

# Complicit Visits in the Space of Jewish-Muslim-Queer

Adi Saleem and Scott Spector

I

*Ilch bin Prinz Jussuf, und ziehe durch die Lande,-  
Mein Herz ist eine goldene Moschee,  
Und meine Sehnsucht betet immerzu.*

I am Prince Yūsuf and I pass through the land,  
My heart is a golden mosque  
And my longing prays without end.

– Else Lasker-Schüler (1911)

*Je ne suis pas juif ... mais je suis là parce que le  
sujet m'intéresse et il n'y a pas un espace pareil pour  
discuter de l'homosexualité en Islam à Paris.*

I am not Jewish ... but I am here because the topic  
is of interest to me and there isn't a similar space to  
discuss homosexuality in Islam in Paris.

– “Salim,” a gay Muslim attending a talk on  
Orthodoxy and homosexuality in a gay Jewish  
space (2019)

These two statements by subjects a century and worlds apart are not in dialogue with one another. How could they be? Beyond occupying such different spaces, the texts are different genres—one a formal poem by a published German Jewish author, the other an interview with a gay North African migrant in Paris. If we are to find a space in which to discuss these two compositions and their authors together, it is not the space of “dialogue.” Yet, both subjects were innovative in their gestures to traverse Muslim-Jewish identities and spaces in unfamiliar ways, which the authors of this essay would like to argue are *queer*. This is not because they both belonged to minority populations that defied sexual and gender (or even racial) roles. The key to their respective innovations, in fact, was a resistance to the assumption that they occupied a role or space shared by a minority of Others, in potential conflict with other groups with which they can and should engage in constructive dialogue. Instead, we see both of these examples as instances of complex subjectivity that entail not just complexity, but paradox and contradiction, or, in the richly suggestive

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French term, *complicité*. What we would like to suggest is that these respective “complicit visits” (along with others we are examining) entail encounter and fantasy that open a space to do the work that the flawed project of “dialogue” promised.

The search after these questions, like the searching of our subjects, comes out of personal experience and encounter. Adi, a cultural critic in French and Jewish studies, has just published a volume he edited entitled *Queer Jews, Queer Muslims: Race, Religion, and Representation*, in which contributors explored how Muslim and Jewish sexualities are so often represented as racially alien, deviant, or dangerous within the context of Western modernity. The “Jews” and the “Muslims” that emerge out of the fantasy universes of Islamophobia, antisemitism, racism, coloniality, misogyny, and homophobia, the anthology posits, belie the complexity of actual queer Muslim and Jewish subjects, even as they imagine the figures of the Muslim and the Jew as essentially opposed and irreconcilable identities. Meanwhile, Scott, a historian of German and European culture as well as sexuality, has long argued against identity models of Jewish belonging and self-understanding within majority gentile societies. Both of us think of subjectivity, with its emphasis on simultaneous and contradictory multiplicity of experiences of self in relation to the world, as a better model of experience. Similarly, we agree that the image of dialogue between Jews and Muslims and Christians, or between Muslim or Jewish queers with other or with nonqueer Jews or Muslims, performs a nailing down of collective identities that reenacts the ideological operations that both Adi’s and Scott’s work has pushed against.



*Else Lasker Schüler dressed as her persona "Prince Jussuf," from the frontispiece of her novel *Mein Herz*, 1912. Via Wikimedia Commons.*

So, Scott and Adi can be read, but cannot honestly read ourselves, as a Jew and a Muslim in dialogue with one another. The tension between being read and reading oneself is key in the two cases that follow.

Prince Yūsuf, narrating him/herself in this three-line strophe, crosses borders of race, faith, and gender, passes through the land (*durchziehen*). Is this simply a violation of a boundary that has too violently contained the author as a subject? Our translation as “passing through” also invokes the problematic gesture of *passing*, with its antisemitic and racist connotations, suggesting inauthenticity, disguise, masquerade, deception. German poet Else Lasker-Schüler depicted herself as a creative Islamic noble in the frontispiece to her 1912 novel *My Heart*, and appeared in that persona on the streets of Palestine in the mid-1930s. Passing through the land (*das Land durchziehen*) suggests wandering, but also penetration. The passing through/into the land she called *Hebräerland* was also, in its way, a conquest.

“My heart a golden mosque” does not identify sentiment as Muslim devotion, it *incorporates* it—the poem’s Islam is the Jewess’s heart. Our larger study assembles other such crossings, cross-dressings, and identifications of putative radical Other as the essence of the self: there is, for instance, the celebrated case of Lev Nussimbaum / Essad Bey / Kurban Said, whose Arab and Muslim personae carried him through Weimar and Nazi Germany and the status of a popular German writer; the similarly popular Jewish-Algerian-French novelist Elissa Rhaïs, confecting the fictitious persona of an Algerian Muslim woman who became a novelist of the North African folk landscape after having escaped from a harem; as well as one of the world’s leading Orientalist scholars, the Habsburg Hungarian Ignác Goldziher, who never formally converted and who advocated the transformation of modern Judaism into Muslim form and spirit. The erotic content of Orientalism has been dwelt upon in much scholarship, but is Orientalism, by definition, “queer”? Certainly that is not our implication any more than it was Edward Said’s, and yet, in these particular formations by apparently nonhomosexual subjects, as these short descriptions indicate, queer readings are readily available. In Lasker-Schüler/Yūsuf, the subject of prayer itself is not the Muslim Yūsuf or

## *The speakers and audience made several comparisons between the Islamic and Jewish traditions on the topic of sexuality.*

Hebrew Else, but their sexuality itself: “my longing prays,” and this desire qua devotion passes through the bounds of time.

### II

“Je ne suis pas juif,” Salim announced to the fourteen or so other individuals in a small meeting room on the premises of the Parisian LGBT Jewish association Beit Haverim. Salim was there that evening attending a talk on “[Jewish] Orthodoxies and homosexualities” organized by Beit Haverim.

Salim explained that, while he was not Jewish, he was there because he felt that he could not find similar spaces in Paris for the discussion of homosexuality in Islam.

Like North African Muslims in early twentieth-century France, who turned to kosher butchers due to the long-established understanding that kosher meat conforms to Islamic dietary laws, Salim’s decision to take part in a discussion on sexuality in (Orthodox) Judaism in a queer Jewish space underlines, on the one hand, the religious and theological similarities between Judaism and Islam and, on the other hand, the sociocultural similarities between Jewishness and Muslimness in France. Indeed, as the evening progressed, the speakers and audience made several comparisons between the Islamic and Jewish traditions on the topic of sexuality. Was this Jewish-Muslim dialogue taking place in a space that was not explicitly about nor tailored toward Jewish-Muslim dialogue? Unlike in some other spaces where Jewish-Muslim dialogue is explicitly performed, was this implicit Jewish-Muslim dialogue?

There is a danger in characterizing Salim's participation in Beit Haverim's event as an example of Jewish-Muslim dialogue, or even of "good" Jewish-Muslim relations. It is tempting to see instances of interactions between Jews and Muslims as examples of positive organic interfaith/intercultural dialogue or relations. However, such a tendency reduces individuals to one single facet of their identity. Salim is Muslim, but he is not only Muslim. Similarly, the Jews at the event were, presumably, Jewish, but they were not only Jewish. For one, Salim and the others are also, broadly speaking, gay. They are also French, mostly middle-class professionals, and mostly male. To only see Salim as Muslim and the others as Jewish and to conceive of their interactions as Jewish-Muslim is to already impose an interpretation of Muslimness and Jewishness within a particular narrative. Interestingly, in the twenty-first century, were Salim Christian, it would not be as tempting to read his presence in a Jewish space as a form of Jewish-Christian dialogue. While one might see the participation of a Muslim man in a Jewish event as an example of Jewish-Muslim dialogue or relations, it could just as easily, and more convincingly, be understood in purely pragmatic terms, that is, Salim, a gay Muslim, cannot locate LGBT-affirming Muslim spaces and so seeks out a prominent LGBT-affirming religious space that happens to cater to Jews. Additionally, human encounters resist simple binaries such as "good" relations or "bad" relations, but, rather, are often fraught with contradiction, complication, but also *complicité* or connection. Indeed, Salim later revealed that the reason he immediately disclosed his Muslimness was that, in the past, when assumed to be Jewish or otherwise not Muslim, he had been witness to Islamophobic comments that made him feel uncomfortable. Yet not only did he keep coming back because he still found something of value there, he did not seek out LGBT Christian spaces. The framework of Jewish-Muslim relations, good or bad, is wholly unhelpful to make sense of Salim and Beit Haverim and, by extension, relationships and interactions between Jews and Muslims.

It is so tempting to read any form of nonhostile interaction between individuals who happen to be Jewish and Muslim as a positive example of Jewish-Muslim relations not only because interfaith dialogue initiatives by definition take the existence and salience of

religious and identity categories for granted, but also because Jewish-Muslim relations tend to already be framed as inherently tense and oppositional in contemporary media and politics. But to reduce everything to "good" or "bad" relations or to "relations" at all overly simplifies a far more chaotic and complex reality and, more problematically, reinscribes real-life Jews and Muslims and their messy encounters and interactions into preexisting identity categories, with their attendant stereotypes and expectations. A particular narrative that one may imagine goes something like this: "In the beginning, there were Jews and Muslims. Despite their similarities and occasional camaraderie, their relations have always been tense, right from the beginning of Islam in Arabia to contemporary Muslim terrorism." Bad Jewish-Muslim relations confirm this narrative, but so do good Jewish-Muslim relations, as yet another promising exception that proves the rule. The trouble with interfaith dialogue, which often seeks to present itself as apolitical, is that it so often neglects to confront the fact that the very terms of engagement are already ideological and political.

Despite even the best of intentions, interfaith dialogue initiatives can only reproduce the dominant discourse of Jewish-Muslim polarization that they seek to mediate and challenge. If there is anything to be learned from subjectivity, it is that Jewish-Muslim solidarity movements must go beyond simply acknowledging shared religious and cultural history and neatly confined identity categories. What happens when, instead of dialogue, we turn to *complicité*?

### III

Beyond the question of sexuality, there is something queer about the way Else Lasker-Schüler and Salim passed through. Unlike dialogue, which is often directed toward specific ends, Lasker-Schüler and Salim had no specific goal. Instead, both of them developed, in very different contexts, a form of *complicité* anchored in the present, fluid, reciprocal, messy, and in motion, filled with contradictions, but without any one contradiction posing a barrier to knowing oneself and others.

Is lasting solidarity a potential outcome of intersecting experiences of exclusion and marginalization? It would in any case be important to open the door for a politically



conscious and socially engaged approach, without, as happens far too often in bourgeois interfaith dialogue initiatives, sidelining important issues of capital and empire, including the very coloniality of the category of religion and religious conflict. We offer *complicité* as a queer notion that may contain the rapport putatively oppositional subjects may create for themselves, even as they traffic in complicity with dominant ideologies that they cannot escape. Complicité is in this sense more of a space than a relation. It is a domain that subjects visit in order to pass through the hardened boundaries between identities constructed out of compulsory antagonism in the interests of power and subjection.

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