

# Queer, Muslim, and Maghrebi: An Intersectional Analysis of Immigrant Identities in Contemporary France

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the complex ways in which queer Muslim women with origins from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) negotiate belonging and selfhood in France. Drawing on a three-month long digital ethnography, I employ an intersectional approach to explore the juxtaposition of “Muslim” and “lesbian/ bisexual” identities and to answer the question, “How do queer Muslim immigrant women negotiate and conceptualize their identities in contemporary France?” As a marginalized group within a marginalized minority of immigrants from the MENA region, queer Muslim immigrant women have been overlooked in scholarship, public discourses, politics, LGBTQ+ spaces, and religious spaces. This research addresses this gap by exploring the identity-related struggles of queer Muslim immigrant women in France and contributes to studies on Muslim subjectivities, immigration, and gender. Based on my findings, I argue that queer Muslim immigrant women in France negotiate their identities through reconfiguring “secular” and “Muslim” identities and queering religious texts. This negotiation takes place, in part, by using social media to connect with others who share a similar conceptualization of their identities within digital spaces.

**Keywords:** identity; gender; immigration; Muslim subjectivities; queerness

*Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it... How does it feel to be a problem? (Du Bois 1904, 1)*

Through the prism of the question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” a formulation that lies at the heart of discriminatory thinking, the prominent twentieth-century African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois examines how discrimination, racism, exclusion, and negative perceptions of Black Americans affect their identities and understandings of selfhood. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1904), he argues that being perceived as “a problem” creates a state of double-consciousness, a psychological split in which the oppressed individual’s identity divides into two as they come to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor (Du Bois 1904, 3). Rather than embodying a unified being, they are fragmented into “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” that ultimately conflict with each other in a single body (Du Bois 1904, 3). Ultimately for Du Bois, a vital stepping-stone towards self-liberation is to merge the fragmented self to become a “truer and better self” (Du Bois 1904, 4) emancipated from the inner and outer perceptions that divide Black identity and ultimately American society.

W.E.B. Du Bois’s contributions to our understanding of the effects of oppression on the minds of Black Americans serve as a useful lens through which to understand the identity negotiation processes of queer Muslim Maghrebi women within the French context. Maghrebi specifically refers to individuals with origins from the “Maghreb” (derived from “west” in Arabic), a region of North Africa which includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, territories

that were colonized by France. Queer Muslim Maghrebi women’s experiences of multiple exclusions within contemporary France are characterized by being considered “a problem” vis-à-vis their intersectional identities. As queer Muslims, they are perceived as “a problem” by their religious communities for defying traditional understandings of what is permissible behavior within the Islamic framework. As Muslim women, some of whom wear the veil, they are labeled as “a problem” by politicians and secular feminists who see veiling as a symbol of oppression and submission. As Muslim immigrants, they are perceived to be “a problem” by individuals who claim they pose a threat to French identity and French secularism (*laïcité*), which privileges the religious neutrality of the public sphere (this concept will be further discussed later). As a result, queer Muslim Maghrebi women experience “double” or even “triple” consciousness (Keaton 2005, 5) as their multiple identities, each with their own layers of discrimination, lead to fragmentations of the self. The problematization of queer, Muslim, and immigrant identities leads in turn to the marginalization of women who embody them. Given these multiple contexts of exclusion and the underlying assumptions about the mutual exclusivity of Muslim and queer categories, how do queer Muslim immigrant women negotiate and conceptualize their identities in contemporary France? How do they experience belonging in a country and in communities that continuously define them as a problem?

This research explores the ways in which queer Muslim immigrant cisgender women with origins from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) negotiate notions of belonging and selfhood in France. I intentionally use the phrase “this” research as opposed to “my” research because I believe that this research is not mine to possess or claim, especially since I am neither Maghrebi/French, do not originally come from a Muslim background, and am writing about communities that are not my own. I acknowledge how my identity categories (queer white Latina) as well as how my academic background as an undergraduate student in the United States frame the observations as well as the questions that I ask. I propose that positionality does not imply claiming ownership of the research. Rather, if

the research were to “belong” to anyone, I suggest re-locating ownership to those who are being written about and studied, whose representations are being shaped by my perceptions. In my aim to understand processes of identity negotiation, I hope that I have respectfully brought some visibility to a largely underrepresented queer community in France. As a marginalized group within a marginalized minority of immigrants from the MENA region, lesbian/bisexual Muslim immigrant women have been largely overlooked in academic scholarship, public discourses, politics, LGBTQ+ spaces, and religious spaces, creating a gap in our understanding of how these women experience and navigate their lives while embodying their intersectional identities. The oversight is partially due to taboo attitudes toward homosexuality, but also to underlying assumptions about the exclusivity of queerness to secular spaces and communities, rendering homosexual relationships among Muslim cisgender women invisible and seemingly non-existent.

Drawing on a three-month long critical media analysis, virtual ethnography, and discursive analysis of social media, this research focuses on the ways queer Muslim women are marginalized on the basis of several fronts: their religious, lesbian/bisexual, and immigrant identifications. I explore some of the dominant Muslim discourses surrounding homosexuality as well as an attempt by a progressive Algerian French imam, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, to challenge these dominant positions in France. Subsequently, I examine how LGBTQ+ individuals are perceived in broader French society as well as the ways in which queer Muslim Maghrebi women are overlooked within LGBTQ+ spaces and in certain feminist organizations. Through a brief discussion on immigration and Islamophobia, I also look at the ways in which multiple exclusionary forces influence queer Muslim immigrant women’s sense of belonging in France.

Despite being situated in multiple exclusionary contexts, queer Muslim immigrant women exhibit agency in the ways in which they choose to embody their complex identities. Based on the findings, I argue that queer

Muslim immigrant women in France negotiate their identities through reconfiguring “secular” and “Muslim” categories and through queering religious texts. The negotiation takes place, in part, by using social media to connect with others who share a similar conceptualization of their identities within the digital space. Although the COVID-19 pandemic restricted in-person fieldwork for the research, the existence of online communities of Queer Muslim individuals in France provided a space to explore digital interactions and exchanges between social media users who identify as Muslim, queer, and immigrant. Employing virtual ethnographic methods to examine online encounters of queer Muslim immigrant women, I find that social networks are being used to (1) bridge the gap between “queer” and “Muslim” identities and (2) connect with others who share similar identities, thereby reinforcing their sense of “self.” The discussion then shifts toward exploring efforts to commensurate and reconcile both “Muslim” and “queer” identity categories within these digital spaces. However, some women do not seek to reconfigure their identities and choose to embody one identity over the other (Queer or Muslim), while others embody both at the same time, maintaining traditional understandings of queerness within Islam. The ensuing findings contribute to studies on gender, Muslim subjectivities, and immigration by examining the lived realities of queer Muslim immigrant women in France and their understandings of selfhood.

## **Muslim and Queer: Spaces of Exclusion and Inclusion within Muslim Communities**

Within contemporary historical, political, and religious contexts in France, queer Muslim immigrant women are excluded for their religious affiliation, immigrant backgrounds, gender identities, and sexual orientations, posing a challenge to the ways they experience feelings of acceptance and belonging. An overwhelming majority of Muslims in France consider same-sex acts and relationships to be strictly forbidden (Eidhamar 2014; Siraj 2016, 187). Although Islamic law considers sex to be a natural phenomenon, traditional religious interpretations indicate that it must take place

within the framework of officially recognized heterosexual relationships (Siraj 2016, 186). Furthermore, some Muslims conceptualize homosexuality as a “test from Allah,” wherein it is acting on same-sex attraction that is regarded as a sin rather than the attraction itself (Eidhamar 2014). Passing the “test” thus consists of abstaining from same-sex acts/relationships during the individual’s lifetime, a feat that is believed to be met with rewards in the afterlife (Eidhamar 2014). Queer Muslim women are also judged for transgressing traditional understandings of gender roles within Islam, especially since homosexuality undermines the heterosexual institution of marriage and the traditional roles associated with raising a family. In France, disapproval of same-sex relationships is prevalent within Muslim communities. A 2019 survey on homophobia conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion (Institut français d’opinion publique) finds that 63% of respondents who identified as Muslim consider homosexuality to be a “sickness” or “sexual perversion” (IFOP 2019). Although there have been some efforts to make Muslim communities more inclusive of LGBTQ individuals, dominant Islamic authorities in France have met these initiatives with disapproval. For instance, Ludovic-Mohamed Zahed, a gay and feminist Algerian French imam, caused considerable controversy within the French Muslim community when he launched Europe’s first LGBT-inclusive mosque in Paris in 2012 (Doezema 2014). Officials from the Great Mosque of Paris, one of the primary Islamic authorities in France, considered the initiative to be “outside the Islamic community” and not in compliance with the Qur’an, ultimately rejecting the mosque’s legitimacy and its pro-LGBT stance (Di Caro 2019).

The discourses that condemn homosexuality render it challenging for queer Muslims to affirm their gender identities publicly. In a podcast by Deutsche Welle entitled “Homosexuality in France,” a reporter interviews several Muslim men who gather for Friday prayers in the gardens of the Great Mosque of Paris to gage their opinions on Islam and homosexuality (Laurenson 2016). One interlocutor stresses the incompatibility between the two categories: “No, it’s not

coherent, Islam and homosexuality can’t go together, that’s how it is, it’s written” (00:31), while another claims it is forbidden: “It’s in the Qur’an in black in white... they have to be stopped, it mustn’t be allowed” (1:28). Another informant expresses the difficulties in making the two categories compatible: “Everyone should live their life the way they see fit, but if they want to live according to the principles of Islam, it isn’t easy to reconcile the two” (01:10). These views reflect narratives of mutual exclusion between the Muslim and homosexual categories through references to the Qur’an and to principles that are considered to be Islamic. Although these discourses are omnipresent within Muslim communities in France, it is important to note that DW’s podcast omits Zahed’s public efforts to challenge these anti-homosexual narratives, rendering an essentialized representation of Muslims as quintessentially homophobic. These depictions, in turn, inform the public’s perception of Muslim individuals who also come to render Muslim and queer categories as mutually exclusive.

Some queer Muslims, like Zahed, uphold that homosexuality is compatible with Muslim identity. As the founder of the pro-LGBTQ French Muslim association Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s de France — Lesbian & Gay Muslims of France (HM2F) and the creator of the HM2F Facebook group, Zahed aims to connect those who share his perspective or who would like to get to know how queer and Muslim identities can be compatible. In the following analysis, I observe the ways in which the HM2F Facebook group serves as a space of inclusion and belonging for queer Muslim individuals in France.

Regarding the ethics of social media research, I justify using Facebook posts from the HM2F group on the basis that the data are textual, anonymized (I have only included first names and have blocked out profile photos), and involve the observation of subjects in a semi-public space. Since informed consent can arguably be waived while conducting observational research within physical public and semi-public space, the same ethics can be applied to digital public and semi-public space (Willis 2019, 3). Furthermore, although HM2F is considered to be a “private group” on Facebook

in that one must apply to join, the divide between private and public is often blurred within online environments (Willis 2019, 4). For instance, the “About” section of the HM2F group offers a statement that it is “open to everyone,” and my ability to gain access without any connections to members of the group indicates the semi-public nature of HM2F.

That said, the data I analyze here only come from a specific subset of queer Muslims. Although digital spaces provide platforms for individuals to explore questions of religion and sexuality, there are generational differences with regards to who posts about these topics online. The children of Maghrebi immigrants navigate and frame their religious practices in ways that reflect their embeddedness within the French context (Beaman 2018, 42). Growing up in France can play a significant role in how they understand and experience their religion relative to their first-generation immigrant parents. Though Beaman’s research specifically looks at how middle-class second-generation immigrants reframe their Muslim vis-à-vis their French identities in non-online environments, it provides insight into how processes of reconfiguration are tied to generation-specific experiences, which may, in turn, shape the types of issues they deal with online. Additionally, individuals who use social media platforms to post about queerness and Islam must be familiar with the technology, have access to the internet, and possess a working knowledge of the mediums and communities available to them for exploring these topics. They must also feel comfortable sharing information publicly. Even though there are methods of maintaining an anonymous presence online, the risk of being recognized may deter some from engaging in personal conversations about their queer and Muslim identities out in the “open.” Lastly, the Instagram and Twitter accounts that I analyze tend to be managed by individuals younger than the members of Facebook groups such as “Musulmane et lesbienne c’est possible!” and HM2F, reflecting generational differences in the ways specific social media sites are being used to foster queer-Muslim friendly spaces online.

The HM2F’s Facebook community includes over 2,400 members and serves LGBTQ

Muslims who seek to connect to resources and people who can support them in their journey to reconcile their identities. For instance, Figure 1 shows a post on HM2F made by a member of the group, a queer woman, who expresses her desire to reconcile her religion and her homosexuality but is experiencing feelings of inner conflict. She asks the members of the group for advice on how to reconcile the two.



Figure 1 (top): A post, and Figure 2 (bottom): responses to it on the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s – Lesbian & Gay Muslims.

Soukaina’s post, receiving 32 comments, shows significant engagement, with each comment encouraging and supporting her. Some members direct her to specific resources through links as well as suggestions in the comment section. The first comment, in Figure 2, posted by a fellow member reads: “Study what your religion says about this subject well and even if it’s not explicitly written, you’ll have to realize that certain old terms don’t mean

exactly the same thing as today.” This demonstrates how recasting Islamic texts with new interpretations and meanings and applying them to contemporary contexts serves as a method for reconciliation. Furthermore, the commenter refers the woman to Zahed, who, he claims, could “give you a lot of answers” and provides a link to the Twitter account of a pro-LGBT Maghrebi Muslim online activist. Connecting users to others who share similar experiences or to resources which may facilitate the reconciliation process, therefore, serves as powerful means through which the “queer Muslim” identity is asserted, negotiated, and constructed.

Members of HM2F, both administrators and followers of the group, also regularly share resources such as videos, images, articles, and educational pamphlets on the group’s feed. These materials serve as useful tools for bridging the gap between Muslim and queer identities. One member’s upload of a queer-positive pamphlet on Islam and homosexuality on the HM2F Facebook group (see Figure 3), for instance, is a stark contrast to DW’s podcast “Islam and Homosexuality” (Laurenson 2016), which paints a portrait of Islam as a quintessentially homophobic religion. With

titles such as “No Explicit Condemnation,” “A Benevolent Prophet,” “What the Hadiths Say/ The Condemnation of the People of Lot,” and “Homosexuality is also a work of God” (see Figure 4, clockwise from top left) the pamphlet aims to re-configure narratives of condemnation to construct an Islamic framework that is inclusive, accepting, and ultimately friendly towards queer Muslims.

Yet negative perceptions of homosexuality within Muslim communities can make it difficult for LGBTQ Muslim individuals to come out to their families and to publicly assume their queer identities. Farhad Khosrokhavar, a professor of sociology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), explains that coming out as homosexual within some Muslim households can make one *najis* or impure (Laurenson 2016). As a result, those who publicly assume their LGBTQ identities can face disapproval from and rejection by their families (Laurenson 2016; Amari 2012, 60). Furthermore, he claims that homosexuality is a taboo that among religious Muslims is “much stronger than among secular people” (2:30) and that many Muslims in Europe feel as if secular society is imposing dominant values on them. Non-queer Muslims, therefore, could perceive queer Muslims as morally corrupt individuals, and also as traitors to their own religion, family, and cultural traditions. (Amari 2012, 60; Yip 2008, 105). French sociologist Salima Amari’s anthropological study (2012) focuses on the decision-making processes behind coming out or staying in the closet for Maghrebi lesbian women. Amari finds that queer women of North African descent keep their identities hidden from their families out of “filial loyalty,” compartmentalizing their identities by revealing certain parts to some and hiding them to others (Amari 2012, 55). The desire to stay loyal to their families, therefore, is one of the many factors that may drive queer Muslim women away from embodying both identities in public and in private (Amari 2012, 73).

## LGBTQ and Muslim: Secularism’s Multiple Exclusions

Within broader French society, a 2019 Pew Research study found that 86% of French citizens believe that homosexuality should be



Figure 3: Positive responses to a file uploaded to the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s - Lesbian & Gay Muslims



Figure 4: Headings in a leaflet uploaded to the Facebook group HM2F | Homosexuel(le)s Musulman(e)s – Lesbian & Gay Muslims.

accepted (Poushter et al. 2020). However, individuals who identify as LGBTQ in France still experience widespread discrimination and harassment (OECD 2019). Queer Muslims are particularly vulnerable to acts of aggression: a recent survey found that 37% of queer Muslims experienced harassment in 2018-2019, as opposed to 15% of queer respondents who identified as Catholic and 14% who consider themselves non-religious (IFOP 2019). Furthermore, SOS Homophobie reported a 42% increase in harassment and discrimination complaints by lesbian women in 2019 since the previous year (SOS Homophobie 2019). These statistics are significant. As the French version of the #MeToo movement, #BalanceTonPorc (#ExposeYourPig), gained ground in 2017–2018, it created a shift in attitudes toward exposing harassment and violence against women and LBT individuals. SOS Homophobie claims that by reporting assaults, lesbian and bisexual women are pushing back against invisibilization and acts of

violence that, until then, were denied and trivialized (SOS Homophobie 2019).

However, immigrant queer Muslim women are often rendered invisible by the same organizations that fight to make LGBTQ struggles visible. For instance, SOS Homophobie's 2020 biennial report of homophobia in France presents one testimony of a gay Muslim man, but does not include any testimonies or statistics of discrimination against queer Muslim women (SOS Homophobie 2020, 118). Official reports from the OECD, IFOP, and SOS Homophobie measure discrimination against LGBT individuals, immigrants, women, LGBTQ Muslims, and lesbians but none specifically focus on the intersection of lesbian/bisexual, Muslim, and immigrant categories, making it difficult to discern how this particular group of women experiences discrimination. Although gaining access to lesbian/bisexual Maghrebi Muslim informants can be challenging, as a result of cultural and religious taboos associated with queerness (Siraj 2016, 186), these wide gaps in

knowledge and data surrounding the struggles and lived experiences of queer Muslim women indicate wider forces of exclusion within the French LGBTQ community.

For instance, there were few accounts of pro-LGBTQ Muslim associations being present at Gay Pride celebrations across the country before 2020, even though increasing numbers of queer Muslims participate in Pride events. Yet the experiences of lesbian/bisexual Muslims at Pride celebrations in Britain demonstrate how interactions between mainstream events of the LGBTQ community and intersectional identities can shape experiences of exclusion and inclusion for queer Muslims across these landscapes. As Pride's narratives of diversity and inclusion exist within the framework of secular understandings of queerness, transgressing these norms can lead to experiences of discrimination as well as harassment. At a Pride event in Britain, Tamsila Tauqir, founder of the LGBTQI Muslim lesbian support group *The Safra Project*, claims that several queer Muslim women were confronted at the march for wearing the *hijab*: "We were harassed and assaulted by some gay men with Islamophobic, racist and misogynistic abuse as well as having beer thrown at us. No one from the march intervened; in fact, others stood by and encouraged the abusers in their actions" (Tauqir 2020, n.p.). These violent reactions against Muslim lesbians at the event point to the ways in which expressing Muslim identity can hinder access to queer spaces and render them exclusionary and even dangerous. Despite claims of inclusivity, discourses of gay-friendliness and inclusivity are ultimately "laden with a value structure" and "informed by gender, class and religion" (Mousawwi 2018, 175). Although Amari finds that Maghrebi lesbians in France consider Pride to be an important stepping stone in their processes of self-construction (2018, 183), their experiences of belonging within mainstream LGBTQ communities are ultimately shaped by the ways in which their various identities interact with hegemonic structures that impose secular cultural supremacy under the guise of inclusivity for all.

In non-intersectional mainstream secular French feminist spheres, Muslim women, especially those who wear the veil, are often

perceived as oppressed individuals in need of saving from controlling patriarchal figures. Through the lens of this framework, the veil is understood to be a male imposition that aims to control women's sexualities. As a symbol of oppression, it is perceived as incompatible with feminism (Abu-Lughod 2002, 786; Diallo 2018). Holding these assumptions, feminist organizations such as Osez le Féminisme (Dare Feminism) and Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores Nor Submissive) have publicly supported or remained silent on policies that prohibit veiling in schools and full-face veils in public spaces (Diallo 2018; The University of Chicago 2013; "Saphir News" 2015). In the process, critics, namely veiled Muslim women, have argued that these organizations have used their political platforms as well as narratives of male oppression and victimhood to alienate veiled Muslim women through discourses that are racist and Islamophobic ("Saphir News" 2015). Although there have been efforts to push back against exclusion through the establishment of feminist collectives such as "Femmes en Lutte 93" ("Women in the Fight 93"), an initiative that is inclusive of veiled Muslim women and queer Muslim immigrant women ("Femmes en Lutte 93" 2011), the disapproval of the veil within French feminist circles reflects broader debates and controversies surrounding the perception of the veil in France.

From a political and secular standpoint, Muslim women who wear the veil are depicted as a threat to *laïcité* (secularism). *Laïcité* refers to a specifically French brand of secularism, a principle that not only advocates for the separation between public institutions and religion, but also envisions a public sphere that is "neutral" and free from religious influence. As a product of historical tensions between the church and state throughout the centuries, *laïcité* is deeply intertwined with the development of the nation and remains an integral pillar of secular republican identity (Colissimo 2018). However, the discourse of *laïcité* has been used to prohibit the physical expressions of religious belief in public schools since 2004 as well as to ban veils that cover the face from all public spheres since 2010. Both these initiatives have primarily targeted and affected Muslim women and girls. As Lila-Abu-

Lughod argues in her article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?” (2002), discourses of salvation and unveiling not only undermine women’s agency and capacity to make free choices but reflect oppressive colonial attitudes towards those who are considered to be the “Other.” Furthermore, Western narratives of oppression aim to suppress cultural difference rather than bring about constructive change in women’s lives (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789). Although France is part of the larger “West,” the historical development of *laïcité* as well as French ideas about sexuality, ethnicity, and feminism have played a significant role in shaping the intensity of the debates surrounding the Muslim veil in a way that is distinct from other Western countries. The controversy over the head-covering ultimately diverts attention away from the broader structural inequalities and failures surrounding immigrant inclusion within French society, increasing feelings of marginalization within not only veiled Muslim populations but also French Muslim communities at large.

## **Muslim and Immigrant: Discrimination and Islamophobia**

The perception of immigrants in France further complicates the ways queer Muslim Maghrebi women experience belonging within society. Since the arrival of immigrant laborers from countries in North Africa to France, starting in the mid 1940s, followed by their families arriving through “family reunification” policies in the 1970s (De Wenden 2003, 70), immigrants have been socially and geographically excluded and tend to occupy the bottom rungs of the socio-economic ladder (Keaton 2006, 4). They often live in disadvantaged districts and housing projects in the suburbs of cities, known as the *banlieues*, which limit opportunities for upward mobility. As statistics from the OECD Biennial report from 2019 demonstrate, social mobility in France is low, and at the current rate, “it would take an average of six generations for children in a family in the poorest 10% of the income distribution to reach the average income in France” (OECD 2019). These structured exclusions impact the way Queer Maghrebi Women are perceived within French society; as immigrants and the descendants of immigrants, they are

considered to be a “social problem,” “others,” “not French” even though they are French citizens (Keaton 2006, 4). As inhabitants of the *banlieue*, they are portrayed as victims of poverty through the mainstream media, with men represented as “criminals” and women as “victims” (Keaton 2006). The label of *beurette* (feminine form of *beur* meaning “Arab” in *verlan*, French slang that originated in the *banlieues*) has also taken on the meaning of “sexually loose,” designating women who are “not respected” (Sabrina 2019). Although the use of *verlan* can be liberating in certain contexts, negative representations of immigrants in France have influenced the use and meanings of terms such as *beur* and specifically *beurette*, a word which now carries the weight of gender and ethno-racial specific stereotypes for European-born women of Maghrebi origin (Hamdi 2017). Classifications such as these can have severe impacts on the ways Maghrebi women perceive themselves within French society, as they may come to measure themselves through the perceptions of others (Keaton 2006, 5). For Muslims, this is especially problematic in a country where they are seen as the antithesis of French secular identity (Keaton 2006, 4). As the historical transformation of the perception of immigrants shifted from *travailleurs immigrés* (immigrant workers) to *Arabes* (Arabs) to eventually *Musulman(e)s* (Muslims), keeping in mind that not all immigrant workers in France were Arabs and not Arabs are Muslim, these changing perceptions of the category of Other and the problematic representations of people from these communities have led to real-life consequences and experiences of discrimination and Islamophobia.

Islamophobic discourses prompted in part by the Syrian refugee crisis, the rise of nationalism, and radical Islamic terrorist attacks have created further tensions between Muslim communities and those who perceive Muslims in France as a threat to republican values. Surveys conducted in 2015 demonstrate that the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis correlated with the rise of Islamophobia in Europe as a whole (Osiewicz 2017). Furthermore, the Syrian refugee crisis is linked with the rise of nationalism, as anti-immigration sentiments were leveraged by centrist as well

as right-wing populist parties who used Syrian refugees as well as immigrants as scapegoats for social problems (Osiewicz 2017; Keaton 2006, 193). For instance, in the 2017 French presidential elections, far-right candidate Marine Le Pen built her campaign around anti-immigration rhetoric vowing to support policies that would render France “more French” (Nossiter 2017). Islamist attacks in France at the *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters, the Bataclan concert hall in 2015, and in Nice in 2016 and 2020, and more recently, the killing of schoolteacher Samuel Paty in Conflans-Saint-Honorine in 2020 have increased the expression of apprehension towards Muslims in France. They have also led individuals to equate terror with Islam, even though members of Muslim communities have continuously condemned such acts and consider them to violate the fundamental principles of their religion (Al Jazeera 2020; DW 2020). Yet following the event at Conflans-Saint-Honorine, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech in which he controversially stated that “Islam is a religion that is in crisis all over the world today, we are not just seeing this in our country,” sparking backlash from Muslim activists and protesters across the Muslim world (Al Jazeera 2020).

By framing immigrants and Islam as “a problem” in a country that houses the largest Muslim population in Europe, the French government has constructed a category of Other that has served to reinforce French secular identity and create a common enemy. Orientalist discourses have marginalized immigrants and Muslim populations in France, creating a split between the West, “us,” and the East, “them,” a conceptualization that in Said’s words “created and... served the two worlds thus conceived” (Said 1979, 43-44). Edward Said and W.E.B Du Bois’s “two worlds” are made manifest through the juxtaposition between the wealthy cities and the disadvantaged *banlieues*, and the conceptualization of the liberated secular woman vis-à-vis the oppressed veiled Muslim woman. The categories of “queer” and “Muslim” are rendered mutually exclusive both within Muslim circles and in LGBTQ and feminist spheres. Given these multiple forces of exclusion, how do queer Muslim women negotiate and reconfigure their “queer” and

“Muslim” identities in contemporary France? How do they bridge the gap between these two worlds to become, in the words of Du Bois (1904, 4) a “truer and better self?”

## Queering the Qur’an

The categories of “Muslim” and “queer” can be perceived to be incommensurable in both Muslim and secular communities. Boellstorff argued in his study of Muslim gay men in Indonesia that the categories of “Muslim” and “gay” are “ungrammatical” within the Indonesian public sphere (2008, 575). Because Muslim life lays the foundations for Indonesian cultural life, Boellstorff found that Western understandings of desire and identity categories such as “gay” were untranslatable within Indonesian cultural contexts. Conversely, being Muslim in queer communities is fraught with difficulties as well, as there are certain value structures that inform what it means to be queer (Mousawwi 2018, 175). Although some individuals do not seek to reconfigure both identity categories, others use very specific methods to reconcile their “Muslim” and “queer” identities through the framework of the religion itself.

As mentioned earlier, an overwhelming majority of Muslims argue that Islam and homosexuality are not compatible (Siraj 2016, 187), claiming that the justification for the condemnation of same-sex acts or relationships can be found in the Qur’an (Laurenson 2016). Yet the understanding of homosexuality as a “sin” is not based on an individual experiencing same-sex attraction; rather, it is a judgment imposed upon the individual for acting on the attraction of same-sex acts or relationships, thereby defying the heteronormative structures established by the Qur’an. The Arabic terms for lesbian (*sahiqa, sahhaqa, musahiqa*) and lesbianism (*sahq, sihaq, sihaqa*) reflect this distinction as they refer to action and behavior rather than an identity category as constructed in Western languages (Siraj, 2016, 187).

Queer readings of how the Qur’an frames homosexual acts or relationships have reconfigured traditional interpretations. All major schools of Islamic jurisprudence refer to the Story of the people of Lot to condemn homosexuality (El-Rouayheb 2005). However,

this story specifically focuses on male homosexual behavior rather than female same-sex acts or relationships, and queer Muslims aiming to reconcile their identities point out that its condemnation is found within a Hadith rather than the Qur'an. Hadiths are reports about Prophet Muhammad and his companions that are used to complement understandings of, but are seen as secondary to the Qur'an (Siraj 2016, 188; Cragg 2020). Anwar (2000) finds that although there are passages in the Islamic holy book that explicitly forbid male homosexual behavior, there is only one excerpt that could be understood as a direct condemnation of female homosexuality in the Qur'an.

Chapter 4 Sūrat I-nisāa (The Women):

وَالَّتِي يَأْتِيَنَّ الْفَلْحِشَةَ مِنْ نِسَائِكُمْ فَاسْتَشْهِدُوا عَلَيْهِنَّ أَرْبَعَةً  
مِنْكُمْ ۖ فَإِنْ شَهِدُوا فَأَمْسِكُوهُنَّ فِي الْبُيُوتِ حَتَّىٰ يَتَوَفَّاهُنَّ  
الْمَوْتُ أَوْ يَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ لَهُنَّ سَبِيلًا

And as for those who are **guilty of an indecency** from among your women, call to witnesses against them four (witnesses) from among you; then if they bear witness confine them to the houses until death takes them away or Allah opens some way for them. (Qur'an 4:15)

In this passage, Egyptian judge Mohammed Habib Shakir (2009) translates *يَأْتِيَنَّ الْفَلْحِشَةَ* (commit [the] immorality) from Classical Arabic to "guilty of indecency" in English. Yet various translations have interpreted this section of the passage differently, to mean "unlawful sexual intercourse" (Sahih International), "illegal sexual intercourse" (Mohsin Khan), as well as "guilty of lewdness" (Pickthall) ("Verse 4:15 - English Translation"). Yet what constitutes as "illegal" or "lewd" may be contested, as Islamic law traditionally defines *zina* (transgression or illegitimate sexual intercourse) as vaginal intercourse between a man and a woman, leaving a grey area and scope for debate of the degree to which same-sex acts between women could be considered a transgression (Siraj 2016, 187). Although female same-sex acts or relationships are also considered forbidden, on the basis that they defy the gender norms and notions of femininity established through the Qur'an, the overall omission of references to female same-sex acts or relationships in the

Qur'an allows queer Muslim women to validate their lesbian/bisexual identities through the authority of the text.

Furthermore, most of the punishments that are ascribed to homosexuality are derived from the Hadiths, which complement understandings of the Qur'an (Siraj 2016, 188). Since the Hadiths ultimately come second to the authority of the Qur'an (Cragg 2020), progressive Islamic scholars such as Habib (2010) and Kugle (2010) have proposed rejections of unauthenticated Hadiths that denounce homosexuality while bringing attention to passages in the Qur'an that encourage the acceptance of difference instead (Siraj 2016, 188). Kugle (2010) offers a reinterpretation of the "story of the Lot" as a condemnation of violence and rape rather than a justification for the prohibition of homosexuality within Islamic schools of thought.

By focusing on social justice, activism, and acceptance of diversity, as well as the equal worth of all individuals regardless of gender and class, LGBTQ Muslims challenge the heteronormative perspectives that dominate within their religion. By reconfiguring understandings of passages from the Qur'an, reinterpreting stories (such as the story of the Lot) that are used to condemn homosexuality, and rejecting unauthenticated Hadiths, as well as emphasizing passages that promote inclusivity, they highlight the ways Islam has been a source of liberation for the marginalized, excluded, and oppressed (Siraj 2016, 189; Kugle 2010, 8).

## Reconfiguration Through Secular Conceptualizations of Freedom and Agency

As immigrant Muslims living in France, queer Maghrebi immigrant women reconfigure their "queer" and "Muslim" identities through secular epistemologies and ontologies that they acquire through their embeddedness in the French context. Their personal understandings of autonomy, freedom, and agency inform the ways they come to embody and reconfigure notions of selfhood. I explore the ways in which authentic interpretive authority is attributed to

personal experience rather than institutional authority by drawing on three discussions: (1) anthropologist Mayanthi Fernando's (2010) informants' conceptualizations of secular notions of autonomy, self-realization, and self-liberation vis-à-vis their religious obligation or personal decision to wear the veil, (2) Siraj's study (2016) of lesbian Muslim religious identity, and (3) Yip's discussions (2005) on religious approaches organized around reflexivity. When religion is understood in a more individualistic rather than collectivist fashion, reconfigurations are rendered legitimate and possible.

Fernando's (2010) exploration of how veiled Muslim women in France negotiate freedom is a useful framework through which to understand how queer Maghrebi Muslim women use secular understandings of freedom, religion, and agency to reconfigure their religious and gender identities. In "Reconfiguring Freedom" (2010), the author unpacks the processes by which veiled women reconcile secular notions of autonomy with Islamic understandings of piety and submission through the act of veiling. Rather than conceptualizing liberty in opposition to religious authority as in the secular republican models of autonomy, veiled women reconfigure notions of freedom through the negotiation of self in relation to Islamic tradition. Fernando finds that Muslim immigrant women merge their understandings of self-realization and self-liberation (rooted in the Islamic concept of *fitra*) with secular understandings of personal freedom and agency that the informants acquired through their lifelong engagements with secular theories of knowledge (Fernando 2010, 20). Conceptualizing self-realization as an internal process by which one comes to re-discover and know God, they reconfigure their desire for autonomy with the willful submission to God in order to achieve self-liberation (Fernando 2010, 25). For born-again Muslims who grow up in France, the imperative to veil "must emerge from the internal desires of the practitioner and cannot be imposed by an outside authority" (Fernando 2010, 22). In other words, the choice to wear the veil is deeply connected to a truth perceived from within, a truth that, according to the informants'

understandings of self-realization, is a reflection of God's will.

By conceptualizing self-realization as the realization of the transcendent will – the enactment of which requires submission to certain religious obligations – these Muslim French women fundamentally reimagine the relationship between norms and the self-such as the "true self" is cultivated and realized not against social and religious authority but, rather, through it. (Fernando 2010, 23-24)

The notion of the "true self" as a manifestation of God's intent is reflected in the underlying assumptions that formed the basis for religious reconfiguration for Siraj's lesbian Muslim informants in Britain (2016). They maintained that sexuality was an "innate quality" that God had predisposed them with, therefore, God would not reject them (Siraj 2016, 194-195). This idea is what ultimately led Siraj's informants to construct the "Muslim lesbian" identity and to see both categories as compatible. Yet in contrast to veiled Muslim women who reconfigure secular understandings of freedom with their Muslim identities by conforming to Islamic tradition, queer Muslim women use individualistic approaches to religion to challenge traditional norms and to reform the religion itself.

As Yip (2005) argues, secular individualism has rendered religious approaches to be more experience-based, prioritizing human subjectivity and reflexivity over reliance on institutionalized religious authority (61). Through secular understandings of freedom and agency, individuals have rendered their personal experiences, interpretations, and approaches towards religion as legitimate by "[relocating] interpretive authority to the 'self'" (Yip 2005, 61). This "relocation" can be seen in Fernando's (2010) informants' claims that wearing a veil must be a personal choice coming from the "self," rather than imposed by an outside authority (22), as well by Siraj's informants (2016) who come to construct a "Queer Muslim" category through their personal understandings of their relationships with God. The declining influence of religious institutions' claims to moral authority,

therefore, is deeply connected to the emergence of LGBTQ Muslim identities in contemporary secular societies. Individual reconfigurations are rendered legitimate, possible, and are ultimately cultivated through spaces of acceptance and inclusion.

## Social Media Platforms as Spaces of Inclusion and Belonging

Pro-LGBTQ+ Muslim social media accounts and groups on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter serve as useful tools for connecting immigrant Muslim lesbians/bisexuals and other members of the Muslim LGBTQ community to resources that might be helpful in bridging the gap between their faith and their sexualities. They also provide digital spaces for individuals with similar experiences to share and voice their thoughts and organize events and gatherings both offline and in the digital world, creating a space of validation, assertion, and belonging. As with the HM2F Group, I justify using social media posts from Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter in the following analysis on the basis that the data are textual/video-graphic, individuals are anonymized (I only include first names and block profile photos), and the research involves the observation of subjects in openly public digital spaces.

One of the earliest efforts to establish a digital community for queer Muslim women in France was the creation of a public Facebook group entitled “Muslim and lesbian, it’s possible, LGBT too, long live homosexual Islam” (@Musulmaneliberee). The group was originally established in 2013 and features quotes that affirm compatibility between homosexual and queer identities, opportunities for group discussions (see Figure 5), and photographs of Muslim women kissing (both hijabi and non-hijabi). Although the group brings visibility to Muslim lesbian relationships, it does not focus on the intricacies of reconfiguration as HM2F does in its Facebook group. The initiative received overwhelming negative attention between 2013-2014, as the comment sections reflected homophobia as well as an overall disdain for the group’s message. Yet between December 2020 and June 2021, the group deleted some of its older posts from that time period, revamped its

online presence (the page now says that it was created in 2018), and currently still brings visibility to queer Muslim women on Facebook. Although I conducted my digital ethnography from October 2020 until December 2020, I witnessed the evolution of this group in the process of revising this article until June 2021. The comment sections on the posts between 2018 until 2021 show much more acceptance of queer Muslim posts than in 2013-2014, demonstrating how the general public’s perception of lesbian/bisexual Muslim women might be gradually shifting.

More recently, in October 2020, the Facebook/Instagram initiative PAINT (not an acronym) published one of its first interviews of a Queer Muslim woman. PAINT aims to bring visibility to French LGBTQ+ individuals of diverse backgrounds and life experiences. In the video, Sarah, a queer Muslim woman of Algerian descent proudly asserts “I am queer and Muslim,” (See Figure 6) and “you can be both,” (See Figure 7). She recounts her difficult experiences coming out to her family and declares that being Muslim and lesbian is “totally compatible,” because it does not affect her relationship to God (Instagram:



Figure 5: Facebook group Musulmane et lesbienne c'est possible ! vive l'islam homosexuel ! (@Musulmaneliberee) The writing on the photo reads: “It’s possible!!! Long live homosexual Islam! Kisses, my babies... Anissa” The caption above the link reads: “Darlings, join us on our group discussions.”



Figure 6: Instagram (@paint.official). The caption reads: "I am queer and Muslim"

@paint.official). By publicly asserting her religious and queer identities, Sarah makes the identity that she embodies visible.

Twitter is employed by some queer Muslim Maghrebi individuals as a medium for identity assertion and activism. They utilize the platform as a space to denounce homophobia and Islamophobia, to share their experiences and thoughts, and to confront those who might challenge them. For instance, a queer Muslim young woman of North African origin tweets: "Today, I still don't know who I am exactly. I will probably never know. Today, I am surrounded more and more by people who look like me. Bis, lesbians, transgender people, queer Muslims. And it feels good" (see Figure 8). She is also especially vocal about her experiences as a queer Maghrebi Muslim woman and conceptualizes her identity as a struggle against prejudice. She tweets: "...I fight every day



Figure 7: Instagram (@paint.official). The caption reads: "You can be both"

against racism that I experience as a **Maghrebi woman**, against the homophobia that I experience as a **queer woman**, against the islamophobia that I experience as a **Muslim woman...**" (see Figure 9).

The tweet was originally a reply to a comment made by another Twitter user who asked her what she "does" (in terms of activist work). By bringing attention to her situatedness in the nexus between the three identities — immigrant, queer, Muslim — and highlighting the multiple forces of exclusion that she experiences as she embodies the three, she positions her identity against these forces, ultimately rendering the assertion of her identity as an activist stance in and of itself.

### Non-Reconciliation

In October 2020, Amina Daas, a Maghrebi queer Muslim woman, published a novel that



Figure 8: Anonymized Twitter post.

garnered some attention in the French media. The text, *La Petite Dernière* (2020), recounts the author's experiences living as an immigrant, lesbian, and Muslim woman in Clichy-sous-Bois, a *banlieue* near Paris, bringing up discussions surrounding queer and Muslim identities to the attention of the public. She also garnered some visibility because she openly considers homosexuality to be a "sin" as a Muslim while still identifying as a lesbian, a contradiction that was rendered unintelligible in public discourses (Mahrane 2020). Daas claims that she embodies both identities without reconciling them, and she does not seek to reform Islam.

Some queer Muslim women like Daas retain both Muslim and queer identities while sustaining the presumption of mutual exclusivity between the two. As Amari's research on Maghrebi lesbian women in France (2012; 2018) demonstrates, the identity negotiation process varies from person to person as some women conceptualize their identities from a framework of division rather than unification. This division is highlighted in the ways individuals reveal certain parts of their identity to some and not to others through processes of compartmentalization (Amari 2012). Siraj's study of Muslim lesbians in Britain (2011) demonstrates how some women choose between their Muslim or queer identities, neither reconfiguring nor embodying both "opposing" identities at the same time. In France, a country where religious affiliation in the public space is often viewed with suspicion due to its associations with "obscuritanism" and the complex history of separation of church and state, choosing between the religious and queer identities might make sense for individuals who come from religious backgrounds. France's specific historical relationship to religion and

the underlying cultural importance of *laïcité* may ultimately play important roles in the choices queer Muslim women make regarding their identities: from abandoning religion and embodying a secular "queer" identity, to embodying both identities separately, to forging an understanding of Islam that encompasses some of these culture-specific values while also challenging the exclusions of secularism. These processes of negotiation emphasize the complexity in how queer Muslim immigrant women shape their identities and how they come to interact with structures that undermine their understandings of selfhood.



Figure 9: Anonymized Twitter post.

## Conclusion

*"In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself, — darkly as through a veil; and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another." (W.E.B. Du Bois 1904, 8)*

The year 2020 was a turning point for discussions surrounding queer Muslim Maghrebi identities in France as more women came forward to talk publicly about their experiences. Although they have been problematized and excluded on multiple fronts within dominant religious, political, and feminist discourses, many queer Muslim immigrants take it upon themselves to embody an identity or identities that reflect their understandings of self in relation to their situatedness within current historical, political, and religious contexts. Muslim lesbian and bisexual Maghrebi women reconcile seemingly juxtapositioned categories of "Muslim" and "queer" through methods such as queering the Qur'an and by

utilizing secular understandings of freedom and agency to locate religious authority in the “self” rather than in religious authorities. For some, claiming all three categories is a political stance, a form of activism that opposes and challenges the dominant narratives that render them incompatible. Others do not reconfigure their identities and retain their “queer” and “Muslim” identities separately or choose to embody one or the other. Social media has served as an invaluable medium for individuals with similar conceptions of selfhood to connect, as well as to gain access to resources that help in the reconfiguration process. The findings and discussions of this research aim to make visible a group that has been largely overlooked within academic disciplines and rendered invisible to the public eye. In a globalized world where intersectional identities are becoming increasingly relevant, a critical analysis of how these identities operate remains essential for understanding how apparent cultural incommensurabilities are negotiated and then made commensurable through the framework of the “self.” Ultimately, by bridging the gap between “queer” and “Muslim” identities and connecting with others who share similar understandings of self, queer Muslim Maghrebi women find ways to negotiate and conceptualize their notions of “selfhood” in ways that challenge traditional notions of what it means to be queer, Muslim, and an immigrant in contemporary France.

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