



## Chapter 4

# “There Must Be Something Else”

### *The In-between World of Healing Secular and Religious Suffering*

Speech is born out of longing,  
True description from the real taste.  
The one, who tastes, knows.

—Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya<sup>1</sup>

*Zwischen zwei Welten und drei  
Sprachen*

*sucht der wandernde Leib*

*nach einem fähigen Geist,*

*der ohne Schuld, Schmerz und  
Wurzeln*

*alles verlassen kann.*

Between two worlds and three  
tongues

the wandering body seeks

a capable mind,

without guilt, suffering, and roots,

leaving everything.

—Aulic Anamika<sup>2</sup>

“There must be something else” (*Es muss was anderes geben*), Gertrud said to me with deep conviction on a summer afternoon in Charlottenburg in 2014 in a café not so far from her home. The seeking of “something else” brought her to the Sufi sounds of Tümata-Berlin. “What is really important?” In the bright light of spring of the same year in Pankow, Murshida Ganga asked me a key question that guided her on the Inayati Sufi path. We share a breathing, way-faring journey on the Sufi path yet navigate divergent desire lines to Sufi practice. Tracing their (and my) desire lines illustrates how a search for something else often constitutes the pathways of (Sufi) breathing-becoming.



My conversations with these wonder-filled, searching, septuagenarian white German women of the postwar generation reminded me a lot of my deceased aunts, powerful brown matriarchs who would be of their age today if they were still alive, but with whom I never had the chance to have a (Sufi) conversation about seeking something else. Forming affective bonds and spiritual kinship with my older interlocutors in Berlin was about building rapport, a *sine qua non* of fieldwork. But it was also about acting out of postmigrant longing, the nostalgia of inhabiting an in-between world (*Zwischenwelt*).

Listening to Gertrud, Murshida Ganga, and Murshida Rabeya filled my curiosity about the Sufi lives of white German women seekers, without jumping to foregone conclusions about their “cultural appropriation” of Islamic Sufism as non-Muslims. My aunts were distinct in their approaches to Islam. While both practiced the regulatory prayers daily, unlike my mother and grandmother, they did not force Islam on their niece, the ethnographer. My aunts smiled at my impatience and mis/understanding of Muslim women’s piety, perhaps waiting for me to grow up and understand what Islam could be.

The life stories of my beloved brown mother, aunts, and grandmother in Dhaka and my more privileged white German interlocutors in Berlin have little in common. The historical lines of global and local power structures have shaped their desire lines toward incomparable pathways in life. I, however, connect these albeit incomparable lines through the affective pedagogic instructions that I received from all these women, at various phases within the pathways of my breathing-becoming.

I can imagine these (more than) seventy-year-old brown and white women sitting in the sun (or at the fireplace when snow is falling outside), discussing the challenges of everyday reality that women (irrespective of race-class-intersecting differences) face in consumer patriarchal societies (be it Germany or Bangladesh). I can imagine these brown and white women gathering in body prayers in the name of the all-encompassing Real, reaching out in longing beyond the differences with which an unequal world has divided and separated them. In the speculative imagination of the ethnographer, the differences and the existential co-evalness of these women seekers, are woven into a braided line of unity that teaches us a few

things regarding how to “breathe well” and heal secular and religious suffering, in very different places, across very different times.

## **Secular/Religious Suffering and Formations of the Postsecular**

What does it mean to “breathe well” as a Sufi in a place where public expression of religiosity is constrained, and Islam is increasingly marginalized? I return to the question running through this book as a red thread, to raise another: how is Sufi healing practiced and experienced in a place like Berlin, known for its liberal cosmopolitanism, yet exerting the double burden of secular and religious suffering on some of its inhabitants?

Secular and religious suffering are everyday forms of social suffering resulting from what “political, economic, and institutional power [of secularism and scriptural authority, for example,] does to people and reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997, ix). Understanding “secular and religious suffering” requires a close look at the distinction between the secular and the religious body. Talal Asad’s (2016) differentiation of the “religious body” from the “secular body” dwells on the former’s experience of pain and liberal politics and calls out secularism’s implicit grounding in Protestant Christianity.<sup>3</sup>

Contemporary Sufi subjects in Berlin, like many of their contemporary neo-religious actors, go through “secular suffering” as a kind of painful experience in the face of public secularist belittling of religious belonging on one hand (Taylor 2007). On the other hand, they experience antagonism and dismissal by the more scriptural interpreters of religious traditions impervious to alternative modes of imagination who consider such subjects not religious at all but secular. These double rejections contribute to the double burden of secular and religious suffering that Sufi breather-wayfarers seek to heal.

“The postsecular denotes not simply the end of the secularization thesis but its unpredictable afterlife, in which currents of disenchantment and re-enchantment coexist” (Graham 2016, 61). Formation of the postsecular (subjectivity) resonates with Asad’s utterance, “formations of the secular,” but only as a point of depar-



ture.<sup>4</sup> The postsecular refers to the juxtaposition of the religious and the secular. It is the co-presence of secularism and the revival of religion/spirituality in Berlin that justifies its framing as a “postsecular city” (Schlüter 2015; Beaumont and Baker 2011).

Imagining Berlin as a postsecular city shifts attention away from envisioning the city as a secular urban space to its simultaneous configurations as both the “world capital of atheism” (sociologist Peter Berger) and the “spiritual center of Europe” (Sheikh Eşref Efendi) (see Introduction). Sufi-Berlin thrives in the afterlife of the religious and secular landscapes of Berlin as much as it exists in parallel to them and intersects with them. The desire lines of Sufi interlocutors connect the religious and secular spaces, existential quests, and quests for healing, toward such postsecular formations.

My second and more relevant usage of the term postsecular in this chapter has to do with the negotiations with religious and secular subjectivities. The desire lines of my interlocutors came from and moved in diverse directions (see also chapter 2). Yet each of them (including myself) chartered a path from a previously secularist or (different) religious position (and belonging) to postsecular Sufism. This cannot be simply termed anti-secular or the other of the secular or even as a religious “conversion.” Postsecular subjectivity consists of continuous negotiation with religious literalism and secularist hegemony, neither in unquestioned affirmation nor the absolute negation of either, but navigating an in-between world.

Subjectivity is a term that refers to “the emotional life of the political subject” (Luhrmann 2006, 345). It refers to the way subjects feel, share feelings, experience, and respond to others (2006, 345). Subjectivity is not erroneous but rather “connotes creativity, the possibility of a subject’s adopting a distinctive symbolic relation to the world in order to understand lived experience” (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007, 6). The articulation of subjectivity is a necessary part of “understanding how people (try to) act on the world as they are acted upon” (Ortner 2005, 34). Subjectivity emerges from the lived experience and the narratives (Good 2012) of those searching for existential dilemmas and the healing of the problems of living.

“The subject is never closed or done with” (Das 2007, 4). The human subject draws a boundary around itself to narrate the experience of a limit. During my fieldwork, such boundaries and lim-

its were triggered by a question the interlocutors often asked me, a question that I asked them back in our conversations: “How did you come to Sufism?” (*Wie bist du zum Sufismus gekommen?*). The narrative responses to this question in this chapter (and chapter 2) show how the subjectivity of Sufi practitioners (Muslim or not) was formed along desire lines, situated within a sustained tension between a secularist society, prescriptive religious traditions, and the existential longing for *something else*.

Esra Özyürek’s (2015) recent ethnography argued that, on the surface, Sufi Muslims were significantly different from other Muslims, and Sufi communities lived in isolation from other Muslims. Her work on converted white German Muslims in Berlin and Potsdam is groundbreaking in laying out how race and religion mark the landscape of new Germany along the spectrum of Islamophobia and Islamophilia. Özyürek’s otherwise seminal work, however, left out an in-depth discussion of Sufi subjects. Emphasizing an ontological difference between the diverse ways Muslims practice Islam and perform their identities takes attention away from other enactments of Islam revolving around explorative authority or Islam’s intersections with practices from other traditions.

“The practice of referring to Sufism—as well as any kind of religion—as mystical inwardness and interiority should be questioned” (Klinkhammer 2017, 6). As scholars, we are expected to explore the claims of inwardness and instead discuss what being/becoming Sufi means in specific contexts. In my porous field, the phenomenon of Sufism has brought Muslim and non-Muslim subjectivities together in the spectrum of shared existential longing. How can we explore Sufi subjectivity beyond assumed interiority and presumed ontological differences between Sufi and Muslim identities?

“What are we to do, . . . how do we designate the non-Muslim actor who takes up units of meaning from the field of meaning of Islam and incorporates them into his [or her] existence *but remains a non-Muslim?*” (Ahmed 2016, 444). The hermeneutical engagement with Islamic practice should be taken seriously as Islamic, even if the practitioners do not identify themselves as Muslims. Not all Sufi subjects I met converted to Islam and became Muslims. More often, they transitioned from one denomination of Islam to another or from a particular secularist disposition to Sufism. Both forms of transition are exemplified by Ayşe, who shifted from a “secular Muslim” iden-



tity to becoming a Sunni-Sufi Muslim in the Haqqani-Naqshbandi network (chapter 2). The second form of transition is palpable in Renate's narrative. She moved from a secular faith in the state-enforced atheism<sup>5</sup> in former East Germany to Inayati Sufism in the post-unification city (chapter 2). I was instructed (and suffered) as a child in the socially inscribed, prescriptive Sunni Islam, which triggered my initial attraction and commitment to militant atheist secularism, followed by a postmigrant longing for the in-between world of explorative authority within the Islamic tradition. The transition from prescriptive, literalist religious traditions or atheist secularism toward *something else* is a notable feature of the Sufi subjects who narrated their pathways of breathing-becoming in Berlin.

"Ethnographic creations are about plasticity and unfinishedness of human subjects and lifeworlds" (Biehl and Locke 2017, x). The concept of *becoming* emphasizes desire's primacy over power and the confluence of social fields. Desires follow "world-historical trajectories" but need to be represented with the "ideas of and relationships to the constraints [and possibilities] and unfinishedness of [the interlocutors'] lives and milieus" (2017, x). In Berlin, my Sufi interlocutors, mostly from the privileged urban middle class with access to higher education, sought *something else*, thereby illustrating the primacy of desire over power in the multiple ways they navigated diverse social fields and (in-) commensurable interpretations of Sufism and the Islamic tradition.<sup>6</sup>

"From the worldview of Sufism, the human being is understood as an integrated, non-dual unity" (Özsel 1995, 137). Michaela Mihriban Özsel (later Özsel-Heymann) (1949–2011) wrote these words in the 1990s in her widely read book *40 Days* (1993). Claire, the Sufi dancer (chapter 2), recommended that I read the *derwish diary* of this white German psychotherapist who walked the path of Sufi Islam. Özsel's articulation draws from diverse Sufi discourses, arguing that the separation from the Real is suffering, under the veils of forgetfulness, manifesting in the body, mind, and soul:

The development process and the healing of the body, mind, and soul, . . . consequently lead to psychosomatic—or physiomental, psychospiritual—perspectives. From Sufi perspective, any sickness is based on an "illusion of separation" through the "veils of forgetfulness," i.e., the loss of the direct, intuitive perception of the essential unity of creation. (Özsel 1995, 137)

In Sufi discourse, dhikr is a breathing practice of remembrance. The repeated remembrance of existential “unity of creation” (*wahdat al wujud*) through breathing, as Özelsel reminded her readers, lifts the veils that make it no longer possible to live with the “illusion of separation.” These illusions disappear as the subject becomes one with the Real, remembering the ultimate unity of existence.

Sufism is enacted and experienced as *participation* in the encompassing reality through the performativity of Sufi practices: mobilizing breath, words, sounds, and things to emanate their healing power (chapters 3, 5). Like Ganga and Murshida Rabeya (both psychotherapists), Özelsel has brought analytical psychology and Sufi healing practices together to establish causal connections between separation and sickness on the one hand, and experiences of union and healing on the other (2005, 1996, 1995, and 1993). This kind of participation in the transcendental/immanent Real (Allah) and its entanglement with the causal makes it possible to consider Sufism to be healing, with participatory modes of thought and action. What it also entails is the formation of a subject along the desire lines of their processual narratives, also known as “experience report(s)”/*Erfahrungsbericht* (Özelsel 1993).<sup>7</sup>

During my conversations with Sufi interlocutors in Berlin, the name Michaela Özelsel appeared on several occasions. She was born Michaela Jantzen (1949) in Kiel, grew up in Turkey, and studied psychology in the United States and Germany. In 2013, during an interview, Claire suggested that I should interview her (chapter 2). In 2014, while discussing the history of Sufi practice in the city, Bernhard too asked me to find Özelsel (chapter 1). We looked for Özelsel only to realize that she had died in 2011 and before I arrived in Berlin.

A posthumous meeting with Michaela in her narrative made me aware of how she struggled with questions that the students of Sufism need to consider in their dialogue with the prescriptive, religious traditions, and hegemonic secularist narratives. Özelsel’s narrative was formulated in a language of experience. Her postsecular subjectivity emerged as a negotiation between the religious and the secular, navigating an in-between world. She spent a lifetime trying to bridge the apparently incommensurable worlds: “Western” psychotherapy and ethnopsychology, and the healing practices of “Eastern” Sufism (Özelsel 1995).<sup>8</sup> Any reader can criticize (and rightly so) how the persistent inequalities of different social worlds and worldmaking do



not figure prominently in her “experience report.” There are many places in *40 Days*, where I stumbled upon her “white fragility” in dealing with societal differences and expectations as a white German woman traveling to Muslim-majority Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from my posthumous encounters with Özelsel, I have met many animated, lively Sufi seekers in Berlin and connected sites: men and women, young and old, Muslim and non-Muslim, healers, and persons suffering from chronic health problems, BIPOC and white people across racial, socioeconomic, and gender differences. The informal conversations at field sites took place in English and German, while formal appointments for interviews took place in my apartment, their apartments, indoor cafés, and outdoor parks. Apart from participating in Sufi practice, we have shared meals. In the retreats that took place outside Berlin, we have shared sleeping (and dream-) spaces. With some, I have developed intimate, long-term friendships.<sup>10</sup>

In this book, I present a fraction of these numerous conversations to offer a glimpse into the languages of experience through which my Sufi interlocutors described their pathways of breathing-becoming and the narratives of their desire lines. Focusing on women brought up in a society dominated by the hegemony of a secularist narrative and the impending prescriptive forces within the Islamic tradition, I have tracked the desire lines that led them to walk the Sufi-designated path of transitions. These configurations of the postsecular condition are not only about the “re-enchantment of the world” (Csordas 2007, 295) but a juxtaposition of disillusionments and critical enchantments in an in-between world.

In the next section, I discuss contemporary articulations of two life stories, based on narrative-biographical interviews. I also draw from my narrative of arriving at and tasting Sufism in the company of a septuagenarian female Sufi teacher. These instances illustrate how experiential knowledge and articulation of (Sufi) experience constituted its desiring, experiencing, and becoming subjects in the quest of healing secular and religious suffering.

## **The Seeking Subjects of Postwar Germany**

Gertrud and Murshida Ganga shared their search for *something else* and *what is really important*. I situate their narrative structures of subjective formation within the major historical events of postwar



Germany with tangential intersections. Gertrud and Ganga grew up in postwar West Germany, and parts of their narratives of becoming Sufi echo the afterlife of larger historical forces. Like many countries affected by wars, the disequilibrium of gender relations affected families in West Germany, and growing up in an atmosphere of domestic trouble was not uncommon (Moeller 1996). The following decades of affluence and conservatism were questioned by diverse movements in the 1960s and 1970s that affected Germany, Western Europe, and the United States with multiple effects on identity, morality, and interest in other traditions, Sufism being one of them (Klinkhammer 2009 a, 2009b).<sup>11</sup>

Gertrud is a white German woman, a trained healing practitioner, and a foreign language teacher. She learned to use her left (dominant) hand only at the age of forty. Late in life, she recognized how her tune resonated with the singing and drumming practices she shared with Tümeta. Murshida Ganga, another white German woman, is a former psychotherapist who reluctantly became a teacher (Murshida) in the Inayati Sufi-Ruhaniyat network. She found her material/subtle body-self in the Inayati ways of breathing (heart), the Dances of Universal Peace, and the Aramaic Jesus Prayers. Each time I listen to their narratives, what draws me deeper into these stories is the abundant joy and humor with which they narrated them. Their laughter continues to reverberate in my ears.

Gertrud and Ganga belong to a postwar generation of white German women in Berlin, but their narratives reveal two different trajectories of existential longing. Rather than pinning down that longing to immediate social circumstances, I follow their desire lines to see where they lead. How did Ganga move with the question of attributing significance (*what is really important?*)? How was Gertrud driven with the anticipation of the possibility of *something else*?

### ***“There Must Be Something Else!”***

#### ***Gertrud’s Healing Quest***

Summer 2014. I took the subway to the Charlottenburg-Wilmersdorf district, a neighborhood in the former West Berlin. Gertrud and I met in front of her house and walked to a nearby café. We had met earlier on various occasions. We rested beside each other and giggled on yoga mats during Tümeta-Berlin’s music therapy sessions. We sat together to drum our respective *bendirs* in the Tümeta-Berlin



workshops and private rehearsals in Raphael's apartment. This was the first chance to have a longer conversation with each other. I asked Gertrud how she came to Sufism, to Tümatata-Berlin. Her answer was short, "It is easy to explain! Knowing/knowledge of music (*Musikverständnis!*)" When I probed further, she stopped me and said, "Let me begin with my life history. That will be easier!"

Gertrud had short hair and lively gray-blue eyes. She came out of her house wearing a checked T-shirt and trousers, smiling. She was filled with more humor than anyone I knew in the city. She liked to make poker faces from time to time when she was about to say something funny. On one of her fingers, she wore a bright greenish-blue turquoise ring. Turquoise seemed to be a favorite among Berlin Sufis. I saw many of my interlocutors wearing it.

Gertrud was almost as old as postwar Germany. When we met, she was about to turn seventy, as Germany was about to enter the seventieth year after World War II. Gertrud told me she was born in Berlin during the last months of the war ("What a troubling time to be born, in the middle of a global war!" I thought). She grew up in a family with a *Wanderungsschicksal* (migration fate). Her father was a French soldier, and her mother was the daughter of a senior army officer in Nazi Germany. They met during the last days of the war. Gertrud said that her parents were not happy together and that she did not have a pleasant childhood. The strict discipline imposed by her parents was inscribed on Gertrud's child-body as she was forced to write with her right hand, although she showed an early tendency to be left-handed. Being left-handed was not acceptable in their "military" household.

It took Gertrud more than a decade and a half to realize the effects of forcing her body against its disposition. After a long training in alternative healing practices, the death of her mother, and increasing conflicts with her grown-up daughter (who had little patience or understanding of her mother's idiosyncratic healing interests), Gertrud rediscovered her (left) hand as she began to turn in *sema*. It is as if she reclaimed her body from the disciplinary regime of postwar Germany with something else.<sup>12</sup>

Gertrud described her life struggles since her twenties as a search for "something else," perhaps a different sound of music, "with one ear":



I was always looking for a way out. I don't know what! I [thought] I must get out now [She broke into laughter when I asked her, “Get out from where?”] Get out of the body, the mind, the society! . . . I was always somehow—how to say that? . . .

There must be something else! [*Es muss was anderes geben!*] It cannot go on like this. (interview with the author, 16 June 2014)

Gertrud mentioned that the psychoanalytical model of psychotherapy (“talk therapy”) did not help her in the long struggle to come to terms with her unpleasant childhood. During our conversation, she showed me several childlike movements (*Kinderbewegung*) that constituted her daily routine of exercising the body. She tried many other methods of healing, such as Traditional Chinese Medicine. Gertrud showed me a special ring she was wearing that she used as an acupuncture device.

Unfortunately, my effort to draw Gertrud into discussing the various concepts of Sufism was not successful. She seemed to care little about formal Sufi discourses, although she was a regular participant in the Sufi events in Berlin. Besides Tümata-Berlin events, I also met her in a healing seminar organized by the Granada Therapy<sup>13</sup> network. When I asked Gertrud what Sufism meant for her, she said: “Music is much more important!” Music, for Gertrud, was Sufism, in practice. When I asked her how mainstream German society could accept practices like Sufism, Sufi healing, or Sufi music, Gertrud came up with a criticism of her society, which she labeled as a “cornered landscape” (*eckige Landschaft*):

They [those who came to Tümata] feel that somehow, straight thinking [*geradeaus Denken*] no longer helps. Let us take the example of music. You know five people [and they say], “What's that!” [*Was soll das!*] Then you play it [music], and we thought we could set something up there. No! That is doubtful. When you let go, a small distance [from everything], this distance builds itself. I do not build anything. That would mean we go against the wall. Rather there is a space in between [*Zwischenraum*] that can be built. That is what I think is now missing in our [societal] discussion. What happens in the discussion? When I look around, what does it tell me? What do I tell myself? Do I speak from joy? . . . There are always more of them . . ., who says, “there is something missing.” Somehow, it is not nice, it is not round. It had never been round. It cannot be round. One cannot move around because it is



square [*eckig*]! The house itself is also [like that]. Straight thinking is square [without space to move around]. This is a cornered landscape! (interview, 16 June 2014)

The “cornered landscape” that disciplined Gertrud’s left hand, leaving her with carried-over wounds from a regimented childhood, was made round by side-stepping the corners that stifled her body and senses. That is what, I presume, partly constituted her love of whirling in *sema*, counterclockwise from right to left, creating and stepping into an in-between space,<sup>14</sup> navigating an in-between world. Gertrud whirled in her own rhythm. She was not a proficient musician, but she did not shy away from singing the *ilahi* (Turkish Sufi songs praising Allah) or tapping her drum. In all that, Gertrud found *something else* she was looking for.

### ***“What Is Really Important? . . . Go to Your Breath . . . Trust the Heart!” Ganga’s Question and Answers***

A few months earlier, in spring 2014. It was raining and took me forever to reach the Inayati Sufi-Ruhaniat *khanekah* in the north of Berlin, a district in the former East. Murshida Ganga was waiting patiently. As always, she was wearing bright colors contrasting the gray city and the propensity of many inhabitants to wear only gray and black (note: a splash of color is considered suspicious, frivolous, or childish, evident in the rampant chromophobia<sup>15</sup> of German society). Today it was a red skirt. Around her neck, I saw a string of golden hearts on a green background (a symbol of the Dances of Universal Peace network). Ganga took my umbrella and served me tea. We were sitting in what looked like a multipurpose room with light pouring in. Looking around, I found Elif Shafak’s *Vierzig Geheimnisse der Liebe* (The forty secrets of love) lying on a table.<sup>16</sup>

Ganga is a few years older than Gertrud. She is a retired psychotherapist and spends most of her time as a senior Murshida in the Inayati tradition, depending on the meager state pension she receives. She was the first Sufi teacher in Berlin with whom I established contact through email while I was still in Dhaka in 2012. A year later, she was teaching in the healing seminar I attended in the *khanekah*. I attended her classes earlier at the European Sufi Summer School in the summer of 2013. When we met for a formal interview in 2014, the physical agility and the lit-up smile on the

face of this seventy-plus-year-old woman impressed me. I could not help complimenting her on looking so young. She laughed, saying: “*Naja!* I am dancing! That is always good!”

Murshida Ganga spoke to me about her visits to India and regretted that she had never visited my country (Bangladesh). She informed me that she had lived in Afghanistan during the 1960s with her former husband. She did her best to make me feel comfortable by sharing her connections to South Asia, alleviating the discomfort I had frequently experienced among white people in Germany, who often had no clue about my South Asian heritage. Since Hazrat Inayat Khan, a South Asian Sufi, was the founder of the Inayati network, I often felt that I had received special treatment from the Inayati members, especially from Murshida Ganga and my teacher Rabeya. Looking back to this moment, I am not so sure how comfortable I was, given that (internalized) anti-Muslim racism never figured in conversations with the white German Sufis.

I tried to relax and focus on the conversation rather than my discomfort in the situation. Murshida Ganga continued with her life story. Two decades later, having traveled to many parts of the world, she found a Sufi teacher in Berlin, of all places. Meeting her Sufi teacher was an “inner knowing” in her narrative:

I can talk only about my experience. [*laugh*] I met my first Sufi teacher in '86 in Berlin . . . I read many books about Sufism . . . But reading books is one thing. Meeting someone is another thing. When I met him [the Sufi teacher], my soul—now I know it was my soul—it immediately knew! It is an inner knowing. Yes! This is the path. (interview with the author, 2 May 2014)

Then she started talking about the importance of connecting “the one in the body” with “the ones *not* in the body.” Among many other things, being connected to the body for Ganga meant staying connected to the “spiritual flesh” of the living and dead Sufi teachers. It is “nothing personal” and yet, a “deep connection to the soul.” Ganga described her connection to the first teacher in a Sufi Muslim network. One year later, after meeting her teacher, she went on a pilgrimage to a Sufi shrine in North Africa. Ganga was ambivalent about gender segregation during the ritual dhikr (*hadra*). On the one hand, she was immersed in the “energy” produced in the dhikr she experienced with her peers. On the other hand, she described her ambivalence:



The energy was very deep, very loving, very strong, and very passionate. I liked the energy . . . *Hadra* is so much fire! *Haah Haah! Haah Haah!* [she starts breathing loud and fast] . . . We [women] were allowed to do *Allah Allah* [hushed dhikr] but not sing [loud]! . . . We were sitting in the dark, and we were silent . . . It was hard for me to cope with this. Men and women [sitting separately]. But the energy was so strong. So I did it . . . But I felt that I want to sing also! [Only men were allowed to sing aloud] It was very clear. I loved the energy, but I wanted to sing myself. I wanted to move. (interview, 2 May 2014)

After about half a year, Ganga left that Sufi network. She felt guilty about leaving. She came to terms with her guilt by turning to an imagined conversation with her late sheikh (father of the current sheikh) of the network, who was rather relaxed about gender segregation. The older sheikh “gave his blessings,” and Ganga continued on her Sufi path. She realized she did not need to feel bad about leaving a place where she did not belong. A few years later, after having visited the first *makbara* (Sufi saint’s grave)<sup>17</sup> in an Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority country, Ganga visited her second *makbara* on the other side of the world, in the English-speaking United States, another society fraught with anti-Muslim racism.

It was near Murshid Sam’s *makbara* and the “spiritual flesh” of the teacher of his teacher’s teacher that Ganga found the dances, the dhikr, and the sounds she could now make, as loudly as she could. She felt she could now move freely with the dances and the walks (although these movements and walks are carefully choreographed as well). She was ready to embody her lessons from the past teachers. Ganga described what she experienced as her (inner) voice: “It is a *makbara* in nature . . . I loved it from the beginning, the simplicity . . . way up in the mountains. And then one voice in me said, “Keep going! This is what you are looking for!” The other voices were not ready . . . Many parts were not ready” (interview, 2 May 2014). Ganga and her companion at that time continued to travel to the Grand Canyon. She also remembered a dream voice from this period:

[Someone said,] “Everything you have been doing is finished!” . . . I was sitting [asking myself] what I would do if I had one more week to live. Very seriously! What is the most important [thing] for me if I imagine I am dying? . . . Then I knew. I want to die in peace. This was clear, and then I knew what to do (interview, 2 May 2014).

It was the late 1980s. For Ganga, it was a turbulent time to be in Berlin. She was forty-nine years old and working as a psychotherapist. She sensed that formal psychotherapy (“talk therapy”) was not sufficient to heal people. “Something was missing,” she said. “Gestalt therapy was not enough. I was in search of more . . . Well, you can work through mother, brother, and all these *traumata*, but something was missing. Through these experiences, what was missing came [to surface]. But the process from the first deep experience to now is a long, long process” (interview, 2 May 2014).

Murshida Ganga emphasized the role of the body in Sufi practice. In her view, Sufism is “embodied spirituality.” At some point during our conversation, Ganga reflected on her days as a “talking” psychotherapist. Her role shifted as she became a Sufi teacher guiding her students on the path. It was no longer about “fixing the problems” by talking to them, but instructing them in how to resonate with the ninety-nine names of Allah (to practice *wazifa*),<sup>18</sup> get connected to the body, pay attention to the breath, and learn to trust their hearts—the steps that she had to take as a life-long student on the path:

I feel that my work and life as a therapist serve me . . . Maybe the difference is that on the spiritual path, I don’t fix the problems. It is not my task! Although when I talk to my *murids*, they tell me about their problems. We talk about them. I give them the *wazifas*, prayers, and walks. Whatever I feel could be helpful for them. Methods . . . Instruments . . . With each murid, it is very individual . . . But for me [*laughing*], it is important that you relax [*she noticed I was tense*]. You go from here [*pointing up and down*] from the head to the feet. Go to your breath—*Yaaah!* Learn trusting. Learn to trust your heart. Our mind is good, but it is not so good when the mind is the boss. We are trained like this . . . I have to learn still to trust the heart. (interview, 2 May 2014)

At this point, I expressed my doubt about a (spiritual) teacher’s abuse of authority and the “guru phenomenon.” She laughed out loud and said that she was skeptical about gurus as well, especially when she was advised to take on a teaching role by her teacher. We agreed that the misuse of power is inherently possible in any position of authority. Ganga said that (Sufi) teaching was about helping students and not attaching them to the teacher. “The aim of the teacher is: My *murid* finds herself, her deepest self—God—so to speak! However you name it, it is in you. It is all about that. It is not about attachment” (interview, 2 May 2014).



At another point in the interview, Murshida Ganga said that there was a single question that guided her throughout and helped to set her priorities in life: “What is important? What is really important?” This question moved me profoundly. Toward the end of our conversation, Murshida Ganga began to reflect on her narrative. She said it might change in time, because “life is change,” but it would not be far off from what she told me now. Sufi teachers are fond of making contradictory statements that throw the listener and the student off track, disrupting the logic of a linear rational mind and teaching how to bypass the mind and reach the heart. Sitting in the company of Sufi teachers, the disruption of linear thinking is an experience to be lived and tasted. Any description, thick or thin, is an inherently limited attempt to make the taste of such deep listening available to readers (see also chapter 5).

Murshida Ganga has practiced Inayati (Sufi-Ruhaniat) Sufism for the last twenty-four years. She will likely continue to do so until she dies. I sensed a quiet urgency in her, at peace and curious at the same time. Expectant of what is coming, she said, “[There is still] a lot of inner work to do. This is never finished. I know it is until my last breath I will be on the path actually of discovering myself” (interview, 2 May 2014).

Following Murshida Ganga’s desire line, listening to her narrative repeatedly, the questions she raised, stayed with me: “What is important? What is really important?” as well as the answer she provided: “Go to breath . . . trust the heart!” In the course of our conversation, the one hour she had agreed on ran into two hours. My wet umbrella dried. I finished my second cup of tea and thanked her for giving me time. She smiled and wished me luck. Several years later, learning to do embodied spirituality with Sufi practices remains an unfinished lesson. But her question has stayed with me and guides me when I am lost in setting life priorities. Practicing the answers that guided her pathway, I hope to have found a few openings in life.

## **The Ethnographer as Postsecular Subject**

Learning how to learn from the subject narratives and images they re/represent is a crucial lesson in both anthropology and Sufi practice (figure 4.1). Listening to the voices of Gertrud and Ganga years after I recorded them brings back the inculcated memory of sitting beside





**Figure 4.1.** Ethnographer photographing the Inayati breathing heart symbol, 5 July 2013. © Nasima Selim.

these two older women, wondering where all the joy was coming from. I may not have found the answers to the most important questions in life, but I am beginning to learn how to ask them. Practicing breathing on the Sufi path has also taught me a few things about the efforts to “breathe well” in spite of structural limits.

“[F]rom the postsecular position, the researcher could no longer make herself the sublime and unaffected knower of religion and enchanted bodies” (Utriainen 2011, 430). In the shared journey with Sufi practice, my fellow breather-wayfarers and I inhabit a wide spectrum of the postsecular imagination of explorative authority in our efforts to transgress the authority of the imagined prescriptions of nationalism, secularism, and religion. Making the researchers’/ anthropologists’ (post-)secular positioning explicit is, therefore, not only about what she had done in the field but how she had been affected by the object of research, being part of the unstable object of research (Buehler 2013; see Introduction and chapter 1).

“I was skeptical, cautious!” Murshida Rabeya (a female teacher in the Inayati Sufi-Ruhaniyat tradition, one of my Sufi teachers in Ber-



lin) fondly recollected an early meeting with her *murshid*. My first year of fieldwork was dogged by doubt and longing, confusion and joy. These affective states and their articulations are significant not only because they are mobilized to gather knowledge as an affective pedagogy based on sensuous, affective scholarship (Selim 2020a; Stodulka, Selim, and Mattes 2018). In Sufi practice, emotions are cultivated toward transforming them. With training and time, these emotions become sustained sentiments and structured feelings that help one progress on the path of transforming the self-centered self (Selim 2020a).<sup>19</sup>

Murshida Rabeya (and Khidr) guided me throughout my fieldwork and its aftermath. As a student anthropologist and a *murid*, my doubts were dissolved with humor and kindness when my teachers linked their narratives to mine, in the *baraka*, they transmitted to me from their lines of transmission. Listening to my interlocutors' narratives brings to mind an early meeting with Murshida Rabeya, her calm, reassuring voice along with mine, which was filled with doubt, uncertainty, and longing at that time. The word *murid* does not only mean a learner but one who wishes and desires to learn. That desire line is perceptible in the following excerpt:

Nasima: I do not know where to start. In 2003, I started reading Rumi. I read a lot but never practiced Sufism. I had a horrible religious teacher and lost interest in religion. . . . I learned that the teacher-student relationship is very important [in Sufism]. I thought maybe I should be initiated. I don't know. What do you think? . . . I did not want to get involved with anything. You hear strange stories about cults [or, sects]. But this Sufi [healing] seminar moved me a lot . . . I need to write about all of these. That is my problem . . . That's it . . . I want to know what you think.

Rabeya: I understand. I did Vipassana<sup>20</sup> for many years. I studied psychology and sociology. I was a yoga teacher. I also had similar thoughts. I was skeptical and cautious . . . Murshid S. listened to me. He smiled and said, "Oh dear! You have come to the right place. We all know this!" [There was a long pause. We were both smiling] He initiated me. I became a *murid* . . . [Looking at my puzzled face, she continued] I understand. You must question but listen to your heart [pointing to the chest]. You have to feel it, *experience!* (fieldnote, 15 March 2013)

Having spent a decade in the company of fellow breather-wayfarers, I am often asked by people curious about Sufism, "Are you a Sufi?" I try to resist their fixation on identity, whether it is national-

ist/linguistic, religious/spiritual, or secularist. My usual response is, “I am a student of Sufism. I am a student of anthropology. I would lie if I say I am not a Sufi. And I will be boasting if I say that I am.” That is what I have become, an unfinished seeker who still has to walk the path and makes efforts to “breathe well.” Breathing well is not about a physiologically optimized breath but rather an expression for joining breath, in coming together in the shared longing for “something else.” The unfinished nature of existential desire holds for my interlocutors as well as my efforts, to “breathe well” and heal secular and religious suffering.

## Healing Secular and Religious Suffering

Sufi subjects in Berlin make considerable efforts to find another life, driven by life crises or love of music, looking for meaning, or searching to resolve healing troubles with breathing, movements, sounds, and utterances. Their subjectivities are formed within the intentional communities with whom they practice Sufism. These pathways of breathing-becoming are also informed by postmigrant and “native” networks of belonging, popular and affirmative orientalism, conventional and alternative medical worlds, retreats and everyday life, inspirational and pragmatic acts in life, as well as the political dangers of whitewashing, cultural appropriation, and anti-Islam discourses. The larger historical forces and events in Germany and the rest of the world are echoed in these narratives, however faint they might be in the present articulation. Attending to these forces to track how they are enacted in micro-narratives is not the primary concern of this book. The desire lines are only partly determined by life circumstances and historical forces. They cannot be reduced to subjectifying regimes and local histories. But, one person’s longing cannot be conceived as a universal prescriptive ideal for every woman to follow. Neither can the efforts of those I conversed with be reduced to “cultural appropriation” alone, even if the political danger of white privileged subjects consuming and appropriating non-Western traditions is real in Germany. Attending these complex ground realities, we need to be mindful of the existential longing for and tasting *something else* that plays its part in Sufi seeking and healing.

Critical feminist scholars argue against the tendency of (Western and white) feminism and post-Enlightenment political theory



to conflate secularism with humanism and emancipation (Graham 2016). Rosi Braidotti (2008, 2) deployed the “postsecular turn” to argue that it “makes manifest the notion that agency, or political subjectivity, can be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve . . . spirituality.” Postsecular feminist thought teaches us to attend to life-affirming religiosity/spirituality in understanding women’s subjectivities in diverse contexts in terms of Islamic feminism (Sirri 2017, Shaikh 2012), the postsecular turn in European feminism (Braidotti 2008), encountering otherness (Irigaray [1999] 2005), and the rethinking of female agency in the politics of piety (Mahmood 2001, 2005).

“What is it about the secular condition that can generate transgression?” (Heelas 2014, 76). The proliferation of (new) religion/spirituality in Europe lies in the transgressive power of the ideals, in the desire for *more* than the secular: “The ‘more,’ ‘something there,’ ‘something more,’ terms that are frequently encountered among those who—to varying degrees—transgress the secular” (2014, 76). The desire lines here echo the utterance of “there must be something else” (Gertrud). Many of my Sufi interlocutors and I are transgressors of the secular and the religious. The Sufi subjects inhabit confluent configurations of the religious with the therapeutic and aesthetic fields. They (have) live(d) diverse forms of secularisms with the gamut of prescriptive religions to reach postsecular Sufism: from the socialist/state atheism (Renate), Catholic and Protestant Christianity (Gertrud, Murshida Ganga, Claire), Turkish secularism (Ayşe), literalist Sunni Islam and Marxist atheism (Nasima) (see also chapter 2).

Some of my older interlocutors had to deal with troubled childhoods of rigid discipline (Gertrud) and discovered the existential imperative of asking important questions (Ganga) in postwar Germany. These lines led these women to a future with various Sufi communities, following the guidance of a sheikh or murshida, and finding everyday healing in their respective intentional communities. Luce Irigaray ([1999] 2005) conceives of such subject formations in non-reductive intersubjective encounters as the “problem of meeting with the other,” by not avoiding or explaining but meeting them in the irreducibility of encounter, allowing others to affect ourselves, whoever they are, and whoever we are. The anthropological project of a dual apprentice is not about the claim to fully understand the

other but to allow the other to be part of one’s lifeworld. What is not lost in the multiple translations of these narratives is the shared experience of joy, a sense of sustained wonder in the face of precarity and existential crises in the contemporary world, and the worlds we inhabit with their continuous intersections.

The structural inequality and the suffering experienced by the inhabitants of a city like Berlin, often remain unseen. The hegemony of majoritarian Protestantism-inflected secularism and anti-Muslim racism in Germany today exerts an external burden on Sufi wayfarers looking for “the otherwise” (Povinelli 2014) (see Introduction and chapter 6). At the same time, the scriptural and literalist Islamic authorities exercise an internal burden of rejecting Sufi-identified Muslims. The Sufi breather-wayfarers navigate Berlin’s urban landscape of healing, carrying the double burden of both secular and religious suffering. Whether framed as Islamic, universalist, therapeutic, or nomadic, Sufism as a phenomenon offers an entangled web of breathing practices (among others) through which Sufis in this city make efforts to “breathe well” to heal such sufferings, with more or less success.

The double burden of secular and religious suffering was reflected in the statements and life stories of my key interlocutors. They expressed this in their apprehension of hegemonic Christianity, often hiding behind a secular public discourse or the wariness in being part of social science research perceived as “dry” and biased against religious imagination (Khidr was fond of repeating these points). Secular suffering carries the lingering trauma of state-enforced-atheism, another form of secularism in former East Germany, albeit differently enacted than in former West Germany (Renate, chapter 2). Secular suffering is also experienced as the hegemonic belittling of spiritual practice in a “cornered landscape” (*eckige Landschaft*) where “something else” (Sufi music in this case) is not welcome (Gertrud). Or, the secular was perceived as a “narrow” “materialist” imagination of the world that went hand in hand with the stifling gender roles in most organized religions, contributing to the double burden of suffering from “religious” restrictions (Claire, chapter 2). Secular suffering is the driving force that led them on the quest for identity and healing beyond being “German” in following a Sufi tradition linked to the country of a migrant father (Hafiz, chapter 3) or in the articulation of a triple burden, suffering from the ridicule of



the “secular Muslims” of Turkish heritage, the structural (and often secularist) Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in German society as well as the accusations of more scriptural Muslims (Ayşe, chapter 2; Abu Bakr, Introduction and chapter 6).

Healing secular and religious suffering does not necessarily mean an epistemic jump to the obliteration of social suffering. “Suffering and the capacity for suffering [can] become preconditions for the acquisition of power, including the ability to heal” (Bourguignon 2004, 563). My Sufi interlocutors continued to experience the double burden (which was triple in Ayşe’s case) of secular and religious suffering. Sufi healing practices do not mark the end of this form of social suffering but equip them with the existential resources to bear with everyday suffering in a society dominated by not only structural inequality but also a hegemonic secular discourse designed to delegitimize the possibility of “the otherwise.”

Postsecular imagination of Sufi healing is enacted in the experiential narratives of healing secular and religious suffering in Germany. “What is really important?” “There must be something else!” The answers to the existential quests that Ganga and Gertrud, Ayşe, Renate, Claire, and I have explored in Sufi practices are not universal solutions for human suffering (see also chapters 1, 2). They are not located in the secular or the religious, but in the in-between space from which postsecular subjectivity emerges. In the previous chapter, I discussed the Sufi techniques of transformation, providing a set of answers to the existential quests of my interlocutors. The next chapter is devoted to the discussion of the healing power of breath, words, and things enacted and performed through participation in Sufi healing practices that provide the conditions of possibilities (albeit limited) for answering otherwise to such questions.

## Notes

1. Upton (1988, 36). Rabi’a lived and died in Basra, Iraq during the eighth century. In her poems, she articulated the metaphysics of love and longing for the Real, followed up and developed by later Sufis to articulate emotions, sustained sentiments, and structured feelings. The Rabi’a legends reached Catholic Europe as early as the late thirteenth century through Jean de Joinville, the chancellor of the French emperor Louis IX (Dickson and Sharify-Funk 2017, 198; Schimmel 1975, 8).
2. Anamika (2023).

3. Charles Hirschkind (2011) also hinted at this point in his questioning of the secular body. Postsecular features are not only attributed to secularized Christian societies. The notion of postsecularity in Islam is gaining ground but lags behind the oft-discussed postcoloniality (Bahrawi 2011).
4. Talal Asad (2003, 1) differentiated between “the secular” as an epistemic category and “secularism” as a political doctrine.
5. The post-socialist (East) Germany experienced heightened religious activities after a period of state-enforced faith in “scientific atheism” (Froese and Pfaff 2001, 482).
6. Omar Kasmani (2017, 2022) explored the spatial, gendered, and inter-corporeal dimensions of *fakir becoming* resisting the autonomous conceptions of the self in Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan.
7. Özsel’s diary narrated her experience of the forty days of isolated retreat (*halvet*) in Istanbul. Her narrative is an example of a *dervish diary*. Sufi teachers since the eleventh century (Al-Hujwiri [1911] 1998) discussed dervish diaries. For example, the *şoḥbetnâme*, a record of conversation and dialogue between a novice and Sufi master, was kept by novices and used as a reflexive learning method in Ottoman Turkey (Kafadar 1989). The European orientalist had written earlier diaries as experiential reports of encounters with dervishes in “the Orient” (Vett [1935] 2005).
8. Michaela Özsel’s (2005) narrative of a “conversion of the heart” was labeled New Age spirituality and neo-orientalism by scholars who undermined her narrative as “pseudo-reasoning” (Wieringa 2009, 218).
9. White fragility is a “state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” among white people, expressing “anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation,” which further “reinstat[e] white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). White fragility is a specific challenge that white Sufi seekers must confront and recognize in the inherited configuration of self-centered selfhood (*nafs*) in societies perpetuating white supremacy and colonial racist structures. Germany is one of many such societies that are fraught with anti-Muslim racism. The diary of the Russian-British Sufi seeker and teacher Irina Tweedie (1907–1999) shows the unabashed mixture of white fragility, racist prejudices, and the many troubles of the *nafs* that she struggled with in the company and with the guidance of her Sufi teacher in newly independent India (Tweedie 1986). While non-Muslims and especially white Sufi seekers need to be aware and cautious about engaging in the “cultural appropriation” of Islamic Sufi practices, this book argues against belittling non-Muslim seekers who show the capacity for an intimate longing for and serious engagement with (and even mastery of) Sufi practice. Paying attention to structural inequalities, being committed to social justice, and practicing on the Sufi path, are about recognizing/sharing the humanity of others (Muslims and non-Muslims alike), and not assuming the ultimate truth about the lives and longing of other seekers. Anthropology as a tradition, in my opinion, teaches us a somewhat similar lesson.



10. I did not live with my interlocutors except Roxanne, with whom I shared an apartment in 2013 for eight months.
11. The green movements in the 1970s and 1980s further inflected certain formations of German subjectivity since that period. See Elim Papadakis (1984) for an early description of the green movement in former West Germany.
12. This regime was perhaps not limited to the postwar and “military” households but much more widespread.
13. The Granada therapy network in Berlin consists of healing practitioners from diverse traditions. They are the students of the late Sufi teacher Agha Omar Ali-Shah. See Omar Ali-Shah (1995) for a discussion of Granada therapy.
14. See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of “the between” or “in-between space” in anthropological theory and as *barzakh* in Sufi discourse.
15. “Western fantasies about non-Western people [are] fantasies that effectively divided the world into chromophobes and chromophiliacs . . . Color for the West became attached to colored people or their equivalents” (Taussig 2009, 16). Sufis (and seekers of “something else”) in Berlin often wear brighter colors in comparison to others, perhaps to combat the chromophobia in the city. The German color austerity is rooted in the established collective sentiments about color preference, reason, and the construction of civilization. For example, Goethe’s *Theory of Colors* “consolidated an imaginary geo-chromatic world” (bright colors embodying the deviant, savage non-Western subjects). Along with the tradition of Protestant and Calvinistic austerity, and the sustained colonial gaze in Germany, such chromophobia is indicative of how the white European majoritarian gaze struggles with the chromic, aesthetic sensibilities of the people from the colonies and its long aftermath (Calvo-Quirós 2013, 86). However, when white Sufi seekers contrast the chromophobia of their own society by adopting non-white and non-Western traditions and the aesthetic sensibilities of Islamic societies, the danger of “cultural appropriation” lurks in the shadow of their otherwise bright efforts to seek “something else.”
16. Elif Shafak (2011, [2010] 2013) mobilized a life-affirming configuration of the postsecular imagination with her rendition of the historical encounter between Rumi and Shams juxtaposing a white US-American woman’s quest for meaning. The bestselling novel enacted a global, postsecular imagination of Sufism with its re-enchanted readers contributing to its commercial success.
17. *Mağbara* (Arabic) is a “cemetery” or “grave” and is mentioned in the Qur’an in its plural form of *mağbir* (Ory et al. 2012).
18. *Wazīfa*, in the Sufi context, refers to a repetitive recitation of prayers, invocations, verses from the Qur’an, and the ninety-nine names of Allah (Bosworth and Jong 2012).
19. Ethnographers’ articulations of the teacher-student relationship in contemporary Sufi contexts vary according to the nature of interactions, gender perspectives, and the positioning of the anthropologists. Frances Trix



described her interactions over many years with an Albanian Sufi, Baba Rexheb (1901–1995, the founder of the first Bektashi community in the United States), framing the relationship as “attunement” (1993, 145). Attunement is a long process through which the teacher-student relationship becomes an intricate meshwork of intimate interactions. For a contrasting mode of experience, see Katherine Pratt Ewing ([1997] 2006), who articulated the interplay of “desire” and “fear” in her interactions with the Pakistani Sufis who challenged her to “experience that [Pir-Murid] relationship,” which she found “tempting and dangerous” ([1997] 2006, 186). See also Bikram Nanda and Mohammad Talib (1992) for an account of the teacher-student relationship in Sufi discourse and Özelsel’s emphasis on the matter (1996).

20. Vipassana meditation is a Buddhist-inspired technique of sitting, breathing, and cultivating mindfulness (Selim 2011a, 2011b, 2014).