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Belfast Brides: Double Dresses: a narrative of a dress in a Civil Partnership

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Versions of this paper have also been presented at the Fashion in Fiction conference, University of Technology, Sydney (2007), Design Research Society conference (Dublin, 2008), the Design History Research Centre (University of Brighton, 2008), and at London College of Fashion's Public Lecture series (2008).

The paper forms the basis for a commissioned chapter titled Double Brides: Double Dresses: lesbian wedding dresses after the Civil Partnership Act UK, 2004, in McNeil, P., Karaminas, V., Cole, C. Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film and Television. UTS/Berg: 2009.

Abstract

The Partnership Act 2004 (UK) permitted same-sex 'marriages', and in September 2006 my partner and I enacted our 'special day'. With two 'brides', the 'wedding dress(es)' became material sites of self-identification and mediated contestation. My partner, at the last moment, refused her shop-bought frock for a 1940s cocktail dress owned by her mother. My role became that of the seamstress, charged with making good a dress falling apart at the seams. These acts of repair took place before and during the celebrations, and the dress took on a key significance in marking, documenting, investigating and explaining the significance and meaning of the day.

*Using material cultural concepts and ideologies variously mobilised via Burman's *The Culture of Sewing* (1999), my maternal grandmother's whitework embroidery, and Gober's *Untitled (Bridal Photo)* (1996), this paper examines how sewing – previously used in my family to enact the discipline, frugality and virtue of Northern Irish Presbyterianism – was used here to (re)construct (queer) femininity. The dress, already invested with the perceived decadence of 1940s London, tempered with the respectability of my partner's mother's successful role as wife and mother, is relocated on a lesbian body, thereby reconfiguring its constructed meanings of the feminine. Yet, by being configured as a bridal gown, this garment re-entered the feminine normative, only to quick skip away as the 'groom' gets revealed as a 'second bride'.*

The tendency of the dress to fall apart throughout the 'marriage' day, and to require repeated mending, set up a dynamic of fixity and slippage, with sewing being the act of temporary anchorage in a field of uncertainty. The tight, white stitching, taught by my puritanical grandmother (a keen homophobe within her generation and context), was re-activated in the subversive construction of a 'lesbian bride'.

But, and to continue to trouble the normative, just as most grooms work hard to eagerly unlace the body, this female 'groom' laboured to sew up the gaps where flesh threatened to emerge...