Ali and Nino is a novel published in German in 1937 under the alias “Kurban Said,” a love story between a Muslim man and a Christian woman set in Baku, Azerbaijan, during World War I and the country’s brief independence. It was a major success, translated into several other languages, but was forgotten by the end of World War II. Recent research by the journalist Tom Reiss has revealed the identity of the author as Lev/Leo Nussimbaum (1905–1942), a Jewish man born in Baku who converted to Islam, worked as a journalist in Berlin, and died forgotten in exile. Reiss’s discovery has spurred new interest in the novel, as has the fact that the book prefigures today’s perceived conflicts between East and West or Islam and Christianity, but also suggests a more peaceful model of intercultural living in multiethnic Baku’s melting pot of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. The present volume collects twelve new essays on different aspects of the text by scholars from a variety of disciplines and cultural backgrounds. It is intended to showcase the suitability of Ali and Nino for inclusion in a curriculum focused on German, world literature, or area studies, and to suggest a variety of approaches to the novel while also appealing to its fans.


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Approaches to Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino*
Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture
Approaches
to Kurban Said’s
Ali and Nino

Love, Identity, and
Intercultural Conflict

Edited by
Carl Niekerk and Cori Crane

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Acknowledgments

The idea for this volume originally grew out of hallway conversations between the two of us on using Kurban Said’s fascinating tale *Ali and Nino* (1937) in the German classroom. In our role as college German teachers, one of our major priorities is helping students, most of whom study German as a foreign language, to develop a deeper understanding of cultural issues and matters of intercultural exchange through the target language. As a first-person narrative, *Ali and Nino* offers students an opportunity to shift and expand their understanding of what German literature, and German studies, represent. Not only is the novel a rare example of early Germanophone literature written by a multilingual speaker from outside of the German-speaking world, but it also addresses cultural constructions of East and West well before Edward Said’s seminal *Orientalism* took on this topic in 1978. *Ali and Nino*, we reasoned, would thus provide a unique perspective for students and scholars of German, European, and global studies to examine current themes related to migration and cultural diversity—for instance, stereotyping and identity construction, gender and feminism, and interpersonal relationships, to name just a few. Our initial conversations took place in 2010, shortly before a number of interconnected world events occurred that would complicate our lens on cross-cultural understanding between East and West and make such work even more pressing in humanities-based education. We saw, for example, the revolutionary events associated with the Arab Spring, the massive Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, the rise of right-wing movements in Western countries, and with it unexpected election results that tested the limits of democratic society. As we might look to literature for some understanding of what these migratory and sociopolitical shifts in the world mean, we believe now more than ever that Kurban Said’s unique novel deserves special attention in a German, European, and global studies curriculum.

Of course, as the project further developed and manuscript contributions came in, our own understanding of how *Ali and Nino* can be applied to different scholarly and learning contexts beyond German studies expanded. We are delighted to share in this volume a range of scholarly contributions that represent different disciplinary perspectives and that approach the novel from a variety of cultural traditions and geographic locations.

To the many individuals who helped us bring this volume to fruition, we would like to express our deep gratitude. A very special thanks
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Carl Niekerk
Cori Crane
November 14, 2016
Notes on Editions of and References to *Ali and Nino*

In the following, all page references refer to the currently available editions of the English and German versions of *Ali and Nino*: Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino: A Love Story*, translated by Jenia Graman (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 2000), and *Ali und Nino: Roman* (Berlin: List, 2002). Parenthetical references list the page number for the English edition first (before the slash), and the page number for the German edition second (after the slash). Sentences or sentence fragments present in the German edition but absent in the English edition are added to the English translation in square brackets.
Introduction: *Ali and Nino* as World Literature

*Carl Niekerk and Cori Crane*

Kurban Said’s novel *Ali and Nino*, first published in German in 1937, is not the kind of text to which one typically finds references in books on literary history, not even in the most comprehensive volumes. The novel is hard to categorize. It is, for instance, not clear to which national literature or cultural tradition the text should be assigned. Although the novel was originally published in German and with a publishing house specializing in German-language texts, the E. P. Tal Verlag in Vienna, its author’s decision to go by the alias “Kurban Said” suggests to readers that his own native language might not be German. The geographical setting of the book—Azerbaijan and Persia during the first two decades of the twentieth century—reinforced this impression that the text’s author might not be from a German-speaking country. Rather, the author must be a newcomer on the literary scene. His chosen alias was perhaps meant to provide the text with a certain authenticity: most likely the book was written, one could stipulate, by someone with a personal history in Azerbaijan or Persia in the early twentieth century. Above all, the alias suggested a mystery: Why this novel in German? And why was it published in Vienna? Moreover, in hindsight, the date of publication, 1937, is intriguing: Europe at the time was, as we know now, at the brink of a new and exceptionally violent world war. *Ali and Nino* indeed takes up the themes of violence and destruction as well, but at the same time suggests an alternative to this world of violence. Above all, *Ali and Nino* is a love story about two people from divergent cultural and religious backgrounds who in spite of their many differences find each other and, at least for a while, are able to create a happy life together.

For a long time *Ali and Nino* was what the Germans call a *Geheimtipp*: only known to and appreciated by a small group of insiders with either a more than superficial interest in the literature of exile or exceptional knowledge of the region (i.e., Azerbaijan, Persia, and the Middle East more generally)—areas about which Kurban Said wrote in both *Ali and Nino* and his subsequent novel, *The Girl from the Golden Horn* (first published in German also by the Vienna Tal Verlag in 1938, one year after *Ali
Current interest in *Ali and Nino*—the book has gone through a series of reprints and numerous new translations since the year 2000—was triggered by two publications by the American journalist Tom Reiss, whose interests concerned mostly the question of the book’s authorship. In October 1999, Reiss published an essay in the *New Yorker* entitled “The Man from the East,” which was followed in February 2005 by a mass-market monograph, *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life.* Both texts were based on detailed historical research that included visits to archives, the unearthing of manuscripts and consultation of historical records, and above all numerous interviews with people who had known some of the main historical figures in his story. In these two documents Tom Reiss argues that the author of *Ali and Nino* is Lev (or Leo) Nussimbaum, born in Baku in 1905 and of Jewish descent, who fled Azerbaijan in 1920 when the Soviets took over, converted to Islam, and eventually ended up in Berlin. In Berlin, Nussimbaum hid his Jewish identity and adopted the alias “Essad Bey.” Working as a journalist writing about issues concerning the Caucasus and the Middle East from 1929 to 1936, Nussimbaum under the pen name of “Essad Bey” published a dozen well-received books about these regions and some of its leading politicians, including an acclaimed biography of Stalin. In 1942, Nussimbaum died in Italy from a degenerative disease and without immediate relatives. The alias “Kurban Said,” registered in 1937 by a friend, the baroness Elfriede von Ehrenfels, in her own name but on behalf of Nussimbaum, was intended to serve as a front and enable copyright payments to Nussimbaum, who due to his Jewish background was barred in Germany from publishing and making money off his publications, an activity he had enjoyed as his main source of income until then. That the alias “Kurban Said” was established in 1937 is particularly curious given the anti-Jewish laws that would soon make their way to Austria through Germany’s occupation and eventual annexation of Austria in March 1938.

The amount of evidence collected by Reiss, in particular in his book *The Orientalist,* that speaks for Nussimbaum’s authorship of *Ali and Nino* is vast. And yet, whether he was the actual author of *Ali and Nino* has been and is still frequently contested. A comparative reading of *Ali and Nino* to Nussimbaum’s *Blood and Oil in the Orient* (first published in German as *Öl und Blut im Orient* in 1929 under the alias “Essad Bey”) reveals, however, striking similarities between the two books both in content and style (see also Azade Seyhan’s contribution to this volume). Nevertheless, Nussimbaum’s authorship of *Ali and Nino* continues to be challenged as a result of various reasons related to personal inheritance and cultural legacy. Nussimbaum’s early death in 1942 left him without close relatives after the war to speak out on behalf of his interests. Accordingly, all earnings associated not only with the German version of *Ali and Nino* but also with its many translations went to Elfriede von
INTRODUCTION: *Ali and Nino* as World Literature

Ehrenfels herself and, after her death, to her heirs. The only evidence that the baroness’s heirs have offered to date in support of their relative’s authorship of *Ali and Nino* is that the alias “Kurban Said” in 1937 was registered in Elfriede von Ehrenfels’s name. Another motive why Nussimbaum’s authorship of *Ali and Nino* is still disputed has to do with the symbolic importance of one’s national cultural tradition contributing an important work of literature to global culture. This is without a doubt at least one of the reasons why it has been suggested that the Azerbaijani novelist Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli (1887–1943) wrote *Ali and Nino*, despite Chamanzaminli himself never having claimed authorship of the text and despite his defenders’ inability to offer factual evidence to support such a claim.

As interesting as these deliberations about the exact identity of the person hiding behind the alias “Kurban Said” and about the historical and political circumstances informing that person’s biography are, this volume of essays has another emphasis. The primary focus of the papers collected here is the literary text *Ali and Nino* and the many possible scholarly perspectives that this text allows for. Our interest in editing a volume of essays on Kurban Said’s novel is rooted in the experience of teaching *Ali and Nino* to American undergraduates at public universities in a variety of contexts (both as part of a curriculum leading toward the German major, and in classes with a focus on general education). As culturally and historically unfamiliar as the novel may be to this student population, *Ali and Nino* speaks to a number of themes considered highly relevant for understanding society today, including cross- and intercultural differences, gender roles, power, and the role of violence in society, to name just a few.

Why did Nussimbaum, exiled from Azerbaijan, on the run from the Nazis, and after having decided not to make the United States into his new home, publish this text in German? One possible answer to this questions is that Lev Nussimbaum in 1937 had to find new ways of making a living; after he was no longer allowed to publish in the Third Reich, his career as a journalist was de facto over, and the marriage that would have permanently freed him from financial worries had been dissolved (see Reiss, *The Orientalist*, 294–96). This answer though is too easy and certainly does not explain why Nussimbaum wrote *Ali and Nino* in precisely the form in which it was published. Coming from the margins of Europe, Nussimbaum’s choice to write his novel in German and on a topic that, at least upon first sight, within the political turmoil of 1937 would have appeared to most readers of German of only remote relevance must have seemed odd to many.

To understand Nussimbaum’s choice of language and topic, it is productive to look at his text in the context of the debates concerning “world literature” that have been part of German literary history since Goethe
popularized the term in 1827. Our aim is not to prove that the novel *Ali and Nino* fulfills all of Goethe’s criteria or, beyond that, is part of a global literary canon of classical texts that deserve to be read by everyone, regardless of national or cultural background. We are instead interested, in line with some trends in recent scholarship, in showing that the term “world literature” not only can be used to argue that literature should be considered in a global context, but as such can also be part of an effort to integrate literature into a transcultural dialogue, the need for which is increasingly urgent.

After Hitler’s march into Vienna and the *Anschluss* on March 11 and 12, 1938, Nussimbaum chose exile and fled to Positano, Italy, where he went into hiding and died at the age of 37 on August 27, 1942. For reasons very similar to those of Nussimbaum, Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), also of Jewish descent and with an interest in literature in its multinational contexts, fled Germany after losing his position at the University of Marburg and spent the war years in Turkey, where he taught European philology at Istanbul University from 1936 until 1947. In 1952, now based in the United States, Auerbach published an essay, “The Philology of World Literature” (Philologie der Weltliteratur), which is generally seen as a meditation on his experiences during his stay in Turkey, the changes such as rapid modernization and secularization that he witnessed there in the late 1930s and 1940s, and the impact these observations had on his views on the role of literature in a global context. What concerns Auerbach in the aftermath of the Second World War is a “homogenization of human life the world over” and a concomitant “eclipsing of local traditions,” a process that either follows a “Euro-American” or a “Soviet-Bolshevist pattern.” It is not hard to find a similar concern in Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino*: Baku’s particular mix of cultures is threatened not only by Russian hegemony, as the first pages of the novel already make clear (3–9/5–11), but also, during the short interregnum of the English after the end of the First World War, by a rapid Westernization, in which Nino, as well as Ali, are complicit themselves (247–59/242–55).

To Erich Auerbach, the task of world literature is to preserve the experience of diversity for which cultural differences allow. A concern about diversity is also one of the key issues in the debate surrounding world literature of the past few years. The latest round of interest in world literature has been ignited by Emily Apter’s provocatively entitled book, *Against World Literature: On the Poetics of Untranslatability* (2013). The book questions the relevance of a seemingly antiquated concept like “world literature” for a time that leans toward the “reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded ‘differences’ that have been niche-marketed as commercialized ‘identities.’”10 Emily Apter’s main argument against the construct of a “world literature,” and the starting point of
her deliberations, is based on the untranslatability of certain concepts. Acknowledging this principal untranslatability suggests respecting the autonomy of cultural traditions. Any attempt to translate such untranslatables inevitably leads to mistranslation; and precisely the phenomenon of “mistranslation” can be the point of departure for a “revisionist history of ideas.” Instead of one world literature, Apter advocates for a plurality of world literatures, and an accompanying notion of “dispossessive collectivism,” by which she means an ability to think about one’s own identity and that of others in ways that do not homogenize, flatten, or minimize “cultural untranslatability.” Something to take away from Apter’s text for our readings of *Ali and Nino* is the insight that (world) literature is not only a place where a variety of cultural identities meet, but that the commensurability of these identities, their translatability or lack thereof, and the exact nature of the relationship in which they engage with each other are topics with which a text like *Ali and Nino* engages as well.

Following a line of thought very similar to that of Apter, Aamir Mufti in *Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literatures* (2016) problematizes the dominance of English in the study of world literature from a perspective informed by postcolonial theory. This dominance shows, according to Mufti, that academic studies on world literature are still caught up in the power dynamics created by a colonial past from which the authors of those studies meant to distance themselves. Mufti’s book is a call to acknowledge the hierarchies and power dynamics still at work not only in academic discourse, but also in the texts themselves that are the focus of this discourse; in this context he writes of the “enormous role played by literature as an institution in the emergence of the hierarchies that structure relations between societies in the modern world.” Here, too, Mufti is interested in a critical approach that lays bare the problematic dimension of such hierarchies.

And yet, in spite of Mufti’s criticism of the predominance of English, one could, nevertheless, speak of a double bind characterizing the relationship of many literatures and cultures to the hegemony of English, as he sees it. Precisely because of its global dominance, English, as a “global literary vernacular,” has the “ability to provide the conditions of legibility of diverse and heterogeneous practices of writing in numerous languages as (world) literature.” The ability to have one’s texts translated into English is tied directly to the possibility to have one’s (maybe peripheral) literature and culture play a role on the global stage. This applies directly to Nussimbaum, for whom it was not English, but German that promised access to a broader readership. As Daniel Schreiner points out in this volume, *Ali and Nino* was written primarily for a Western readership, and Nussimbaum may very well have expected that the German publication of his novel would be followed swiftly by an English translation, as had happened with *Öl und Blut im Orient*, his most successful
Like Aamir Mufti, Pheng Cheah in *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016) seeks an innovation of the concept “world literature” through engaging with postcolonial writing and theory. In his study, Cheah offers a critical examination of the components that make up world literature, in particular its spatial and temporal dimensions. He is especially interested in literature “as a force of world-making,” pointing out that “the presentation of the world” is not to be taken “for granted because, at the very least, it is given to us by the imagination.” Literary texts, in other words, create space in a specific way, tied not only to a particular culture, but also to a perceiving subject. This, however, not only applies to the spatial realm. World literature is the product of a specific constellation of space and time, but in particular the latter dimension has often been overlooked by scholarship, according to Cheah. In this way, literature provides readers with an imaginative window into other times, while offering a sense of time that sees the future as fundamentally open.

Cheah further emphasizes the normative ambitions of world literature. Literary texts with global ambitions do not merely seek to describe the world or report on it; they strive to change it. This normative dimension—one could perhaps also speak of its humanistic goals—is by no means unproblematic and is not to be understood as a straightforward ideological message contained within a text. It is rather to be identified as world literature’s goal to contribute to a better life, the power of which, however, is limited: “The force of world literature is fragile. But it nevertheless persists as a real immanent promise because without the openness of the world, nothing can take place.” Understood in this way, world literature is emancipatory in that it reminds its readers of potential futures and sees those as open. For Cheah, world literature is part of a cosmopolitan project, one that reflects the experiences of our contemporary postcolonial world and gives a voice to those who find themselves in the margins of that world (his examples include contemporary writing in Jamaica, the Philippines, and Somalia, among other places).

While Apter expresses skepticism about literature’s ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural borders, Cheah emphasizes its communicative ability. Many of Cheah’s ideas about world literature apply to *Ali and Nino* as well. Not only is Nussimbaum’s book a meditation on Baku and Azerbaijan’s place in the world; this is made all the more visible through frequent and explicit contrasting references to people and places representing the cultural hegemonic powers of Russia, Persia, and also the West, as symbolized for instance by Paris, the city of Ali’s new possible diplomatic post and where Nino yearns to move after the collapse of Azerbaijan as an independent state (257–59, 271/253–55, 267).
The novel is driven by a strong desire to narrate the historical events and accompanying injustices that play themselves out in 1920s’ Azerbaijan, and wants to communicate a sense of how history at that point in time might have taken another turn.

In spite of the fairly major differences among their approaches, Emily Apter, Aamir Mufti, and Pheng Cheah all point to a need to come to a more deliberate and sophisticated notion of world literature that can accommodate for the historical circumstances in which such literature emerges. Each one of these authors opposes a notion that conceives of world literature as a stable canon of classical texts that no longer need to demonstrate their value, and as an expression of seemingly universal notions of humanity. What to make, however, of the contradictory impulses underlying their theorizing? Apter’s emphasis on untranslatability (albeit not one that would make “world literatures,” a term deliberately used in the plural, impossible) stands in stark contrast to the communicative ethos of world literature that speaks out of the works of Mufti and Cheah.

In this context, it is productive to return to Auerbach’s essay “Philology of World Literature,” a text that is discussed in detail by all three of these theorists. Underlying Auerbach’s essay are two premises that may help us understand how world literature functions and can function today. In Auerbach’s view, world literature “does not refer merely to what we share or what is common to all humanity. Rather, it concerns how what we share and the great diversity of what we do not share can be mutually enriching.”21 Auerbach closely follows Goethe’s ideas on world literature here, as he articulated them in a letter to Thomas Carlyle from July 20, 1827.22 In Goethe and Auerbach’s views, world literature on the one hand always seeks to establish commonality while on the other hand insists that those individual experiences that cannot be shared may still be of relevance for a broader audience. The communicative ambitions of world literature do not tie it down to what is common to humanity alone, but in addition also concern what Apter calls “untranslatables”—that is, those elements or experiences that are specific to a culture and that cultures do not share. Part of Auerbach’s cosmopolitan agenda is his assumption of an interest not only in what literatures have in common, but also in what distinguishes them.

A second point that Auerbach makes concerns what Cheah terms the temporality of world literature, an element that Cheah clearly develops on the basis of his reading of Auerbach’s essay.23 Auerbach connects diversity—a key concept, as we already have argued—with historical awareness: “Without this experience of diversity I fear our sense of historical perspective might rapidly lose its vitality and concreteness. [. . .] it is only in history that we can remain what we are, and develop.”24 Auerbach does not use the term “memory” in this context, and what he has in mind is
most certainly much broader and includes languages and entire literary and cultural traditions, of which memory is only one aspect. It is intriguing, however, to apply his idea to the memory work that takes place in literature. Keeping in mind that world literature aims for both commonality and cultural specificity, memory may be a helpful factor in determining world literature’s functioning. Memory work in general combines a broader global picture—what we know went on in the world at a specific time—with the question of what a specific person or group experienced at a specific place at that time. Understood this way, it by necessity concerns communal and individual experiences.

As a form of cultural memory, world literature is part of an intended communicative act, a struggle to make one’s voice heard by a global audience. To be part of world literature means the potential to share with a much broader readership what otherwise might remain just local knowledge. Yet, in order to earn such a distinction, the text needs to be able to appeal to such a readership. In relation to the catastrophic events that shaped the first half of the twentieth century, we live in the era of “post-memory”; actual historical memory of the events Nussimbaum describes in *Ali and Nino*, as well as in the earlier *Blood and Oil in the Orient*, is fading rapidly. Instead we can now only access such memories through images and texts. For many of its readers, *Ali and Nino* can be a perplexing and disorienting text in how it contributes to our understanding of the first half of the twentieth century. Through its content and what we know about the biography of its author, the novel appeals to our interest in the literature of exile and Holocaust literature, while at the same time complicating our view of both. Through its focus on Azerbaijan and Baku in the first two decades of the twentieth century, the novel adds to and also complicates our picture of the events leading up to the Second World War and the Holocaust. An important part of the relevance of *Ali and Nino* for our time is that the text forces us to face the question how we negotiate different traditions of memory with each other, acknowledging that we rarely deal with one memory tradition alone, that our memories are, in other words, “multidirectional.”

Because of this, *Ali and Nino* and the type of literature it represents, written in German, but “outside of the nation,” or, to use another metaphor, in the margins of what German culture has been understood to be, has the potential to change our understanding of German cultural and literary history and the ways in which we approach the teaching of German literature itself. Looking at Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino* as world literature can help us make the case for the relevance of similar texts whose themes embody tensions between the global and local. The quality of a literary text is not measured by the answer to the questions of whether it fulfills the (stylistic or narrative) criteria of a national canon and how it fits into a national literary or cultural tradition. Literary texts and other
cultural artifacts are often the product of multiple traditions that sometimes coexist peacefully, but may also (directly or indirectly) experience disagreement with each other. Precisely where traditions and cultures conflict with each other, literature can play an important role. This is an important insight that has the potential to change the ways in which we perceive and teach literary texts. A pedagogy informed by such a “world literature” view therefore strives to help students discover and probe how their own positionality impacts and shapes their reading of cultures that are removed from them in time and space. Engaging with a text like Ali and Nino, which both encompasses myriad universal motifs found in literature (such as love, war, cultural difference, coming of age, and travel) and yet provides a unique socio-cultural perspective that may not be familiar to readers, can help students to question, revise, and expand on their understandings of national and world literatures. Carefully guiding such conversations in the classroom can lead students to critically reflect on the translatability of the text for today’s readers (see especially Hock and Saatchi’s discussion in this volume).

Given these needs, Baku, and more broadly speaking, Azerbaijan, at the beginning of the twentieth century provides an especially interesting setting for a novel. On the one hand, Muslims, Jews, and Christians managed to coexist harmoniously in Baku at the time, no doubt in part because the booming oil industry made cooperation economically attractive to all of its inhabitants. On the other hand, Ali and Nino shows that such a peaceful cohabitation of different ethnic groups and cultures was fragile and, in particular at moments when the world outside of Baku interfered with Azerbaijan’s affairs, could easily collapse. As much as we, from an early twenty-first-century perspective, may desire to locate models of successful intercultural living in the products of literary and cultural history—our own and that of others—we should not close our eyes to the fact that such utopian designs were often endangered and accompanied by tensions that could easily turn violent.

The following collection of essays makes the case that Ali and Nino is a text that should interest us today, as readers and teachers, precisely because it deals in a complex way with the topics sketched above. In particular, the essays in this volume seek to address both the utopian perspective on intercultural living expressed in Ali and Nino, as well as its endangerment, often exploring the inherent tension between both. Azade Seyhan sets the stage for this collection by arguing for Ali and Nino as a text that not only documents, but also itself is the product of processes of cultural translation that cover many ethnicities and resist all facile categorization. She makes this point not only through a series of methodological deliberations based in contemporary theory and on issues that, in many respects, are already anticipated by Ali and Nino, but also by reflecting on her own readings of Ali and Nino in the context of Baku around the
beginning of the twentieth century, in different stages of life. Lisabeth Hock and Soraya Saatchi present approaches to teaching *Ali and Nino* as a model of transculturation, taking in particular into account the multi- and interdisciplinary skills needed to analyze the text. Through its multiple encodings, the complexity and interpretative openness of this text make it a particularly productive object for teaching and understanding cultural difference, forcing the reader/student to further consider her or his own (historical and geographical) position in relation to the conflicts discussed (see in particular also their reflective writing prompts in the appendixes). Christine Rapp Dombrowski’s contribution looks at the use of Persian poetry and its recitation in *Ali and Nino* as comparative and confrontational cultural moments, intended to foster mutual acceptance and intercultural tolerance. Dombrowski not only analyzes references to specific poems in *Ali and Nino*, but also reflects on the important role of poetry in society and culture as depicted in the novel.

The three subsequent essays in the volume explore, from different perspectives, the issue of gender in *Ali and Nino*. Sara Abdoullah-Zadeh takes the notion of “stereotype” as the point of departure in her analysis to argue that traditional gender expectations are depicted and analyzed in *Ali and Nino*, but also become part of an urgent cross-cultural process of communication. In her essay, Abdoullah-Zadeh criticizes a mis- representation of Muslim culture, especially concerning its ideas about women, that is often projected onto a text like *Ali and Nino*. In her view, patriarchal structures that are not necessarily typical for societies in either East or West are to blame for the difficulties of women in society as thematized in the novel. Gender is also one of the main categories of analysis in Anja Haensch’s essay, which reads *Ali and Nino* as a text that simultaneously denounces and assists the construction of Orientalist stereotypes linked to religion, gender, and race. In particular, Haensch examines the links between Islam, masculinity, and violence in Kurban Said’s text and points out the troubling nature of the return to a stereotypical depiction of Islam in Western societies today. Elizabeth Weber Edwards in her contribution looks at the connections between gender, honor, and shame. Through their sense of “honor” and “shame,” central concepts in *Ali and Nino* that convey strong cultural connotations, both Ali and Nino are at the mercy of communitarian systems that may not act in their interest or work out for their relationship. Sexuality—and with it specific expectations about normative male and female behavior—plays an important role in determining what is honorable and shameful for Ali and Nino.

In part, the provocative side of *Ali and Nino* can be explained by its tendency to conceive of identities as fundamentally unstable and in flux. Focusing on *Ali and Nino* from the perspective of Azerbaijan’s literary history, Daniel Schreciner argues that the many Orientalist patterns in the
novel speak against an author with a background embedded in Azerbaijan culture, but rather point to the text having been written for a specifically Western audience. Schreiner himself offers a comparison between Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino* and *Artush and Zaur* (2009) by Azerbaijani author Alekper Oliyev (born in 1978). The provocative nature of Kurban Said’s text at the time of its first publication is best understood through comparison of its pivotal love affair between Ali and Nino with the homosexual relationship at the center of *Artush and Zaur*, written within the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh War between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kamaal Haque explores the complex spatial dimensions in *Ali and Nino* by considering the various spaces between Asia and Europe, both geographical, as represented by Persia and Georgia, and metaphorical, as depicted in the desert and the forest. Within this geography Baku functions as a mixed space with an outer city largely Western and modern, and an inner city predominantly Asian and in decline. Upon their return from Persia, Haque points out, Ali and Nino’s new house is paradoxically located in the inner city, and yet European in style—symbolic for the slow Europeanization of Baku. Chase Dimock looks at the many oppositions visible in *Ali and Nino* and the ambiguous identities that result when contrasting forces begin to interact with each other in the text. Dimock’s aim is to show how *Ali and Nino* conceives of modernity and Western ideology, and the attractions and dangers both represent as culturally “feminine,” particularly as Ali seeks to assert and maintain a stable “masculine” identity throughout the novel.

Elke Pfitzinger investigates *Ali and Nino* from the perspective of a basic tension between what can and cannot be seen. Even despite its strong visual orientation, the novel consistently demands of its reader that the visual be interpreted and its hidden meaning be revealed. Pfitzinger concludes that in *Ali and Nino* the realm of transcendence is always present, but it is tied to the Eastern sphere and is therefore not accessible to everyone; while Ali forcefully seeks to enter this Eastern sphere, Nino in contrast is unable to follow him there. Ruchama Johnston-Bloom argues that Nussimbaum’s Jewishness is reflected in *Ali and Nino*’s portrayal of Islam and Islamic responses to the West in that the depiction of both can be compared to Western discourses surrounding Judaism. Modernization and geographical determinism are key topics determining the West’s view of the Islamic, but also the Jewish world. Modernity is often conflated with the West. In her discussion, Johnston-Bloom discusses three issues that concern the “Jewish Question” in relation to Islam in *Ali and Nino*: religious reform, changes in dress and behavior, and the question of the possibility of a universal subject position. Carl Niekerk’s essay takes as its point of departure contemporary debates about a “Clash of Civilizations,” a term coined by the conservative critic Samuel P. Huntington. He argues that *Ali and Nino* depicts traditions as cultural constructions that
additionally contain the images a society produces of other cultures outside of itself. While culture certainly plays a role in the construction of one’s own identity, such identities are not by necessity monolithic and, at least at times, may leave some space for the individual to make its own choices, including when these may go against the dominant culture.

Our volume, *Approaches to Kurban Said’s “Ali and Nino,”* seeks to show that the novel can be read and analyzed from a variety of contemporary literary, cultural, and pedagogical perspectives that provide important tools to work through the historical and cultural memories that literary texts often contain. The novel’s complexity—even in spite of the (perhaps not so complex or subtle) political and commercial motives that its author may have had in mind when he wrote *Ali and Nino*—invites, and indeed calls for, the use of different interpretive methods and approaches from disciplinary and interdisciplinary viewpoints. One should certainly not idealize Baku around 1900; the novel makes this very clear. It is surely also a mistake to draw quick parallels between the conflicts that dominated the global scene in the first two decades of the twentieth century and our world today. And yet there is some inherent value to studying the issues of culture, identity, and power that the novel raises in its specific historical and geographical settings. The editors and authors of this collection believe that *Ali and Nino* can be a valuable text to explore these issues, especially when used with students in the classroom. Our hope is that these essays will contribute to an increased interest in and a continuation of the debate about Kurban Said’s *Ali and Nino*—not with the intention to find final answers to every question one could ask about the text, but rather in the belief that asking questions and debating issues from a variety of contrasting (and sometimes maybe conflicting) perspectives itself can be a productive exercise.

**Notes**

1 See Tom Reiss, “The Man from the East,” *New Yorker*, October 4, 1999, 68–83; and Tom Reiss, *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life* (New York: Random House, 2005). The following biographical information about Nussimbaum is taken from these texts. Soon after the publication of the *New Yorker* essay, Kurban Said’s two novels were reissued in both German and English, including *The Girl from the Golden Horn* (*Das Mädchen vom Goldenen Horn*), which now appeared in English translation for the first time.

2 See, for instance, the English-language entry for “Ali and Nino” on Wikipedia (accessed October 13, 2016, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_and_Nino](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_and_Nino)), which has served as a platform for different constituencies to claim the authorship of *Ali and Nino* for their candidate and provides a good overview of the contenders for that position. Wikipedia has marked the
page as having “multiple issues,” specifically: “the neutrality of this article is disputed” and a “major contributor to this article appears to have a close connection with its subject.” Both comments, marked “January 2012,” have not been resolved since.

3 This point was made in a letter to the magazine Newsweek, which had reviewed Reiss’s book, published on March 28, 2005, accessed October 16, 2016, http://www.newsweek.com/mail-call-114521. For more details regarding this matter, see Carl Niekerk’s contribution at the end of this volume.

4 See Pascale Casanova, The World Republic of Letters, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), for a discussion of the mechanisms involved in national cultural traditions that compete with each other for global attention. See also Christine Rapp Dombrowski’s contribution to this volume, which also makes the case for looking at Ali and Nino as world literature.


7 Regarding these experiences in Turkey and their impact on Auerbach’s work, see Aamir R. Mufti, Forget English: Orientalisms and World Literatures (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 213–16 and 226.


11 Apter, Against World Literature, 32.

12 Apter, Against World Literature, 328 and 334.

13 See Aamir R. Mufti, Forget English, 79–80; see also 19, 53, 57, and 96.

14 Mufti, Forget English, 97.

15 Mufti, Forget English, 17 and 52.
16 See Essad Bey, Öl und Blut im Orient (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1929) and Essad Bey, Blood and Oil in the Orient, trans. Elsa Talmey (London: Nash & Grayson, 1931) and (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1932).


18 Cheah, What Is a World?, see, for instance, 5, 12–14, and 25–26; Cheah returns to this topic toward the end of his study (see, for instance, 311).


22 “Eine wahrhaft allgemeine Duldung wird am sichersten erreicht, wenn man das Besondere der einzelnen Menschen und Völkerschaften auf sich beruhen läßt, bey der Überzeugung jedoch festhält, daß das wahrhaft Verdienstliche sich dadurch auszeichnet, daß es der ganzen Menschheit angehört” (A truly general tolerance will be reached most securely if one leaves intact what is unique about individual people and nations while simultaneously maintaining the conviction that what deserves true merit distinguishes itself by the fact that it belongs to all of humankind), in Werke: Weimarer Ausgabe, sec. 4, vol. 42 (1907), 267–72; here 270; translation mine.


25 Marianne Hirsch speaks of “postmemory” when a person has no direct knowledge of historical events, and relies on images and texts produced by others to learn about such events; see The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), for instance 4–5, 31, 35 and 48.

26 Michael Rothberg develops the notion of “multidirectional memory” as a means to “draw attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance”; see Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11. Memory is “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing”; it is “productive and not privative” (3). In a similar context, Marianne Hirsch speaks of “connective histories” (The Generation of Postmemory, 21).

27 Azade Seyhan makes the interesting point that many of the categories used to analyze literature that is the product of mobility implicitly rely on a national model: “descriptions such as exilic, ethnic, migrant, or diasporic cannot do justice to the nuances of writing between histories, geographies and cultural practices”; see Azade Seyhan, Writing outside the Nation (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 9. As a response to this, she emphasizes the “responsibility to reflect, problematize, and preface the terms we employ” instead (9).
1: **Ali and Nino: The Novel as/of Cultural Translation**

Azade Seyhan

Many years ago in a different age and place, in a bookstore that carried English-language books in an upscale neighborhood of Ankara, I found a novel, titled *Ali and Nino*, by a certain Kurban Said, an author I had never heard of. The name was undeniably one of someone from the Middle East. Thus, I was surprised to find out that the book was translated from the original German. Kurban Said was obviously a pseudonym, but whose? A few years later, this time as a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, I found another copy of *Ali and Nino* in a used bookstore. By then, I had lost or misplaced the first one. None of my well-read professors nor any of my bookish graduate school friends had ever heard of this book written in German, though resonating with memories of other languages: Persian, Azeri, Russian, and Turkish. Who was this modern Heine, or even Nietzsche, with a piercing insight into religion, morality, and slave and philistine mentality? Wrapped in a cross-cultural and star-crossed love story, the novel chronicled the devastation brought upon the oil rich city of Baku in Azerbaijan by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution. At the time, I thought this short novel would be a stimulating and informative addition to the German major reading list, but the book was out of print, and we were still bound by the “canon of German literature.”

Some time ago I found the English translation of another novel by this mysterious Said, *The Girl from the Golden Horn* (*Das Mädchen vom Goldenen Horn*, 1938), whose protagonist Aziyadeh, a young woman from the Ottoman court and student of Oriental languages in Berlin, was forced into exile with her widowed father when the Ottoman dynasty was banished after the First World War.¹ Coincidentally, another Aziyadé (spelled slightly differently in French) is also the protagonist of Pierre Loti’s Orientalist novel *Aziyadé* (1879).² But this Said clearly was no Orientalist in the sense established by the other Said, Edward Said, who defined Orientalism as a methodological and disciplinary appropriation of the cultures of the Orient in its broadest geographical parameters.³ He (or perhaps she?) seemed to be writing from the inside; his or her knowledge
of Persian and Ottoman culture was not only comprehensive, but also nuanced. The mystery deepened; there was no information about the identity of this Said. Both *Ali und Nino* and *Das Mädchen* were translated into English by Jenia Graman in 1970 and 2001 respectively, and the copyright belonged to Leela Ehrenfels, a Viennese woman, whose relationship to Said was another mystery. The more I tried to find about this elusive author, the more I was reminded of Winston Churchill’s *bon mot* about Russia more than seventy years ago, that it was a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.

Before I return to the contested question of the identity of its author, I would like to briefly reflect on the importance of *Ali and Nino* as an early example of translational/transcultural German writing, which offers an extended meditation on physical and cultural displacement, translation, trials of diasporic existence, and religion and religious conflict with particular attention to Christian and Islamic identities. Although Said’s numerous books on the history of Transcaucasia and Russia and his biographies of Mohammed, Stalin, and Reza Shah are now available in reprint in the original German along with a few in translation, only *Ali and Nino*, the first of his two novels, has achieved an almost cult-like following, particularly in Azerbaijan, where it is seen as a national novel, albeit attributed to an Azeri author, Yusif Vazir Chamanzaminli.4 In terms of its elegant and accessible German, its multilinguistically inflected tone, and its ethnographic and historical interest, the reemergence of *Ali and Nino* from the lost archives of German literary history comes at an opportune moment, as German studies aspires to enter a culturally diverse territory in research and teaching.

During the last three decades, the future trajectory of German studies has been a frequent topic of debate in German programs at many American universities. Numerous editions, conference sessions, and special issues of journals have addressed the question of why the modern German literature canon needs to expand to include the work of bi- and multilingual and/or transcultural authors writing in Germany. Whereas French studies had enjoyed a tremendous boost first from poststructuralism since the early sixties and soon thereafter from Francophone literature, transnational/translational studies in German got off to a slow start. Scholars and teachers of German realized that a revised and expanded canon would be a major catalyst for the transformation of a nationally defined *Germanistik* into a transnationally conceived territory of German studies that takes into its purview issues of cross-cultural identity, colonialism and postcolonialism in German literature and film, bi- and multilingualism, translation studies, and other interdisciplinary subjects. The growing visibility of “hyphenated” German writers and artists from the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East has challenged us as critics and educators to envision new paradigms for understanding
Germany’s “others.” The unprecedented scale of human movement across borders since the last decades of the twentieth century, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and of nation-states like Yugoslavia, and the reunification of separate Germanies have caused a cultural sea change in the heart of Europe and posed a major challenge to the idea of an enlightened, unified Western cultural legacy. The transnational flow of monetary and cultural capital, high speed and instant communication, and global social networks have contributed to the growing diversity and complexity of exile stories. While this development has been instrumental in shifting the study of “Migrationsliteratur” from sociological descriptiveness to literary analysis, the representations of other worlds, cultures, and value systems cannot always be accurately abstracted from immigration tales, most of which still focus on alienation, homesickness, and culture shock in a subjective vein. Postcolonial theory and discourses of identity politics have undoubtedly provided important critical insights into the colonial and postcolonial experience, global consciousness, and the work of writers writing across political and linguistic borders. However, many studies that paint non-Western artistic and literary production with a broad theoretical brush—be this of the postcolonial, poststructuralist, deconstructive, or race and gender kind—gloss over or eschew its cultural specificity and detract from its pedagogical insights. *Ali and Nino* resists facile categorization, for it engages in a multifaceted work of cultural translation in its broadest sense, one that involves an ongoing meditation on cultural similarities and differences that reflects on cultures in translational encounters from multiple viewpoints.

My confidence in *Ali and Nino* as a great find for the multicultural German classroom was confirmed by the popular interest it had recently garnered as a mirror into the little-known world of the Caucasus, as well as due to the lingering mystery of its authorship. At a lecture I gave at the Jewish Schneidertempel in Istanbul in June 2012, many listeners came with the original German and different translations of the book. Some of them had also read *New York Times* investigative reporter Tom Reiss’s book, *The Orientalist: Solving the Mystery of a Strange and Dangerous Life*, which endeavored to untangle the contested question of the book’s authorship. When Reiss accepted an assignment to report on the Baku oil boom in the nineties, he was advised to read *Ali and Nino*, a novel that covered everything he needed to know about the city and region. Reiss was so intrigued by this book that he took time off to trace its author’s steps across geographical and historical borders to unravel the mystery of his or her identity. Reiss is no literary critic, and his detective work, which offers a fascinating story of an even more fascinating writer, fails to deliver a close (or even a distant) reading of *Ali and Nino* as well as of Said’s other works with regard to their writer’s identity. An analysis of the unity of language, style, and critical reflection in Said’s œuvre would
have provided just as much if not more evidence of his authorship than journalistic zeal was able to. What drew lecture attendees and Reiss to Kurban Said was probably not so much the literary value of *Ali and Nino* but rather the relevance of questions of exile, identity, cultural loss, translation, and ethnic strife that demand our attention with particular insistence in the present age. The same questions as well as its language and style make *Ali and Nino* an exciting and thought-provoking book for the German classroom. However, just as Reiss’s book is incomplete without attention to language, a classroom reading without some of Reiss’s background material would also be incomplete. In this case, biographical information is integral to historical context. So who was, or was not, this Kurban Said?

When Reiss set on a mission to find out the real identity of this writer of many identities, whose life embodied, in very concrete terms, our well-worn critical notion of identity as performance, he had little idea that his biography would resuscitate a writer who had disappeared in the shuffle of a violent history. Through Tom Reiss’s detective work of many years we have now learned that Said, who also wrote his earlier works under the name Essad Bey, was an Azeri Jew by the name of Lev Nussimbaum, born in 1905 in Baku to the oil magnate Abraham Nussimbaum and his Bolshevik wife. The tragedy of his parents’ union, where the father became the target of ruthless Bolshevik tormentors and the mother, a close associate of Stalin, plotted against her husband and then committed suicide when Lev was a young boy, marks the short life of this prolific, multilingual writer. In an attempt to protect his only son, a sickly and sensitive, yet exceptionally talented child, the older Nussimbaum fled with him first toward the East—in the novel, the fictional parallel to this escape is Ali and Nino’s temporary exile in his uncle’s mansion in Teheran—and then westward through the Caucasus and dangerous border zones to Istanbul. Istanbul, the seat of the collapsing Ottoman Empire, nicknamed the sick man of Europe at the time, was under enemy occupation. The Ottomans had entered the First World War on the side of Germany and were defeated by the Allied forces, whose warships lined the strait of Bosporus.

Fascinated by the melancholy visages of Istanbul and the splendor of its Islamic architecture and aura, Lev resolved to convert to Islam and refashioned himself as a Muslim prince. The Nussimbaums eventually settled in Berlin, as the father’s portable fortune dwindled. The small family could barely afford run-down boarding houses. The postwar decadent life of Berlin, which Lev experienced with bitter intensity as an outsider, finds its vivid fictional expression in *The Girl from the Golden Horn*. Lev graduated from the Russian Gymnasium in Berlin and enrolled at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität to study Oriental languages and Turkish (like the fictional Aziyadeh). In 1922, he converted to Islam and embraced its