

The Intimate Ironies of the Wifey: Material Religion and the Body

A discussion with Ellen Amster, Dusty Gavin & Suzanne van Geuns

- 1 In August 2020, Zoom was still something of a strange place. Like the gender performances we summoned as we spoke—the wife and the wifey, the artist and the influencer—Zoom evokes intimacy as well as expanse. Our contributions took us from the familiarity of scent to the spread of colonial space/time, pulling us into Black vernacular culture and “linking” us to divine power through the digital. As we saw our heads appearing side by side, Toronto (Suzanne van Geuns), New Haven (Dustin Gavin), and Hamilton (Ellen Amster) suddenly close enough to touch, we were struck by the ironies that stack up in the gender performances we discussed. Continually drawing in and refusing their audiences, they never quite stay fixed in the frame.

Key words

- 2 Gender performances as openings or windows—into colonial space/time, into Black vernacular culture, into divine power
- 3 Intimacy—of the body, its smells and familiarities, of affiliation and connection as gendered performances
- 4 Space—as calling on religious histories, gendered embodiment as enmeshment with space, as existing online in dynamics of perusing/browsing, as circulation in or out of control
- 5 Irony—gender performance and irony as they become possible by taking on the perspective of the watching audience, humor as happening through being a gender and not being it, performances that are always removed from their audience, performances that are always already refusing any other perspective

Edited transcript Zoom call

- 6 **Suus:** [00:00:07] All right, go. We can start shining!
- 7 **Ellen:** [00:00:13] I can start.
- 8 **Suus:** [00:00:15] Sure.
- 9 **Dustin:** [00:00:16] Sure.
- 10 **Ellen:** [00:00:17] So my slide is about Lalla Essaydi, who is a Moroccan visual artist. Her name means Madam Sir, and she says explicitly in her artist’s statement that she draws on male languages of Orientalist painting and Islamic calligraphy in order to

create women-centered art. I didn't emphasize that in the slide because there wasn't enough space. For religious studies, I focus on another aspect of her work, which is the ways in which she creates place. She calls her body a converging territory between east and west and between past and present. In her images, like the ones I showed you, the woman becomes part of the house: her clothing looks like the fabrics or the tile work in the house, so that she literally becomes part of the place. This is a realization of an Islamic concept, also demonstrated in Sufi shrines, in which a person becomes an opening to God in the world when they are buried.

- 11 In terms of the ways in which I see our pieces fitting together, I see the common theme that the material of religion is about the body, representation of the body, the body and space. Suus has Bible hair accessories, Dustin has *Wifey*—a physical fragrance. Dustin also has a picture of Kim Kardashian's body. And there's an allusion to food with this little candy that she's sitting on. In all these ways, the body or the processes of the body are being referred to through the rendering of the female body. The author is trying to define womanhood and women's identity, getting to Suus's point, but the author or artist is also translating a religious concept to the contemporary world through the body—making the abstract concrete.
- 12 The themes I saw were biblical womanhood and the *wifey*: both a wife as a good wife and then also this different and somewhat historical concept of the *wifey*. And then the third theme is this idea of Sufi Islamic sacred. What is the sacred space? That's it for me.
- 13 **Suus:** [00:03:12] That's great, thank you. I'll jump in here, because I see an interesting connection to what you wrote in your piece about the dead bodies of holy people as openings to God. The women I study will often say that their goal is for the blog to be less of them and more of Jesus, emphasizing that they are making themselves into a channel for divine power. When they pass on that divine power to other people, that's a really good thing—the more they can make themselves into that kind of opening, the better. I think we can think about this in general terms. What sort of power comes from being a transmitter or a “link” to something else? A media question that is interesting in relation to Kim Kardashian, too. Is the *wifey* someone who gains power, or even just proximity to power, by being its window or its channel?
- 14 **Ellen:** [00:04:43] Did you want to say a bit more about your piece?
- 15 **Suus:** [00:04:47] Oh, yeah, sure. I'm really interested in this idea of stickiness and affiliation, and the Internet as a place where that can be monetized and rewarded. These women fuse together and *affiliate* these different systems of circulation. One is the Internet economy, which works by installing cookies on a particular user and then those cookies will kind of survey the user as they browse online, bringing in money by following their movements. But there's also religious circulation happening, with these women working to model and pass around something other than themselves. Their blog posts always repeat: “I find it actually very hard to smile at my husband, I need divine grace and intervention to be able to summon or model Christ for my husband in how I smile at him.”
- 16 My interest is in how the coded layer of cookies fuses with the theological layer of saying

this is how women should be. People often think that influencers are selling themselves. For the women I study, it's very clear that they're actually not selling the self so much as they're selling their ability to be a link, their ability to affiliate. And I think that is a relevant distinction in religious economies, too.

- 17 **Dustin:** [00:06:58] The one word that I think runs through all of our topics is intimacy. I'm thinking of what to do with how intimacy is gendered, and what religion may have to do with this gendered nature of being intimate. The choice to do Kim and the fragrance comes from how I think personally about fragrances and how important fragrances are to me. That is mostly about some intimacy with my own body, but also the bodies that I come in contact with. What does it mean to be an intimate body and to engage with other bodies?
- 18 With Kim Kardashian in particular, what does it mean when all your engagement is your body? This is the example of smell, but what does it mean when you're a body in constant engagement, the body as the pieces of your life? What does it mean to move through life and being this idea of a fleshy sort of body? I was also thinking about space and how we craft and mesh with spaces, how we become different spaces, how we become a space in between our different projects. In my mind, that flows through all of the projects, this idea of engaging with and becoming or being one with a space, and what that has to do with holiness and sacredness. What is sacred when you're claiming a space?
- 19 **Suus:** [00:09:19] Yeah, that is really interesting. I am thinking now of the way these blogs are always saying "welcome and settle down with a cup of tea, come sit on my porch." The blog is ostensibly a diary, a story of the self. Yet it also becomes a place where we go as we're "surfing." That is very thought-provoking for me—while blogs feel less physical, we do actually move from place to place online, and they are bounded sites in a network.
- 20 **Ellen:** [00:09:55] Dustin, can you talk a little bit about your project? Why did you choose that particular image and that particular thing?
- 21 **Dustin:** [00:10:15] I picked the thing and the image as a nod to different ideas of nostalgia and memory. The heart candy—I'm also thinking about production and consumption and capitalism, and the heart candy taps into nostalgia. I have also been thinking a lot about intimacy and smell. A lot of my work is in reality TV. I deal with the Housewives franchise, and I'm always asking: What does it mean in the contemporary world to be a housewife? What is that role? How is that defined?
- 22 The contrast between the housewife as an idea from Protestant Christianity and her claim to the role of wifey, in relation to how I came to understand the term "wifey," is really interesting to me. I think she does embody that role, this idea and aesthetic of the ride-or-die chick. I wanted to play with the fact that this demarcation of the wifey is very much still wife, but remixed. It's the colors of a wife, maybe with a different sort of texture. I wanted to play with whatever that texture is—what is it? What happens when we add that "y" at the end? Why does it change when the form is still the same? A lot of what Kim Kardashian does—she is a cultural reset sort of person, someone who does

things that make you question the nature of terms. I wanted to question the term that she claimed, wifey, from a completely different sort of realm and world.

- 23 **Suus:** [00:13:02] The super white conservative Christian bloggers in my research would be upset at the “y” being necessary.
- 24 **Dustin:** [00:13:30] I think it’s also interesting to me precisely because the wifey is not a wife. Wifey is an attitude, it’s an idea. Your girlfriend can be wifey. I wanted to play with that a bit. She’s not exactly a wife, necessarily. I think her categorization is a bit broader than wife; she’s the person that you can depend on almost. Wifey’s almost like having your cake and eating it, too.
- 25 **Ellen:** [00:14:13] Is she part of the Kardashian appropriation of Black culture?
- 26 **Dustin:** [00:14:18] Oh definitely. The heart candies are now all words like bae; bae is something that was completely co-opted. I don’t remember a time I did not say bae. In the same way, I’ve never not known about having a squad. When it became a thing around early 2010 I was like, oh, that’s a thing now? To have a squad? I think it’s definitely a part of that conversation, a sort of sanitisation or a selling of Black popular vernacular culture. She’s definitely in that.
- 27 But that’s also her engine—that’s how she makes money. She does it so well, never saying too much. It’s always just a tag, it’s the wifey. Everything we’re doing with the term I’m making up, and she knows that we can do that. I think that’s what gives her space. She can just throw something out there and if she steps back from the crowd far enough—she’s always far enough from it that there’s nothing that happens with it.
- 28 **Suus:** [00:15:47] It’s an Internet thing, too, right? It’s not just Kim. It’s also that Black vernacular is a particular currency online. There’s this really cool book by André Brock, *Distributed Blackness*, about Black Twitter and Black Internet cultures and how they spread out. Maybe Kim as the influencer of all influencers has her own role in that ecosystem.
- 29 **Ellen:** [00:16:36] One last thought and then, unfortunately, I have to run to my student. In both of your projects, femininity or feminine identity is developed in relation to a man. This Lalla Essaydi character is part of a larger project on transvestism. I found that in colonial North Africa, there are all these transvestites, people dressing up as other genders, as other races.
- 30 And then there’s all these postcolonial artists that use transvestism to deconstruct the category itself. On the one hand, Lalla Essaydi appropriates aspects of what has traditionally been male for a performance. That’s the thing about drag. It’s a performative identity, in which you, the viewer, know what’s supposed to be feminine and what’s supposed to be masculine and see that it’s all mashed up. Each of your projects relates to a man or the masculine, and involves performance. They’re all performing this gendered identity.
- 31 **Suus:** [00:18:47] What are responses to this artist’s work?

- 32 **Ellen:** [00:18:57] I think there are a lot of people who like it. I didn't put this in my piece, but she'll take a really famous painting, like the *Odalisque*, and restage it but with a real woman. The woman is wearing a white drape, so she doesn't have her boobs hanging out, which is what the French painters always have. On the fabric, she writes pages of her own diary and calligraphy, in Arabic. And then the woman is just like looking at you, right? So instead of these drugged, blissed-out European paintings, you have this woman who is looking right in your soul, staring right at you. So there are some people that say, oh, you're just repackaging this Orientalist stuff to make a buck. And she says no, I'm trying to use it to subvert it. But I think there are some people who will say that she's just making pretty pictures, and making people feel comfy, seeing the harem all over again.
- 33 **Suus:** [00:20:16] That's interesting—the performance can't be too close to some presumed original or it becomes problematic and fraught.
- 34 **Ellen:** [00:20:26] Or they don't think it's ironic or that it has to do with camp or irony around what's straight and what's not.
- 35 **Suus:** [00:20:38] Oh I think that's really interesting: is the wifey an ironic wife?
- 36 **Dustin:** [00:20:43] What does it mean to try to subvert an original? What sort of problems do you get into when you do that? It's always about the audience. Subversion is just difficult in general, because it's so dependent on a sort of original document.
- 37 **Suus:** [00:21:10] That arises especially once things start traveling, of course. If you do something, everyone in the audience knows the context and it's situated. But if you become somebody like Kim Kardashian, it's massive circulation either way, and you can't control whether the audience will see irony or not. I can definitely say that for most of the women I study, there is very little irony going on. There's a rather extreme earnestness, which is the other side of the coin—a particular gender performance where there can be no irony. It can't come in because it would be dangerous.
- 38 **Ellen:** [00:21:58] Is there any humor?
- 39 **Suus:** [00:22:04] Maybe I'm just not enlightened enough to grasp it. There's lots of “the kids were being so funny,” but very little ironizing, where people say “I know what this looks like and I'm joking with you about it.” There's almost none of that. Nah. They'll sometimes say that they get approached in supermarkets for having many kids, and then they will take on the perspective of the audience—I know what this looks like to you. But it always pivots to actually, you are wrong for seeing this, for seeing something strange instead of seeing the way things should be. So even when that shift of perspective happens, it doesn't actually. It can only strengthen the idea of being the true remnant, the last people still standing, holding on to what's right. A lot of that type of language.
- 40 **Ellen:** [00:23:06] I'm so sorry I have to run to my student, because you're helping me think! These different figures in the colonial context are appropriating what they are appropriating for a performance, riffing on this past in a way that is sometimes humorous or takes power. It has to do with this sense of “I'm me and not me at the same time.” And you can see both of those realities. Whereas these women say there's

one way that's right and everything else is wrong, and I'm at war with the world. This is my worldview and everything has to be in it. Anything that's not is a threat or bad or whatever. There can be no humor then.

- 41 There's another artist that I'm really interested in, a comedian called Gad Elmaleh. He has this stand-up called "The Other is Me," and in part of it, he dresses as his own Moroccan grandma. He's a Moroccan, Jewish, French Canadian comic. And he wears a headscarf and he's shouting, he's pretending to be his grandma. He wears fuzzy slippers, hairy legs, and an apron, yelling and jumping between French and Arabic. So, you know, he's not really his grandma—he sort of is, but he also isn't. By doing this at the same time, it's funny.
- 42 Achille Mbembe talks about humor as the way to get one up on power, to bust down power. If you can make fun of it, if you can twist it, if you can ironize it, you can master it a little bit. So there's something about the presence and the absence of humor—I haven't figured out what it is or what it means, but it seems to carry weight here. I'll let you guys go. Thank you so much for organizing, I'm just under such a tsunami of stuff that it's been bananas.
- 43 **Suus:** [00:25:40] Honestly, I feel like we killed it, in a very short time frame.
- 44 **Dustin:** [00:25:46] I think so, too. We got everything in and it's probably better that we were rushed, almost, because things are probably quite tight.
- 45 **Suus:** [00:25:56] Getting down to business!

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