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CAN WOMEN IN INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE SPEAK?

Productions of In/Visibility at the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Race

Judith Gruber

Echoing Gayatri Spivak's seminal essay, Gruber asks, Can women in interreligious dialogue speak? She develops an answer through an analysis of Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali's film *Submission* and Candice Breitz's video installation *Love Story*. Both of these works of art raise questions of representation and agency for marginalized people, and by bringing these questions into conversation with theoretical reflections about women in interreligious dialogue, Gruber charts potential positions of women in the field of interfaith dialogue. The crucial argument is that what position women take in this field depends on their access to epistemic privilege, which is distributed unevenly along gendered, racialized, and religious differentiations—interreligious dialogue takes place at the intersection of male, white, and Christian privilege.

Keywords: Christian privilege, epistemic privilege, feminist, hypervisibility, interreligious dialogue, white privilege

Women in Interreligious Dialogue: Critiquing Patriarchal Traditions

Since Ursula King's much-quoted observation that "feminism [is] the missing dimension in the dialogue of religions,"¹ a growing body of literature has produced

¹ Ursula King, "Feminism: The Missing Dimension in the Dialogue of Religions," in *Pluralism and the Religions: The Theological and Political Dimensions*, ed. John D. May (Herndon, VA: Cassell, 1998), 40–55, quotation on 43.

a critique of this omission of women's experiences from interfaith dialogue.² This critique is, first, a descriptive endeavor, searching for the causes and discursive patterns of the silencing of female voices in interreligious conversations: feminist commentators have demonstrated that the exclusion of women from interreligious dialogues both depends on and reinforces the patriarchal constitution of religious traditions. They have shown that the majority of formal, public interfaith dialogue events focuses on a comparison of official doctrine of religious traditions, and therefore centers on teachings formed in the androcentric history of religious traditions. Because women have traditionally been refused leadership roles in many religious traditions, they also find themselves excluded from these official interreligious dialogues.³ Due to the focus on authoritative teachings, accordingly, interreligious dialogues privilege male experiences and male understandings of religious traditions. While women have been active and engaged in a wide range of more informal settings of interfaith encounter, the androcentric focus on official teaching in interfaith dialogue conceals these contributions of women and erases their experiences as legitimate sources for interfaith conversations.⁴ Through the lens of a feminist critique, interreligious dialogue thus appears as a catalyst for the silencing of women in religious traditions: in the name of "respect and tolerance" and in order to foster "mutual understanding" among religious traditions, forums of interreligious dialogue can perpetuate established patriarchal discourses and reinscribe the male as norm. The transgression of boundaries *among* religious traditions consolidates sexed and gendered boundaries *within/across* these traditions, which exclude women from visibility and refuse to acknowledge their active participation in religious traditions. Hence, interreligious dialogue can serve to

² See, for instance, Virginia R. Mollenkott, ed., *Women of Faith in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); Helene Egnell, *Other Voices: A Study of Christian Feminist Approaches to Religious Plurality East and West*, Studia missionalia Svecana (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Mission Research, 2006); Catherine Cornille and Jillian Maxey, eds., *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, Interreligious Dialogue Series 5 (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013); Maura O'Neill, *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue*, Faith Meets Faith (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007); Mara Brecht, *Virtue in Dialogue: Belief, Religious Diversity, and Women's Interreligious Encounter*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 193 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2014); Doris Strahm, ed., *Damit es anders wird zwischen uns: Interreligiöser Dialog aus der Sicht von Frauen* ([Ostfildern]: Matthias-Grünewald-Verl., 2006); Anne Hege Grung, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith*, Currents of Encounter 53 (Leiden: Brill Rodopi, 2016); and Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue*, Bordering Religions (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

³ See, for instance, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Women in Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, ed. Catherine Cornille (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 168–83, 170–74.

⁴ See, for instance, Catherine Cornille, "Introduction: On Women and Interreligious Dialogue," in Cornille and Maxey, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2–5; and Annette Wilke, "Interreligiöses Verstehen: Rahmenbedingungen für einen gelingenden christlich-muslimischen Dialog," in Strahm, *Damit es anders wird zwischen uns*.

preserve male privilege. Chung Hyun Kyung poignantly writes: “So called, all higher world religions are patriarchal and are institutionalized under the patriarchal light. So we have patriarchal Buddhists and patriarchal Christians having interreligious dialogue, and we have nice patriarchal conclusions here.”⁵

Critique is never limited to a mere description of problems; it always also has a normative thrust geared toward a correction of the diagnosed shortcomings. The goal for feminist women as they approach the field of interreligious dialogue, therefore, is to disrupt these sexed and gendered boundaries and to overcome women’s exclusion. In their introduction to a special issue of the journal of the *European Society for Women in Theological Research* on the role of women in interreligious dialogue, the editors succinctly captured this normative motivation, noting that “as feminist theology enters into interreligious dialogue, the empowerment of women, respect for and curiosity about women’s experiences, and commitment to women’s liberation can serve as guiding principles.”⁶

Yet, theorists of female contributions to interreligious dialogue are keenly aware of the temptation to essentialize “womanhood” in this endeavor. If the call for increased participation of women in interfaith dialogue rests on the presupposition that there is an essential dimension to female experience that lacks if women are excluded from interreligious dialogue, it would level the particular and diverse experiences of women. What’s more, this conception would ultimately participate in naturalizing the differences between men and women and thereby deploy the very strategy on which patriarchal discourse rests. Such an understanding of women in interreligious dialogue would thus end up being complicit in perpetuating the hegemonic discourses that legitimize women’s exclusion from positions of agency and representation. These observations complicate a reflection of the role of women in interreligious dialogue and the normative goal to overcome their exclusion from interfaith conversations. It is by way of a tentative question, therefore, that Catherine Cornille introduces her 2013 volume, whose contributions explore the role of women in interreligious dialogue. According to Cornille,

While women have thus played an important role in dialogues from below, and while dialogue has played an important role in the development of feminist reflection within different religions, one may still ask whether women actually bring something distinctive to interreligious dialogue. The question may seem overly general and disturbingly essentialist. What contemporary gender theory and the papers in this volume make clear is that

⁵ Hyung K. Chung, “Seeking the Religious Roots of Pluralism,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34, no. 3 (1997): 309–402, quotation on 401.

⁶ Annette Esser, Katharina von Kellenbach, and Annette Mehlhorn, “Introduction,” *Journal of the European Society for Women in Theological Research* 17 (Feminist Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue—Perspectivas feministas acerca del diálogo interreligioso—Feministische Zugänge zum interreligiösen Dialog) (2009): 5–11, quotation on 7.

one cannot speak of “women” as a fixed and universal category. Women’s experiences and orientations differ according to race, class, sexual orientation, cultural norms, socialization etc. However, the critique of women’s absence from official dialogues contains some suggestion that women might offer a distinct perspective or approach, or at least that the presence of women would make a difference.⁷

At stake, therefore, in a reflection of the role of women in interreligious dialogue is a critique of their marginalization that does not fall prey to the temptation of essentializing and naturalizing women’s experiences. Against this background, the question Can women in interreligious dialogue speak? becomes pertinent.⁸ More precisely, and in reference to the normative goal of feminist theology, the question to ask is: How can women in interreligious dialogue speak in such a way that their exclusion from dominant discourses may be overcome? In approaching this question, the potential pitfall of essentialism serves as a call for nuanced answers that can account for the irretrievable entanglement of women’s agency into politics of representation: The risk of including women in interreligious dialogue at the cost of reinscribing essentialist, patriarchal notions of womanhood highlights that representation is not a binary, and reversible, choice of either absence or presence. Rather, this risk exemplifies Gayatri Spivak’s argument that representation is never free from power asymmetries. The subaltern, Spivak says, can ultimately not speak for themselves, but their possibility of being heard is always already prefigured by colonial and patriarchal politics of representation. Those who listen remain the organizing principle and provide the silent frame for subaltern self-articulations; they give the subaltern a voice.⁹ Representation, therefore, is a discursive product that emerges within, from, and/or in contestation to hegemonic constellations of power and knowledge. A critique of the absence of women from the field of interreligious dialogue that resists the temptation of essentialism will therefore refrain from “simply” attempting to reverse established patterns of representation. Instead, it will question what the absence/presence of women reveals about the silent organizing principles that grant access to representation in a particular field and the underlying power structures that produce the right to speak in the first place. I approach the guiding question of this article through an analysis of the short film drama *Submission*, by Theo van Gogh and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the video installation *Love Story* by South African artist Candice Breitz, which she created in 2016 for the exhibition *Ponderosa* at the Kunstmuseum Stuttgart. While neither of these works of art deals explicitly with questions of interreligious dialogue, both do raise questions of representation and

⁷ Cornille, “Introduction,” 8.

⁸ This question echoes Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 8th ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

⁹ Compare with Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

agency for marginalized people and can therefore teach valuable lessons for gauging the role of women in interfaith dialogue, and the politics of representation that are at stake in this field. The two videos give voice to excluded people in very different ways, and by bringing them into conversation with theoretical reflections about women in interreligious dialogue, I chart pertinent landmarks in the political field of interfaith dialogue and the potential positions of women in this field.

Shifting the question of women's speaking in interreligious dialogue to the "visual rhetoric" of film thereby entangles the issue of speaking/being heard with an interrogation into the conditions of the production of in/visibility in interfaith encounters. Politics of representation is a positioning of bodies and therefore, a multisensory discourse that calls for an analysis of embodied performance and for an examination of the (whole) body as an argument.¹⁰ Theoretical insights from the discipline of visual rhetoric offer helpful trajectories to sound out the powerful politics of representation at stake in women's agency in interreligious dialogues in all its discursive complexity. Although much of the scholarship in visual rhetoric focuses on the power of images in shaping people's understanding of the world, there is also a recognition of the power of looking.¹¹ There is, we will see, an intimate, if asymmetrical, connection between the agency of speaking and the politics of the gaze. Women, my analysis of *Submission* and *Love Story* reveals, can be (hyper)visible and yet, precisely for this ostensible visibility, lack a voice. Choosing to approach the contested issue of women speaking in interreligious dialogue through the visual rhetoric of two short films thus allows us to shift the search for women's representation beyond the binaries of either presence or absence to an investigation of the political and epistemic arrangements that (often silently, invisibly) control the means of production of the right to speak.

My analysis of *Submission* and *Love Story* shows that representation in interreligious dialogue is not only organized along sexed and gendered lines but also defined by racialized and religious differentiations. Speaking in interreligious dialogue takes place at the intersection of religion, gender, and race. By treating the question of women's representation in interreligious dialogue in an intersectional framework of gender, race, and religion, I thus aim in this article to advance existing feminist work in the field by proposing *how* to change the landscape of interreligious dialogue. Analyzing the visual rhetoric of *Submission* and *Love Story*, respectively, distills two remedies for the problem at stake (in other words, the irretrievable dependence of agency on hegemonic politics of representation): (1) rather than representing/reproducing androcentric norms, women should bring a feminist/deconstructive angle to their participation in interreligious dialogue; (2) the white, male, Christian production of the right to speak should be made visible.

¹⁰ Compare with Zazil Reyes García, "Visual Rhetoric," March 2018, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia on Communication*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.212>.

¹¹ García, "Visual Rhetoric."

Submission: The Colonial Power of the White Male Gaze

Let us first turn to the film *Submission*, an English-language Dutch short drama produced and directed by Theo van Gogh and written by Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Played by a single actress wearing a veil, *Submission* tells the story of four fictional characters—Muslim women who have been abused in various ways. The actress conveys monologues of these women, framed as prayers, and dramatically highlights three verses of the Qur'an (4:34, 2:222, and 24:2), by showing them painted on women's bodies. Throughout his career as a writer and filmmaker, Van Gogh was a vocal and controversial critic of Islam as purportedly violent and misogynist; Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born, Dutch American activist, feminist, author, and former Dutch politician. Once a practicing Muslim, Hirsi Ali now self-identifies as an atheist. Their film project *Submission* is entangled with a history of violence: a few months after the broadcast of the film on Dutch television in August 2004, Van Gogh was murdered in public by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Dutch Moroccan Muslim. A letter, attached to the body by the knife with which he was stabbed, linked the murder to Van Gogh's views regarding Islam and called for the assassination of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In the aftermath of the murder, there were arson attacks on mosques in the Netherlands.

Aside from the violence that occurred after it was released, the film itself has been very controversially received. Some criticize its approach as recklessly divisive; others view it as a fiercely honest critique of the oppression of women by/in Islam and praise it for (allegedly) telling the unabashed truth about religiously sanctioned domestic violence. It is in this vein that Hirsi Ali herself wants *Submission* to be seen; with this film, she (and Van Gogh) intended to give women a voice. In her book *The Caged Virgin*, published shortly before the film was first screened, she wrote: "Muslim women are scarcely listened to, and they need a woman to speak out on their behalf."¹² Iveta Jusová's analysis of the visual language of the film, however, shows that its advocacy for female agency and representation is less straightforward than the broad strokes its stark, cinematic language suggests. She illustrates how the film develops a visual rhetoric that directly draws on and uncritically reinscribes images and topoi recognizable from Western orientalist discourse. For example, the main actress's translucent robe evokes Western fantasies of the oriental veil as a "Western invention that has inscribed into it both the lopsided East-West power-relations and the West's obsession with Arab women's sexuality."¹³ The camera moves up and down the actress's body, which is clearly visible through the transparent material, and zooms in on her naked upper body. Furthermore, the film script, which has the actress undress herself in a harem-like room, "fall[s] back onto, rather than undermining the traditional Western fixation on the East as

¹² Quoted in Iveta Jusová, "Hirsi Ali and Van Gogh's *Submission*: Reinforcing the Islam vs. Women Binary," *Women's Studies International Forum* 31, no. 2 (2008): 148–55, quotation on 150.

¹³ Jusová, "Hirsi Ali," 151.

veil and in need of unveiling,”¹⁴ making the spectator’s gaze an important, invisible, supplementary element of the visual rhetoric of *Submission*. This, Jusová argues, is reinforced “by the camera’s construction of a voyeuristic spectator”; she shows how the film works with—and fully satisfies—voyeuristic expectations that subject the bodies of the depicted women to objectification through the spectator’s gaze. At the same time, the film reinforces “yet another orientalist stereotype—the perception of Muslim women as passive victims.”¹⁵

In line with the filmmakers’ motivation to call attention to Muslim women’s domestic abuse, *Submission* depicts female bodies marked by violence; but as Jusová argues, it presents them in an erotically charged way so that “the final impression is pornographic,” joining violence and sex in a stylized way. The impression of Muslim women as passive victims is reinforced through the fact that the female actors remain silent, they are not given a direct voice. Instead, the central female figure speaks for them, representing the women’s biographies in the form of prayer, which, due to the voyeuristic camera work, also appears as a “confession before the Western viewer.” Jusová concludes:

Rather than . . . undermining the “hegemonic modes of representation” of Muslim women, *Submission* deploys, and manipulates for dramatic effect, a repertoire of visual stereotypes that have long been associated in Western cultural imagination with perceptions of Muslim women as sexual objects and as victims of their culture. . . . Muslim women are portrayed in the film as nothing more than oriental odalisques, available to male abuse, with little agency to resist it, and in need of protection by the West.¹⁶

Jusová thus argues that *Submission* grants representation to Muslim women but not in such a way that gives them voice or agency. Instead, their visibility is the product of a male, white gaze that has sovereignty over the representation of brown female bodies. The gaze itself remains concealed and is, therefore, all the more powerful. It is at work silently, but effectively silences the voice of these female bodies and deprives them of agency and independent positionality. Once we expose this white male gaze as formative for the representation of Muslim women, we begin to see that this film also stages an interreligious encounter, despite its seemingly sole focus on domestic violence sanctioned by the Islamic tradition. The film and its organizing principle—the white male gaze—not only concentrate on Muslim identity but also use brown female bodies to define Christian identity. From its encounter with brown female Muslim bodies as its other, it can derive its identity as Christian. The power asymmetries that determine this encounter allow the white male Christian onlooker further to consider himself

¹⁴ Jusová, “Hirsi Ali,” 151. *Submission* was released over a decade ago, yet its orientalist strategies continue to shape public discourse in Europe. In 2016, France temporarily introduced a “burkini ban” on its beaches, leading the police to force women to “unveil” themselves in public.

¹⁵ Jusová, quotations on 151.

¹⁶ Jusová, quotations on 150, 151.

the final mediator of salvation.¹⁷ In *Submission*, there is an orientalist dynamic at work that uses the intersection of gender and race to negotiate religious identity.

In the film's reinscription of orientalist imaginations, Hirsi Ali, the author of the script, takes on an invisible role in the visual rhetoric of *Submission* that is firmly circumscribed by orientalist discourse and reproduces the white male gaze as the orienting principle of this discourse. As Lila Abu-Lughod and others have argued, her role can be described as that of the "native informant," that "authenticate[s] a reductive feminist narrative about Muslim women that promotes racism and orientalism through an authoritative voice of Muslim women who have escaped oppression."¹⁸

This orientalist imagination finds its origin in European colonialism and continues to shape cultural imaginations in Europe, having an enormous impact on current affairs. By way of example, the framing of the incidents of harassment on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne and other German cities was profoundly shaped by this orientalist imagination that constructs female bodies simultaneously as victims of brown male violence and receivers of white male salvation. The German newspaper *Die Süddeutsche* featured a title page, on which the contrast between black and white spaces conjures up an image of a black hand groping a white female body, reinforcing the imagination of uncontrolled, violent black sexuality. The female body, again, is imagined to be a passive victim; this time, the body was white, not brown, but equally in urgent need of white male salvation. As a corollary of colonialism, these orientalist constellations of race and gender, violence and sexuality have a global and violent history. They have taken various forms in different contexts;¹⁹ always, however, they are activated to serve the economic interests of the white male elite, as Lisa Lindquist Dorr has shown for the post-Civil War era in the United States, arguing that the "rape myth" of the black male beast that hungered for white female flesh began as a way to protect white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

After Reconstruction, whites conflated black men's desires for white women with their desire for political rights as men, thus creating the rape

¹⁷ For a critique of such "politics of rescue," see Spivak, who notes, in respect to the British abolition of *suttee* in nineteenth-century India, that orientalist discourse depends on the notion that "White men [need to save] brown women from brown men" ("Can the Subaltern Speak?," 297). See also Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (September 2002): 783–90.

¹⁸ Quotations are from Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 19; and Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 84, respectively.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Angel Adams Parham, *American Routes: Racial Palimpsests and the Transformation of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Parham offers a comparative and historical analysis of the migration and integration of white and free black refugees from nineteenth-century St. Domingue/Haiti to Louisiana who reinforced Louisiana's triracial system and, in contrast to the binary system of Anglo-American racialization.

myth. By the twentieth century, the rape myth was at its height, and it structured most white southerners' beliefs about the consequences of allowing interaction between white women and black men. The rhetoric about black men's propensity to rape and the corresponding need for white men to protect white women flourished both in debates about black men's civil and political rights and in discussions about new freedoms and opportunities for white women. The rape myth thus enforced white women's subordination to white men and the social, economic, and political power of whites over blacks.²⁰

Submission thus taps into a history in which the oversexualization of nonwhite bodies and the victimization of female bodies have served to bolster male white privilege, and it uses these entrenched images to negotiate religious identity. Because the film relies on an unbridled orientalist strategy, it stages interreligious encounter as conflict, geared toward demarcation and exclusion. Not surprisingly, therefore, violence and oppression are important elements of its vocabulary. The underlying dynamics, however, that negotiate identity at the intersection of race, gender, and religion are not only decisive for the production of meaning in this film; gendered and racialized asymmetries of power are, if in more subtle ways, at work in all interreligious encounters, even in those framed as amicable dialogues of mutual respect, geared not toward exclusion but toward the bridging of religious differences. Jeannine Hill Fletcher has highlighted this dynamic; she hones in on male privilege as a governing principle in interfaith encounters when she points out that "interreligious dialogue is . . . [always] political—and must be interrogated for how affirmations are uttered in a religio-political landscape which regularly and explicitly denies justice and equality to women."²¹ From a feminist perspective, therefore, the crucial question to ask is "what function [do] sexuality and sexual difference [play] in interreligious political exchange and dialogue?"²² Fletcher shows that in the political settings of interreligious dialogue, women "function in a variety of ways," often "for patriarchal aims . . . as bodies to be agreed over and as fictive persona for heteronormative ends."²³ This fictive representation of women is certainly true for *Submission*, which does not speak to the complex experiences of particular women, but constructs a fictive narrative of "Islamistan, an imaginary country where the majority of the population is Muslim and where the legal system is the Shari'a."²⁴ In the interreligious encounter staged

²⁰ Lisa Lindquist Dorr, *White Women, Rape, and the Power of Race in Virginia, 1900–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 8.

²¹ Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "Gift from the Prophet to the King: Politics of Women in Interreligious Dialogue," in Cornille and Maxey, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, 32.

²² Fletcher, "Gift from the Prophet," 29.

²³ Fletcher, 28, 47.

²⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, paperback ed. (New York: Atria, 2015), 142, quoted in Jusová, "Hirsi Ali," 150.

in *Submission*, the female characters are not speaking subjects, but fictive “objects of interreligious, political maneuvering.”²⁵

Fletcher further points out that women position themselves in various ways within the constraints of male-dominated interreligious dialogue: “Women emerge into the dialogue setting . . . [from] multiple social and material locations. ‘Women’ are not singularly interested and all of one mind, but are diversely interested and may have competing and contradictory aims.”²⁶ In the politically charged discourses of androcentric interfaith encounters, “participation in patriarchal social arrangements [can bring] personal benefits” for women.²⁷

Hirsi Ali embodies some of this complexity of women’s positionality in male-dominated interreligious dialogue. A black female ex-Muslim body, Hirsi Ali considers herself a spokesperson for oppressed women. As Jusová points out, however, “never does the author acknowledge the tricky and potentially problematic nature of the act of speaking on somebody’s behalf and the danger of appropriation inherent in such an act.”²⁸ What is more, Hirsi Ali’s portrayal of Muslim women “does not acknowledge, in fact it entirely ignores, the long-term project of decentering and reinterpretation of the Qur’an that numerous Islamic feminists have been involved in.”²⁹ Thus silencing alternative female voices in the Muslim tradition, Hirsi Ali ultimately contributes to the reification of Islam as a patriarchal tradition: “Watching the film, one is left with the impression that the text of the Qur’an leaves no space for women’s emancipation and that there is only one version of Islam, a version irreparably misogynistic.”³⁰ In response to her generalizing discourse on Islam, Hirsi Ali has in a number of interviews conceded that only a minority of Muslim husbands beat their wives and that there are also positive elements in Islam. She has also specified that she would only like to eliminate those facets of Islam that contradict human rights and individual freedom.³¹ Yet, her position remains highly ambiguous, as she often simultaneously presents contrasting opinions. In an interview with the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* shortly after Van Gogh’s murder, in which she presented her plans for another film, *Submission 2*, and a book, she maintained that while people admit behind closed doors that Islamism is dangerous, she herself considers Islam in its purest form, the Islam of the prophet Mohammed, of the Qur’an and the hadith, as a threat to life.³² This ambiguity allows us, first, to

²⁵ Fletcher, “Gift from the Prophet,” 29.

²⁶ Fletcher, 44.

²⁷ Fletcher, 45.

²⁸ Jusová, “Hirsi Ali,” 153.

²⁹ Jusová, 152.

³⁰ Jusová, 152.

³¹ See Annelies Moors, “*Submission*,” *ISIM Review* 15 (2005): 9.

³² Frank Vermeulen, “Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Ik ga me absoluut niet aanpassen. Ondergedoken Tweede-Kamerlid werkt aan vervolg op film *Submission*,” *NRC Handelsblad*, November 29, 2004, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2004/11/29/ayaan-hirsi-ali-ik-ga-me-absoluut-niet-aanpassen-gerectificeerd-7712803-a600020>.

argue that Hirsi Ali's speaking in interreligious dialogue, ultimately, does not unsettle patriarchal religious discourses; instead, it reinscribes their violent insistence on the unquestioned self-evidence of androcentric interpretation. What's more, the ambiguity in Hirsi Ali's words further reveals how hegemonic arrangements of in/visibility profoundly shape voices and agencies of self-representation. Abu-Lughod has argued that such ambiguous representations of Islam not only mark Hirsi Ali's commentary on *Submission* but are also at work in her autobiography *Infidel*. In fact, Abu-Lughod describes this tension as a formative principle of this text:

Two visions are at war in *Infidel*. One is a closely observed and keenly felt rendering of the uncertain and contradictory experiences of a particular girl in a particular Somali family with its unique circumstances, tensions, tragedies, vulnerabilities, and precarious struggles to maintain life and dignity in trying times. The second is a compulsive repetition of a formula that overlays these poignant struggles. The formula generalizes about what Islam means and does to people. Besides promoting a strangely decontextualized and ahistorical view of religion that relies on a simple literalist reading, the formula pits the enlightened and free West against backward and enslaved societies. That story turns on simple oppositions between choice and bondage, force and consent.³³

The first version gives texture to Hirsi Ali's self-representation as an authentic (ex-) Muslim voice, the second reiterates orientalist strategies of ahistorizing and decontextualizing Muslim traditions. Together, they reveal that Hirsi Ali's representation of herself as a (former) Muslim is tied to and emerges from a discourse of representing Islam as "other." Mineke Bosch's analysis of Hirsi Ali's autobiography allows us to elucidate this point further. Bosch looks at *Infidel* from the perspective of a long autobiographical tradition and strong feminist countertradition that has established distinctive narrative lines, plots, and counterplots. Written by a ghostwriter, *Infidel* reiterates the conventions of the genre of autobiography and, as Bosch's reading reveals, "is indebted to the (male, archetypal and enlightenment) plot of individual accomplishment, as well as to a so-called 'feminist Orientalism.'"³⁴ Such a reading of her autobiography as fiction that uses "'personal narrative' in framing a specific kind of politics" by no means discredits Hirsi Ali's speaking *tout court*, but more fundamentally, problematizes the idea of authenticity and originality in self-representation.³⁵ It indicates that her (or anyone's) agency and visibility unfolds within—and is irretrievably shaped and marked by—a patriarchal, colonial discourse. An analysis of the video installation *Love Story* allows us to pursue and substantiate this point further.

³³ Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 110.

³⁴ Mineke Bosch, "Telling Stories, Creating (and Saving) Her Life: An Analysis of the Autobiography of Ayaan Hirsi Ali," *Women's Studies International Forum* 31, no. 2 (2008): 138–47, quotation on 145.

³⁵ Bosch, "Telling Stories," 138.

Love Story: Deconstructing the Politics of Representation

Submission, we have seen, represents nonwhite, non-Christian women in ways that reinscribe patriarchal regimes of in/visibility and perpetuate orientalist, racist politics of representation. Breitz's video installation *Love Story* chooses a different path for the representation of marginalized voices. As described by the museum:

Love Story (2016) is based on interviews of six individuals who have fled their countries in response to a range of oppressive conditions. Their accounts are articulated twice by "Love Story." In the first room, fragments from the six interviews are performed by Hollywood actors Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore on a green-screen set; Breitz's edit weaves the six migration stories into a fast-paced montage. In a second room that is accessible only via the first, the original interviews are projected in their full duration and complexity. *Love Story* suspends its viewers between the gritty firsthand accounts of individuals who would typically remain anonymous in the media, and an accessible drama featuring two actors who are the very embodiment of visibility.³⁶

Like *Submission*, *Love Story* deals with the representation of marginalized people and introduces spokespersons for those who are often deprived of a public voice. Unlike *Submission*, however, *Love Story* resists the temptation to reify and naturalize the representation it offers of those without a voice of their own; quite on the contrary, the video installation centers around the problem that the stories of marginalized people are communicated more effectively, and come across more "authentically," when they are told not by those who actually experienced them, but by other, more public figures. The video installation thus raises profound issues of agency and authenticity and of visibility and exclusion, and again, issues of race play a role. Crucially, the video installation draws viewers' attention to the processes of mediation that are at play in giving voice to the voiceless: for example, it displays the green room with its microphones and cameras visible. The installation thus puts a spotlight on the fictitiousness of Baldwin and Moore's representations of migrant stories. It highlights the performative character of representation only through which visibility in public discourse can be achieved. The explicit staging of authenticity in *Love Story* makes visible how voice and agency are never "naturally" given but instead, produced in a discourse. Suspending viewers among a plurality of speech acts and exposing the production of visibility under asymmetrical power relations, it provides us with deconstructive tools to critique dominant narratives that claim authentic representation through the exclusion of alternative narrations.

³⁶ See Candice Breitz, *Love Story, Ponderosa* (exhibition), produced by Felix von Boehm, Begleitfilm zur Sonderausstellung, 2016, http://kunstmuseum-stuttgart.de/index.php?site=Videos;Videos_Details&id=35&PHPSESSID=ba043130fc0d43c0c84f8409b37c1814.

Such strategies of denaturalization and de-essentialization do not reproduce but disrupt hegemonic modes of representation. They thus provide resources for women to speak in interreligious dialogue in such a way that their exclusion from the androcentric interpretations of their traditions may be overcome. And indeed, women in interfaith encounters have taken this critical-deconstructive route. In her participatory observation of the Philadelphia Area Women's Interreligious Dialogue Group, Mara Brecht found that the interfaith encounters among these women differ significantly from more "traditional" (in other words, male-centered) initiatives of interreligious dialogue: "Women in dialogue emphasize processes over products. . . . They focus on ways by which they form their religious beliefs rather than on the beliefs themselves. . . . They highlight belief formation rather than justification."³⁷ This shift in emphasis has profound ramifications for our understanding of religious traditions: "The attention that the women of Philadelphia give to the processes of belief formation . . . calls for a new religious epistemology."³⁸ By focusing on the process of belief formation, these women follow a strategy related to Brecht's approach in *Love Story*: they expose the conditions under which representations of religious traditions take their shape. Rather than taking existing narratives of/about a tradition at face value, they make visible how their visibility in public discourse has been produced. The speaking of the Philadelphia women thus denaturalizes established (in other words, patriarchal) representations of religious traditions and exposes their contingency. Once their contingent formation is made visible, the epistemological sovereignty of androcentric representations is called into question; their claim to be the only possible rendering of a religious tradition loses its self-evidence. As Fletcher puts it, "What women as formerly obscured participants may bring into greater relief is the dynamics of religion in its sheer multiplicity and the recognition that religions are ultimately unrepresentable in any totalizing . . . way."³⁹ These critical re-lectures of tradition break space open for alternative narratives, which is precisely the ethical-political goal of the epistemological shift toward deconstructive readings of traditions. Jacques Derrida phrased it rather poetically: "Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home. Deconstruction is the hospitality to the other."⁴⁰ The denaturalization of androcentric representations of religious traditions opens the door for women to speak in such a way that their exclusion may be overcome.

Such door-opening "hospitality" is a precarious undertaking. For good reasons, Derrida pointed to the etymological coincidence of *hospes* and *hostis*,

³⁷ Mara Brecht, "Epistemology and Embodiment in Women's Interreligious Dialogue," in Cornille and Maxey, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, 52. Brecht points out that she does not consider this difference normative, but descriptive (58).

³⁸ Brecht, "Epistemology and Embodiment," 67.

³⁹ Fletcher, "Women in Interreligious Dialogue," 173.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida (New York: Routledge, 2002), 356–420, quotation on 364.

host and enemy.⁴¹ A deconstructive approach, which makes the contingent formation of religious traditions visible, suspends the representation of religious traditions between a plurality of speech acts and thus exposes the “messiness” of lived religious experience.⁴² As Annette Mehlhorn has pointed out, *intra*-religious dialogue (and conflict) therefore becomes an integral component of *inter*religious dialogue.⁴³ The representation of religious identity becomes a matter of contention under asymmetrical power relations. The exposure of multiplicity within a tradition does not simply imply that suddenly all can speak (equally); rather, it exposes conflicts of interpretation that have been previously silenced by the hegemonic narrative. However, *Whose* voice is representative? And *Who* can speak for a tradition? remain contested and unresolved questions.

Taking stock of what we have discussed so far, we can develop a first answer to our question, How can women in interreligious dialogue speak? We have seen that when women speak, they do not automatically disrupt the patriarchal traditions which silence female voices. Helen Egnell, therefore, has helpfully differentiated between what she calls “women’s traditional experiences” and “women’s feminist experiences.”⁴⁴ Fletcher elaborates on these two modes of female speaking, noting that “while some approaches of women in dialogue may simply report ‘neutrally’ on the distinctive experience . . . of women in the tradition, women trained in feminist methodologies move beyond . . . to insist on a structural analysis of the many factors, including the religions themselves, which compromise women’s full flourishing.”⁴⁵ With Rita Nakashima Brock, she explains, “In examining patriarchy, feminist theories expose the structures, such as class, race, region, religion, sexuality and nationality, that subordinate and oppress women.”⁴⁶

For women to speak in interreligious dialogue in such a way that their exclusion can be overcome, we must perform a shift in methodology toward critical-feminist approaches and undergo an epistemological paradigm change toward a deconstructive stance.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, 10th ed., Perspectives in Continental Philosophy 1 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 110.

⁴² Helene Egnell, “The Messiness of Actual Existence: Feminist Contributions to Theology of Religion,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 17 (2009): 13–27.

⁴³ Annette Mehlhorn, “Gleich und doch verschieden—getrennt verschieden oder gemeinsam? Intrareligiöse Debatten und interreligiöser Dialog im Wechselverhältnis zwischen Religion, Politik und Gender,” *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 17 (2009): 29–40.

⁴⁴ Egnell, “Messiness,” 15.

⁴⁵ Fletcher, “Women in Interreligious Dialogue,” 174.

⁴⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock, “Feminist Theories,” in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, ed. Letty M. Russell and J. Shannon Clarkson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 116–20, quotation on 117.

Contingencies of Representation and Intersecting Privileges

Love Story allows us to take the answer to our question one critical step further. This step takes us into the second room of the video installation, in which screens show the unedited firsthand narrations of the migrants Breitz interviewed. The video installation derives its effect from the contrast between the two rooms in which it takes place: in the first room, Moore and Baldwin perform these migration stories to great effect, and here, the artist takes great care to expose the orchestration of representation; the second room, then, seems to provide us with the “raw material” for these fictive representations of marginalized people. However, walking into the second room does not give us access to the complete story as it “really happened.” Instead, it also presents us with a selection of stories; it stages narratives collected, chosen, and shaped by the interviewer’s questions. In this room, too, processes of exclusion and productions of fictitiousness are necessarily at work. The artist does not make this explicit any more—the selection process remains invisible—but room two shows us that representation is never free from asymmetries of visibility; any speech act is bound to acts of silencing. We thus have to take our question a step further. Not only do we ask, Can women speak in such a way that they overcome their exclusion from patriarchal discourses? Our question must also be, How is the right to speak granted in the first place? By asking this question, we analyze the contingent, and powerful, conditions of representation in public discourse: Where, when, and by whom is the right to speak granted? When women meet for interreligious dialogue in order to disrupt patriarchal hegemony, processes of exclusions and selections shape the performance of the interreligious encounter.

Adil Khan has highlighted the discursive power differentials that inform any interreligious dialogue. Focusing on Christian-Muslim dialogue in post-9/11 Western societies, he argues that in these encounters, visibility and agency are unequally distributed between the participants. These “‘interfaith dialogues,’” he maintains, “are usually structured in advance according to the majority-group conveners’ [in other words, white Christians’] interests, priorities, ideology and assumptions with . . . no attention to the . . . concerns of Muslims invited to participate.”⁴⁷ As the dominant goal for these interreligious dialogues, Khan identifies the desire to provide a counter-narrative to the “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, “which contends that conflict between Islam and Christianity is inevitable.”⁴⁸ Dialogue, “from the outset,” therefore, “is predicated on the notion that the ensuing conversation must lead to a presupposed goal . . . , [which] serves more

⁴⁷ Adil Hussain H. Khan and Michael A. A. Cowan, “Why Christian-Muslim ‘Dialogue’ Is Not Always Dialogical,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 28, no. 2 (2018): 23–48, quotation on 26. As Tracy Tiemeier has argued, the majority group conveners are dominantly white Christians (Tracy S. Tiemeier, “On Intercultural Theology and the Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A View from Los Angeles, California,” *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* 1, no. 1 [2017]: 119–24).

⁴⁸ Khan and Cowan, “Christian-Muslim ‘Dialogue,’” 28.

to reaffirm liberal pluralistic values through a ritualized exchange of pleasantries than it does to deepen understanding of another's religion."⁴⁹ This goal not only prefigures the agenda for the conversation and basically leaves Muslim participants only with the option to demonstrate how well they can be integrated into "liberal," "Western" society but also is a determining factor for the selection of conversation partners: "The typically liberal conveners of 'interfaith dialogue' usually invite only liberal or 'tolerant' Christians and Muslims to participate, thereby seriously limiting the possible range and depth of candid communication. Before one word is exchanged what can be discussed and who can be discussion partners are set unilaterally in ways that limit genuine dialogue."⁵⁰ The selection of conversation partners, which often focuses on imams, further "betray[s] a basic misunderstanding of how authority operates in Islam, . . . especially Islam in the West. . . . Christians often assume that Islam is organized in a similar fashion to their own faith in the sense that there is a religious hierarchy with an ordained clergy who hold a special role in relation to laity."⁵¹ Khan concludes that "power imbalances between majority and minority religious groups condition communication between them. . . . One group sets the agenda with the unspoken acquiescence of the other."⁵² He finds these observations encapsulated in his own experience as a scholar of Islam: "When I am invited into 'interfaith dialogue,' what typically follows is an opportunity to play a role fully circumscribed by others. . . . I am no longer willing to be another token Muslim, put on display for others to observe from afar, in an attempt to persuade liberal Christians that Muslims are not all terrorists or address other controversial issues in which Islam is implicated."⁵³

In her contribution to Cornille's seminal volume on women and interreligious dialogue, Aysha Hidayatullah similarly highlights power differentials that have shaped interfaith dialogue among women in the United States, particularly women of the so-called Abrahamic religions:

The premise of these interactions was that an examination of the shared experiences of the "daughters of Sarah and Hagar" would yield enriching mutual engagement through a common interest in combating patriarchal dominance in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The reality of these interfaith endeavors, however, unfolded quite differently from this vision, in part because of the glossing over of at least three problems . . . : the phantom of colonial feminism that continues to stir Muslim defensiveness;

⁴⁹ Khan and Cowan, "Christian-Muslim 'Dialogue,'" 33.

⁵⁰ Khan and Cowan, 26.

⁵¹ Khan and Cowan, 35. In a case study on emerging Muslim communities in Ireland, Khan and others have shown how the Catholic preconceptions of the majority culture affect the formation and consolidation of Islam in the Irish context. See Oliver Scharbrodt; Tuula Sakaranaho, Adil Hussain Khan, Yafa Shanneik, and Vivian Ibrahim, eds., *Muslims in Ireland: Past and Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

⁵² Khan and Cowan, "Christian-Muslim 'Dialogue,'" 26.

⁵³ Khan and Cowan, 25.

the tokenizing and surface character of a number of multi-faith feminist conversations; and the cooptation of Muslim feminist thought as part of violent state agendas for “democratizing” the Muslim world.⁵⁴

Hidayatullah’s and Khan’s arguments hark back to our analysis of *Submission*; here, too we have seen that in interreligious encounters, power differentials unevenly distribute the right to speak. Hidayatullah and Khan, too, allow us to see that interreligious dialogues function as regimes of in/visibility in which access to representation is prefigured by racialized and gendered power differentials. Hypervisibility in these regimes often corresponds with a lack of agency in speaking and self-representation. So far, our question Can women in interreligious dialogue speak? has led us to concentrate on gendered and sexed power differentials. We have seen how these asymmetries make women objects, rather than subjects of dialogue, and with Fletcher, I have argued that these political power dynamics, which intimately link hypervisibility and lack of voice, can be identified as a decisive factor in the reproduction of patriarchal discourses in the representation of religious traditions.⁵⁵ Khan now points out that these power asymmetries are also drawn along lines of racialized and religious differences. The power asymmetries between Christians and Muslims in Western societies turn Muslim conversation partners into highly visible, fictive persona whose speaking silently serves the identification of the dominant group as white liberal Christians. Khan argues that in these dialogues, Muslim identity is entirely perceived on Christian terms and constructed through the lens of the Christian tradition. The discursive framework of the Christian tradition serves as the mold for setting the agenda, choosing the participants, and evaluating the goals of interreligious dialogue.

Brecht coined the term *soteriological privilege* to capture the power differentials at work in the interreligious encounters between white Christians and their religious and racialized others. Brecht develops the concept of soteriological (or, more specifically, Christian⁵⁶) privilege in analogy to Peggy McIntosh’s concept of “white privilege,” which was in turn developed as an extension of the concept of “male privilege.”⁵⁷ One of the defining characteristics of privilege,

⁵⁴ Aysha Hidayatullah, “The Qur’anic Rib-ectomy: Scriptural Purity, Imperial Dangers, and Other Obstacles to the Interfaith Engagement of Feminist Qur’anic Interpretation,” in Cornille and Maxey, *Women and Interreligious Dialogue*, 150–67, quotation on 151.

⁵⁵ Compare with Fletcher, “Gift from the Prophet,” 44.

⁵⁶ Mara Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” in *Comparative Theology in the Millennial Classroom: Hybrid Identities, Negotiated Boundaries*, ed. Mara Brecht and Reid B. Locklin, Routledge Research in Religion and Education 5 (New York: Routledge, 2016), 85–98, esp. 86.

⁵⁷ Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” 87. Starting out from an analogical relation between white privilege and soteriological privilege, Brecht also convincingly argues that white and Christian privilege intersect and mutually reinforce each other: “The theological imagination inherited by Western Christianity is indissolubly related to colonialism’s heritage. . . . European colonialists tied their commercial interests to theological ones, justifying the conquest of ‘new’ worlds by making native people Christian. . . . The alliance . . . between Western Christianity and colonialism has a third important and

Brecht argues with McIntosh, is its invisibility: “At the heart of . . . privilege is an assumption about the ‘neutrality’ of positionality. . . . Privilege depends on and generates obliviousness about the dynamics of one’s own position and the relative experiences of others.”⁵⁸ To have male, white, and/or Christian privilege crucially implies that one can consider one’s own particular and contingent experiences as “‘morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal.’”⁵⁹ Privilege thus produces profound asymmetries in the distribution of epistemic power and has a powerful impact on how the right of speech is distributed in a discourse: Once a group can conceive of their position as the norm, their gendered, racialized, and religious others become “abnormal,” and are perceived solely in terms of their aberrations from this norm. This is precisely the dynamic Khan has exposed in the political settings of Christian-Muslim dialogue in U.S.-American and European societies. White and Christian privilege prefigure the agendas and selection of participants in Christian-Muslim dialogue. The suspicion that begins to rise in the second room of *Love Story* is thus consolidated. Interreligious dialogue never takes place “on a clean slate”—rather, it is always already entangled with the politics of representation, which govern access to speech and conditions of visibility.

When women begin to speak in the political field of interreligious dialogue, they can find themselves in a variety of positions—they can be subjects or objects, they can be producers or products of in/visibility. Which position women (and men) take in this field, depends on their access to epistemic privilege, which is distributed unevenly along gendered, racialized, and religious differentiations. Furthermore, those who can claim hegemonic positions in interreligious encounters often do not even have to raise their voice; they remain the silent, invisible organizing principle in the political discourses of interreligious dialogue, determining the conditions of visibility for those who take “subaltern” positions. The invisibility of hegemonic power stands in stark contrast to the hypervisibility of those who find themselves constructed as fictive figures, put to the service of those who silently conceive of themselves as normative. A deconstructive approach

undeniable aspect: an alliance with whiteness. Theology functioned as the ‘trigger’ for classifying and subjugating all non-white, non-Western peoples in the colonial period. . . . The whiteness of the colonists—the slave-traders, missionaries, and explorer-soldiers—silently emerged in the moment that the blackness of colonized—those being captured, ministered to, and conquered—was recognized. In that moment, two competing operations take place simultaneously. First, a divide is created between white and black Christian and native. Second, that divide is ostensibly closed by the Christian soteriological vision. What matters about people is their need for salvation, which the white Christians can offer the black natives” (Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” 91). Brecht develops her argument based on Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

⁵⁸ Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” 99.

⁵⁹ Peggy McIntosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” in *Gender through the Prism of Difference*, ed. Maxine B. Zinn, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and Michael Messner, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 235–38, quotation on 238, quoted in Brecht, “Soteriological Privilege,” 121 and 88.

allows us to disrupt such an instrumentalization and objectification of women in interreligious dialogues. It does this by exposing the uneven distribution of epistemic privilege that silently governs the politics of representation in interreligious dialogue. Deconstructive critique, however, does not overthrow the gendered, racialized, and “religiolized” (my term) power differentials that shape the political field of interreligious dialogue. As the analysis of *Submission* and *Love Story* has shown, agency in interreligious dialogue remains prefigured by the politics of representation that grant access to speech and visibility in uneven ways. The search for women’s agency in interreligious dialogue is thus an ongoing, inconclusive project that must continue to interrogate the positions of epistemic privilege that agents are able to take in interreligious encounters.

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