

Animal Bodies: Woman/Nonhuman Links and the Bride

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Abstract

A case study of images found in popular American bridal magazines demonstrates how women's and nonhuman animals' bodies are linked. This linking is evident in images that pair brides with animals, animal parts, or items that refer to animals. Of a convenient sample, 79.4 percent of images that contained such links paired the bride with birds and/or feathers. An analysis of images shows that, when paired with the bird, the bride is linked to a dominated and controlled species. As extensions of nature and symbols of the transcendent, birds also posit and affirm the bride's supposed fertility and ethereality. Unfortunately, such proscriptive gender categories insist that ideal woman, when imagined as bride, is valued for her farmability, or reproductive capabilities, while at the same time associate her with a mystical yet unattainable femininity. The bridal industry is an example of one of the many stages on which speciesism and sexism function in concert to link women's and animals' bodies.

Key Words: bride, animals, birds, feathers, fertility, ethereality

1. Introduction

Images found in bridal magazines demonstrate how women's and nonhuman animals' bodies are linked. At times, part of the construction of the bride involves the incorporation of the denigrated animal that functions to create and affirm her as an ethereal and farmable woman.

Much feminist scholarship in this area focuses on how women and animal links function to devalue, animalize, and degrade either the woman or both the woman and nonhuman. The woman is aligned with a species that has been conquered again and again, yet because our society is sexist and speciesist, these associations with women and animals remain largely unquestioned. Practices such as the wearing of furs and feathers are based on these associations; they reflect existing ideologies, and because they are familiar, they are successfully marketed and capitalized upon in the bridal industry. Traditionally, the wedding has been a place of public display of gender difference, and the bride's femininity has been stressed through the piling on of various fancy, feminine accoutrements such as a white dress, high heels, a flower bouquet, manicured and pedicured nails, and a veil or hairpiece. The process of linking animals with the bride not only differentiates the bride from the groom, but also plays a vital role in the presentation of the bride as an ideal woman within the prevailing patriarchal framework. The physical linking of animals with the bride's body demonstrates her associations with nature and affirms her supposed ethereality. Further, this linking affirms the bride's ability to reproduce—or, in other words, her farmability (a concept largely developed by Jennifer McWeeny). This study is important for those who desire to better understand the varying and complicated consequences that result from associating women with animals.

2. Review of Relevant Literature and Theory: Women, Nature, and Nonhuman Animals

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone De Beauvoir sets out to discover what has been made of what she calls “the human female” (37). The focus of many theorists who followed has been the relationship between the female body and nature. However, analyses of this relationship and the associations between women, nature, and the body have been refined, and many argue that this relationship is more accurate when understood as the link between women's and nonhuman animals' bodies. This category, nonhumans, includes sentient beings of all sorts, from insects to apes.

2.1 Women and Nonhuman Animals

The associations between women and nature are more accurate when understood as links between women's and specifically animals' bodies. Both women and animals are associated with devalued nature and the corporeal and are likely to be used to describe one another. I term this process of association or connection as "linking."

Marian Scholtmeijer, in "The Power of Otherness: Animals in Women's Fiction" (1995), details why it is important to see how women are specifically associated with animals and not simply all that the umbrella term "nature" encompasses. "The identification of women with nature and the inferior social status entailed by that identification has been reviewed and contested in ecofeminist literature," she writes. "The posited identification of women with animals represents a more substantial threat to women than identification with nature" (Scholtmeijer, 233). This is because nature is grandiose and a source for awe. It is that place where one can escape from the ills of modern society and, some argue, reconnect with the divine. At the same time, man is at constant battle with nature—tornadoes and tsunamis may leave one powerless at any moment. The theme of man versus nature illustrates that nature remains a threat in man's imagination. Surely nature is valued less than culture, but it remains a revered force.

Animals, on the other hand, are clearly viewed as inferior and have been successfully conquered by man. Certainly some animals such as the lion provide a livelier contest for man, but they too have been successfully hunted, caged, and displayed. It is these symbols of nature—the hunted, the caught, the displayed, the domesticated, the farmed, those exploited for their reproductive capabilities—with which women are associated. Thus, it is often the case that the linking of women with nonhumans is a pejorative act and serves to effectively degrade women more powerfully than linking women to the category of nature alone.

2.2 The Links

If, as Scholtmeijer argues, the linking of women with animals truly does pose more of a threat to women than identification with nature, then it is necessary to understand how these links manifest in cultural ideas and imagination. Here I will focus on three ways such linking occurs—through the linguistic, the visual, and the physical. Not entirely distinct, these three categories bleed into one another, and different ways of linking can and often do occur simultaneously. However, tracing these links may offer new ways of conceptualizing how sexism and speciesism function in concert and allow for a more extensive critique of patriarchal society.

In "So, is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" (1996), Sherry Ortner illuminates how language often gives voice to the relationship between nature and women. "Gender," she writes, "becomes a powerful language for talking about the great existential questions of nature and culture, while a language of nature and culture, when and if it is articulated, can become a powerful language for talking about gender, sexuality, and reproduction, not to mention power and helplessness, activity and passivity, and so forth" (Ortner, 179). Animals, when understood as components as nature, serve as a way to articulate and problematize female sexuality, to make invisible women, and to justify women's abuse.

Carol J. Adams provides a look at how gender, sexuality, and more specifically, nonhumans are linguistically linked. In *The Pornography of Meat* (2003) and *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), she elaborates on the ways linguistic links manifest via what, in she calls the principle of the *absent referent*. The *absent referent* is the unnamed subject (typically a woman) who is forgotten when ontologized and thus spoken of as a violable object (typically an animal). The result of a functioning *absent referent* is that the subject, or woman, is made invisible.

In *The Pornography of Meat*, Adams explains what happens when nonhuman descriptors are applied to women. "Exploitative language moves women and nonhumans down the Great Chain," she argues. "Women are called by the names of other beings who are not free to determine their own identity" (Adams, 31). Through linguistic linking with animals, woman's identity is subsumed into a more general category of devalued nonhumans.

Joan Dunayer, in "Sexist Words, Speciesist Roots" (1995), offers perhaps the most cogent explanation of the ways in which sexism and speciesism merge in language. For Dunayer, the application of terms for devalued animals labels women as inferior and justifies their abuse, especially when women are associated with those farmed animals exploited for their reproductive capabilities such as chicks, cows, bitches, etc.

In a discussion of the hen, Dunayer notes that “if hens were not held captive and treated as nothing more than bodies, their lives would not supply symbols for the lives of stifled and physically exploited women... The hen’s defaced image derives from her victimization” (13). She notes that like sexist language, speciesist language also legitimates and normalizes animal oppression, exploitation, and abuse.

Alice Echols, in “Nothing Distant About It: Women’s Liberation and Sixties Radicalism” (1994), tells the story of the 1968 Miss American Pageant in which liberationists protested the colonization of women’s bodies in the name of beauty. The protestors crowned a live sheep and “paraded it on the boardwalk to parody the way the contestants, and, by extension, all women, ‘are appraised and judged like animals at a county fair’” (Echols, 180). Though the use of an animal for human political gain may be rightfully viewed as exploitative, the activists highlighted the crucial truth that women and animals are also visually linked.

In *The Pornography of Meat*, Adams explores how women and animals are visually linked through pornographic objectification in advertising and in actual pornography. Through this process, women, present but made invisible, become consumable objects, or more pointedly, pieces of meat. Adams argues that envisioning women as consumable objects is central to our culture. She explains the consequences that result when women’s and animals’ bodies are used with and as visual proxies for one another. “Showing women with nonhumans or showing them *as* animals is one way to convey that women are animal-like, less than human, unruly, needing to be controlled,” she argues. “Placing them in positions of subservience is another. Implying bestiality, that women are having sex with an animal is another” (Adams, 46).

Adams further argues that the principle of the *absent referent* functions in what she calls *anthropornography*, or the depiction of animals as sexualized women and vice versa. Such substitution allows one body to stand-in for the other while disguising and justifying misogynistic ideas about women. Through *anthropornography*, it is the objectified and feminized animal (e.g. a pig wearing a bikini on a restaurant menu) or the animalized woman (e.g. a woman wearing a skimpy Halloween cat costume) rather than a respectable human subject who is mistreated. “Because women are not being depicted, no one is seen as being harmed and so no one has to be accountable,” Adams writes. “Everyone can enjoy the degradation of women without being honest about it” (Adams, 115). Again, the woman is made invisible, made absent, and is associated with the lesser world of the nonhuman.

After examining the linguistic and visual linking of women and nonhuman animals, it should come as no surprise that these groups are also physically linked. In “Woman-Battering and Harm to Animals” (1995), Adams demonstrates that woman-batterers often first harm the woman’s pet in an effort to warn the woman of punishment to come. The pet is placed in a proxy role and is forced to physically experience the degradation and devaluation the batterer feels towards the woman.

Jennifer McWeeny explains the physical links between women’s and animals’ bodies through what she calls corporeal exchangeability. In “The Reversible Flesh of Women and Nonhuman Animals: Thinking Connection and Difference in Feminist and Decolonial Ethics” (2012), she analyzes Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*. McWeeny notes that through a process she calls corporeal exchangeability, both the black female character and a goat experience their milk being stolen, and both are raped for the pleasure of the white male. They are similarly objectified and violated. Their flesh, McWeeny argues, is reversible, or subject to the same treatment because both bodies are viewed as farmable. McWeeny points to the interplay of speciesism and sexism when she writes that the fact that the black character is “...ontologized as a farmable object is enabled by our attitudes and practices towards animals and vice versa” (12).¹

¹ McWeeny makes the salient distinction that not all animals are equally objectified and equally linked. She discusses the work of Karen Davis, who, in “Thinking Like a Chicken: Farm Animals and the Feminine Connection” (1995), argues that men seek to emulate wild, liberated animals, while women are associated with domesticated farm animals. For Davis, it is because both women and domesticated animals’ bodies are reproductively exploited and managed that they are more likely to be linked. Linking is context-based, and like McWeeny, S. S. Riley in “Ecology Is a Sistah’s Issue Too” (1993), specifies that because of the exploitation of black women’s bodies under slavery and the resulting attitudes, the black woman is more often in a linked relationship with farmed animals, as both are viewed as accessible and able to be exploited. In *The Pornography of Meat*, Adams adds that people of color, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups are often associated with sexualized, seemingly ignorant, or dangerous animals, while white women are more likely to be linked with smooth, pink pigs. If a man is associated with a nonhuman, it is often an animal that is admired for its virility.

In conclusion, many theorists have demonstrated the negative consequences for women when linked with animals. I will now show how such linking functions in the American bridal industry.

3. Methodology and Material

In order to demonstrate how the larger phenomenon of linking occurs in the particular bridal context, I utilized the case study method of social research. By looking at a specific instance in which a wider phenomenon occurs, I aim to develop a better understanding of gender in the social world. In order to make sense of the use of animals in the bridal industry, however, I first used the systematic methods of content analysis to gather, code, and categorize my findings.

A convenient sample of images exhibits the links between women and animals. These images show animals, their body parts, or items that refer to nonhumans (such as bird cages) physically placed on or near brides. By looking at magazines created for traditional, heterosexual brides, I aim to trace how the industry presents the idealized bride. Specifically, I pay close attention to the bride's dress and accoutrements in order to decode gender messages meant for American women. I derived my data from two popular bridal magazines that are available to the general public and do not explicitly target a subset of the U.S. population: *Brides* (published monthly) and *Bridal Guide* (published bimonthly).

According to its website, *Brides* is the foremost media brand reaching engaged women; it has a print audience of 5.6 million and is the world's largest bridal magazine (2012). *Brides* is "for the woman who wants style and substance in a chic, sophisticated publication" (2012). Demographically, *Brides*' readers are 17 percent male, 83 percent female, a median age of 32, and have a median household income of \$72, 003 (2012). Forty percent are college graduates, 73 percent are employed, 51 percent are single, and 49 percent are married (2012). The cover price per issue is \$5.99 (2012).

Bridal Guide boasts on its website that it has an audience of approximately 4.3 million, has 28 readers per copy, and has "the highest pass-along readership of any magazine" (2012). *Bridal Guide* is "committed to helping brides and grooms have their dream wedding on a practical budget," and its readers have less money than *Brides* readers with a median household income of \$57, 326 (2012). Demographically, *Bridal Guide*'s readers are 15 percent male, 85 percent female, and median age of 28. (2012). Sixty-nine percent are college educated, 59 percent are employed full-time, and 77 percent are engaged or have never been married (2012). Like *Brides*, the cover price per issue is \$5.99 (2012).²

I surveyed 12 issues from each publication beginning in summer or fall of 2010 and ending spring or summer of 2012, documenting the percentage of both editorial and advertising content for each publication that linked brides with animals (see Figure 1). Further, I specified the types of animals, parts, or items found in these images (see Figure 1).

Due to financial restrictions and publication availability, I examined only two years of past issues from the two magazines. Thus, my data set and subsequent analysis is limited. Additionally, I elected not to analyze animal links with other groups such as men, and I did not deconstruct my data based on each pictured bride's race, nationality, age, or class. I did not explicitly use the American wedding ritual as a mode of analysis but rather focused on the specific presentation of the bride. Suggestions for further study include historical analyses of various magazines (including alternative or feminist bridal publications), specific deconstructions of both the linked women and animals, and tracings of the ways and conditions in which components used in bridal wear—such as feathers and fur—are taken from nonhumans. Further, one may wish to look at the use of animals and their parts in all components of the American wedding for a more complete understanding of the ways in which women and animals intersect in this ritual.

4. Case Study

4.1 The Data

Based on the issues surveyed, issues of *Brides* contained at least four and up to 33 woman/animal links, with a mean of 20.2, a median of 17.5, and a mode of 32.

² No data regarding racial demographics of subscribers or readers for either magazine was available.

Issues of *Bridal Guide* contained at least 16 and up to 39 links, with a mean of 23.8, a median of 22.5, and modes of 16 and 17. Together, the magazines had a mean of 22, a median of 19.5, and a mode of 32. Both publications had the greatest number of links per magazine in September/October of 2011. The September 2011 issue of *Brides* contained 23 images of women with feathers and 10 images of women linked to other animals such as a horse, a rabbit, coral, clams, dogs, and furs. The September/October issue of *Bridal Guide* contained 34 images of women with feathers and four additional images that linked women to dogs, coral, and birdcages. Perhaps autumn, that time of seasonal transition when the dying processes and cycles of nature are most evident, is signaled by the inclusion of symbols of nature–animals. Feathers, the tools of flight, especially evoke feelings of movement and change.

As noted in Figure 1, 6.9 percent of images found in *Brides* contained woman/animal links, and 7.6 percent of images found in *Bridal Guide* contained such links. Together, 7.25 percent of total pages examined contained woman/animal links. Of the images that contained these links, 75.3 percent included feathers, 4.3 percent included or depicted butterflies, and 4.1 percent included or depicted birds (not a subset of the 75.3 percent that included feathers). 16.3 percent included or depicted other animals or items that referred to other animals.

The prevalence of feathers in bridal wear (on hats, hair pieces, corsets, skirts, gowns, belts, and purses) perhaps affirms the assertion, as one upscale bridal boutique employee informed me, that feathers have been popular in the past few years (Felicé Bridal Salon employee, personal communication, May 8, 2012). Surely, a larger-scale study of the specific use of feathers in bridal wear is necessary to accurately document whether this is indeed a trend and, if so, which cultural curiosities or economic motives such a trend serves.

4.2 Analysis

I will now turn to an analysis of the use of woman/animal links in bridal magazines to explore how the bride is represented in and by popular media. I have found that when presented as ideal woman, the bride is often associated with nature in the form of flowers, trees, outdoor settings, etc. However, my research also shows that the bride is at times associated–or linked–with animals.

In the wedding setting, the bride is presented as a symbol of ideal womanhood. Charles Lewis, in “Hegemony in the Ideal: Wedding Photography, Consumerism, and Patriarchy” (1997), demonstrates through a study of gendering in wedding photography that when the bride becomes an ideal, she is also objectified. “She is ‘beautiful bride’ in the spotlight rather than the individual human being about to consummate an important relationship,” he writes (Lewis, 183). The same process of objectification occurs in images used in bridal magazines. Here, the bride is no longer viewed as an individual woman but is rather as a reflection of societal ideas about ideal womanhood.

Those things that present or affirm the bride as an ideal woman can be understood as her associations with nature. Such associations reaffirm existing ideologies that link women with nature and men with culture. Pamela Frese, in “The Union of Nature and Culture: Gender Symbolism in the American Wedding Ritual” (1991), examines the nature/culture binary influences gender roles in the heterosexual American wedding. For Frese, it is through the wedding ritual that the bride, first as a pure yet seductive goddess-like figure associated with nature and its processes, transforms into a fertile yet virgin mother figure.³ Frese examines the flowers used, clothing worn, and gifts exchanged to explore the qualities assigned to gender in the context of the wedding.

In her analysis of flowers used in the wedding ritual, she notes that a bridal bouquet signifies “female in ‘full bloom’... a woman at the height of her beauty and fertility” (Frese, 103). Fertility, often considered something sacred, is that quality that has been valued and idealized in women. The traditional use of a white bridal gown attributes to the bride qualities of purity and sacredness; however, she is often in her gown described as otherworldly, ethereal, mystical, or seductive. The bride is simultaneously virginal yet sexual.

³ Frese asserts that such figures or aspects of the female originate from Christian, Greek, and Roman mythologies and belief systems. In the wedding ritual, men undergo little change and instead, as father and groom, simply exchange the bride. Thus, “it is control over what is perceived as nature and natural cycles that is represented by the groom as ideal male” (Frese, 100). Frese does not address change-based rituals that boys go through to in order to transition into adulthood.

These contradictory characteristics operate around promises of fertility; as virgin, the bride remains a pure being who saves herself for her husband, yet when seductive, she advertises her sexuality and potential farmability. Finally, Frese notes that gifts from the bride often are in themselves gestures to fertility. The bride often gives to her guests and attendants egg- and swan-shaped containers that hold birdseed, flowers, or egg- and ovary-shaped almonds. Frese concludes that “the symbolism of the wedding equates female with container of life and eternal, cyclical natural processes... the ritual is a powerful force for the reinvention of traditional gender categories in American culture” (109). I will examine a specific component of this ritual, the presentation of the bride, to understand how the use of animals plays a part in the bridal industry’s reinvention of the category of womanhood.

If indeed the bride is idealized for her ethereality and fecundity as evidenced through her associations with nature, then what is one to make of the linking of the bride with animals? As extensions of nature, animals not only act as symbols of the fecund and the ethereal, but they present the woman who is linked with the dominated, controlled, and farmed creature as ideal. As previously discussed, much has been made of the negative consequences for women when linked with animals. Be they linguistic, visual, or physical, it is the dominant position that these links objectify and exploit and make woman invisible, inferior, violable, consumable, and manageable. Surely the linking of women and animals functions through the channels of both speciesism and sexism, and one must look at the consequences of such links to truly understand their power and function in society.

As previously noted, 75.3 percent of the images containing woman/animal links included feathers, and 4.1 percent included or depicted birds. As Frese notes, fertility is a key force in the American wedding ritual and very much a revered component of traditional womanhood. Because birds are associated with eggs and because eggs symbolize fertility, it comes to no surprise that that birds and their feathers together make up a great majority—79.4 percent— of the woman/animal links in the images that I examined. Additionally, though birds were prevalent in the autumn issues of *Brides* and *Bridal Guide*, they are often associated with spring, as they return to green lands during nature’s most fertile time of year. The fecundity signaled through the use of birds can also be understood an homage to the bride’s farmability, or her ability to be used for her reproductive capabilities. Further, birds are creatures of flight and are associated with the heavens. Here, birds gesture to the sacred, mystical, otherworldly, and ethereal qualities ascribed to bride when imagined as a virginal goddess.

Nowhere did I find brides as overtly associated with other animals, nor did I find brides associated with animals valued for their strength or intelligence such as the dolphin or lion. In fact, birds are often associated with people of low intelligence, as illustrated in the insult “birdbrain.” Those who maintain a small or weak physical mass because they eat so little are also associated with birds, as evidenced by the idiom “eat like a bird.” Also notable is that, amongst the images that linked brides with birds, I did not come across any eagles, hawks, or vultures and found reference to only one predatory bird, the owl (see Figure 4).

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the bride exists at the threshold, or in what Victor Turner calls the liminality, of the American wedding ritual (46). As bride, the woman bridges contradictory states as she prepares to transition from virgin to sexually active wife. Curiously, in this liminal state, the bride is simultaneously pure and fertile and is thus defined by symbols that represent her “ambiguity and paradox, confusion of all the customary categories” (Turner, 47). Birds, as icons of both pure ethereality and farmable potential, represent the bride’s “peculiar unity... that which is neither this nor that, and yet is both” (Turner, 49).

Turner elaborates, noting that both the death of one state and growth of another is captured in the symbolism of the liminal. He notes, for example, that bear symbolism captures autumn hibernation or death and spring awakening or rebirth; I argue the same could be said for the use of birds as symbols, for they too migrate, or die, in the autumn and return in the spring. Here, birds also symbolize the bride’s transition from single woman to wife, or the death of one state and the birth of another.

I will now show how, through an analysis of images containing woman/bird links, these symbols of the bride’s liminal state degrade her and function to present and affirm her as an ethereal yet simultaneously fertile being—surely an unattainable and limiting version of womanhood.

4.3 Analysis of Images

Figure 2, from the November 2011 issue of *Brides*, shows two young women in what appears to be a chic domestic environment. This image is unique in that the woman on the right is wearing a shirt that reads “Last Night Out.” The viewer is to understand that these women intend to soon enter the public realm—a bar, restaurant, or club—to celebrate the woman’s last night as a sexually available single person. It is implied that she soon will engage in the American wedding ritual and no longer be available to anyone else but her spouse. Both the bride-to-be and her friend are young and beautiful, and the viewer immediately notices their smooth, bronzed legs and arms. Exposed legs especially communicate sexuality, as does the body language of both women. On the left, the friend leans forward into a seductive, welcoming position, while the woman on the right opens herself to the viewer. Her eyes are closed, and she smiles elatedly. Though situated indoors, the bride-to-be is linked with nature through her feathered skirt. The skirt is white and foreshadows the gown that she soon will wear at her wedding. As a symbol of her liminal state, it presents her as pure but is worn over her womb, thus simultaneously emphasizes her fecundity. Further, the skirt is described as “cheeky” and connects the woman with brazen yet celebratory sexuality. She wears a necklace that is comprised of a number of phallic-shaped crystals or stones, again suggesting that she is prepared to enter into heterosexual relations and physically please her soon-to-be husband. Both women have curly hair and appear to be shoeless, exhibiting their “wild” nature and intent to flirt as public, seductive bachelorettes before they embrace the roles of domestic, fertile wives.

Figure 3, an advertisement from the May 2012 issues of *Brides*, demonstrates the typical use of feathers in the bridal hairpiece (Figure 7 demonstrates more examples of the various ways in which feathers are incorporated into bridal wear). The feathers are situated on the woman’s head near the top of the photograph; it is only through the hairpiece that the viewer is aware that she is bride. Often paired with flowers, the feathers are white, wispy, and feminine. The type of bird from which the feathers were taken is unclear, as is whether they are real or synthetic. Whether plucked from an ostrich, dove, cockatoo, or created in a factory, they signify fertility, lightness, loftiness, and the ethereal. The woman in the image is confident, seemingly topless or scantily clad, by most standards beautiful, and with her mouth slightly agape, she suggests seduction and advertises her farmability. Sex, a process of nature and one that can be sometimes read as an act of animality, is also an exercise in fertility. This image illustrates the transition the bride makes as she moves from pure, spiritual being into that of fertile wife; as bride, she exists in the liminality that lies between virgin and mother. In this image, the feathered hairpiece is a key symbol of both her purity and sexuality.

Figure 4, from the November/December 2010 issue of *Bridal Guide*, consists of a six-page editorial spread entitled “Twilight.” The subtext on the first two pages reads: “Poised for an enchanted evening? Choose one of these sumptuous gowns and own the night!” As in Figure 5, magic and the ethereal are invoked. The brides are both wearing white gowns and are set against a misty white and blue backdrop. The image on the left is entitled “Spellbound,” and a description of the gown promises to “mesmerize him” and “make you queen for a night.” The described earrings “add sparkly wonder.” Again, it is as bride that woman is presented as queen, or ideal, and associated with the seductive powers of the supernatural. From the bride’s right hand hangs a marabou (stork) jacket, and it cascades down alongside her gown. The jacket, not worn as such, allows for the nonhuman to become a sort of extension of the bride herself; the nonhuman remains faceless and vanishes into the presentation of bride. Here, the bride and the dead stork are one in the same. The jacket unobtrusively connects the woman with the powers and processes of nature and fertility as well as with the animal’s victimization.

In the image to the right, the bride is heavily engulfed by what seems to be mist. The subtext describes certain features of the dress as “illusion” and as providing “ladylike refinement.” The bride reclines against a wall, looks dreamily into the distance, and though she appears innocent, holds one arm up in a position of sexual enticement. Again, as ethereal and pure yet seductive bride, the woman can promise sexuality and fertility once she is wife. Though there is no mention of the bird (which appears to be fake) poised on her right hand, the title of the image, “Night Owl,” gestures to this obvious woman/animal link. Owls have traditionally been considered keepers of special powers that enable them to see and fly at night. These powers extend to prophecy and witchcraft, and by labeling the bride herself as a “Night Owl,” she too is given mystical powers. Beyond signaling her ethereality and advertising her farmability, the owl reference is significant in that it affirms that the woman is correctly presenting herself as bride (she is mystical, beautiful, and pure yet simultaneously seductive).

The owl is often associated with protection, wisdom, and guidance, and since it is mentioned on the spread, one can imagine that it blesses her participation in the gendered heterosexual wedding ritual.

In three of the following four pages of the spread, the featured brides are linked to animals through the use of feathers. Two of the featured brides hold flowered and feathered bouquets, and another bride holds a feathered clutch. Terms such as “sublimely luminous,” “dream weaver,” “ultra-feminine,” and “fairy tale” are used to describe the brides. To describe bridal gowns and accessories, terms such as “magic,” “dreamy,” “cloud of loveliness,” and “incandescent shimmer” are invoked. These terms allude to the ethereal qualities that Frese argues the bride shares with the bird, such as the connection to mysterious yet natural processes like flight. Birds signal that the brides exist in an unrealistic (and childish) dream world, as can also be seen in the below analysis of Figure 5. Here, to be a bride is to be linked with animals and their seemingly mysterious abilities or characteristics; these links allow the bride to become a phantasmagoric being who is at the same time a farmable object.

Figure 5, from the March 2012 issue of *Brides*, is an advertisement for Disney’s Fairy Tale Weddings and Honeymoons. Pictured is a groom affectionately yet possessively touching the bride’s face. The couple stands in front of a castle, suggesting that the bride herself is a sort of queen or princess. She holds flowers, and the cartoon birds and mice one might recall from Disney’s *Cinderella* (1950) can be seen to the left. The mice, Cinderella’s confidants and helpers who in the film sew a dress for her as she anticipates meeting her prince, are looking upon the couple, grinning with approval at the successful marriage ritual. The text spanning the image reads: “You grew up with Disney fairy tales. Now it’s time to live one.” Below, the subtext reiterates the concept of wedding as fairy tale and asserts that Disney has “the magic to make it come true.” The couple is surrounded by what appears to be fairy dust. The theme of magic harkens back to Frese’s analysis of the bride as otherworldly.

Surely the birds in the image, associated with flight, transcendence, eggs, and spring, are symbols of the liminal bride’s supposed ethereality and farmability. However, the birds also function to degrade the bride in other ways. The birds exist for the viewer’s entertainment just as are real caged and displayed birds. Domesticated birds—taken from their native environments and rendered helpless—are considered unintelligent, fragile, lacking in free will, and requiring of the protection of their owners. Here, the linking of the bride with the birds derives from what Dunayer describes as birds’ victimization (13). In this scene, the birds reiterate the assumed dependency the domesticated bride has on the groom. She too is considered unintelligent, fragile, lacking in free will, and in need of protection. The bride cooperates in this portrayal as she smiles at the groom who is physically larger than her; the viewer is meant to understand that she desires the physical protection that he is capable of providing. The birds act as a benevolent force in the construction of the helpless bride; they extend her veil to help her take up more space, demanding that the viewer recognize her as a figure of ideal womanhood, however unrealistic and limiting this category may be.

As idiotic creatures all atwitter, the fictional birds continue to infantilize the woman. Their cartoonish presence stresses the fact that the desire for a fairy-tale wedding is an irrational and childish trait attributed to the bride (certainly the advertisement is not meant for the groom). One can hardly imagine taking this bride, who longs to exist in some protected, patriarchal fantasyland, seriously.

Finally, Figure 6, from the May 2012 issue of *Brides*, consists of an opening spread for the feature “Cocktails, Anyone?” and is meant to educate the reader about hosting a wedding reception. Instead, it pictures a murder scene. The photo editors cropped the image to produce a decapitated and de-legged bride to the left. She wears a white, feathered dress that, on following pages, is described as “fun and fashion forward.” Like the bird from which the feathers were taken, the bride’s identity has been erased from the scene. Her right hand is poised to grab a “sunny-side-up” quail egg from the tray that dominates the centerfold; it would be easy to imagine her as a participant in culture and a conqueror-murderer-consumer of nature, if only she had a face (in fact, the only portion of a face one can see is that of a white, well-dressed male in the upper right corner of the spread). This bride has no value as an individual. Instead, it is through the feathered dress overlaid on her organs associated with reproduction—her breasts and womb—and her physical proximity to eggs that she is valued solely as a fertile object. Her left hand is displayed to show her wedding ring, that symbol that proves she has taken on the role of farmable wife.

4.4 An Alternative Reading

Those who understand women's links with nature as positive or even emancipatory might suggest an alternative reading of the bride who is associated with animals. Ynestra King, in "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology, and the Nature/Culture Dualism" (1990), focuses on radical cultural feminists and notes that they believe that "women's side... is also the side of nonhuman nature" (King 111). Radical cultural feminists are often separatists and have no desire to enter the cultural realm of men; it is through their identification with nature that they are instead liberated from it. They associate feminism with ecology and, for some, earth-based spirituality. This spirituality, notes King, recognizes "women as embodied, earth-bound living beings who... celebrate their connection to the rest of life" (King 112). In siding with nonhumans, one might imagine liberation from a patriarchy that has long sought to dominate and control nature, animals, and women. Unfortunately, the images I found largely associated women with weak or dainty animals and do not support such a reading. Instead, they affirm the limited perception of degraded bride as ideal woman and show how the bride, when linked with animals, is absorbed into rather than separated from patriarchal society and its ideas about gender.

These links may not necessarily be pejorative if, for example, the bride were not connected with dainty, weak, or domesticated creatures and instead associated with animals revered for their strength or intelligence. Further, if the magazine reader were provided with a variety of options in bridal dress, accoutrement, etc, she would be given the opportunity to practice her agency in choosing how she will look and with what she will surround herself during the wedding ritual. Instead bridal magazines distribute rather homogenous, proscriptive ideas about gender displays in the American wedding and leave little choice for a bride who may want to venture beyond traditional categories. Finally, animal links in the wedding ritual could be understood very differently if they were expanded and associated with all humans, not just women. If one of the aims of the animal in the wedding is to affirm the bride's fertility, is it not impossible that both the bride and groom (or bride and groom or groom and groom) be linked with animals? A celebration of both men's and women's fertility does not seem so silly, especially if the couple wishes to reproduce or adopt children.

Despite the abundance of harmful images in bridal magazines, I did find reason to believe that the use of animals in the reinvention of dominant gender categories has, at times, been appropriated in playful yet subversive ways. In Figure 8, an advertisement from the January/February 2012 issue of *Bridal Guide*, one can see a pink-feathered boa draped across the shoulders of three characters (who appear to be a woman escorting two men—a radical image in itself, as one traditionally associates the wedding ritual with a bride escorted by a father or groom). The advertisement is for a musical based on the 1994 film, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which tells of the escapades of a transsexual and two drag queens as they travel across the desert in their bus, Priscilla. With this knowledge, the image takes on new meaning. The fertility icon graces the shoulders of three characters who altogether reject heterosexual gender categories.

The viewer is left in a state of uncertainty when it comes to the gender or sexual orientation of the characters. This association of feathers with gender-bending characters can be read as an act of defiance against a patriarchy that not only offers confining gender expectations, but that dominates and degrades animals as well. The boa gestures to the theatrics and flamboyance of the musical genre, and the text across the top of the image, "Brides and Priscilla...the perfect marriage!" encourages the reader to join in the fun. Even the marriage ritual itself is complicated and suggests that a bride might choose to indulge in a musical act—here, an homage to muddled patriarchy—over a union with a heterosexual male. Even the title of the musical, *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, plays with the category of queen; here, it is not the bride on her wedding day, but the homosexual male, who is glorified as ideal. Though this was the only image I found that used animals in a celebration of ambiguous gender categories, it still provides a glimpse at the latent, subversive potential that human/animal links might contain.

5. Conclusion

This study reviews how recognition of the links between women and nonhuman animals provides a better understanding of the associations between women and nature more broadly. It illuminates how the pairing of the bride with animals, as symbols of her liminal state, not only degrades the bride but also plays a part in the creation and affirmation of bride as a figure of ideal womanhood. The links she shares with nonhumans degrade her by associating her with a dominated group valued mostly for its farmability. Further, linking the bride with the bird suggests that she is a mystical, ethereal creature—certainly an unattainable standard for all women.

Thus, the gender category presented in popular, heterosexual American bridal magazines can be understood as a degrading and limiting one.

This study lends itself to a critique of the perceptions and uses of animals and may allow for a better understanding of the belief systems that are currently capitalized upon in the name of fashion or tradition. Specifically, it offers a critical look at proscriptive gender categories presented through magazines that reflect the interests of the popular American bridal industry. Through this study, I hope to open the door for new investigations of the ways in which sexism and speciesism interact as women and animals continue to be linked.

Figure 1: Woman/animal links broken down by content and nonhuman type

Publication	Percentage of editorial pages that show woman/animal links	Percentage of advertising pages that show woman/animal links	Total percentage of magazine pages that show woman/animal links
<i>Brides</i>	8.4%	6.5%	6.9%
<i>Bridal Guide</i>	9.1%	7.4%	7.6%

Based on information above, **8.75%** of total editorial pages examined contain woman/animal links, **6.95%** of total advertising pages examined contain woman/animal links, and **7.25%** of total pages examined contain woman/animal links.

Publication	Percentage of woman/animal links that includes feathers	Percentage of woman/animal links that includes or depicts birds	Percentage of woman/animal links that includes or depicts butterflies	Percentage of woman/animal links that includes and/or depicts other nonhumans*
<i>Brides</i>	69.4%	4.8%	4.0%	21.8%
<i>Bridal Guide</i>	81.2%	3.4%	4.6%	10.8%

* Includes cats, dogs, chicks, swans, horses, lions, rabbits, mice, elephants, circus animals, dragonflies, coral, clams, horns, furs, bird cages, animal tattoos, and leather as well as snake-, zebra-, leopard-, and cheetah-print items. Also included is the depiction of a bride as the fictional yet dinosaur-like “Bridezilla” (*Brides*, May 2012).

Based on information above, **75.3%** of total links examined include feathers, **4.1%** of total links examined include or depict birds, **4.3%** of total links examined include or depict butterflies, and **16.3%** of total links examined include and/or depict other animals.



THIS PAGE From left: The MOH flaunts sensational shoulders in Haute Hippie's sexy merlot-hued bias-cut dress, featuring a low-scoop cowl neckline and an open back; \$495, hautehippie.com. Earrings, isabellatropea.com. Ring, bcbg.com. Wear your heart on your shirt: Combine Nina's black tee with a cheeky BHLDN feathered skirt. Top, \$45, ninabridal.com. Skirt, \$850, bhldn.com. Necklace, isabellatropea.com.

OPPOSITE You're white-haute in a Hervé Léger by Max Azria banded minidress; \$1,590 for a similar style, herveleger.com. Earrings, anna beckdesigns.com. Cuff, dannijo.com.

Figure 2: *Brides*, November 2011

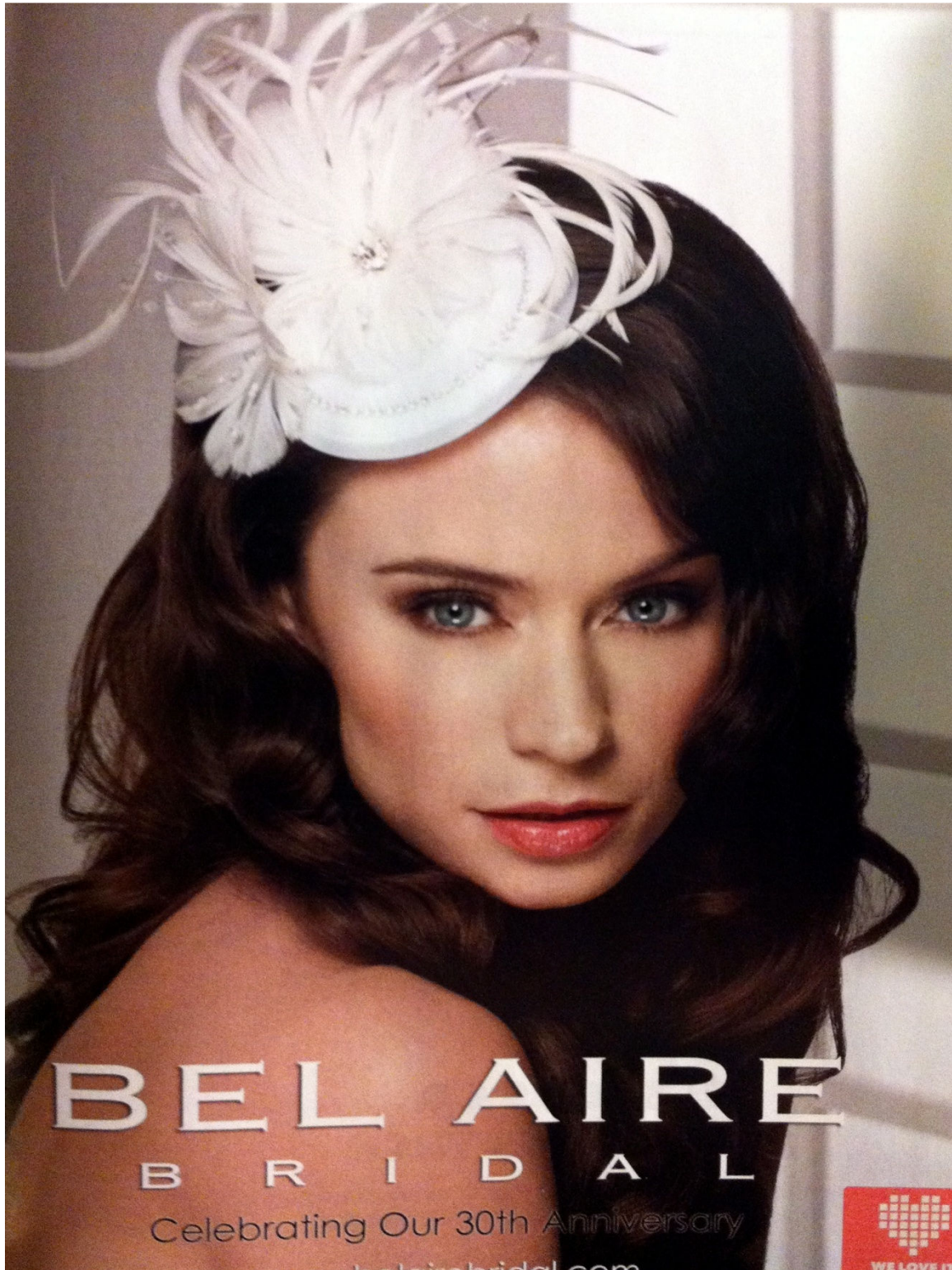


Figure 3: Brides, May 2012





Figure 4: Bridal Guide, November/December 2010



IF YOU GREW UP WITH DISNEY *fairy tales* NOW IT'S TIME TO LIVE ONE.

Disney's FAIRY TALE Weddings & Honeymoons

The glass slipper fits, but your fairy tale is just beginning. And whether you want your story to unfold in the shadow of castle spires, on a tropical island or aboard a majestic ship, *Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons* can make it happen. Because whatever your fairy tale wish, we've got the magic to make it come true.

GREG GRIFFIN
Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons
Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons
Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons

Figure 5: Brides, March 2012



Figure 6: Brides, May 2012



Figure 7: Bridal Guide, November/December 2011

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Figure 8: Bridal Guide, January/February 2012

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