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I, Carolyn Wagner, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History.

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Material Memories:
The Parachute Wedding Gowns of American Brides, 1945-1949

A thesis submitted to the
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by

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ABSTRACT

After the Second World War there are several accounts of brides and grooms repurposing parachute silk to make a wedding dress. This study collects, records, and examines nine case studies of this sporadic practice, focusing primarily on parachute wedding gowns designed and worn in the United States between the post-war years of 1945 and 1949. By exploring the materiality of the fabric and the physical transformation involved in fashioning a dress from a parachute, these wedding dresses are seen as the result of creative resourcefulness. This practice also embodies the synthesis of the post-war transitions occurring within the personal and social spheres. In contrast to today’s disposable culture, the parachute dresses of the Second World War emphasize singularity and historicity. Drawing from current scholarship on material culture and the complex relationships between people and their possessions, this study examines how parachute gowns bridge world-historical events and the lives of ordinary people. The dresses are vibrant material creations with lives and histories that are worth recording and remarking.
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INTRODUCTION

When flames engulfed American soldier Temple Leslie Bourland’s plane 590 feet in the air, the threads of his white silk parachute literally became his lifeline, enabling him to land safely on cold Axis ground. Now sporting bullet holes, the parachute provided warmth and protection for Bourland who lay in a foxhole for several days until discovered by his Allied comrades. One year after the war, the same parachute material that saved Bourland’s life was transformed into the white silk dress that his fiancée, Rosalie Hierholzer, would wear as she walked down the aisle.

This is only one of many different accounts united by a common thread—repurposing parachute silk from the Second World War to make a wedding dress. These gowns are housed and exhibited at numerous museums, ranging from the largest collection of decorative arts and design housed at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum and the widely acclaimed Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., to the modest galleries of the Don F. Pratt Museum in Fort Campbell, Kentucky, and the Historic Costumes and Textile Collection at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. As a result of such collections and exhibitions, the sporadic practice of reusing parachute silk for wedding dresses has become increasingly well-known in recent years. However, the specific stories of these historic dresses still need to be told. Therefore this study records and examines nine case studies of this practice. Although I make mention of several international accounts, this research primarily focuses on parachute wedding dresses designed and worn in the Midwest and Southern United States between 1945 and 1949. This exploration of material culture, which I see as a study of relationships between people and their possessions, demonstrates that these dresses deserve greater recognition. The disposable culture we live in
today holds sway over desires for gowns to be both timeless and, most commonly, brand-new (for use of one special and particular bride on one occasion). In contrast, the parachute gowns are at the same time markers of world-historical events and the lives of ordinary people, involving personal and collective memories. They are vibrant material creations with lives and histories of their own.

This research is particularly relevant in today’s world, considering what appears to be an entire generation of twenty-somethings who are fixated on the perfect proposal and ideal ceremony and reception, which is then spread and encouraged by social media. Scrolling through a Pinterest “My dream wedding” board we see dresses that are adorned with lace and jewels, embellished with ruffles and feathers, and drowned in a sea glitter. These dresses lack singularity and historicity. It may be useful to analyze weddings dresses that interweave past, present, and future.

Countless publications narrate the history of the wedding dress, such as *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashions*, written by Edwina Ehrman, Curator of Textiles and Fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum. In the catalogue, Ehrman visually and contextually explores the evolution of the wedding dress chosen for a bride’s day through a European perspective. Others including Cynthia Amnéus, Curator of Fashion Arts and Textiles at the Cincinnati Art Museum, have attempted to marry the comprehensive aesthetics of the dress with the sociological factors that led to the current status of the iconic gown, in the exhibition catalogue *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns*. Also noteworthy is Ohio University professor, Katherine Jellison who wrote *It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005*, which provides a detailed cultural history of the American wedding since the Second World War and the phenomenon that centers on the celebrated dream in white.
Each of these titles, along with several others, mention the use of parachute silk for wedding dresses on account of the fact that only “inferior” fabrics were available after the war. However, more writing specifically dedicated to discovering, collecting, and documenting the stories behind repurposing this material needs to be done.

Information on specific parachute dresses can be found on a range of websites, including The National World War II Museum, which offers small summaries of the two parachute dresses in its collection, and Ohio University’s The Post which featured a blog post by Olivia Young who interviewed a retired Ohio University secretary who wore a parachute dress herself. These writings on global networking sites have acted as catalysts for the growth of a larger discussion of parachute wedding dresses among the online community. Beyond that, a few recent dissertations flirt around the topic but do not address parachute dresses as their main area of focus. For example, Tamara Clayton’s “World War II Wedding Dress as Presented in United States High Fashion Magazines: 1939-1945” and Ashley Hasty’s “Love Will Never be Rationed: World War II Bridal Apparel,” both approach the topic of wedding dresses in part as testable experiments providing charted variables and data results from surveys, but they make few references to parachute dresses.

Additional areas of study that will be incorporated into the discussion will be the history of silk (for both parachutes and wedding gowns), alternative resources used for dresses, social relations among men and women during wartime and postwar, foreign war brides, the royal wedding ideal, and contemporary bridal trends. Writings from notable scholars in these areas include Mary Schoeser’s Silk, Jane Mersky Leder’s Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II, Susan Zeiger’s Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century, and Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck’s Cinderella Dreams: The
Allure of the Lavish Wedding. By exploring each of these threads related to the topic of parachute wedding dresses, I will provide a fuller and more in-depth analysis of the topic.

Up until this point much literature on parachute wedding dresses of the Second World War has adopted a historical approach. I extend the historical analysis, while incorporating insights drawn from current discussions surrounding material culture. At its most basic level, material culture argues that things matter. It is through the study of objects that one finds manifestations of values, beliefs, culture, and historical events. For this discussion, I draw from the works of five notable scholars in these fields of material culture and new materialism: Henry Glassie, Jane Bennett, Susanne Küchler, Daniel Miller, and Mukulika Banerjee.

A pioneer scholar of material culture is author and folklorist Henry Glassie. In 1969 he published *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*, which examined physical embodiments of American culture on the east coast. Thirty years later, in 1999, Glassie published *Material Culture*. This book strives to remove institutional limits on the study of history and art. Glassie proposes that material culture can bring history and art together to successfully reinvent the study of the past. Pulling from the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and folklore, Glassie provides case studies and theories that argue the validity of studying material culture. Most currently, Jane Bennett, political theorist and author of *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, questions the political side effects of acknowledging that all matter, human or nonhuman, is alive and it possesses what she terms “vital materiality.” Although Bennett chooses to apply her ideas to environmental things including trash, landfills, metal, stem cells, and electricity, this notion that everything is alive and interconnected is also at the core of the parachute dress stories.
Susanne Küchler, Daniel Miller, and Mukulika Banerjee build on similar ideas and apply them to my area of focus—clothing. In Clothing as Material Culture, Küchler and Miller successfully challenge and overcome a number of preconceived notions about fashion, textiles, and the social sciences. Through an impressive amount of collected data from a wide range of sources including fieldwork, museum collections, photographs, and case studies, Küchler and Miller demonstrate clothing’s ability to bridge the gap between individual experiences and social events and circumstances of the world at large. Lastly, The Sari, by political anthropologist Mukulika Banerjee and, again, Daniel Miller, focuses on the sari as “a lived garment” rather than a simple, cold, and inanimate object of clothing. Banerjee and Miller work from the central concept that wearing clothing is a personal, sensual, and social experience, for clothes are simultaneously in contact with our bodies and the outside world. Based on ethnographic findings, the authors attempt to relate “micro perspectives” of individuals to “macro perspectives” of worldly matters, such as religion or politics. Through the use of these major ideas and concepts highlighted by current available scholarship, I perform a material culture study of the parachute wedding dresses from the Second World War utilizing an analysis of the material’s physical history, private vs. public memories, and oral testimonies.

My account brings together a range of primary and secondary sources. Through the use of 1930-1940’s bridal magazines, such as Bride’s Magazine, I determined the state of the wedding dress before, during, and after the Second World War in order to assess the extent of this trend and how it was perceived. I interviewed brides Ruth Hensinger, Elizabeth Morgan, and Barbara Ley who used a silk parachute gown at their post-war wedding. I drew upon these firsthand accounts to show why some people chose to repurpose this material, what meanings it held for them, and how their wedding dresses compare to the gowns of today. Secondary
resources that were used to reinforce my findings include the aforementioned Cynthia Amnèus’s *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns*, Edwina Ehrman’s *The Wedding Dress: 300 Years of Bridal Fashions*, and Katherine Jellison’s *It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005*, to name a few.

My chapters are divided based on nine primary case studies of parachute wedding dresses from the Second World War that address three broad themes: material transformations, weddings in wartime, and oral testimonies. In the first chapter, I lay the logistical foundations for this discussion by examining Bernice and Fred Short’s wedding dress (Don F. Pratt Museum, Fort Campbell, Kentucky), which was made by Bernice and her mother, who found silk rather difficult to work with bearing in mind its slick texture. I consider the very basics of the process that is required to make the transformation from parachute to dress. Next, the dress of Joyce and Adrien Reynolds (The National World War II Museum, New Orleans), which is made of Japanese parachute silk, allows for the detailed discussion of the quality of different silks and why silk was used for both parachutes and idealized white wedding dresses. Lastly, I discuss Marian and Robert L. Bush’s gown (Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection Columbus, Ohio), which was not made of silk but instead of damaged nylon. This leads to the discussion of other possible materials and resources for wedding gowns. Although a wedding dress made of white silk was the ideal, countless other materials were utilized due to their availability and low cost.

The second chapter then elaborates on the topic of weddings and war. The first account in this chapter is that of Myrtille and Sargent Joseph Bilodeau (The National World War II Museum, New Orleans), who were married in Merville, France on October 15, 1945. This is an example of the practice extending overseas and it is discussed in relation to the phenomena of
foreign war brides. Here I also incorporate the topic of rushed marriages that took place during wartime and postwar due to an attitude of getting married as “the thing to do.” The subject of rushed marriages is grounded and supported by facts and statistics of wartime and postwar weddings. Secondly, through the analysis of Rosalie and Temple Leslie Bourland’s gown (Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington D.C) and Ruth and Claude Hensinger’s dress (Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Washington D.C), I explore postwar martial relationships and address the possibility of these two dresses holding different layers of significance due to the fact that they both saved the lives of the groom’s-to-be during wartime. Furthermore, the elaborate design of Ruth and Claude Hensinger’s dress was inspired by Victor Fleming’s 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, therefore, providing a platform for the discussion of the inspiration of film, Hollywood, and the Royals in the realm of wedding fashion.

The last chapter consists of three cases that offer personal, oral testimonies. I discuss the stories of each bride and groom in order to highlight the unique nature of these accounts. Starting with Elizabeth and Edwin Morgan’s dress (Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio), I emphasize the fact that Elizabeth’s dress, which was originally a German reserve parachute, was made by a local tailor who saved and stitched into the train of the dress the German label. The saved material displays the swastika and lists the name and company of the German soldier who was originally issued the parachute. Second, the dress of Rona and Kenneth Cox (location unknown) is analyzed for its rarity in the sense that both the bride and the groom were in active duty during the war. Thus, women’s role in the military is addressed accordingly. Lastly, Barbara and Jack Ley’s story begins like many others, in which Jack saved his reserve silk parachute as a memento and later offered it to Barbara for her
wedding dress (Ley’s home). Although the couple divorced years later, Barbara’s wedding dress still stands as a testament to this practice and the historicity that is embedding in each dress. Through the examination of each of these cases, I convey the singularity of these dresses and their changing historical meanings.

The stories of these parachute wedding dresses from the Second World War offer a stark contrast to the wedding dresses of today. Now we recycle old trends using new material, most dresses are mass-produced, and they attempt to embody a sense of timelessness. In contrast, the parachute dresses present the notion of fashioning current stylistic trends using old material. They are one-of-a-kind (the only wedding dress that will ever be made out of that specific parachute); time and history are inescapably woven into the dress itself. Upon hearing the parachute dress stories, one cannot help but marvel at the multiple meanings that these gowns hold. The practice of fashioning parachute wedding dresses and the stories of the people who were part of this history will change how we see the wedding dress.
CHAPTER ONE

Material Transformation

Captain Lewis Nixon catches a glimpse of a reserve parachute in First Lieutenant Harry F. Welsh’s rucksack. Surprised, Nixon says, “Harry… what exactly are you doing with your reserve chute? You’ve been hauling that thing around ever since we jumped.” Welsh replies, “Gonna send it to Kitty when we get back to England,” nonchalantly shrugging he adds, “Silk. Figured it’ll make a good wedding dress, you know. With rationing and all.” For most, this reference, in the 2001 HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*, is the first and last time they hear mention of a parachute being used to make a wedding dress. Based on real-life accounts, recorded in Stephen E. Ambrose’s 1992 book *Band of Brothers, E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne: From Normandy to Hitler's Eagle’s Nest*, the American World War II drama follows the paratroopers of “Easy” Company. At the end of the film, it is relayed that after the war Welsh returned home and married Catherine “Kitty” Grogan, and Ambrose confirms that she did use Welsh’s silk reserve parachute for her wedding dress.\(^1\) Initially this notion of a gown made from a parachute is intriguing, but often the follow-up question is—how was it done? This chapter therefore addresses the process of material transformation. I will focus on three case studies that describe the physical alterations involved, the properties of the parachute material and why this fabric was seen as ideal for a wedding dress, and other materials that were utilized when resourcefulness was of utmost importance.

To say the topic of parachute wedding dresses from the Second World War fits comfortably in the parameters of art history would be a deeply flawed statement. In order to

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accurately and effectively tell these stories, there must be a broad understanding of history and art that are united under material culture. One of the pioneer scholars in the field of material culture, author and folklorist Henry Glassie, wrote in his 1999 book *Material Culture* that “History and art connect in the study of material culture. Material culture records human intrusion in the environment. […] We live in material culture, depend upon it, take it for granted, and realize through it our grandest aspirations.”

Throughout the work, Glassie strives to remove institutional limits on the study of history and art, and prove that material culture can bring these two disciplines together to successfully reimagine how we look at and study the world around us. Traditionally, there is a specific formula followed when researching art or history and he attempts to add another variable to the equation. In other words, when researching there are certain resources one looks to for gathering information, such as archival files, letters, photographs, oral testimonies, etc. However, Glassie suggests that historians look to objects and the complex relationships formed between objects and possessors in order to see a physical manifestation of life and culture. It is here that he is quick to point out a fundamental paradox within the constructs of material culture—culture is immaterial and intangible, whereas material things exist as solid forms in the physical world. To alleviate these tensions, Glassie proposes that “art is a better word” than things or objects. Referencing Ralph Waldo Emerson’s definition of art as the intersection of nature and will, “the unity in things mind and matter,” Glassie states that, “Things are works of art when the act is committed, devoted, when people transfer themselves so completely into their works that they stand as accomplishments of human possibility.” It is because these works are “so filled with the human,” as professor and author Robert Plant Armstrong argues, one begins to encounter them as subjects rather than objects.

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3 Ibid., 41.
This is my understanding of the parachute wedding gowns—they are works of art made with intention and saturated with the human experience.

Recent works involving material culture studies have proven that clothing is a significant source of cultural understanding and a window into both the personal and social spheres. In Clothing as Material Culture, authors Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller provide a collection of essays that successfully challenge and overcome a number of preconceived notions and disciplinary boundaries pertaining to fashion, textiles, and the social sciences. One of the included essays is Kaori O’Connor’s “The Other Half: The Material Culture of New Fibres.” In this work Connor states:

Once viewed simply as mere artefacts, it is now recognized that cloth and clothing are culturally constructed commodities with complex symbolic properties, transmitting purity and pollution, linking past and present, transforming through belief, carrying fundamental values. […] The very ubiquity, intimacy and materiality of cloth and clothing mean that by studying them we can obtain nuanced insights into the dynamics of society on many levels not easily arrived by other means, if at all.4

Throughout Clothing as Material Culture, it is suggested that if the stereotypes surrounding fabrics and textiles are removed and clothing is embraced as a notable item of material culture, these materials will have the potential to unravel the very “fabric of social change.”

In his essay, “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies,” Michael Yonan writes that material culture “exists as an interdisciplinary space.” In the same spirit I have approached this project as an art historian and photographer.5 For each dress I visited, I photographed details of the gown against a black velvet background. This dark void was in part due to the inaccessibility of placing such petite dresses on mannequins, but more so as a method of emphasizing the idiosyncrasies of each gown. In “Clothing as Subject,” Nina Felshin speaks

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to a rising trend in the 1990s for artists to incorporate into their work articles of clothing without a wearer. She writes, “In refusing to represent the body, [artists] are creating significance out of its absence.” Artists such as Elaine Reichek have explained that the lack of a body is “about presence and absence, who has a voice and who does not.” Similarly, without diminishing the voice of the wearer, my work remarks on the voice of the dress. By focusing on the details (both those intentionally designed—as in Figure 1—and signs of wear and tear—as in Figure 2), I intend to validate the premises of material culture, in that objects have the potential to speak volumes. Here, I focus on two dresses housed in the collection of the Don F. Pratt Museum in Fort Campbell, located on the border of Kentucky and Tennessee. The stories of these dresses are linked through social connections between soldiers and the single parachute that was shared to make both wedding dresses.

**Bernice and Fred Short: From Parachute to Dress**

One of the dresses at the museum, and aptly the first parachute dress I discovered, was once owned by Clarence “Fred” and Bernice Short. As a former shipbuilder, Fred Short hoped that his expertise in the field would grant him a position in the Merchant Marines. However, due to a forgotten deferment he was drafted into the Army, and in 1943 he began his training as a paratrooper. Fred became a member of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, in the 101st Airborne Division. The idea behind this division was to fly the paratroopers (carrying all the equipment and items they needed to survive) behind enemy lines, the paratrooper would then jump from nearly 1000ft in the air, land surrounded by enemy territory, and attack the opponent from the inside. This air assault tactic and the airborne division itself were seen as experimental

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7 Ibid.
and for an elite group of men, and ultimately they were largely successful. Although airborne forces were not utilized and parachutes were not considered standard equipment for American military pilots during the First World War, they were becoming vital in a war which increasingly relied on air power.⁸

While Fred was stationed in England during the D-Day invasions of 1944, Bernice Plunkett waited for the inconsistent wave of letters often containing large black marks from Army censorship of locations and events, such as that which occurred later that year, on September 17th when Short participated in Operation Market-Garden, landing in Holland and attacking South through the Zonsche Forest in an attempt to seize the city of Son. After parachuting into Zone C, both Fred and his comrade Private Sherwood clipped their unused T-7 reserve parachutes to their belts and fled the drop zone. Fred intended to keep the silk parachute for Bernice’s wedding dress. Due to surplus stock and supplies at the end of the war, soldiers were in fact encouraged to take such items homes as souvenirs of the war. Used or still-packaged main or reserve parachutes made popular take-home items. Later in an interview for Kentucky New Era, Fred remarked, “It was just one of those things you don’t really think about at the time. I just thought the silk would make a pretty dress.”⁹

Despite Fred’s good intentions, his parachute was later lost or stolen. However, his fellow paratrooper Sherwood generously split his saved reserve parachute to give Fred enough fabric for a dress. Fred returned to the United States in December of 1945 and he and Bernice married on January 6, 1946 (Fig. 3). Bernice’s silk parachute dress was made by herself and her mother, who found silk rather difficult to work with considering its slick texture. In each of these

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parachute dress cases, it is common for a relative or friend of the bride, the bride herself, a local tailor, or a collective of these individuals to make the wedding dress. In this particular case, the dress was not only made possible by the skill and collaboration of the women, but also by the comradery and goodwill of the military men.

Typically, if the parachute was unused and still packaged, the dress making process began by carefully pulling the ripcord to deploy the parachute (if the parachute was used, one would begin with an often wrinkled bundle of fabric recently sent or brought out of storage by the groom) (Fig. 4 and 5). The fabric of the parachute’s dome-like canopy was then spread out in a backyard or other large area. A standard main parachute would have a diameter of 32 feet and a reserve parachute (used as a last resort) would be 28 feet. At the center of the parachute is the apex, an open circle used as a vent to gradually release the air trapped under the canopy (without it the canopy would capsize). Radiating from the apex are 24-28 fabric panels double-stitched together. Branching out from the center apex are nylon suspension lines that run down the edges of canopy panels and attach to its edges, effectively connecting the canopy to the harness (Fig. 6). The skeleton that is formed by the suspension lines absorbs the majority of the shock from the initial deploy of the parachute (Fig. 7). Usually, for the purposes of the dress only the undamaged and unmarked fabric panels of the canopy would be cut from the seams and suspension lines to be used in the design. If the parachute was used in the war, the bride would have been inclined to discard the areas that had been burnt, bloody, or full of bullet holes. Other undesirable markings on the chute’s silk canopy could have been an “AN” (Army, Navy) stamp or the label of the manufacturer (Fig. 8). After evading the blemished materials, the remaining

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11 Parachutes were made by a number of companies including: Hayes Manufacturing Company Grand Rapids Michigan, American Lady Corset Co., Atlantic Parachute Co., Cole of California, Inc., Eagle Parachute Co., Federal
white silk panels often had a translucent characteristic, because lighter silks were used to support parachutists, whereas heavier fabrics would have been used to drop supplies from an aircraft.\textsuperscript{12} When enough suitable fabric was obtained from the parachute, the material would be given to the dressmaker and the drafting, patternning, fitting, and stitching process would begin.\textsuperscript{13}

For the Shorts, the finally product was a lucid floor-length dress with a slightly ruched bust, a sweetheart neckline, short sleeves, and a basque waist silhouette. All of the seams were tailor-made and a train and veil were not included (Fig. 9 and 10). As Bernice reminisces, “It was a simple pattern but elegantly sewn together.” After 58 years of marriage, the couple donated the dress to the Don F. Pratt Museum in December 2004. Bernice humbly writes in her initial letter to the museum, “We do not have a daughter or grandchild to pass my dress on to. I think my dress would be a lovely addition to your Museum.”\textsuperscript{14}

Upon viewing Bernice’s dress (and most of the parachute gowns), the fragile nature of the material is inescapable (Fig. 11). Although slips were often worn beneath the dress to increase opacity, the thinness (and perhaps insubstantiality) of the silk brings to attention the vital role that the tactile, sensory, and material qualities of the dresses play in relation to this subject. As Michael Yonan has noted, the studies of art history and material culture have been “poorly integrated.” He points out that a hamartia of art history is its tendency to prioritize visuality over materiality. Yonan suggests that, “[…] art history has tricked itself into believing

\begin{footnotes}
\item[13] Often the bride had an idea of what the dress was going to look like from the beginning. Planning was involved to recover enough fabric.
\item[14] Bernice Short to Don F. Pratt Museum, September 2004. Bernice aptly states, “I’m very excited about it and feel it has a worthy place in history.”
\end{footnotes}
that it is a discipline of images, when really it has always been a discipline of objects.”\textsuperscript{15} In losing sight of an object’s or work's material nature, art historians are in danger of overlooking the material context by which the item was fashioned and by which it exists. As an advocate for the effective incorporation of material culture studies in the field of art history and vice versa, Yonan states, “One central revelation is the idea that art has a physical, sensual dimension, and not just a visual one.”\textsuperscript{16} The parachute gown’s materiality is of the utmost importance to the understanding of its history.

The donor and story of the second dress in the museum’s collection is unknown. However, collection’s manager John Foley suspects that this dress was made for the bride of Private Sherwood (Fred’s friend) who used the other half of his reserve parachute. When compared at the microscopic level, the material of both dresses is seemingly identical, supporting this theory of social and material connections. The dress itself is in three parts—a slip, blouse, and skirt, all of which are made out of the same delicate parachute material (Fig. 12). Dividing the dress in such a way was an economically attractive option for brides who wished to maintain the possibility of future use of each part for a less formal occasion. The slip has a sweetheart neckline, a natural waist, and is supported by thin straps (Fig. 13). Unique to this piece is the fact that it is dyed a light shade of pink.\textsuperscript{17} According to Bride’s Magazine, which was a prevalent bridal publication of the time, “pale pink,” “rose-tinted,” and “blush pink” were wedding accent colors that were considered in vogue off and on throughout the late 30’s and 40’s. The second piece is the button up blouse which sports a collared sweetheart neckline and cuffed long sleeves, with all seams appearing to be tailor-made (Fig. 14). Lastly, and most interesting, the skirt itself creates a strong visual parallel to the original parachute. It appears as if the maker cut the

\textsuperscript{15} Michael Yonan, “Toward a Fusion of Art History and Material Culture Studies,” \textit{West 86th} 18, no. 2 (2011): 240.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 243.
\textsuperscript{17} A characteristic of silk is that it absorbs dyes very well.
suspension lines from the apex and canopy and hemmed the material to be floor-length. The original parachute seams are intact with few additional diagonal seams connecting the panels. Therefore, as the comparison in Figure 15 shows, it is if the bride simply stepped into the apex of the parachute and walked down the aisle to say “I do.” Underneath the seams of the skirt, the pink slip creates a subtle rosy shimmer (Fig. 16).

Joyce and Adney Reynolds: Substance of Silk

Joyce Adney and Adrien Reynolds’s account most fittingly illustrates the properties of silk, its usage in parachutes and clothing, and its rich cultural history. Joyce and Adrien met at a dance hosted by Utah State University, where Joyce was starting her college education and Adrien was learning to be a radar operator. In a short entry published on the website of the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana (where their parachute dress is housed), Joyce fondly remembers that, “After we had gone through the receiving line and had punch, we went into the hall and we danced together all evening. He walked me home and I went in and told my roommate I had met the man I was going to marry.” On June 15, 1944, Adrien and his comrades of the 4th Marine Division departed to invade the island of Saipan, the largest of the Northern Mariana Islands in the western Pacific Ocean. After nearly a month, combat ended on the island and Adrien and his fellow marines discovered numerous unused Japanese cargo parachutes while clearing caves. Adrien sent one of these parachutes home to Joyce. Being a cargo parachute, the silk material would have been denser and less translucent. This parachute was made in Japan with higher quality Japanese silk. Due to the Japanese government’s investments in the most modern and up-to-date equipment in the silk industry, during the Second

World War Japan was the major supplier of raw silk to the West. However, today China is the world’s leading manufacturer of silk.\textsuperscript{19}

The earliest examples of cultivated silk date back to 3000B.C. Scholars note that although silk was first seen as frivolous, the process and luxurious material quickly became fundamental to Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{20} The intricacies of sericulture, defined as the art of breeding and cultivating silk moths, was developed and heavily guarded in China which resulted in their monopoly of silk production for many centuries until the creation of the Silk Road.\textsuperscript{21} The secrets of sericulture begin with the larva of the \textit{Bombyx mori} (commonly known as the silkworm). After hatching, the fragile and finicky silkworm feeds exclusively on tons and tons of white mulberry tree leaves.\textsuperscript{22} Once it has gained 10,000 times its original weight, it will begin to spin a chrysalis around itself for protection while it transforms into a moth. If the moth is intended to continue for breeding purposes, it will break free from the cocoon blind, flightless, and unable to survive in the open air due to excessive inbreeding. On the other hand, for the production of silk, the chrysalis is steamed or soaked in salt water effectively killing the moth before it breaks the fibers of the cocoon.\textsuperscript{23} If the fibers are broken it is rendered less valuable and produces different silks.

Harvesting the silk then requires the hands of a specialist skilled in the art of reeling—the term used for the process of extracting and combing the silk filament from the silkworm’s


\textsuperscript{22} Best results are found by feeding the silkworms leaves that are approximately the same age as themselves. If this is not done, the silkworms will produce inferior silk or no silk at all. See Julie Parker, \textit{All About Silk: A Fabric Dictionary & Swatchbook} (Seattle, Washington: Rain City Publishing, 1991), 11.

\textsuperscript{23} Ethical issues have arisen when the moth is exterminated in the chrysalis, however, one could argue that the quality of life is not high in either circumstance.
A single, unbroken chrysalis yields from 1600 ft. to more than a mile long of continuous filament, which is spun into thread. The thread is then woven into fabric in typically one of three weaves: plain (the most common weave in which each lengthwise yarn passes over-under-over-under each crosswise yarn, forming a checkerboard pattern) (Fig. 18), twill (the strongest of the three where an under one-over two-under one pattern creates a broken, reclining zigzag line), or satin (the most fragile which uses a pattern of under one-over four in a varied, random method). The weave of the natural protein silk fiber determines the texture, strength, and form of the fabric. Typically the resulting silk will create soft and smooth folds; however, sturdier weaves can produce an almost sculptural effect.

Although the fabric was commonly utilized for clothing, drapery, or upholstery, the first recorded person to use silk in the design of a parachute was French inventor Jean-Pierre Blanchard in 1785. Although two years earlier another Frenchman, Sébastien Lenormand, invented the modern parachute, Blanchard used folded silk in place of earlier uses of linen stretched over a wooden skeletal frame. Silk proved to be a more practical solution because it was the strongest natural fiber for its light weight. It was durable and easy to pack; it resisted mold and mildew that cause the fibers to rot; it was a porous, breathable material allowing for additional air flow; and its resilience was high—stretching up to 20% without breaking. During the Second World War, once trade between the United States and Japan was severed and the supply of silk was diminishing U.S. parachute manufactures began to use manmade nylon fabric.

26 Ibid., 15, 21, 37.
27 "The first recorded design for a parachute was drawn by Leonardo da Vinci in 1495. It consisted of a pyramid-shaped, linen canopy held open by a square, wooden frame. It was originally intended as an escape device to allow people to jump from a burning building, but there is no evidence that it was ever tested." See “Parachute,” How Products are Made, http://www.madehow.com/Volume-5/Parachute.html.
which ranked superior to silk due to its increased elasticity, resistance to mildew, and lower cost. However, in the world of textiles and fashion, silk has remained a “designer’s dream.”


Silk is widely perceived to be the most beautiful and elegant of all the natural fibers, and even after more than a century of attempting to provide a man-made substitute, no single synthetic fiber has come close to replicating either the magical, myriad properties of silk or the breadth of applications that it can embrace.

It cascades down the body as liquid drapery, its weightlessness renders it a sensuous delicacy, and its cost only intensifies its seductive allure. As mentioned before, its delicate appearance is only a façade for its strength. In actuality, its tensile strength, which refers to the amount of stress required for the material to reach its breaking point, is higher than that of common materials, such as wool and cotton. Silk is comfortable and versatile due to its breathable structure that still maintains warmth, and its ability to readily absorb dyes well. Each of these properties have ushered silk to its prestigious status.

To reiterate, the material character of the gowns and, in particular, the sensuality of the silk must be taken into account. In *The Sari*, anthropologists and leading scholars on material culture, Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, examine the intimate relationship between Indian women and India’s most symbolic garment. They write, “Clothes are among our most personal possessions. They are the main medium between our sense of our bodies and our sense of the external world. The sensual qualities of the sari, the way it feels on the skin, profoundly affects women’s experience of the garment as something simultaneously part of them yet outside of

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30 Ibid., 105.
them.”

The same can be said of silk. Its sleek, lucid, and delicate nature lends itself useful for sensual garments. For example, in Britain a lingerie set was fashioned for aristocrat Patricia Mountbatten, out of a silk map given to her by her boyfriend (Fig. 20). Despite silk’s seductive and sensual qualities, I would argue that the way in which the parachute wedding gowns were designed allowed for a modest appearance. Long sleeves and covered chests ensured that the sensuality of the silk did not overcome the need for austerity and restraint. Each of the women I spoke to who wore a parachute wedding gown commented on the modesty of their dresses in comparison to the wedding gowns of today.

One of the drawbacks to silk is that it is necessarily costly due to the previously mentioned specific and complex methods of production. However, arguably even this characteristic is advantageous, making the fabric all the more prized. For centuries, its prominence has made it attractive to all, but its cost had made it available to few: the royalties and elite. Fittingly, Curator of Textiles and Fashion at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Edwina Ehrman states, “Often the things that mark status are fashionable.” As we will see again later in this essay in relation to the white wedding dress, both then and now, designers and society at large looks to royalty, celebrities, and wealthy elite for guidance and inspiration.

During the Second World War white silk was the material for a traditional wedding dress and the rising “fledging” bridal industry portrayed it as such. As previous Director of the Cincinnati Art Museum, Aaron Betsky points out, the establishment and growth of the bridal

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industry in the beginning of the twentieth century directly resulted in the standardization of the wedding gown as we have come to understand it today.\(^{37}\) By the 1930’s shopping for the bridal gown began in the boutique or department store where the bride tried on factory-made sample dresses, with the help of a consultant, and once one was chosen, a custom fit gown was ordered. However, during this time, these services were targeted towards the middle to upper class white American bride. African Americans and Hispanics were not permitted to shop in many clothing stores, especially in the South. It was not until the 1960’s and 1950’s that civil rights movements called for equality with regard to shopping or applying for employment at bridal boutiques. Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck, authors of *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, describe that, “The democratization of bridal shopping signaled one basic fact: the demand for the lavish wedding was growing and beginning to attract consumers who had never considered such an extravagance before.”\(^{38}\)

A variety of bridal advertisements and magazines were distributed first locally then on a national scale. In these magazines, you could find advice on the wedding dress that suited you and the level of formality of your wedding, charts for what the wedding party should wear and where they should stand, items for your trousseau that could all be purchased “under one roof at Macy’s,” what headpieces to buy, guides for what lingerie to purchase for the honeymoon, and homemaker etiquette. Interviews and photos of smiling brides in white accompanied the text.

One of the most influential publications of the time was *Bride’s Magazine*. In the fall of 1934 the magazine was launched by Brides House, Inc. and it was titled *So You’re Going to Be Married: A Magazine for Brides* (Fig. 21). At first the periodical was solely dedicated to the affluent brides of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Only a few short years later, it circulated on a


national scale and was renamed *Bride’s Magazine*.\(^{39}\) Ohio University professor and author of *It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005* Katherine Jellison foreshadows, “This ingenious method of producing and marketing luxurious wedding dresses for the masses resulted in the establishment of a national bridal wear business that would become the centerpiece of a postwar wedding industry.”\(^{40}\)

Following the trends of everyday dresses, the hemlines of wedding gowns in the 1920’s rose, but by the 1930’s magazine pages were printed with ample amounts of full length silk gowns with trains spilling out over the margins of the page. Such dresses with heavy price tags could not be afforded by the average American woman during the Great Depression. In response, the bridal industry introduced the use of rayon or nylon, which would provide an optically white appearance, rather than one of creamy white or ivory. Using synthetics was beneficial for a bride on a budget who feared her white wedding would be compromised. Reassuring brides of the quality of the synthetic materials, gowns utilizing products such as Duplon’s Satin Ultra were boasted as “liquid, shimmering beauty, its exquisite texture and pearly whiteness, will live glamorously through many an anniversary.” In addition to the use of nylon, the standardization of dress designs allowed for the majority to participate in high style regardless of their upper or middle class status.\(^{41}\) However, despite the efforts of the industry to facilitate fashion and affordability, during the depths of the Depression, borrowed or repurposed dresses or suits were considered acceptable replacements if a formal gown could not be purchased.

\(^{39}\) Cynthia Amnéus, *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns*, 44.
\(^{41}\) Cynthia Amnéus, *Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns*, 44.
This pattern of the bridal industry alleviating financial or material constraints persisted throughout the fashion-frozen period of the Second World War. For the bridal business, their largest concern was the rationing of materials, in particular their need for silk. On March 8, 1942, only months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the War Production Board issued Regulation L85 enforcing restrictions on certain items of women’s clothing and on the amount of fabric that could be used.\(^\text{42}\) Turned-up cuffs, sashes, patch pockets, double yokes, attached hoods, metal zippers, and hosiery were thereafter restricted.\(^\text{43}\) Silk was one of the highest ranking materials of concern, because China and Japan had halted all imports of silk to the United States and the small amount of spare silk was needed to produce parachutes and plastics. During a time of total warfare every resource was channeled toward war production.\(^\text{44}\) This was catastrophic for the wedding industry and a couple’s budget. Long trains on gowns were prohibited and the price of silk skyrocketed, rendering it a challenge for most Americans to purchase traditional silk wedding dresses. The wedding industry feared that the lack of materials would cripple their business and send brides searching for a more feasible suit or evening dress.

Yet, the bridal industry’s ability to rework a situation in their favor once again prevailed in a difficult situation. Not long after the regulation was sanctioned, this up-and-coming industry established the American Association of Bridal Manufacturers which lobbied Congress to exempt the bridal industry from rationing in defense of the tradition al white silk wedding gown.\(^\text{45}\) They argued to representatives in Congress that, “American boys are going off to war and what are they fighting for except the privilege of getting married in a traditional way?

\(^{42}\) “Day dresses were limited to 3.5 yards of fabric; skirts could be no more than 78 inches around, and the number of buttons, pleats, and pockets also was limited. Trimmings could be no more than 3/8 of a yard, and the height of high heels was fixed at 1.5 inches.” Kathleen York, *Bridal Fashion 1900-1950* (Great Britain: Shire Publications, 2012), 47.  
\(^{44}\) Olivia Young, “Post Modern: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a dress?” http://thepost.ohiou.edu/content/post-modern-its-bird-its-plane-its-dress. 
They’re fighting for our way of life, and this is part of our way of life […]". Essentially, it was a plea to remove a threat to a tradition that guaranteed business for the bridal industry, and they were successful. They called for tradition and tradition called for long trains and gowns made of silk. Additionally, they saw the ability to have a traditional wedding was owed to the groom. The vision of a bride in a traditional white silk dress was part of the American Dream and it was both the bride and groom’s democratic right to have the opportunity to see this dream fulfilled. In this way, the wedding dress became a means of boosting national morale. “It sounds funny to think of bridal wear as war equipment,” Jellison states, “But that’s what they were arguing for.”

Although they were ultimately successful in persuading the government to ease some fabric restrictions, silk in particular remained in short supply for civilian use, limiting the number of formal silk wedding gowns manufactured during the war. 

Interestingly enough, even though U.S. brides (with the time and resources) were given the chance to acquire the traditional dress, women clearly understood the necessity of wartime restraints. Receiving the conflicting notions of both the necessity of practicality and tradition brides were torn as to how to approach their wedding day. The bridal industry delivered a clever solution in Bride’s Magazine which addressed this issue head on by providing various advices on “bridesy suits,” but more explicitly they made it clear that women should be encouraged to wear the ‘real’ wedding dress, versus the suit, because they owed it to the groom. A 1943 issue of Bride’s Magazine featured an article titled “Your right to a wedding,” which openly spelled out

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46 Katherine Jellison, “The Commercialization of Weddings in the Twentieth Century,” 81-82. Originally in Kitty Hanson, For Richer, For Poor (New York: Abelard-Schuman Limited, 1967), 113, 114. Hanson writes that in 1965 the significance of the formal wedding dress was confirmed when the Bridal and Bridesmaids Appeal Association commissioned a study on the relation between formal weddings (including a full-length white formal gown, a wedding party, and a religious ceremony) and the divorce rate in the United States. After drawing from the responses of 2,000 American brides, the findings projected that the use of a full-length white formal gown doubled one’s chances of having a lasting marriage, as opposed to those who wore a suit or “street dress.”

47 Olivia Young, “Post Modern: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a dress?”

that the United States Government gave the okay for women to participate in this tradition. The article plainly states, “Mindful of your Right to Romance, your government has recognized the importance of preserving the traditional bridal gown.” Other department store advertisements proclaimed, “a wedding gown with a train, a veil, and a bridal bouquet. These things belong to the American way of life, and they should be yours [...]” (Fig. 22). This option was patriotic, traditional, and what every bride secretly or outwardly hoped for—it was a win-win situation for all involved.

Using tradition as leverage to obtain silk only lasted as long as the war. Although the war ended in 1945, it took years for factories to gear up for domestic production and for supply routes to be reestablished. In the meantime, over a period of about four years, silk became scarce and new silk was only available in the U.S. through the black market. This acted as an equalized, regardless of class, ethnicity, or background new silk was legally not available. By 1946 wedding gowns were being manufactured with synthetic nylon, but not silk. Ready-made gowns were sold in department stores for a bank-breaking $100, equivalent to $1,000 today. On top of the cost of a dress, Bride’s Magazine reported in 1946 that the average total cost of a formal wedding was $1,830, or $19,000 by today’s dollar value, and an informal wedding was $195 or $2,000 today. Again the standard options of wearing a suit, a military uniform (if the bride was in the service), evening dress, or borrowed dress were present if a new white dress could not be afforded.

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51 Even advertising of products not directly associate with weddings benefited from the use of a bride in white. For example, Woodbury Soap featured their product next to the frequent characters of a bride in white and a groom sporting his military uniform, once again promoting the advocacy of tradition that was an asset to all parties. See Jellison, It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005, pg 11.
52 Young, Olivia. “Post Modern: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a dress?”
53 Ibid., website.
An additional option was available to those brides, such as Joyce, who happen to have access to parachute silk. Although Adrien had sent the parachute home earlier, he was not discharged until the end of the Battle of Okinawa (Operation Iceberg), the largest naval assault in the Pacific theater of the Second World War. Once he made a quick stop to his hometown in New Orleans, he flew to see Joyce in Detroit, Michigan where she was completing her master’s degree. Joyce recalls, “I went out to the airport, and it had been almost three years since I had seen him. He was the last one off the plane wearing his dress blues, and he melted my heart into a little puddle.” Hiding in one of Adrien’s pockets was her engagement ring.54

With the continuation of rationing, repurposing the Japanese silk cargo parachute seemed like both an economical and patriotic alternative for Joyce’s wedding gown. Joyce’s mother, who lived in Utah, agreed to make the gown. With Joyce still in Detroit, she would take her measurements with strings and send them to her mother. From the length of the strings, her mother was able to sew the fabric as needed. Proving that weddings were quite the family production, Adrien’s father made heart-shaped tins for the structure beneath the couple’s five-tiered wedding cake.55 Joyce and Adrien were married on March 27, 1946. The design of Joyce’s floor-length dress included long sleeves and slight variations of a Queen Anne neckline and a basque waist (Fig. 23). One of the couple’s wedding photographs shows Joyce dressed in the opaque gown and crown-like vail holding a large array of flowers and Adrien, in a tailored suit and white gloves, smiles at her as they walk down the aisle (Fig. 24).56

56 “Wedding Gowns of WWII.”
The extent of the practice of reusing parachute silk for a wedding dress is somewhat obscure and current sources are conflicting. Although my research focuses mainly on American Midwestern cases, Avril Lansdell, author of *Wedding Fashions 1860-1980*, notes that in 1945 surplus Royal Air Force parachutes were sold free of coupons in England.\(^5^7\) However, she states that though the material was available, “[…] few wedding dresses were made from parachutes, because the fabric was slippery to handle, difficult to sew and did not always hang well when finished.” Instead, in England (and there are U.S. cases as well) much of the parachute material was used to make trousseau nightgowns, lingerie, bridal petticoats, baptismal gowns, and first communion dresses.\(^5^8\) On the other hand, in the Autumn issue of *Bride’s Magazine* in 1946, they almost condescendingly indicate that this practice was nationally known by saying, “Ever since the first war Bride wore a dress from a parachute, you’ve learned that you may use nylon, lingerie satin, thin crepes, cottons, upholstery brocades as substitutes for the traditional tissues.”\(^5^9\) Yet, each of the American brides I interviewed said that they were not aware of other brides using parachute material for their wedding dress. Therefore, while the exact magnitude of this practice is not clear, what is certain is that the lesson of resourcefulness was exceedingly widespread. The appearance of traditional wedding attire was still being stressed, but it became the bride’s responsibility to arrive at the traditional look through any resourceful and unorthodox methods needed. The last case study I will discuss in this chapter exemplifies this notion of embracing other materials in situations where silk was not available.

\(^{57}\) The parachute silk was offered for sale whole or in 11 foot triangular panels. Some were made of the new synthetic nylon and usually white or lime green, although orange-coloured ones could occasionally be obtained. \(^{58}\) Avril Lansdell, *Wedding Fashions 1860-1980* (Great Britain: Shire Publications Ltd, 1983), 78-79. \(^{59}\) *Bride’s Magazine*, Autumn 1946, Vol. 13, 84.
Marian and Robert L. Bush: Other Materials

As mentioned earlier, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, trade routes between the United States and Japan were broken, effectively halting all silk imports. When the United States’ stock of silk depleted, U.S. parachute manufactures began looking for an alternative resource and settled on manmade nylon fabric. This synthetic fiber was first produced in 1935, by Wallace Carothers and it was intended to be a substitute for silk, acknowledging even then U.S. overreliance on Japanese silk imports.\(^6\) While silk became scarce throughout the Second World War, nylon proved to be the ideal replacement for parachute production and other military applications such as flak vests and vehicle tires. In fact, for parachute manufacturing the nylon fiber ranked superior to silk due to its ability as a man-made fabric to be produced readily (as opposed to the long and laborious natural process of silk). It was easier to care for, it had increased elasticity and resistance to mildew, its tensile strength when wet was superior to that of silk, and most significantly, it was cheaper.\(^6\)

The parachute material that Marian Schold wore as she walked down the aisle was made of this very fabric. Both natives of Muskegon, Michigan, Marian F. Schold and Robert L. Bush wed on June 29, 1946 in their hometown (Fig. 25).\(^6\) Her floor-length nylon gown included a ballet neckline, short sleeves, a dropped waist, and gloves, all embellished with white patterned lace (Fig. 26 and 27). A Juliet cap and fingertip-length netting veil completed Marian’s look, which would not have been possible without the groom’s forward thinking. During the Second World War, Robert was a staff sergeant in the 474\(^{th}\) Fighter Group of the 9\(^{th}\) Air Force with the assignment to give support to the First Army as it crossed Europe. While stationed in France,

\(^{6}\) Nylon revolutionized the hosiery industry. Hosiery was a common seductive gift from American GI’s during WWII.


\(^{6}\) Marian was a fashion model.
enemies broke into their supply room, damaging one of their parachutes. Robert was given the parachute as it was deemed unusable due to safety concerns. Throughout his journeys in France, Germany, and Belgium he carried the damaged parachute in his footlocker intending to have a wedding dress made for Marian, his bride-to-be.

After returning to Michigan in the December of 1945, the parachute was spread out in Marion’s backyard and all of the nylon fabric panels with manufacturer writing were cut out. The remaining material was given to a local dressmaker and friend who hand-sewed Marion’s gown as a wedding present to the couple. After the couple married they lived in Muskegon until the fall of 1945 when Robert began attending the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Living off of $90 a month from the GI Bill of Rights, there was not much spare change for formal dresses, so Marian later cut the train off of her wedding dress to make it more appropriate for the occasional dance, once again giving the parachute material a new life. When donating the dress to Ohio State University in 2000, Robert wrote: “After celebrating 53 years of marriage, Marian died on November 8, 1999. It is with a great deal of joy that I donate this wedding dress to the Historic Costume & Textiles Collection at OSU.” Marian’s dress is now a part of the exhibition “And the Bride Wore…” in the Gladys Keller Snowden Gallery.⁶³

Apart from their use of nylon and other more traditional fabrics, some brides took “Make-do and Mend” resourcefulness and unconventionality to an extreme. This can be seen in the case of a plethora of British war brides forced to overcome even scarcer resources and more regulations. Rationing and fair distribution of clothing was introduced in 1941, a year earlier that the U.S., that affected all manufacturing of textiles in Britain—ready-made to couture. During the same year, the June issue of British Vogue remarked, “It behoves a bride to have her head

Fluttering helplessness is a peace-time luxury.”

Elizabeth King who married Rowland Absalom on September 6, 1941 in Hyde Park Square, London, wore a beautifully crafted wedding dress made of curtain fabric (Fig. 28). Lacking enough clothing coupons to purchase a ready-made gown, Elizabeth bought a lightweight, satin curtain material because the rationing regulations did not yet extend to upholstery fabrics. She commissioned Ella Dolling, a London Court dressmaker, to design her wedding gown. Dolling fashioned a floor-length dress, complete with a sweetheart neckline, slightly gathered and puffed sleeves (which were later removed to make a more suitable evening dress), a fitted bodice, and silk net veil attached to a triangular-shaped headdress decorated with fabric flowers. Fittingly, woven into the cream fabric is a pattern of yellow buttercups with green stems, reflecting Elizabeth’s occupation as a florist. Stitched to the inside hem of the dress is a sliver horseshoe for luck (Fig. 29).

Henry Glassie states, “The past is vast, and it is gone. Almost all of it is gone utterly, leaving no trace in the mind or archive. We know the past only through things that chance to exist in the present: old books, broken pots, disturbed memories.” Therefore, these objects, these works of art, these subjects are indispensable to the study of history. Following the ideas of Susanne Küchler and Daniel Miller, authors of *Clothing as Material Culture*, I want to challenge the preconceived notion that clothing is “intrinsically superficial.” Unfortunately, the study of fabrics and textiles is commonly given the label of irrelevant, insignificant, or highly gender specific. Throughout this essay I will continue to make a strong stance against this belief and prove that the parachute wedding dresses of the Second World War play a pivotal role in history through their explicit bridging of world-historical events and the lives of ordinary people and

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their inclusion of diverse cultural layers that bespeak resourcefulness, patriotism, romance, tradition, and sacrifice.

The three parachute dress case studies mentioned in this chapter emphasize the element of resourcefulness during a time of need, illustrating that above all else “brides had to be imaginative and practical” regarding every aspect of their wedding, but most importantly when dreaming up their wedding dress. Bernice and Fred Short’s dress, and presumably Sherwood’s dress, demonstrate the importance of comradery during war and they create a visual parallel between the original parachute and the resulting dress—displaying the process of material transformation. Being fashioned from high quality Japanese silk, Joyce’s dress worn during her marriage to Adrian Reynolds provides an account of silk’s character as a leading material in both war and weddings. Lastly, Marian and Robert Bush’s nylon parachute gown exemplified the fact that if silk was unobtainable, other materials could be utilized in creative ways. Within each of these stories, resourcefulness resounds from every corner, but these works of art “so filled with the human” go beyond the necessity of ingenuity into a representation of the sacrifice, patriotism, and romance felt and experienced by the bride that wore the gown and the groom that offered the parachute.

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Fig. 1: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan Dress Detail*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 2: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Dress Detail*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 3: *Short’s Wedding Day*, 1946. Photographic print. Don F. Pratt Museum, Fort Campbell, Kentucky.
Fig. 4: Carolyn Wagner, *Reserve Parachute*. 2014, Digital photography.

Fig. 5: Carolyn Wagner, *Back of Reserve Parachute*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 6: *Paratrooper training exercises*. Photographic print. Available from: 3 Quarters Today: My Life, my photography, my passions, http://3quarterstoday.com/2012/05/26/honoring-my-dad-the-paratrooper/.

Fig. 7: Carolyn Wagner, *Suspension lines*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 8: Carolyn Wagner, *Label of Parachute Manufacturer*, 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 9: Carolyn Wagner, *Short’s Dress*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 10: Carolyn Wagner, *Short’s Dress Detail*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 11: Carolyn Wagner, *Short's Dress Detail Two*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 12: Carolyn Wagner, *Sherwood’s Dress—Blouse, Skirt, Slip*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 13: Carolyn Wagner, Sherwood’s Dress—Slip Detail. 2014, Digital photography.

Fig. 14: Carolyn Wagner, Sherwood’s Dress—Blouse Detail. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 15: Carolyn Wagner, *Apex/Sherwood’s Dress Comparison*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 16: Carolyn Wagner, Sherwood’s Dress—Slip Detail Two. 2014, Digital photography.

Fig. 18: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan’s Dress—Plain Weave*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 19: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan’s Dress Silk Detail*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 22: “Your Right to a Wedding.” Available from: Bride’s Magazine, Summer 1942, Vol. 8, 33.
Fig. 25: *Bush’s Wedding Day*, 1946. Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio. Available from: https://fashion2fiber.osu.edu/.
Fig. 26: *Bush’s Dress*, 1946. Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio. Available from: https://fashion2fiber.osu.edu/.
Fig. 27: Carolyn Wagner, *Bush Dress Detail*. 2014, Digital photography.
CHAPTER TWO
Wars and Weddings

In 1940, the last full year before U.S. involvement in the Second World War, there were 132.1 million American citizens. Of those citizens, 16.1 million would serve in the war and more than 407,000 American soldiers would die at war. By 1945 one out of every three surviving American servicemen was married. In 1946, the first full year after the Second World War, the marriage rate continued to rise by nearly 50 percent. During that same year, for every 100 couples getting married, 31 were legally divorced — marking the highest divorce rate in U.S. history. By 1950, the American population had grown to 152.3 million people. Over the time period of a single decade, total warfare had produced a society of life, death, marriage, separation, and overall uncertainty. For the men returning from service, this time marks the social, physical, and mental challenge of re-acclimating oneself into civilian life after their identity as a soldier was no longer required. For the women, this transition was filled with a reassessment of their roles in society, the workplace, the home, and the family. As always, extreme and rapid change is never welcome with open arms. Even when transitioning from a period of turmoil and suffering to a time of peace and celebration, there was simultaneously a want to suppress and a reluctance to forget recent events. In this chapter, I will argue that the practice of repurposing parachutes to fashion wedding dresses allows for a marriage of the past.

70 He Has Seen War, directed by Mark Herzog, 2011.
and future, the solider and the civilian, and the worker and the wife. The following three case studies prove that these historic wedding gowns transcend the notion of resourcefulness into a representation of sacrifice, patriotism, and romance.

**Myrtille and Joseph Bilodeau: Foreign War Brides**

Here I am mostly concerned with examples of parachute gowns that were made and used in the U.S., however, I have included one European case study which originates in Merville, France. After hearing the shots fired at the Allied invasion of Normandy, the people of Merville warmly welcomed the American and British soldiers upon their arrival. Many of the G.I.s were giving of their surplus supplies, for most of Merville had been under severe rationing for the last four years. One generous solider, Sergeant Joseph Bilodeau, of Berlin, New Hampshire, regularly gave items to Madame Cocque, who owned a dress boutique across the street from where Joseph was stationed. To thank him, Cocque offered him an invitation to dinner one evening. Conscious of the fact that it would be inappropriate for her and him to dine alone, she also invited an employee of her shop, Myrtille Delassus. At the age of seventeen, Myrtille started dating Joseph. Six months later, and a little over a month after the surrender document was signed by Japanese officials, they were married on October 15, 1945, at a church in Merville. Made from a parachute and by the employees of Madame Cocque’s dress shop, Myrtille’s wedding dress featured a sheath silhouette, long sleeves, a V-neck neckline, a rouched design on the bodice, and a cathedral veil with a headpiece (Fig. 30). While the origins of the parachute that was used to create the dress are uncertain, the thin material would suggest that it was

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originally made for a paratrooper rather than cargo. Myrtille’s dress is now housed at The National WWII Museum in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Although I have so far focused only on the bride’s attire, most peculiar is the fact that this is the only case study in which there is documentation of the groom wearing his military uniform to the ceremony (Fig. 31). Each of the other cases show the groom wearing a suit and the parachute wedding dress adorning the woman is the sole material trace of the recent wartime.73 Perhaps in Joseph Bilodeau’s case, since his wedding to Myrtille occurred only months after the war and it took place away from his native home, his uniform was one of the few formal items of clothing currently in his possession. For the other grooms discussed in this thesis, it is possible that their lack of military insignia reflected an attitude of “mental demobilization” and an attempt to return to a state of normalcy. Rather than sporting clothing that literally and repetitively stood as a marker of war, the parachute dress stood as a physical and metaphorical marker of the transformations that occurred during the war.

Prompted by a 2007 Newsweek cover story on the marriages between Iraqi citizens and American military personnel, since the U.S. invasion, Susan Zeiger, author of Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century, sums up this phenomenon by saying:

In each of the major wars of the last century—World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War—the overseas military service placed U.S. military personnel in sustained contact with young women of both allied and enemy nations. In each of these wars, U.S. soldiers returned home with thousands of foreign-born wives and children. Tens of thousands of allied war brides were officially recognized as a new category of immigrant, their numbers peaking in the aftermath of World War II but continuing through the Cold War era. Thousands of former ‘enemy’ women—Germans, Italians, and Japanese—also met and married U.S. soldiers under conditions of post-war occupation.74

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73 Martin Francis (Associate professor) in discussion with the author, March 2015.
In July 1942, a headline in the armed forces magazine *Yank* read, “Don't Promise Her Anything—Marriage Outside the U.S. Is Out.” Yet, between the years 1942 and 1952 it is estimated that a total of one million American soldiers married foreign women from 50 different countries. In particular, nearly 115,000 of those marriages were the result of American—British romances. Given that young American soldiers faced extensive deployments overseas, they would often seek or find companionship from the local British women. From the perspective of a young British woman, American G.I.s “were like a breath of fresh air.” Their uniforms trumped the unflattering, khaki-colored wool uniforms of the British soldiers, like Sergeant Bilodeau, they were generous with their food and supplies, most were thought to have an easygoing charm, and they were simply nearby and novel. As suggested by the *Yank* headline, such relationships did not go unopposed. Generally disliked by the British public, American soldiers were popularly described as “overfed, oversexed, and over here.” Often the women’s family and/or community would condemn of interactions with such soldiers, which presumably fueled their desire to continue the relationship and agree to marriage. Additionally, there was also the possibility of premarital pregnancy. Between 1939 and 1945, 5.3 million British infants were born, and more than a third of them were illegitimate (granted, American troops were not involved until 1942, and not all of these births were a result of American—British relations).

Despite each of these challenges with foreign relations, the end of the war brought waves of brides to the U.S, which would have exceed the legal limit of 150,000 immigrant aliens per

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77 Jane Mersky Leder, *Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II*, 126.
year. However, on December 28, 1945 the War Brides Act was passed in order to allow foreign spouses, natural children, and adopted children of U.S. military personnel into the United States as non-quota immigrants.\textsuperscript{80} British brides immigrating to America alone reached nearly 70,000 (Fig. 32). Most intriguing is the fact that military ships were quickly converted into vessels specifically designated to transport war brides to the United States. On February 4, 1946, the Argentina carrying 452 British brides (30 of them were pregnant), 173 children, and one war groom landed on the shores of Manhattan. Being the first official war bride contingent, the ship and its passengers were greeted by a crowd including a band, newsmen, photographers, and the mayor, William O'Dwyer, all celebrating and documenting this bizarre event.\textsuperscript{81} War brides would continue to flock in masses to the U.S. throughout 1946. Only three years later, the film \textit{I Was a Male War Bride} was released, portraying a comedic perspective based on this mass migration. Directed by Howard Hawks and starring Cary Grant and Ann Sheridan, the film follows an American—French relationship that begins with aversion, which turns into affection, and ends in an amusing finale where the French officer, Henri Rochard, attempts to impersonate a female army nurse in order to return to the United States with new-found lover Catherine Gates, an officer in the Women’s Army Corps. Although the film depicts war brides in a lighthearted way, it acknowledges the immediate difficulties that were involved with foreign marriages and those that could follow in the years to come as the bride adapted to American society.

Cited in Jane Mersky Leder’s \textit{Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II}, Gibrich Fefferman, veteran member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, stated the bottom-line in regard to war’s effect on relationships and marriage: “War turned up the romance…and

\textsuperscript{80} “War Brides,” http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/war-brides/.
\textsuperscript{81} “USAT Argentina,” http://uswarbrides.com/WW2warbrides/argent.html.
the sex.”82 Both foreign and domestic relationships across the globe developed quickly, escalated to marriage quickly, and at times ended quickly. As the old adage says, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die”—this was their mindset. Nothing is guaranteed during war, so many saw it best to live life hastily and to the fullest. As aforementioned, during wartime American marriage rates soared to unprecedented heights. Before the war, the marriage rate was 11.9 marriages per 1,000 people. By 1942, the first full year of American involvement in the war, the stampede to say ‘I do’ increased the marriage rate to a record 13.2 per 1,000.”83 Although many of these brides would have opted to wear a suit or nice evening dress for a quick informal wedding before the groom was deported, Bride’s Magazine continued to push for the traditional formal wedding. In a 1942 issue, a wedding gown advertisement titled “Weddings as Usual” reads, “Now, even though the pace of life is quickened, weddings go on in the best romantic tradition.” Other ads present scenarios such as this: Only three day to plan your wedding? No problem, we can still make your dream day possible.84 By 1944 the ever-present “What Shall I Wear?” articles take on more of a do-the-best-you-can attitude, noting that often the bride is no longer the one who determines the date, place, or formality of the wedding, but rather that is decided by the groom’s commanding officer. An article by wedding consultant, Barbara T. Morrow, even proposes practical and transportable packages to “Take Your Wedding With You.”85 Although the wedding industry could sell the promise of a suitable dress and ceremony for a hurried wedding, they could not guarantee the permanence of the marriage.

First lady Eleanor Roosevelt addressed this question of longevity on one of her radio broadcasts to warn against “eligible young women” being pressured into “hasty marriages” by

82 Jane Mersky Leder, Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II, 47.
“patriotic fervor,” for it was not uncommon for men and women to make impromptu decisions influenced by the sentiments of patriotism, fear of loss, and hope for the future.\textsuperscript{86} Locally, evidence of such unthoughtful marriages appears through the analysis of wartime wedding invitations, which characteristically list the military title under the name of the groom. An invitation from 1942 reads, “Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle Murdoch announce the marriage of their daughter Anne to Mr. Francis George Baldwin, Jr.” Five years later another invitation to a Cincinnati wedding announces that Mr. and Mrs. Carlisle Murdoch now invite you to the wedding of Anne Murdoch Baldwin to Mr. John B. Hunter, Jr (Fig. 33). Anne’s marriage to Baldwin at the beginning of the United States war effort did not prove everlasting, and their divorce was only one of many.

In 1942, 321,000 couples were legally divorced. By 1945, the number rose to 485,000, and after the first full year of peace in 1946, the total climbed to 610,000 couples (Of course these figures also include non-military divorcees, but the majority had at least one partner fighting overseas).\textsuperscript{87} Sean Kennedy, author of \textit{The Shock of War: Civilian Experience, 1937-1945}, explains the haste to the divorce courts in America by saying: “As in other countries, the excitement and danger of wartime tended to encourage marriage but also facilitated conditions for divorce.”\textsuperscript{88} The pattern was not promising: irrational wartime passions led to rushed marriages which resulted in unstable foundations that could not withstand post-war pressures. For some couples, the likelihood that they would be separated soon ensued rushed marriages. Once on separate continents for long durations, both parties could give in to temptation and partake in affairs that yielded illegitimate children. After the war ended, multiple more factors

\textsuperscript{87} William M. Tuttle, “\textit{Daddy's Gone to War}”: The Second World War in the Lives of America's Children (Oxford University Press, 1995), 219-220.
\textsuperscript{88} Sean Kennedy, \textit{The Shock of War: Civilian Experience, 1937-1945} (University of Toronto Press, 2011), 41.
awaited the couples still standing. Rekindling relations were complicated by accusations or confirmations of distrust and possible future plans were reconfigured for both the wife and husband were changed by the war (the women experienced a newfound independence in the public and domestic domains, and the men had experienced total and utter devastation and destruction which often resulted in physical and mental impairments). A post-war article in Ladies’ Home Journal asked: are you going to accept your husband, or better yet do you want him back? Take a good look at him, because he’s been changed by the war. Author of The Good War: An Oral History of World War II Studs Terkel recounts the unfortunate story of the nurse Betty Bayse Hutchinson who remembered an American soldier who had lost his nose in combat and was then divorced by his wife because of it. Betty recalled, “The doctor wanted her to understand it’ll take time, he’ll get his face back. But they broke up. She couldn’t stand it. That was pretty common.” Each of these factors and more could contribute to the weakening or end of a couple’s marriage. Simply put, it was a formula for failure. By 1950, a million veterans had been divorced. But even against the odds, there were still millions of American men and women who created stable families and futures after the Second World War.

Rosalie and Temple Les Bourland: What’s in a Parachute?

As previously pointed out, between mid-1945 and late-1947, getting married became “the thing to do.” In 1946 the nation’s marriage rate was 16.4 marriages per every 1000 persons, which equates to nearly 2.2 million couples, more than double the number of any prewar year. Katherine Jellison, author of It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-

89 He Has Seen War, directed by Mark Herzog, 2011.
92 Katherine Jellison, It’s Our Day: America’s Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005, 68.
suggests that a marriage trend came in full swing because it was a time to celebrate home and family, for they had survived the Great Depression and a war. “[…] happy marriages would be the foundation of a prosperous and secure postwar society free from the worries of depression and armed conflict and ready for the full realization of the American dream.” Of those getting married around this time were the aforementioned Rosalie Hierholzer and Temple Leslie Bourland. Unlike the majority of the case studies discussed thus far, Rosalie and Les did not know each other before the war and they would likely have never met had it not been for the parachute that saved Les’s life and served as Rosalie’s wedding dress.

Now housed in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington D.C., Rosalie’s white silk wedding dress has a rouched design topped with buttons running down the center of the fitted bodice, small pearls that outline the V-neck neckline, long slender sleeves, an oval train (which includes some of the original parachute seams), and a waltz/ballet length veil to complete the look (Fig. 34). The dress was made by Rosalie’s aunt Lora Hierholzer, whom she was living with at the time. In a letter of correspondence to Priscilla Q. Wood, the then Curator of 20th Century Costume, Rosalie remarks that her aunt salvaged as much of the parachute material as possible, but given Rosalie’s height it was still barely long enough. The unusable material was filled with bullet holes and blood stains from Les’s emergence jump over Germany.

During the Second World War, Les Bourland, a Texas native, served as a radio operator aboard a C-47 Douglas Skytrain transport plane nicknamed “Sleepy Time Gal.” On March 25, 1945, while flying over Germany during Operation Varsity, anti-aircraft fired on Les’s plane

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93 Ibid., 83.
94 Rosalie Bourland to Priscilla Q. Wood.
forcing him and the crew chief to bail over the Rhine at 590 feet in the air.\textsuperscript{95} As they fell the enemy aircraft aimed for the men, but only managed to hit the canopies of the parachutes. Landing near Wesel, Germany, Les suffered a hip injury, and he and his comrade concealed themselves in a foxhole wrapped in the parachutes to stay warm during the cold nights. A few days later the two airmen were discovered by Allied troops and brought back to their base in France.

After the war, Les returned to Texas and was introduced to Rosalie by a mutual friend, Betty. In an interview for the \textit{San Antonio Express-News}, in 2004, Rosalie recalls that Betty said, “I want you to meet him, but I’ve got to tell you, he’s serious and he’s ready to settle down. He’s been there and done that.”\textsuperscript{96} True to Betty’s word, the couple was married at Alamo Heights Methodist Church on November 15, 1945, only three months after their first meeting. During their short courtship and engagement, Les would visit Rosalie while she was living with her Aunt Lora and Uncle Russell in Alamo Heights. On one of the visits, Les brought and showed his trunk full of war souvenirs, which included his war-torn parachute. Upon seeing the thin, white silk, Rosalie’s Aunt Lora decided that she could make her wedding dress out of this material.\textsuperscript{97} Although the ‘slinky’ and bias fabric proved difficult to work with, Lora knew that both Rosalie and Les were in favor of repurposing it and they greatly valued this lifesaving silk.\textsuperscript{98}

By definition a parachute is a piece of equipment that allows both people and things to land safely after leaving an aircraft.\textsuperscript{99} However, to any soldier required to use a parachute during the Second World War, the experience of employing this equipment was never as simplistic as

\textsuperscript{95} The pilot and his co-pilot, David Schooley, were unexpectedly able to fly the plane back to Allied territory.
this one sentence definition. For these soldiers there was a large sense of anxiety and at times thrill associated with the parachute. First and foremost there was the ubiquitous thought: will I survive this jump? At a U.S. Marine Corps paramarines training facility in San Diego California, a sign above the parachute packing room read “Through these portals parachutists pass pack well and pass again,” reminding them that it was their responsibility to pack their parachute correctly to make it to the next day (Fig. 35).¹⁰⁰ Both then and now, injury or death could and can result even from basic training exercises. From the second a solider left the plane to the time they hit the ground, there was a high level of risk involved that few could withstand. As depicted in the HBO series Band of Brothers, at Camp Toccoa, U.S. Army Airborne paratrooper training camp, it was not a rare event for one to deny a jump and be sent home. Of the select few to make it through training, 13,400 American paratroopers jumped into Axis territory shortly after midnight on June 6, 1944—D-Day (Fig. 36). For these men the challenge began even before the plane left the ground. When packed, the amount of required equipment and personal items they carried matched or out massed their body weight, because of this many soldiers had to be pulled or pushed into the plane (Fig. 37). Once in enemy air, shots began firing at the planes and the paratroopers, upon their departure from the aircraft at speeds of 150 miles an hour. For many, as soon as they unclipped from the plane’s static line the intense “prop blast” that met them at the door ripped off much of a soldier’s gear, including the infamous British leg bags designed to hold most of one’s equipment. While dodging falling equipment and enemy fire, the paratrooper then had to slip to avoid falling in trees or conspicuous area.¹⁰¹ Throughout the remainder of the Second World War other jumps followed a similar pattern. The bottom line was whether it was

¹⁰⁰ Towards end of the program they revoked the rule that stated that each marine had to pack their own parachute. The paramarines were never utilized in combat.
¹⁰¹ We Stand Alone Together, directed by Mark Cowen, 2001.
for training purposes, for a planned operation, or for necessary evacuation, the experience of using a parachute was full of anxiety, uncertainty, and thrill, and survival was never guaranteed.

A paratrooper, such as Fred Short, would have gained an in-depth familiarity with parachutes and the process of evacuating a plane so much so that the parachute as a souvenir could stand for an interchangeable and mass-produced item that was a part of everyday life—a symbol of their occupation at war. However, for airmen like Les Bourland, who had probably hoped to never need to use their parachute, the parachute would have been seen as the singular, irreplaceable item that stood between life and death during an unexpected event—a symbol of their life. And for those similar to Adrien Reynolds who discovered a parachute and kept or sent it home, this would have been a chance find that could act as a resource or artifact—a symbol of the occurrence of war. I am by no mean suggesting that there is a hierarchy of importance among the differing case studies, but I am proposing that the exact meaning of each parachute wedding gown is dependent upon the history of the parachute.

I introduced the first chapter with a scene from the HBO miniseries Band of Brothers, but I did not mention how the conversation between paratroopers Captain Lewis Nixon and First Lieutenant Harry F. Welsh concludes. After Harry’s explains that, when they return to England, he intends to send his reserve parachute to his girlfriend for a wedding dress, smirking Nixon says, “Jeez, Harry, I never would have guessed.” Harry unaffected responds, “What? That I’m so sentimental?” Nixon quickly retorts, “No, that you think we're going to make it back to England.” Although Harry is not necessarily teased by Nixon for his intentions, Harry’s initial response would imply that there were sentimental connotations attached to this practice which could have been received by other soldiers as non-masculine. Collecting items of war was not uncommon, but clearly what one collected was taken in to consideration by others. Soldiers
collected and saved everything from lugers, bullets, and knives to the enemy’s watches and teeth. At the end of the war, it was even encouraged for soldiers to take souvenirs home. However, as Russell W. Belk and Melanie Wallendorf point out in “Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity in Collecting,” “collecting makes visible the gender distinctions governing social life,” therefore, gender is largely reflected in what one chooses to collect and in the act of collecting itself.  

(Although collecting usually refers to the act of selectively amassing an interrelated set of multiple items and quite often the same item, I am applying the term in the sense that even though only one parachute was typically saved, it is part of a larger collection unified by their relation to war). According to Belk and Wallendorf, certain objects tend to have either masculine or feminine implications and men and women are often inclined to collect different objects. In 1931, an educational psychologist Paul A. Witty performed a study that suggested that girls were more likely to collect decorative objects, personal things, and household items (i.e. flowers, pictures, jewelry, and souvenirs) and boys were more likely to collect animal and insect parts, objects of war, sporting items, and repair or maintenance objects (i.e. guns, trophies, and tools). By collecting a parachute for the purpose of a wedding dress, soldiers were walking the fine line between Witty’s two gender specific categories and ran the risk of being harassed for it.

Along these same lines, once collected, stored, and saved, an object is granted what Belk and Wallendorf describe as a “non-utilitarian sacred status.” Typically, the object would be intentionally removed from its originally intended setting and purpose in order to be treated as extraordinary and unusable. In the case of the parachute, it is placed in a realm of uselessness only to later be repurposed, used once again, and then return to a permanent state of disuse.

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103 Ibid., 11.
104 Ibid., 7.
(excluding the wedding dresses that were altered after their original use and those worn more than once), all the while maintaining and elevating its sacred status. By analyzing the components of gender and usage, in regard to the act of collecting material objects, the motivations and ramifications behind the soldiers choice of saving a parachute proves to be more complex and unconventional than one might assume.

There is a general pattern to this practice, but no two case studies are exactly the same. However, the common thread seems to be that in some way the collected parachute acts as a memento of war, a reference to a soldier’s time at war. Therefore, through the groom’s act of supplying the wartime parachute as material for the bride to fashion her peacetime wedding dress, he is offering a part of his current identity, for many soldiers identified with and even romanticized the conditions of war. By accepting the fabric, the bride is in turn accepting the veteran’s history, embracing it, and by her own hands (or by those of a close relative or friend) she creates something new from his sacrifice, cementing the past, present, and future together. Katherine Jellison reiterates, “Men of that generation, their identity as WWII vets was very important to who they were. By taking one of their major supplies and turning it into wedding gowns, they took a war artifact and made it into one of the main artifacts of peacetime.”

It seems that while in the groom’s possession the parachute is representative of his history, yet when the bride-to-be is presented with the parachute, the material takes on a representation of a shared history. In this way, the parachute dress acts as a metaphorical and physical marker of the union between man and woman, wartime and peacetime, and male heroism and female form.

Mementos of war such as these parachutes were in many cases the only tactile souvenirs veterans had to remind them of their time as soldiers. For years they were taught how to be a

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soldier, but teaching oneself how to forget and return to civilian life often proved to be the more difficult task. The HBO documentary *He Has Seen War* begins with a post-war film by the War Department describing the challenges the returning soldiers will face. As black and white footage of the war plays, the narrator’s voice states:

> Here is your man. Remember, he isn’t naive anymore. He’s been places. He’s seen things. He has seen and experienced things which should not happen under God, which should not happen under the sun, which should not happen again. Not to his children. Not to his friends. Not to anyone. He has been toughened to withstand these things. He is no longer illusioned. He is no longer a boy. He has seen war.  

Returning home was bittersweet. The fighting was over, but it was replaced with uncertainty. Although many soldiers were met with celebrations and recognitions, they felt aliened from society, unable to relate to the general public or to find empathy. William Manchester, writer and marine veteran recounted that, “It was rather diminishing to return in 1945 and discover that your own parents couldn’t even pronounce the names of the islands you had conquered.”

Veterans were also returning to an unpredictable job market, which for the past four years had been dedicated to the war (90 percent of American jobs during the Second World War were war related). The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, provided the veterans with a variety of benefits including tuition payments for education, low-cost mortgages and low-interest loans, and unemployment compensation for one year. However, as veteran and cartoonist Bill Mauldin illustrates, the homeless veteran was still a widespread and despairing reality (Fig. 38). This is partially due to the aversions many had

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106 Some soldiers romanticized the war and did not want to forget their experiences. To them this was the climax of their lives and all else was gray.
107 *He Has Seen War*, directed by Mark Herzog, 2011.
109 *He Has Seen War*, directed by Mark Herzog, 2011.
110 Peter Drucker, American management expert and author, argued that the G.I. Bill created the informational society, doubling the college enrollment, and allowing housing to become accessible.
toward veterans. It was popularly believed that the veterans had lost all of their individuality during the war, they had been brainwashed, and they could take over. This fear ungrounded in fact kept many veterans from successfully transitioning back into a state of normalcy.

Additionally, beyond any physical setbacks were the emotional and mental effects of the war. General Omar Nelson Bradley, who had led the D-Day invasion and was head of the Veterans Administration, aptly stated “The shooting may be over, but the suffering isn’t. This is the beginning of a struggle for them. This might be their longest war, the individual battle that they are going to have to fight.” During the Second World War, 1.2 million soldiers were discharged from service for mental disabilities, and upon returning home, many more developed post-traumatic stress disorder or rarely spoke about their wartime experiences.

On the home front women willingly stepped into the role of the independent provider for the past four years only to be politely forced back into the domestic sphere, which acted as “[…] a kind of container for a lot of postwar aspirations.”

Author Jane Leder quickly points out that “Society as a whole was happy to get its women back in the home. Americans had never really gotten used to so many women going to work but had grudgingly accepted the phenomenon as a necessity of war.” Almost immediately after the war ended many of the 7 million women that joined the workforce during the war traded in their “Rosie the Riveter” sense of independence for a life as a “happy housewife” in suburbia. Leder describes this occurrence by saying:

In the years after World War II, the collective consciousness of Americans revolved around the virtues of family, the good life, and the status quo. Whether it was getting married, moving to a new home in the suburbs, or raising children, American men and women appeared to be putting the horrors of war and the confusing changes on the home front behind them. Women left the workplace as quickly as they had entered it. There was no longer any room for the single, independent girl or the married career woman.

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112 Ibid., 56.
Men reassumed their position as breadwinner, and prewar social and sexual mores prevailed.\textsuperscript{114}

The postwar flood of ‘I dos’ ushered in the idealized nuclear family as Americans across the U.S. caught “family fever,” beginning what is now referred to as the baby boom. Between 1946 and 1964 nearly 70 million babies were born—the highest birth rate in the U.S. to date.\textsuperscript{115} Similar to the wartime events happening overseas, pre-marital pregnancies made up a large portion of this statistic. Although very little information is available as to the exact numbers of pregnant American brides during and after the war, the treatment of a maternity wedding dress would presumably be very similar to maternity clothing created for everyday wear. While attitudes towards pregnancies were not as extreme as in the Victorian Era when “[…] the pregnant body was considered by polite society to be somewhat repugnant and best kept from view,” the pregnant female form, especially if the child was conceived out of wedlock, was not as overly distinguishable as it is today.\textsuperscript{116} A 1940’s advertisement headliners read “Charming Camouflage for Mothers-to-Be,” reinforcing the need to keep pregnancy discreet (Fig. 39). After the war, similar to the institution of marriage, pregnancy was patriotic. Uncle Sam encouraged couples to raise a large family, for “the nuclear family was as American as the nuclear bomb.”\textsuperscript{117} Therefore, women were presented with the conflicting notion of fulfilling the image of the picturesque, ideal family unit, but to do so discreetly.

Rosalie and Les Bourland too followed this model and started a family. After traveling the world during Les’s military career, the family of four settled in San Antonio, Texas. A few years later, while Les was traveling to manage chambers of commerce in Texas, he had an affair.

\textsuperscript{114} Jane Mersky Leder, \textit{Thanks for the Memories: Love, Sex, and World War II}, 155.
\textsuperscript{117} Alan Petigny, “‘Silent’ Sexual Revolution Began In 1940's and '50s.”
and the couple divorced. After three years apart, Rosalie and Les remarried on July 11, 1972. In the previously mentioned interview in the *San Antonio Express-News*, Rosalie attributed her faith in their relationship to the sight of her parachute wedding dress hanging in the closet.

**Ruth and Claude Hensinger: Wed in White**

In a recent interview with Ruth Hensinger, she fondly recalls her daughter saying in reference to her wedding dress, “That saved daddy’s life and I want to wear it.” After being worn by Ruth on July 19, 1947, Ruth’s daughter and her daughter-in-law both wore her nylon parachute gown (Fig. 40). All three brides walked down the same aisle of Union Lutheran Church in Neffs, Pennsylvania. Ruth jokes that the dress “has a lot of mileage on it,” but she could not be more accurate. On the night of August 20, 1944 Major Claude Hensinger, a B-29 pilot, and his crew were returning to their base in India after completing a bombing mission over Yowata, Japan. During the flight, they experienced technical difficulties and when the plane’s engine caught on fire they were forced to bail out over unoccupied China. After landing on rocks, Claude dislocated his knee and received some minor cuts. That night he wrapped himself in the parachute to sleep. In the morning, the crew reassembled and was housed by friendly Chinese until taken back to the base. Claude eventually sent his nylon parachute back to his mother, who had it dry cleaned after seeing the dirt and bloodstains (which Ruth notes did not completely remove the stains). After the war Claude returned to his hometown of Allentown, Pennsylvania and starting courting Ruth a fellow Union Lutheran Church parishioner whom he had known from a young age. Nearly a year later, in 1947, he proposed to Ruth by presenting her with his parachute and saying, “I’d like you to have you make a wedding dress out of my parachute—it saved my life.” Having learned from her mother and a home economics class, Ruth

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118 Ruth Hensinger in discussion with the author, February 2015.
was an experienced sewer, but at the time she had not heard of others making wedding dresses out of parachutes and she was concerned as to how she was going to make a gown from 16 nylon gores (the triangular fabric panels of the parachute) and all of them were on the bias (a type of textile grain referring to the orientation of the weft and warp threads).\textsuperscript{119} The resulting wedding dress is the most elaborate parachute gown I have discovered.

The top of the dress’s fitted bodice is lined with lace and lies slightly off the shoulders. Shear fabric creates an illusion neckline and from under the lace, long sleeves protrude (Fig. 41). A local seamstress, Hilda Buck, made the bodice and the layered, fingertip veil, and the skirt was sewn by Ruth, herself. By drawing up the original parachute’s vertical seams on eight panels (creating a number of bunched poufs), Ruth designed a dress reminiscent of the antebellum period, with a raised, voluptuous skirt in the front and a chapel train in the back. In the early 40’s, Ruth recalls seeing a wedding dress in a similar style in the windows of Hess Brothers Department Store. During the month of June, the store would often display a number of wedding dresses, but this antebellum style dress left a long lasting impression on Ruth. The dress was modeled after one of the many iconic dresses shown in director Victor Fleming’s 1939 film \textit{Gone with the Wind}. A prewar advertisement in \textit{Bride’s Magazine} states, “[…] we look to that most romantic of sources, ‘Gone With the Wild’ for inspiration […] [it] is just the type that Scarlett O’Hara herself might have worn.”\textsuperscript{120} This is not the first nor is it the last time bridal fashion is guided by the influence of the film industry.

A recent issue of \textit{People Magazine}, title “Dream Day!” covers the long awaited celebrity wedding of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt (Fig. 42). On the cover of the magazine Jolie stands at the base of a white staircase pensively looking down seemingly uncomfortably, as the bold print

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., interview.
\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Bride’s Magazine}, Summer 1937, Vol. 3, 10.
boasts “Exclusive Photos.” There are two major reasons that these photographs are a major selling point: they confirm and validate the ceremony and they show what everyone wants to see—Jolie’s wedding dress. Created by Italian fashion designer Donatella Versace, Jolie’s wedding gown featured a fitted bodice held up by thin straps and gathered at the bust to create a scoop neckline. Often viewed as a nontraditional celebrity, Jolie chose a very traditional white silk satin material, but unorthodoxly had her children’s drawings embroidered into the elongated train and sheer veil (Fig. 43). Celebrity wedding gowns such as this leave a large impression on bridal fashions for years to come. Similarly, another key influence on bridal wear are the wedding dresses worn by royalty.

Most recently, in 2011, during the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge, Prince William and Katherine Middleton, all eyes were on Middleton’s Alexander McQueen satin gown, which breached both the traditional and modern by featuring a sweetheart neckline disguised by the use of elegant lace with a floral motif (Fig. 44). However, this is not the first instance of royal wedding attire influencing the bridal industry at large. In fact, the tradition of the white wedding dress is often credited to Queen Victoria who, in 1840, wore an ivory silk wedding dress adorned with orange blossoms, an ancient symbol of fertility (Fig. 45). Although to wear white was an unusual choice, Queen Victoria was not the first to do this, she did implant the idea in mainstream fashion (by following the fashions of the royal family one showed their allegiance, status, and wealth).

Up until this point, white was a bridal color in the 18th-Century, but not the most prestigious. Edwina Ehrman, Curator of Textiles and Fashion at the

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122 Middleton’s wedding dress was specifically designed by Sarah Burton.
123 Royal wedding influenced continued 1981 with the wedding of Princess Diana and Prince Charles.
124 Edwina Ehrman, “Unveiled” (presentation, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand, December 17, 2011). White was a popular color for wealthy women. It demonstrated wealth because it required servants to keep it clean. Before the white wedding dress, pastel colors with floral designs were a popular choice for the middle class.
Victoria and Albert Museum states that although the color white was and is associated with innocence and purity, these connections made the color more suitable, but the idea of the white wedding dress was primarily driven by fashion.\footnote{Edwina Ehrman, “Unveiled” (presentation, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand, December 17, 2011).}

By the 19th-Century it was believed that the marriage ritual symbolized the rite of passage from youth to adult and it served as the official form of separation from the woman’s family of origin. Beyond the notion of true love, marriages were economically based as a means of raising or maintaining one’s status, power, or wealth. As author of Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns and Curator of Fashion Arts and Textiles at the Cincinnati Art Museum, Cynthia Amnéus, notes, for the bride marriage “was considered a ‘dark leap’ [sic] and ‘the important crisis’ upon which her fate depended.”\footnote{Cynthia Amnéus, Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 2010), 12.} Due to the growing occupational possibilities between 1920 and 1945, a woman’s need to marry primarily for financial security began to diminish. Considering women’s rising ability to live independently during the postwar era, the possibility of having a compassionate marriage was an added benefit. The wife no longer held the sole responsibility of serving her husband. Rather, such a union through marriage was ideally seen as advantageous for both parties.

Between the end of 1945 and throughout 1946 the Cold War had not officially begun and America slipped back into an isolationist movement. As a result of this and their occupation during war, American women seemed to have a brief period in which assertions of female agency flooded the social sphere. There was a common notion that a lower or middle class woman could rise to a higher, or aristocratic, status through once again a marital union, but a chosen rather than required union. Interestingly enough, it may be that the silk parachutes gave a
sort of agency to the brides who utilized them (the majority of whom were from middle class families) in the sense that the use of silk was reserved for the elite. Therefore, although many of these brides did not marry into wealth, their wedding dress did provide them with a visual leap in status. The idea of strong female agency supplemented the royal ideal and happily-ever-after model that took root in the U.S. only years before the Second World War.

The debut of Disney’s Cinderella in 1950 is often associated with the universal emergence of the storybook wedding. Five years later, the Spring Issue of Brides Magazine coined the headline “Be a Cinderella bride and live happily ever after.” Statements such as this fed the wedding fantasies of women that had developed decades before the release of the film. Amnéus postulates that “perhaps the earliest association of a wedding with ‘fairyland’ was that of Consuelo Vanderbilt in 1895,” but by the 1930’s, in wedding advertisements and general discourse, brides were no longer characterized as “solemn,” “innocent,” or “heavenly,” rather such terms were replaced with “fairy princess,” “regal,” “prince charming,” and “when you are queen.”

Royal weddings set these standards for the fairytale dress and marriage ceremony. Both the wedding of Prince George and Princess Marina of Greece, in 1934, and the 1937 coronation of George the VI and Elizabeth contributed to wedding fashions of the late 30’s and 40’s. For the first time wedding headpieces were being referred to as tiaras and the Spring Issue of Bride’s Magazine remarked that such design “embodies all the charm of the English bride and all the

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127 Martin Francis (Associate professor) in discussion with the author, March 2015.
128 Cynthia Amnéus, Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns, 42.
129 Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding (University of California Press, 2003), 44-46.
130 Cynthia Amnéus, Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns, 45.
131 Ibid., 45.
132 Barbara Pierce’s wedding dress, worn during her marriage to President George Bush in 1945 would have also been influential during this time.
glamour of a Coronation Year Wedding.” After the war, bridal fashions were again fueled by royal inspiration with Queen Elizabeth II marriage to Prince Philip of Greece in 1947 (Fig. 46).

Also during this time, financial hardships were gradually beginning to be elevated with the national income increasing by 60 percent and the post-war consumer culture ascended to a new level of prominence. Thus, the fairytale princess and prince notion persisted and heightened after the war. A 1946 summer issue of *Bride’s Magazine* reaffirmed this belief by stating,

> A toast … to you, the beautiful American Bride, with your clear-eyed smile and your head in wedding clouds… you’ll dream your wedding first, then make it come true. Your imagination is the priceless, precious philosopher’s stone that can turn … you to a fairy princess for this most precious day.

This mass consumerism coupled with the ever-present idealization of the fairytale wedding merged with great success for the bridal industry. Jellison explains,

> The young wedding industry’s wartime advertising whetted Middle American’s appetite for the white wedding, while the strong postwar economy and the era’s emerging domestic ideal provided consumers with the financial resources and the ideological rationale to satisfy their hunger.

According to Karen Dunak, author of *As Long as We Both Shall Love: The White Wedding in Postwar America*, the affluent and consumerist society during the post-war years also created the ideal environment for refocusing on the white wedding. She states,

> […] the wedding still served as a recognizable component of American culture and symbolized home, marriage, and stability. As fighting forces returned to the home front, a wedding, marriage, and a family seemed an ideal trifecta for domesticating war-weary

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134 “So personal is this connection that each of the women who worked on Princess Elizabeth of England’s wedding gown embroidered a stand of her own hair into the gown, as a way of embodying her good wishes for the princess bride.” See Carol Wallace, *All Dressed in White: The Irresistible Rise of the American Wedding* (Penguin Books, 2004), 199. Other accounts say that women gave Princess Elizabeth some of their clothing coupons so that she would have enough to get her wedding dress.
135 *Bride’s Magazine*, Summer 1946.
veterans. As the white wedding became ever, more popular, and increasingly was identified as the American way of wedding, difference in wedding style became less prominent. During the postwar years, the white wedding provided a safe, and in some ways natural, vehicle for experimenting with the many social and cultural changes on the horizon.\textsuperscript{137}

The post-war idealization of the royal white wedding based in a consumerist climate set the foundations for future brides. Despite the tremendous cost of a 20th-Century American wedding, which ranges between $20,000 and $30,000, there continue to be “must-have” fairytale factors that brides will go great lengths to achieve.\textsuperscript{138} Amnéus, notes that “Even the most successful and independent women often succumb to the allure of a fairy-tale-style dress that is the culmination of girlhood fantasies.” Of course there are exceptions and outliers, as more and more brides are sporting alternative styles. However, the majority of the West continues to participate in the white fanciful wedding in some form or another.\textsuperscript{139}

For Ruth Hensinger, her parachute wedding dress embodied the traditional white wedding, the notion that bridal fashion was influenced by public figures and film productions, and the idea that this lifesaving vessel could be collected, offered, and transformed for a separate purpose. Ruth recalls that, like most men who fought in the Second World War, Claude never said much about his experiences at war, but each year in August he would remind her on the day that he was forced to bail from his plane and utilize the parachute to safely reach the ground. When asked what it meant to her to be able to wear the parachute material on her wedding day Ruth responded, “The fact that he gave it to me meant a lot. If it did not save his life, he wouldn’t have come home. It was his life.”\textsuperscript{140} Smiling when he first saw the wedding gown, Claude

\textsuperscript{138} Cynthia Amnéus, \textit{Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns}, 15.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{140} Ruth Hensinger in discussion with the author, February 2015.
undoubtedly confirmed that the significance was mutual. Ruth and Claude Hensinger’s story along with Myrtille and Joseph Bilodeau’s and Rosalie and Temple Les Bourland’s account, all reiterate that for both the bride and groom these dresses extended far beyond the necessity of the resource to signify and reflect changing identities, sacrifice, devout nationalism, and a collective history—characteristics which are often absent in today’s bridal fashions.
Fig. 32: British war brides traveling to America. From: Jenel Virden, *Good-bye, Piccadilly: British War Brides in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996. Cover.

Fig. 33: Carolyn Wagner, *Invitation Comparison*. 2014, Digital photography. Cincinnati History Library and Archives, Cincinnati Museum Center, Cincinnati, Ohio.


Fig. 39: *Maternity Wear Advertisement*, 1940’s. What to Expect. Available from: http://www.whattoexpect.com/tools/photolist/100-years-of-maternity-fashion.

Fig. 45: *Queen Victoria’s Dress*, 1840. Jan Austen’s World. Available from: https://janeaustensworld.wordpress.com/tag/queen-victoria/.

CHAPTER THREE

Testimonies and Forecasts

In 2009, Kevin Cotter’s wife of twelve years divorced him, moved out of their home, and purposely left behind one item: her wedding dress. Over the next few years, Cotter used the dress as a pasta strainer, shoe cleaner, soccer goal, tent, shower curtain, fishing net, kite, cape, camouflage, and many other items which were all documented in his book *101 Uses for My Ex-Wife’s Wedding Dress* (By doing this, Cotter ironically inverted the parachute wedding dress practice—instead of repurposing material to make a dress, he repurposed the dress to make various items) (Fig. 47). More recently, in 2014, Shelby Swink’s southern wedding was called off by the groom five days before the ceremony. Instead of getting married on November 1st, as originally planned, Swink, her bridesmaids, and parents ceremoniously trashed her wedding dress with colored paints and feathers (Fig. 48). Both of these trending news stories hint at the fact that, whether it is days before or years after the wedding, for better or for worse the bride’s gown is a narrative garment. In other words, certain articles of clothing have a subjective history, they incite vivid memories for the wearer or viewer, and they can signify a certain time, place, individual, or event. For most, a wedding dress is the quintessential *personal* narrative garment. The same can be said of a parachute wedding dress, however, these dresses not only narrate the lives of the bride and groom, but they extend further into the realm of the *collective* narrative of the events of the Second World War. This is one of several ways in which these dresses differ from contemporary wedding gowns.

Now, it seems, there is a gown for any personal style (styles including ballgown, A-line, trumpet, mermaid, sheath, tea-length, etc.), and although there has been a recent reemergence of
sleeves (attributed to Kate Middleton), the majority of wedding dresses today are strapless or have a low neckline, which was uncommon in the 40s. While fabrics are not being rationed today, less and less material is being utilized for the bodice of the dress. The use of lace (also credited to Middleton), off-white, natural colors, and headbands (credited to the 2013 film The Great Gatsby) or flower crowns are also popular elements of current wedding fashions. Looking at a Pinterest “My dream wedding” board, many of the dresses appear generic and seem to display today’s disposable culture that embraces conformity, commodity, and the brand-new, onetime usage. Thus, the aim of this chapter is two-fold. I will continue to explore the personal histories of each case study through oral testimonies, while discussing the comparison of the parachute gowns to contemporary wedding fashions.

Elizabeth and Edwin Morgan: Collective Memory and No Memory

On March 5, 1998 The Vindicator (a newspaper in Girard, Ohio) published the headline written by Laurie M. Fisher, “She Fell for a Hero, Wed in a Parachute, and Rest is History” and the question, “When does a bridal gown gain historic significance? When it used to be a German parachute.” The article (which draws from provenance material) and a recorded interview by the Columbus Museum of Art, recount Elizabeth “Betty” and Edwin “Doc” Morgan’s story. In 1942, Edwin signed up to be a paratrooper because an additional 50 dollars was added to their stipends. During the same year he entered “jump school” in Fort Benning, Georgia to earn his jump wings. Afterward he was transferred to the 82nd Airborne division, and was soon deported to England. Recalling his participation in the Invasion of Normandy, Edwin said, “I jumped outside Ste-Mere-Eglise around 11:30pm on June 5, 1944. I saw the moon above and below me. I landed in a

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flooded area and thought that I was going to drown.” Fortunately, the water was not too deep and Edwin was able to return to his outfit two days later. After the jump into Holland, during Operation Market-Garden, he was wounded along with six other soldiers and flown back to England. Rejoining his division for the last time, Edwin was sent to France to participate in the Battle of the Bulge.\textsuperscript{142}

At the war ended, he was stationed in Ludwigslust, Germany. While in Ludwigslust Edwin and some of his comrades came across one of the first German war jets located in a burning hanger. It was common for the Germans to set fires to destroy equipment and supplies before retreating. During the interview for the Columbus Museum of Art, he recollects that “The hanger was partially on fire, but we did pull this plane out of the hanger, because it didn’t have no propeller on it, and we never saw a plane with no propeller on it.”\textsuperscript{143} Edwin removed two German parachutes from the plane and later sent them home to his parents. He states:

\begin{quote}
They said we could send souvenirs home, you know, so I sent a bunch of guns home. We had to crate them all up and [I] got this German parachute. [...] When I sent it home to my Mother and Father we didn’t know what [...] we were going to do with it. We never dreamed that [...] [it] would ever be a wedding gown.\textsuperscript{144}
\end{quote}

Although he did not have a motive for collecting and saving the parachutes, Edwin did have an idea of who he was going to marry. Even though the couple did not date when Edwin was in the service, Elizabeth humorously retells a conversation Edwin had with his friend and comrade Cliff McDonald. McDonald made the observation, “‘Geez Doc, you keep getting letters from all these girls.’” Laughing, Edwin clarified, “other girls.” Betty continued quoting McDonald,
“‘Which one do you think you’ll marry?’ And he (Edwin) said, ‘Oh, I’ll probably end up with that farmer across the street.’” Smiling Elizabeth explained, “That was me.”

Within six months of Edwin’s return home, in September 1945, the couple were engaged at Niagara Falls and married at Trinity Lutheran Church in Girard, Ohio. On February 16, 1946, Elizabeth walked down the aisle in an elegant gown made from one of the parachutes that Edwin sent home (Fig. 49). The couple’s personal photos show Edwin and Elizabeth standing in a sea of parachute silk, for Elizabeth’s look featured a dress with long sleeves, a version of a Queen Anne neckline, a button up back, and a cascading cathedral train radiating from their feet, and a long cathedral veil of netting and lace emerging from a headpiece (Fig. 50, 51, and 52). At the time Elizabeth recalls, “Finances were limited, fabrics were in short supply, and wedding gowns were expensive.” Therefore, although she was at first not in favor of using the parachute silk, it proved to be the ideal resource. Elizabeth remembers:

My mother-in-law said ‘Why don’t you have your wedding gown made out of the parachute that Edwin brought home?’ I didn’t think it was a very good idea. It had a lot of gores in it and I didn’t think it would be very pretty. But we took it up to a tailor, Mr. (John) Parva and he said that he could take all the gores out and that he would leave a piece of the material in, which included […] a swastika […] and he left the German soldier’s name and the company that he was in […]. And we only had to pay 18 dollars for it, so that was a very good deal.

The piece of fabric that Parva placed inside of the dress includes the manufacturer’s label, the Luftwaffe insignia (an eagle perched over a swastika with its wings spread out), the date of the manufacture, and as Elizabeth noted the name of the German soldier who was originally issued the parachute (Fig. 53). The gown was donated to Ohio University’s Historic Costume and

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145 Edwin and Elizabeth Morgan, interviewed by Columbus Museum of Art, YouTube, September 23, 2013.
147 Ibid., interview.
148 Edwin and Elizabeth Morgan, interviewed by Columbus Museum of Art, YouTube, September 23, 2013.
149 Laurie M. Fisher, “She fell for a hero, wed in a parachute, and rest is history,” The Vindicator, March 5, 1998.
Textiles Collection in 1998 (Fig. 54), and the collection’s curator, Gayle Strege pointed out that, despite proper preservation, the ink of the label is fading.\footnote{Gayle Strege (OSU Historic Costume and Textiles Collection Curator) in discussion with the author, October 2014. The Morgan’s dress was a part of the exhibition “Wedding Traditions” at the Snowden Gallery in the College of Human Ecology on the Ohio State University Campus in Columbus.}

As Laurie M. Fisher noted in the article in *The Vindicator*, wedding dresses do not typically possess historical significance that spans into the collective memory. In fact, most bride’s today strive for a sense of timelessness, which necessitates the lack of historicity. Furthermore, the element of the brand-new requires buying a never before worn dress to be worn by the bride once on her wedding day and then stored away. There is no memory in the new, and these dresses will remain relevant only as long as the wearer or viewer deems them as such. In today’s disposable culture, there is also little drive to reuse fabrics. Similar to most resources, we frequently treat textiles as assets that will forever be infinitely available. The hand-me-down, now typically sporting a negative connotation, is becoming more and more absent in first-world countries. Especially in regards to wedding dresses, it is becoming exceedingly rare for a bride to choose to wear her mother’s gown for her wedding. Although styles do tend to repeat, seldom are those vintage styles created with repurposed materials. Rather than simply being an illusion of the past, the parachute gowns similar to Elizabeth and Edwin’s, are an actuality that presents and embraces the history of the material, and retains the narratives of the bride and groom as well as the world at large.

After their wedding, Edwin and Elizabeth settled in Girard, Ohio and bore two children. *The Vindicator* reported that at the age of 96, Edwin Morgan passed away on October 4, 2014 at Park Vista Nursing Care in Youngstown, Ohio.\footnote{“Edwin C. ‘Doc’ Morgan.” http://www.vindy.com/news/tributes/2014/oct/08/edwin-c-doc-morga/.} Edwin received several medals for his service,
including a Purple Heart, and at his funeral he was given military honors. Elizabeth Morgan continues to reside at the Youngstown nursing home and her parachute wedding dress continues to be a collective narrative garment and a testament to the meaningful embrace of utilizing the used.

**Rona and Kenneth Cox: Handmade and Made Anonymously**

Although women were not permitted to fight as soldiers during the Second World War, in 1942 a number of organizations were established allowing women to operate military planes and trucks, nurse the wounded and sick, and perform other noncombat jobs, in order to free men for combat. A few of the women’s groups included the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), the Navy’s Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), and the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots (WASP). By the end of the war, more than 288,000 women were in the U.S. Armed Forces. Rona Cox, a classification specialist for B-17 bombers, was one of these women and the only bride (that I discovered) whose dress was made possible by her military occupation. Rona’s story is recounted in a 2014 recorded interview by the *Chicago Tribune* and an accompanying article “WWII Vet's Bridal Gown Indelibly Linked to Her Wartime Experience” written by a reporter for *Chicago Tribune*, Jenniffer Weigel. Rona recalls in the video footage, “[…] that was my job—to associate certain people with certain jobs and see they were sent overseas […]. And at the end of the war it was a case of bringing them back home.” Rona served in the Army Air Corps from 1944 to 1946. When asked why she decided to join, Rona stated:

152 Elizabeth Morgan in discussion with the author, March 2015.
I came from a small [middleclass] family. [I] thought no one was doing anything, so why don’t I go in the Air Corps. […] My boyfriend, from when I was a junior in high school […], had joined and some of his friends had joined a year, or so, before. I was skating at the time, I was involved with the skating, you know, but I left.  

Rona adds in Weigel’s interview, “I loved skating. I started when I was 19 and I skated until I was about 83.” During the war, Rona was stationed in New Mexico and then at an army base in Colorado Springs, Colorado. She remembers, “They sent you around wherever they wanted you to go, on the train of course. We didn’t go in airplanes in those days. The big shots went in the airplanes, but the little guys like me we went on a train.”

The previously mentioned high school boyfriend Rona spoke of was Kenneth Cox, who also grew up on Chicago's West Side during the Depression. Upon joining the army Kenneth became a radioman on a B-29 bomber. Soon after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, on August 6, 1945, Kenneth and nine other airmen went on a reconnaissance mission. Rona states that during the mission, “[Kenneth’s plane] was shot down over the Pacific Ocean. There were ten of them on the mission. They rescued seven and three were lost. Kenneth was in the ocean with just a life vest overnight. […] I said it's a good thing he was a good swimmer!”

When the war ended, Rona said, “We got together again after the war and went right back dancing […] and I went back roller skating. He got a job. I got a job too, and then three years later in 49’ we got married.” The dress Rona wore on their wedding day was made of parachute silk given to her by fellow military employees. Rona recollects:

When we were discharged […], they were bringing things ‘do you want this, do you want that’ cause the army didn’t want them anymore. Somebody knew that I sewed and my mother sewed, and they wanted to know if I wanted some parachute silk. They had

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155 Rona Cox, interviewed by Chicago Tribune, YouTube, March 21, 2014.
157 Ibid.
bundles of it, yards and yards. So, they gave me a whole arm full of parachute silk. So, I brought it home and I said well I don’t know what I’m going to do with this. I said maybe I’ll use it for a wedding dress, never knowing whether I was ever going to get married of course. So, three years later (in 1949) I got married and my mother made the wedding dress for me.\textsuperscript{158}

Rona’s mother, Helen Reynolds, designed and created a dress out of the yards of silk, and the finished product slightly resembles Ruth Hensigner’s antebellum inspired dress. The gown features long sleeves and a scoop neckline embellished with a floral patterned lace that was reused from one of Rona’s grandmother’s hats.\textsuperscript{159} The skirt of the dress begins at the waist and each panel of fabric (formed by two non-original parachute seams) is bunched and hemmed to create multiple swooping forms (Fig. 55). Rona mentioned, “When I see my wedding dress, I think of him [Kenneth], floating overnight in the Pacific Ocean and I’m thankful he didn’t die that day.”\textsuperscript{160}

Rona’s gown was made domestically, specifically for the bride, by someone who knew her, which was characteristic of many wedding dresses during the time and dissimilar to those manufactured today. In the present day, there are few brides who know the specific designer of their dress, where their dress was made, what materials their dress is made from, and whose hands physically crafted their dress (if any). These gowns are interchangeable and there is an immediate disconnect with their material history. According to authors of \textit{The Sari}, Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, the sari is “a lived garment” constantly dynamic, changing as the wearer moves, and never inanimate, distant, or cold.\textsuperscript{161} The highly personal relationship between a woman and her sari could arguably parallel that of a woman and her wedding dress. Although

\textsuperscript{158} Rona Cox, interviewed by \textit{Chicago Tribune}, YouTube, March 21, 2014.
\textsuperscript{159} Jenniffer Weigel, “WWII vet's bridal gown indelibly linked to her wartime experience.”
\textsuperscript{161} Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, \textit{The Sari} (New York: Berg, 2003), 1.
typically the sari is worn for more than one occasion, the dynamic experience of wearing the
wedding dress, the idealization of it, and the selection process could be similar to that of a sari.
Wedding gowns also have the potential to be a lived garment. However, few contemporary
dresses live up to that title because of the inherent divide between material and wearer resulting
from a lack of knowledge of the material’s origins.

Although the popular photo-sharing website Pinterest has recently sparked a wave of “do
it yourself” wedding details, the majority of the circulating ideas focus on being resourceful and
handcrafting everything except for the wedding dress.\textsuperscript{162} Even despite a bride’s attempt to utilize
their creativity rather than their finances, Cynthia Amnéus, author of \textit{Wedded Perfection: Two
Centuries of Wedding Gowns}, estimated that in 2010 the cost of a 20th-century American
wedding, ranged between $20,000 and $30,000.\textsuperscript{163} Comparatively, \textit{Bride’s Magazine} reported in
1946 that the average cost of a formal wedding was $1,830 ($19,000 by today’s currency value)
and an informal wedding was $195 ($2,000 by the current dollar value).\textsuperscript{164} Rather than spending
thousands on a wedding dress that is void of singularity and innate personal value, Rona’s
wedding dress was free of cost and possessed a material history that was both inherently personal
and collective (Fig. 56).

Jenniffer Weigel wrote in the \textit{Chicago Tribune} in March 2014 that Kenneth died from a
heart attack on January 1, 1988. After serving in the American Legion and American Legion
Auxiliary for over sixty years, Rona retired at the age of 90 and remained a resident in Hodgkins,
Illinois. The American Legion’s National Headquarters is slated to receive Rona’s wedding
dress.

\textsuperscript{162} Informal weddings (or the appearance of such) and personal, but polished, touches are currently trending.
\textsuperscript{163} Cynthia Amnéus, \textit{Wedded Perfection: Two Centuries of Wedding Gowns} (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum,
2010), 15.
\textsuperscript{164} Olivia Young, “Post Modern: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a dress?”, 2012, http://thepost.ohiou.edu/content/post-
modern-its-bird-its-plane-its-dress.
Barbara and Jack Ley: Then and Now

No story is more fitting to be the last case study than that of Barbara and Jack Ley. I first came across their involvement in this practice through Ohio University’s *The Post*. The 2012 article “Post Modern: It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a dress?” was written by previous student Olivia Young, and featured the account of the Ley’s parachute wedding dress based off of Barbara’s testimony. I was fortunate enough to visit Barbara in Chauncey, Ohio, and hear her story firsthand. Although it was unexpected, I walked away from the interview in awe of Barbara’s endearing, sincere, and strong character, her elegant and witty use of words (at the age of 87), and the fact that her recollections seamlessly reinforced many of the topics discussed in this essay.

Although Barbara and Jack were both Ohio natives, they met after the Second World War at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond, Kentucky. As a part of a ritual there the upperclassmen would form a row of chairs in the cafeteria and the freshmen would have to walk the gauntlet as the guys proceeded to catcall at the girls. It was then that Barbara first met Jack. Afterwards, during Christmas time, Jack would give Barbara a ride to and from Ohio. The couple dated for two years before getting married on February 10, 1948 at St. Mark’s Church in Richmond, Kentucky (Fig. 57). Due to a blizzard, road conditions were poor resulting in a very intimate ceremony with only a few college friends and some parishioners of the church in attendance. Barbara’s dress was fashioned from Jack’s emergency parachute that he carried with him throughout the war.

During the Second World War, Jack was a U.S. Army Air Force piolet of C-47s cargo planes in the China Burma India Theater. Unlike many veterans, Barbara recalls Jack telling her a few stories from his time in the service. Barbara relayed two of his experiences. The first was
about a group of soldiers who were ordered to accompany Jack’s crew on one of their flights. During the flight the soldiers played a sort of poker game. The loser of the game was forced to jump from the plane without a parachute. Being in the cockpit, Jack was unaware that this was occurring, but when the plane landed they were short one person and the officer in charge of the group of soldiers was very nonchalant about the whole matter. They second story occurred when Jack’s unit was assigned to a mission in a Chinese village that was run by American priests. Most of the priests had fled except for one elderly priest who remained and they were ordered to retrieve him. When the troops arrived, the village people relayed to Jack (through an interpreter) that the Japanese had invaded the village. Most of the villagers ran to safety, but left many of the children with the elderly American priest (presumably they assumed the children would not be harmed). When the villagers returned they found that the Japanese had shot all of the children and the priest and placed their bodies in the village water fountain. Barbara recalled Jack’s disbelief in the Japanese soldier’s cruelty. Experiences such as this undoubtable left a lasting impression on Jack and the recounting of those experiences stayed with Barbara.

When asked about how the war affected her everyday life, Barbara compared the feeling to the *Peanuts* comic strip character Pig-Pen who is followed by a ubiquitous cloud of dust and dirt that remains with him wherever he goes. She recalls, “In the back of your mind there was always the thought of your loved ones.” For Barbara, her thoughts lingered on her brother and her fiancé who was killed at Iwo Jima in 1942. She states:

We made the best of it and we’d get together if somebody got married or someone came home on leave. We’d always have a happy time, but I know when people left and went home, they felt sad. My mom did, because my brother was in the service. You did the best you could. You had to go ahead and work. I worked in a war assets office—an army depot in Sharonville.

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165 Barbara Ley in discussion with the author, February 28, 2015.
166 Ibid.
At the depot Barbara kept track of the surplus items, mainly toilets and tires. Each object was accounted for, because people were desperate and it was not uncommon for some to try to steal war assets. Elaborating on the social climate during the war, Barbara continues:

> It made people together, we all had a common goal and everybody would work together. As far as saving tin foil or any kind of thing that we could recycle was always done by everybody. It was a common goal and the people worked together, and especially if you lived in a small community. If someone received a telegram about their loved one you went and visited them. You didn’t let it go. You dropped whatever you were doing and went to their house, gave them a hug, wished them the best, and cried with them if you knew the person. So people were bonded because we had a common goal. We don’t have that today. Now, I don’t wish for a war so that we do have it, but it would be nice if people were a little more loving to each other.\(^{167}\)

Upon returning to the United States after the war, Jack brought back a number of souvenirs including his parachute, a Chinese boat shaped sand pen made of rosewood, and two rings, one with a red and one with a blue glass jewel made from the lights of a Chinese runway (Fig. 58). The parachute and rings were gifted to Barbara. Even three years after the war, resources were still hard to come by. Therefore, when Mary, a local seamstress and Barbara’s good friend, inquired if the couple had any material for the wedding dress, Barbara was at a loss, but Jack offered that he had a parachute. After discerning that the parachute material was white silk, Mary was keen on the idea of utilizing it. Although at the time Barbara, like Ruth Hensinger, did not have any prior knowledge of other brides who also repurposed parachute silk, she did have faith in Mary’s abilities.

The resulting wedding gown featured long sleeves, a V-neck neckline bordered by pleating, a pointed Basque waistline, bunched material on the left and right sides (similar in appearance to the gathered fabric on the hips of 1700s gowns), and a chapel train (Fig. 59, 60, 61, and 62). Mary also crafted a slip for underneath the dress, a veil, and a Christmas tree skirt.

\(^{167}\) Ibid.
all out of the parachute silk, and all for only ten dollars. Although Mary devised the idea of using the parachute, Jack took the initial step by offering his parachute as a material for the wedding dress. This act meant a lot to Barbara because, “[…] he treasured things from his air force days [and she] felt very honored to have it.” She continued to elaborate on the meaning of the dress by saying:

That was a part of his life that I never knew, because I didn’t know him when he was in the service and by giving me the parachute he included me in that part.” Patting the dress she said, “I felt more a part of him, because he offered this to me. It was like a real gift. I felt very proud that he would even think of it.”

Barbara recalls Jack telling her what he thought when he first saw the dress: “I couldn’t believe this beautiful woman was coming down the aisle in the beautiful dress to be my beautiful bride.”

When asked about current wedding dress styles, Barbara comments, “When I see people come into a church, I don’t partially want to see shoulders and cleavage. That’s for the beach or home alone. It’s not for a church. I think the dresses of so many of them are not modest.” When asked this same question, Ruth Hensinger echoes this notion: “Today the tops are bare [and] you didn’t bare yourself then.” As the previous case studies have shown, in the 1940s, it was common to have a modest wedding dress, especially for women who were married in a church. Acknowledging the changing social practices, Barbara comically stated: “Some wedding dresses are just beautiful, but (gesturing to her chest) from here down. […] Why do they have to expose everything?”

After Barbara and Jack’s wedding, the couple moved to Athens, Ohio, in the 1950s, because Jack was offered a position as a physical-education teacher at Chauncey Dover Elementary and was later offered the position of principle at Shade Elementary. Although

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168 Ibid.
169 Ruth Hensinger in discussion with the author, February 2015.
Barbara was not able to complete her studies in education at Eastern Kentucky University, while in Athens, she worked for Ohio University as a secretary and devised a plan where she could enroll in one class each semester. After 50 years, she finished a degree in psychology and graduated in 1999. During their 36 years of marriage, Barbara and Jack bore six children, and in 1981 they divorced. Before Jack died in 2003, the couple remained close, and today Barbara speaks of him and their time together with the utmost honor and respect.

Barbara’s dress was recently featured in the Athens County Historic Society exhibit of wedding dresses “Something Borrowed, Something Blue”, and today it resides with Barbara in Chauncey, Ohio (Fig. 63). From the handmade seams by a local seamstress to the meaning that the dress holds for Barbara, Jack and Barbara Ley’s wedding gown and story intertwines many of the major characteristics found in the separate parachute wedding dress case studies.

In the television sitcom *Friends*, there is an episode in which all three main female characters (Rachel Green, Monica Geller, and Phoebe Buffay) find themselves sitting together on a couch in wedding dresses (Fig. 64). Although only one of the dresses was worn on the wedding day of one of these women (the others were borrowed), each character remarks how wearing the dress somehow eases their current situation. Similarly, Beth Py-Lieberman, a journalist for the *Smithsonian Magazine* website writes, in the article “June: A Time for Weddings and Wedding Tales: A wedding dress made from a WWII parachute makes for a sweet story”:

I recently celebrated my 24th-wedding anniversary by doing something rather silly. I put on my wedding dress. I do this every year. I shake it out of its box and slip it on, and parade around my bedroom, just for fun. This year the zipper was a little bit sticky, so I’ll be eating salads for awhile.170

Both of these instances suggest that, although re-wearing one’s own gown or momentarily wearing a new or borrowed gown may seem ridiculous at first, for many women the gown is full of nostalgia and possibilities. The underlying premise is that there is something innate about a wedding dress that appeals or “calls” to us. A large portion of this appeal is perhaps due to the appearance of oneself in an extraordinary garment, but also as a result of viewing the dress as a personal narrative garment able to incite subjective memories.

Today’s disposable culture promotes a lack of material memory—the newer the better. However, as the stories of Elizabeth and Edwin Morgan, Rona and Kenneth Cox, and Barbara and Jack Ley have showed, wedding dresses can take on an aspect of enduring collective memory, which entwines lives other than just those of the bride and groom. Oral testimonies of those who participated in the practice of repurposing parachutes to create wedding gowns are thus of paramount importance. Urgent work still needs to be done to discover and preserve currently unknown cases both in the U.S. and abroad. The different values conveyed in contemporary wedding dresses, as a result of changing social practices over the past 70 years, now highlight more than ever the singularity, historicity, modesty, and collective memory present and alive in the parachute wedding gowns of the Second World War.

Fig. 49: Morgan’s Dress, 1946. Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio. Available from: https://fashion2fiber.osu.edu/.
Fig. 50: Morgan’s Wedding Day, 1946. Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio. Available from: https://fashion2fiber.osu.edu/.
Fig. 51: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan’s Dress Detail*. 2014, Digital photography.

Fig. 52: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan’s Dress Detail Two*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 53: Carolyn Wagner, *Morgan’s Dress Detail—German Label*. 2014, Digital photography.
Fig. 54: Elizabeth and Edwin Morgan at the exhibition “Wedding Traditions” at Ohio State University. Ohio State University’s Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, Columbus, Ohio.
Fig. 55: Cox’s Wedding Day, 1949. Chicago Tribune. Available from:
http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2014-03-23/features/ct-sun-0323-rona-cox-20140323_1_wedding-
dress-wedding-gown-wwii-vet.
Fig. 57: Ley Wedding Dress, 1948. Athens County Historical Society and Museum, Athens, Ohio.
Fig. 58: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Ring*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 59: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Wedding Dress Detail*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 60: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Wedding Dress Detail Two*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 61: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Wedding Dress Detail Three*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 62: Carolyn Wagner, *Ley Wedding Dress Detail Four*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 63: Carolyn Wagner, *Barbara Ley and Wedding Dress*. 2015, Digital photography.
Fig. 64: “Friends” characters in wedding dresses, 1998. Available from: http://friends.wikia.com/wiki/The_One_With_All_The_Wedding_Dresses.
CONCLUSION

In her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010), Jane Bennett argues that all matter, human or unhuman, is alive and that it bears what she terms “vital materiality.” Although Bennett focuses on the object in relation to the unnerving environmental changes that are occurring in today’s world, at the core of her argument is the notion that all matter is living, interrelated, and actively affecting the world around it. Bennett labels this notion “Thing-Power.” She defines Thing-Power as “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” According to Bennett, material objects have lives of their own which “call” us; they also have the capacity to affect lives beyond their own—the lives of their possessors, the lives of other objects, and the lives of any active body linked to the multifaceted network of interrelations. The bottom line is that these things and objects, or perhaps works of art (as Henry Glassie would describe a thing created with wholehearted human intention and commitment) and subjects (as Robert Plant Armstrong would define an object “so filled with the human”) all make a difference in this world. They are not masses lacking in significance and they are not simply governed by humans. They are vibrant material creations with lives and histories that are worth telling and remarking.

Exploring this facet of material culture, I have recorded and examined nine case studies of men and women repurposing military parachute silk for a wedding dress designed and worn between 1945 and 1949. These accounts show that parachute wedding gowns are among the living material items that are saturated with human history, attesting to the capacity of objects to change lives. Specifically in relation to clothing as active agents, English writer Virginia Woolf

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states, “There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them […] they mold our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.”\textsuperscript{172} This statement is validated by the parachute wedding dresses I have discussed in this study.

In Chapter One, the cases of Bernice and Fred Short, Joyce and Adrian Reynolds, and Marian and Robert Bush demonstrated the material processes of transformation, highlighting the significance of silk as a material used for both parachutes and wedding dresses, and the uses of other materials, such as nylon. These stories echo the role of resourcefulness in this practice. In Chapter Two, the accounts of Myrtille and Joseph Bilodeau, Rosalie and Temple Les Bourland, and Ruth and Claude Hensinger explore the effect of war on marital relationships, reflect the phenomenon of war brides and soaring marriage and divorce rates, and point to the parachute wedding dress as a marker of the bride’s and groom’s changing identities. Lastly, in Chapter Three, the oral testimonies of Elizabeth and Edwin Morgan, Rona and Kenneth Cox, and Barbara and Jack Ley emphasize the singular historical resonance of these gowns, which are characteristics that are often absent in today’s bridal fashions. In today’s culture, wedding dresses are often rendered as a commodity with little or no reference to collective memory.

Yet, the website *Offbeat Bride* showcases a few brides who have recently embraced the historical or handcrafted wedding dress.\textsuperscript{173} Brides featured include those who chose a gown that had been worn by three generations within their family, those who wore a grandmother’s dress as a way to remember and honor the deceased family member, and those who designed and crafted their wedding gown by hand.\textsuperscript{174} These dresses, like the parachute wedding gowns of the Second

\textsuperscript{172} Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1956), 188.
World War, point to living histories and collective memories that will outlast the lives of the wearer.

Henry Glassie writes, “The courageous act of history is the act of the historian who ignores most people and events while selecting a tiny number in order to speak usefully about the human condition.”175 The men and women who contributed to the practice of parachute wedding dresses are not celebrities. They are not of the elite. Their stories are not well-known. They are ordinary people contributing extraordinary objects to the field of material culture. Deliberate steps were taken by the couples and museum curators to be sure that this material practice is not forgotten. Glassie writes:

Our responsibility is to keep the idea of art wide and useful, so that the old man’s basket, the kid’s chopped coupe, the old lady’s beautiful kitchen composed of cheap goods, and our own earnest writings will be taken seriously. The job is to get up, go out, and find the things that will help us learn how others manage in the world we share. We need to learn about their work and values so we can improve our own. We need to meet them, joining in appreciation of their creations, in hatred of the forces that thwart them, overcoming our separation in a oneness of humanity.176

Here, in the same spirit, I have sought to share the stories preserved in the parachute wedding gowns of the Second World War, and to position these vibrant material objects within their pivotal roles in a widened understanding of material history and culture.

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