



Conclusion

Lessons from the Breathing, Wayfaring Hearts

O you who seek knowledge of the things as they are in themselves . . . you will gain what you seek through tasting, while you become acquainted with it through unveiling.

—Ibn Arabi¹

“[T]hings as they are” have no stable or essential “isness” or “selfhood,” but appear and emerge quite differently for us depending on our situation, interest, and perspective.

—Michael Jackson and Albert Piette²

What is Sufism? What role does healing play in Sufi practice? What does it mean to “breathe well” along the Sufi path in a place where public expression of religiosity is constrained, and Islam is increasingly marginalized? These questions do not aim to articulate any stable or essential “isness” of Sufism. Classical and contemporary Sufi discourse and practice may claim otherwise in the name of the Real or Real-Truth. There is apparent incommensurability between Sufi thought (embodied in the first quote) and the analytical commitments of ethnographers (expressed in the second quote).

Sufi discourse and practice invoke the reality of existence here and now and the Elsewhere simultaneously. Sufis emphasize direct insights through unveiling, tasting, and preparedness to know “things as they are in themselves” while announcing that such privileges can be granted only by the Real (Allah). Anthropologists, however, avoid fixing the essence of a phenomenon and emphasize the contingencies of attempting to know things as they are. “[L]ife is irreducible to the terms with which we seek to grasp it,” therefore,



“truth and understanding, like well-being, are never securely possessed, and human existence always implies a vexed, imperfectly realized relationship between what is given and what is aspired to, what is within and outside our reach, what can be comprehended and what cannot” (Jackson and Piette 2015, 9).

Breathing Hearts has not restricted Sufism to its historical ontologies nor to a singular, truth-claiming authority of what Sufism is supposed to be. This book does not resolve the incommensurability between Sufism and anthropology. None of these traditions of inquiry have monolithic, unchanged, singular identities. Islam is mostly contested and only partially accommodated in the German landscape of postsecular imagination. This book has offered some of its formations, extensions, and intersections visible as Sufi Islam, and universalist, therapeutic and nomadic Sufism in Berlin. In this concluding chapter, I will summarize the lessons from the breathing, wayfaring hearts, combining Sufi healing practices and politics.

In Berlin, Sufism is multiple. Its tastes vary from network to network, from one site to another, and from practice to practice. These formations co-occupy space, inhabiting the diverse spectrum of the (historical) Sufi tradition with practical, experiential, and hermeneutical engagements with Islam, enacting explorative authorities. In the contemporary discussions on global Islam and its media portrayals, the most common designation of Sufism is still Islamic mysticism. *Breathing Hearts* does not take that definition for granted. I, as an ethnographer, describe the internal diversity of Sufism encountered in the field and add a critical angle in the company of anthropological theory. Rather than only Islam or mysticism, Sufism aspires to an excess of something else. In *Breathing Hearts*, body techniques, participatory performances, experiential narratives, and potentially life-affirming politics are the dimensions that enact Sufism in practice as something more than only Islamic mysticism.

Sufism, Anthropology, and the Postsecular Condition

In sum, *Breathing Hearts* contributes to contemporary theoretical and political concerns in several ways. First and foremost, it offers the first book-length account of Sufi (healing) practices in Berlin

as enactments of contemporary postsecular imagination of healing, where “breathing well” is central. This book describes breathing lessons as an entry point to invite the readers to the possibility of breathing otherwise, to argue how the ethnographer’s breath can be put to analytical use. Second, breathing is central to Sufi practice. While (Sufi) breath/ing remains marginal in anthropological scholarship, this book has made its presence known from the beginning, addressing its epistemic potential for the discipline.³ Sufis reconfigure the line of transmitting breath in the presence of Sufi teachers, their students, and others who accompany them. The techniques of Sufi body prayers and healing practices center around body movements and breathwork, words and sounds, enlightened things, and postsecular imagination. These techniques create the conditions through which everyday secular, materialist bodies could be transfigured into subtle/material bodies.

Third, the postsecular Sufi subjects inhabit an in-between world to navigate the religious, therapeutic, and aesthetic fields in their efforts to “breathe well” by seeking “something else” in a society fraught with anti-Muslim racism. Sufi healing practices cannot promise to resolve everyday secular and religious sufferings but equip the breather-wayfarers with the existential resources to bear them. The healing dimension cannot be separated from the political implications of Sufi practice in German society. Sufi action is not only about feeling and inhabiting the Elsewhere but also about serving the practical reason in the here and now. *Breathing Hearts* responds to the political challenges posed by German secularism and everyday anti-Muslim racism; and talks back to the prescriptive, literalist formations of Islam that might seek to inhibit the explorative, expansive enactments marked by the epistemic openness with which Islam intersects with other traditions.

Fourth, this book takes postsecular Sufi practice and subjectivity seriously. It does not reduce Sufism to the products and consumers of a religious/therapeutic marketplace in late liberal capitalism, nor does it push the Berliner Sufis to the margins as “pseudo-Sufis” or “New Age” Sufis, or perpetrators of predatory “cultural appropriation” alone. By representing Sufis as breather-wayfarers following their desire lines of breathing-becoming, their presence talks back to the secularist belittling of the otherwise in German society and anti-Sufi trends within Islam.



The fifth and final contribution of this work is methodological. I propose dual apprenticeship as a method for early scholars and students, articulating an agile condition of possibility in ethnographic practice. Learning to be affected, but not overwhelmed, by the field is essential to an anthropological project. Dual apprenticeship extends the tradition of apprenticeship—through which many anthropologists before me have combined their lessons from the field—by taking a dual learner’s position in terms of disciplinary practices and the practices in the field.

Sufism is named the “way of the (breathing) heart,” among many other names. The term “Sufism” is saturated with the discourse of academic and popular, affirmative orientalism. In Berlin, Sufism follows its unique historical wayfaring trajectory. In the contemporary rendition of Sufism, the metaphysical heart (*qalb/Herz*) remains a central metaphor, similar to and yet different from the classical Sufi discourses. Berlin Sufis resonate with Allah by participating with the breath, words, sounds, and things to mobilize their healing power. Tasting (*dhawq*) Sufi experiences is crucial for human subjects, as their existential desire lines lead to Sufism in dialogue with the secular and the religious, intersecting with medicine and performing arts.

Breathing Hearts does not claim to offer a holistic ethnography of Sufi-Berlin or a comprehensive account of the Sufi networks that the ethnographer has encountered during her fieldwork. The book focuses on the practices and politics of Sufi healing in Berlin and connected sites. Sufi networks have provided the entry points to approach the internal diversity of Sufism in practice. Selections from the enormous diversity of these practices were necessary for simplification, articulation, comparison, contrast, and clarification. The limitations and gaps in this book are uncharted terrains that offer plenty of opportunities for future inquiry.

The Uncharted Terrains

Breathing Hearts might have told a different story if it had focused exclusively on the dimension of prescriptive authority in Sufism. “Sufism is generally perceived as being spiritually focused and about the development of the self” (Milani 2018, 1). The historical roles of Sufi networks as civil and political actors, describing Sufi par-

ticipation in interfaith dialogues and political challenges to dominant prescriptive traditions, are only partially explored in this book. Following Milad Milani, future research can examine how political power is conceptualized and exercised in Sufi-Berlin. How do Sufi networks live up to their discursive, practical aspirations of transcending self-centered interests? What are their political affiliations in terms of formal participation in a liberal democracy? These questions further destabilize the non-political ontologies of Sufism and contribute to the growing literature on the intimate connection between Sufism and politics.

Breathing Hearts has discussed the scope of imagining and inhabiting the human body through Sufi healing practices. Healing the problems of living may require participation in the Real, but what happens when there is a failure to heal? Farida Pirani, Rena Papadopoulos, John Foster, and Gerard Leavey (2008) discussed failure, the possibility of accepting failures, and the search for healing in a Sufi shrine in Pakistan. Transferred to the German context, the question of how Sufi seekers of healing might be blamed for continued suffering is pertinent. While Sufi practices create the conditions of the possibility of healing, failures are also likely to happen. Future inquiries can address the question of to what extent religious and secular suffering might be perceived as failing to heal or achieve the aspired state of being according to the standards of Sufi practice. The assumption of taking for granted that the body is always able, that one can simply choose to open up, needs to be interrogated as well. How would Sufi body prayers accommodate the transformation of non-normative bodies and varying degrees of ability?

The conditions of possibility lie at the heart of this book, but the conditions of structural limitations are significant elements to examine further. Future paths of inquiry can draw lessons from not only how Sufism can create conditions of possibilities but also which possibilities are foreclosed by becoming a Sufi and practicing Sufi healing. While charting the pathways of becoming Sufi, one could also follow other (desire) lines of flight and ask, how and why people leave Sufism or shift their allegiance from one network to another.

Both dual apprenticeship and affective pedagogy are routes that emerged through my fieldwork and guided me throughout the writing process. I learned to be more attentive to my sensuous affective engagement, and the role affect (and related phenomena) plays in



Sufi practice. This book recognizes affect as a key ingredient of Sufi practice/experience. However, following ethnographic studies on Sufi performances of emotions and affects in other regions (Kasmani 2022; Werbner and Basu 1998), future research can center on a wide range of Sufi affects specifically to pursue the role of emotions, feelings, and sentiments with the epistemic positioning of affective pedagogy of the Elsewhere (Selim 2020a). For example, how is the key sentiment of love in classical Sufi discourse/practice cultivated and articulated in the contemporary “linkages of knowledge and love” (Ernst and Lawrence 2002, 15)? Beyond the words of ecstasy in classical Sufism (Ernst 1985), what are the new and perhaps old affect-laden terms mobilized for emotions in Sufi practice within Muslim-minority societies? What are the socio-material arrangements promoting and limiting such cultivation and articulation of affect in Sufi healing practices?

In terms of methods, this work has not exhausted the opportunities offered by the diverse social media as research tools. The interrelation between social media and Sufi sociality is left open. All Sufi networks had a virtual presence during my fieldwork, especially during the recent COVID-19 pandemic (see Epilogue). But the degree to which the interlocutors in each network engaged in social media varied considerably. Recent studies show a radical increase in internet use, not only as a mode of diffusion of Sufi content but also in producing virtual Sufism (Alatas 2017; Piraino 2016). The use of the internet and social media is significant for the broader presence of Sufi teachers through online courses, live transmission, and a reaffirmation of lived Sufi experience in digital space. Combined with the classical ethnographic mode, digital ethnography can provide tools to pay attention to the expanding social worlds of Sufism, examining the offline and virtual dimensions as a continuum.

“The soul has no race and no [human] language!” Sophia, one of my best friends and a companion on the Sufi path, told me during the so-called BLM (Black Lives Matter) Summer in Berlin when there seemed to be a renewed racial reckoning in German society (Selim 2023a, 2023b; Selim and Albrecht 2020). “Easy for you to say as a white woman, a native German speaker!” I retorted. Sophia was not immune to white fragility, but I was harsh in judging my fellow companion with whom I have shared my efforts to “breathe well” for a decade. Confronted with the white privilege and the lack

of racial reckoning among many (white) German Sufis, I often harbored angry thoughts and engaged in a series of outbursts. Beyond their active involvement in resisting anti-Muslim racism, I desired from my fellow (white) wayfarers a substantial political commitment to anti-racism as privileged white subjects in a white supremacist society that racialize Muslims. The harsh accusatory tone provided a necessary catharsis for my everyday frustrations as a postmigrant woman of Color and non-native German speaker in a society filled with structural inequalities at the intersection of racialized identities and language fluency (among others) that many fellow Sufis of Color face. But, the hardening of the heart and the harshness of the breath are counterproductive in a collective fight against anti-Muslim racism in Muslim-minority Germany.

Breathing Hearts is not a systematic study of anti-Muslim racism. This book has attempted to situate Sufi practices and politics in the context of anti-Muslim racism in German society to widen the understanding of Sufism and healing in this particular setting. The interstices of race-class-gender-sexuality (and other indices of marginalization) constitute the epistemic and political struggle of the ethnographer to find lines of agreement somewhere between the more privileged (white) Sufi breather-wayfarers and the more marginalized breather-wayfarers of Color. The analytical (and political) battle I choose to fight in this book stands in solidarity with other battles to “breathe well” against racist structures in Germany (Selim 2023b; Selim and Albrecht 2020).

Breathing Hearts aims to talk back to the hegemonic discourses of German secularism as a political doctrine and the prescriptive, literalist traditions within Islam that seek to suppress the expansive, postsecular imagination of Sufi practice. Furthering an analytical focus on racialized identities would have allowed the exploration of white privilege and the marginalization of the Sufis of Color in German society. My aim in this book, however, is to facilitate an understanding of the dynamics the Muslim and non-Muslim Sufis face together, as they are caught between political secularism and the prescriptions of literalist Islam in the context of anti-Muslim racism in Germany.

In Sufi-Berlin, class-race-gender distinctions do not miraculously disappear. Experiencing varying degrees of privileges and marginalization, Sufis in Berlin express a metaphysical commitment to step



away from material, political conditions of limitations that human bodies are subjected to, with more or less success. *Breathing Hearts* provides a foundation for and underscores the necessity of pursuing an analytical focus on racialization and cultural appropriation for future ethnographers of Sufi practice.

Sufism in anthropology is an object of inquiry, an assemblage of breathing, wayfaring practices, and experiences. Anthropology for Sufis might seem like a textual practice of knowledge-making, a dry habit of framing/reducing the rich phenomena of the Real. *Breathing Hearts* attempts a hermeneutic/epistemic bridge between these two traditions of inquiry. If anthropology enables us to examine Sufism critically, Sufism talks back to us, challenging anthropology to learn how to learn. Both Sufism and anthropology can perhaps realize their critical potentials as forces of living the otherwise, enabling us to resist anti-Muslim racism, and the trivialization of the postsecular imagination. As a dual apprentice of both traditions of inquiry, my book concludes with this appeal.

Note

1. Chittick (1989, 245)
2. Jackson and Piette (2015, 11–12).
3. I have argued and demonstrated how central Sufi breathwork is to the tradition in a recent public anthropology lecture performance at a prestigious exhibition hall in Berlin, Martin-Gropius-Bau, and previous publications (Selim 2023a, Selim 2020a). See Selim (forthcoming, 2022a, 2022b) for the arguments I have made elsewhere for ethnographers to focus on breathing epistemologies in anthropological theory and practice.