as a "constant construction and deconstruction" of both the individual and the couple (Daniela, 2013); and as a way of "becoming something else [through a] process that can be painful or can be joyful, but at the end it will always transform you" (Flavia, 2013). Marriage is also perceived as a "dead tradition" (Desirée, 2013); and as an act that "in no way guarantees a loving, lasting, or meaningful relationship" (Lee, 2013). It is also understood as something unnecessary, as there are "many other ways to celebrate which are less expensive, less complicated and less energy/time consuming" (Denisse, 2013), or simply as an action

[15] "compartir la vida con otro, con un entendimiento y un compromiso mutuo de amor, apoyo y crecimiento." (Paula, 2013).
[16] As explained in the introductory chapter, Paula, Rosa and Nati answered their surveys in Spanish and I translated them to English for the purpose of this work.
[17] "un compromiso y un proceso que implica crecer todos los días con las concesiones y con el apoyo no incondicional, pero honesto de la pareja." (Rosa, 2013).

that does not necessarily imply “something bad” (Sara, 2013). Regarding my own position, I realize that I feel ambiguous and contradictory about the concept of marriage. On one hand I see it as merely institutional bureaucratic paper work, like a visa or an official transcript. Marriage is a legal contract for a relationship between two people, which—while wives have gained specific legal rights protected by a multitude of laws in recent years—still traditionally perpetuates dominant heterosexual patriarchal norms. Consistently, I see white weddings as a reflection of this regulation of love: an impersonal way of making a personal commitment. On the other hand, I must admit that when I attend a wedding I always become excited and feel deeply touched by the happiness of the couple—usually friends of mine. Although I do not believe in—and actually question—many of the symbols still used in this contemporary ritual and their implications, I enjoy being there and sharing the couple’s love, illusions, commitment and happiness. I like the human aspect of this ritual. And I love to dance all night at a wedding party, surrounded by friends and family!

White Weddings

I'd imagine my wedding as a fairy tale... huge, beautiful and white
Paris Hilton (n.d.)

A wedding ceremony is the most common way of carrying out a traditional marriage today. Through history, weddings have functioned as “a symbolic rite of passage for heterosexual men and women” (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 5). Weddings are ordered social, symbolic and formal acts performed to unite a couple, based on significant principles and cultural traditions, often becoming the major ritual in many people’s lives (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Although the traditions and customs involved in a wedding vary between cultures, religions, countries, ethnic groups, social classes and genders, for the purposes of this text, I’ll be focusing primarily on the Western concept of marriage, colloquially referred to as white weddings. Today a number of cultures have adopted the traditional Western “white wedding,” a term which originates from the white color of the bride’s wedding dress. Besides a sophisticated white

gown for the bride, these ceremonies usually involve a ritual in a religious location which includes a public statement of marriage made by an authority figure, an exchange of vows by the couple and the trading of a gift (usually a ring), flowers, money, or another symbolic object. This is commonly followed by a reception, which includes a multi-layered white cake, more flowers, presents, a toast, music and dancing, and a honeymoon (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a). Some of the most important influences for a wedding ceremony are informally taught to the couple through tradition, personal expectations—which are usually guided by images from popular culture—and wedding specialists, whose idea of cultural identity is strongly related to consumerism. Among other professionals, this last group includes wedding photographers, who usually produce stereotypical social and commercial images of the couple, instead of integrating different personal signs creatively (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002).

In this way, weddings reproduce important aspects of Western societies while communicating social prestige and giving status, mostly to women (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). Cele C. Otnes and Elizabeth H. Pleck, in their book *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (2003), expose the wedding industry as a site of reproduction for important aspects of popular consumer culture. They see weddings as a site of excessive consumption justified by the illusion of romantic love and its promise of an extraordinary transformation. Although they are considered to be one of the most important traditional and religious rituals in contemporary societies, weddings' current pervasiveness is probably due to the link that they make between romantic love and the values of consumer culture. They suggest a magical change and offer the promise of eternal love, thus validating an excessive material and economic consumption targeted mainly towards women and represented by the bride's gown.

While the "ideology of romantic love is a belief in a social relation disconnected from real conditions of existence" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 124), it still plays a central role in a wedding. Although in many societies arranged marriages are still the norm, in Western societies most people claim to marry primarily for love; this, despite the fact that the highest divorce rates belong to people who assign love

the most importance as a basis for their happiness. However, it is common—and even expected—that other aspects are taken into account when getting married, like a partner's social or economic status (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011, p. 138).

Through popular visual culture, the concept of romance generates and regulates meanings and beliefs that justify dominant interests, becoming "an ideology in action" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 123) and thus naturalizing our social reality. In this context, we learn to recognize marriage and weddings as instances of commitment and love, where romance "represents the utopian promise of love, joy, happiness, well-being, belonging and community. Ultimately, romance is ideology at work in the creation of illusion. It is not about the real but is, instead, about the fantasy, fairy-tale, or utopian vision of the real" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 179). Western white weddings are recognized social expressions of ideas influenced by race, patriarchy and heterosexuality, where gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples are often devalued or hidden (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a). These ceremonies make use of the ideology of romantic love to serve patriarchal and capitalist interests, reinforcing "a heterogendered division of labor that subordinates women's needs to men's desires, notions that are central to the heterosexual imaginary. Creating the illusion of plenitude and fullness, the ideology of romance produces a belief that sexual objectification and subordination are both natural and justified" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 125).

In Catholicism, which has historically deeply shaped many of the ideas and beliefs of the Québecois and Latin American population[18] (Seljak, 1996), marriage is seen as a monogamous and lifelong institution that encourages people to raise children. Many of the gestures and symbols presented today in traditional Western weddings are influenced by Eve and Adam, the archetypal

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[18] As weddings' religious and traditional connotations have been widely replaced today by the commercial interests surrounding romance, I am not considering my participants' religious heritage or beliefs as a significant aspect of this research. Given the pervasiveness of the white wedding imagery, I didn't consider necessary to open this research to the religious, racial or ethnic heritage of the participants, except as it has been expressly introduced by them.

woman and man, communicating exaggerated forms of femininity and masculinity. Originating as religious rituals intended to portray marriage as a lifetime commitment, they often present the wife as a submissive servant to her husband and whose duties are fidelity and procreation, transforming the wedding into a ritual of subordination (Otnes & Pleck 2003, p. 112). Probably one the most influential texts affecting current gender roles and concepts of sexuality in Western society is the biblical account of creation found in Genesis 2-3. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of the creation of Eve and Adam has been used to establish that women are inferior and subordinate to men. Coincidentally, Eve, who was created by God from Adam's rib to be her companion, was the first dressmaker of garments, which she made out of leaves: “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3:7). However, some biblical texts present Lilith as the first wife of Adam, reflecting an expansion of women's roles in contemporary culture that oppose to patriarchal gender stereotypes restrictive to women:

> She was created at the same time as Adam and as his equal, but faced with Adam’s claim that she should submit to his will, Lilith left her husband and the Garden of Eden on her own initiative, rebelling against the established roles. (Herrera, 2012, p. 18)

Despite the fact that in recent years the average North American wedding cost nearly US$30,000 dollars (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 9; White, 2012, p. 116), presently the demand for white weddings is rising in Western cultures, encouraged by media and consumer culture (Ibid.). According to Ingraham (2008a), this “wedding ideological complex is made up of those sites in [North] American popular culture—children’s toys, wedding announcements, advertising, film, Internet, television, bridal magazines, jokes, cartoons, music—that work as an ensemble in creating many taken-for-granted beliefs, values and assumptions within social texts and practices about weddings” (p. 119). Couples still want to marry through traditional ceremonies—in which brides want to wear a white long dress—despite the deep social changes that have taken place in the last century, such as the women’s rights and gay rights movements, the increase in interreligious, intercultural and same-sex matrimonies, the

revision of ethnic traditions, the rising ages at marriage, the frequency of divorce, the relaxation of social rules influenced by media and popular cultures, and the decreasing expectations of virginity for brides (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a; White, 2012).

The White Gown

The term "white wedding" was popularized after the wedding ceremony of British Queen Victoria in 1840, whose own marriage started the tradition of white weddings and white bridal gowns[19] (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a; Choron, 2010). The term was later appropriated by consumer culture to foster a desire to imitate this royal wedding. Although women married in white long before Queen Victoria, it was not until royal brides—who previously wore velvet capes trimmed with ermine—began wearing white that it became a trend and later developed into a tradition. White was the color that young women wore at court during that period; as it was difficult to keep clean, it was an indication of privilege. Based on colonialist power structures founded on notions of white supremacy and white privilege, white dresses were also associated with racial superiority (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). During the Victorian era, when values of social and sexual restraint reigned and romance was a social trend, white became associated with virginity and elaborate weddings functioned as a reward for women who willingly sacrificed their sexuality by remaining 'pure' until marriage (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a).

[19] Following the enormous interest in Queen Victoria's wedding, the news media of that time began reporting in their society pages on the nuptials of royalty, aristocracy, and high-profile families. This audience interest in celebrity weddings intensified in the twentieth century. Print media and the expanding film and television industries covered royal marriage ceremonies such as that of the young Princess Elizabeth—now Queen Elizabeth II—in 1947, or film star Grace Kelly's marriage to Prince Rainier of Monaco in 1956. These were followed by the ultimate nuptial spectacle of the twentieth century: the wedding of Lady Diana Spencer to Charles, Prince of Whales, in July 1981, which was watched by an international television audience of 750 million people. This wedding not only reinforced associations with fairy-tale romances of brides who became princesses on their wedding day but renewed women's interest in the formality, splendor and privilege associated with the white wedding (Richter, 2008b, p. 121-122). Prince William and Kate Middleton's British royal wedding which took place in 2011 culminates these series of lavish ceremonies, with 1 million people observing from the streets of London, 26 million watching it on television and uncountable number of spectator on the Internet, making of it the "tenth biggest audience in history" (Thomas, 2011).

Figure 30. Queen Victoria's Wedding Dress (1840).
Image from Rain Coast Creative Salon (http://raincoastcreativesalon.com)

By the 1930s, these fashionable expensive white gowns—which were supposed to be worn only once in a woman's life—had become an important facet of the wedding ceremony. Although the wedding dress is still considered to be a sacred object, its current significance is mostly commercial and normative (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a). Today, white is more associated with a social tradition than with the ideas of purity and virginity. Popular visual culture has transformed the white gown into a symbol of the significant but stereotyped role that the bride plays in the ceremony. It implicates exclusivity, along with power, wealth and taste, where with "the Cinderella myth firmly embedded in so many countries, it is natural that the wedding gown—with its ability to transform a

‘commoner’ into a princess—would be considered the focal point of the ceremony” (Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 83). However, white femininity, so prevalent in popular culture sites, also works to ensure the place of women from particular classes and racial groups in the collective imagination, presenting white women as classic brides:

> Women’s experience with weddings and the wedding industry is racially structured. Over and over again the icon of the beautiful white bride in the beautiful white bridal gown is replayed and reinforced, sending a clear message to young and old alike that what counts as beautiful and marriageable is white. Not only does this process secure the consent of white women in participating in the commodification of weddings, but it also contributes to the production of white heterosexual privilege. (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 140)

White gowns have important religious connotations, as they used to represent the bride’s virginity and purity of the soul “in heart and life, and in reverence to God” (Fairchild, 2012), reflecting for many people the idea of virtue described in Revelation 19:7-8: “Christ clothes his bride, the church, in his own righteousness as a garment of fine linen, bright and clean" (Ibid.). While it has gradually lost its religious implications, the white dress still reflects the social expectations and requirements that marriage represents for women. This research-creation project is based on the idea that when a bride chooses her wedding dress, she is not only following tradition, conforming to social norms and supporting commercial interests—often paying more than $1000 for a gown (White, 2012, p. 117)—she is also choosing a self-image that she will present to society for the purposes of transmitting a series of personal and cultural ideas (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 63).

Today the dress is such an important element of Western weddings that it is frequently used as a metaphor for the whole ceremony, where an “image of the gown alone is sufficient to convey the information that a wedding is occurring or has occurred” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 110). When the participants of this project chose a dress to transform, or decided to create one, we did so with the intent to represent our personal experiences or ideas about marriage. Although we were all aware of the traditional symbolism of the wedding dress, the meaning that each one of us attaches to it varies.

Some of us see it as a reflection of personal hopes and a container particular expectations. For Anne, choosing a wedding dress symbolizes a “promise for the future and yet it is meaningless at the same time, as although I had all the garments and rituals of a traditional wedding […] in the end it all came apart” (2013). On the other hand, some participants see it only as an object. For Denisse “a traditional wedding dress is something very uncomfortable and expensive, as you cannot move well because it is very tight and usually big” (2013), while for Claudia it is “only an object filled with beautiful memories” (2013), but not the base of her marriage. That is why she decided to use her own dress to transform for this project, because she sees her clothes “more like a ‘uniform’ that helps us or protects us to go by life and its challenges” (Claudia, 2013).

The idea of purity was brought up by Desirée, who believes that “the white dress representing the purity of the bride is really out of date” (2013) and by Daniela, who simply doesn’t “find much value in the elements that the wedding dress represents such as purity and wealth” (2013). The wedding dress for her “is not more than a costume for the occasion, as opposed to wedding gowns from other traditions that have a lot more meanings” (Daniela, 2013). Both participants perceive purity as an outdated component in a Western bride’s context. For Rosa the wedding dress has “all the imprint of [her] mother and her family, of being married in white for the rest of their life, to give a message of purity to others”[20] (2013).

Many participants recognize the wedding dress as a sexist symbol. For Tina the white wedding dress is a repressive tradition for women. While she understands and respects couples who get married to symbolize their love and commitment, she doesn’t agree with “the standardization of weddings” represented by the white wedding gown which she sees as “a ploy to fuel the wedding industry” (Tina, 2013). Similarly, for Lee, the white wedding dress represents “an unrealistic, idealized, and out of date

[20] “toda la impronta de [su] madre y de su familia, el de casarse de blanco para el resto de su vida, para dar un mensaje de pureza al resto.” (Rosa, 2013).

idea of romantic relationships and marriage" (2013). She finds "the values attached to the image of a religious wedding in a white dress naïve, sexist, out of date, and limiting to both partners" (Lee, 2013). Sara also talks about the restraining symbolisms that the wedding dress has in other cultures like Iran, her country of origin, where "there is a culture which says a woman goes to her husband's home with a white wedding dress and leaves the home with a white funeral cloth after death" (Sara, 2013).

I will come back to these ideas in Chapters Six and Seven, in which I present and develop my participants' ideas and experiences in this project. Here I just wanted to present the wedding dress as a symbol that has both objective social values and personal subjective meanings. With this project we are recreating through art the different ideas, connotations, implications and narratives of marriage through the transformed wedding gowns. They function as a metaphor for the experience of marriage as a normative social practice, based on the idea that "we can't talk about weddings without talking about marriage" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 5).

Becoming a Wife

When a woman choses to wear a wedding dress, she is choosing to become a wife[21], more than a bride: she is following tradition, conforming to social and cultural norms, and committing to a relationship under specific social parameters that support commercial interests. Her wedding dress plays an important role in defining, shaping and exhibiting her identity from a single to a married woman. By shifting the focus from the marriage to the wedding ceremony, white weddings are the medium through which domesticity is romanticized—if not outright masked—by popular culture. The wedding industrial complex avoids representations of wives, instead presenting the bride as a fairy-tale

[21] According to Ingraham (2008a), current marital status categories such as married, divorced, separated, widowed, single, common-law partner, or never married are heteronormative assumptions, presented as the only options "to define our identities" (p.28). In this research I use heterosexual categories of 'wife' and 'husband' based on their deeply embedded gender connotations. However, there are gender neutral words to refer to a partner in an intimate relationship. Some terms that can be used in relation to a person's partner without disclosing her marital or relationship status or sexual orientation are cohabitee, couple, spouse, domestic or life partner, and significant other.

heroine (Kingston, 2004). In her book *The Meaning of Wife* (2004), Canadian journalist Anne Kingston states that while wifehood—and not prostitution—is the world's oldest profession, the notion of what constitutes a wife today in Western societies is contradictory and ambiguous (p. 27). She argues that a 'wife gap' has emerged along with the legislative rights women have won in the last decades. Paradoxically, despite wives gaining many legal rights in marriage, a bride's identity is still dictated by social, religious and commercial patriarchal institutions like the wedding complex. Women are still expected to conform and submit, if not to their husbands, then at least to commercial forces (Kingston, 2004, p.58). However, despite the fact that fewer women are marrying today, bridehood is on the rise as the "twenty-first century's most potent consumer icon" (Ibid. p. 27). Many women want to marry and a large number of them want to do it in white, even while wives report being less satisfied with their relationships than husbands in heterosexual marriages (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2011). This is probably due to the fact that weddings are presented by commercial interests as the natural and ideal conclusion of 'falling in love,' despite recent social changes regarding restrictions and patriarchal power structures traditionally symbolized by the wedding gown, such as social attitudes about sex, as well as women's educational and economic pursuits (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a; White, 2012). Driven by the fantasy of romantic love rather than the intricacies of a genuine commitment, weddings reinforce women's subordination to men's desires by presenting this behavior as the norm (Ingraham, 2008a).

This research presents visual testimonies of wives and women having other kind of relationships, whose reality became the starting point of this project's creative process. Most of the participants transformed their dresses to talk about marriage, partnership, singlehood, or other emotional experiences from a personal perspective. While most of us conveyed complex ideas, marriage was generally perceived and presented as an instance of commitment and love. Although there is no single objective definition of romantic love, when the participants of this research-creation

talk about love they commonly refer to an intense emotional experience that involves a deep affective connection with someone. We have culturally learned what love is supposed to be through a socialization process that involves stories, imitation and direct instruction. Love as we understand it today is socially constructed, organised, interpreted and distributed through Western cultural discourses within which we position ourselves (Burns, 2000; hooks, 2000a; 2000b; Redman, 2002; Schäfer, 2008).

In her book *All about love: New visions* (2000a), American feminist, social activist and educator bell hooks examines what love means for people today. Looking at the emotional and cultural consequences that heteronormative gender socialization has on relationships today, she advocates for love based on respect, care, recognition, affection, commitment and trust. Love, for her, cannot be achieved within power struggles related to gender stereotypes such as male domination and control. However, children in Western societies are constantly taught to properly play their assigned gender roles. Boys are socialized to deny their emotions while girls are taught to change their feelings to please everyone else, mostly men. Taught to become wives, women find it very difficult to feel emotionally satisfied with men who care more about sexual satisfaction and performance than actually to love them. For hooks, love in all its forms—romantic, friendship, our love of strangers and community—is possible and important, and we have to change the way we think about it to improve not only our own relationships but our culture. Gabriele Schäfer, in her text *Romantic Love in Heterosexual Relationships: Women's Experiences* (2008), states that romantic love is not limited to our private life, as it is a social and cultural practice that pervades heterosexual couple relationships and promotes gender inequalities. A Professor in the School of Social Work at the Bremen University of Applied Sciences in Germany, Schäfer sees romance as one of the most prevalent subjects within modern mass media and popular culture (Schäfer, 2008). Through the wedding industry, it regulates meanings and beliefs that validate dominant notions (Ingraham, 2008a). The commercial interests surrounding romance have widely

replaced weddings' religious and traditional connotations to such an extent that many brides are no longer familiar with the symbolism implicit in many of the ceremony's customs, such as the diamond ring, the father giving away his daughter to another man (whose name she is still expected to adopt in many countries, including the United States and some regions of Canada, although not in Mexico or Québec), the vows, the rice, the multi-layered white cake, the flowers, the presents, and crucially, the bride's white gown (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a).

While rituals continually change and adapt to their times and context, they usually retain what is most important to their ideals and goals, reflecting the current realities of those who perform them (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 218). Many of the currently important symbols in white weddings are cultural constructions that express and reproduce heterosexual gender hierarchies, more than the couple's believes. The symbols of the wedding dress are so far removed from the ritualistic origins of weddings that they no longer seem to have an emotional value for the bride. As a reaction to the reduction of wedding dresses to mere tools through which to improve the bride's appearance and convert her into something fundamentally temporary, this project offers women the opportunity to use and re-signify them in personal and deeply meaningful ways. Central to white weddings' cultural constructions are feminine beauty standards conveyed to and by the bride, primarily through media and fashion. A bride is expected to conform to dominant patriarchal conceptions of beauty, which include wedding dresses, makeup and hair styling as ways of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Socially controlled thorough diets, beauty regimes, gesture, posture and costume, the bride's body is expected to ensure "that the organization of heterosexuality in everything from gender to weddings to marital status is held up as both a model and as normal" (Ingraham, 2008a, p.27-28). Moreover, in contemporary Western societies, feminine ideals of youth, slenderness, firmness and whiteness influence women's likelihood of marrying (Ifekwunigwe, 1999; Prichard & Tiggemann, 2011). The female body, as a socially colonized territory, is not a site of individual self-determination (Ifekwunigwe, 1999). Despite the current cultural

diversity and complexity of images and ideals, brides' options are still limited by a strong homogenizing and normalizing tendency. The bride is simultaneously a consumer and a product. Trapped between romance and consumption, the bride's role today is increasingly conflicting, influencing our notions of wifehood.

Trash the Dress Photography

> *We will work with you to create the photo-shoot of your wildest dreams. Your imagination is the only limit. So what are you waiting for? Trash that dress!*
> www.trashmydress.ca

Photographs are an essential aspect of a wedding because they capture and preserve a moment forever, also providing status and formality to the ceremony. The representation of the event has become almost as important as the wedding experience itself (Otnes & Pleck, 2003, p. 114). These images serve a significant memory function, not only capturing the couple's love, but also becoming a "record of perfection" (Ibid.) that exposes a consumer culture characterized by luxury, abundance, innovation and fashion (Ibid. p. 18). In the last century, wedding photography has evolved from a single retouched studio picture of the couple, or even just the bride, to a series of hundreds of glamorous digital images, inspired by fashion photography and film stars (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). What started as a mere documentation of the marriage—to commemorate and confirm a wedding—has, like the ceremonies themselves, shifted from a "rite of passage" to a "rite of distinction" (Dudek, 2011, para. 7). The development of digital photography and the Internet are crucial technological changes that have completely altered the way wedding photography functions and is understood, as they not only allow more mobility and quantity, but also provide instant access to images taken virtually anywhere (Ibid.).

Wedding pictures are usually taken by professional photographers—as opposed to friends, family members or even the couple—to ensure a beautiful memory of the event. These photographers, however, are not always realistic or accurate, and tend to support social norms and ideologies. Wedding

pictures today “convey rules of conduct for, among other things, family relationships, friendship and public display of wealth, [centring] around the display of gender norms dictating how men and women should act, especially regarding their (hetero)sexuality” (Strano, 2006, p.38). In her text *Ritualized Transmission of Social Norms through Wedding Photography* (2006), Michele M. Strano argues that the conventions of wedding pictures “serve to ensure the display of socially acceptable images of male and female identity” (p. 38). The bride is typically represented wearing a white dress and a veil that symbolize her virtue and purity, holds a bouquet of white flowers that indicates fertility, and is frequently posed in postures that emphasize both beauty and vulnerability. Sometimes brides are photographed before the wedding ceremony in more intimate situations, either in lingerie, in transformation shots while getting dressed, or having fun for a series of sassy photos. Unlike traditional wedding photography, these images are not openly shared, as they challenge the social norm of the virgin bride. More than for the bride’s personal memory, they seem to be created for the husband’s viewing pleasure, reinforcing the tendency of perceiving the bride’s body as the property of the groom (Strano, 2006).

Couples today create visual records of themselves, the ceremony and the wedding party to remember their wedding day, having been strongly influenced by media and fashion images. There is a strong tendency in contemporary wedding photography to make a couple resemble film stars or royalty, where the bride’s body is usually highly objectified (Otnes & Pleck, 2003). Wedding photography often imitates fashion images which present women as sexually available and impose high and unrealistic beauty standards that produce constant dissatisfaction among their own audience (Crane, 2000). These images play an important role in popular visual culture, reinforcing women’s assigned social roles, creating and preserving ideals of feminine beauty, grace, delicateness and slimness, and wedding photography functions as “an essential part of this normalizing structure and instruct[s] women in how to enact the portrayed roles of bride and wife” (White, 2012, p. 117). In this context, “Trash the Dress”

(TTD) developed as an ‘anti-bridal’ style intended to resist the pureness and appropriateness expected from women’s bodies—represented by their wedding dresses—while simultaneously encouraging aggression towards them (Ibid.).

Michele White—an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at Tulane University, who teaches and researches Internet and New Media Studies, Visual Culture Studies, and Gender and Queer Theory, among other things—is the only scholar I have found who examines the phenomenon of the “Trash the Dress” movement, focusing primarily on its ambivalent postures towards the figure of the bride. In her texts “Dirty Brides and Internet Settings: The Affective Pleasures and Troubles with ‘Trash the Dress’ Photography Sessions” (2011) and *“*The Dirt on ‘Trash the Dress’ Resistance: Photographers, Brides, and the Mess of Post-wedding Imaging Sessions” (2012), and in her recently published book *Producing women: The Internet, traditional femininity, queerness, and creativity* (2015), she considers how post-wedding TTD sessions, despite their apparent intent to resist the cultural conceptions implicit in Western wedding cultures, ultimately repeat and trouble them further, perpetuating heterosexuality, normative femininity, women's visual accessibility and women's position as clean and mannered bodies, being “a continuation rather than a break from photography’s long association with and perpetuation of the normative family” (White, 2012, p. 124).

According to White (2012, 2015) the term “Trash the Dress” was first used by wedding photographer John Michael Cooper in a 2006 essay for Wed Shooter (a wedding photography blog) called “Show Off! a.k.a. Trashing the Dress,” in which he introduced TTD sessions as an alternative to traditional wedding photography, part of a growing trend in unconventional and alternative wedding sessions. The web page for Cooper’s company, Altf Photographers, states that Cooper is

> a 26 year photography veteran - shooting things his own damnway. From high volume Vegas style weddings to extravagant events across the country, John first arrived into international attention because of his unconventional approach in conjunction with a ‘dress unfriendly’ concept of art that inspired the current Trash the Dress craze that is consuming brides and changing their views of photography as they know it. (Altf Photographers, 2013)

Interestingly, even though Cooper coined the term "Trash the Dress" he now claims to dislike it. In his personal blog he wrote that he prefers the term "Anti-bridal shoot" over "Trash the Dress." He presents these anti-bridal shoots (which he claims to have been doing since 1999) as "a bridal portrait based on a concept that is well outside the context of the wedding environment and far left of the paradigm of what is socially expected of a bridal portrait" as "people take the term 'trash the dress' too literally." For him it is "more of an outside of the box type of session without bounds" which he won't make "unless there is a reason or concept behind it" (Cooper, 2011). This seems interesting to me because 'anti-bridal' offers more flexible and open interpretations, either as being against the social expectations of a bride, or against women who are brides.

When photographer Mark Eric read Cooper's essay, he produced and posted images from his own TTD sessions in http://trashthedress.wordpress.com and http://www.trashthedress.com, sites created specifically for this purpose, presenting his aesthetic as restrained and oppositional to established wedding norms, just as Cooper had (White, 2012). According to White, recognizing these two photographers as the unique creators of the TTD phenomenon without considering the photographed brides as active agents in this creative process assigns TTD a patriarchal origin which continues to masculinize photography. She argues that Cooper, Eric and other photographers and reporters of this phenomenon avoid disturbing the gender coding of wedding photography and photographers by rejecting the feminization of TTD, both by excluding women from the creative process and by the aesthetics of the photographs that they present. Thus, TTD not only maintains a bride's socially assigned passive role, but also promotes violence towards women, while the roles of the male photographers stay unchallenged, or—in White's words—"even elevated" (2012, p. 120).

Figure 31. *Trash the Dress*. Photo by John Michael Cooper (n.d.)
Image from Altf Photography (www.altf.com)

TTD photographers sell the idea that women are challenging traditional feminine roles by damaging their dresses, thus offering a contradictory experience that mixes opposition with pleasure and prestige, as they rely on the very same norms that they claim to oppose (White, 2012, p. 114). It is true that resistance in everyday acts can destabilize social norms (Butler, 1990), contributing to positive changes and rejecting oppressive social structures, relations and identities (White, 2011). Resistance in TTD, however, seems to be deeply contradictory, as these women aim to criticize the restrictive roles established by traditional weddings despite choosing to marry in those same traditions, supporting standardized notions of heterosexuality and femininity. Therefore, TTD images end up enforcing—not resisting—the norm, by symbolically attaching women to their wedding dresses and their implicit ideals of femininity (White, 2012, p. 118).

Figure 32. *Trash the Dress*. Photo by John Michael Cooper (n.d.)
Image from Altf Photography (www.altf.com)

TTD wedding photography is considered by many today as a creative and artistic trend, or even as an edgy development of wedding photojournalism (Roney, 2010, para. 3). The images presented by this "increasingly popular ritual" (Ibid.) oppose the traditionally proper and clean feminine body and the pureness implied by wedding dresses, while they also aestheticize violence towards women, promoting it by showing the bride burning, drowning, dying, or otherwise being repressed. These photographs, instead of empowering brides, restrain them in many ways, from subtle to brutal forms of violence, even associating "brides with death" (White, 2012, p. 120).

Figure 33. *Trash the Dress*. Photo by John Michael Cooper (n.d.).
Image from Altf Photography (www.altf.com)

Despite its increasing popularity, and despite the large number of photographers involved with TTD photography around the world today, there is no specific data about the demographics of this phenomenon. These images can be seen on many websites—mainly photographers' pages offering their services and bridal blogs. The blog started by Mark Eric in September 2006 called "Trash the Dress", based on Cooper's TTD images (White, 2012), is no longer available (it was originally accessible at trashthedress.wordpress.com). When I last accessed it, on July 20, 2012, it was presented as a "home base for this emerging trend in wedding photography," and it only featured three photographers in

Canada (one in Vancouver, one in Edmonton and one in Victoria) along with photographers from the USA, Mexico and Australia who offered TTD sessions. There are also TTD photography sites based in the UK (www.trash-the-dress.co.uk), in Europe (http://trashthedresseurope.wordpress.com), in Australia (http://trashthedressaustralia.wordpress.com) and in Brazil (http://www.trashthedress.com.br). As of January 2014 Canada[22] and most American countries do not have a dedicated TTD site, although several web pages from independent photographers offering TTD photo sessions in these countries can be found online, which I am not listing here as they are too many, and changing too frequently, without contributing significant information to this research.

Because this is still a relatively new phenomenon in popular culture, there is not yet much scholarly information about it. I have still not found a book about TTD wedding photography and I have found very few academic articles besides White's texts (2011, 2012, 2015). There is a Tumblr blog called "Trash the Dress" which invites users to "Take a risk, have a little fun. Trash YOUR dress! This amazing photography just gives you a free spirit to be yourself. Be dirty sometimes...In something so beautiful; your wedding dress. Your beautiful dress mixed with the slightest piece of imagination, makes such a piece of art" (trashthedress.tumblr.com). It contains a series of about 30 TTD images. There is also book titled *Trash the Dress: Stories of Celebrating Divorce in Your 20s* (Caputa, 2014), although it is specifically focused on young women going through divorce, so its context is different from the original TTD wedding photography (http://www.trashthedressbook.com/).

[22] It is important to mention at this point that through my work on this research I learned about the tragic death of Maria Pantazopoulos, a bride from Montreal who drowned in August of 2012 in a Québec river during her "Trash the Dress" photo shoot when "her wedding dress became heavily soaked [...] dragging her into the water and causing her to drown" (National Post, 2012). Websites reporting that sad event are the most commonly found results when Google-searching "Trash the Dress" in Montreal and Québec, or even in greater Canada, confirming the importance of spreading awareness about the dangers of this trendy phenomenon.

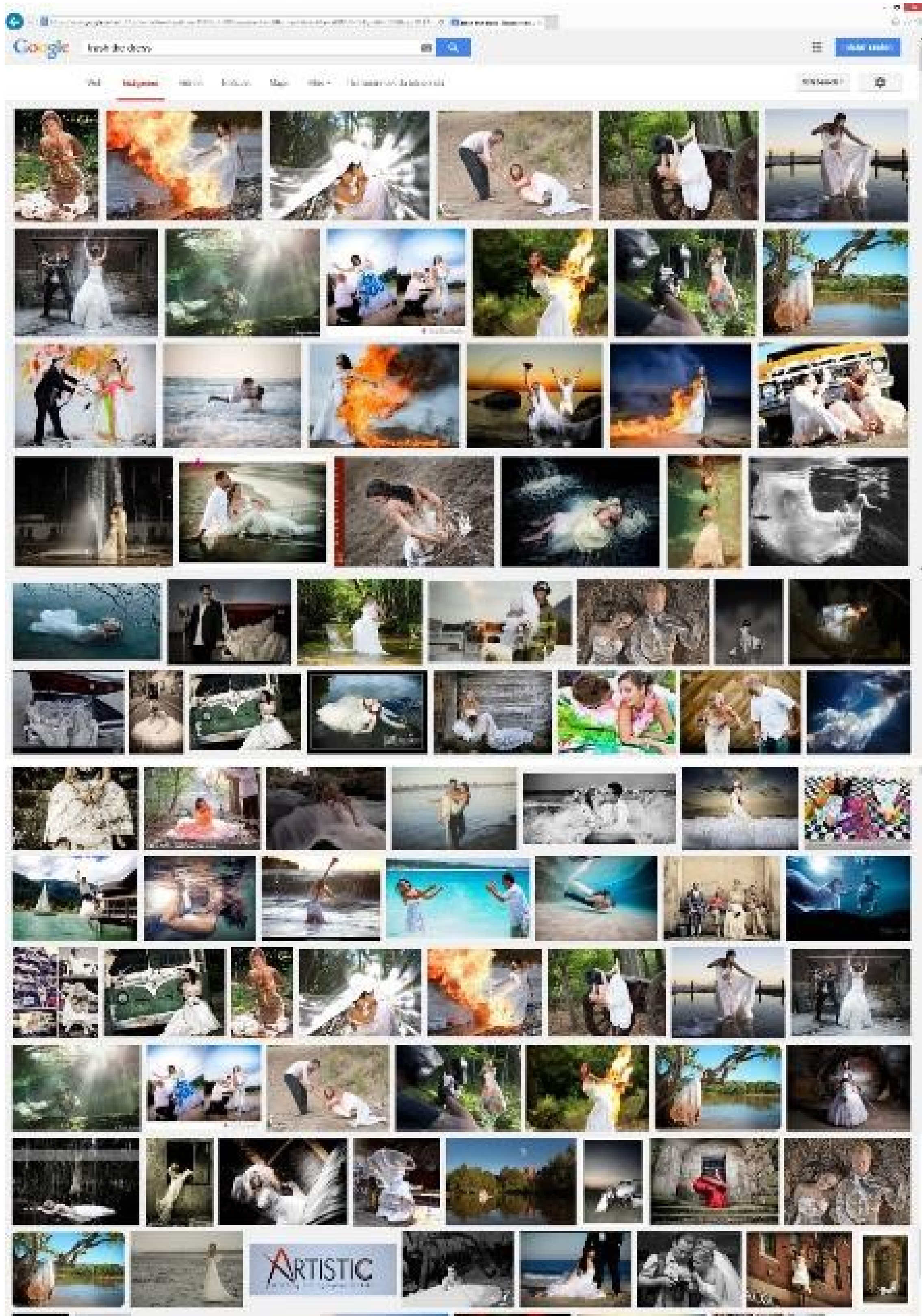

Figure 34. Trash the Dress images in Google search

TTD wedding photography was the starting point for this project, as it informed and shaped it in different ways. I intended to use this project to examine not only the messages conveyed by visual culture through phenomenon like TTD photography, but also the opposing ideas presented by contemporary wedding ceremonies. I believe that some of these traditions and norms can be changed effectively with an understanding of their restrictive implications. Some of the proposals that I received from my participants to transform a dress were a direct personal response to TTD, while others were only informed by this phenomenon but transformed the dresses to talk about marriage from a very intimate and subjective perspective. Daniela, for example, deconstructed the dress and re-built it again in a different way, as for her, "the transformation of the dress in conjunction with the act of photographing it as a way of re signifying it is what I think responds to the 'Trash the Dress' photography" (Daniela, 2013). Jessie, instead, guided her dress transformation by the shape of the dress itself, placing her project "outside of the central purpose of the 'Trash the Dress' which is […] to create a fashion situation which shows the wearer and her dress off while at the same time signaling that the wearer is so wealthy, hip and unconventional (all attributes of haute couture) that she can afford to destroy her very expensive garment in the process of making a fashion shoot" (Jessie, 2013). Anne sees the choosing of a wedding dress as a very important decision and thinks its destruction is a ridiculous trend. For her, "trashing the wedding dress is a superficial way to get attention and not a profound statement about rejecting the wedding formalities," although she can see how this gesture "can be a release from the complicated and excessive pressure to have 'the perfect wedding' with all its bells and whistles" (Anne, 2013). For Paula, the idea of TTD divests the implicit beauty of a traditional wedding dress and therefore of marriage itself. For her it "represents the most negative aspects of a relationship, which should be recognized and discarded, or transformed into something more beautiful and

truthful"[23] (Paula, 2013). Lee thinks that for many women the idea of 'Trashing the Dress' is rooted in an awareness of the absurdity regarding the symbol of a virginal young woman, and is a playful attempt to balance out this image to fit more with their own sense of self identity, creativity and originality, rejecting the implications that come with the symbolism of the white wedding dress while still adhering to tradition:

> The women who chose to trash their dress have not chosen to openly reject the symbolism of a traditional wedding, yet there is a rebelliousness, and lack of conformity in the gesture of destroying or somehow transforming the dress you have married in. I also think there is an element of disregard in the gesture of trashing a dress, in that there is no respect for the craftsmanship, time, materials, and cost that has gone into the production of the dress. I think the lack of respect and disposability of physical objects is very much a sign of our modern times and culture, which is also reflected in the lack of commitment in many relationships these days. I find it an interesting juxtaposition that many women and men still construct their relationships through traditional marriages, yet without the sense of longevity, or duty that many of our grandparents and parents understood and accepted as part of this union. In this way I feel that the trend of trashing the dress is very coherent with our modern ideas of marriage and relationships – we like the image and idea of security, but lack the skills, energy, and 'selflessness' necessary for the long-term commitment of a traditional marriage. (Lee, 2013)

White (2012) sees the potential that TTD has as "a useful research site from which to modify resistance studies, including an acknowledgment of how resistance is marketed, and further reflect on the diverse enactments of gender and sexuality that are part of wedding cultures" (p. 114). The images created for my project can be considered artistic and enjoyable, just like Eric's and Cooper's photos, but involve personal reflections and present a positive model for women's empowerment that their images lack. TTD supports traditional notions of heteronormativity and femininity that *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* collaboratively explores, questions and resists through art.

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[23] "representa los aspectos más negativos de la relación de pareja que hay que reconocer y de los que hay que desprenderse, y tirar a la basura o transformar si no en algo más bello, sí en algo más real." (Paula, 2013).

Chapter Four
The Art of Wearing a Dress:
Clothes and Creative Processes

One should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art.
Oscar Wilde (1894)

Fashion is defined by the Oxford Dictionaries (2015) as a "popular or the latest style of clothing, hair, decoration, or behavior" or as "a manner of doing something" (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com). However, it is no longer only understood as the newest dress style or the idealized image of a person. Today it is a wider cultural phenomenon that occurs in daily life and in every person, determined not only by designers and major firms but also by subcultures looking to express their ideas (Crane, 2012; Kawamura, 2011). Fashion has become a significant aspect of visual culture and consequently a social and political phenomenon. Clothing still is one of its most important components, constantly mediating between our body and the world. As an important aspect of visual culture, clothing strongly influences the construction of gender stereotypes, ideologies and practices (Berry et al., 2011) that affect women's everyday social and learning experiences (Buffington & Lai, 2011).

The wedding dress, which is a central element of bridal fashion, is an effective medium through which to make visual statements about our identities as women. Being an outcome of social factors and individual actions, it continuously acquires new meanings in relation to femininity and marriage (Entwistle, 2010). The white gown is not only a symbol of the role that the bride plays in a marriage today; it also reflects the expectations that Western societies have historically placed on women. Commonly used as a metaphor for the entire wedding ceremony (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002), wedding dresses function symbolically in this research-creation, as I believe that their contradictory and increasingly ambiguous connotations offer a series of challenging but rich ideas to study. Converted into art through collective and participatory practices, these garments can help us to understand traditional and restricting feminine roles more than they can contribute to their legitimization and assimilation.

Therefore, through an embodied art practice this collaborative textile project explores the conflicts that the white gown conveys today in Western cultures, challenging the aspects of gender inequality and heterocentricity in marriage, presenting not only an academic work, but a creative way to confront some of these repressive structures and recreate meaningful human relations.

Undressing fashion

Traditionally, we use clothes as habitus, or expressions of social status, economic class, age, race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, gender, sexual orientation and individualism, reinforcing ideas of power, dominance and subordination (Bourdieu, 1984). However, postmodernism has challenged and transformed this notion, allowing fluid identities to democratize fashion. Emphasizing the importance of difference, fragmentation, change and interpretation, postmodern fashion challenges traditional cultural values. Generating new connections between art and visual culture, today's fashion signifiers no longer have secure and fixed meanings. This development in fashion is a consequence and a reflection of social, political and cultural changes that have transformed the ways through which different social groups and the dominant culture relate and are represented. These changes have also affected contemporary fashion and dress research, which is moving away from fixed categories like gender, class and race, based on the notion that clothing today reflects fluctuant identities by involving choice and agency (Crane, 2000, 2012; Kawamura, 2011; Entwistle, 2000).

Despite this shift, fashion still determines how people relate to one another in social interaction, comprising desires for social equalization as much as for individual differentiation (Crane, 2000, p. 206). Clothing today, more than being essential for physical survival, is a central element of fashion that functions as an "interface between self and others, an element of recognition or discrimination [which is] situated between what we are and what we wish to present of ourselves" (Scardi, 2010, p. 13). Involving a complex interaction between our desire to fit in and the wish to be

distinctive, clothing today is paradoxical. Wedding dresses are not an exception. This restriction and control happens not only through the availability of garments in the market, but also through fashion's mediatized notions of conformity and order. In this way, visual culture shows us how to 'fit in' by wearing the 'right' clothes while material culture makes them available to us. By defining the latest style, the fashion system "helps to shape trends and tastes that structure our experience of dress in daily life" (Entwistle, 2000, p.338). Structured by this system, clothing somehow embodies the dominant values of society, and therefore our cultural beliefs, as it:

> constitutes a cultural entity in time and space, and its nature relates directly to place and period, to cultural shifts and to a specific economic and social context and its transformations. Rather than being merely a formal exercise, clothing is alive—to the extent that it is connected to (and compromised by) reality. (Scardi, 2010, p. 13)

For Diana Crane, a Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania specialized in Dress and Fashion Studies, fashion fits several definitions such as "a form of material culture related to bodily decoration" (2012, p.1); "a signifier" (p.1); "a system of business organizations" (p.2); and a phenomenon which can potentially reinforce social differentiation, express aspirations for social mobility, and even resolve concerns regarding social identity (p.2). In her book *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (2000), Crane traces significant fashion changes over the last two centuries, looking at how a person constructs her identity in postmodern societies through dress. According to her, 19th century fashion practices—in which the white gown was adopted as the wedding dress—were structured mostly by fixed class and gender hierarchies, shifting towards fluid consumer identities in the twentieth century. Current consumer fashion has acquired "an increasingly important role in the construction of personal identity, while the satisfaction of material needs and the emulation of superior classes are secondary" (Crane, 2000, p.11). However, although fashion functions as a form of non-verbal communication that conveys personal and social information about individuals,

today it has different meanings for different social groups, thus becoming fluid and unpredictable (Crane, 2000, p. 240).

Yuniya Kawamura, an Associate Professor of Sociology at the Fashion Institute of Technology at the State University of New York, introduces some basic qualitative research methods for the field of fashion and dress studies in her book *Doing Research in Fashion and Dress* (2011). Also looking at the meaning of fashion in postmodern societies, Kawamura believes that a dress can be read as a text and therefore communicate meaning. She sees fashion as actively produced by postmodern consumers, revealing not only a series of fragmented, heterogeneous and individualistic identities (2011, p. 123), but the existing ideology of a society (p. 127). She supports many of her findings in Crane's ideas, understanding fashion as a phenomenon in which "consumers seek to project conceptions of identity that are continually evolving" (Kawamura, 2011, p. 122). The variety of current available choices liberates individuals from tradition by enabling them to create a meaningful self-identity but it also restricts them to the prevailing ideologies of a specific consumer culture (Kawamura, 2011, p. 122).

In their text *Not Just Any Dress: Narratives of Memory, Body, and Identity* (2004), Sandra Weber, a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Education at Concordia University, and Claudia Mitchell, a Professor at in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education within the Faculty of Education at McGill University, introduce a visual research methodology based on clothing called "dress stories." This methodology allows them to research the personal meanings visual objects like clothing convey and their social and cultural implications (p. 5). For them, dress stories told by women involve "events, family, community, relationships, body-image, feelings, aspirations, attitudes, beliefs and thoughts about all sorts of things" providing "insight into how we perceive and make sense of our lives" (p. 4). From the various essays of dress stories that the book contains, there is one section called "Of Dresses and Weddings," which includes a poem by Mitchell in which she creates an interesting metaphor between the Bridesmaid Dress and her own doctoral research, symbolizing the inner conflict many

women have today in accommodating their diverse and usually conflicting identities and social expectations in one self: *"The thesis," she said, "is just like the bridesmaid's dress—you always think you are going to get your wear out of it—a few cocktail parties, a conference or two—but somehow you never do. Nobody takes it out and you can never dress it up* (p. 164). This section also includes a series of "Poetic Notes from Wedding Dress Research," and an essay by Jo Visser, in which she compares marriage to clothing (p. 178).

The focus of this research-creation is not so much on fashion as it is on dress as a lived experience. In order to fully understand the connotations that the wedding dress has in women's lives we need to acknowledge its relation to our female bodies as a social entity. Joanne Entwistle is a Senior Lecturer on Culture, Media and Creative Industries, specialized in Fashion and Dress studies at the King's College London. Her ideas on dress as a socially structured embodied practice are particularly significant here. More than looking at the way in which clothing and the body are represented within the fashion system, she looks at how they are lived and experienced, which is what I am doing with this project. Understanding the body as "a social entity" and the dress as "the outcome of both social factors and individual actions" (2000, p.344), Entwistle sees a dialectical operation between them, where the clothes that we use work on the body, providing its social meaning, but also living through it. In this way, our clothes delimit the boundary between ourselves and the others, placing the body in the social world and therefore becoming a visual metaphor for our identity. Inextricably situated within the context of the wedding ceremony, which is deeply mediated and restricted by culture, the bride's dressed body communicates the social pressures placed by marriage on women.

Dress as text

In semiotic terms, fashion in clothing has been generally theorised as a fixed linguistic system (Barthes, 1967). However, postmodernist theories present dress as an imprecise and complex code, in

which meanings are subject to interpretation and uncertainty (Feinberg et al., 1992). Clothing still functions as a nonverbal mode of communication (Kawamura, 2011, p. 26), but has become “a set of dialects rather than a universal language” (Crane, 2000, p. 247). José Teunissen, an independent fashion curator and professorship of Fashion Theory and Research at ArtEZ Institute of the Arts in the Netherlands, explains that fashion is not understood anymore as a meaning system that communicates people’s identities but as a visible aspect of this problematic construction (2009, p. 19). In this light, our clothing no longer offers fixed meanings, presenting instead a series of multiple symbols that are “unstable, contradictory, and incessantly changing” (Kawamura, 2011, p.122). While today it seems impossible to make a precise interpretation of any dress (Weber & Mitchell, 2004, p. 5), ambiguous and even conflicting fashion still plays a central role in our lives, providing “one of the most ready means through which individuals can make expressive visual statements about their identities” (Bennett, 2005, p. 96). As the boundaries of dress are unclear, we need to “experience the whole” to understand what clothes intend to communicate (Barney, 2007, p. 92).

Current bridal fashion is highly representative of the conflicting meanings that fashion communicates today. In contrast to 19th century women’s fashion[24]—in which white wedding dresses became trendy and common ways of expressing the bride’s moral, social and economic status—the symbolism of wedding gowns today is confusing. Along with the increasing relaxation of social norms around marriage, wedding dresses have progressively lost their religious and traditional implications, such as purity and virginity. However, they still promote white femininity and all its cultural implications as social values. In fact, in Western societies—where it is more and more common for women to have

[24] In 19th century Western societies, women were expected to wear a specific style of dress for each stage of their lives, such as childhood, adolescence, marriage, motherhood, and mourning (Baumgarten, 2002, p.140). These items of clothing were public symbols of their compliance to social norms that expressed and reinforced shared values and beliefs (Lynch, 2010). Strictly moral norms were conveyed as clear symbols through dress, which were expected public displays of decency, but also of wealth. Before Queen Victoria chose to wear white for her wedding ceremony—which rapidly became a tradition and a symbol of prosperity and class in Western weddings—brides could wear any color except for red or black, which were associated with prostitutes and mourning, respectively (Collard, 1978). However, because few brides could afford a gown for a single occasion, many of them selected a special colored dress instead which could be still used after the wedding ceremony.

the same status as men in both professional and personal settings—the symbolism of the white gown seems to be confusing and even incongruous. Over the course of the last century, bridal identity has been defined by the meanings of the wedding dress, such as maidenhood, purity and nobility. While many of the Victorian ideals regarding the bride's purity and innocence have lost their significance today, its symbols of "privilege, extravagance, and luxury have increased over time, resulting in wedding attire that transforms present-day brides into princesses" (Richter, 2008b, p. 118-119).

The white gown is a key symbol of marriage today as it has greater significance than other symbols in the wedding, being more present, visible and frequent (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 105). Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, a Professor Emerita from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside specialized in language and social interaction, says in *Wedding as text: Communicating cultural identities through ritual* (2002) that the wedding dress can be read as any other symbolic text.[25] The whiteness of the dress still intends to symbolize the bride's purity, innocence and virginity. Its length represents her modesty and formality, and the elegant fabric from which it is made (usually decorated with lace and pearls) symbolizes expense (p. 106). Despite recent cultural and social changes regarding gender roles, wedding gowns are probably among the most expensive and elaborate pieces of clothing any woman will ever wear because of the desire to distinguish the wedding dress from other daily garments. But this effect works both ways, as it is her desire to be unique and special that encourages her to follow conventional norms by displaying traditional symbols rather than her own identity (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 112). Because "mainstream [Western] weddings are the result of a single, powerful voice stating its assumptions about what is 'normal and expected' behavior" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 173), when a bride 'chooses' to wear a white dress, she is accepting the symbolic meaning conveyed by it (p. 88). However, many of the symbolic elements of the white dress no longer seem appropriate outside of the wedding context, and

[25] She bases her research on Witte's (1992) definition of text as "any ordered set of signs for which or through which people in a culture construct meaning" (p. 269).

do not even correspond with the images of women presented by the media. Currently, the embodied white dress symbolizes a tension between tradition and innovation, becoming vague and even conflicting by constantly overlapping new meanings with old connotations. This ambiguity, present in the dresses transformed for this project, is the cause and consequence of the multiple meanings that a symbol can convey today, informed mostly by references to past events or in connection to another symbolic code (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 186). Losing their traditional fixed values by constantly combining cultural codes and acquiring new meanings from contemporary fragmented societies, wedding dresses have evolved from 'closed' to 'open' texts[26] (Crane, 2000 p. 243).

Clothes do not function as a fixed language in this research-creation project, which is based on the idea that a wedding dress's meaning has acquired more flexible interpretations in postmodern societies. The meanings of a wedding gown are constantly given by the different cultural groups in which it is not only exhibited but worn, and by the embodied experiences of the women wearing it (Crane, 2000, p. 243). As a symbol, it has acquired the ability to convey multiple meanings. I believe that each of the wedding dresses transformed for this project simultaneously convey multiple identities, where—as Leeds-Hurwitz says—the fact that not all audiences will read all the references equally is not a problem, but a solution (2002, p. 214). The diverse interpretations of the wedding dresses are made not only by each of the 19 participants, based on our own experience, but also by each viewer. Because "no text has any single, correct interpretation [as] meanings change with the reader, the time and the context" (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010, p. 28), each viewer is not only allowed, but expected, to make new and diverse readings of those interpretations.

[26] The notion of openness was initially explored by semiotician Umberto Eco in his book *The Open Work* (1989). For him, an 'open' text is not limited to a single reading. These texts are open to alternative interpretations, offering multiplicity of meanings based on the freedom of the reader and the plurality of interpretation. In this way, the participant becomes a co-creator of the artwork, engaging with it based on her own experiences. In contrast, 'closed' texts encourage a predetermined reading, being limited to a particular interpretation. They were intended to represent an ordered, hierarchal and fixed reality, imposing an anticipated response to it. Wedding dresses, as open texts that inherited a set of fixed conventions, can be used in or converted into art, allowing more diverse and pluralistic interpretations.

Fashion and gender

Fashion and clothes are deeply involved in the socialization process of sexual and gender roles (Barnard, 1996, p. 111). According to Entwistle (2000), fashion—traditionally used to mark class divisions and now essentially preoccupied with gender—is closely related to the operations of power. While historically, one of the main purposes of clothing—besides protection—has been to hide biological sexual differences, fashion has been used primarily to reinforce gender roles, participating in a complex interaction between sexed bodies and gendered identities (Entwistle, 2000). By contributing to the shaping of male and female identities, fashion also determines what is and is not socially acceptable to men and women. Because "the self is not inherently masculine or feminine" (Crane, 2000, p. 17), fashion involves the adoption of certain clothing styles, accessories and makeup to communicate gender through social performances. Our clothes are socially expected to be a clear marker of our gender, despite the symbolic inconsistency that they might offer. This gender system is "too all-encompassing, too prevalent for any individual to fight," and it inevitably affects the development of children, who "will most likely demand to fit into one or other category once they acquire language and thus become aware of gender" (Entwistle, 2010, p.26).

The institution of heterosexuality is organized by gender, which defines the principles for heterogender male and female relations at all levels (Ingraham, 2008a, p.119). The term gender is commonly used to talk about the "roles, responsibilities, constraints, opportunities and needs of women and men in all areas and in any given social context" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 6). We are socialized into these roles from birth by the main social institutions like the state, family, culture, religion, education, economy and the law (Berry et al., 2002). These sites determine gendered behavior, regulating people's actions in relation to the position they have within this structure. Gender is "the most obvious identity maker that is articulated through clothes" (Entwistle, 2010, p. 25). Although conceptions of gender usually vary among societies and cultures, I see it as socially constructed

(Beauvoir, 1989; Crane, 2000; Kennelly et al., 2001; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Entwistle, 2010). We are not born women, but rather become women (Beauvoir, 1989), as society imposes upon our sexed bodies a series of meanings and expectations to create 'feminine' identities. Therefore, gender is a learned social behaviour, affected not only by our physicality, but by our sexual orientation, age, class, race, ethnicity and religion, and also by the geographic, economic and political environments in which we live. Gender is something we are constantly 'doing' (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Lorber, 1994) because we are socially expected to conform to it. We construct gender through "prescribed processes of teaching, learning, emulation, and enforcement" (Lorber, 1994, p. 56). Judith Butler (1988; 1990), a highly-regarded American theorist of power, gender, sexuality and identity from the University of California in Berkeley, understands gender as a performative act from which social constructions are continually formed. In what is possibly her most significant book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler argues that gender is an unstable category. Gender identity, according to her, is shaped through a stylized repetition of acts, becoming—more than a manifestation of our inherent essence—the consequence of our actions and behaviors.

The discussion of dress and gender inevitably involves the discussion of history as well, as clothing has traditionally functioned as a form of symbolic communication that reflects its circumstances (Scardi, 2010, p. 14). In this sense, 19th century fashion and clothing are "available sites for examining the relationship between marginal and hegemonic discourses" (Crane, 2000, p. 99). Reproducing cultural notions that have historically presented men as the active sex and women as passive consumers, men's fashion has generally been more functional and practical than women's fashion (Ibid.). In a time when clothing was a clear way of conveying information about the wearer's social role, women's clothing—which restrained the female body and made movement difficult—was a form of social control which forced women into passive and dependent roles. As a reaction to this, women's movements often attempted to reform dress conventions, aiming to substitute corsets and

heavy garments with more practical, healthy and comfortable garments (Crane, 2000, p. 111). Alternative styles of clothing—embraced mostly by single and working women—incorporated components of men's fashion like trousers, ties, men's hats and suit jackets. Despite the fact that the Victorian ideal of domesticity and motherhood marginalized the role of the middle-class unmarried woman, some women in the United States and Europe chose singlehood as a form of rebellion against the demands and restrictions of marriage. Women's education, along with their awareness of their political and social rights, increased. By the end of the century they had adopted alternative clothing behaviour as an embodied and non-verbal form of resistance against a fashion system that objectified and limited them, deeply influencing twentieth century fashion (Crane, 2000, p. 111).

The relation between dress and gender roles is reflected in the close connection that exists between clothes and feminism, in which specific garments have been used to reproduce, challenge, reject, or question specific social values. In the Western world, women began wearing trousers for the first time in the 1920s as an indication of the important social and political changes pursued by first wave feminists. Later, second wavers of the 1960s rejected certain items of clothing like panty hose, high-heels, girdles and bras to symbolically release themselves from the oppressive obligations of a patriarchal society that tended to control and dominate women's sexuality and identity. Currently, feminist artists have a complex approach to gender issues, adopting new media and original strategies to connect with society in new ways (Dekel, 2011). While fashion has been historically seen by some first and second wave feminists as an oppressive and imposed form of gender identity which reinforces dominant culture's views of femininity, it is currently seen as a cultural phenomenon that also involves enjoyment and expressivity (Crane, 2000; Kaiser et al., 1991). Many women in Western societies today actively decide whether to adopt, resist or abandon market's regulations through their own style. Clothing styles have become an important cultural, and even political, practice to create multiple fluid identities through both social codes and individual images (Pomerantz, 2008). Furthermore, as a

response against conventional approaches to fashion—which are mostly based on the fashion industry's expectations of how femininity and sexuality should be conveyed in dress—alternative clothing styles offer a variety of options from which consumers can create personal images to represent their identities. In this way, some alternative fashion styles promote the construction of unconventional identities and opposition to hegemony by condemning cultural expectations of women's roles.

Women's resistance through fabrics

Women "have always used the arts to uncover or create new knowledge, highlight experience, pose questions, or tackle problems" (Clover, 2011, p. 13). In Canada, for example, women used to make quilts to document family stories (Ibid.). Unfortunately, until recently, women's activities have traditionally been perceived as domestic and therefore trivial, and were not considered as pedagogical, even for feminist education (Ibid.). Today, however, crafts are starting to be understood as imaginative and innovative creative pedagogies used by women "to educate, empower and demand visibility and justice" (Clover, 2005, p. 631). In this context, textiles—particularly sewing, knitting and embroidering—are a meaningful metaphor for the act of attaching two people together in a close partnership, and thus a powerful medium through which to explore issues of marriage.

Lycia Danielle Trouton (2004), a practicing textile artist and academic, studied the strategies used by groups of women and artists—including herself—to communicate anti-violence messages in art through interdisciplinary needlework and textiles. Her work is in a similar vein to Springgay's (2004, 2008) artistic exploration of the embodiment of knowledge through dress (mentioned further on, in Chapter Five) and Clover's (2005) ideas on the use of crafts by women as "tools of critical learning that exercise and contest power" (p. 641). Trouton examines both the sculptural and political use of textiles in public spaces and rituals. She focuses on the way they are used by women to symbolically represent violence and trauma inflicted by war upon the body and its surrounding social fabric. As a part of this

investigation, I think it is important to also consider the textile work made by diverse groups of women as a form of political confrontation to critical issues that affect their lives. These women utilize forms and techniques usually seen as a domestic activity or craft such as sewing, knitting, etc. These practices allow women to share their stories, but also double as a form of resistance.

In Mexico, for example, diverse groups of women are working on collective projects involving sewing and embroidering (such as “Bordar por la paz: Un pañuelo una víctima,” mentioned in Chapter Six) to share people’s experiences with the recent violence resulting from the ongoing “War on Drugs” and other forms of repression that have become widespread across the country over the last decade. Similarly, following the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan in the early 1980s, women responded to the war by introducing new themes related to the armed conflict into the designs of traditional rugs. The horrors of human rights abuse during the apartheid regime in South Africa were depicted in tapestries telling the stories of the women who embroidered them. In Asia, Filipino women who had been kidnapped and used as sex slaves by Japanese soldiers during World War II voiced their demands for justice through quilts. In Chile, complex tapestries called *arpilleras* were secretly made by women to depict the atrocities of human rights abuses and the disappeared victims during Pinochet’s repression (Morris & Bales, 2012).

I know arpilleras well. Being a South American exile myself, my family and I developed many friendships with Chilean exiles in Mexico who had arpilleras hanging in the walls of their homes. Later in life I learned that they were part of the Arpillera movement in Chile, which united women through the tapestries they secretly produced together. Through sewing, embroidering and stitching, these women explored and represented the violence, repression and privations they experienced throughout Pinochet’s dictatorship between 1973 and 1990, enacting a powerful form of protest and becoming agents of change. Jacqueline Adams, in her paper “Art in Social Movements: Shantytown Women’s Protest in Pinochet’s Chile” (2002), uses arpilleras as an example of the power of art as a device in social

movements responding to oppressive situations. Adams sees arpilleras as a unifying symbol among women—one which is as crucial to their identity as the need to feed their families. By conveying information about the social circumstances of these women, these symbolic fabrics managed to inspire national empathy. Eliana Moya-Raggio recognizes these women as active agents of change and identifies this movement as a feminist one. In her text "'Arpilleras': Chilean Culture of Resistance" (1984), she describes women's transformation from "passive observer to active participant in a process of collective work" (p. 278). Raising their needles together to protest against violence, the arpilleras movement allowed Chilean women to become active participants of change. It gave them a purpose to continue with their lives, and—most significantly—played an important role in raising international awareness of Chile's human rights violations, ultimately functioning as a step towards improvement. As a preservation of the memory of the *desaparecidos* (the disappeared ones) and as a reminder of other government atrocities, arpilleras are still considered a powerful symbol of women's resistance in Chile's strongly conservative and patriarchal society (Moya-Raggio, 1984).

During the "Dirty War" that took place in Argentina between 1976 and 1983—which forced my family to leave the country when I was 5 years old—thousands of people opposing the dictatorial regime, mostly students, were tortured and "disappeared" by the military government. In 1977, a group of mothers of disappeared students in Buenos Aires began meeting every Thursday at the Plaza de Mayo, in the heart of Argentina's government, in a peaceful assembly to protest the disappearance of their children. They all wore white kerchiefs on their heads, symbolizing the dove of peace, and walked alone or in pairs to evade being arrested for disorderly conduct. Some carried pictures of their missing loved ones with them. As time went on, many started writing pleas for justice on their clothes and kerchiefs, along with their children's names, birthdays and dates of disappearances. Dress and embodiment became powerful mediums through which to make political statements for this group, known as the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,

http://madresfundadoras.blogspot.ca). Soon, they became a strong but threatened movement that stood up not only for the disappeared students, but for one another. As mothers, they presented a powerful moral symbol, raising awareness and gaining international attention over the violations of human rights occurring in Argentina. In a book titled *Disappearing Acts. Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's 'Dirty War'* (1997), Diana Taylor explains what going public meant for the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* in a country where motherhood is traditionally restricted to the private realm and "*good* mothers are invisible" (p. 195). By publicly exhibiting their grief through clothing, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* became "one of the most *visible* political discourses of resistance to terror in recent Latin American history" (p. 191). According to Taylor, these women "perceived and literally acted out the difference between motherhood as an individual identity and motherhood as a collective, political performance" (p. 194). Despite their traditional confinement to a domestic sphere that has historically disempowered women, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*[27] managed to empower themselves by publicly performing these restrictive roles. By bringing attention to human rights violations in Argentina, they triggered many positive changes, particularly in relation to violence against women.

In Canada, where I am pursuing this research-creation project, several Aboriginal women artists use traditional native crafts to emphasize unresolved problems of social justice and to dispel stereotypical notions about First Nations people. Winnipeg's Métis artist Jaime Black created *The REDress Project*, an ongoing installation through which she intends "to draw attention to the gendered and racialized nature of violent crimes against Aboriginal women and to evoke a presence through the marking of absence" (http://www.redressproject.org). Made from dozens of red dresses collected from the community and hung in public spaces, this piece is a visual reminder of the nearly 1,200 Aboriginal

[27] In 1977 a non-governmental organization called *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo, http://www.abuelas.org.ar) was formed with the aim of finding babies born to imprisoned 'desaparecidos' during the Dirty War, many of whom were illegally adopted by people deemed ideologically safe by the government. The *Abuelas* still work closely with the founders of *Mothers of Plaza de Mayo* toward the shared goal of discovering the identities of the disappeared through DNA identification. As of 2015, their collective efforts have resulted in the recuperation of 118 grandchildren.

women who have been murdered or gone missing over the last 30 years in Canada. Nadia Myre, a Québec-based Algonquin artist, also uses craft-based media related to traditional Aboriginal beadwork and stitchery to address identity, longing and loss. She has "built a distinctive visual vocabulary by translating her experience and that of others into works that employ traditional crafts within a contemporary, multidisciplinary practice [creating] a symbolic image of wounding and resilience that conveys something deeply human while addressing urgent social concerns" (Myre, 2014). Finally, Anishinabe artist Rebecca Belmore—the first Aboriginal woman to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale's Canadian Pavilion in 2005—addresses colonial history, place, trauma and memory in her artwork (www.rebeccabelmore.com). Her performances, sculptures, videos, photographs and installations reflect the current political and social realities of Aboriginal communities in Canada. Clothing is a recurring symbolic reference in her work that challenges the conventional stereotypes of both Aboriginal and Western European culture while exposing a complex relation with the artist's body. By performing through dress, Belmore explores power relations and the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people, especially women. These examples complement the ideas transmitted by *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* where, rather than conforming to normalizing notions of femininity and heterosexuality through clothes, women understand dress as a site of resistance to these social pressures, but also as an opportunity for enjoyment, sharing, learning together and building community.

Clothing in contemporary art

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress is based on the idea that the visual is central to our knowledge, where interpreting images is a valid way to recognize and understand them. Social life is culturally constructed through the visual in contemporary Western societies (Rose, 2011) and essential to the way we understand culture itself. However, we must know how to interpret and

make sense of these images and the role we play in the meanings that they acquire (Ibid.). In her book *Art on my mind: Visual politics* (1995), American feminist, social activist and educator bell hooks proposes a new approach to visual arts, based on the "defamiliarization" of images to avoid the reinforcement of artistic values that reproduce normative principles. Exploring the politics of representation and aesthetics of African-American women artists and based on her own creative experience, hooks acknowledges the transformative power of art. Representation, for her, "is a crucial location of struggle for any exploited and oppressed people asserting subjectivity and decolonization of the mind" (1995a, p. 3). Art, in this sense, "constitutes one of the rare locations where acts of transcendence can take place and have a wide-ranging transformative impact" (p. 8). Considering this, the works of textile art that resulted from this research-creation project are not only based on, but they also examine, interpret and critically represent meaning based on TTD wedding images. It is important to clarify that TTD photography is only a small fragment of the innumerable wedding images that we confront on a regular basis.

The relationship between photography and fashion is also important here. Fashion has been explored through photography by many artists throughout history, not only for its capacity to communicate meaning, but also in relation to appearance and identity. Over the past five decades fashion has been used to express increasingly complex ideas and concepts. It has become "one of the most important normative frames of reference in our society [which] is profoundly influencing artistic methods and subject choices" (Teunissen, 2009, p. 13). The relation between art and fashion strengthened in the 1960s as the distinction between high (art) and low (fashion) culture became blurred. As awareness regarding fashion's relation to the body and its environment increased, fashion became more democratic, pluralistic and complex. In 1967 Roland Barthes published *The Fashion System*, an essay that examined the language used by a French fashion magazine to describe women's clothing. His analysis produced a system with which to interpret the jargon of the fashion industry.

Around the same time, the fashion system that Barthes had examined in his text—one which demand that women be sophisticated, stylish and dynamic—began to fade in favour of a more inclusive and politically avant-garde fashion (Teunissen, 2009, p. 22). This was also the context of the civil rights and anti-war movements in North America—including Québec's Quiet Revolution—and the students' demonstrations in France, when feminist art emerged and began to gain recognition. Influenced by the women's liberation movement, feminist art arose at the same time as other important art movements such as pop art, conceptualism, minimalism, happenings, body art, land art, fine-art photography, experimental film and public art (Teunissen, 2009; Phelan, 2001, p.19). It was in this complex setting that clothing was incorporated into performances that involved the viewer in an embodied experience with the (un)dressed body of women artists such as Yoko Ono (*Cut Piece*, 1964), Marina Abramović (*Rhythm 0*, 1974) and Hannah Wilke (*Super-T-Art*, 1974). The performative and bodily aspects of these projects are closely related to feminism, as they challenge the position of women as models for male artists and the cultural system that often excluded them from the art spheres (Johnson, 2013).

Dress functions as an embodied practice that marks the liminal space between the interior and the exterior of a body that is culturally constituted—determined by social structures—but also the site of personal identity (Entwistle, 2000, p. 333). Dress, with its material and even sculptural qualities, depends on the physical self to exist, becoming performative (Teunissen, 2009, p. 18). In *Féminismes Électriques*[28] (2012), Thérèse St-Gelais, professor of art history specializing in gender and women's studies at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), talks about Feminisms and Performativity. For her, feminist artists in Québec have made the private public in order "to make its political dimensions visible, but also to reveal it as the location from within which a discriminatory power has being

[28] In 2012 Montréal's La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse released *Féminismes Électriques*, a publication that reflects on the last ten years of activity at this feminist artist-run centre. This collection of texts offers a good review of feminist artistic practices in Québec over the last decade, focusing on cultural practices and critically engaging with relationships of power in our society.

exercised." (p. 73). In this way, feminist art has explored several issues and generated a shared knowledge, informed by both collective and individual experiences (p. 71). For St-Gelais,

> Many questions about the concept of normativity have been articulated in relation to the status of women and the critical representations of women as privileged objects of reflection. Such questions have had repercussions for the conventions of art history and the social sciences—as well as many other disciplines consciously engaged in the production of knowledge. (2012, p. 71)

Today many artists work with clothes to undress and expose through diverse media and techniques the relation that they have built with certain social codes. Through sculpture, installation, body and performance art, to name a few, artists explore and generate new understandings about personal, political, cultural, gender and social issues. Based on the individual and social connotations of garments, many artists use them to generate an intuitive understanding of themselves and their relation with others. This is reflected in the many art exhibits that have been presented in recent years exploring the relationship between clothing and/or fashion and art. Such exhibits include *Fashionality: Dress and Identity in Contemporary Canadian Art* (2012), presented at The McMichael Canadian Art Collection, in Ontario (http://mcmichael.com); *Outfitters: The Contemporary Art of Clothing* (2012),held at The Bedford Gallery, in California (http://www.bedfordgallery.org); *Art-Robe: Women Artists at the Nexus of Art and Fashion* (2005), from the UNESCO, Paris (http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001388/138861M.pdf); *Close to You: Contemporary Textiles, Intimacy and Popular Culture* (2008), featured in the Textile Museum of Canada, in Toronto (http://www.textilemuseum.ca); *The Art of Fashion: Installing Allusions* (2009), at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, in Rotterdam (http://www.boijmans.nl)—along with the many recently presented museum retrospectives focused on significant fashion designers or labels, including *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk,* held in 2011 at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (http://www.mbam.qc.ca); *Yves Saint Laurent*, a retrospective exhibited in 2010 at the Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris (http://www.petitpalais.paris.fr); *Fashion Narratives*, a major

exhibit of the work of Hussein Chalayan, presented on 2011 at the Musees des Arts Decoratifs in Paris (www.lesartsdecoratifs.fr); and *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty*, which opened in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2011 (www.metmuseum.org) and was exhibited in London in 2015.

One of these art shows, called *Close to You: Contemporary Textiles, Intimacy and Popular Culture* and curated by Sarah Quinton, examined the use of visual and linguistic texts from popular culture in the work of five contemporary artists from Canada and the United States: Ai Kijima, Scott Kildall, Allyson Mitchell, Mark Newport and Michèle Provost. These artists explored popular visual culture "through the practices of quilting, collage, knitting, appliqué, embroidery and crochet," looking at craft as an artistic activity "that can encapsulate personal, social and political spheres as a lens onto today's world, communicating through a globally shared iconography based on real things" (Quinton, 2007, p. 5). Another exhibit focused on clothing, this time in terms of identity, nationality, displacement and conflict, was *GSK Contemporary – Aware: Art Fashion Identity*, presented at London's Royal Academy of Arts in 2010. It looked at the relationship between our physical covering and the construction of personal environments, our individual and social identities, and the contexts in which we live. Divided into four sections (*Storytelling*, *Building*, *Belonging and Comforting,* and *Performance*), it included work by Marina Abramovic, Acconci Studio, Azra Aksamija, Maja Bajevic, Handan Börüteçene, Hussein Chalayan, Alicia Framis, Meschac Gaba, Marie-Ange Guilleminot, Mella Jaarsma, Katerinaedá, Kimsooja, Claudia Losi, Susie MacMurray, Alexander McQueen, Yoko Ono, Grayson Perry, Dai Rees, Cindy Sherman, Katerina Séda, Yinka Shonibare, Rosemarie Trockel, Sharif Waked, Yohji Yamamoto and Andrea Zittel, among others.

A book titled *GSK Contemporary – Aware: Art Fashion Identity* was published in conjunction with the exhibition, in association with the Royal Academy of Arts, with texts by Gabi Scardi, Lucy Orta and Joanne Entwistle (2010). Gabi Scardi's text, called "The Sense of Our Time" (2010), looks at the ways in which artists incorporate clothes into their work as a response to the reductive vision of glamorous

fashion. Deeply connected to the notion of celebrity, which is “based on a self-referential interpretation of seduction and an anachronistic idea of beauty” (p. 14), fashion ignores bodily reality. Through dress, most of these artists’ works deal with issues of multiculturalism, geopolitics, habitat, community and exclusion, authority and control, and social and environmental sustainability (p. 17). According to Scardi, fashion has been a significant subject for artists deeply committed to social and pedagogical practices for decades, such as the experiments in Neo-Concretism by Hélio Oiticica and Lygia Clark and their ‘habitable clothing,’ and Joseph Beuys, whose work often incorporated felt and other materials from daily life—with strong autobiographical implications—such as honey or fat (p. 14). However, women artists have been particularly notable for using clothing in all its diverse forms in their work to rebel against social rules and taboos (Scardi, 2010, p. 15). Artists like Méret Oppenheim, Atsuko Tanaka (specifically her *Electric Dress*, 1957), Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono (specifically her *Cut Piece*, 1963), Orlan, Annette Messager, Cindy Sherman, Birgit Jürgenssen, Adrian Piper, Jana Sterback, Marina Abramovic, Martha Rosler, Maja Majevic, Susie MacMurray, Gillian Wearing and Gina Pane are examples given by Scardi of women artists who have “dressed and undressed themselves in order to deliver a powerfully direct and disconcerting message, and made a major contribution to the redefinition of the female identity” (p. 17).

Taking advantage of the fact that gender differences are primarily coded visually, many women artists use clothes as a recurrent metaphor for personal concerns related to social norms. Besides the artists included in these shows, Louise Bourgeois, Annette Messager, Jana Sterbak, Sophie Calle, Senga Nengudi, Ann Hamilton, Shirin Neshat, Beverly Semmes, Lygia Clark, Lucy Orta and Doris Salcedo are outstanding examples of female artists who work with textiles to make sculptures, installations and performances that challenge traditional gender stereotypes. They use their work to explore feminine identity in relation to memory, feelings, tradition, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationality. The possibilities that clothes offer as art to explore and research personal, social and cultural issues have

also been theoretically explored by some academics and educators such as Stephanie Springgay (2004, 2008), Lycia Trouton (2004) and Darlene Clover (2005, 2011), who have investigated the potential that clothing has as an effective medium for questioning the implications and restrictions involved in women's creation and representation knowledge.

Wedding dresses in art

Weddings have been a source of inspiration and work for artists since ancient times, as these ceremonies have been represented in diverse art forms for centuries. Exploring this phenomenon, Paula Bradstreet Richter edited a book called *Wedded Bliss: The Marriage of Art and Ceremony* (2008), which looks into the various forms in which art has captured and represented weddings in diverse cultures since the 18th century. By the twentieth century, photography—which became increasingly accessible during the 19th century—was already a highly popular and well established genre. It functioned, and still does, not only as documentation of the wedding day and portraits of the couple, but also as "compelling evidence of how the ideals and visual culture of the white wedding have been manifest in endless variations on a unified theme" (Richter, 2008b, p. 120).

In today's consumer culture, artists are often commissioned to record wedding ceremonies, getting "the opportunity to express personal experiences, ideas and emotions, and offer commentary on the social conventions, relational dynamics, power structures and politics inherent in weddings, and the institution of marriage" (Richter, 2008a, p. 70). In this way, artists and photographers respond to the white wedding either by creating conventional artworks that fulfil the couple's expectations, or by commenting on, challenging, or opposing the wedding industry and even the institution of marriage through their work (Ibid. p. 116-117). Somewhere between these two stances, photographers like Cooper and Eric intended to solve the creative dilemma of doing wedding photography—which is frequently seen as a banal, conventional and low art form—by developing TTD, presenting their

practices as “innovative and artistic” (White, 2012). However, many artists have actually found “rich fodder for social commentary, satire, critique and humor in wedding-related subjects that probe the values and beliefs inherent in marriage ceremonies” (Richter, 2008a, p. 26).

Some artists have also worked specifically with wedding dresses to explore and subvert the traditional female stereotypes that they convey, questioning or redefining traditional women’s roles while presenting diverse and reinvented femininities. Chrys Ingraham (2008b) examined the production of contemporary wedding art in her article “Straightening Up: The Marriage of Conformity and Resistance in Wedding Art.” In this text she looks at how “activist wedding art” intends to challenge “the production of white weddings as spectacles of accumulation and conformity and creates openings that allow us to imagine alternatives” (Ingraham, 2008b, p. 162). For Ingraham, weddings are a cultural site that reflects the way in which our social world functions and is understood. As previously mentioned in Chapter Three, Ingraham (2008a) also looks at the relationship between weddings and visual culture, emphasizing the significant role that these lavish Western ceremonies play in the heterosexual imaginary. According to her, artists have the capacity to use their work to pinpoint, challenge, criticize, and/or resist the production and dissemination of racial, class, gender and sexual hierarchies legitimized by white weddings (2008b). She presents examples of artworks that can be considered ‘activist art’ by “interrupting the taken-for-granted and contradictory landscape of weddings” (p. 162). She explains her ideas through the works of Julia Jacquette (*White on White*, 1996-97), Sandy Skoglund (*The Wedding*, 1994), Florine Stettheimer (*Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue*, 1931), Arthur Tress (*Untitled – Bride and Groom*, 1970), Teddy Pruett (*Fractured Wedding Rind: Divorce Attorney’s Quilt*, 2005), Lesley Dill (*Dada Poem Wedding Dress*, 1994), E.V. Day (*Bride Fight*, 2005), Cecily Brown (*Father of the Bride*, 1999), Frida Kahlo (*My Grandparents, My parent, and I (Family Tree*, 1936), Gertrude Morgan (*New Jerusalem*, 1960), Gay Block and Malka Drucker (*A Recontextualized Ketubbah*, 1994) and Robert Boyd (*Cake Cutter, True Blue and L’Age d’Or*, from his show “The Virgin Collection,” 2001).

Because wedding dresses “set tighter constraints around the body” (Entwistle, 2000, p. 337) than other garments, they function as a strong symbolic element and the role they play in defining current feminine identities should to be both theoretically and creatively examined. I think it is important for this investigation to present some examples of artists working with wedding dresses as ways to explore their different meanings and participation in the definition of specific female identities in particular marital contexts. I believe that a critical analysis of contemporary art works is central for the development and improvement of research-creation, as it will help us to identify “how their work and practices operate to secure particular opportunities for meaning making” (O’Donoghue, 2009, p.364). As this research aims to explore the way female identities are constructed through the wedding dress, it requires moving between the discursive, representational and performative aspects of marriage.

True Blue and L’Age d’Or (2001), from the series “The Virgin Collection,” *by Robert Boyd*

Figure 35. *True Blue* (left) and Figure 36. *L’Age d’Or* (right) (2001)
From the series “The Virgin Collection”, by Robert Boyd
Images from Artist Pension Trust (www.aptglobal.org)

For his exhibition *The Virgin Collection* (2001) Robert Boyd (http://www.robertboyd.info) combines photography, video, sculpture and performance to challenge and resist traditional notions of the white wedding. He does this "by 'cutting' through the ideology of romance associated with this dominant form, [offering] an analysis of heterosexuality as imbricated in both racism and heterosexism, and [changing] the viewer's idealized notion of weddings forever" (Ingraham, 2008b, p. 175). Along with various other objects and videos, the exhibit presents an official *Virgin Collection* gown designed for men, which looks like a "surreal Klansman's wedding dress" (Boyd, 2002), incorporating not only ideas of matrimony and virginal purity, but of gender, power and racism. The dress is accompanied by a series of photographs of the artist modeling it, reproducing poses from bridal advertisements, thus also exploring issues related to gay identity and alienation from media culture.

Wedding Dress (1967), by Christo and Jeanne-Claude

Figure 37. *Wedding Dress* (1967), by Christo and Jeanne-Claude
Image from Museums Quartier Wien (www.mqw.at)

In 1967, a *Wedding Dress* made by the couple of artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude (http://christojeanneclaude.net) was shown at the opening of *The Museum of Merchandise*, an exhibit of artist-designed furnishings and fashions held at the Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Association in New York City. At the end of the evening's fashion show a barefoot and undressed model appeared carrying—more so than wearing—a *Wedding Dress*. The "dress" was a white satin package much bigger than her body, tied in a silk white rope, "as if the bride were a beast pulling a burden" (Reif, 2003). Christo's work is characterized for wrapping everyday objects, including tin cans and bottles, stacks of magazines, furniture and automobiles. In 1961 he began collaborating with his wife Jeanne-Claude, gradually expanding the size of the wrapped forms, using industrial materials like polypropylene sheeting or canvas sustained by irregularly tied ropes. By covering an object with fabric they restrain its function, transforming it into an aesthetic presence (Prokopoff, 2009). They are possibly best known for their large-scale pieces, including their wrapping of buildings, bridges and islands.

Save the Date (2012), by Kathryn Cornelius

> Save the Date (2012) explores the life cycle of marriage and divorce, and the wedding ceremony's complex mix of private emotion, public spectacle, social expectation and state power. Every hour, on the hour, Kathryn wed and eventually divorced seven suitors, six of whom were personally selected by the artist from proposals submitted via Tumblr, and the seventh was chosen by public vote on Facebook. (Cornelius, 2012)

It was performed on August 11, 2012, at The Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., to explore the institution of marriage as both a private experience and a public ceremony. Attendants to this event participated in both an art show and a wedding ceremony, serving as witnesses to the marriage. Besides the actual marriage, each wedding ceremony involved a bride in a white dress, the couple's first dance, the exchange of vows, a champagne toast, a wedding cake, a kiss between the bride and her new spouse and a photograph of the event. It culminated with the couple signing the divorce inside the museum before the artist-bride would go outside to meet her new partner and begin the process all over again. Kathryn Cornelius did this every hour until she had wedded and divorced

seven people. Though the ceremonies were officiated by an ordained minister, they were not legitimate marriages, questioning the concept of legality itself.

Figure 38. *Save the Date* (2012), by Kathryn Cornelius
Image from Cargo Collective Gallery (http://cargocollective.com)

This performance not only questions and challenges the authority that the state imposes to recognize our personal choices, such as love and sexuality, but also the important role that the media plays in defining what is right and wrong, as it enforces “an underlying ideology that asserts the ‘right’ age for a woman to be married, purports that a divorced person is a ‘failure’ responsible for their loss of marriage and ‘flawed’ as a result, and, to chose not to marry is to face the egregious fate of being deemed an ‘Old Maid’ or a ‘Terminal Bachelor’ in society. These notions are further complicated by a general anxiety towards same-sex couples as somehow defiling the institution of marriage” (savethedatedc.tumblr.com, n/d). *Save the Date* is a public spectacle that exposes the institution of marriage as a public spectacle as well, thus challenging our attitudes toward legitimacy, commitment and equality.

Bride Fight (2006), by E.V. Day

Figure 39. *Bride Fight* (2006), by E V Day
Image from E V Day Studio (http://evdaystudio.com)

Bride Fight (2006) is an installation made by New York based artist E.V. Day (http://evdaystudio.com) of two bridal dresses suspended in space with fishing line and hardware. Traditional wedding gowns are used here to represent a pair of brides fighting with each other and destroying their clothes, which appear methodically frozen in space. Using her work to explore themes of feminism in relation to women's identity and sexuality, Day presents this strong image of two brides fighting as an expression of change and liberation while vestiges of tradition remain recognizable and intact. *Bride Fight* comes from a series of installations called *Exploding Couture* which display women's dresses suspended in space, exposing ironic conventional feminine stereotypes confined in a dramatic eternal explosion, perpetuating a state of transformation of tradition (Day, 2012; Deitch Projects, 2006).

The Extended Wedding Party (1995), by Aganetha Dyck

Figure 40. *The Extended Wedding Party* (1995), by Aganetha Dyck
Photo by Peter Dyck & The W.A.G. Image from Aganetha Dyck's Web Site (www.aganethadyck.ca)

Aganetha Dyck (www.aganethadyck.ca) is a self-taught Canadian artist who since 1991 has been "collaborating" with bees to create her art pieces. In creating this wedding dress, she places an emphasis on the bee work, making a glass structure with a living bee hive attached to it. Strongly influenced by her rural education and her life as a middle-class housewife, this work is a subtle provocation in which her personal memories are mixed with her interest in exploring the complex and interdependent relationship that exists between humanity and animal species. More than a wax sculpture, *The Extended Wedding Party* (1995) looks like an organic shape, more disturbing than protective. It transmits a certain discomfort related to the anxiety of being physically vulnerable and

exposed, taking advantage of the common perception that people have of bees as threatening rather than nurturing beings (Artisword, 2012; Edmonson, 2011; Eyland, 2007).

La Novia (The Bride, 2009), by Daniela Edburg

Figure 41. *La Novia* (The Bride) (2009), by Daniela Edburg
Image from Daniela Edburg's Web Site (www.danielaedburg.com)

Daniela Edburg (www.danielaedburg.com), a photographer born in Texas and raised in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, creates beautiful and striking images, often using textiles to create absurd and provocative situations and installations. She often incorporates knitted and crocheted objects into portraits, still lives and landscapes as soft traces of other realities. *La Novia* (The Bride, 2009) is part of the *Knit* series, which "portrays intense characters dealing with their restlessness and the passing of time. The element of knitting is a constant, as a form of occupational therapy or channeling an obsession" (Edburg, 2014). The old bride in the picture shown is part of a series of compulsive knitters who—like Edburg herself—are inserted into obsessive cycles of creation and self-destruction, "two of the most endearing

and defining qualities of human nature." For Edburg, who likes to confront us with situations where "concepts swivel and contradict themselves" (Edburg, 2010), knitting is related to creativity, both as a destructive passion and as constructive obsession. We know that this woman is a bride because of her white wedding dress, and the setting in which she is inserted: sitting, waiting and knitting all the wedding implements placed on the table next to her. The image is quite disturbing, probably because this bride seems to have always been there, condemned to her own predetermined destiny.

Untitled (1989-96), by Robert Gober

Figure 42. *Untitled,* 1989-96, by Robert Gober
Image from Matthew Marks Gallery (http://www.matthewmarks.com)

In a 1989 installation shown in Washington, DC, Robert Gober placed a white wedding gown a room with wallpaper of two alternating images: a lynched black man hanging from a tree and a white man sleeping in a bed. The base of the walls was lined with eight hand-painted plaster reproductions of cat litter bags. At the center was an empty wedding dress standing on an armature. In Gober's words, the sculpture of the empty wedding dress represents:

> the supposed white purity that often triggered or justified the violence depicted on the walls. It also represents a vessel that is ready to be filled with all of the optimistic hopes

> and dreams of marriage. And to many Americans, gay Americans (an estimated 10 % of our population), it is a reminder of equality denied. The sculptures of bags of cat litter are the link between the violent imagery and the wedding dress, the metaphorical fulcrum. Cat litter both absorbs the stench of excrement (the wallpaper) and it allows for domestic intimacy (think diapers). It is also a reminder of the sacred vows that those who wear the dress profess—to care for the body of your loved ones 'in sickness and in health, till death do us part.' (as cited in Rondeau, 2009, p. 51)

Romantic Subjecter (2010), by Thomas Hirschhorn

Figure 43. *Romantic Subjecter* (2010), by T. Hirschhorn
Image from Stephen Friedman Gallery (www.stephenfriedman.com)

Thomas Hirschhorn is a Swiss artist who creates excessive and overwhelming installations to comment about the "complex, chaotic, cruel, beautiful and wonderful" world we live in (La Casa Encendida, 2009). Dealing with issues of social justice, power, consumerism, global politics and moral responsibility, he creates massive constructions with cheap and basic everyday materials. The inexpensive domestic components that he uses in an apparently disordered manner are a conscious political decision for him. References to fashion, art, politics and philosophy are ambiguously mixed, juxtaposing media images of supermodels with atrocities of war, presenting a provocative vision of

entertainment and visual culture. *Romantic Subjecter* (2010) displays a mannequin in a wedding gown covered by magazine cuts of genitals in sexual intercourse. *Romantic Subjecter* is a work that uses pornographic images attached to a wedding dress to comment on the media's treatment of women as sexual objects (Arndt Gallery, 2012; Art Knowledge News, 2009).

Sometimes Rainbows Are Black (2011), by Dana Holst

Figure 44. *Sometimes Rainbows Are Black* (2011), by D. Holst
Image from Dana Holst's Web Site (www.danaholst.com)

Canadian artist Dana Holst (www.danaholst.com) explores feminine identity in relation to emotions such as love, anxiety and self-hate. In an exhibit titled *Sometimes Rainbows Are Black* (2011), she presents a textile arc structure made of strips of antique wedding dresses painted black to talk about mourning and loss. The piece is surrounded by paintings depicting moments in the lives of young girls in the process of becoming women, conveying feelings of loneliness and desolation and exploring "hope and desire as filtered through destiny and human cruelty/weakness" (The Red Head Gallery, 2011).

Recuerdo de nuestra boda (Memories of Our Wedding, 2008), by Jessica Lagunas

Figure 45. *Recuerdo de nuestra boda* (Memories of Our Wedding) (2008), by Jessica Lagunas
Image from Jessica Lagunas' Web Site (www.jessicalagunas.com)

To make *Recuerdo de nuestra boda* (Memories of Our Wedding, 2008), Jessica Lagunas (www.jessicalagunas.com) borrowed 20 wedding dresses from different women of diverse marital status in Guatemala. She exhibited the gowns by groups in circular racks, displaying the first letter of the owner's name, the number of years in marriage and the owner's current marital status (married, common-law, separated, divorced, or widowed) besides each dress. Usually associated with happiness, purity and commitment, in this installation the wedding dresses are used to explore concepts of loss, memory and nostalgia, functioning as witnesses to the difficulties that women can experience in a marriage and the emotional and sentimental load that they might implicate (Lagunas, 2008).

A Mixture of Frailties (2004), by Susie MacMurray

Figure 46. *A Mixture of Frailties* (2004), by Susie MacMurray
Image from Susue MacMurray's Web Site (www.susie-macmurray.co.uk)

The artwork of British artist Susie MacMurray (www.susie-macmurray.co.uk) is beautiful and provocative. Using daily objects to create seductive and aggressive garments, sculptures and installations, she explores the nature of memories and personal experiences related to the female body. *A Mixture of Frailties* (2004) is a long white gown made from thousands of yellow standard rubber gloves used for domestic chores turned inside out to reveal their white soft interior. Reminiscent of a sophisticated wedding dress, this piece explores the relationship between women's labor and the cultural presentation of women's bodies. It is an ironic statement on feminine domestic reality, where women often find themselves in a vulnerable and unfair position (Soriano, 2011).

Nupci@s: Ceremonia nupcial (Nuptial Ceremony, 2006), by Gabriela Olivo de Alba

Figure 47. Nupci@s: Ceremonia nupcial (Nuptial Ceremony) (2006), by Gabriela Olivo de Alba
Image from Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos (http://av.celarg.org.ve)

Mexican performance artist Gabriela Olivo de Alba executed *Nupci@s: Ceremonia nupcial* (2006) as a way of questioning the commonly shared belief that all women dream of marriage in a white dress. Based on autobiographical and self-referential elements, she performed a wedding ceremony with a focus on its relation to the female body. Her performance is a ritual action to question the socially assumed forms of representation that function as part of the female imaginary and gender stereotypes. According to her site, by marrying alone—without a spouse—she intended to 'usurp' existing codes that place women in a territory where intimate and private attributes are made public as a collective appropriation of the female body. Made as part of the Tenth International Conference of Women in the Arts, at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, the performance started at the Hotel de Cortes, where she took a room to prepare for the ceremony and to dress in a white gown. Later she rode a white car, decorated with white ribbons and red flowers, to the Palace, to participate in marriage ceremony with no one.

Para siempre (Forever, 2011), by Tanit Plana

Figure 48. *Para siempre* (Forever) (2011), by T. Plana
Image from Plusesmas (http://www.plusesmas.com)

Another artist who has worked with wedding gowns is Spaniard Tanit Plana (http://www.latanit.com) with her project *Para siempre* (Forever, 2011) to explore and represent bride's beliefs, behaviours, ideas of beauty and tradition, the everyday and memory (James, 2012; Dígame Mallorca Guide, 2011). *Para siempre* is a participatory project in which married women are asked to wear their wedding dress again to explore the cultural meanings and the female experience of marriage: "the project was born in response to my own life experience, after I realized that being a married woman has little to do with the fantasies I had on my wedding day. It also emerged as a part of my need to share these concerns and seek answers in other, often wiser, women" (Colors Magazine, 2012). Also focused on representations of women produced and transmitted by the media and cultural industries, Plana's work includes portraits and performances involving feminine stereotypes: "central to the ritual of marriage, the wedding dress is a fetish object which embodies all the personal and cultural fantasies (or imperatives) that women have inherited about marriage and raising families" (Ibid.).

Dialogue with Absence (2010), by Chiharu Shiota

Figure 49. *Dialogue with Absence* (2010), by C. Shiota
Image from Chiharu Shiota's Web Site (http://www.chiharu-shiota.com)

Dialogue with Absence (2010) is a wedding dress connected to a 1000-meter long network of catheters pumped with a blood-like red liquid. The piece was made by Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota (http://www.chiharu-shiota.com), who often incorporates old-fashioned dresses painted in white plaster in her impressive threaded nets to communicate the "existence of the absent" (Trice, 2011). Strongly influenced by a generation of feminist artists who used their work to question and change traditional gender definitions, asserting that gender identities are a social construction, Shiota's work presents a critical approach to the complex definition of female identity. She constantly reformulates

her role as an artistic subject and object, playing with the ambivalent position that she has as a woman artist and a female body that can be exposed, painted, tied and get dirty.

The Wedding (1994), by Sandy Skoglund

Figure 50. *The Wedding* (1994), by Sandy Skoglund
Image from Sandy Skoglund's Web Site (www.sandyskoglund.com)

The Wedding is a photograph taken by American artist Sandy Skoglund (www.sandyskoglund.com) in 1994. It shows a bride and a groom, dressed fully in red, in a reddish room covered with roses and a big red wedding cake at the center of the image. The red bride is facing us but looking down, as if trying to cautiously walk forward, while the groom is facing away from us, probably looking at the bride's face, also intending to walk forward towards her. The room's tone is set by the red jam that covers the walls and the orange marmalade in the floor. Red is a warm but also passionate and even violent color. It goes against all the notions of purity and whiteness associated with a traditional Western wedding. Despite the warmness and sweetness of the room, and the huge care with which

everything seems to be placed, the couple does not seem comfortable in this setting. The image "projects a sense of outrage and discomfort; a feeling that defies the notion of well-being upon which depends the dominant meaning system about weddings" (Ingraham, 2008b).

As we can see from these examples, art related to weddings can be used successfully to "examine our social, economic, and cultural priorities and challenge our position as disinterested observer. [These artists] offer a global, historical, ideological, and sometimes humorous context and address the ways in which weddings have served as a symbolic target and site for social commentary" (Ingraham, 2008b, p. 162). Moreover, wedding dresses can be used by artists to resist hegemony and social norms by exploiting the capacity that fashion has to convey unique personalities while creating a collective identity. Because fashion is a personal choice but also a social practice that holds the potential for both pleasure and for subjugation, the wedding dress becomes a symbolic, expressive, creative and powerful element in art. Like the participants in this project, many of the artists working with wedding dresses are women, probably due to the strong relationship that exists between gender roles—mostly female stereotypes—and fashion, but also as a personal response to the cultural pressure they feel to conform to the social ideal of the bride. Fashion is a constant and significant source for feminist discourse. Being both so personal and social, it inevitably becomes highly political as well. Like power, fashion is perceived by feminist scholars as neither inherently good nor bad. What matters is how it is used. In this sense, I believe that wedding dresses can be successfully used in art to "dismantle and challenge the taken-for-granted and offer an alternative perspective to the romanticized experience of weddings and marriage" (Ingraham, 2008b, p. 175).

To conclude, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* intends to use clothes transformed into art to collaboratively explore, expose and understand the connotations and standards that the white wedding dress may uphold in many personal and social aspects of women's lives. In this project our gendered identities are shaped not only by fashion—in the form of wedding dresses and

photography—but primarily by our own participation in it as an embodied experience. Based on the idea that culture is not only a site but also a process that repeatedly constructs and presents meaning (Hall, 1997) where seeing is knowing (Rose, 2011), we examined together the TTD phenomenon to understand how body images help to construct womanhood through the visual representation and textual discourse of the bride. Based on artistic creation—and not only a linguistic approach—with this research I intend to integrate many diverse identities and voices into an embodied knowledge. By performing gender through transformed wedding dresses we are subverting it and challenging heterosexual norms enforced by everyday actions, behaviors, language, gestures and dress codes. Moreover, through the integration of my own art-making I aim to incorporate these series of diverse feminine identities into my academic research as a way of bringing deeper understanding to the thesis. I see these creative textile explorations as a rich way of conducting this study and as a method for learning more about the role that bridal fashion plays in the creation and development of female stereotypes.

Chapter Five
The many Fabrics of my Dress:
Doing Research-Creation through Wedding Gowns

Clothing is… an exercise of memory…
It makes me explore the past…
how did I feel when I wore that…
Louise Bourgeois (http://www.moma.org, n.d.)

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress is a research-creation project that integrates artistic forms of knowing with more traditional social research. Involving visual, material, performative and intuitive explorations, this project examines the roles wedding dresses play in shaping women's identity and how participatory and collaborative art projects can help us understand our conditions as wives in marriage. I undertook this investigation through artistically transformed dresses based on the idea that some of the most complex and subtle forms of thinking take place when we have the opportunity to work meaningfully on the creation or discussion of artworks (Eisner, 2008). Art encloses intellectual, intuitive and reflective qualities that not only have the capacity to broaden our understanding about what it means to know, but to use it to teach others the importance of seeing through an "enlightened eye" (Eisner, 1998). When I first decided to pursue this research—based on my own artistic process of exploring how wedding dresses shape women's identities—I did so with the belief that meaning does not reside solely within an artwork itself. Meaning making is a complex and organic process of interpretation. It involves a series of relations between content and form, time and place, action and reaction, researcher and researched, and art and academics, as well as the specific narratives that surround the artwork (Rose, 2011; O'Donoghue, 2009). This research-creation project considers the social conditions in which the creative process of a group of women takes place, becoming a meaningful act of interpretation of their circumstances (O'Donoghue, 2009). In the next chapter, called "Ethnographic Tendencies," I discuss the experiences of the 18 other women and the transformation process of their dresses in relation to ethnographic research. This chapter, however, focuses on my own process of creating a dress and how I relate it to my experience in a couple's

relationship. This chapter is rooted in the idea that writing about this experience as an artist allows me to understand the process as a researcher. Therefore, I write about this experience not only as one of the project's 19 participants, but also as the orchestrator of this project.

Wedding dresses as research-creation

I have always perceived my artwork as a form of research; I believe in its ability to reflect reality and therefore affect it. I use it as a creative and critical tool to discover and construct new understandings and awareness about issues that are relevant to me. Through my artwork, I can materialize and share my perception of a diverse range of personal, social and cultural issues affecting my existence. As a form of academic exploration, creativity becomes a primary method of inquiry (McNiff, 2008), functioning as research because it expands our collective knowledge through artistic processes (Sullivan, 2010). This project addresses problems that are relevant in both academic and quotidian contexts, contemplating theoretical and social knowledge as much as personal expressions of imagination and thought (Sullivan, 2006, p. 19). It employs creative, empirical and analytical methods to explore and share our experiences in marriage, revealing "the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific artworks and artistic processes" (Ibid.). This is not new, as there are many artist-researchers seeking an effective academic method of inquiry that successfully functions as art (Vaughan, 2014). Through this work of research-creation I strive for a balance between qualitative research practices and the creative process while "working within and between these two well-developed disciplinary bodies of knowledge and modes of inquiry, which are both aligned and distinctive" (Ibid. p.7).

As Graeme Sullivan, a researcher and professor of art education, states in his book *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts* (2010), art is an important mode of inquiry. He argues that artists' creativity is able to generate, examine and circulate innovative ideas that can be used in academic

contexts to evaluate existing knowledge and to develop new understandings. In this regard, research-creation projects such as mine are able to explore and explain issues in new ways, generating unique and novel connections and providing original insight into the examined subject (p. 95). *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* is therefore based in an imaginative and autonomous method of research able to create "knowledge that can help us understand in a profound way the world we live in and how we make sense of it" (p. xi). It is a representation of intimate relations and a shared experience from which the participants learned together. Through our collective participation in the art-making process, we gained a unique insight into the institution of marriage and, most importantly together we generated new ways of validating our own experiences and previous knowledge.

There is no universally accepted methodology for research-creation. As a result, an artist develops her own unique critical approach depending on the specific characteristics of her project and of her research interests (Leavy, 2015; Sullivan, 2010). In this way, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* offers a unique procedural approach. Like many other inquiries based on art-making processes, this project began as an "unequivocal creative impulse" which, through a collective experience, gradually developed into a tool with which to critically examine our perception of things (Sullivan, 2010, p.62). This creative research project involves experimentation, innovation and embodiment to generate new experiences and therefore new insight (Dewey, 2005 [1934]) into the roles that women are expected to play as wives. While creatively exploring our personal understandings of marriage, we participated in a collective construction of knowledge in relation to our life experiences and provided an outlet through which to share that knowledge with others. These reflections are meaningful not only to each one of us (through the awareness gained by individually transforming a dress), but also to the entire group of participants (through the collective embodying of the dresses) and to many other people outside the project (by the public display of the final images and by this text).

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress is informed by subtle everyday actions, behaviours, language, gestures and dress codes. It is an examination of the Western ideal of the bride imposed by media and fashion—specifically by images like those constructed by the "Trash the Dress" phenomenon (see above, in Chapter Three)—and it aims to resist these heterosexual norms through artistic collaborations. Based on the idea that all images convey meaning (Rose, 2011), with this project I perform a creative exploration of wedding imagery and TTD pictures to understand and respond to the social conditions in which they were created. Each of the transformed wedding dresses for this project informs us of the "cultural significance, social practices, and power relations in which [they are] embedded" (Rose, 2011, xv). For the purposes of this analysis, I am looking at the diverse meanings that this research-creation project conveys following Gillian Rose's (2011, 2014) visual methodology. I am looking at the pictures of the participants wearing their wedding dresses from three different sites: the social conditions in which TTD images are produced (visual culture), the images that we created by symbolically transforming our own dresses and photographing them professionally (art), and the effects that contributing to this project has had on each participant, whose photographs and written responses to this experience are analyzed in detail in the next chapter (feminist pedagogy).

One and many ideas

After having seen the "Trash the Dress" images, the idea of transforming a wedding dress as an art project came to me almost intuitively as a natural response to this phenomenon. It was originally planned to be an individual art piece, but the need to make it a collaborative piece became evident quite rapidly when I discovered that many women around me were willing to participate in it. I realized then that it could also be developed into a meaningful collaborative research-creation project. It encompasses many of the ideas that I usually explore with my artwork, such as gender stereotypes and violence towards women represented through clothing, while also providing new elements for research,

like the incorporation of my participants' voices through images and texts, as well as the project's relation to my interest in feminist and public pedagogy. As research-creation, I expected it to "disclose particular insights and generate particular understandings about educational settings and situations in addition to, and in ways, that linguistic based research methods cannot" (O'Donoghue, 2009, p.364).

Contrary to what I originally imagined, it was easier to conceptually define *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* than it was to formally shape my own dress. I have produced art for 20 years but have never before undertaken doctoral research, and shaping my own experience in marriage to be analyzed academically quickly became an arduous process. Creating my dress was more difficult than I imagined because the dress was meant to integrate my professional life (as an artist and an academic) with my personal life (as a wife, mother, daughter, sister and friend) in many different ways. I felt pressured to create something academically and artistically 'worthy' while also having to expose some very intimate aspects of my personal life. I felt that my dress had to be clear, strong, comforting, imaginative, smart, educational and creative, all while retaining a certain degree of honesty. It was very challenging—almost paralyzing—despite the fact that I have integrated aspects of my personal life into my artwork for several years now. In this sense, it was the collaboration with other women that allowed me to keep going, as I will explain in Chapter Seven, and my previous understandings of education. My parents—both academics—taught me to value different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing, as education—for them—happens everywhere, all the time.

When I began the process of critically revising my feelings about marriage for this project, I came to a potentially obvious conclusion: that they are complex and varied. I love Pedro, my partner, profoundly. I deeply appreciate the relationship we have created together. With him I share the beautiful adventure and huge responsibility of raising our two children, Matías and Eugenia. There is a huge love involved in this process. I also feel that my children came into my life to teach me some of the most important things I know: things that cannot be found in any book. I love, care for, and am deeply

committed to my family. However, in every gain there is a loss and to me marriage also implies a loss of independence, autonomy, individuality and liberty. I have been in this relationship for almost a third of my life, so it is quite difficult to separate my current identity as a wife and mother from my identities as an artist, a teacher, a student and many others. I sometimes struggle with these different and even opposing identities as the time, energy and commitment that I invest in my relationship and family life are frequently at the expense of my professional life. I often struggle to find a way to fit everything I do and am into my life, but I think it is worth it. For better or worse, it makes me the woman that I am, and I wanted to incorporate these different facets of my life into my dress.

To explore and represent my personal and social circumstances in marriage, while also aiming to alter dominant conceptions of femininity, I decided to make a dress from many parts. I wanted it to reflect my opposing but still complementing selves while taking into consideration the fact that it would be part of a bigger process in which several women would be taking part. I wanted it to reflect my experience in a relationship while also considering marriage as a social phenomenon. In the end, instead of transforming a wedding gown as was originally planned, I decided to create an entirely new dress from several different pieces of white clothing. I created this as a metaphor for the manner in which our identities are formed. From a postmodernist perspective, everything—from our fragmented identities to clothes and art—is socially constructed and acquires its meaning through its cultural context. With my dress, I wanted to represent my identity as a wife through the context of my other identities.

Creating the dress: Materializing my thoughts

Despite the fact that women's identity construction is strongly related to dress, which through the fashion system becomes a central part of popular visual culture, fashion has always had a marginal position within the realm of serious intellectual research due to its perceived frivolousness (Entwistle & Wilson, 2001; Kawamura, 2011). This is probably because of the limited amount of methodological

inquiry in fashion and dress studies, as “when the method is mostly adopted by female researchers, the method itself begins to lose its value, and object-based approaches were often taken by female historians” (Kawamura, 2011, p. 92). My research-creation acknowledges that fashion is a complex cultural and commercial phenomenon that has become “an intrinsic part of today’s visual culture, and vice versa” (Smelik, 2006, p. 153). Furthermore, this project is based on the premise that fashion functions as an interdisciplinary area of knowledge—developed through diverse theories and diverse research findings—that go beyond “traditional disciplinary boundaries, making it possible to integrate fashion and dress research to multiple, different methodological strategies” (Kawamura, 2011, p. 13).

According to Kawamura (2011), culture and its resulting material objects must be studied jointly because they are inseparable. For her, “material culture studies show us that we all live within, act through, and are shaped by the material world” (p. 95). My research-creation project is based on wedding dresses because clothing is “one of the most important and richest aspects of material cultures” (Kawamura, 2011, p. 96). Furthermore, wedding dresses in particular represent an intersection between fashion and bridehood and therefore femininity. Material culture, as the object-based aspect of the study of humanity (Prown, 1982, p. 5), emphasises the social context of materials. It not only offers a real vision of tangible things, but also has the characteristic of “remaining available to analysis even after an interaction ends” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 222). Material culture studies consider “the intrinsic materiality of what are otherwise regarded as social relations” (Miller, 2005, p. 2). This project considers clothing as an important aspect of material culture that “as a relational structure of meaning […] it is not seen as simply reflecting given aspects of the self but, through its particular material propensities, is co-constitutive of facets such as identity, sexuality, and social role” (Woodward, 2005, p. 21).

This research project is rooted in the belief that dress has the capacity to embody, connect, convey and emphasize the social context of material (Miller, 2005). For making a dress, one needs to

choose the fabric, measure and cut it, sew it together and try it on before applying the finishing touches. Its production process is implied in the final piece. In this way, my dress for this project offers many layers of interpretation. It can be analyzed through various critical approaches, from its formal aspects or cultural context to its social associations or deeply personal implications. For the purposes of this text, I am revising the material and technical process of making my gown in relation to the symbolic, personal and conceptual elements that it conveys. Following a critical visual methodology (Rose, 2011), I aim to explore the creation of my dress and its picture for this project from three different sites: the personal and social conditions in which it was produced, the photograph as a text and my own experience while creating it.

The fabric

To represent my experience in marriage I wanted to make a traditional wedding dress with a long and wide train, which traditionally was a sign of the bride's position in society (the longer the better). The train—the portion of the gown's skirt that extends behind it along the ground—required a substantial amount of fabric. I had to acquire almost one hundred white garments, which was a challenge primarily due to my limited budget. Initially, I looked for white clothes that my family and I were not using anymore (one from each member of the family). It was important to me that I include not only my own clothes but also theirs so as to represent them symbolically in the piece. I also asked my friends to donate any white garments that they were no longer using, but found little luck with this method as well. The solution to this problem was provided to me by Denisse and Ivan, two participants in my project who recommended a store called *Eva B*, located near Metro Saint Laurent, which among many other things sells vintage clothes. The store's backroom houses a mountain of clothing, upon which I had to climb with a ladder, digging through the huge pile and grabbing all of the white garments I could find, which were priced at only a dollar each.

Figure 51. Pile of clothes at *Eva B* (2012)
Image from *Eva B*'s Facebook Page (https://www.facebook.com/Eva-B)

At home, I began the gradual process of washing each of the garments and sorting them into groups. The variety of tones, shades, thickness, texture and patterns contained in that whiteness was surprising. Some clothes were thin and delicate while others were thick and tough. Some were clean and in great condition while others were worn out and filthy. Some were large and others quite small. Some had much to say while others were mute. Once incorporated into my wedding dress they functioned as a metaphor for my social female body. Similarly, Stephanie Springgay, a Canadian art educator, has worked with textiles to question the connotations and restrictions involved in our creation and representation of knowledge. In her article titled "Body as fragment: Art making, researching, and teaching as a boundary shift" (2004), she examines the way in which dresses can be artistically used for the purpose of framing the body, alluding "metaphorically and metonymically to gender, sexuality, and desire, and to issues pertaining to the shifting identity of woman, artist, and scholar in the academy" (Springgay, 2004, p.62). Exploring the embodiment of knowledge, she examines the boundaries that garments set between the internal and the external to generate new

understandings about ourselves and our links to others. In regards to my own research, I believe that my wedding dress can function as a participatory practice that offers different ways of generating knowledge, conceptualizing pedagogy in new forms while considering the materiality of the body (Springgay, 2004). The diversity of fabrics composing my wedding dress can translate into bodily experiences that open the possibility of establishing an active pedagogy to destabilize and break restricting boundaries through art (Ibid.). The first step to understand how my female identity is shaped through clothing is to acknowledge others in my own dress. These dozens of empty clothes represent many bodies, signifying other people's identities mixing with my own in a fluid way. My family has a central position in this process, but consideration is also given to people I do not know, so as to understand the social context in which our identities are formed. In addition to the symbolic workings of the fabrics, I also become part of the dress, using my own body as an artistic medium to express my experience as a woman.

The pattern

I began working on my dress from the top, with the white blouse that I contributed to the piece. This garment would become the support of the whole gown, both physically and conceptually, as it would hold the other pieces together around my body. It was important and meaningful to have a personal piece of clothing as a starting point, representing my own identity. I chose a long, thin, sleeveless pleated top with a long V-neck. Its shape was simple and casual, while its fabric was formal and classy. I was drawn to its vagueness, as it implies both the intimate and public spaces between which I move. To this blouse, I

Figure 52. White garments (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

attached a skirt made from my family's clothes: a T-shirt from my partner Pedro, a jersey from my son Matías and a skirt form my daughter Eugenia. These garments were still close to my body, shaping and protecting me, symbolizing the important place that they have in my life.

Once the dress was completed, I continued working on its train, which consisted of most of the garments I had bought. This process required a lot of work, involving a great deal of time and logistics, as I wanted to integrate all those individual garments into a single dress while still maintaining their original shape. It was like solving a puzzle: gradually and continually, I increased the number of clothes forming each subsequent row from front to back. I finished the last row with a train made out of 20 long-sleeved shirts, representing the participants in this project. I created the fabric of my wedding dress by joining other people's clothes to mine because of the symbolic, material and conceptual implications that this action conveys. The process of sewing these garments together was parallel to the act of thinking, making meaningful connections between past and present, art and life, collectivity and individuality, private and public, art and research, concepts and experience, and many other ideas. In relation to art education, I see the act of arranging old garments together to create a new fabric as a "re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the 'stored,' material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation" (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 63). My dress is made from other people's clothes, which reflect their cultural and social context while creating a shape based on my life experiences, thus becoming a generator of new experiences to reflect on the roles that visual culture play in shaping our identities.

The stitches

I worked on my dress intermittently over a six-month period while also undertaking the transformation of other participants' gowns, which I discuss in the following chapter. My dress was created in stages, always starting with provisional stitches made by hand and finishing with the more permanent darns of the sewing machine[29]. Stitching the dress was not only a creative process but a material and formal investigation as well. It also became a contemplative activity and a meditative process. Sewing creates links; the garments' margins were transgressed by the stitches, making their limits evident while simultaneously dissolving them. The stitches also connected my ideas together.

Figure 53. My dress' pattern (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

They materialized my thoughts in the cloth. Through the needle, the thread merged each garment's individuality into a combined fabric in which loose ideas became a concept. It was a connective act with

[29] I used the sewing machine to strengthen my hand stitches. While it limited the closeness of a connection with the materiality and symbolism of the fabrics, it afforded me some much-needed time to work on the other dresses for this project. The sewing machine stitches are faster and, using two strands of thread simultaneously, tend to be stronger and more resistant. Also, on the machine I was able to maneuver different types of fabrics—particularly thicker ones—more easily than I could have by hand.

the past—with the lives of the anonymous owners of these garments bought at a second hand shop, and a way of revising my own story. Sewing became my way of thinking. As American philosopher and educator John Dewey[30] explains:

> Because perception of relationship between what is done and what is undergone constitutes the work of intelligence, and because the artist is controlled in the process of his work by his grasp of the connection between what he has already done and what he is to do next, the idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd. [H]e has to see each particular connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the whole that he desires to produce. To apprehend such relations is to think, and is one of the most exacting modes of thought. (Dewey, 2005 [1934], p. 47)

In art, the needle is an instrument metaphorically associated to repetition, restoration and continual return to the original whole. For Kimsooja, a Korean textile artist whose work I deeply appreciate, sewing—more than a female domestic process—is related with contemplation and healing. According to her, "the relationship of the needle to the fabric is same as [her] body to the universe" (as cited in Martinez, 2012). Like Louise Bourgeois, her work also contemplates the ambivalent connotations of the needle and its ability to restore things. Bourgeois, who grew up surrounded by seamstresses and tapestry makers, uses many textile references in her work, including the spider, the needle, and recovered clothes. Often addressing gendered power roles in her artwork, she sees sewing as an "attempt to keep things together and make things whole" (Matt & Weiermair, 2005, p. 201). Fascinated by the needle's power to join and mend things and to repair damage, she saw her own work as a form of "restoration and reparation" (Bernadac & Obrist, 1998, p.142-3).

Sewing my wedding dress for this project was an imaginative, constructive and meditative act. It brought together different concepts to create something new. The seam is the place where "multiple

[30] In his book *Art as Experience* (2005 [1934]), Dewey presents experiences as cognitive and art as "the most direct and complete manifestation there is of experience as experience" (p. 309). Questioning the traditional separation of fine art from daily life, he was one of the first educators to talk about the embodied experience as art, and the importance of non-linguistic bodies of knowledge. For him, experience and learning are deeply connected and knowledge is a dynamic process that initiates new inquiries.

images, identities, and ways of knowing collide and are in tension with each other" (Springgay, 2004, p. 61). Sewing fragments of different things together can be an effective pedagogic process "that serves to deepen our understanding of how identities are formed, artwork produced, and responsibilities engaged so as to enable the possibilities of generativity and transformation" (Springgay, 2004, p. 61).

Embodying my thoughts

Due to the fact that I created my own gown (as opposed to transforming an existing wedding dress), I had to try it on several times in the process of its creation. I experienced its textures, shape and weight on my own body, both by sewing and wearing it. When I finished the dress I went to Trenholm Park, located across from my house, to try it on. Once extended on the ground the dress seemed smaller than I had envisioned, which was somewhat frustrating. However, the different patterns composing the fabric looked beautiful. When I put it on, the dress felt nice: its loose and simple shape made it comfortable around my body in the summer's heat. The challenge began when I attempted to walk, which was made difficult by the dress's large and heavy train. I had to pull hard, walking cautiously but firmly in order to advance. I could feel it pulling me, and on a few occasions it almost made me fall back.

Figure 54. Sewing my dress together (2012)
Photo by Pedro Orozco

Figure 55. Trying my finished dress on for the first time in Trenholme Park (2012)
Photo by Pedro Orozco

Thus, my dress not only speaks to my experience in marriage, but became an experience in its own right. I see the performative aspect of this work as an embodied enquiry, able to generate reflections by challenging existing social values. Through the dress, I embody the ability that institutions like fashion and marriage have to convey both individual and collective personalities, functioning simultaneously as sites of self-expression and subjugation. I present alternative and unconventional expressions of what it means to be wife, challenging traditional understandings of weddings and marriage. Covered and restricted by dozens of white garments, I simultaneously expose and confront the connotations that the traditional white wedding dress upholds in many women's lives. My dress thus facilitates the shaping of my identity as a woman, not by passively accepting institutional norms but by actively creating and fulfilling my own.

Getting the picture: Visualizing my ideas

A component of the project was the creation and exhibition of a photograph of each participating woman wearing her transformed wedding dress. This was as necessary in my own case as

it was for the 19 participants, who had to choose a final image to represent her understanding of marriage from two different sets of pictures, taken in both informal and formal sessions.

Informal photos

Prior to the final shoot at Loyola Chapel I was photographed wearing my dress on two separate occasions. The first series of pictures was taken by Pedro and the second one by Jackie. On both occasions the shoots were done in Trenholm Park, across from my house. The experience, however, was entirely different each time. The weather and the light changed considerably from summer to fall: Jackie's shoot was significantly colder than the shoot with Pedro. Instead of green grass, the train was resting on a layer of fallen leaves. The dress did not feel as fun or as welcoming as it had the first time around. I felt too cold, exposed and uncomfortable in it. Nonetheless, I found the experience exciting as my attention became fixed on the subtle differences in the act of wearing it and on my own reactions and feelings towards the context of the shoot. Although it was difficult to capture in images how I felt and sensed the dress that day, I feel that Jackie's pictures were quite representative of the experience. When I see these pictures, I see a bride that is out of place. She is alone, in a cold and dark setting, restricted by the surrounding fences, heading uphill, and wearing a dress that is more inconvenient than protective. However, she is also enduring the situation as best as she can, rigidly smiling, determined by a deep sense of responsibility, and motivated by the warmth of the photographer's friendly face on the other side of the camera.

Figure 56. Wearing my dress for the second photographic session in Trenholm Park (2012)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

The formal photographic session

Enrique Uranga, a Mexican-Canadian photographer living in Montreal, took the final series of pictures for this project at Loyola Chapel in March of 2013. We met through my partner Pedro and Juan Carlos, a mutual friend and a husband to Paula (one of my participants). Prior the photo shoot we had a couple of meetings in his studio to discuss the project, sketch out ideas and examine images that resembled what I was looking for. We also met at the chapel on a few occasions to explore the location and to make technical, spatial and creative decisions regarding the project. We planned the basic logistics involving the times, spaces, lights and coordination for the photo shoot. We made sure to maintain a certain degree of flexibility in our plans to allow each participant to choose her location and pose. Enrique took my pictures at Loyola Chapel after all the other participants had been successfully photographed. Because of my dress's large dimensions, I chose an open space at the center of the chapel for my shoot. With Jackie's assistance, Enrique took the pictures from the second floor where he had a better view of the dress' train. I wanted the dress to appear as the varied, adaptable and inclusive

extension of my body that I had designed it to be. To this end, I first wore the dress alone, facing the camera with my train fully extended on the chapel's floor.

Figure 57. Wearing my dress alone for the final photographic session, at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Wedding picture or family portrait?

Initially, my family's inclusion in the dress was not conceived as a literal embodiment. During the design and creation stages I had incorporated my family in the dress symbolically through their clothes. However, before the Loyola photo shoot my daughter Eugenia questioned my choice of posing for the photographs alone. Her remark had a profound impact on my approach to this project: it made me realize the degree to which I value her input (and by extension, that of my partner Pedro and my son Matías). I subsequently decided that such an important aspect of my daily life should play an equally important part in this project. I thus decided to incorporate them into the dress itself. Their physical involvement and active collaboration in this project was probably a more accurate representation of my family life. My family is always involved in and affected by my art projects, as my creative process is continuously informed and determined by my personal life—of which my family is an essential part.

Therefore, for the final exhibition of this project and for this written analysis I selected a picture in which I am wearing my dress along with my family inside Loyola Chapel.

It is a vertical image in which we are all facing the camera in an open and luminous space. I am placed at the front of the frame, closest to the camera. My dress' train extends behind me, supported by Pedro at the end, Matías on the right and Eugenia on the left. Like me, they are all embedded in the dress' fabric, having placed their heads and arms through the garment's openings. I am holding a small white bouquet, Eugenia a single white rose and Matías a yellow balloon. Pedro's hands are carefully holding the fabric, providing balance and support to the structure. I chose this image because it is a collective representation of my family and, by extension, my role as a wife and mother. We are held together by this fabric but we are not trapped by it. We are wearing it by choice: it gives us structure, it shelters us and it is important to us. I am not wearing it alone. We are occupying it together as a family.

Figure 58. The final image: wearing my dress with my family at Loyola Chapel (2013)

Figure 59. Wearing my dress with my family at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga.

When I asked my partner Pedro to write a brief paragraph about this experience, he was unsure whether to talk about his involvement with the project, how he felt while wearing the dress with our children and me, or his reflections upon looking at the final series of pictures. He wrote that it was difficult for him to “distinguish [his] interpretation of the picture from [his] original reactions to the shoot” and to know how much his opinion has been affected by different aspects of the project. Like me, he sees all these as interwoven aspects of our relationship, where it is difficult to separate the things that we do from the way we feel as individuals, as a couple and as parents. We collaborate on numerous things; so many that we are often no longer conscious of it. Initially, his only expectation was to assist me with the project, so he did not give much critical thought to how he felt, but he gradually became involved with the emotional aspects of the project to the same extent that he did with the practical aspects. He says:

> It was also a good reason to comment and see different aspects of marriage, that despite living in one and enjoying it, I also realize the load of negative connotations that it has,

> especially for women. Although at times I felt displayed and criticized, which perhaps says more about me than about Maria, in general I like the playful and meaningful way in which she presents it, through performances full of irony or sarcasm. (Pedro, 2013)

The role that Pedro plays in my life extends beyond sharing a home and a life or fathering my children. We often collaborate and he is frequently involved in my art projects in many ways. He is a strong reference point in my work, which speaks to the diverse roles that I play in society as a woman, including my domestic life. He is also usually the first person with whom I discuss new projects, deliberate feedback regarding works in progress and celebrate or criticize my finished projects. He helps me with all manner of practical matters as well, including photographing many of my works and performances. He is not a professional photographer, but he sees my work with a fairly understanding eye and I feel comfortable when he is the person behind the camera. The pictures that Pedro took of me wearing my wedding dress for the first time are quite honest and representative of my experience in marriage. Although only I can be seen in the images, I believe they nonetheless reflect the fact that my family was involved in their creation.

Considering all the clothes of my dress

I see numerous and flexible interpretations regarding the way in which my transformed wedding dress helped me to generate learning experiences related to my personal and social circumstances as a married woman. My dress is a large structure that constricts my movement but also enables me to grow and offers me a shelter that extends to my family. The dominant conceptions of femininity implicit in the dress are challenged by the fact that it offers a multifaceted reality instead of displaying a simplistic, normalizing and immaculate cultural fantasy. Like postmodern societies, my dress is fragmented, heterogeneous and individualistic (Kawamura, 2011). My dress contemplates the burden that traditions such as weddings can become while also lending consideration to their potential to be meaningful if we allow them to be more inclusive and diverse.

Upon reflecting on the role that wedding dresses have played in shaping my identity as a woman, wife and mother, many ideas come to my mind. On a personal level, I remember the beautiful black and white wedding pictures that both of my grandmothers used to have hanging in delicate frames on the wall. These were pictures of themselves and of their own mothers getting married in gorgeous white wedding dresses. I remember looking at them when I was a girl and thinking that without these majestic moments I probably would not exist. My mother also had pictures of her wedding, though she never hung them on a wall. They are black and white images of my parents on top of a tree that they climbed after the ceremony. In my youth, my grandmother told me the story of my own parents' unconventional wedding in the 1970s. My mother entered the church running instead of walking, and she skipped many of the wedding formalities of that time. She did, however, wear a white wedding dress; a very simple homespun gown which later—after my parents' divorce—my mother transformed into a lampshade hanging into our living room. That dress has been prevalent in my thoughts for much of this project's duration. The subtle gesture of that dress' transformation has probably influenced many of the art pieces that I have done in recent years, including this project. Furthermore, my mother, who was Argentinian by birth, got married for a second time with her Mexican long term partner in order to accelerate her (and our) citizenship paperwork in Mexico. My sister also married in a white dress, after having lived for many years in a common-law relationship. She eventually divorced as well. Both my mother and my sister now live happily in common-law relationships with their partners. My farther also got married for a second time. Despite both their reluctance, he married the woman with whom he had been joyfully living for many years and had already two children, basically to expedite the paper work to move to another country as a family. His partner wore a beautiful Mexican embroidered blouse, as she always does for special occasions. Their daughter, my half-sister, got married recently with her long-term boyfriend in a very modest but meaningful ceremony for which she wore a casual and beautiful blue dress. Through these stories,

wedding dresses have generated both emotional responses and learning experiences that directly relate to my personal and social circumstances. For my family, marriage has involved not only personal choices. commitment and romantic love, but complex social and cultural circumstances that reflect the dominant conceptions of femininity that each of us has had to grapple with.

From a personal perspective, this piece refers to my experience as a partner and a mother. More than a wedding picture, it is a family portrait. Pedro and I are not married and I had never worn a wedding dress before this project. It was not until Matías was born that we gained some of the legal and institutional privileges of married couples. In Mexico we are not officially considered to be living under a legal category equivalent to the Canadian common-law regime, and it was due to our children that our relationship was institutionally legitimated, which facilitated our move to Canada. We did not enter a legal marriage because we do not believe that love, or even commitment, needs to be supported by any institution in order to function. My relationships are a personal matter, but my decision to live and enjoy this one 'unofficially' is also an ideological choice. As a couple, we do not need external influences telling us how our relationship should be. As a woman, I do not share the values of a wedding dress either, and in fact I reject many of them, such as the ideals of female purity and objectification, beauty norms, heterosexuality, etc. If I made my dress white, long and wide for this project, it is because I wanted it to resemble a traditional wedding gown to fit into the social norms still imposed by marriage today to women.

My dress can also be understood as a metaphor for my family's move to Canada, which was a collective decision influenced by my necessity to pursue my PhD. Its picture shows that we are in this boat together —partly due to the dress' literal resemblance of a ship. The picture also represents the complex and profound ways in which the personal, artistic and academic aspects of my life integrate but also collide. When I came up with the initial idea for this project I was looking for a way to incorporate my diverse and usually opposing professional and personal identities through art. It was a result of my

deeply seated need for a practical way to play many roles simultaneously without constantly feeling defeated due to a lack of time or energy. Therefore, through the integration of personal issues into my art-making, and through the incorporation of diverse feminine identities into my academic research, I brought a deeper understanding to the thesis while simultaneously gaining unique personal insight into my own life.

Informed by "Trash the Dress," my wedding gown conformed to the social norms of marriage in an atypical manner, managing to transform me into a bride while questioning the concept of bridehood itself in a meaningful way. My dress is made of a social fabric, a remainder and reminder of other people's lives, and this has taught me about marriage, or more specifically: the way I perceive marriage. Pieced together into a postmodern fashion, my wedding gown emphasizes ideas of fragmentation, change, difference and interpretation as ways to challenge traditional cultural values (Crane, 2000; Kawamura, 2011). All the different clothes that constitute my dress shape my identity as ambiguous, fragmented, heterogeneous, fluid and even contradictory. In this way, I see my dress as an open text(ile).[31] Clothes do not function as a fixed language in this research-creation project, as they convey multiple meanings and offer flexible interpretations. Each participant and each viewer, based on their own experience, can interpret the garments in different ways. The garments invite audiences to question and reflect on marriage, gender roles, female stereotypes and visual culture, but also on many other different and unexpected issues, because "what art-making has to offer is not accurate representation but rather the complication of readings so that we can discover new questions. It is when we position ourselves in those tentative locations, and when we persist in making them into concrete experiences, that interstices become locations of meaning" (Helguera, 2011, Location No. 771).

[31] The English words text and textile (texto and textil in Spanish) share a common etymological root: the Latin word *textus*, which means fabric, weave, or style (Oxford Dictionaries). This connection between textiles and texts was revived with the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s (Byatt, 2008).

This research-creation project has helped me to understand how my female identity has been shaped through clothing, and specifically influenced by wedding dresses in the making. I like to think that I used a needle to write my thoughts onto the fabric of my dress and that I am stitching my ideas and experiences together in this text to develop new insights. I shaped my dress based on my life experiences and I am writing this text using the knowledge generated through my art practice. In this way, my wedding dress also functions as a metaphor for the whole project, as it links personal garments into a social fabric that contains and signifies them while keeping their individual identities.

Chapter Six
Ethnographic Tendencies:
My Friends and their Transformed Wedding Gowns

Something old, something new
Something borrowed, something blue
And a silver sixpence in her shoe.
Anonymous Old English Poem

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress provides a deep and thoughtful creative description of what marriage means for a group of women living in Montreal. Through this project, we looked at the role that wedding dresses play in shaping women's identities today. Based on visual research methods, we intended to uncover the knowledge implicit in an everyday practice such as marriage (Rose, 2014). We collectively transformed the gowns into art to better understand our personal and social circumstances as wives. Together we embodied and represented the transformed dresses in a series of works of textile art to simultaneously explore, challenge and change dominant conceptions of femininity. The participating women became active subjects in the process of understanding and representing marriage as a normalizing institution. This chapter contains testimonies from each of the participants, which I consider essential for reflecting on the individual circumstances in which the dresses were transformed. The result is an unusually long chapter, which comprises participants' responses to my questions and indications about their choice of photograph, as well as some visual documentation of each woman's process. Due to its unusual length, I am not including any analytical content in this chapter. The analysis of my participants' dresses can be found in the next chapter, Feminist Threads for Weaving a Collective Fabric. There I examine the participants' material and verbal responses in relation to the social and cultural context in which those responses were produced. I answer my research questions by specifically examining how artistically transformed wedding dresses can generate new learning experiences about marriage and gender in relation to collaborative and participative practices.

As mentioned in Chapter One, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* process began with each woman's invitation to participate, after which she selected a dress and began thinking about its transformation based on her notions of marriage. After modifications to her dress, each participant wore her transformed gown and we took pictures of it, in both informal and formal shoots, followed by an art exhibition involving a verbal exchange among the participants and a questionnaire that they answered, reflecting on the whole process. One series of photographs comprised the more personal and intimate pictures that we took while the participants tried their dresses on for the first time. These images were relatively subjective and I was personally involved in many of them. Some of these pictures were taken by Jackie, a photographer and a good friend of mine. Others were taken by me and a few were taken by the participants and their partners, primarily in domestic contexts. The other series of photographs consisted of those taken by Enrique Uranga at Loyola Chapel. These photographs were intended to represent each woman's unique experience while channeling her voice through a more traditional setting, like a church. It seemed necessary to have different and contrasting perspectives on each woman's ideas to get a more truthful representation of her experience for the purposes of this research-creation project. Each participant was given a choice between an imperfect but honest personal image—shot in an intimate and secure environment—or a stylish but presumably more detached representation of herself wearing her dress. She was asked to choose a picture that symbolized her ideas and experiences of marriage and represented her embodied experience of wearing her transformed dress for this project.

This chapter is based on the content from the survey that the participants answered, supported by preliminary design input and the two photo sessions, making a combined use of different methods and approaches to data collection. Research through dress and other visual methods allow to notice what usually remains unseen, being particularly useful to generate evidence that surveys alone cannot (Rose, 2014, p. 5). By distancing participants from the familiar, these methods allow them "to articulate

thoughts and feelings that usually remain implicit" (Rose, 2014, p. 5). Researchers who are making photographs, have to negotiate and collaborate with the people being pictured. This project, by creating images that actively involve the research participants, required a series of negotiations not only over the making but also the meaning of the images, empowering the women participating in this process (p. 6). Following Creswell's mixed methods approach (2009), I used a semi-structured survey beginning with an open-ended question in the form of a request: I asked each participant to transform a wedding dress based on her notion of marriage. This question was answered by the participants in material, performative and visual forms, and accompanied by written responses in the form of surveys. As I have explained in Chapter One (p. 31), the questions that I circulated were both in English and in Spanish. Most of the participants answered them in English, except for Nati, Paula and Rosa, who replied in Spanish. For the purposes of this research's accessibility and fluidity, I translated them into English, with footnotes to the original answers in Spanish.

The participants complemented their material thoughts on the personal and social implications of marriage and the current symbolism of the white wedding dress with the answers to these questions:

1. Explain your original idea for transforming a wedding dress. If possible, talk about the implications that marriage does or does not carry for you. What does the white wedding dress mean to you? In what way does your idea resemble or respond to "Trash the Dress" wedding photography?
2. Was your proposal for transforming a dress based on your personal marital experience, or was it more like a social comment on the institution of marriage? Why?
3. Do you feel represented by your transformed dress? Why? If possible, talk about your idea and the process of making it.
4. Do you feel represented by your chosen photograph of you wearing the dress?

5. Do you feel represented by, or identify with, the photographs of other women wearing their dresses?
6. Do you think that your dress's meaning changes or expands by being part of a collective art project that involves other women's ideas?
7. Do you think that your participation in this collaborative textile art project helped you to develop a better understanding of your own self-identity and your role within a marital relationship?
8. Do you think that you learned something from your personal or your social reality by participating in this collaborative art-making project? Why?
9. Do you believe that this collaborative art-making project can function as a site of resistance to gender stereotypes? Why?

Asking people about their clothes may be "one of the best ways to interview women (and perhaps men too) about almost anything" (Weber & Mitchell, 2004, p. 4), as dress stories disclose a lot of information about the wearer and the culture in which she lives. For Weber and Mitchell, "It is when talking about mundane, concrete, material objects from our everyday lives that we often uncover the multiple and culturally constructed meanings that a whole range of events and experiences can have for us" (p. 4). By focusing on the details of their respective experiences, my participant's written responses allow me to contextualize and expand on their notions of marriage seeking broader truths and trends within a small sample group. I believe that a research-based art piece like this is able to complement the rigor of academic research with the flexibility of artistic practices "with an aim toward creating, critiquing, extending, revising, rejecting and constructing new knowledge based on rigorous and exhaustive inquiry methods and methodologies" (Zimmerman, 2005, p. 72). The written testimonies of the participants are developed and selectively reported in this chapter in order to illustrate the way they feel about the institution of marriage, explain how they read the wedding dress as a symbol, and clarify

why they responded to it in the way they did. The inclusive ethnographic approach of this work will provide a real input from my participants into their ideas, perspectives and practices as a way of enriching our understanding of questions of dress and women's identity.

My Friends' Participation and Collaboration

As was mentioned in Chapter One, the notions of contemporary collaborative practices that were used in this research are predominantly based on Bishop's (2004; 2006; 2012), Bourriaud's (1998), Helguera's (2011) and Kester's (2011) ideas. These include, creating art while participating in it, and producing a relationship in which art becomes "a state of encounter" (Bourriaud, 1998, p. 6). This process involved thinking about the quality of the relationships implicated within it, attempting to generate critical awareness regarding these relational practices and providing "a more concrete and polemical grounds for rethinking our relationship to the world and to one other" (Bishop, 2004, p. 79). Collective art projects like this one function to structure the experience of participants, "setting it sufficiently apart from quotidian social interaction to encourage a degree of self-reflection, and calling attention to the exchange itself as creative praxis" (Kester, 2011, p. 28). Moreover, creative collective projects produce an experiential form of knowledge that is dependent on participants' unique understandings and exchanges (Kester, 2011).

By involving participatory and collaborative art practices, this research-creation allowed me to produce knowledge in cooperation with my participants. All the women who took part in this project participated in its making, but some of them also actively collaborated in the transformation of their dresses, creating the art themselves as opposed to cooperating within a pre-defined artistic idea. Thus, this project is both participative and collaborative, involving various interactions between women who engaged with a common creative goal and whose experiences became a central aspect of the final work. Participatory practices are not new, but their recent trend can be understood as a "return to the

social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to rethink art collectively" (Bishop, 2011, p. 3). While not all participatory art contains social elements, some participative works like this one create a social situation, allowing a re-evaluation of contemporary social interaction and even challenging it.

It is important to acknowledge the implications of inviting my friends to collaborate in this research-creation project. Most of the participating women are good friends of mine, with an intimate knowledge of my life and the lives of each other, while others are simply friendly acquaintances. In either case, I believe that our relationship involved a shared experience based on our common perspectives and understandings as women. I had collaborated with many of these women before on a number of artistic projects primarily related to social justice, feminism and migration[32]. Our collaboration on those projects strengthened our friendship and sense of community, while also challenging constraining and normative social practices. Those artistic collaborations between friends were an inspiration for this research-creation project. Thus, in this project I acted as a friend to my participants while also functioning as an artist and a researcher. Their participation, however, was based in the context of our friendship more than in the research itself. It was precisely because of our friendship that I invited them to collaborate with me, though I feel that they are adequately representative of women's diverse marital ("civil" in Spanish) status nonetheless.

[32] This association emerged from a series of social encounters between a diverse group of Mexican women living in Montreal. From the group's inception, our meetings were an excuse to be together, accompany each other and have fun. However, we gradually started developing art projects as part these encounters. The first collaboration was made during my show *Abiertas* (Open, 2012) at the FOFA (Faculty of Fine Arts) Gallery at Concordia University (http://fofagallery.concordia.ca/oldsite/ehtml/MariaEzcurra.htm). After that, we did another piece together for the FOFA Gallery's *Recto/Verso* project, called *No pierdas el tino (*Don't lose your aim, 2012), for which we created a piñata that was smashed at the end of the day with the collaboration of the Recto/Verso Programming Collective, École de la Montagne Rouge and the public (http://fofagallery.concordia.ca/oldsite/ehtml/RectoVersoIIManifestationDemonstration.htm). We also came together for an ongoing embroidery project called "Bordar por la paz: Un pañuelo una víctima" (Embroidering for peace: A handkerchief per victim), an initiative of the Mexican collective *Fuentes Rojas* (Red Fountains), which proposes embroidering handkerchiefs with the names and descriptions of each of the thousands of dead victims of the war against drugs (http://bordamosporlapaz.blogspot.ca). Finally, in 2014 we created some altars to protest for the disappearance of 43 students from Ayotzinapa, Mexico at the hands of Mexican police. We displayed them during a peaceful protest at the Mexican Consulate during Day of the Dead and they were later exhibited at the CEREV (Centre for Ethnographic Research and Exhibition in the Aftermath of Violence) Exhibition Lab, in Concordia University, in an exhibit called *Narcotraffic and the Art of Violence* (http://cerev.concordia.ca/events/narcotraffic-and-the-art-of-violence).

Nonie Harris, a Professor and Researcher in the Department of Social Work and Human Services at James Cook University in Queensland, Australia, wrote a text called "Interviewing friends and the feminist research process" (2002), in which she argues that a pre-existing friendship brings a particular dimension to the research process, contributing to the exploration of previous knowledge and power relationships within the project. She explains that the choices she made during the survey process were based "on the hope that the research would not negatively impact [her] friendship" (Harris, 2002, p. 50). As a feminist researcher, she encourages a revision of the research process, particularly in regards to the balance of power between the researcher and the researched:

> Power shifts were evidenced in my own research. As the researcher, I was concerned about loyalty to my friends and maintaining the future friendship. This may have diminished my power in the research relationship. And yet, I felt my power was increased by the prior knowledge I had of my respondents. (Harris, 2002, p. 51)

There is a sense of loyalty and responsibility contained in the research when friends are involved. The women taking part in this project agreed to participate precisely because they are my friends, and they trust me. However, I also feel that they were empowered by this project because of our pre-existing friendship. Their creative contributions to this project are meaningful and clever, despite the fact that many of them are not artists and some had never even created art before. Their written responses are also significant and perceptive, contributing to personal and expressive discoveries about how they experience marriage. This research-creation, like other creative research, relies on "artistic expressions in all the different forms of art as a primary way of understanding and examining experience by both researchers and the people that they involve in their studies" (McNiff, 2008, p. 29). I also believe that by exploring and sharing women's experiences regarding marriage through collaborative textile art practices with friends I developed new understandings about the interviewing process itself, considering the material thinking experience of women. My pre-existing friendship with the participants also "added depth and re-emphasised the complexity of this type of

research by exploring, particularly, the impact of pre-existing knowledge, and the shifts in power that are unique to the friendly interview" (Harris, 2002, p. 51). Moreover, some scholars see friendship as a method of qualitative inquiry to get to know others in meaningful and open ways:

> Researching with the practices of friendship, first, means that although we employ traditional forms of data gathering (e.g., participant observation, systematic note-taking, and informal and formal interviewing), our primary procedures are those we use to build and sustain friendship: conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, generosity, and vulnerability. (Tillmann, 2015, p. 6)

Figure 60. Some participants looking at TTD images in my home (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Consequently, this project redefines the way we understand marriage, but it can also offer new and creative examples of collective learning, as friends. The wedding dresses transformed for this research embodied meaningful knowledge that engaged the participating women in both personal and social reflections through material and verbal responses to the concepts of marriage and collaboration. They felt protected, and even empowered, by doing this not only as a group of women, but a group of friends. Through gatherings, conversations, interaction, humor, and sharing we collaboratively provided

our crafts with the potential to not only function as artworks, but to generate valuable learning experiences that redefined and challenged traditional notions of power in both marriage and academia.

Some participants took an active role in the transformation of their wedding dresses while others collaborated with me to come up with ideas that I put into action. A few of them decided to transform their dresses as a performance during the photo session at Loyola Chapel. Each of them had the option of coming to my house and selecting a dress from among the many I had purchased in second hand stores. It was at this stage that some participants decided to do the transformation themselves. I also organized a meeting for all of us to review some TTD images together and discuss the project, while having a nice brunch together. At this meeting, some of the participants tried the dresses on and experimented with them before defining or refining their concepts. Some women sent me a written proposal or a drawing of their ideas to transform a dress. Most of the participants doing the transformation themselves also sent me sketches of their planned alterations. I include these images in this chapter, as I consider them to be the first visual documentation for this research. Once a sketch had been sent or approved by a participant, I started the transformation of her dress. Once a dress was ready, I met with its corresponding participant to photograph her trying the dress on. These informal pictures became the second visual documentation of this project and are also included here.

Figure 61. Some participants trying their dresses on in my home (2012)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

It was important for all of us as collaborators to be clear from the beginning about our roles and motivations for participating in this research. Communication and commitment were essential to this project, in which shared control and responsibilities generated a sense of belonging and empowerment

in all the participants. This required a working process that was both highly structured and flexible. To me, this flexibility meant sharing power—and therefore ceding control—and continually generating creative responses to the unexpected. Between my responsibilities as the originator and orchestrator of this project, it is very important to acknowledge the authorship of the collaborators who transformed their own dresses and the co-authorship of the women who participated with their ideas and actual embodiment of the gowns. While the project's structure, and therefore the participants' involvement, was defined in advance by me (as the artist-researcher), they always had a choice regarding the extent of their contribution to the project's development. I shared the decision-making process with each participant, allowing her to decide for herself how she wanted to collaborate, how she wanted to be named in the dissertation and what aspects of marriage warranted representation through her wedding dress. In this way, the participants played an active role in some of the planning and production of the work, being empowered by their participation in transforming and embodying the dresses, but also by the critical dialogues that we had around this process and its final visual representations.

The final visual documents presented in this research are the formal pictures taken in Loyola Chapel. I printed two copies of each participant's chosen photograph on silk (at a size of 50 x 80 cm) at Hexagram, a Centre for Research-Creation in Media Arts and Technologies at Concordia University. I kept one copy for myself and gave the other one to each participant. My choice to print the photographs on silk was determined by its physical and metaphorical properties. Besides being associated with notions of transformation (from the silkworm into a butterfly, although the larva is killed to harvest the thread), silk involved important processes of intellectual and cultural exchange across Eurasia along the Silk Road. This big network triggered the movement and mixing of populations, involving an important transmission of knowledge, ideas, cultures and beliefs. Silk, then, had a profound impact on the history of humanity (UNESCO, n.d.). Moreover, silk is important in in this project because Queen Victoria's marital gown, the first official white wedding dress, was made of white silk-satin

(Choron, 2010). Silk also has extraordinary material characteristics: It is a beautiful natural fabric, strong and still soft. It offers a nice gloss and luminosity that make it look neat and it dyes well, resulting in colorful fabrics. It is a flexible material that retains its shape well, tending to fall naturally and hang delicately when exhibited. I printed the images myself, using a wide format digital printer, which gave me the opportunity to understand the material and connect with the work in new and deeper levels. By printing the final photographs on cloth, I am presenting them as both visual and material texts that not only are aesthetically pleasant, but offer an engaging texture and feel.

The series of works of textile art was exhibited at La Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce in April of 2013. They were hung in the lower gallery, forming a weightless and somehow responsive textile installation. Silk naturally reacts to the presence of our bodies in the space. Its materiality involved our participation and expanded our experience. As material culture, these images have the capacity of obstructing, disrupting or interfering with social norms. Containing, and not only representing, the participants' experiences, the installation involved interactions between matter and bodies (Lange-Berndt, 2015). All the participants came to see the pictures together for the first time, many of them with their families, and got to talk with each other about their participation in this process. They were later uploaded to my web page, along with my participants' testimonies (at www.mariaezcurra.com). While these images can stand on their own as autonomous works of art, each participant's picture is complemented with other visual texts and a survey to add depth and linguistic understanding to this research-creation project. While this inclusive overview makes the chapter quite extensive, it also enriches the overall project. The detailed accounts of each participant's ideas and experiences provide valuable insight into their intentions and reactions to transforming and subsequently wearing a wedding dress.

Figure 62. The works of textile art exhibited at La Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 63. Works of textile art exhibited at La Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 64. Detail of works of textile art exhibited at La Maison de la Culture de Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Participants' Dresses

Anne Pilon

Age: 54

Nationality: Canadian (Born and raised in Québec)

Profession: High school visual arts teacher

Marital Status: Married for the 2nd time in 2012

Partner: Man / 54 / Canadian

My first marriage ended in divorce after 17 years. While I was married I often felt like I was hanging on by a thread. The break-up process was slow and difficult. I wanted to symbolize the idea that, over time, the marriage was becoming weaker and weaker. I thought this would come across well by having the dress cut into pieces and re-attached using a few stitches while leaving a small gap between each piece. I wanted the top to be cut into only a few large pieces; and to have the pieces cut smaller and smaller down whole the length of the dress until, finally, at the very bottom there would be the smallest pieces. (Anne, 2013)

Figure 65. *Anne* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Anne during my first week as a graduate student at Concordia University. Even before I invited Anne to collaborate with me on this project, we had already talked about TTD and the implications of my art project as an academic research. After thinking about it for a while, she presented me with a small sketch of her idea. It was a dress made out of triangular fragments. We spent some time talking about its physical shape, its meanings and its connotations. I wanted to be sure that I was making something accurate when transforming her dress. She chose a very simple gown, as she was aware that it would require a complex transformation.

With the exception of my own dress, Anne's gown was probably the one that required the most work on my part. It was a laborious task to undertake. Whereas my dress involved a needle to sew together many clothes, hers involved a pair of scissors to split the dress up entirely. The dress' fragmentation was done by cutting the fabric into pieces and leaving each piece attached to the rest of the structure by a single thread. The first fragments were about the size of our hands and subsequent pieces were cut progressively smaller, symbolizing not only the bride's fragmentation, but also her disintegration. In this process I decided to leave the lining intact; it would keep the pieces together, representing Anne's inner self. The final dress was terribly fragile but—crucially—still a whole. Besides a successful professional life, Anne has three wonderful children from her first marriage and she is happily remarried.

Anne's fragmented dress is not only a symbolic representation of her married life; it is also partially a "comment on the huge social pressure put on people who want to get married and follow traditions that are part of the whole wedding industry" (Anne, 2013). To represent her in this project,

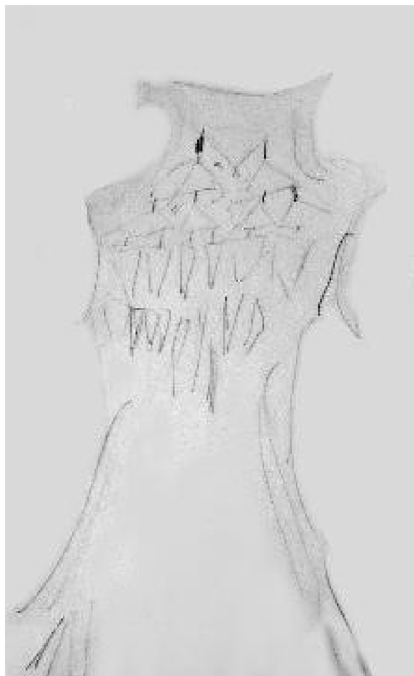

Figure 66. Anne Pilon's sketch to transform a dress (2012)

Figure 67. Anne's original dress

Figure 68. Maria's sketch for Anne's dress (2012)

Anne chose one of the pictures taken of her by Enrique at Loyola Chapel. Coincidentally, that chapel turned out to be a perfect setting for her, as it was the venue for her first marriage at the age of 23. Placed there again, wearing a symbolically transformed wedding dress, made her reflect deeply on her experience as a wife:

> During the photo session I stood on a table so that the full effect of the fragmented dress could clearly be seen. I stood in the orientation in which I walked down the aisle for the first time. As I looked toward the back of the chapel I reflected on all the fear and pain that I had experienced during my first marriage. I tried to think about that while the photographer worked. I think the mood came across in the pose that was chosen. (Anne, 2013)

Figure 69. Anne's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Carmen Giménez Cacho

Age: 55

Nationality: Mexican (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Film production designer and painter

Marital Status: Married for the 2nd time in 2000 (Living together since 1996)

Partner: Man / 73 / Canadian

I transformed my dress thinking of my first marriage. I thought I would be forever happy, like the end of all the children's tales. Little did I know! I tried representing what my husband's words did to our relationship or to my dream. He changed from the day we came back from our honeymoon and became very manipulative and a controller. I was too young and did not realize what was going on until much later. […] The idea is that what you say transforms things for ever. (Carmen, 2013)

Figure 70. *Carmen* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Having worked tirelessly as a film set designer in Mexico, Carmen now dedicates herself completely to her art work in Montreal. Her daughter and grandson live in Mexico City and she travels to visit them often. When I invited her to participate in my project, Carmen told me that she wanted to do something based around the concept of words and their ability to transform things forever. She wanted her dress to represent the power that words have to both break and mend relationships.

Figure 71. Carmen's original dress
Figure 72. Sketch to transform Carmen's dress (2012)
Photo and Sketch by Maria Ezcurra

Carmen chose a dress made from a fabric on which she could easily write and draw and took it home with her. She first treated the fabric with coffee and black tea to make it grimier. Then she began writing on the inner lining with black and red markers. The fabric is covered with words expressing her ideas, thoughts and experiences. Some of them are legible while others function more as textures, signs and figures. She also made a few small drawings and transferred some photo images onto the fabric to accompany the texts. She then moved on to the external fabric, which is thinner and translucent. She cut it and stitched it back together some time later. She also used a red thread to embroider short phrases in Spanish onto the dress, such as "no era mi intención" (it was not my intention), "no quise decir eso" (I did not mean that), "olvídalo" (forget it), "perdón" (sorry) and "no era eso" (it was not

that). Finally, she "started wearing the dress everyday in the house [in order] to wear it out, putting it on or using it as an apron" (Carmen, 2013).

Figure 73. Carmen's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 74 and Figure 75. Embroiders on Carmen's dress (2013)
Photos by Maria Ezcurra

Carmen's dress was the result of a long, rich and complex artistic process, involving drawing, painting, writing, sewing and performance to embody "a bit of the reality that leaves marks and transforms that illusion" of getting married (Carmen, 2013). Through her dress, she symbolically represented "the words that transform, that label, that deceive, that hurt…" (Ibid.). This dress uses words as texts and texts as symbols to represent the importance of words in a relationship. It shows how "marriage wears out with regular use" (Ibid.) not only through the symbols applied to the fabric, but by its frequent wearing in Carmen's house to do daily chores. The words represented on this dress are "a testimony of the reality, of the killing everydayness, distorting illusions, and then come the restorative words, healing, trying to repair the damage, but the damage is done and the reality has been altered, distorted" (Ibid.).

Figure 76 and Figure 77. Carmen performing her daily tasks while wearing her dress (2013)
Photos by Barrie Howells

Claudia Vega

Age: 36

Nationality: Mexican-Canadian

Profession: Business Administration, specialized in Restaurants

Marital Status: Married in 2009 (Living together since 2007)

Partner: Man / 35 / Canadian

I wanted to preserve the "white dress" and the "man's suit" because I feel that it represents the “traditional way" in which people sees marriage (including specific expectations, paradigms, adaptation to society, etc.). I love the clichéd duality of white vs. black. This mixing of attires represents the moments in which my husband plays the mommy's role, in all the possible aspects, and the ones in which I play the daddy, due to our busy schedule. It also represents how we complement each other. (Claudia, 2013)

Figure 78. *Claudia* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Claudia because she owns and runs *Café 92* in NDG, along with Desirée, another participant in this research-creation project. I asked both of them to be part of this project because I felt their voices could be very important for it, as they are not part of the confined academic or artistic circles in which I usually move. Claudia not only accepted my invitation to participate, but offered me her actual wedding dress to transform. She decided to use the dress in which she had recently married “because even though it brings me beautiful memories, at the end, it is only an object and that is nothing that my marriage would be based on” (Claudia, 2013). She also gave me the groom’s shirt, which had been signed by all of their friends during the ceremony. Additionally, she provided me with

two chef's jackets—a white and a black one—to integrate with her proposal. Claudia decided to mix their wedding clothes not only with each other, but also with their working garments because both she and her husband own restaurants, and their jobs play "a very important role in our life every day" (Claudia, 2013).

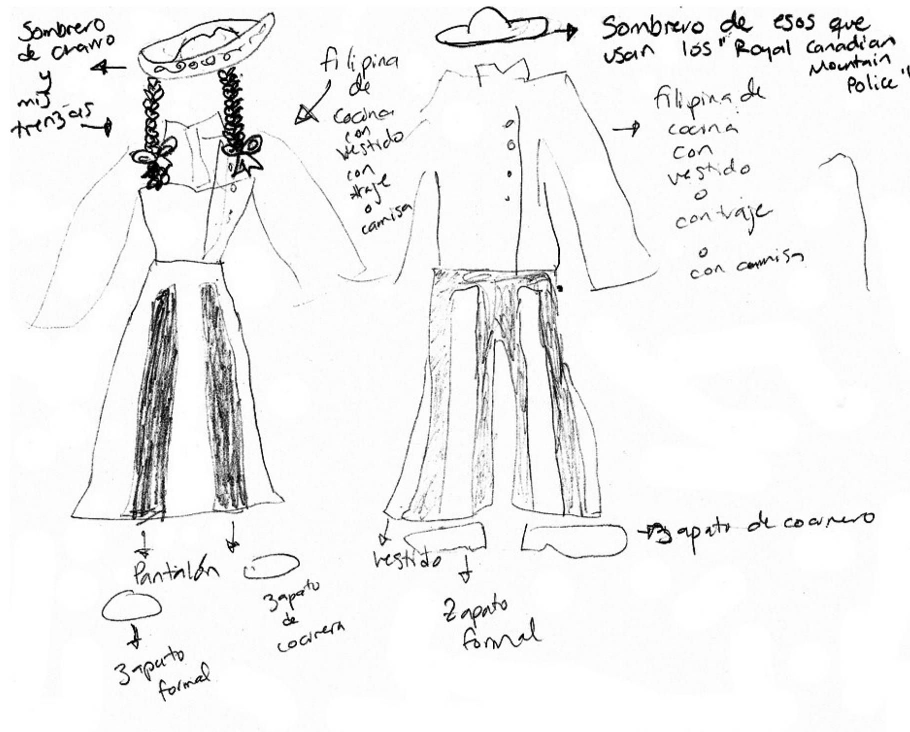

Figure 79. Claudia's sketch to transform her dress (2012)

Claudia proposed to combine the bride's dress with the groom's suit to represent the way in which she and her husband complement and complete each other in their relationship. She intentionally plays with and draws attention to gender roles and race stereotypes, represented by the black and white fabrics:

> The duality to me is very important even to a point of a joke... White and black: my husband is very tall I am short, we were born in different countries, he smokes and I do not, he is a spender and I am not... the list is long, but the idea of having the same style of clothes, with the jacket and patches means to me the points where we meet, and where we complete each other. At the same time, this duality depicts that each of us have a different personality, and to be honest, most of the time I play the role of the caregiver, the one at home, etc. (white, long dress) and my husband is more the stay out at work longer, strict, protector (man's suit, pants). (Claudia, 2013)

Based on the sketch that Claudia gave me, I incorporated both their chef's jackets into their outfits: hers was added to extend the top of her strapless dress and his black jacket became the groom's coat. For the picture, they both wore their working shoes, and she added some ladles and cooking spoons to her flower's bouquet. Surprisingly, I managed to find a white "Mexican" hat (Mariachi style) in a second-hand store in Montreal. I could not find the Royal Canadian Mountain Police's hat that Claudia originally suggested for the groom, so we used a hockey helmet instead, finding it quite representative of Canadian culture as well. For their daughter, I had a beautiful dress made by a professional seamstress. It featured the traditional chef's neck, and she wore it with the traditional black and white checkered chef pants and a white cook's hat, symbolizing her parents' union. For Claudia it was very important to represent their Mexican and Canadian roots, and she chose to do it through the hats. She also wanted to incorporate their "passion" for cooking, which has become their job, and their daughter, "who is our most important reason to love each other and 'fight'" (Claudia, 2013).

Figure 80. Claudia's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Daniela Ortiz

Age: 31

Nationality: Mexican (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Visual Artist

Marital Status: Married in 2008 (Living together since 2007)

Partner: Man / 33 / Canadian.

For me being married is a constant construction and deconstruction: of the relationship, of each of us as individuals, of each of us in relation to the other. A sort of weaving of our dreams and plans with our reality of our day to day. So I wanted to deconstruct the dress and re-build it again in a different way. The transformation of the dress in conjunction with the act of photographing it as a way of re signifying it is what I think responds to the "trash the dress" photography. (Daniela, 2013)

Figure 81. *Daniela* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Daniela is a Mexican artist and a photographer currently pursuing a Master's of Fine Arts degree at Concordia University. Since Carmen introduced us we have worked together, along with some other Mexican women, in several art projects involving social issues, as I mentioned before. Daniela came to Montreal after marrying a Canadian man she met in Mexico, however, she does not "find much value in the elements that the white wedding dress represents, such as purity and wealth, […] as opposed to other traditional wedding gowns from other traditions that have a lot more meanings" (Daniela, 2013). Her proposal for transforming a wedding gown involved its deconstruction and creative reconstruction. She picked out a dress from the lot I had purchased that fit her perfectly and she chose to transform it herself. First, she took it apart by cutting strips of cloth from the skirt. Then she began playing with the different elements and ideas resulting from it "until the puzzle came together in the shape of the reconstructed

dress" (Ibid.). For her, "the process of making it was very fun and it gave me the opportunity to question my ideas about marriage and its relation to my experience with my partner" (Ibid.).

Figure 82. Daniela's original dress (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 83 Daniela's self-portrait wearing her transformed dress at her home (2013)
Photo by Daniela Ortiz

I was familiar with Daniela's proposal to transform her dress, but I did not see it until she sent me a picture she had taken herself, wearing the dress in her home. She was portrayed in profile, standing on top of a couch and looking melancholically down towards the floor. Her long wedding dress was spread out with its train extended towards the floor. She had added a series of elements to the dress that made it look sculptural. The skirt had a near-circular shape, inflated under her waist and narrowing again towards the bottom. A series of white stripes emerged from her lower back forming hoops. Another series of stripes fall from her belly forming a net, a basket-like waist apron. It is difficult to determine whether she is shaping this structure or being shaped by it.

During the photo session at Loyola Chapel, Enrique photographed Daniela from different angles and at various poses. They also took some photographs resembling Daniela's first picture, which were

aesthetically effective and meaningful. This re-enacted image was the one that she chose to represent her in this project. It portrays Daniela standing comfortably still, showing us her right side while looking away. She is standing on a wooden pedestal, in the upper section of the chapel, with the building's ceiling beautifully framing her. She chose this picture because it represents "not only my idea for the dress but the whole experience of participating in the project." (Daniela, 2013). This image, for her, is a "sort of 'illuminated' insight within a well-structured framework" (Ibid.). However, although Daniela feels well-represented by it, she also thinks that "it should have been more radical or evident the different shapes and forms as to leave little of the classic dress" (Ibid.).

Figure 84. Daniela at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Figure 85. Daniela's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra.

Denisse Horcasitas

Age: 29

Nationality: Mexican (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Graduate Student in Psychology

Marital Status: Married in 2012 (Living together since 2002)

Partner: Man / 30 / Mexican

It was very difficult for me to think/originate an idea because a wedding dress does not represent me (it does not go with me). For the project, I decided to trash the dress without having worn it before. It is my way to say that I throw away the idea and the implications of wearing a white wedding dress from the beginning. (Denisse, 2013)

Figure 86. *Denisse* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Denisse through her husband Ivan, whom I have known for a long time. They are both pursuing graduate programs and helped us to find a place to live near their home in NDG when we first came to Montreal. Denisse's proposal for this project involved a simple but powerful gesture: she wanted to throw her dress in the garbage without ever having worn it.

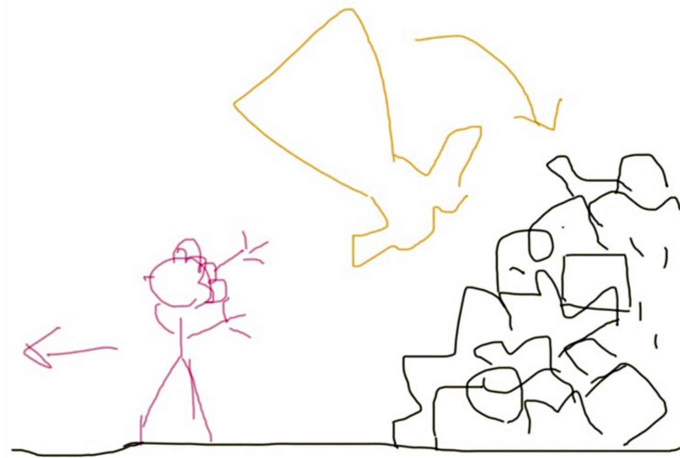

Figure 87. Denisse's sketch to transform her dress (2012)

For Denisse, "a traditional wedding dress is something very uncomfortable and expensive, you cannot move well because is very tight and usually big" (2013). She wanted to symbolize the fact that she does not need a wedding to celebrate her relationship with her loved one, as for her "there are many other ways to celebrate which are less expensive, less complicated and less energy/time consuming" (Denisse, 2013). Her original proposal involved her discarding the dress by herself, but after talking about it with both Ivan and me she decided to include him into the picture to give a clearer idea of the implications of her gesture. For the purposes of this project, Denisse and Ivan were photographed on two different occasions. We met first in the parking lot of a supermarket located near our homes. I took several pictures of them throwing the dress into a large garbage container placed there. The second series of pictures were taken by Enrique at Loyola Chapel.

Figure 88. Denisse and Ivan trashing the dress (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra.

Figure 89. Denisse trashing her dress outside of Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

For her contribution to the project, Denisse chose a picture of herself and Ivan discarding the dress together in Loyola Chapel. She later told me that it had been very meaningful for her to trash her dress in a chapel, as she was raised in a "very Catholic family," although she renounced her own Catholicism a long time ago. Because of this, she said, "trashing a white wedding dress with my partner in a chapel is tough for me" (Denisse, 2013). She thinks that her final photo successfully represents the idea of trashing the wedding dress and everything that it represents. After we took the pictures, we left Denisse's dress in the garbage.

Figure 90. Denisse's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Desirée Grajales

Age: 34

Nationality: Mexican-Canadian

Profession: Self-employed (Coffee Shop Owner)

Marital Status: Living in a Common-law relationship for two years

Partner: Man / 35 / Canadian

Figure 91. *Desirée* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

> I perceive traditional marriage as a death tradition. Anyhow, I consider it a nice ceremony to share the love between two people, and as such I respect it, although personally I don't plan to do it. With these conceptions in mind, I thought of making my wedding dress for this project an offering to a death tradition, beautiful in meaning but still a death thing, including it within my favorite Mexican tradition: the Day of the Dead. (Desirée, 2013)

My friendship with Desirée developed partly due to our frequent meetings at *Café 92* in NDG, which she runs with Claudia. When Desirée accepted my invitation to work on this project we met to discuss it on a few occasions before she found an adequate solution to represent her ideas. She was very clear in what she wanted to represent but was unsure about how to achieve it. After discussing her

main concept of traditional weddings and marriage as dead traditions, we came up with the solution of transforming the dress into a skull. It took me several days to cut and create a solid structure from the dress' fabric. I made the skull accurate in scale to a real skull, and used the dress' buttons to make the eyes. Once it was ready, I gave it to Desirée, who decorated it "to emulate a sugar skull, the sweet dead: colorful and beautiful but dead after all" (Desirée, 2013).

Figure 92. Desirée's dress being transformed into a skull (2012)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

Figure 93. Desirée's dress transformed into a skull (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Desirée's proposal was based on the fact that she does not want to marry. Instead, she chose to live with her partner in a common-law relationship. She feels that "the white dress representing the purity of the bride is really out of date" (Desirée, 2013). She says that she "can't visualize myself wearing

one" (Ibid.). This might explain why she also decided to not appear in the picture. Including the skull in the photo was a means of talking about herself symbolically "without being physically in it" (Ibid.). Through this piece, Desirée questions the restrictive social beliefs that traditional marriage promotes, in which men are still seen as the providers while women are expected to be "in charge of household and offspring" (Ibid.). She rejects the values that social institutions still give to marriage, as for her, "in a marital relationship the responsibilities of providing and caring should be shared equally, moreover as now women also work and provide" (Ibid.). Furthermore, she chose to relate it to the Mexican holiday of Day of the Dead because she feels a deep connection to it. She believes that the holiday "synthesizes what being Mexican means: the mixture in between Spanish and prehispanic cultures, the colorful vision that we can have of everything, even death, the importance of food in our culture and the respect to our ancestors" (Ibid.).

Figure 94. Desirée receiving her skull-dress at Café 92 (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Flavia Hevia

Age: 44

Nationality: Mexican-American, Canadian resident.

Profession: Set and light designer, puppeteer and visual artist.

Marital Status: Living in a Common-law relationship since 2004

Partner: Man / 60 / Canadian

My original idea came from the concept of metamorphosis, from a cocoon to a butterfly, from being something and becoming something else by an event. For me, relationships, living and sharing with somebody else, transforms you. My relationship with my partner has converted me into something new and beautiful; it has helped me become my true self. (Flavia, 2013)

Figure 95. *Flavia* (2013)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

I was introduced to Flavia via Facebook by a mutual friend, but it was not until a year later that I finally met her in person in Montreal. Her idea to participate in this project "involved an action more than just a photo" (Flavia, 2013). It was based on her marital experience and informed by her extensive experience in creative projects. She wanted to not only represent but actually perform the transformation, "from a cocoon to a fully wedding dressed bride" (Ibid.). Flavia's performance with the wedding dress took place at her home. Jackie and I assisted and photographed her in this process. I prepared the dress ahead of the shoot, loosely stitching it together at the ends. I converted it into a kind of cocoon for Flavia, leaving only a small opening entrance at the bottom. We took the pictures in her

studio, next to a wall covered with a transparent plastic that she uses when she paints. She placed herself inside the dress, on top of the plastic, and began searching for her way out of it. Eventually she managed to tear the dress' temporary seams and gradually she put it on properly. What I found most interesting about this process is what happened next, as Flavia did not stop there. Once fully dressed, she began improvising, interacting with the space. She slowly placed herself under the plastic. She stayed there for a while, playing with it, until she finally walked out of it to finish the performance. Jackie successfully documented the whole process.

Figure 96. Sketch to transform Flavia's dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Flavia was not able to attend the photo session at Loyola Chapel. She chose her final picture from the images that Jackie took in her home. There were many strong and beautiful photographs and she found it difficult to pick one. Together, we narrowed the selection down to two options. In the first one we can see a woman sitting on the floor, pulling at the fabric around her to get out of it. This image

better represents her original proposal, showing her emerging from a cocoon. However, Flavia ultimately chose the second image, in which she is wearing her dress and finds herself partially covered by the transparent plastic of her studio walls. She chose that photo because it "is a perfect expression of what I wanted to do, what I wanted to express" (Flavia, 2013). The change was no longer represented by the dress, but rather by the plastic used to cover the walls and floor of her studio. Flavia's picture ended up incorporating the actual space that she shares with her partner, in which she also works and makes art. In this way, her transformation seems to be influenced in equal parts by her professional life and her marriage. Flavia's performance was based on her personal marital experience, but it also talks about the institution of marriage. She is transformed by the experiences that she lives and by what she shares with her partner, who "has helped, guided and supported me in each and all of my daily transformations" (2013). In her view, the experience of marriage always changes people, and it can be a painful or joyous process, literally ripping the dress "to transform myself and the dress itself into something new" (Flavia, 2013).

Figure 97. Flavia finding her way out of her dress (2013)
Photo by Jaqueline Fortson

Gen

Age: 29

Nationality: Canadian (Born and raised in Québec)

Profession: Singer

Marital Status: Married in 2009

Partner: Woman / 33 / Mexican

I think that society has come around to gay marriage. However, raising a family within a homosexual union still raises eyebrows and it is still a debated subject. […] In my photo, the well-being of the child is being taken care of by the two moms, with their wedding dress making a safe shelter and protecting her. That is exactly what I wanted to show. It makes me laugh to hear and read all the arguments that society has as to how it is not a good idea for gay couples to have children. Parents in gay couples, choose to be parents, it does not happen as an accident, there is a commitment involved. (Gen, 2013)

Figure 98. *Gen* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

When I began planning this research-creation, I quickly thought about asking both Gen and her wife Gina to collaborate. Even though they are not as close friends of mine as some of the other participants, their experience as a married lesbian couple was essential for broadening the scope of this project. My decision to ask for their participation was also driven by the fact that they are a Mexican-Canadian couple, and they both have experience working in culturally diverse fields. Gen is the only participant that I met after the development of this project had begun. Having accepted my invitation to participate, she met with me once to have dinner and discuss the project in my house. Because of Gen's busy schedule, following that meeting we continued collaborating on her dress through e-mail. As a

result of Gen's time restrictions, her dress developed into a more collaborative process than some others, in ways I will describe below.

Figure 99 and Figure 100. Gen's original dresses (2012)
Photos by Maria Ezcurra

Gen feels that gay marriage is not a big taboo in Montreal anymore, as it is both legally supported and popularly accepted. However, she believes that having children within a homosexual union still provokes negative social reactions today even though she and her wife don't yet have children of their own. She asked for my help in finding a way to convey her ideas and concerns through her dress. After discussing it, we decided to represent Gen and her wife with two dresses, giving each one of them its own identity and individuality. Crucially, however, we attached the dresses to each other as a way of symbolizing the couple's union while also "showing stereotypes and breaking them" (Ibid.). Gen wanted to address the fact that today in Québec "it is legally possible to be part of a gay marriage and have a family" (Ibid.). In order to portray a lesbian couple as committed parents, we thought about shaping the dresses' union into a bassinet to hold a baby.

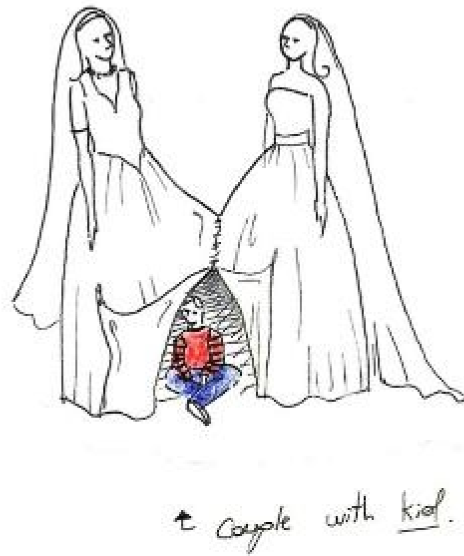

Figure 101. Sketch to transform Gen's dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Figure 102. Gina and Desirée trying on Gen's dress (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

For the photo shoot at Loyola Chapel, Gina and Desirée supported Gen, who couldn't attend, by wearing her dress together. Desirée was ideal for this due to her existing familiarity with this project as well as her close friendship with Gen and Gina. Having known Gina for many years now, the two were comfortable doing this together. For the dress' tryout as well as the final shoot we took some pictures of this female couple wearing their joined dresses with a plastic baby placed in the center, but it was not an effective image. The doll seemed too artificial and gave theatrical connotations to the picture. It felt too 'girly,' and this was precisely the aspect of marriage that Gen was trying to question with her dress:

> Since I was very young, marriage has been really important for me. I guess it has to do with the entire princess tales in movies and the idea that society draws about marriage. All those TV shows, books and magazines that picture the perfect marriage and the perfect wedding day with a beautiful white dress. I pictured my wedding day as a key day in my life; that is why I had an internal conflict when I accepted my sexual orientation. When I first came with acceptance that I will live an open gay life, I got disappointed because of the image that I had in my head of the institution of marriage didn't go with my new way of living; I thought at first it wouldn't be possible to have all what I had pictured in my head; but when I first met my wife, in 2007, I realized that I could be married and be gay at the same time. (Gen, 2013)

The idea of including a real child in Gen's picture to represent the children of a gay couple came up spontaneously when we taking the pictures at Loyola Chapel. Claudia, who is also good friends with Gen and Gina, was still at the chapel with her family. Her daughter (who is close with Desirée, Gina and Gen) happily agreed to be involved in Gen's pictures, as did her parents. I perceived this as a beautiful gesture of care between friends, but also as a statement of support for the ideas represented by this dress. Gen was very happy with that solution as well. The resulting final image speaks to the social challenges that gay couples face today in raising a family, but does it by showing all the love and support that they are able to give and receive from their loved ones. Gen feels well represented by the final picture of her dress, despite not being physically in it.

Figure 103. Gina and Desirée wearing Gen's dress for the photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra.

Gina

Age: 33

Nationality: Mexican (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Sound Engineer

Marital Status: Married in 2009

Partner: Woman / 29 / Canadian

For me, marriage is just about being committed to the person that I love; is a promise to myself and to my partner that I'm going to be there for her. That is my role in my marriage, to do my best. However, it is interesting to see how society sees the roles that each one of us "should" play. I cannot even count how many times I've been asked who is the guy and who is the girl in our relationship; there are no guys, I am a girl, my wife is a girl and we love each other. (Gina, 2013)

Figure 104. *Gina* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

When I met Gina to discuss her proposal for this project, she explained that she wanted to do something to challenge and question the stereotypical ideas of gender roles within a marriage. While she had a clear notion of what she wanted to say through her dress, she was unsure about how to accomplish it. One of the first ideas we discussed involved her wearing a black tie along with her wedding dress, but we felt that method did not fully integrate the female and male aspects of the outfit. We felt that the tie should not merely 'decorate' the dress; it should be an essential part of the dress so as to make her statement clear. In this project, she saw "an opportunity to be able to play outside the box and destroy stereotypes" (Gina, 2013). She explains that:

> One of those stereotypes is getting married in a white dress. This is merely symbolism in the Western culture. The white dress associated with purity and embraced by the church was not my option when I got married. I actually wore a black dress that day, why? Because I looked good in it! (Gina, 2013)

We decided to make Gina's dress with ties. It is the only colorful garment I made for this project, portraying Gina "in a joyful way" (Gina, 2013) just as she did on her actual wedding day. Although men's garments are usually much more subdued than female ones, men's ties paradoxically offer a varied array of colors and patterns. The ties' different colors serve dual purposes: they reject the restrictive values of purity and whiteness implied in the wedding dress and they also "show diversity" (Ibid.). The tie is a formal male element and has become a symbol of manhood, just as the dress represents femininity. By juxtaposing these two significant stereotyped gender elements in a single piece, Gina is merging both the stereotypical roles of the husband and the wife.

Figure 105. Sketch to make Gina's dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Gina's proposal is mostly "a social comment on the institution of marriage." (Gina, 2013). However, she also "wanted to express how it makes me sometimes feel that I have to explain my marriage to society" (Ibid.). Through her dress, she is trying to break traditional notions of what becoming a wife means by questioning "stereotypes that people have about being gay [which] do not

go together with society's traditional institution of marriage" (Ibid.). With her tie dress, Gina celebrates the fact that she is "married to a beautiful woman, and that, to begin with, breaks a bit the 'traditional' way of marriage" (Ibid.). But she also wants to make it clear that "as much as I am happily married here in Canada, as of today, gay marriage has only been approved in 14 countries and in 12 jurisdictions of the USA, and there are places in the world where is even illegal to be gay!" (Ibid.).

Figure 106. Gina's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Jessie

Age: 62

Nationality: U.S.A. Citizen

Profession: Colorist / Artist / Art educator

Marital Status: Divorced in 2011 (Previously married for 33 years)

Ex-Partner: Man / 62 / U.S.A. Citizen

I had just finished a very long (33 years) marriage, and I was in the process of assessing the experience (which amounts to a review of most of my life!). I am two years away from the divorce so some of the sorrow and anger is dissipating and I am feeling a lovely sense of being released from a stifling situation. The image I chose, therefore, was very straight forward: with the help of Maria and Jackie, we wound the train around and around me until I was wrapped up like a mummy, and then, with a pair of scissors that I had close to me inside the dress, I cut my way out. (Jessie, 2013)

Figure 107. *Jessie* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Jessie in the program of Art Education at Concordia University and since then she has collaborated with me on a number of diverse art projects. Probably based on her experience as color specialist, Jessie originally toyed with the idea of changing her dress' cultural connotations by standing in a container filled with ink and dyeing the dress black while wearing it. She wanted to do it in a performative way at Loyola Chapel, as she feels "it is the actual experience of the piece which is so much fun" (Jessie, 2013). However, after choosing a dress to take home with her, she decided instead to wind "the train around and around me until I was wrapped up like a mummy, and then, with a pair of scissors that I had close to me inside the dress, I cut my way out" (Ibid.). It was a very straight forward representation of her experience in her own marriage, which by its end had become a marriage "of

great compromise and limitation" (Ibid.). This idea "was suggested by the shape of the dress itself" which "had a very long satin train that […] could be used for a good effect." (Ibid.). Perhaps because she did not wear a wedding dress when she married, Jessie focuses her attention on the fabric instead of the dress:

> The actual sensation of being completely wrapped up, feeling stifled and unable to move, listening to the voices of the people outside, and growing increasingly warm as I waited for the cue to start cutting my way out could certainly be compared to the feeling of being in a dead-end marriage that kept me from doing the things I needed and wanted to do. (Jessie, 2013)

Figure 108. Jessie' action at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Because of the photographic nature of this project, we documented Jessie's performance at Loyola Chapel in a series of pictures as opposed to video. The resulting images function almost as an animation. Jessie, however, feels that these photos, although necessary for the project, "are weak representations of a much more interesting and multi-dimensional lived performance" (Jessie, 2013). To represent her part in this project, she chose an image in which she is cheerfully looking up, having just released herself from imprisonment. The contrast between her still tied legs and her recently freed arms and head creates a physical tension in the image that goes beyond its emotional content. Although her pictures are more effective as a series of images, this single image still manages to transmit the happiness and relief that she felt when she finally escaped her self-confinement. She feels that:

> The cutting out was great, though not as wonderful as realizing when I was single again that I was free to do what I wanted to do and go where I wanted to go. The cutting did not completely ruin the beautiful dress; it can be used again, but I have no wish, at this point in time, to be married again. (Jessie, 2013)

Lee Lapaix

Age: 37

Nationality: Canadian

Profession: Teacher

Marital status: Recently separated after getting married in 2001

For me the wedding dress, even in our modern times, represents a very traditional and stereotypical idea of love and commitment (till death do us part), highly defined roles within the family, and a hierarchical relationship between man and woman, which no longer reflects our desires nor realities, leaving little room for same sex partnerships, or "modern" relationships where roles are reversed, blended, questioned, etc. (Lee, 2013)

Figure 109. *Lee* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Lee and her children playing in the park and, having many things in common, we ended up becoming good friends. For Lee, the white wedding dress represents "an unrealistic, idealized, and out of date idea of romantic relationships and marriage" (2013). She identifies with a generation of women who "find the values attached to the image of a religious wedding in a white dress naïve, sexist, out of date, and limiting to both partners" (Lee, 2013). For Lee,

> This virginal image of an inexperienced young woman who takes the name of her husband, and is personally fulfilled in the role of family caregiver and home maker is no longer an image many women (or men) in North America relate to nor wish to partake in. Many of us go into marriage after having previous relationships, with an established career, and often questioning some of the foundations of "traditional" marriages and relationships. (Lee, 2013)

Figure 110. Detail of Lee's dress (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Lee's original suggestion to transform a wedding dress for this research-creation project was to make it heavy or rigid. She eventually decided to create an apron to be worn while doing her daily housework and childcare. Lee's various ideas "play with the difference between the dress as a symbol of an idealized/unrealistic relationship, versus the daily reality of married life and relationships for many women" (Lee, 2013). Her piece is both a personal reflection and a critical statement about traditional marriage. As Lee was working on the dress, she reflected on the life of other women close to her. She thought especially about her mother, who is "the 'wild child' of the family" and has "dedicated her life to fulfilling her own dreams, and has not let marriage or relationships ever get in the way of this pursuit" as well as her grandmother, a woman who "married at a young age, and devoted herself to caring for her husband and four children, and was a dedicated member of the Catholic Church" (Lee, 2013). Despite being "polar opposites" (Ibid.) these two women have had a profound impact on Lee's own self-identity and her relationships with others. They are both figures that Lee recalls wearing aprons, but in quite different ways: Lee's mother wears an apron working as a self-sufficient and independent farmer while her grandmother used to wear an apron in her kitchen preparing food for others. As Lee was working on her own apron she found herself wondering about the hopes, dreams, desires and frustrations of both her mother and grandmother. They are both strongly tied to traditional female roles, one through her acceptance of said roles and the other through her rejection of the same.

More than negative, Lee's apron is purposely conflicting in its emotions. Her piece is representative of the "complex and ever changing" ways many women today feel about marriage and relationships (Lee, 2013). For her, an apron is one of the only symbols capable of representing the two juxtaposing female roles that have been important models for her. It denotes "the traditional role of 'homemaker' and caretaker, but also embodies an active, strong, able, and working model of a woman" (Ibid.).

Figure 1121. Lee's performance at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Figure 111. Lee's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

María Natividad Vega Vega (Nati)

Age: 50

Nationality: Mexican

Profession: Graphic Designer

Marital Status: Married in 1989.

Partner: Man / 52 / Mexican

I wanted to use the wedding dress as a blank page on which to narrate a story. It is written with a spontaneous calligraphy, sometimes upside down, simulating the difficult moments of marriage. With its mistakes and achievements. Just like family life is. To me, being married signifies the beginning of a great story[33]. (Nati, 2013)

Figure 113. *Nati* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Nati and her family came to Montreal from Mexico in 2010, accompanying her husband Salvador for his PhD studies. Nati and Salvador are both graphic designers and she has recently developed a special interest in traditional Mexican textiles. When I asked her to be a part of this project I was with at their home, having dinner my family. She became very excited about the prospect and immediately showed me their wedding picture, which was framed in the living room. This picture became Nati's main inspiration for this project. During the process of making her dress, Nati "always had my wedding photograph nearby"[34] (Nati, 2013). She began her work by "starting […] almost from

[33] Yo quise utilizar el vestido de novia como una página en blanco en donde se narra una historia. Esta está escrita con caligrafía espontánea, a veces de cabeza, simulando momentos difíciles. Con errores y aciertos. Tal como es la vida de familia. Estar casada para mí significa el inicio de una gran historia.
[34] siempre tuve cerca la fotografía de mi boda.

nothing, in the way a family is started, with creativity, dedication and effort"[35] (Ibid.). More than an actual transformation, she wanted to use the wedding dress as a canvas. Nati chose a simple dress on which to write their story, without lace or complex pleats. She altered the dress herself, carefully outlining a text with black ink in the fabric to represent what marriage means to her:

> My experience in marriage has been unimaginable. In it (I begin writing upside down) I have felt that I am myself. In this adventure, Salvador and I have made a (I return to writing normally) great team, resulting in a worthy outcome called family. (I write upside down again) I believe that sometimes I have not done my part well, I have erred (I go back to write normal) and a lot. I have learned and corrected on the way with effort and patience. Today my family is my great treasure. God loves me through them, through Salvador, Sal, Naty and Dany.[36] (Nati, 2013)

Figure 114. Nati's original dress (2012)
Figure 115. Nati's dress in process (2013)
Photos by Maria Ezcurra

Nati created an effective metaphor by linking the concepts of her writing and her marriage, each one being a different way of starting a story on a blank page. She wanted to further represent her

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[35] *Lo hice como empezando […] casi de nada, como se empieza una familia; con creatividad, dedicación y esfuerzo.*
[36] La experiencia en mi vida de matrimonio ha sido inimaginable. En ella (empiezo a escribir de cabeza) me he sentido que soy yo misma. En esta aventura Salvador y yo hemos hecho un (regreso a escribir normal) gran equipo, del resultado puedo decir que todo ha valido la pena porque su nombre es familia. (Vuelvo a escribir de cabeza) Creo que algunas veces no he hecho bien mi papel, me he equivocado (regreso a escribir normal) y mucho. He aprendido y corregido en el camino con esfuerzo y paciencia. Hoy mi familia es mi gran tesoro. Dios me ama a través de ella, a través de Salvador, de Sal, de Naty y de Dany.

marriage by including “things that are important in my married life”[37] in the dress (Nati, 2013). For example, “the skirt printed with the repeated logo represents the job and profession that I share with my husband. Our domestic economy is based on it”[38] (Ibid.). Nati and Salvador designed this logo together 25 years ago for their wedding invitations. She recently recovered the image, in which their initials are interrelated. She used serigraphy to print it onto a fabric which would become the train for her dress. In this way, she symbolically interlaced her professional and personal life, upon which her family is based.

Figure 116. Nati’s dress pattern (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

For the picture, her daughters helped her to decorate her right arm with another text representing some of her beliefs and feelings as a wife and mother. This text was white, acting as a lace-like texture, similar to a bride’s glove. To symbolically represent the central role that her family plays in her life, Nati involved them in the process of transforming the dress. This idea is reinforced by the bouquet, which is made from the small shoes of Nati’s children instead of flowers, because “they are

[37] cosas importantes en mi vida de matrimonio.
[38] la falda impresa con el logo en repetición, representa la profesión y nuestro trabajo. En él basamos la economía familiar.

the joy of the family"[39] (Nati, 2013). Through these methods, she was not only able to "evoke my original dress through significant and important things related to my marriage,"[40] (Ibid.) but actually managed to incorporate these significant and important things into the dress-making process.

Figure 117. Nati wearing her dress at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

[39] ellos son la alegría de la familia.
[40] quise evocar mi vestido original a través de cosas significativas e importantes de mi vida de matrimonio.

Norma Vite

Age: 44

Nationality: Mexican-Canadian

Profession: Economist / College Teacher

Marital Status: Married since 1999

Partner: Man / 47 / Canadian - U.S.A.

Citizen

The transformation of the wedding dress tries to represent the idea of 'stretching,' reaching out in many directions, keeping a balance between embracing new spaces while at the same time, holding on, remaining one single piece. (Norma, 2013)

Figure 118. *Norma* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Norma a few months after arriving in Canada in *Café 92*, during an outing with my children. Being neighbors, we kept meeting regularly and developed a friendship. When I asked her to participate in this project, and after giving it some thought, she told me that she wanted to transform her dress based on the concept of "stretching." I knew right away how I wanted to "stretch" Norma's dress. As described in Chapter One, I have a wide body of work based on the process of cutting and extending garments on the wall, as trophies or shields. Following from that idea, I decided to cut her dress through the seams while she was wearing it and spread it towards the wall. I sketched and presented this idea to Norma, who responded positively to my proposal. I chose a beautiful dress for

her and luckily it fit her perfectly. The skirt had many layers of fabric and the top offered an elegant decoration made of lace and small pearls. I carefully cut through its seams to ‘open’ it. When it was ready, Norma came to my house to try it on. She patiently and amusingly stood on my kitchen table as I extended the dress over the wall while Jackie took pictures. We later repeated this process at Loyola Chapel for her photo shoot, fixing her dress’ ends to the frame of an exit door. That is the image that she chose to represent her in this project.

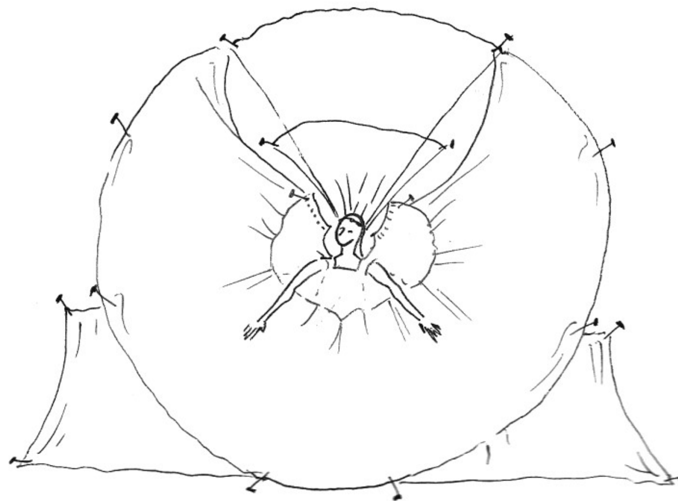

Figure 119. Sketch to transform Norma’s dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Norma thinks that her transformed dress successfully denotes the ideas that she wanted to communicate about her own experience in marriage. Symbolically, the white “represents my adhesion to the institution of marriage” (Norma, 2013) and the multi-layered fabric feels light but not fragile. The many layers of the dress’ skirt extend in various ways, representing idea of her “trying to reach things far away, and also being pulled away in different directions” (Ibid.). She chose a picture in which she is smiling because she did not want to represent her experience “as something sad or resentful” (Ibid.). In her words, “my marriage and my kids make me very happy! This picture represents a balance between being pulled away in different directions while staying still, grounded” (Ibid.).

Figure 120. Trying Norma's dress at Maria's home (2012)
Photo by Jacqueline Fortson

Figure 121. Norma's photo session at Maria's home (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Norma's participation in this project was an "enriching" experience, allowing her to reflect upon marriage in new ways. She became aware of the fact that, in her experience, "being married and becoming integrated into a different society as an immigrant have been two things that come hand in hand" (Norma, 2013). While these circumstances have "enriched my life beyond what I could have imagined, and at the same time, have presented challenges I could not have foreseen the day of my wedding" (Ibid.). Since her marriage, her "family has become a trilingual, multicultural, adapting entity with roots in three different countries." She believes that this process, "although voluntary and incredibly enriching, sometimes has also felt as an external force that 'stretches' me in directions that I would not have taken on my own" (Ibid.).

Paula

Age: 43

Nationality: Mexican (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Biologist

Marital Status: Married in 1993

Partner: Man / 47 / Mexican

A stage of my life is represented by the transformed dress. The idea is simply that when the couple loses priority and is taken for granted, it begins to fall apart. If it is a relationship that is worth preserving, you work with all of the necessary means to re-establish it, resulting in a better couple, more mature and involved.[41] (Paula, 2013)

Figure 122. *Paula* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Paula moved to Canada from Mexico in 2010 with her husband and two sons. We met in Montreal through common friends, becoming friends ourselves. When Paula agreed to be part of this project, she took some time to carefully consider how she wanted to transmit her idea through a transformed dress. To Paula, the white dress only represents "a continuity in the tradition of marriage"[42] (Paula, 2013). For her, the ideas behind "Trash the Dress" are completely dissociated from the traditional wedding dress and from the "implicit beauty"[43] of marriage itself" (Ibid.). For her, a

[41] Una etapa de mi vida está representada por el vestido transformado. La idea es simplemente que cuando se pone a la pareja en un segundo plano y se le da por sentada, se empieza a desmoronar. Si es una relación que vale la pena mantener, se trabaja con todos los medios necesarios para reestablecerla, dando como resultado una mejor pareja, más madura y compenetrada.
[42] únicamente la continuidad en la tradición del casamiento.
[43] belleza implícita.

phenomenon like TTD "represents the most negative aspects of a couple relationship, which have to be recognized and which we need to detach ourselves from, and 'throw away' or transform into something more beautiful, or at least more real"[44] (Ibid.).

Figure 123. Photo collage sketch to transform Paula's dress (2012)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 124. Paula's photo session at her home (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Paula wanted to leave a scar on her dress. Her proposal involved ripping the dress to later repair it. It was this process of mending the fabric that really interested her, as a metaphor of her own experience in marriage. First I did a small cut in the chest and sewed it with white a thread, but it was too subtle and difficult to see. We then decided to tear it apart from the neck to the belly. Ripping it up in that way felt very aggressive, but mending it later felt equally redeeming. Using different materials, lengths and stitches, I repaired the harm that I had previously done to Paula's dress. Each stitch, however, damaged

[44] representa los aspectos más negativos de la relación de pareja que hay que reconocer y de los que hay que desprenderse, y *tirar a la basura* o transformar si no en algo más bello, sí en algo más real.

the fabric as much as it mended it. This practice—which could have continued indefinitely—symbolizes marriage as an ongoing process of personal doing and undoing, of loss and gain.

Figure 125. Paula's photo session at her home (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

When her dress was ready, I went to Paula's house with Jackie, who is a friend of hers as well, to take some pictures. Paula approved the last modifications that I had done to the dress. She participated in the photo shoot at Loyola Chapel, from which she selected her final picture for this project. This was the picture that Paula felt best represented the idea that "being married means sharing your life with someone else, with a mutual understanding and commitment of love, support and growth" [45] (2013).

[45] Estar casada implica compartir la vida con otro, con un entendimiento y un compromiso mutuo de amor, apoyo y crecimiento.

Rosa

Age: 39

Nationality: Chilean

Profession: Psychologist / Doctoral Student

Marital Status: Married in 1998

Partner: Man / 42 / Chilean

It is within those transparent pockets of the dress that each of my preoccupations is symbolically reflected; each of my loves and my pleasures. They represent me as a family woman with a life full of tasks, where I try to put everything in its place, where I try to give priority to my kids and to my affections, and which sometimes becomes flooded by other worries which eclipse my desires.[46] (Rosa, 2013)

Figure 126. *Rosa* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Rosa and her family came to Montreal in 2010, accompanying her husband who was starting a master's in engineering. We met through our children, who were attending the same French welcoming school program, and became good friends. A year later she began a PhD in psychology. She chose not to start her graduate studies concurrently with her husband because she wanted to support their children in the complex process of adjustment that moving from one country to another involves. She feels that being married "is an acceptance of a sense of cooperation and teamwork, which establishes implicit and explicit rules regarding the way things function within that collective union"[47] (Rosa, 2013).

[46] En esos bolsillos transparentes del vestido es en donde se reflejaban simbólicamente cada una de mis preocupaciones, de mis amores y de mis placeres. Me representan como mujer en familia, con una vida llena de quehaceres, dónde intento poner cada cosa en su lugar, y dónde busco darle prioridades a mis hijos, a lo afectivo, pero que a veces se ven inundado de otras preocupaciones, que eclipsan mis deseos.
[47] corresponde a aceptar un sentido de cooperación y de equipo, que tiene el establecimiento de reglas implícitas y explícitas de cómo se harán las cosas dentro de esta colectividad.

Upon accepting my invitation to be part of this project, Rosa sent me four different ideas to transform a wedding dress: covering it with to-do lists; using it as a flower pot; attaching dolls to the dress' train, or covering the gown with pockets, "representing order and organization in regards to the home, the family, and the children"[48] (Rosa, 2012). Rosa's ideas were based on her personal and social experiences. She believes that her understanding of marriage, at "a time in which women perform multiple roles (multi-functions and multi-expectations)" (Ibid.) is not unique, as "it is shared by many women"[49] (Ibid.). Each and all of the roles that she plays daily—mother, daughter, wife, student, professional, woman, friend and housewife—demand a tremendous amount of organization and love. In her attempts to achieve everything she feels is needed from her, she often ends up postponing many of her own necessities, such as her "self-care and personal interests"[50] (Ibid.). Rosa feels that "although there are many things that have changed along the years, [...] in Latin American culture there still are too many exigencies for women. On the other hand, it is a space that as mothers and women we don't want to give up"[51] (Ibid.).

Figure 127. Photo collage sketch to transform Rosa's dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Figure 128. Rosa trying her dress on in her home (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

[48] Representando el orden y la organización del hogar, la familia y los hijos.
[49] época en que la mujer realiza múltiples roles (multifuncional y multi-expectativas) es compartida por muchas mujeres.
[50] el autocuidado y los intereses personales.
[51] Aunque haya muchas cosas que han cambiado en el transcurso de los años, pienso que aún en la cultura latinoamericana se siguen exigiendo demasiadas cosas a la mujer. Y por otro lado, es un espacio que como madre-mujer, tampoco queremos ceder.

She ultimately chose the pockets-covered dress. When I completed it, I went to Rosa's house, where she tried it on. It was deeply meaningful to observe her wandering around her house, looking for objects to fill her pockets. I documented this process by taking pictures. She was aware of the symbolic connotations of each of the objects she was choosing: kitchen utensils, cleaning products, make-up, her cell phone, psychology books, children's toys, medicines, movies, warm clothes, comic books, nylons, head phones, a TV remote control, pencils and markers, food and some other things. Towards the end, the weight of the dress was making it difficult for her to walk around the house. It is an interesting metaphor for how loaded she feels as a wife. On this topic, Rosa says:

> One thing I did not consider during the idea's formation was the sheer weight that a dress with these qualities would impose, which strengthened the concept. At the same time it made me reflect on the fact that my life truly is like this, sometimes it is difficult to walk carrying so many things.[52] (Rosa, 2013)

Figure 129. Rosa and her family at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

[52] algo con lo que no contaba al momento de concebir la idea fue el tremendo peso que significaba ponerse un vestido con esas cualidades, lo cual hizo más potente el concepto. A la vez me hizo reflexionar que verdaderamente para mí es así, a veces es difícil caminar con todo lo que se carga.

For the final photo session, Rosa came to Loyola Chapel accompanied by her husband and two sons, who helped her to carry all the objects she brought from her house and to accommodate them in her dress' pockets. We took some pictures of her with her family, although she ended up choosing a photograph in which she is alone to represent her in this project. It is worth noting that although they are absent from Rosa's selected picture, her family was nonetheless involved in the process of selecting, carrying and arranging the objects that filled Rosa's pockets. Rosa believes that her participation in this project allowed her to reconsider her role in marriage in a number of ways. She recognizes that despite often feeling encumbered, she is usually the one who decides to load her own pockets so heavily, even to the point of impeding her husband from doing certain things to lighten her weight. While she seems to be carrying more weight than ever, she realizes that she can "ask my partner to fill his own pockets, and thus keep certain aspects of our shared life in order."[53] There are many pockets that she would like to empty and many more that she would like to fill further, but she wants to do it with the help and support of her family.

[53] pedir a mi compañero llenar sus propios bolsillos y mantener en orden ciertas cosas de la vida común.

Sara

Age: 34

Nationality: Iranian (Canadian Resident)

Profession: Student / Housewife

Marital Status: Married in 2002

Partner: Man / 35 / Iranian

Figure 130. *Sara* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

> The transformed dress represents that I am happy in my life because of having a beautiful daughter and a kind and sweet husband, but I lost the free and relaxed life that I had before marriage, when there were no responsibilities or obligations. (Sara, 2013)

Sara and I met through our daughters, who attended Concordia's daycare program together. Sometimes, while waiting for them outside of their evening's activities, Sara spoke to me about "the limitations and the boundaries that Iranian women have in Iran" (Sara, 2013), her native country. Like all women there, she was expected to cover herself with a scarf when out in public. She was not allowed to have a boyfriend or to interact with her future husband until their marriage was legalized. Regarding the

wedding dress, she told me that in Iran there is a saying that "a woman goes to her husband's home with a white wedding dress and leaves the home with a white funeral cloth after death" (Sara, 2013). She interprets this to mean that "a married woman should not get divorced, she should tolerate all the difficulties and stay married even in hard circumstances" (Ibid.). However, she considers herself lucky, for in her case the white dress meant:

> Finding happiness and peacefulness in a new life, having a good partner who can protect me and help me to succeed in my life. A person with whom I can build a better future, I can learn new ideas and I can enjoy spending time with. On the other hand, I should give some part of me to my husband and my daughter in order to have a successful marriage. I cannot have the same freedom and leisure time that I had before. (Sara, 2013)

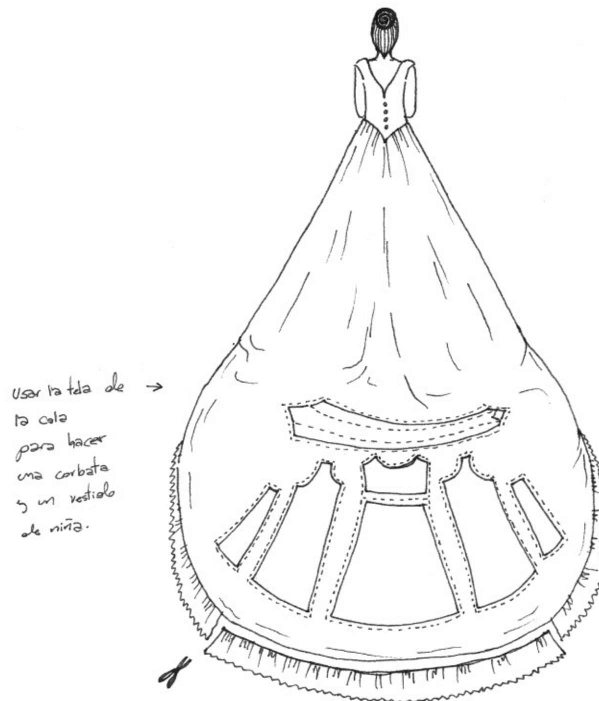

Figure 131. Sketch to transform Sara's dress (2012)
By Maria Ezcurra

Sara wanted to transmit this idea of simultaneous gain and loss in marriage through her transformed wedding dress. She also wanted to show her own transformation as, in her words, "I am not the same person anymore, I am happy in my life, but I have so many responsibilities to fulfill that because of them I gave up some part of my heart and soul to it" (Sara, 2013). We discussed Sara's idea

several times, usually sat on the wooden benches around the arena where our daughters skated. She was not sure about what she wanted to do but she had the idea of removing something from the dress and creating something new with it. Slowly, the solution took form. We decided to use the fabric of Sara's dress to make a small second dress for her daughter and a tie for her husband. For this, Sara chose a very elegant dress with a long train, wide enough to cut the amount of fabric that we needed to make her family's garments without exposing her too much. I was faced with the difficult task of carefully cutting the different patterns of her daughter's dress from the train before sewing it. However, not being a skilled seamstress, I hired Elvia, a professional dressmaker, to help me accomplish this piece successfully. She did a wonderful job sewing the girl's dress and the husband's tie. However, because of the dress' problematic fabric and shape, it became very difficult for Elvia to maintain the figure of each pattern cut from the fabric. Instead, she cut a hole from the bottom end of the train, leaving only the ruffled laced border.

Figure 132. Sara and her family at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Sara came to her photographic session at Loyola Chapel with her family. Along with her own transformed dress, Sara's picture involved two additional elements: her daughter wearing the small

white dress and her husband wearing the white tie. They decided to position Sara's daughter next to her, inside the dress' hole—filling it with its original fabric, now transformed—and her husband stood on the other side. Sara sees herself as "really peaceful and happy in my husband's arms and beside my daughter" (Sara, 2013). She feels like she "had the real ceremony" (2013), as she feels that this experience was more than a research-creation project; it was an opportunity to reconsider and reinforce her family links. For her, this picture is a family portrait more than an art piece.

Figure 133. Sara's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Tina

Age: 34

Nationality: Canadian (Born and raised in Québec)

Profession: Graduate Student / Artist

Marital Status: Living in a Common-law relationship since 2002

Partner: Man / 43 / Canadian

Figure 134. *Tina* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

The white wedding dress represents for me a tradition that is repressive to women. I completely respect people who choose to get married as a symbol and declaration of their love and commitment, but I don't agree with the standardization of weddings such as white wedding dresses, sugar coated wedding cakes, etc. which, in my opinion is a ploy to fuel the wedding industry. I believe my visual response to Trash the [Wedding] Dress, is very much of a subversion of the traditional imagery of the bride dressed in white as a symbol of virginal purity in hopes of making a comment on how some wedding traditions are repressive to women. (Tina, 2013)

Tina is a colleague from the program of Art Education with whom I have worked on several projects since we met in 2010. She collaborated in *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* by specifically challenging the traditional connotations of the white wedding dress. As opposed to written instructions or a verbal concept, her proposal to transform a wedding gown came in the form of a drawing. In it, we can see a woman wearing a dress that resembles an open flower. While it is intact at the top, below the waist it is fragmented into four pieces that extend towards her sides in a provocative manner.

Figure 135. Tina's sketch to transform her dress (2012)

Tina's proposal is a social comment of the institution of marriage, informed by her personal experience as a "first generation Canadian woman" (Tina, 2013). Her dress represents her stance against the normalization of love and commitment, which is influenced by the place she occupies as the youngest of five sisters who grew up in a "traditional family" (Ibid.). She chose to "carve out my own path," especially in regards to her choice to live with her partner, precisely because she was not only expected to marry, but was able to "witness this continuation of social family pressures that continues today" (Ibid.). She and her common-law partner feel that "not being married and choosing to remain in a committed relationship keeps proving to us that we really do want to share our lives together" (Ibid.). For Tina:

> The idea of transforming the dress was to cut it in a manner that each point of the dress is meant to represent one of my sisters who did get married. Each sister is a point of support with me being in the centre. The flow-y quality is also meant to feel freeing or free of the institutionalization of marriage. Perhaps to really get all these ideas across, I would have had to have my four sisters holding each point, but I also feel the sense of being free is represented in the photograph through the form of the dress and my body expressions. (Tina, 2013)

After I finished the transformation of Tina's dress I went to her home, where she tried it on and I took some pictures. We realized that this dress would have some very particular specifications in terms of location, as it required a closed area upon which to pin the dress' ends. This was the original reason for photographing her inside the confessionary at Loyola Chapel, as it was the only location we could find that met our spatial requirements. While this decision was made primarily due to formal considerations, the resulting image acquired a series of unexpected conceptual and symbolic connotations as a result. That is the image that Tina chose to represent her in this project. She chose it because "the lighting was more expressive to the ideas explored in the altered dress" and also because "[t]he context of the chapel's confessional booth is more ambiguous then the informal shooting which clearly shows it is my home. The ambiguous setting can offer the viewer more meanings." (Tina, 2013).

Figure 136. Tina trying her dress on at her home (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Tina does not feel fully represented by her transformed dress, which—even altered—is still a white wedding gown full of restrictive connotations. There are, however, important aspects of herself that she chose to display in her picture as a means of defying these restrictions. The "short cut of the dress" is a "youthful fashion choice" (Tina, 2013), and a clear provocation towards its normalizing tendencies. Furthermore, by wearing her hair and make-up as she always does, she managed to preserve her identity—something which can often be lost among the standardized aesthetics of the white dress.

Figure 137. Tina's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Zacy

Age: 49

Nationality: Canadian

Profession: College Teacher

Marital Status: Married for the 2nd time in 2005

(Living together since 2000)

Partner: Man / 49 / Mexican-Canadian

My inverted dress represents the difficulty or actually the downright impossibility of preserving intact the ideal state of marriage, that which has been self imposed through external societal pressures. The idea of blissful perfection in the couple/family—whether it be romantic, work related or parental—is an imaginary state that can only pretend to exist if it is supported by practical and exacting efforts... the doing of which completely contradicts the imaginary state of perfection. But, the joy of togetherness is paradoxically based within the difficulties of the day to day. (Zacy, 2013)

Figure 138. *Zacy* (2013)
Photo by Enrique Uranga

I met Zacy through our partners, who both coached the soccer team in which our sons were playing in the summer of 2011. She is a musicologist and an artist, currently pursuing a PhD at Concordia University, besides teaching art in a college. Zacy has lived with three different men and had a child with each of them but she has only married twice. For her, “the only difference between being married and not married is nominal [as in] Québec it is important to be married if you want a fair settlement, should the partnership break apart” (Zacy, 2013). She married her current husband “in order to have the union blessed and celebrated by our families, and friends” (Ibid.). She wore a gold wedding dress, which she keeps in case they “ever attend a party that requires a gold evening gown”

(Ibid.). To embody her experience in marriage for this project, she chose a dress that she found "hideously and ornately beautiful" (Ibid.). She did not actually transform it but changed the way it is worn, choosing to wear it turned inside out:

> In so doing I was delighted to see that the dress came with breast enhancing modesty pads (I don't know if they are meant to augment a slender bosom or to conceal nipples). Whatever the case I discovered that the whole effect was perfectly suitable for my take on the psychological demands that are placed upon the woman in a couple to maintain an idea of an ideal while having to constantly navigate through the complexities of the quotidian (events usually lacking in glamour). If I am to maintain the slightest inkling of preserving the potential for that state of otherness (in reference to otherness of what I usually am), I can only do so by hiding and/or disguising that which I feel is supposed to be put on display. (Zacy, 2013)

Figure 139 and Figure 140. Zacy trying her dress on at her home (2013)
Photos by Maria Ezcurra

Zacy "cannot understand orchestrating the destruction of a dress" other than its "organic" destruction (Zacy, 2013). She chose, instead, to wear it in a nonconforming way, "preserving its

integrity" (Ibid.) while challenging its normalizing connotations. It felt "quite natural" for her. She first wore the turned dress in her house, which is an intimate space in which she feels comfortable. Later she wore it over her work clothes for the photo session at Loyola Chapel, symbolically keeping the intimate aspects of her identity attached to her professional self. In this way, she is not resigning to an essential aspect of her personality in order to privilege the other. They are equally important for representing the different aspects that make her the woman she is. For her contribution to this project, Zacy chose the photo taken by Enrique at the chapel "because the church doesn't have the debris of my house around" (Ibid.). She thinks that it "definitely […] is a representation of me wearing the dress… and in that case it is a reflection of me… and in fact to get the correct expression I had to think of something related to work and not to marriage per se!" (Ibid.).

Figure 141. Zacy's photo session at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

The Photographer's Point of View

Just like wedding pictures, photographs in this project serve a significant memory function, preserving the moment forever (Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Strano, 2006). The recording of *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* was almost as important as the experience of wearing the dress itself. To picture this project, I invited Jackie—who has taken several photography art courses and has a passion for it, despite not doing it for a living—and Enrique—a professional photographer. I knew that their qualified technical skills and trained eye would effectively capture the embodiment of the dresses by the participants to share it later with broader audiences. Jackie, who was originally invited to transform a dress, says:

> Having always had some difficulty in expressing myself with words or through conceptual elaboration, I was not sure I could come up with an idea or metaphors to express and embody in a transformed wedding dress. But I knew right away that my contribution could be achieved through photography: my preferred hobby and means of expression. (Jackie, 2014)

Thus, we successfully adapted her participation into this project. Jackie was deeply inspired by the creative originality and sensibility embodied in many of the dresses, which encouraged her to explore a new photographic approach. To her, "one of the most remarkable aspects of this enriching experience was María's ability to transmit her enthusiasm for the project and have participants take ownership of it, making it a true collective process" (Jackie, 2014).

On the other hand, the pictures taken by Enrique in Loyola Chapel were intended to adhere to traditional wedding photography standards so as to emphasize the unusual transformations made to the dresses and the ideas they convey. Prior to the shoot he discussed the ideas behind each participant's dress with her in an effort to capture and reinforce them through the photographs, considering the pictures composition, lighting, color and perspective. Being mindful of the fact that brides' portraits tend reinforce heterosexual gender hierarchies, his job was not an easy one. He had to respect each woman's decisions regarding her own image and identity while still giving consideration to

traditional photographic standards, intending to glamorously capture an iconic moment and emotion. The final images are beautiful and elegant but nonetheless honest representations of women's alternative means of understanding marriage.

When each participant chose a final photograph for this project, questions of illumination, stance, placement within space, camera angle, etc. were carefully considered. While Jackie's pictures were more realistic or accurate—like those taken by friends, family members, or even the couple—Enrique's photographs involved attractive posing and lighting, the two most important things to consider in wedding pictures (SLR Lounge, 2014). Enrique's visually pleasant images were preferred by the participants over informal pictures of themselves wearing the dresses in intimate contexts. Inserted in a feminist research-creation in art education, the male gaze behind the pictures is the first thing that came to my mind when I realized about this general choice. In Western societies, the gaze behind most images has been traditionally male, heterosexual, white and economically privileged, "reflecting a patriarchal power structure built on gender, race, and class" (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010, p. 90). The gaze is always gendered, becoming a key area of feminist analysis in visual culture (Ibid. p. 28). While the male gaze is a well-studied topic, I don't think it applies in this research-creation. Each picture was negotiated between Enrique, the participant and me, always considering the requirements already defined within the project. We relied on Enrique's professional skills, applied in a really convenient context like Loyola Chapel, to negotiate the identity each one of us wanted to represent. The series of pictures are the result of a teamwork. Enrique approached this project "with respect, because it was a collaboration and I didn't want to add too much of my universe. Nonetheless [María] gave me creative freedom and her trust to interpret her vision with the other women" (Enrique, 2014). So, unlike TTD photographers, he was especially careful in treating each participant with "empathy and the care needed on the message, trying to translate emotion to a tangible image" (Enrique, 2014).

Enrique understood his work as relational, a collaboration in which the participants could and should feel represented and empowered by the pictures, and not restricted by them. More than encouraging women to see themselves as the photographer views the model, Enrique found a way of looking at us through our own lenses. This process involved a lot of talking and negotiation between Enrique and each participant, to ensure that her view was understood, respected and represented in the pictures. As a result, these formal images, besides being an attractive memory of the collective experience of embodying the dresses, also challenged social norms and ideologies restrictive to women. Unlike wedding pictures—specifically "Trash the Dress" photography—more than perpetuating heterosexuality, normative femininity and women's visual accessibility, these pictures defy them in a visual language (Strano, 2006; White, 2012). Based on the participants' remarks presented here, in the following chapter I explore the ways in which the creative and collaborative transformation of the dresses allowed the participating women to develop new understandings of their personal and social circumstances in couple relationships, exploring dominant conceptions of femininity.

Figure 142. Enrique and Jackie taking pictures at Loyola Chapel (2013)
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

Chapter Seven
Feminist Threads for Weaving a Collective Fabric: Learning Together through Artistic Participation and Collaboration

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm.
They change our view of the world and the world's view of us...
It is the clothes that wear us and not we them.
Virginia Woolf (*Orlando,* 1928).

Addressing my Research Questions:

Research Question # 1. *How can art help us understand the roles wedding dresses play in shaping women's identities as wives and female individuals today?*

Through collaborative art-making processes involving text, textiles, photographs and the body, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* explores the different understandings women have about marriage and the roles that personal experiences and social norms play in shaping their identity. The ambiguous and even contradictory requirements and expectations that bridal fashion imposes on women are deliberately reflected upon and challenged in this research-creation project, involving discursive, representative, performative and participative explorations of wedding dresses. My participants and I explored marriage together, revising and recreating the quality of our human relationships through art (Bishop, 2004, p. 79) and reflecting upon it in open and flexible ways (Schäfer, 2008). This research-creation project grapples with issues of love, commitment and power in close relationships—issues that are difficult to access through traditional research practices because of the profoundly personal way in which they are experienced—bringing new understandings of women's collaboration and participation in art education.

As we have seen, participants' own life experiences influence their dresses' transformation, and their interpretations of the resulting pictures are reflective of their experience taking part in this project. The works of textile art involve a series of personal processes and understandings that

represent dominant conceptions of female gender roles as much as intimate observations and reflections of womanhood. In the previous chapter I reviewed the participants' written testimonies to better understand their ideas and feelings towards the institution and experience of marriage and the role that wedding dresses play in shaping their identities as women. Based on those reflections, in this chapter I am answering my research questions by looking at how the collective artistic transformation of the dresses allowed the participants to generate new understandings from their personal and social circumstances in couple relationships while examining dominant conceptions of femininity.

Throughout this text we have seen how, on the one hand, wedding dresses are closely related to marriage and the wedding complex, which is made up of patriarchal institutions that through the wedding industry support and reproduce heterosexist, racist and classist ideals, promoting consumption disguised as romantic love through white weddings (Geller, 2001, Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a; White, 2012). We have also seen that, on the other hand, the white gown is associated with the bride and the social aspect of the wedding ceremony, which has become a feminized ritual that can involve love, imagination, transformation, celebration and attachment (Freeman, 2002). This dual identity of the bride is accurately represented by the women participating in this research-creation project. The roles that wedding dresses have played in shaping their identities are ambiguous and contradictory, just like the concepts of bride and wife. Most of the participants related marriage to notions of love and commitment. Many of them also talked about change (Anne, Carmen, Claudia, Daniela, Flavia, Lee, Maria, Nati, Norma, Paula, Sara, Tina, Zacy), fragmentation (Anne, Claudia, Daniela, Maria, Norma, Paula, Sara, Tina), immobility (Anne, Daniela, Desirée, Flavia, Jess, Maria, Norma, Rosa, Tina), family (Claudia, Denisse, Gen, Maria, Nati, Norma, Rosa, Sara), domesticity (Carmen, Lee, Norma, Rosa) and confinement (Flavia, Jess, Norma, Tina). Some participants deliberately trouble traditional notions of marriage, incorporating subversion and provocation into their dresses, (Gen, Gina,

Tina, Zacy), while others simply reject the institution of marriage in their relationships (Denisse, Desirée).

Collaboratively transformed into art, the dresses mediate between the participants' bodies and the social world, determining how women relate to each other and to themselves. The participants actively constructed unconventional identities through their transformed dresses to share their experiences and reinforce their own beliefs. Looking beyond the restrictive and normalizing aspects of the categories of wife, we collaboratively created new female representations that provide opportunities to redefine traditional concepts of family and motherhood (Kingston, 2004, p.221). In this way, through collaboration and creativity, these series of dresses challenge traditional cultural values by emphasizing the importance of interpretation, difference, fragmentation and change in the visual identity of the bride. Although wedding dresses continue to enforce conformity towards dominant conceptions of gender roles, they can also reveal the new directions that these roles are taking. As we have seen in this project, they present the contradictions that we face today as women, where on the one hand we are expected to conform to heteronormalizing behaviours while on the other we are encouraged to look for diversity and change (Crane, 2000, Kawamura, 2011). Instead of allowing these dresses to constrain our bodies—like female Victorian outfits did—we actively transformed them to challenge together their oppressive expectations about our sexual identity, femininity and behaviour (Crane, 2000). Because clothing is strongly connected to dominant values through a normative fashion system, it functions in this project as a powerful form of visual communication for the purposes of making personal and social statements through art. The wedding dresses transformed for this project reflect the participants' social influences and individual experiences, acquiring various new meanings not only in relation to femininity and marriage (Crane, 2000; Entwistle, 2010; Kawamura, 2011), but also collaborative practices in art education.

Understanding Marriage through the Wedding Dress

As a response to social expectations towards women's passivity conveyed through dress, this project explores and challenges normalizing or stereotypical conceptions of the bride's fragility, powerlessness and restraint by actively defining our identities as women through creative collaboration and participation. Anne's wedding dress, for example, might be falling apart—along with its many connotations and restrictions—but she remains strong, freeing herself from social requirements and hard self-expectations. Similarly, the scar in Paula's dress relates to both deterioration and improvement in her marriage, symbolizing an essential aspect of the woman she has become. Claudia's patched dress is about a couple's sense of balance and mutual fulfilment. The void in Sara's dress, in which her daughter stands, represents women's renunciation and realization in marriage. Norma is stretching out, similar to a tree. She might not be choosing the direction that each branch is taking, but she is growing nonetheless. Similarly, the large dimensions of my dress constrict my individual movement but embrace my family. In a vastly different approach, Jessie cuts her way out of her wedding dress, symbolizing her divorce. She performs a joyful rite of passage, rising in meaningful new ways. Rosa's dress, covered by transparent pockets[54] carrying a series of personal, family and domestic objects, exposes as much as it covers her conflicting roles as a professional woman, mother and wife.

Various dresses were transformed to represent more ambiguous or impartial ideas concerning marriage. Zacy's reversed dress symbolically exposes the intimate and imperfect side of marriage. By giving up its decorative façade in exchange for a more honest perspective, she discovered a meaningful and unexpectedly fun aspect of it. Tina's dress is like a compass pointing at the repressive connotations that traditional weddings have for women. However, by posing provocatively in the center, she rebels

[54] Historically, pockets have been a place where women keep handy items such as money, keys, or handkerchiefs. For centuries they have functioned as a woman's "most private storage space, for some women perhaps the only private space they had, so a pocket might contain more intimate objects such as personal letters" (Burnston, 2001, par. 2).

symbolically against these established social norms. Full of domestic connotations, Lee's apron[55] can be easily understood as a symbolic representation of the bride turned into a wife after the wedding. However, this picture involved a complex process of personal reflections on gender roles where the apron was removed from its restrictive normative context and became a representation of female strength and agency. Both Denisse and Desirée reject the institution of marriage through their dresses for being—like most heterosexual institutions—a structure designed by and for male domination in which wives are still discriminated against, sometimes explicitly and sometimes through subtleties like the division of labor (Dryden, 1999). Denisse and her partner literally trashed the dress together as an act of love. In Desirée's picture, instead of a bride, we see a skull in the altar to represent marriage as a dead tradition. Gen and Gina also incorporated subversive elements in their dresses, but in their case they did so in direct relation to the social challenges that gay couples face today. Gen's dress deals with the obstacles that she still sees, if not marrying, then raising a family within a same-sex relationship. She does so by showing a happily married lesbian couple offering safe shelter to their child. The picture works both as a provocation and a recognition of their happy and committed relationship. Challenging dominant gender roles, Gina's final picture shows a beautiful woman wearing an elegant dress made entirely from men's ties. This is not the first dress made with ties—textile artist Lucy Orta made a series of them in 1995, entitled "Identity + Refuge - experimental catwalk" (Studio Orta, 2014)—but Gina's ties

[55] Probably because of their strong symbolic connotations, aprons have often been used by women artists to examine gender roles in society. One of the most representative examples of aprons in art is Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). In this performance-based work, we can see her in a kitchen wearing an apron next to a variety of domestic utensils (http://www.moma.org). Resembling a cooking demonstration, she names and shows the objects, one by one, in alphabetical order (from "apron" to "tenderizer"). She presents the tools in a socially rebellious but comical way, confronting the system of meanings that regulates and restricts domesticity as feminine. The different gestures performed by her not only "negate each of the accessory's original intended functions" (St-Gelais, 2012, p. 71), but also "recount a domestic reality incongruously linked to one still very feminine in its connotation" (Ibid.). In this way, Rosler's piece makes it "impossible for semiotics and the kitchen to cohabitate" (Ibid., p. 72). In Québec, Women with Kitchen Appliances and Les Fermieres Obsedees are two feminist art groups whose work subverts traditional notions of femininity, contributing to a critical reflection about the norms that socialize us as women (St-Gelais, 2012, p. 75-76). Another artist that worked with aprons is Canadian Barb Hunt. In her piece titled *Aprons* (2002), she embroidered bits of feminist texts onto 134 vintage aprons. Hunt interweaves "both contradictory and supportive correlations between material, image, and process" (Hunt, 2002), revaluing and reconsidering femininity in contemporary societies.

make it a unique wedding gown. A tie—an arrow pointing at men's genitals—is usually associated with masculinity. Despite being a traditional male work accessory strongly tied to class, ties are functionally useless, serving a solely decorative purpose. However, transformed into a wedding dress for a gay bride, ties acquire a series of new meanings. Reaching symbolically beyond the patriarchal system of male authority that we confront on a daily basis, each tie of Gina's dress is a loving tie between two women.

Performing Gender through Dress

In regards to the way they understand and perform gender, some participants clearly represented the roles that they play—or are socially expected to perform—as women in couple relationships through dress. For Claudia, marriage involves complementing and balancing roles. By denying the white dress's implications for women, Desirée suggests that the responsibilities of providing and caring should be shared equally by both partners, regardless of gender. Lee realizes how difficult it is to balance social expectations and personal beliefs, feeling torn between two juxtaposed ideals of female identity, while Tina feels that certain wedding traditions are repressive towards women. Some participants consider their context as an important influencing factor in the roles they play as wives, with Gen stating that living in Québec has allowed her to marry her gay partner, while Sara gives consideration to the limitations and social barriers that women face in her native Iran. Similarly, considering gender roles through her proposal, Desirée's skull can be related not only to a symbolic death, but to wives' vulnerability in marriage. Her piece builds a bridge between domestic and institutional violence towards women, particularly in regards to Mexico and Canada.[56]

[56] Mexico was recently ranked 16th in the global incidence of homicides against women. According to the report on femicide in Mexico produced by UNWomen, the National Women's Institute (Inmujeres) and the College of Mexico (Colmex), femicides in Mexico have been increasing since the year 2007, exceeding those recorded in 1985 by about 25% (Católicas por el Derecho a Decidir and Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, 2012). It is not a coincidence that this violence towards women increased with the escalation of Mexico's "drug war," which started in 2006. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 60,000 people have been killed in this war (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Many have been executed by the drug cartels, but many also by the brutality of colluded state security forces, promoted by the extensive corruption that has haunted parts of the country since this war started (Ibid). The security forces' brutal tactics have not only compromised their legitimacy, but have encouraged the growth of smaller criminal groups that rely on criminal activities other than smuggling

Being a lesbian couple, Gina and Gen believe that this project reinforced their ideas against predefined gender roles in a couple relationship. Equally dividing tasks and responsibilities, they are well aware of the significant aspects of their marriage. While gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender couples are often devalued or hidden in white weddings (McDaniel & Tepperman, 2010; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a), Gina and Gen got married in a formal but loving ceremony. However, they refused to wear normalising white dresses, rejecting their restrictive connotations.[57] While taking part in this project did not change Gen's mind about her own marital experience, she was surprised to see some representations of marriage that she thought were beyond our times and circumstances. The project allowed her to realize that women still live in different realities, and that many of them still struggle with the cultural and social expectations that marriage imposes on them. To Gina, all of the project's proposals make strong statements concerning different realities for women in marriage, showing us that diversity should be embraced instead of judged.

Extending their sense of possibility while creating and strengthening community bonds, this project has empowered the participants. By weaving together the threads of creative practices, self-reflective texts, exchanges within the community of participants and academic writing, this project

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drugs, such as kidnappings, extortion, and human trafficking, especially of women and children (UN-Women, 2011). Also, according to a report by Statistics Canada from the year 2000, male violence on women accounted for almost half of all violent crime in Canada, where women are the victims in three of four conjugal murders and at least one in three women and girls is beaten or sexually abused in her lifetime (Empowering Non-Status, Refugee and Immigrant Women Who Experience Violence, 2010). In 2006, approximately 75 women were murdered by their partner each year. Furthermore, violence against indigenous women and girls—First Nations, Inuit and Métis—has become a human rights crisis in Canada. Aboriginal women are nearly three times more likely to be victim of a violent crime—perpetrated either by a stranger or by a spouse—than non-Aboriginal (Amnesty International, 2014).

[57] Historically, women outside of the socially established norm—like pregnant women, gay women, divorced women or single mothers—have been barred from marriage, and this is still the case in many societies and religions. Even if they were allowed to marry, they were often expected to not wear white during the ceremony. Today, most women have won not only the civil right to marry in many Western societies, but also to wear a white dress, making white weddings increasingly inclusive. However, while this is seen as a gain for women and gays' rights, an increasing number of people see it as "the product of a very effective marketing campaign" (Ingraham, 2008a, p. 222), as the white dress is limited to privileged people who can afford it and still conveys the restrictive symbolism of traditional marriage. At the same time, while TTD photography displays very few representations of same-sex couples, there are a few TTD sessions with two brides, and more recently with two grooms, called "Trash the Suit." These images can be found in several wedding photography web sites like http://4realequalityweddings.com and in web pages like http://equallywed.com, which specifically covers gay, lesbian, queer and transgender weddings. Such sites resist the conventions of heterosexual unions and traditional ideas of family, while challenging the marketing of TTD as a form of heterosexual commitment.

looks into the ways in which gender defines what and how we are taught. Opening a creative space for women to participate in the construction and interpretation of their own social and political realities, this project can be seen as a feminist pedagogy of dress. Influenced by feminist education theories and the exploration of performance and pedagogy, participatory projects like this function as a tool for understanding the world and dealing with critical issues (Helguera, 2011). As feminist art education, it generates new knowledge and new ways of knowing as alternative pedagogical strategies to end sexism and gender inequity (Church, 2010). For Judy Chicago, one of the first feminist women artists teaching about and through art practices in the early 1970s, feminist art education starts "with each person's individual voice and builds both individual and collaborative art-making out of those issues expressed by many different voices" (n.d., p. 9). For her, "such an education can lead to a truly diverse art community and a more equitable world" (Ibid.). Her ideas are quite significant, especially considering that—despite the passage of time—this project also arose from a profoundly rooted need for a feminist art education that allows us to rethink what, why and how gendered learning is teaching us. In this sense, the alternative aesthetic of the transformed wedding dresses combines art with academic research to generate broad creative understandings in relation to critical issues.

Dress as a Lived Experience

In order to fully comprehend the connotations that wedding dresses have in women's lives, we need to acknowledge them as a lived experience, and to consider their relationship to our female bodies as a social entity, recognizing them as "dresses-in-use, dresses embodied, dresses worn" (Weber and Mitchell, 2004, p. 6), rather than as a concept or a historical object to be analyzed. Like many women artists, the participants of this project revised and experienced through their own bodies the different ways in which their identity is formed and expressed (St-Gelais, 2012, p. 70). Collectively transformed and worn as art, wedding dresses reproduce women's experiences with marriage, but also

become experiences in and of themselves. Thus, this research-creation's collaborative and participative aspects bring original insights to the project, and its aesthetic qualities enable us to share these insights with other people and disciplines. It expands the possibilities for art within academic research by considering the manners in which the art work was produced, shared and interpreted (Clover, 2011; Helguera, 2011; Rose, 2001).

Participation is perceived by the collaborators of this research-creation as one of the main values of this project. Anne, for example, deeply appreciated having a forum to discuss gender stereotypes, which allowed her to reflect on the ways in which traditional gender roles have changed over time from bride to homemaker. As an immigrant, Carmen felt empowered by being part of a collective project that brings people together like this. She realized that she is "not alone" (2013) in thinking that women's roles are still quite restrictive, regardless of nationality or age. Recognizing her participation as a positive experience, Claudia realizes how important it is to discuss these topics. Daniela expanded her notion of marriage not only by transforming her dress but also through the collaborative aspect of the project, which allowed her to see and share the processes of other women. Denisse thought about her relationship in different ways and collaborated with her partner to choose an effective way of representing it. Desirée broadened her notion of marriage by examining her own relationship and considering the ideas of the other participants. She thinks that her participation in this project helped her to understand the reality of other women and to symbolically change stereotypical notions of femininity through dress. Similarly, Flavia recognizes her experience was quite positive: she enjoyed working collaboratively, and in analyzing her relationship she learned to appreciate it more. Gina's awareness of the relatively undefined social role she plays in her same-sex marriage was reinforced by her participation. She believes that this project functions as a site of empowerment and resistance to gender stereotypes, as it successfully stimulates people's emotions, ideas and thoughts. Lee thinks this project allowed her to more clearly recognize her conflicting feelings about traditional

female roles. Through collaboration, reflection and sharing of ideas, she believes these roles can be questioned and reconfigured in a lasting way that reproduces slower but more profound changes within society. For Nati, this project was like participating in a forum about gender with other women. It helped her to develop a better comprehension of her identity as a wife and the roles that she and her family play. Norma also defined and materialized some of the feelings she has towards her marriage and her family, learning through a process involving self-reflection as well as the experiences of other women. It was a valuable experience for Paula as well, not only for the personal reflections that she made but because she was able to meet a supportive group of women with whom she was able to share these reflections. Participating in this project allowed Sara to better perceive her identity as a wife: she realizes that women experience both losses and gains when they marry. She felt free and relaxed, in sharp contrast to the stress and anxiety she felt when she married as a woman in Iran. Rosa believes that collaborative projects like this can help to combat gender stereotypes, as many women can identify themselves within these images, reflecting and reaffirming their own ideals of womanhood. Moreover, she believes men also stand to gain something from this series of pictures; by reflecting on the concepts carried by the wedding dress, they can "find a place for themselves between those garments"[58] (Rosa, 2013). Similarly, Zacy believes that this project's potential as a site of learning could be stronger if men were also able to participate by transforming a dress or a tuxedo. Her participation allowed her to uncover the social demands placed upon women in marriage by hiding that which is meant to be displayed and showing instead the dress' usually concealed "otherness" (2013).

Despite the different perspectives of their roles in marriage or their learning experiences, all of the participants found that the collaborative aspect of this project was critical to generate awareness of our personal and social situation as wives or non-wives. Wedding dresses employed here as a visual

[58] "encontrar ellos mismos un lugar en esas ropas" (Rosa, 2013).

research method empowered participants to make personal reflections while also fostering a collective identity (Clover, 2005). This participatory research-creation project gave us an opportunity to trouble normalizing perceptions and traditional knowledge systems (Bourriaud, 2002), allowing us to redefine what it means to be a female partner and collaborator. The creative aspects of this artistic research functioned as data, method and product, and the resulting body of work was not only significant as research but also inclusive and significant as art.

In conclusion, this research-creation project allowed us to better understand, from both objective and subjective perspectives, the roles that wedding dresses play today in shaping women's identities as wives and female individuals in ways that are often inaccessible through purely theoretical approaches. Art became an effective medium through which to explore and shape the participants' ideas and personal feelings towards marriage, as well as its social and cultural significance (Sullivan, 2006). As an artistic practice and social research, this project allowed the participants to be both critical and creative. It functions as an organic process which, through creativity, reflection and problem formulation and solving, communicates significantly innovative meanings of wifehood to others (Leavy, 2015, p. 11). By jointly exploring our personal and social experiences as wives through imagination and intellect, we participated in a collective construction of new understandings of marriage (Sullivan, 2010). Thus, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* creatively explores and represents women's identities, validating their perspectives and experiences. As research-creation, the works of textile art created for this project enabled participants to partially develop and disseminate some knowledge in a flexible, collaborative and transformative way, and to participate in the elimination of gender inequity.

Research Question # 2. *How can collaborative art-making generate learning experiences related to our personal and social circumstances as women?*

Most of the participants feel represented by, or identify with, at least some of the photographs of other women wearing their dresses (Anne, Carmen, Claudia, Daniela, Denisse, Desirée, Flavia, Gina, Lee, Nati, Paula, Rosa, Sara and I), although some do not (Gen, Jessie, Tina and Norma). The majority of them attest to having developed new understandings in relation to our roles in marriage by participating in this research-creation (Anne, Carmen, Claudia, Daniela, Denisse, Desirée, Flavia, Gina, Lee, Nati, Norma, Paula, Rosa, Sara, Zacy and I). Those participants who do not think that through this research-creation project they developed a better understanding of their self-identities as wives, or intimate partners, feel it gave them an opportunity to express and share their roles within a marital relationship (Gen, Jessie and Tina).[59] The fact that some participants do not report having learned about their self identities through this project presents a challenge and opportunity I carry into the planning of new projects, described in the next section.

Although not all of the women fully relate with the other proposals, most of the participants responded affirmatively when asked if they thought that their dress's meaning changed or expanded by forming part of a collective art project.[60] Even those participants who do not personally identify with the

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[59] Gen appreciates every participant's perspective and opinion as unique, although she was surprised to see an overrepresentation of what she perceives as stereotypes in the final pictures. Jessie simply does not believe that art, in any of its forms, "instructs, makes meaning, helps create identity, works out personal problems, or should be a site of resistance" (2013). However, she thinks that "the coming together of women to work collaboratively" is where "the world changes" (Jessie, 2013). For Tina, the value of this experience is that it allowed her to re-examine and communicate her personal and social reality while also permitting her to evaluate the experiences of other women. Tina agrees that this project functions as a site of resistance to gender stereotypes because it talks about marriage and its implications in a "non-general, non-stereotypical, and nuanced manner" (2013).

[60] Anne, for example, concluded that many women share similar experiences in both successful and failed marriages. Carmen thinks that the series addresses, expands and complements gender concerns that affect all women. Claudia also feels represented by the other photographs and believes that all the ideas effectively complement each other. To Daniela, some of the pictures accurately represent elements from her own marital experience, each expanding the other's meaning. Flavia identifies with some of the other dresses as well and believes that her own dress' inclusion as part of a larger series makes it more interesting and rich. Gina identified with some of the images, although she felt more connected with the overarching project and what it represents as a whole. She found the project's collective approach, where women represented various different realities while making strong personal statements, particularly meaningful. Lee feels some connection to each of the other photographs, as all of them touch on aspects of identity and relationships that virtually all women experience at times. However, much like Gina, she thinks that the images are more effective as a collective whole in representing how women feel

other photographs agreed that their participation in this collaborative textile art project helped them develop a better understanding of women's role in marriage.[61] In this way, the participants' understanding of the collective meaning carried by their dresses provides "original insights unavailable to the individuals involved in any one story, but that become apparent when the set is viewed as a whole" (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002, p. 243), becoming a rich site for artistic investigation (Desai, 2002).

Darlene Clover, a Professor at the University of Victoria specializing in Feminist, Non-formal and Arts-based Adult Education, argues that the arts can function within feminist education as a critical practice of learning and meaning-making, confronting normative patriarchal conventions such as gender stereotypes (2011). In this sense, projects like *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* can be used to resist inequitable knowledge patterns and power relations through art. Clover believes that despite their challenges—as not everyone likes to work collectively or finds it easy to focus solely on the process and not on the aesthetic result—collaborative practices allow trust and collective identity to emerge, thus empowering participants. Bishop agrees that socially collaborative art projects, while possibly uncomfortable, exploitative or confusing, have a potential to invite both their audience and participants to "confront darker, more painfully complicated considerations of our predicament"

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about relationships, marriage, motherhood and self-identity. Nati feels connected to the series of pictures and agrees that each photograph's capacity of expression is strengthened by being part of a collective, becoming an evocative mosaic of visual texts. Paula also identifies with some aspects of the other pictures, which she interprets as being representative of different moments in a couple's life. At the same time, she sees marriage as such a personal thing that it is difficult to relate completely with any of them. Rosa also relates with the images of the other dresses. She believes that her dress synthesises many of the others and its meaning is more effective when seen alongside them, as they collect and represent diverse emotional experiences and female roles. Sara finds both differences and similarities between her dress and the others, as her dress shows the responsibilities and the losses she confronts in her marriage, expanding on the series' main ideas.

[61] Denisse appreciates the implications of most of the pictures and even felt genuinely touched by some of them. Desirée also thinks that the meaning of her dress, although completely different from the others, benefits greatly from being part of a series. Participating in this project allowed Gen to realize how many women continue to struggle with gender stereotypes, which was a surprise for her, as she saw many commonplaces which she thought "we were done with," although she doesn't specify which ones (Gen 2013). Jessie does not completely relate with the other pictures, and while she does not believe that art itself can change the world, she does think that the collaborative aspect of projects like this can improve it. Norma understands and appreciates the meanings of the other women's transformed dresses but does not identify with them, as she considers each marriage a unique experience. To her, the pictures represent different aspects of what it means to be married in the 21st century, as current women's experiences, challenges and expectations seem to be more complex than in previous generations. Tina also feels that each photograph represents a personal narrative and experience, and while she does not feel that any of the photographs adequately represent her own experience, she can identify to a certain degree with their narrative.

(2006b, p. 183). While in participative and collaborative art projects artists tend to prioritize the interactive aspect of participants' experiences over the physical elements of the resulting art, this project was always intended to present the experience through engaging images, as wedding photography does. Participants were actively involved in the art-making process to "restore and realise a communal, collective space of shared social engagement." (Bishop, 2011, p. 275).

This research-creation project allowed us to understand the importance that collective art-making has in generating learning experiences related to our personal and social circumstances as women by elaborating on new meanings together (Bourriaud, 2002) and responding to the needs of our community through art (Clover, 2005, p. 635). By utilizing participatory and collaborative formats, women's experiences expand our understanding of gender roles in couple relationships and of what art can do to contribute to our understanding. This project allowed us to recognize the roles that wedding dresses play in shaping women's identities as wives and female individuals today and also permitted us to collaboratively challenge them. We took on the dress's power and choose to perform through it in a way that resists the restrictions imposed on our bodies and identities by the institutions it represents. Because "the most important day in our lives should be the day we make this a better world for all who live here" (Ingraham, 2008, p.235), *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* considers the real affective dimension of human relations. It adds nuanced, personalized understandings of marriage in all its complexities. Moreover, the challenges and also possibilities of this research-creation allowed us to identify that which is expected from us as women and acknowledge what really matters to each one of us as individuals. Each participant's dress conveys concepts that complement and expand upon those of other dresses, creatively examining the connections (threads), tendencies (trends) and dangers (threats) that marriage, friendship and other close relationships contribute to women's lives today, generating new understandings that help us to resist or embrace them.

In answer to Bishop's question regarding our relationship to the world and to one other—"what types of relations are being produced, for whom, and why?" (2004)—together we produced meaningful and thoughtful relations. All of the participants emphasize the importance of collaborating and sharing joyful moments of making art with other women, many of whom were friends. Research involving friends provides the project with "an ethic of friendship, a stance of hope, caring, justice, even love" (Tillmann, 2015, p. 8). I also believe that working with other people in this project made the experience much more enjoyable, significant and representative. We were not only participating in an academic art project and collaborating with each other; we were also sharing and providing each other with company and creating an opportunity for personal and social growth. In our time together, we explored ideas, talked them over, developed creative responses, reinvented ourselves and supported each other through this process. This collaborative process strengthened our friendships and sense of community. Together we explored the influence of previous knowledge and challenged the constraining elements of marriage. We generated a meaningful learning experience, delineated by our own interests and necessities, which considered our social contexts and their implications in our lives (Buffington & Lai, 2011).

Learning through Dress

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress deepens our understanding of gender roles in marriage, collaborative art practices and of research-creation by inviting us to rethink what it means to be not only a wife and a woman, but also an artist and an educator today. This research-creation project allowed us to produce broad meanings by transforming wedding dresses, to reproduce our experiences by wearing the transformed gowns, and to transmit our thoughts through the photographic fabric prints and through this dissertation. Clothes were used in this research-creation project to explore personal identities based on individual stories and to generate different understandings of the social components of identity based on "the wearer's view" (Weber & Mitchell,

2004, p. 5). Recognizing dress as an effective method of inquiry into identity processes, this project incorporates participants' experiences and creativity through the images we collectively generated. The series of pictures resulting from this research-creation project are simultaneously informed by, and inserted into, contemporary visual culture "saturated with the everyday and with talk, with meaning and with affect" (Rose, 2014, p. 18). Taking different women's voices into consideration, this work includes several perspectives, respecting diversity and constructing community to make the participants active agents in their own learning.

As mentioned in Chapter Five, the dress that I made for this project represents the complexities inherent in being a practicing artist and mother pursuing doctoral studies in a foreign country, and in a language that is not my own. I believe that not only my dress, but this whole project explores and reflects this conflict, while also becoming my way of creatively dealing with it. While it is a privilege to be a doctoral student, as academia has provided me with the unique opportunity to challenge and develop my knowledge in an inspiring environment, it has also been difficult.[62] On the one hand, I have learned to see things differently, acquiring new understandings and innovative skills. This experience has provided an ideal context for meeting new, supportive and exciting people, from whom I have learned a lot, exchanging ideas and collaborating in many significant ways both inside and outside academia. But on the other hand, it has also been a difficult experience, involving a lot of stress and the need to build new competencies has sometimes taken me away from the things that really mattered to me before starting graduate studies. Sometimes, I have found myself feeling quite misplaced, losing confidence in the way I personally perceive and understand the reality around me. Moreover, being a full-time student with a family leaves me with very little time to invest into my own creative processes

[62] Pursuing a graduate degree can be physically, emotionally and psychologically challenging. According to a 2006 UC Berkeley survey, almost half of graduate students reported having an emotional or stress-related problem that significantly affected their emotional wellbeing and/or academic performance. These experiences were even worse for international students and mostly for women (Hyun et al, 2006).

and art-making. This has been one of hardest aspects of being an artist in academia, as I am accustomed to gathering my thoughts through my art practice. Without it, I start losing touch with my sense of awareness and natural curiosity. This doctoral research-creation project became my creative form of dealing with this issue, allowing me to incorporate my way of knowing as an artist and my community into my work, complementing academic research with artistic creativity. By involving my colleagues, my friends and my family in my research through my artwork, I generated creative opportunities for developing knowledge through collaboration, enjoyment and imagination. In this way, this research-creation project allowed me to stitch together my different identities, keeping them compartmentalized but relying on them to prevent me from falling apart, just like the garments that make up my dress.

One of the reasons I work with clothes as an artist is because, beyond their aesthetic qualities, their open meanings and discursive accessibility allow for flexible, diverse and rich interpretations. I use dress as an artistic strategy in this research-creation project to develop new meanings and accessible ways of exploring and sharing them. This experience taught me to validate my own knowledge and form of knowing, while allowing other women to do the same through collaborative textile art-making processes. Similar to what Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule describe in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (1986), with this research-creation project I intend to understand how women know what they know, and how their understandings affect their perception of the world and of themselves. By allowing women to collaboratively develop and cultivate knowledge from their own experiences through dress and personal narratives, we are not only making art, but participating in the creation of new pedagogical practices. This research-creation project allowed us to learn from each other at every stage, using creativity, problem-solving and collaboration in thinking by doing.

After almost three years of working with the participants on their dresses and pictures, this research-creation project has already evolved into a number of different works that apply much of the knowledge I have gathered through this project. I created some artworks that closely relate to it, just one of which I will highlight

here. *Displaced* (2014)[63] consisted of several brides performing through their transformed dresses in diverse public spaces. It was presented as part of Art Souterrain, a winter festival of artworks in Montreal's linked underground malls, for three nights at different locations throughout Montreal. It involved several participants of this doctoral research as well as other women with specifically performative proposals conceived for this event. This new project was based on the reflections I had made about *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress*, and on some of the participants' reflections on how dresses relate to nomadic bodies and places, more than stable identities. Based on this project's outcomes, it was specifically concerned with notions of participation and place, considering the context in which the dresses were worn and how it affected their significance as well as the participants' identities by being together.

Figure 143. *Displaced* (2014), by María Ezcurra. Place des Arts, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Enrique Uranga

[63] *Displaced* (2014) was first performed on March 1st at Place Bonaventure with the collaboration of Amanda Ruíz, Anne Pilon, Daniela Ortíz, Dani Valdovinos, Danielle Maither, Flavia Hevia, Jessica Hart, Leigh Cline, Lidoly Chávez, Lina Moreno, María Natividad Vega, and Nati Valdovinos. It was presented as part of the Nuit Blanche—among many other live pieces—where we were received as performance artists and had a great amount of interaction with visitors. We performed it again on March 8th, commemorating Women's Day, in Place des Arts with Daniela Valdovinos, Danielle Maither, Denisse Horcasitas, Jennifer Wicks, Jessie Hart, Lee Lapaix, Leigh Cline, María Natividad Vega, Nati Valdovinos, and Petra Hoss. We were placed in a hall where people were passing by, receiving curious approaches and positive comments but not much of an active response from the passersby. Our third performance was at the Eaton Center, on March 16th with the help of Daniela Valdovinos, Danielle Maither, Denisse Horcasitas, Jennifer Wicks, Jessie Hart, Lee Lapaix, Leigh Cline, María Natividad Vega, Nati Valdovinos and Petra Hoss, where people was not expecting to see art, they were unsure as to how to interpret out presence there. We were intended to be critical without being judgemental, but mostly, to recreate human relation in a place conceived mostly to consume.

Figure 144. *Displaced* (2014), by María Ezcurra. Eaton Centre, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Pedro Orozco

Figure 145. *Displaced* (2014), by María Ezcurra. Eaton Centre, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Pedro Orozco

Allowing the space around us and the reactions and interactions it generated to shape the piece was a meaningful and empowering experience for all of us. *Displaced*'s main significance, however, was that unlike this research-creation project, it gave us the opportunity to perform together. We exposed ourselves, likely feeling vulnerable as individuals, though not more so than we typically do performing as women in daily social situations.

At the same time, as a group we felt connected, protected, excited and empowered, learning from the experience and from each other. We learned a lot from our different and even opposing approaches through creative processes, generating awareness among visitors too. Focused on the influence that fashion has on women's everyday lives, with *Displaced* we creatively reinterpreted and challenged popular images of women as brides, actively involving others in a shared process of redefining wedding dresses and gender roles.

Figure 146. *Displaced* (2014), by María Ezcurra. Place Bonaventure, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Figure 147. *Displaced* (2014), by María Ezcurra. Place Bonaventure, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Enrique Uranga

Further, as an artist, researcher and teacher, I really enjoy developing creative projects in different contexts by involving others in the process. I believe that collaborative art practices allow to make visible the invisible, complementing theoretical thinking with material and visual understandings to generate innovative learning experiences. I have learned to read and understand diverse visual, material and verbal texts, often functioning as a translator of sorts. This project has allowed me to value and even validate my artistic appreciation of things, complementing them with a more rational evaluation, in an academic setting. In fact, the experience of pursuing this research-creation project has allowed me to become involved in academia in meaningful creative ways, not as a teacher or researcher, but as an artist. Since the summer of 2015, I have been working as an Artist-in-Residence at McGill University, where I have developed a range of activities that stem from my own creative and academic practices to collaboratively explore the multifaceted practices of art within the Department of Integrated Studies in Education (DISE). Supported by the P. Lantz Initiative for Excellence in Education & the Arts (http://knowledge-through-the-arts.ca), this experience has allowed me to complement my artistic practice with the knowledge I have of academia and with the awareness I have acquired after teaching art for over 15 years on multiple levels. My artwork there is shaped by the needs and interests of the faculty and students, but also by my own experience as a teacher, graduate student and researcher, making it an enjoyable, significant and educative experience for me as well. One of the first projects I developed was *c* (2015), a series of pictures of objects that represent DISE's Faculty teaching or research practices in symbolic and meaningful ways. It not only allowed me to document and share visual representations of what people are doing at DISE, but also to personally meet each one of them to understand their interests and talk about the possibility of future collaborations. These encounters led me to a series of meaningful creative collaborations with DISE's faculty members to integrate art activities into their courses in order to deepen the learning experience while providing alternative opportunities for reflection, imagination and innovation. I am currently working on projects including

the *Tree of Life* (2015-2016), an ongoing participatory drawing made by outlining the silhouettes of people from the Faculty of Education, creating a community out of a series of individualities, and *Growing Awareness,* a collaborative art project that integrates Indigenous knowledge and student's personal interests to grow together new and meaningful relations into the Faculty of Education. I also started hosting an *Art Hive*[64] (http://www.arthives.org) in September 2015. It is McGill's first Art Hive, held in a non-renovated wide space in the Education Curriculum Resources Centre. I hold the Art Hive there on Wednesdays, making art supplies available to everyone, while also working on several creative projects, helping students and professors to develop a wide range of art projects, and building community ties. Since starting the Art Hive, this space has become an important artistic place for the Faculty of Education, functioning as an exhibition space, a meeting place, and creative laboratory.

Figure 148. DISE's *Art Hive* (2015), McGill University, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

[64] The Art Hives are a network of spaces and organizational structures led by Dr. Janis Timm-Bottos, which function as inclusive, welcoming art spaces "for dialogue, skill sharing, and art-making between people of differing socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and abilities" across Canada (http://arthives.org).

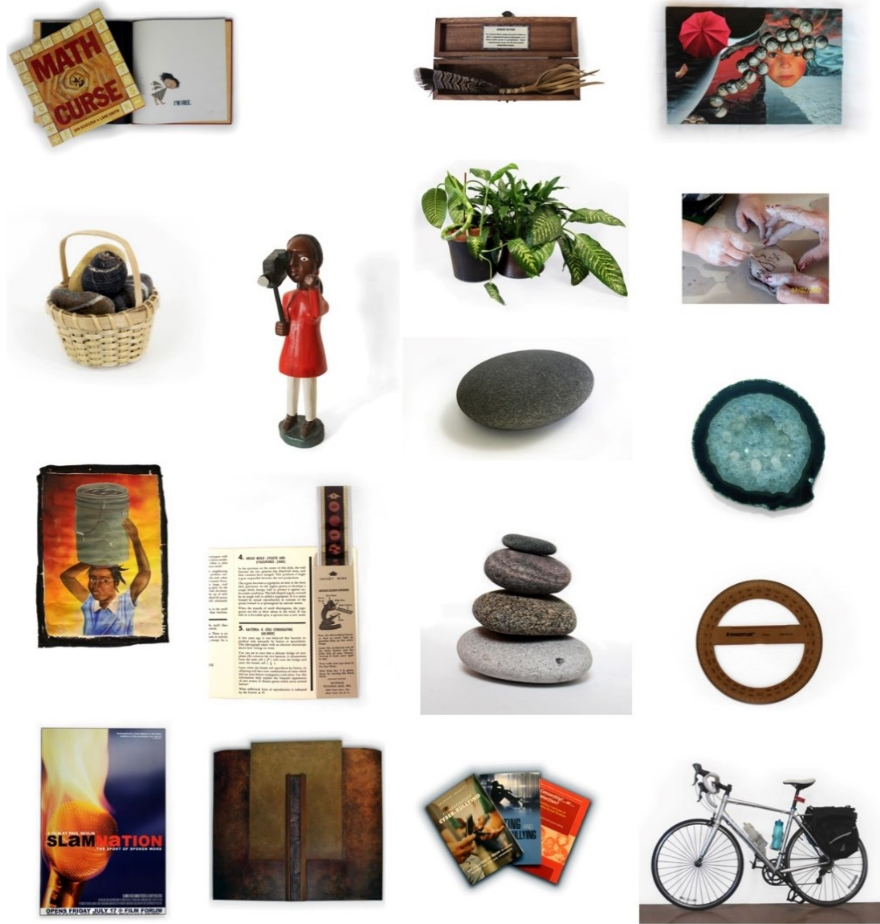

Figure 149 *Objectively Subjective* (2015), McGill University, Montreal, Canada
Photos by Maria Ezcurra

Figure 150. DISE's *Art Hive* (2015), McGill University, Montreal, Canada
Photo by Maria Ezcurra

These are just two of the artistic initiatives I've undertaken since completing the visual work of this dissertation project, chosen to highlight particular aspects of my own learning. In relation to art education, this project creatively represents women's notions of marriage, which are embodied in the transformed dresses and presented as photographs that have been shared in several art exhibitions, academic conferences, artist talks and the Internet. It functions not only as art, but also as research, in that it considers and validates the differing approaches to knowledge involved in its making. These include: the individual reflections that each participant made by artistically transforming a dress; the shared learning that took place by being part of a group of people creatively working together; the written thoughts of each participant about her individual participation and group collaboration and the reflections that I developed in this text of the whole process. By actively incorporating participants' verbal reflections into the work, rather than only considering their material and visual thinking, I not only gained more information about their notions of marriage, but also understood what they actually learned by creatively reflecting upon marriage through collaborative art practices. As research-creation, this project allowed me to obtain a dual knowledge: it permitted me to explore through art women's understandings of the roles wedding dresses play in shaping their identities; and made me aware of the importance that collaborative art practices have in generating learning experiences. Moreover, collaboration in this research-creation project gave us the opportunity to share, experiment and construct knowledge together, contributing to individual awareness, collective transformation and social improvement through the arts.

Limitations of the Study

It is important to acknowledge this study's limitations. Centered on a fairly small sample of women living in Montreal, this research-creation project is not representative of a broader population. The objective of the research was to creatively and collaboratively explore women's experiences and

notions of marriage, which was accomplished. However, while the study considered voices of white women and Latin-American women like me, it could be improved by incorporating the experiences and ideas of a greater diversity of married and unmarried women, and even men. It could also be enriched by considering the voices of more Latin American scholars. Collaboration is another aspect of the research with many strengths—the sharing of ideas, interaction with others, exposure to multiple perspectives, increased productivity, enjoyment, support and the building of relationships—but also involves many limitations—presenting individual differences, inequity, the substantial amount of time/effort required, participants' losing motivation, the need to resolve conflicts, control over the quality of the final product and authorship as potential problems (Violanti, 2000). Additionally, not all participants learned something through the individual art making processes, as I had anticipated. Still, the pedagogical aspect of this study, for them, arose from the collaborative practices that offered new understandings related to other women's circumstances and views, and from participating in a shared production of knowledge. Another limitation was the big amount data I had to revise for this study. While I believe this project gained diversity by incorporating many voices, this also involved a lot of work that significantly slowed the writing process. I also believe that creative processes can be limited in academia by university regulations, facilities and approaches to art. These restrictions, however, can trigger new artistic strategies that may eventually become new research methodologies.

Future Research

There are several ideas that I briefly considered for this dissertation but would prefer to further develop in future research-creation projects, including other people's involvement in the validation of personal thoughts and experiences to produce new forms of knowledge acquisition. For example, I would like to explore the role of motherhood in socialization processes. To this end, I could utilize dress to represent our own experiences as both mothers and daughters to understand how motherhood-

related knowledge is generated, transmitted and applied. Additionally, this study does not consider the fact that many of the participants are new immigrants in Canada. Future research would benefit from exploring and representing through art the strategies used by displaced people to integrate themselves to—or protect themselves against—new and unknown places, situations and relations. I would also like to work on a more inclusive project in which men's views and experiences in marriage and close relationships are considered and directly included in the artwork and the research. Several participants mentioned this, and I think that it is important to have men's voices included in this project. Men ought to be considered "as allies in the struggle for change" (Clover, 2011). We should work together to "un-do" traditional concepts of wife, allowing the term to become gender-neutral, "as it captures all of the domestic duties and emotional support that two partners must be willing to share" (Kingston, 2004). This re-definition necessitates looking at women and men as human beings, both in marriage and in society at large. In this sense, I think this research can be extended by looking more deeply into the exploitative process of making wedding dresses (Ingraham, 2008a) and clothes in general.

Also, while this project considers new technologies (it began and continues on the Internet via open-access to this dissertation and my own artist website), it is important to consider what digital technologies might offer in future research. Emerging from "a collective desire to create new areas of conviviality and introduce new types of transaction with regard to the cultural object" (Bourriaud, 2002, p.26), the Internet is a cultural nexus that implicates complex issues of access, visibility and privilege. On the one hand, the creation of social knowledge that the Internet enables can be used to reproduce dominant social orders (Ingraham, 2008a), but on the other hand it can also be used to resist them by disrupting social standardization (Robertson & McDaniel, 2010). This is why I uploaded the final series of pictures on my web site, and I believe that other projects can take similarly fruitful advantage of such innovative tools.

Final Thoughts

Because in *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* the personal is connected to both art and education, and this project shows that different forms of pedagogy seem to profoundly affect our personal life, I think it is not only valid but important to mention that on a personal level this project has been truly fulfilling in many ways. It brought me closer to the participating women, strengthening our friendship through a sense of mutual understanding, empathy and camaraderie while allowing us to better appreciate the social roles we choose to play. It has also strengthened my bond with Pedro, my partner, on many levels. It gave us an opportunity to engage in numerous meaningful conversations about the roles each of us play in our relationship and to reflect through art on how these roles affect us on a daily basis, allowing us to improve it. When I look at the visual, material and performative representation of my family life in my picture, and somehow in the whole project, I realize that the only way I could have pursued a PhD in a foreign country with two children while still practicing art was with the equitable and understanding support of Pedro. He has enjoyed the pleasures of our family life and suffered its demands as much as I have, continually redefining couplehood and negotiating our own identities as partners. Together we have learned to resist the restrictive expectations of marriage through commitment, love and a support that goes beyond institutional contracts. In this sense, this project also became the perfect opportunity to talk with our children about the threats of traditional gender roles. By having them involved in this project, they became more aware of the implications that normative social stereotypes have in our lives. We engaged in rich dialogues on ways to challenge them to participate in the creation of a fairer reality, as a counterbalance to the information they constantly receive through media and popular visual culture. Lastly, but definitely not least, this project initiated a beautiful love story between two very good friends of mine. Lee and Enrique—a participant and photographer, respectively—met in the course of this

project and are now a couple. Thus, this is not only about art or research anymore, but about meaningful human relations and life itself.

Marriage, in addition to being an institution, is a personal and shared experience that involves not only emotional links between a couple, but also among the people close to them. Love is a complex concept that cannot merely be reduced to an act between two individuals. Love in this project, like education, is also about collaboration, support, inclusion and equality. For hooks (2000), love takes on many forms: romance, friendship, empathy and community. I believe that by changing the way we think about love we can improve not only our own relationships, but also our broader culture. Understanding feminism as a form of love, hooks makes the case that “there can be no love without justice” (2000, p. 104). This argument is particularly relevant to this research, given that in current societies—which place heterosexual romantic love as the primary relationship in a person’s life—the focus on marriage has damaged people’s sense of community. Only by confronting romance will we manage to see what it conceals. Thus, by collaboratively questioning through art the heteronormative, patriarchal and commercial interests hidden behind the veil of romantic love in Western societies, we have become aware of how their affective dimension is institutionally used to control and shape women’s identities (Geller, 2001; Cele & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a).

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and strong advocate of critical pedagogy, claimed that “Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage” (1973, p. 38). In his well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), he developed a theory of education incorporating love as a necessary requirement to pursuit full humanity. For him “It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving in. In short it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well-thought-out capacity to love” (1998, p. 42). This project works upon Freire’s (1974), hooks’ (2000) and Ingraham’s (2008a) notions of love, through which communities of friends, extended family, collaborators or educators can empower women beyond the romantic notion of a

partner. It shows that working in collaboration with others can provide a context for social and personal learning and growth, allowing participants to creatively explore their experiences together and to discuss and develop new ideas. Through collaboration, inclusion, equality and empathy, this project values human relationships and personal experiences to transform oppressive ideologies. Thus, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* considers love not only as our subject of study but as a strategy to collaboratively create and perform knowledge in ways that allow for compassion, awareness and humanization through art-education.

Chapter Eight
Conclusions

Through collaborative, ethnographic and research-creation methods, we explored how visual popular culture has appropriated the white dress as a stereotypical symbol of the bride's role in the wedding ceremony, affecting her identity as a wife and woman in general. By turning the wedding dress into a visual and material representation of its own problematic constructions (Teunissen, 2009), the 18 participants and I weaved an inclusive, flexible and collective tapestry of knowledge. We collaboratively generated new understandings about the ways informal pedagogies produce and encourage ambiguous and contradictory meanings that affect women's learning processes and influence our identities and roles in marital relationships and other social interactions. Based on "Trash the Dress" wedding photography and its tendency to objectify and even attack women, we examined the social structures, relations and identities promoted by white weddings. We altered the ways in which conventional women's roles are formally and informally taught to us through tradition and popular visual culture, collaboratively re-evaluating, negotiating and representing ourselves as wives or non-wives by creatively embodying alternative perspectives that represented the roles we actually play in close relationships.

As discussed in this text, wedding dresses—closely related to the institution of marriage and the wedding complex—support commercial interests and reproduce patriarchal, heterosexist, racist and classist ideals (Geller, 2001, Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002; Otnes & Pleck, 2003; Ingraham, 2008a; White, 2012). Because these white gowns do not usually account for the actual hopes, beliefs and experiences of the bride, we negotiated and created new understandings of gender roles by involving love, imagination, transformation, celebration, empathy and community as part of the research process. The significance of this project resides in the fact that it is made by women, and not just for or about women, and that it truthfully represents participants' individual expectations and notions of marriage. As this research-creation demonstrates, our identities as adult women are much broader and more complex than that of

nurturing, domestic and loving wives. The resulting fabric prints present diverse, divided, fluid and deeply personal female identities, questioning or outright rejecting traditional notions of passivity and submission enforced by the institution of marriage. This project reveals that while love and commitment are perceived as the two key aspects of a marriage, concepts of change, fragmentation, immobility, family, domesticity and confinement play an equally large role. Moreover, through this creative process, we were able to recognize the heterosexual structures of power behind the institution of marriage while acquiring the necessary tools to represent, challenge and change them. Thus, by creating participative responses to popular representations of brides, we were able to actively reject their imposition on our bodies and lives while validating other forms of being together. Based on a relatively small sample of participants living in Montreal, this research-creation project does not present itself as necessarily representative of a broader population, but it nonetheless reflects how women experience white wedding dresses as the norm even in a society where marriage has become an option.

Informed by the social context of its participants, *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* critically examines and ultimately subverts the ways in which gender and place interact with dress (Crane, 2000; Kawamura, 2011; Teunissen, 2009). More often than normative, fixed and restrictive categories, the project's textile artworks show fragmented, heterogeneous and unique identities. They comprise a collective effort to understand restrictive social norms carried by traditional wedding imagery and the stereotypical gender roles that it supports, taking advantage of the symbolic, expressive and creative potential of dress as art and education. While this study relies on white gowns, in the end this is not a research about weddings, or even about dresses. The focus of this research-creation is not so much on fashion as it is on dress as an experienced knowledge. In it, the white gown is a performative piece rather than merely an object of visual or even material culture. Performativity and agency are central in this work to understand the ways in which our gendered bodies are socially produced and individually signified through dress. The process of wearing and photographing the

transformed dresses inspired and empowered the participants, and through art validated our own experiences as meaningful. The collective awareness displayed in the final series of textile prints allowed us to understand our circumstances and our relationships with others in personal and significant ways. Within the project's expanded scope, this research enabled participants to find commonalities through the shared activity of transforming a dress. Moreover, by offering us the opportunity to work collaboratively with friends, it strengthened our bond and sense of community, empowering us to challenge normative and constraining social practices in ways that were significant for us. This project considers each of our relationships with our partners but also incorporates our supportive relationships amongst ourselves and our community. In this way, it reflects and generates alternative social structures relating as much to life as to art and research. Working together not only required personal reflections on marriage, but a shared reflection of our social interactions, generating new understandings about wifehood as well as collaboration and participation in art.

The significance of *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* resides in that it allowed participants to experience the research-creation inquiry in both personal and social contexts, responding creatively through visual, material and embodied thinking. Conceptualizing and representing our experiences through dress and text, we developed new understandings about close relationships and community through imagination and intellect. By incorporating original creative strategies, our art allowed us to consider inventive exploratory perspectives to develop new pedagogical approaches and share our findings with others. This work explores, represents and validates women's ideas and experiences. It develops and disseminates knowledge in flexible, collaborative and transformative ways, contributing to a deeply needed counteraction to the sexism and gender inequality that still prevails in the wedding industry, in traditional marriage and in Western society at large. We furthered awareness about stereotypical notions of brides and wives by critically embodying the wedding dress and thus reduced its damaging effects on our lives. In this way, this research-creation offered us the opportunity

to consider, represent, share and even change traditional, restricting and heteronormative gender roles in marriage and in society at large. Understanding the wedding gown's potential as an empowering experience, we subverted stereotypical identities by presenting diverse and reinvented femininities through our transformed dresses, using our bodies as sites of learning. The power of the wedding dress was acknowledged but also challenged as we critically examined its embodiment, reproducing women's real experiences in close relationships while also generating new understandings and resisting dominant conceptions of femininity. Consequently, art as research allowed us to creatively consider *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* in regards to women's lives so as to make informed and meaningful decisions about what we want to weave in our shared social fabric.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress: A Collaborative, Studio-based Dissertation

A project by Maria Ezcurra

Questions for participants:

After having worn and seen the photographs of your transformed dress, I would like you to write an individual response to this experience (preferably in English, although Spanish is also fine). Although this text is a free exercise, and can be written in any form you like, it needs to be clear, as it will be used for the dissertation's research. It should contemplate the following questions:

1. Briefly explain your original idea for transforming a wedding dress. If possible, talk about what implicates for you to be married today? What does the white wedding dress mean to you? In what way does it resemble or respond to TTD wedding photography?

2. Was it based on your personal marital experience, or was it more like a social comment on the institution of marriage?

3. Do you think that this idea is it reflected in your final picture? Why?

4. Do you feel represented by you transformed dress? Why?

5. Do you feel represented by the photograph of you wearing the dress? Why?

6. Do you feel represented by, or identified with, the photographs of other women wearing their dresses? Why?

7. Do you think that your dress' meaning changes or expands by being part of a collective art project that involves other women's ideas?

8. Do you think that you learned something new from your personal or your social reality by participating in this project?

9. How does your participation in this collaborative textile and performative art practice enable a better understanding of your own self-identity and your role within a marital relationship?

10. Please add any additional comment that you feel should be included in this research.