

Companions on the Way: Sufism in 21st Century Oakland, California

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Abstract

This project explores the religious philosophy, pedagogical practices and story of Mahmoud Malamatian, an Iranian-American Sufi teacher who practices in present-day Oakland, California.¹ I have known Mahmoud, his wife Rozaneh and their family for eight years. To honour my proximity to the ‘subject,’ I employed a Lived Religion theoretical framework and gathered data using the qualitative autoethnographic research method.

This dissertation highlights three themes in particular, (1) Mahmoud’s pedagogical approach for teaching Sufism, (2) his lack of affiliation with any religious institution, and (3) Sufi *tabaqat*, a genre of Islamic and Sufi biographical manuals. The *tabaqat* serve as a tool for historically and religiously contextualizing, as well as defining Mahmoud’s philosophy and practices. In particular, I consulted the *tabaqat* of the medieval Persian Sufi masters Sulami (d. 1034), Hujwiri (d. 1077) and Qushayri (d. 1072/3), in addition to the work of Sufi poets and storytellers like Rumi (d. 1273) and Attar (d. 1221).

This autoethnographic case study of contemporary Sufism illuminates Mahmoud’s philosophy, pedagogy and practices, by exploring the three themes within the context of six specific subjects: Sufism; love (*muhabba*; *ishq*); lineage and transmission (*silsilah*); *adab* and companionship; storytellers and stories in Sufism; and gender and power. Ultimately, this work provides a window into a contemporary expression of Sufism that is profoundly traditional but adapted for its time and place.

¹ This project employs pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

It was strange starting this degree in September 2020, in the depths of the Covid pandemic. I couldn't go to campus and I never really met my professors or the other students in the Religious Studies program at the University of Ottawa. It was a time when I could have been incredibly lonely but instead, as the 5 years passed (including 1 year of leave), my life became richer and happier. While I never became especially connected to the scholastic program, my experience was productive and I was given the time and space to work on a project that I care about deeply. I thank the Religious Studies department for this opportunity.

I begin these acknowledgements by thanking my interlocutors, Mahmoud and Rozaneh Malamatian. Being the recipient of your patience, generosity and love over the last eight years has been one of the most moving and important experiences of my life. I am grateful every day that you shared your ideas, time, space and community with me. Thank you for being so open with me and trusting that I could write this piece. We might not agree on everything but meeting you both has changed me for the better; I am humbled. Sincerely.

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micromanaging allowed me to work in my own way. It meant so much to me to see you walking across the bridge on your way to mine and Stefan's wedding. Amidst all of the things that have been going on in your own life these past few years you have always been in my corner. Thank you.

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Transliteration

The transliteration approach I took in this work aims to avoid obscurity. This approach is based on the premise that accessibility is both desirable and possible in scholarship. Given these premises, the transliteration practices that guide my work are:

- All transliterated terms are italicized.
- I employ the most common transliteration of words, for example, *adab* instead of the Turkish transliteration of *edep*.
- I do not use diacritical markings, nor do I employ the as- prefix/lexical elements, which are often used in Farsi to suggest similarities and were linguistically based on the definite article al-, found in Arabic. For example, in this text you will see, ‘Hujwiri’ instead of ‘al-Hujwiri.’
- Additionally, the names of many Sufis referred to herein contain many multiple honorifics. I refer to those honorifics in the first instance of their mentioning, as well as their date of death where applicable and then refer to them by their most commonly known name thereafter.
- For the sake of consistency, I maintain my own transliteration practices, including in texts that I quote from. This approach is extended into my Works Cited list.

Introduction

This dissertation is an autoethnographic case study about contemporary Sufism in Oakland, California, in the United States. In particular, I focus on the way that Mahmoud Malamatian, a Persian man in his fifties, teaches and practices Sufism.² In this work I suggest that the way Mahmoud ‘does’ Sufism reiterates that it is a living tradition that has the fluidity to evolve for the present day while remaining profoundly traditional, despite the fact that his pedagogical style may sometimes seem unorthodox.³

This introduction will clarify some of the central aspects of the project, particularly the project’s approach and intention. I also include an outline of the six chapters that follow. Details about the project’s methodological and analytical approach are outlined in a Methodological Appendix.

The Sufi religious tradition is often defined using the short-hand phrase, ‘the mystical branch of Islam,’ but in its formative period, Sufism was characterized more specifically as an

² I use pseudonyms throughout this dissertation to protect the identities of my interlocutors. My interlocutors are aware that early readers of the text have had access to their names and we have agreed that for this final draft, which will be shared at the University of Ottawa, where I am a PhD candidate, and eventually saved in electronic in Theses Canada portal, I will employ alternative names. These alternative names were selected by Mahmoud. The family name that Mahmoud selected, Malamatian, refers to the Malamatiyya Sufi order that originated in the Greater Khorasan region of Persia. The root of the term ‘Malamatiyya’ is *malamah*, the Arabic word meaning ‘blame.’ The word ‘Malamati’ also refers to a Sufi method of teaching that is based in the Sufi taking blame. There are a number of related attributes that characterize the Malamatiyya Sufi order, including the belief that piety should not be a public display but a private affair. The Malamatiyya are also known for having concealed the wisdom of their order. While Mahmoud has avoided answering my direct question as to the reason that he chose ‘Malamatian’ as a pseudonym last name, it seems obvious to me that his relationship to Sufism and his expression of the tradition relates to many of the aforementioned characteristics. In particular, his approach to Sufism is mostly private and mostly devoid of public displays of faith. More about the Malamatiyya can be found in Yannis Toussulis’ *Sufism and the Way of Blame* (2010) and Sara Sviri’s chapter *Hakim Tirmidhi and the Malamati Movement in Early Sufism* (1999).

³ The concept of a ‘living tradition’ has roots in Christian theology, but I apply the term ‘living tradition’ in the way that contemporary political theorist Mark Beckstein, whose work is informed by 19th century Austrian-British philosopher Karl. R. Popper’s theories of tradition, describes the term wherein “traditional material [...] internalized by the various recipients may in some way differ among each other and change over time” (Beckstein, 2017, p. 498). And the concept of ‘traditional’ is defined quite literally as “in accordance with customs or beliefs handed down from generation to generation” (*Dictionary.Com | Meanings & Definitions of English Words*, 2025).

“interiorization of Islam, a personal experience of the central mystery of Islam” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 17).⁴ Another relatively common explanation breaks the tradition down into three significant aspects which consist of Islamic law (*sharia*); the Path (*tariqa*); and the Truth (*haqiqa*) (Schimmel, 1975, p. 16). *Sharia* is the exoteric (i.e. legal) aspect of the tradition that, for many Sufis, provides the foundation for the ways that Sufism is practiced. In this context, the term *tariqa* refers to the inner teachings of Islam, but the term is also commonly used to refer to the ‘Sufi path’ or Sufi orders.⁵ In Sufism, the term *tariqa* also can be used to mean the ‘way,’ ‘method,’ or the pedagogical approach that Sufi teachers use to teach their students. The third aspect, *haqiqa*, is mystical understanding or knowledge that is gained through direct experience of the divine.⁶

Project Approach and Intention

This autoethnographic case study aims to extend the scholarship of contemporary Sufism in North America by exploring the way that Mahmoud practices and teaches Sufism.⁷ To investigate this, I examine two primary themes: (1) Mahmoud’s non-institutional approach to

⁴ Various aspects of the Sufi tradition will be defined and explored in more philosophical depth in chapter 1, “On Sufism (in this case).”

⁵ A brief history of institutionalized Sufi orders is provided in footnote 12.

⁶ Many Sufi orders have websites these days that also provide definitions of Sufism. These definitions, which have been provided by Sufi teachers, masters and practitioners, could be more useful to understand what Sufism is than the definitions provided by academics. The Persian Suhrawardi Sufi order, for example, defines Sufism as “Sufism is the practice that allows us to recognize our purpose in life, realize our reality and concentrate and awaken inside us that which has created us and has allowed us to be here now, in this life. Sufis are those who spend their life awakening their inner spirit to call Allah's name and to be one with Him as He intended us to” (Qadri Suhrawardi, 2009). Other Sufi orders who have websites and definitions of Sufism that may be of interest include the Inayati Sufi Order; the Nimatullahi Sufi Order; the Jerrahi Sufi Order; and the Chishti Ribbat Sufi Order, among others.

⁷ There are many other themes that could have been investigated in this study, including Islamophobia, or a more detailed look at the background and make-up of Mahmoud’s students, for example. But the primary focus of this project, that is Mahmoud’s Sufi philosophy and pedagogical approach, ultimately dictated subject matter inclusions and exclusions. Relatedly, I do not provide any details about Rozaneh or Mahmoud or their children that I deemed to be personal or identifying details. I draw this line to protect their identities, but also because I do not feel that this study, which includes a relatively close look at their lives, gives me permission to intrude on their personal lives. The personal details about my interlocutors that were included in this project were agreed upon with my interlocutors and described in my UOttawa Ethics application, which was approved by the university Ethics Office.

Sufism and lineage and (2) Mahmoud's philosophy, various pedagogical approaches and religious practices, such as *adab*, story-telling and love.⁸

Lack of Institutional Affiliation

Mahmoud teaches Sufism in late-stage capitalist Oakland, California.⁹ The location and time period influence the way that he expresses ideas and his pedagogical approach because these factors determine the individuals, i.e. students, potential students and non-students that he is interacting with. The location and time period also come up in his teaching often, as the people that he is speaking to influence the ways that he expresses ideas and his pedagogy and practices. There are many examples that could be supplied here to elucidate this characteristic of Mahmoud's expression of Sufism, but I will provide two. The first example is more simplistic, wherein Mahmoud will discuss the physical beauty and incredible athletic capacity of the Portuguese soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo in the same lecture on beauty where he recites and analyzes the Persian poetry of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi (d. 1273).¹⁰ The second example is more nuanced and relates to his lack of institutional affiliation. Mahmoud does not require or

⁸ My methodological approach, including the approach I took in my analysis and interpretation of the data, is described in detail in the methodological appendix.

⁹ David Elias Aviles Espinoza, PhD Candidate in Political Economy at the University of Sydney, provides an excellent overview of the history of this term and its contemporary application in an article written for the University of Sydney's monthly newsletter (2022). He points to the term's origins in volume 3 of Karl Marx's *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, (Marx, 1929) and how the term was taken up again in the mid-1970s by Belgian Marxist economist Ernest Mandel. Espinoza points to Fredric Jameson's "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1991) for the term's more recent relevance. In this treatise, Jameson describes late capitalism as "characterized by globalised, post-industrial economy, where everything – not just material resources and products but also immaterial dimensions, such as the arts and lifestyle activities – becomes commodified and consumable" (Espinoza, 2022). Espinoza concludes that this last stage, or late stage of capitalism follows economic crises, wherein the rich get richer, and the poor get poorer, and asks, theoretically, what will come after late capitalism in the face of the climate crisis?

¹⁰ Rumi (d.1273) was a jurist, or scholar of Islamic law and a theologian, who was born in today's Afghanistan, to a father who was also a jurist and theologian. Rumi lived in Persia and Turkey, and is best known for his poetry which was originally written in Farsi. Rumi has been associated with the Mevlevi Sufi order, but his poetry is claimed by Sufis and Muslims regardless of institutional affiliation, and is read widely outside of Muslim readers as well. His poetry describes concepts like divine love, intoxication and loneliness, his impactful and enduring works are and composed some of the most enduring poetry of the Sufi tradition. Perhaps his most significant work, the six volume, *Masnavi* (2013), is sometimes referred to as the 'Persian Qur'an.' I refer to Rumi throughout this work.

even suggest that any of his Sufi students convert to Islam. I have asked him about this and he has explained to me that while his own teacher required his students to be Muslim, he does not because identifying with any specific label, characteristic or category can become an attachment.¹¹

Beyond this, Mahmoud is not affiliated with any institutionalized Sufi order, a short statement about religious institutionalization, including Sufi orders (*tariqa*, pl. *uruq*) is warranted.¹² Going into this project, I knew that one of the reasons I was interested in Sufism the way that Mahmoud teaches it is because he is not affiliated with any religious institution. Mahmoud is a free agent who speaks candidly about organizations, people and ideas and this integrity, in my experience, is rare in more institutionalized contexts. While it is not unusual for Sufis to be unaffiliated with a religious institution, it is a feature that is not widely reflected in the literature of contemporary Sufism.

Affiliations to institutionalized Sufi orders are often used to identify and describe Sufism because the orders work the same way that institutions do in other religions: by establishing legitimacy by way of linking individuals and orders to the source. In the case of Sufism, the lineal lines of Sufi orders describe their succession, they also generally connect themselves

¹¹ This idea is explored in more detail in chapter 1, in the section on Sufism and ambiguity.

¹² While details of Sufi orders are generally one of the first things expressed when discussing this tradition, they really were only becoming established in the 10th century, and particularly in the 12th century. Before the establishment of the Sufi orders, there were Sufi lodges (*khanegah*) and hermitages and disciples (*murids*) are known to have learned from several teachers. The formation of Sufi orders changed a number of aspects in the tradition including pedagogically. Where the relationship between Sufi disciples and their teachers was initially one-to-one, in contrast, as orders were formalized, teachers began to teach larger groups of disciples simultaneously and require loyalty from their disciples (Knysh, 2000, p. 172). But pedagogical approaches continue to evolve in Sufism. The Nur Ashki branch in New York in the United States, led by Fariha Friedrich and Lex Hixon (Nur al-Jerrahi), recently made changes to the teacher-student relationship too. Where teachers in more traditional Sufi orders may treat their disciples like children, the teachers at the Nur Ashki branch in New York have decided to treat disciples like companions of the teacher instead. Rather than reducing the importance of the teacher, this shift has allowed for discussions, questions and other interactions that might be considered inappropriate elsewhere. Friedrich and Hixon are said to consider these changes in line with what their own teacher, Shaykh Muzaffer, started in his adaptations for the American context, where critical thinking and deeper questioning are encouraged as part of the culture (Dickson, 2015, pp. 129–130; Hazen, 2016, p. 50).

genealogically to the Prophet Muhammad. But Sufi orders were not always such a prominent feature of the tradition. “Sufi institutions – the ‘orders’ or ‘paths’ – did not begin to play a major role in Islamic history until about the twelfth century, but even after that time, Sufism does not necessarily entail affiliation with an order” (Chittick, 2000, p. 24).¹³ While analysis of institutionalized Sufi orders can be a useful tool for understanding the tradition, it is limited because it excludes Sufi movements that are not associated with established Muslim Sufi orders. The historical chronicling method of classification also assumes, to a certain extent, that lineages and successions are clear. Recent scholarship on contemporary Sufi movements demonstrates that this isn’t necessarily so (Hanlon, 2025; Hermansen, 2000).¹⁴

Before Sufi orders were formalized, Sufi disciples worked with Sufi teachers on a one-to-one basis and travelled from one teacher to another.¹⁵ But as the centuries passed after the death of the Prophet, Sufism’s form began to take shape, spurring the development of institutionalized Sufi orders (Alatas, 2020; Dumayriyah, 2023; Knysh, 2000; Trimmingham, 1971).¹⁶ And like other religious organizations, Sufi orders such as the Suhrawardiyya, the Mevlevi, the

¹³ Institutionalization occurs in formalized religious organizations, but can also occur in informal milieus as well. Klin-Oron’s case study of ‘wild channeling’ explores institutionalization in spirituality (2020) and finds that even those who channel spirits work to organize or institutionalize their practices. He found that initially these individuals are unable to control their channeling, but eventually these mediums fall into something he calls ‘cultivated’ channeling. He defines ‘cultivated’ as standardized and controlled by the ‘channel’/medium. This work suggests that even within something as variable as spiritual channeling, individuals and groups strive to create uniformity. He concludes that human beings appreciate predictability and impose standardization, even in the religious sphere, where innovative and novel experiences are sought after. A finding that affirms Hall and Orsi’s assertion that “regulation is ongoing within the most fluid of [spiritual/religious] movements” (Hall, 1997, p. xii).

¹⁴ See also Bruce Lawrence’s chapter, “Sufism and Neo-Sufism” (2010), in which he further clarifies and differentiates between Sufis and non-Muslim Sufis, among other related groups.

¹⁵ The section on lineage and authority in Chapter 3, “Lineage and Transmission,” provides a brief overview of the way that Sufism was institutionalized.

¹⁶ Many texts about Sufi orders have been written by Sufis themselves as well as by scholars of Sufism. Some texts that provide useful ways into the subject in the contemporary North American context, useful to the subject at hand, include “Sufi Movements in America” (Hermansen, 2015); *Contemporary Sufism: Piety, Politics, and Popular Culture* (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017); *Unveiling Sufism: From Manhattan to Mecca* (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017); *Varieties of American Sufism: Islam, Sufi Orders, and Authority in a Time of Transition* (Bazzano & Hermansen, 2020); *Living Sufism in North America: Between Tradition and Transformation* (Dickson, 2015); and *Sufism in Canada: Past and Praxis* (Xavier & Mercier-Dalphon, 2025).

Nimatullahi, or the Alawiyya-Maryamiyya, have accountability structures embedded in their hierarchies which theoretically assure that particular spiritual and ethical standards, among other types of standards, are met. But like other religious institutions, Sufi orders do not always meet the ethical and spiritual standards they espouse. In fact, stories of abuse occurring in Sufi orders are not rare.¹⁷ While most studies of Sufism rely on institutionalized Sufi orders and hierarchical information to define and categorize individuals and practices, this case study provides a perspective outside of those boundaries.

Pedagogical Approach

Mahmoud employs pedagogical methods that are not frequently documented in studies of contemporary Sufism. In this work I explore the ways that Mahmoud uses emotions, ambiguity and coarse behaviour in his teaching and philosophy. It is important to note that these distinctions do not put the way that Mahmoud does Sufism outside of the tradition, rather, they are actually manifestations of early Sufi tradition that are explored less frequently in contemporary literature. Further, these distinctions, while interesting to scholars and academics, are notably less significant to many practitioners and laypeople.¹⁸ Regardless, each of the following chapters are thematically organized to explore particular aspects of Mahmoud's interlinked philosophical and pedagogical approach, and some of the related teachings.

¹⁷ Rose Mohammad-Deighton's article on spiritual abuse in Sufism is a useful foothold from which to begin delving into the topic (2024). Hava Dayan's article on sexual abuse in charismatic cults provides another way in to understanding some of the issues at hand (2018).

¹⁸ In his text on mysticism in Iran, Richard Foltz includes a chapter on Christianity in Iran that describes the significance of distinctions between religious factions aptly, which also serves here: "The preoccupation of [Christian] church leaders with what might seem minor details (such as the disagreements over dates or the sharing of meals with unbelievers), as well as with the prevention of miscegenation, is typical of priestly types in all religions, who more than any other group are concerned with creating and maintaining distinctions between 'us' and 'them.' Laypeople, by and large, are less concerned under normal circumstances with the blurring of boundaries, although in times of social stress, when scapegoats are needed, such differences are more readily perceived and acted upon" (Foltz, 2004, p. 87).

Tabaqat

This project also employs a selection of medieval Persian Sufi *tafaqat* as the tool to analyze and demonstrate the traditional-ness of Mahmoud's expression of Sufism. Despite the distinctions that may appear to be in Mahmoud's philosophy, pedagogy and practices, my analysis will demonstrate that many of his approaches are described in the *tafaqat* literature.¹⁹ In the following chapters I highlight those connections and exemplifications.

The *tafaqat* genre of Islamic literature aims to preserve and transmit the tradition. These texts can be understood as manuals or a type of dictionary that describes Sufi philosophy and practices.²⁰ *Tabaqat* are a particularly layered textual resource for understanding Sufism because they contextualize teachings and practices geographically and temporally by providing biographies of Sufi figures and attributing sayings to particular Sufis. In other words, these texts clarify the tradition's historical roots and lineage, in addition to the teachings and practices. *Tabaqat*, then, can be understood to provide a window into traditional formative and medieval Sufism.

The genre has been found to have three essential elements: (1) being organized according to the century in which the subjects lived; (2) an authoritative tone and (3) where order of the bibliographic sections highlights both the *isnad* (chain of authority, i.e. the way information and philosophy is passed from one Sufi to another) and the tradition that is being represented

¹⁹ Throughout this dissertation, I strive to use English translations of Persian and Arabic words because this text is written in English, but because the term '*tafaqat*' is so intricate and no single English term speaks to its nature, I use the appropriate Arabic term that is applied in Persian as well.

²⁰ The connections that I found between Mahmoud's expression of Sufism and the *tafaqat* literature were strong enough that it prompted me to amplify them in my work stylistically: besides employing narrative and biographical sketches that lean on the *tafaqat* definitions, I title my chapters using the same formula as English language translations of *tafaqat* manuals: "On...", as a nod to the tradition. Additionally, I suggest here that Mahmoud, like many Sufi teachers, is a living *tafaqat* manual: an amalgamation of the teachings transmitted by his own living teachers as well as the texts he has consumed over the course of his lifetime.

(Mojaddedi, 2015, p. 178). And those who put these *tabaqat* together can be understood as biographers.

The *tabaqat* manuals that I explore in this work were produced by three medieval Persian Sufis: Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1034) (Sulami, 2000; Sulami, 1991),²¹ Abd al-Karim ibn Hawazin Qushayri (d. 1072/3) (Qushayri, 1990; Qushayri, 2002; Qushayri, 2007), and Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Uthman al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri (d. 1077) (Hujwiri, 1999). I engage primarily with *tabaqat* produced by Sulami, Qushayri and Hujwiri because their work played a crucial role in the systematization and preservation of the history, philosophy and practices of medieval Persian Sufism, and ultimately its transmission.²²

Sulami was a 10th century Persian poet who was born and raised in Nishapur, Iran. He was one of the most prolific Sufi biographers and one of the primary focuses of his *tabaqat* is conduct. The second Sufi biographer I refer to herein is Qushayri, a Sufi master and philosopher in 10th century Persia who wrote his treatises on Sufism in Arabic. Sufi tradition holds that Qushayri was one of Sulami's students. *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risala al-qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* (2007) is a text that makes accessible this manual which carries an apologetic message that works to legitimate Sufism as a branch of Islamic science (Knysh, 2000, p. 131). While Reynold A. Nicholson, the 20th century orientalist scholar produced a translation that emphasizes Sufi practices, contemporary scholar of Islam and Sufism, Alexander Knysh, provides a translation that gives us a better understanding of the sometimes disjointed relationship between Islam and Sufism.

²¹ More information about Sulami's contribution to literature of Sufism and the *tabaqat* tradition can be found in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission."

²² I engage exclusively with resources that are originally written in English or those which have been translated into English as opposed to the originals that were written in Farsi and Arabic.

The third biographer that I refer to is Hujwiri, an Indian Sufi master who lived much of his life in Persia and wrote his *tabaqat* in Farsi. Because he lived in Persia at the same time as Qushayri it is very likely that they were acquainted. Hujwiri's *Revelation of the Mystery* (1999) is a revered treatise on Sufism and includes some biographical notes. It is written from the perspective of a Sufi teacher and was said to be a short-term substitute for seekers without a guide, containing a complete system of Sufism with its doctrines and practices.

I provide a more detailed description of my analytical and interpretive approach in the Methodological Appendix.

Summary of the Chapters

Based on the concepts outlined above, this dissertation explores five central themes, building one on the next. The first chapter, "On Sufism (in this case)," begins with an in-depth definition of Sufism from Mahmoud's perspective. Rather than reiterating the academy's previously employed definitions of the religious tradition, it explores, among various topics, the religious and historical roots of Sufism, referring to Ali, Umar and the Prophet Muhammad,²³ and touches on Sufism's poetic or textual history, referring to Rumi, Mansour al-Hallaj (d. 922)²⁴ and Khawjeh Shams-od-Din Moḥammad Hafez-e Shirazi Hafiz.²⁵ This introductory information situates the reader in the philosophical and pedagogical perspective and approach of this particular Sufi teacher and provides the foundation for the following five chapters.

²³ Ali and Umar are two of Islam's first four caliphs; along with Abu Bakr and Uthman, they are referred to as the *Rashidun* ('rightly guided' or 'rightly directed'), which is an honorific title that suggests that these four men upheld the Prophet's teachings and were guided by wisdom and piety. Ali was the cousin, son-in-law, and companion of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632 C.E.). Shia Muslims consider him Ali the rightful successor to Muhammad and the first Imam; he was assassinated in 661 C.E. Umar was one of the Prophet's companions as well. Some Shia Muslims believe that he conspired with Abu Bakr to assassinate Ali, but Sunni Muslims hold Umar in high esteem. Umar was assassinated in 644 C.E.

²⁴ Hallaj was a 10th c. Sufi martyr. I provide more details about this figure in chapter 1.

²⁵ Hafiz was a 14th century Persian poet who was given the title *lisan al-ghayb*, which translates to 'the Tongue of the Unseen,' because of his ability to describe the intangible. Hafiz's *Divan*, often called *The Divan of Hafiz*, is referred to by many Persians as the 'Second Qu'ran,' and is often placed in the highest spot in the home.

The second chapter, “On Love,” provides an overview of the significance of love in the Sufi tradition. I begin by describing Mahmoud’s teachings on love, a model that he refers to as the ‘Stages of Love.’ Mahmoud’s six stages expand on the descriptions of love found in Sufi manuals and treatises, in that Mahmoud’s six stages clearly describe the progression of the Sufi disciples’ love for their teacher. I also explore the Sufi concepts of intoxication (*sukr*) and sobriety (*sahwa*). In Sufism, these are two distinct ways of experiencing divine love and expressing that love. In the third section I highlight the darker side of love: the negative emotions and facets that can arise when deep love emerges. This part is important because love generally has mostly positive associations, but I emphasize that love in Sufism also has significant implications. I conclude by restating the importance of love in Sufism and the part that it plays in providing a foundation for the following chapters.

In the third chapter, “On Lineage and Transmission,” I delve into the two title themes, lineage and transmission. I begin by analyzing the way that lineage (*silsilah*) is manifested in this particular case of Sufism, including describing the relationship between Mahmoud and his teacher, and analyzing some of the qualities of Sufi leaders and teachers. I also explore some of Mahmoud’s descriptions of his teachers’ previous institutional affiliation to the Persian Sufi order, Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi (M.T.O.). I also briefly explore the significance of dreams in the Sufi tradition and the way that jealousy can arise between students of Sufism. In the second portion of this chapter, I investigate two modes of wisdom transmission in Sufism: textual transmission and transmission through love. In the case of textual transmission, it serves as a means through which students of Sufism can learn without a teacher present, but Mahmoud suggests that transmission through love is the most effective means of transmission. In the section of ‘transmission via love,’ I detail Mahmoud’s theoretical model, which he refers to as

three ‘Varieties of Love.’ These varieties are built upon Greek philosophical concepts, and are called Eros, Philo, and Agape. I conclude that while lineage and transmission are well-established and documented aspects of Sufism, they can present in alternative ways, as in this case study, where Mahmoud is not affiliated with an institutionalized Sufi order.

The fourth chapter, “On *Adab* and Companionship,” analyzes *adab*, an Islamic concept that is defined as the ‘height of moral behaviour.’²⁶ I break *adab* into two forms: an ‘outer’ form, which is understood here as an expression of cultural and religious norms, manifesting in the standards and expectations of community life. In particular, I explore Persian culture and Persian Sufism, and the Islamic concepts of Chivalry (*futuwwat*) and Servitude (*ubudiyya*) as these are the pillars upon which this case of contemporary Sufism stands. The second form of *adab* that I explore is ‘inner’ *adab*. I define ‘inner’ *adab* as the less tangible expressions of *adab*: wars waged in the inner worlds of Sufis, in their thoughts and reflections. I investigate (1) friendship and self-reflection; (2) companionship; and (3) spiritual conversation and meditation. I conclude that when *adab* is understood as a practice that works simultaneously on the ‘outer’ behaviours and ‘inner’ worlds of novices, it has the potential to support Sufis’ efforts at self-improvement by regulating and refining patterns of thought, and their capacities to be communal.

The fifth chapter, “On Storytellers and Stories,” describes a gathering that was held at a gazebo in Nevada City. This conference brought together seventeen people for two days of lectures by Mahmoud and discussions. Using the gathering as a frame, I analyze the tradition of storytellers in Sufism, emphasizing the Sufi tradition of teachers subverting expectations through

²⁶ *Adab* is an Islamic concept that is generally translated from Arabic into English as ‘etiquette,’ but that actually refers to ‘the height of moral behaviour,’ or ‘ethical behaviour at its highest,’ among several other meanings. As with the term *tabaqat*, because ‘*adab*’ is a complex term with no single English equivalent, I use the appropriate Arabic term that is applied to Persian as well. It is explored thoroughly in chapter 4, “On *Adab* and Companionship.”

audacious and sometimes rude behaviour, with the aim of bringing their listeners into the present moment. In the second portion of the chapter I focus on stories, recounting two of the stories told at the Nevada City gathering, and describe two methods for interpreting stories. The final section explores aspects of epics, with reference to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, and Irina Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master* (2006). I conclude that when a story is being told with a pedagogical aim, the way that a story is told is just as important as the story that is being told.

"On Power and Gender," the final chapter, investigates some of the ways that gender and power are described in the scholarship on Sufism and in Sufi manuals, and elaborates some of the implications of patriarchal interpretation of the religious texts and traditions. I also outline the ways that the metaphysical Divine Masculine and Feminine aspects in Sufism, including the metaphysical model of the 'Perfect Human,' a concept that Mahmoud has studied and also published a book on, all of which can help each of us better understand equity in Sufism and more broadly, in human relationships. I also highlight some of the ways that I have witnessed Mahmoud's teachings around gender changing over the years. I conclude that while Mahmoud and I do not seem to have always seen eye to eye in the ways that we understand gender, given our different backgrounds and experiences, it makes sense that we would not necessarily have the same opinions; that every human being is limited, regardless of the wisdom that they have access to.

I conclude the dissertation by affirming that the way that Mahmoud 'does' Sufism demonstrates that this is a living tradition that has the fluidity to evolve for the present day, while remaining profoundly traditional, as per the teachings in the medieval Sufi *tabaqat*. This case study also finds that the way that Mahmoud teaches Sufism exemplifies traditional

manifestations of Sufism as they are described in the Sufi *tabaqat*, as a direct result of the ways that Mahmoud has adapted Sufism for his particular context.

Conclusion

So much of the scholarship of mysticism, including Sufism, emphasizes the esoteric: chanting, uniforms, dances, proclamations of affiliation and hierarchy. These studies speak to the human curiosity about the ‘unusual’ things that other people are doing. But you’ll find very little of that here. In fact, you’ll find a rejection of performative religiosity. What is described and analyzed here are mundane activities and a lot of talk. But the talk and the ideas are the object of the study; they are the seed. The talk and the ideas are what is planted in people with the hope that with time and care and perhaps with grace, they will germinate into inspiration and then something more permanent: refinements of a person’s life; progress on the Path.

What I try to express in this study of Sufism is the religion of a person who is seeking to understand life and themselves on a deeper level, and seeking to make a positive impact in the lives of the people around him. And what might make the subject of this case study compelling is the ambiguous way that religion is expressed here. This expression of religion is for people who are interested in philosophy and in the stories that have led human beings through life, providing comfort and moments of darkness. What is being expressed in this autoethnographic case study is Sufism taught by a Persian man in Oakland, California in the 21st century.

Chapter 1: On Sufism (in this case)

I learned about Sufism from a man named Mahmoud Malamatian. Mahmoud is a Sufi, but I've never heard him identify himself that way.²⁷ He is also a college professor, and we first met in his World Religions class at the downtown Oakland college where he teaches in 2016. I found him charming, with impeccable manners and a good sense of humour. In those first minutes of class I saw him making jokes and chatting with students, but after several minutes passed things got quiet. As I continued to attend Mahmoud's classes, I continued to witness this progression and began to understand that it was intentional. In the first five or ten minutes he aims to create a comfortable atmosphere using humour, by referring to people by name and engaging with them about their lives and families. He is mostly deferential and patient with the older students and usually pokes fun at the younger students. This congenial 'small talk' serves an important function: it puts people at ease so that he can engage intellectually with them on a deeper level; the atmosphere is a requirement for his philosophical symposiums.

Once a relaxed atmosphere is created, Mahmoud waits for a natural pause and appropriate moment to ask, "So... do you have any questions?" The asking of this question signals the formal beginning of class. In these classroom discussions, I have witnessed students ask him about romantic love and family relationships, about losing jobs and homelessness, but in that first class that I attended, because I was a guest I was the first person he singled out.²⁸

The ethic that underlies Mahmoud's approach to his classes and which I would eventually understand extends to his personal life with his wife, Rozaneh, their two children and extended family, is described in his thirteen-page syllabus. He uses the same syllabus for all the

²⁷ This is a complex and layered philosophical aspect of the Sufi tradition that is described and defined later in this chapter, in the section "Sufism and Ambiguity." It is also referred to in the chapter, "On Love."

²⁸ I describe this first class in greater detail in chapter 6, "On Power and Gender."

classes he teaches, from introductory philosophy courses to courses about the New and the Old Testaments. And in all of the slightly different iterations, he insists on very specific expressions of respect for students in a way that I had not seen in other syllabi. One point that he makes, for example, is that no one person should be eating in class unless they have brought enough to share with other people. The reason given for this is that some students might not have eaten that day; there are often students in his college classes who are precariously housed. I was stricken by this awareness of the different ways that people could impact one another.

But in those first classes of Mahmoud's that I attended, I was particularly drawn in by the balancing act between what I witnessed as the respect insisted upon in his syllabus and a genuine irreverence. I found Mahmoud's irreverence, which was often expressed as anti-establishmentarianism, compelling because it pointed to life's absurdities and referred to human beings' own limitations; the deficiencies of human systems we like capitalism, relationships, bureaucracies. The way that he seemed to question everything reflected my own ambivalence for arbitrary authority and rules.²⁹

Mahmoud's irreverence extends to himself too, though. From his first class that I attended, I took copious amounts of notes and this garnered a surprising amount of mockery: "Emily. There's nothing to write down, just listen. I'm not saying anything important."³⁰ This remark, repeated to me on many occasions, confused me, because I was interested in the stories and sayings he shared in the classroom and I ultimately was never able to put my pen and

²⁹ Despite having a relatively sheltered childhood, I grew up listening to punk music and started participating in a small way in the Ottawa music scene in the mid-2000s. I believed that human-made systems were deeply broken and I found authority distasteful, but because of my sheltered upbringing and my privileges (being a white, relatively educated, middle class girl and then woman), I was endowed with some of the characteristics that help navigate bureaucracies and systems of authority with more ease. I could examine some of these systems without being ensnared in them in many regards.

³⁰ I explore the role humility plays in Mahmoud's expression of Sufism particularly in chapter 5, "On Storytellers and Stories," but the idea is also touched on in chapters 2 and 4.

notebook away. I wanted to remember the tools that he used to answer students' deeply personal questions: a mix of religious stories, personal anecdotes, recitations of poetry and sacred texts and references to modern philosophical concepts. He maintained over the years that making notes was not a necessary activity in his classes; I continued writing in classes regardless.

And I found Mahmoud's way of being unusual, what I mean by this is that I found his way of being unfamiliar; it was outside the boundaries of my personal and cultural experiences. I could see that there was 'something else' going on with a few of the people that were around him, but I wasn't able to discern what it was. Finally I took matters into my own hands: Mahmoud referred to many different books in his classes, but one that kept coming up was Irina Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master* (2006).³¹ I finally bought my own copy, but to my frustration, even after reading the first hundred pages or so I still didn't really understand what was going on: I understood the words, but their meaning was nebulous and too vague for me. What the book did point me to, and what I did finally begin to understand, was that Mahmoud's seemingly lawless approach to philosophy was based a religion called Sufism: a religion that has its own traditions, rules of engagement and complex history.

This chapter will serve as a primer for Sufism, emphasizing the way that Mahmoud expresses the religious tradition. I will begin by addressing some of the scholarship on the term 'mysticism' and then I will explore Mahmoud's definitions of Sufism and their relationship to ambiguity. I will also investigate Persian and California Sufism, two types of localized Sufism,

³¹ Irina Tweedie (d. 1999) was born in Russia, and during her youth she lived in various European countries. After the Second World War, Tweedie married a British man and took his last name, Tweedie. Tweedie was in India in 1961, and met her Sufi teacher who she called Bhai Sahib. At Bhai Sahib's request kept a diary of the time she spent training with him, and that diary was eventually published: *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of a Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master* (Tweedie, 2006).

one medieval and the other quite new, and finally provide some details about conceptions of authenticity in religious studies.

Mysticism

Sufism is commonly referred to and defined as ‘the mystical branch of Islam,’ which may beg the question for some: what is ‘mysticism?’ In past conversations, I have attempted to casually define mysticism as an attempt at a direct relationship with God, as opposed to through an intermediary. But this definition invariably calls up Protestantism and Quakerism, a correlation that I agree with. My conversation partners often find my vagueness and the lack of differentiation between the traditions irritating. To alleviate their exasperation, I have taken to saying instead that all religions including mysticism are essentially the same, but the differences are mostly important to academics, some practitioners and most religious leaders. Needless to say, people find this irritating too. What, then, is mysticism really? I rely on the more technical definitions and theories of mysticism from the academy to clarify this concept in my stead.

There are also scholars who suggest that mysticism is culturally constructed. These scholars, who are generally found in the ‘Western’ academy, include American scholar of religion, Wayne Proudfoot, who suggests that concepts, beliefs and linguistic practices are presupposed by the rules that govern the identification of an experience as religion (1987).³² Another academic, Jonathan Z. Smith, an American historian of religions, who suggested relatedly, that the category of religion was demarcated during Europe’s period of Enlightenment and asserted that “religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study ... [and it] has not

³² I employ the term ‘Western’ in singular quotation marks in the same spirit as the critical scholars of religion who seek to complicate the definition and understanding of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘religion,’ discussed in footnote 33. The ‘Western’ category prizes an American, white supremacist perspective, and is practically incorrect. I use the term in my work for simplicity’s sake, but will often employ the single quotation marks to remind the reader that the West is a cultural construct.

independent existence” (1982, p. xi). Contemporary critical academic of religion, Russell T. McCutcheon, asserts similarly, that the study of religion in its current form describes religion as inherently meaningful, personal and rooted in experiences that transcend historical and rational explanation. McCutcheon suggests instead, on a retelling of a plenary speech at the 1999 Eastern International Regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion, that religion is *only* [sic] “social, biological, political, economic, etc.” (2023, p. xxvi).³³

Instead of focusing on the existence of the categories of religious studies as these critical scholars do, the sociological study of religion begins a definition of ‘mysticism’ by pointing to the challenge of defining it, suggesting that because it has “no doctrine or dogma” many scholars “decline to define [mysticism]” (Adair-Totteff, 2020, p. 518). The definition then goes on to refer to William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (James, 2008). Published in 1902, this text continues to be a mainstay in the academic study of mysticism. This collection of transcribed lectures covers religious and psychological topics like religion and neurology; the reality of the unseen; the religion of ‘healthy-mindedness;’ and the ‘sick soul.’ And in his chapter on mysticism, rather than attempting to define mysticism, James begins by providing four qualities to describe ‘the mystic state.’ The first of the four qualities is ineffability, i.e. something that is beyond definition; beyond the reach of those who do not know it personally.

The mystic state is ineffable because it defies unambiguous, practical expression. The second quality that James ascribes to the mystic state is a ‘noetic quality:’ mystical states are

³³ It is notable that in the same way that the term ‘mysticism’ is complicated here, there are academics whose critical scholarship of religion asserts that the category of ‘religion’ is a ‘Western’ construct. See critical scholars of religious studies, Aaron Hughes and Russell McCutcheon’s *Religion in 50 Words: A Critical Vocabulary* (2021) and Timothy Fitzgerald’s work on critical religion explores the idea that the concept of the ‘world religions,’ including the term ‘religion’ and ‘religious tradition’ was designed and perpetuated by academics. See, as an example of Fitzgerald’s work on these subjects, an article published revisiting and critiquing his text *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (2003), “The Ideology of Religious Studies Then and Now: The Author’s View” (2019).

marked by insight and revelations that, in many cases, likely could not have been accessed by the intellect itself. The third and fourth qualities that James ascribes to mystical states are transiency, i.e. temporally limited; and passivity, whether these mystical states occur does not correspond with ‘efforts’ made by individuals (2008, 267).

Another early 20th century ‘Western’ text that defines mysticism handily comes from a British Catholic, Evelyn Underhill, who wrote about religion, spiritual practice and mysticism, and who began her prolific writing career writing about the Virgin Mary. Underhill defined mysticism via the mystics as having

succeeded where all [others] have failed, in establishing immediate communication between the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that ‘only Reality,’ that immaterial and final Being, which some philosophers call the Absolute, and most theologians call God (Underhill, 2002, p. 4).

Both James and Underhill refer us to the directness of the mystical experience. A more recent definition of mysticism emphasizes it as stepping outside the boundaries and patterns of normative, orthodox religious activities, and are often defined by direct and personal religious experiences. These religious expressions, in the case of theistic traditions like Islam, may include attempting to gain “direct subjective experience of God, or perhaps a sense of merging or unification of the Divine” (Oliver, 2009, pp. 8–9). Each of these explanations attempts to approach mysticism from an agnostic perspective.

These definitions of mysticism are further clarified, I think, by a differentiation provided by a scholar of Christianity, Ernst Troeltsch. He differentiates between mysticism and ‘technical mysticism.’ Mysticism, he asserts, embodies the highest form of the religious expression, and appropriates, as opposed to detracting from, the organization to which it belongs. Whereas technical mysticism is defined as making a break with traditional religion where its adherents see themselves as independent from religious principle and institutions and even reject religious

morality (Milani, 2014, p. 206; Troeltsch, 1992, pp. 734–736). Troeltsch’s definitions seem to suggest that one variety of mysticism has positive characteristics and another variety is more sinister.³⁴

Sufism and Ambiguity

When I began this study I received a different definition of Sufism from Mahmoud. When I called him over the summer of 2021 to ask if I could write about the way that he teaches and ‘does’ Sufism, he asked me how I was planning to define it. I began to talk about academic definitions like the ones listed above, and he promptly interrupted me,

The Prophet Muhammad asked Ali and Umar to take his cloak and go find someone named Oveys. He was known to be grouchy, to be refined, not talk to too many people, to be reflective. But he didn’t have a teacher. The cloak was just given to him. And you know that the cloak represents lineage. That could be one definition of Sufism.

You could also define Sufism as the story of the four moths. The one moth who sees the flame; the one who gets close to the light, a second feels the heat of the flame. One gets singed and the last one gets consumed. They all could be using the name of the Sufi, if they want to. This could be a way to explain Sufism. Then you have Sufis like Hallaj, who would say things like “You see me, you see God,” that’s a kind of Sufi. But there was also Rumi who wrote beautiful things about Sufis. Or Hafiz.

But back when I was a student at Sac State, there was this instructor of Humanities and Religious Studies and I was doing a ‘Directed Study’ with him. I wrote him a fifty page paper on Sufism and gave him a stamped envelope to send it back to me once it was graded. He sent the envelope back empty with the grade on the front. He gave me a B. He told me that I hadn’t given him a chance to teach me anything about Islam or about Sufism and he was right, I didn’t. But it’s because he didn’t know anything about it. When you’re dealing with people who don’t know the culture, who don’t speak the language or know the tradition, you’ll likely have people disliking the work that you’re doing (Malamatian, June 15, 2021).

³⁴ It is notable that the definition and categorization of mysticism and its related term, ‘religion,’ seems to be a preoccupation of the ‘Western’ academy in particular.

In his explanation, Mahmoud points to a number of Sufi stories and personalities to describe the essence of the religion. He begins with reference to Oveys Gharani, a Muslim who lived in Yemen at the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Oveys was said to have been a pious camel herder who spent his days caring for his camels and his elderly mother, and his nights in prayer. And while Oveys and the Prophet never met, hagiographical tradition names him as an honorary Companion of the Prophet, describing him as the Prophet's most faithful follower.

Their relationship is clarified in a story in which the Prophet is said to have been in Mecca and looked towards Yemen saying, "A blessing blows in from Yemen." In the story that Mahmoud refers to above, the Prophet charged Ali and Omar with travelling to Yemen to find Oveys in order to give him the Prophet's cloak in a mark of lineage and transmission of spiritual knowledge (Hanlon, 2025, p. 164; Schimmel, 1975, p. 28). It is notable that Mahmoud began his definition of Sufism with reference to Oveys whose faith and piety was such that he was recognized by the Prophet himself without their having met. This is the type of human being that, it seems, Mahmoud deems worthy of the title of 'Sufi.'³⁵

The second reference that Mahmoud makes in his definitions of Sufism is to a Sufi story about four moths.³⁶ In this story that Mahmoud tells with some regularity, there is a kingdom inhabited by moths, and beyond the bounds of this kingdom a light appears. The king of this realm sends four moths out consecutively to investigate the light. The first returns from the journey having gotten close to the light; the second returns describing the heat that was felt in close proximity to the light; the third returned to the kingdom singed by the light; and the final

³⁵ Oveys Gharani and a Sufi Order that claim lineage to him, M.T.O. are described in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission."

³⁶ This story is analyzed in chapter 5, "On Storytellers and Stories."

moth was consumed by the flame, never to return. Mahmoud uses this story to describe the different levels of relationship to Sufism: some people read manuals but may not understand them deeply; some listen to teachers and are inspired by the ideas but cannot apply those ideas in their lives, or only some of the ideas; other people encounter Sufism and their lives are consumed.

In Mahmoud's third definition he refers to three Sufi personalities: Hallaj; Rumi; and Hafiz. Hallaj was a Persian Sufi teacher and poet who was executed because of his public exclamation, "I am Truth." The Muslim and Sufi establishments saw Hallaj's statement as arrogant and blasphemous, but Hallaj's apparently brash exclamation was understood by others as an expression of one-ness with God, which is one way to describe the Sufi's ultimate aim. He is an important Sufi martyr.³⁷ Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi, the 13th century Persian Islamic jurist, who is known these days for his poetry, is an important Sufi figure. Mahmoud often quotes Rumi's poetry in Farsi and sometimes translates his verses into English.³⁸

The third Sufi figure that Mahmoud referred to is Hafiz. Khawjeh Shams-od-Din Muhammad Hafez-e Shirazi, who is also known as *Lisan al-Ghaib*, which translates to English as 'the tongue of the unseen,' is a 14th century immortal Persian lyric poet. Few details of Hafiz's life are known, but at a young age he is said to have memorized the Qur'an, earning himself the title of Hafez which he later used as his pen name (Bloom & Blair, 2002, p. 166). Hafiz's poems, like Rumi's, have a heavy influence in Iranian culture and Sufism too. These three Sufi figures

³⁷ I refer to Hallaj in Chapter 4, "On Adab and Companionship" and chapter 5, "On Stories and Storytellers."

³⁸ I refer to Rumi throughout this dissertation, but in particular in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission" and chapter 5, "On Storytellers and Stories." As well, ideas about extending the work of this dissertation, including investigating the ways that Mahmoud uses Rumi's poetry in his teaching, can be found in the concluding chapter.

are significant in Sufism generally and Persian Sufism particularly, but also to the way that Mahmoud does Sufism specifically.³⁹

I interpret the fourth explanation about Sufism that Mahmoud gives as a warning to me: some people will understand the things he does that I describe in this work; others won't. The factors that he is referring to that could impact their capacity to understand the way that Sufism is being expressed here are their lack of knowledge about Farsi and the Persian culture, or individuals who don't have a deep understanding of the tradition. The way that Mahmoud expresses Sufism is purposefully ambiguous, and this ambiguity is a known characteristic of Sufism. This desire for ambiguity was especially evident in one conversation that we had in the early stages of the project; Mahmoud asked me, "Can you call it something other than Sufism?" When I pressed him on this matter he told me, "For many years I would ignore any book with the word 'Sufi' on the cover because it was too sacred to be used so callously as an advertisement" (M. Malamatian, June 15, 2021).⁴⁰

The definitions of Sufism that are referred to in the opening paragraphs of this study describe the tradition practically and contextually, but during the first year that I knew Mahmoud I would sometimes ask him, "what is this?" because I simply didn't know. I would come to know the answer to Sufism, but in those early days, unlike the extended, detailed answers that he

³⁹ One definition of Sufism that speaks to the tradition's nuances in the contemporary moment is provided by scholar of Sufism, Alexander Knysh, in his chapter, "Definitions of Sufism as a Meeting Place of Eastern and Western Creative Imaginations" (2019). He notes that "the abstraction called 'Sufism' serves as a meeting place of discourses and imaginations, both Muslim and 'Western,' namely 'internal' and 'external' to Islam as a devotional tradition. It is in such 'meeting places' that various visions of Sufism are being (re-)negotiated, (re-)adjusted and (re-)articulated by various actors based on their personal convictions and predilections. This conclusion should alert us to the danger of juxtaposing too rigidly internal and external discourses about Sufism, not to mention endorsing some of them as being 'faithful' to the tradition and debunking others as 'Orientalist' and thus somehow inauthentic. Seeing resonances, dialogues and crosspollination rather than ruptures, discontinuities and incompatibilities in these discursive fields gravitating around the notion of Sufism seems to be a more productive approach" (2019, p. 58). Like most other religious traditions, Sufism can be understood as a dynamic tradition.

⁴⁰ This perspective is reiterated in chapter 5, "On Storytellers and Stories," in the section on epics, where Mahmoud describes the beginning of his relationship with a book called *Daughter of Fire* (2006).

would give to my many questions in his college Humanities and Philosophy classes, his answers were not tangible or practical. “We’re just talking, Emily,” or “We’re just sitting,” he’d tell me, always with an amused smile. This ambiguity is central to the way that he engages publicly or socially with Sufism. It is also central to the way that he defines Sufism: through stories and allusions rather than through direct attempts at definition.

The ambiguity that Mahmoud returns to, seemingly instinctively, is reflected in Hujwiri’s *Revelation of the Mystery* (1999), in which Hujwiri quotes another Sufi master, “Today Sufism is a name with no reference to any truth, while before it was a truth that had no name,” (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 44). Hujwiri provides some analysis of this statement: “in the time of the Companions and the Ancients [...] this name did not exist, but the reality thereof was in everyone; now the name exists, but not the reality. That is to say, formerly the practice was unknown and the pretence unknown, but nowadays the pretence is known and the practice unknown” (1999, p. 44). Sulami expresses this paradox in his *tabaqat* in a similar fashion, “the Sufi must conceal the signs that God manifested in him and he must keep them secret. [...] He must not behave with affectation because of the secrets he knows and he must not speak of them or use them in any way when being with the common people” (2010, p. 57). Qushayri, similarly, defines Sufism,

Know, may God have mercy upon you, that the best of the Muslims after the Messenger of God were not called, in their own time, by any special name, but were known only as those who kept company with the Messenger. Since there is no excellence greater than that, they came to be spoken of as the Companions. In the second generation, those who kept company with the Companions were called the Followers, and saw in this the noblest of titles; the ones who came after them were called the Following of the Followers. After this people began to differ and levels of development became distinguishable, so the elite, who had been given an intense concern for matters of religion, were called the Ascetics and the Devotees (Qushayri, 2002, p. xiii).

The paradox that is being articulated is the claim that the once-great tradition of Sufism is degrading with time and is being diluted by changes. But this paradox can also be interpreted as a statement about the way that language is used too. Hujwiri is articulating the idea that to name something intangible suggests that it is *known* or at least *knowable*. This process has the power to dismantle and discredit it (Dabashi, 2012, pp. 301–302). Giving something a title produces implication and assumptions, it subjects a phenomenon to the limitation of language and the imagination, which is essentially limited by the imaginer’s own life experiences.

In one of my early interviews with Mahmoud, he asked me, “Tell me about your project.” We were sitting on the front porch at his and Rozaneh’s house eating rye sandwiches that Rozaneh had made, and my answer was stalled because he seemed to have waited for my mouth to be full to ask the question. Six months prior to this interaction I had called him on the phone to ask if I could write about the way he does Sufism and he had said yes. Rozaneh responded for me: “It’s about you.” To this he said

I don’t really see myself in the role that you’ve laid out for me. Sufism, at least in the Middle East, comes from a profoundly religious culture and tradition and language. Sufism in the West has a different flavour because religion is different here. So I’m not quite sure which words you can use for ‘religion,’ for ‘god,’ for ‘spirituality’ (Malamatian, October 12, 2021).

The importance of language and definitions is central to communicating, and the choice of words and the definitions attributed to them differ based on context, and the way that Mahmoud uses language is deliberate. His reference to the fact that the terms ‘religion,’ ‘god,’ and ‘spirituality’ may not be appropriate in the ‘West,’ i.e. the very context in which he is speaking is based in the perspective that in the United States in particular, and North America in general, much of the dominant culture is relatively ‘young’ or new, and relatively secular in direct comparison to his own Persian roots. Using these terms in a country where many people are not religious, in

comparison to Iran; where the government is apparently separated from the church; where there are a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives, ‘languages,’ and approaches has the potential to lead to misunderstandings.

The way that Mahmoud does not use language is also intentional: he does not refer to himself with any degree of clarity as a teacher of Sufism and he won’t refer to anyone as a student of his. Further, Mahmoud will only address or clarify the Teacher-Student relationship when asked explicitly: ‘What kind of teacher are you talking about?’ for example, or ‘What kind of ‘student’ are you talking about?’ When he is caught in a magnanimous moment though, Mahmoud will clarify the terms that he’s using. In one instance he stated that he evades these terms because they suggest that human beings can actually teach or learn anything; that human beings have the capacity for profound reflection and self-reflection which simply isn’t true for most of us. In another discussion, Mahmoud explained that mentor-mentee relationships which are similar to Sufi Teacher-Student relationships can occur in a variety of contexts besides a spiritual one and that many of the aspects he outlines can be observed in these other contexts. I assert that this ambiguity is also a practice or expression of humility.

This play with language and avoidance of titles is also a reference to the Sufi tradition that ‘a Sufi will never say that they are a Sufi’.⁴¹ This tradition is founded on the metaphysical idea that a subject that is named is a subject that is defined, and a subject that is defined is bound, or limited by its definition, and therefore its capacity to evolve is stifled. A subject that is named, defined, and bound to any particular characteristics may also become attached to said characteristics, which creates additional attachments that must be severed if one’s fundamental aim is, as the Sufi’s is, to become nothing at the feet of God; to remove all aspects of duality that

⁴¹ This philosophical tradition is defined in footnote 39 above and is also referred to in the chapter, “On Love.”

are created by the particularities of the physical world. This approach can extend to hierarchical titles and positions: once a person obtains a title or any hierarchical position, be that socially, spiritually, or otherwise, it is plausible and understandable that their ego would begin to attach to aspects of that position. How can one become nothing, as the Sufi aims to through the annihilation of their ego, if one is making efforts, be they conscious or unconscious, to be a teacher or a Director or a financial advisor? This approach permeates Mahmoud's expression of Sufism, but is especially compelling with regards to the relationship between him and his students.

Persian and California Sufism

Like any religious tradition, Sufism shifts in subtle and sometimes less subtle ways depending on the location in which it is being practiced. There are two locales that are at play in this case study: Iran and California. Iran's output of Sufism is referred to as 'Persian Sufism' and the Sufism that is practiced more recently in California has been dubbed, 'California Sufism.' I will take each of them up in turn.

In his lecture titled *Persian Sufism in its Historical Perspective* (1970), Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob, historian of Persian culture and literature, illuminates the relationship between Islam and Sufism, asserting that "Sufism appeared as a protest against a disturbed society, its traditionalism and its intellectualism" (Zarrinkoob, 1970, p. 150). He also suggests that after the Prophet's death, "Muslim society witnessed the growth of a kind of theosophical school which later developed into the real mystical dimension of Islam –Sufism" (Zarrinkoob, 1970, pp. 152–153). From there, Sufism began to take shape. When neither "traditionalism nor reason [inspired] great confidence, there remained, in the search for religious certitude, only the so-called inner light, of which the Sufis were fervent advocates" (Zarrinkoob, 1970, p. 153).

In particular, Persian Sufism can also be understood as an amalgamation of religious elements rooted in a variety of traditions that were prominent in Iran over the centuries: Zoroastrianism, Ismailism and Islam, among other influences. The amalgamation that is expressed in Iran's multi-religiosity can be attributed in part to the many invasions that the country has suffered over the centuries as a result of its geographical location (Foltz, 2004).⁴² The relatively recent invasion by Muslims in the 8th and 9th centuries, for example, marked the transition from Zoroastrianism, Persia's second most recent national religion, to Islam, the current national religion. According to Zarrinkoob, Iran was a world civilization at the time of the transition that was overthrown by a relatively small group of nomadic, tribal warriors with limited resources. The Muslim invasion was successful as a result of a weakened state due to previous wars, as well as the corrupt ruling class, composed of the priesthood and ineffectual kings (Zarrinkoob, 2017).

Iran's cultural resilience to these invasions does serve as an affirmation of an unofficial Persian cultural narrative: that everything originates in Iran. This narrative can be heard in casual conversation among Persians, but is reaffirmed in the scholarship as well (Foltz, 2004, p. 123). Another perspective is that Iran's geographic location and the distinct impacts of various invasive powers has forged an innovative people and culture for Iranians (Milani, 2013).⁴³ But the influence of Persian culture on Sufism is significant: "Persian poetry of classical times was so extensively influenced by Sufi philosophy that almost every great lyric poet of that period was

⁴² Some of the invading forces include Greece, 'Arab', Turkish, Mongol, and the more recent imperial efforts by the United Kingdom and United States. Of relevance too, of course, are Sunni and Shia Islam. The conversion from Sunni Islam to Shiism, a branch of Islam containing approximately twenty-one sects, began at the start of the sixteenth century and over the next five centuries, Shiism became the official religion of Iran (Corbin, 1998; Newman, 1999).

⁴³ Additional scholarship that illuminates Persian Sufism includes Alexander Knysh's *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History* (2000); Henri Corbin's *The Voyage and the Messenger: Iran and Philosophy* (1998); Attar's *Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis* (2009); and Rumi's *Masnavi* (2004).

a Sufi, as nearly every great Sufi of the time was a poet” (Lewisohn & Morgan, 1999b, p. xx).⁴⁴

This is demonstrated in the significance of the Sufi prose and poetry produced by the previously mentioned Persian poet Rumi, and the Persian Sufi biographers, Hafiz, Fariduddin Abu Hamed Mohammad Attar (d. 1221) and Sulami.⁴⁵

While the category of ‘California Sufism’ is perhaps less relevant for this case study, a brief discussion is merited given the locale of this case study and some of the relationships that are elucidated. In his book, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (2016), Mark Sedgwick explores the establishment of Western Sufism between 1910 and 1933, up to 1968. He argues that Western Sufism is distinguished primarily by their expressions of four particular characteristics. The first, emanationism, is defined as the idea that human souls share in the divine and should ultimately return to the divine; anti-exotericism, which he defines as the idea that religions can be divided in two, the public, exoteric segment and the secret, inner core. The third characteristic is perennialism, the idea that religions’ secret esoteric core is ancient and can be traced back to a remote past, and finally universalism, which is the idea that the truth can be found in all religions (Sedgwick, 2016, p. 6). These characteristics suggest an evolution of

⁴⁴ Lewisohn and Morgan’s work exploring Islam and Sufism in Persia at the turn of the 21st century were significant contributions to the field at the time, but thirty years on, they better serve to mark the incredible development of the field since their publication (Lewisohn & Morgan, 1999a, 1999b). At the time, these scholars were providing access to translations and ideas that had never before been accessible in English, but today the field of Sufi studies has developed significantly. The number of translations has increased remarkably, and the variety and quality of voices has broadened, i.e. of the twenty-four contributors to the first of these two edited volumes, two are women. That said, there is some enduring scholarship in these volumes. For example, one scholar uses Persian poetry, such as Hafiz’s *Divan*, to recontextualize mysticism and show that it is not an esoteric or tangential offshoot, but an all-pervasive reality (1999b).

⁴⁵ Attar of Nishapur (d. 1221) was a poet and hagiographer from Nishapur in Iran. Tradition has it that Attar worked as a pharmacist, but at a certain point left his profession and began studying with Sufi teachers across the region. One of his most best-known texts, *The Conference of the Birds* (2011), is an allegory that is commonly referred to by Sufis.

Sufism for a new environment, the ‘West’, which is culturally, geographically, historically and religiously different from Muslim-majority countries where Sufism and Islam originate.⁴⁶

But some trace the origins of California Sufism to Samuel L. Lewis (d. 1971), a.k.a. the Sufi Sam who is said to have led ‘Sufi dance’ performances at Grateful Dead concerts in the 1960s (Dickson, 2020, 27-28).⁴⁷ But there are currently numerous Sufi orders with bases in California including the Threshold Society, a branch of the Turkish Mevlevi Sufi Order;⁴⁸ the Jerrahi Order of California, another Turkish order in the Helveti line;⁴⁹ the Nimatullahi order that has a base in San Francisco and can be traced to Iran;⁵⁰ and the Shadhiliyya Sufi Order has a base in Pope Valley in Northern California too.⁵¹ Some of these Sufi orders are Islamic and others are not, but over the years, the state of California has been appealing to immigrants and Americans alike because of its climate, proximity to the ocean and deserts, and more recently, the influx of ‘Eastern’ religions like Buddhism.

There is also non-Islamic Sufism being practiced at the Golden Sufi Centre in Point Reyes Station, California, headed by the teacher Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee. While Vaughn-Lee’s expression of Sufism is decidedly not Islamic, the work of contemporary scholar of Sufism and Islam, William Rory Dickson, asserts that it is, in fact, firmly rooted in the classical, traditional Sufism, specifically the Indian Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi order.⁵² Vaughn-Lee’s Golden

⁴⁶ While Sedgwick’s four characteristics are useful for understanding the socio-religious context, this project does not aim to produce or investigate typographies of Sufism.

⁴⁷ ‘Sufi Sam’ was apparently initiated into four different Sufi orders before the end of his life. For some, this may be a further suggestion at his unseriousness, while others may find the fact that he was ‘recognized’ by four deeply spiritual teachers to be compelling (Rawlinson, 2009, p. 50).

⁴⁸ <https://sufism.org/> (The Threshold Society, 2024).

⁴⁹ <http://www.jerrahisufiorder.org/about-us.html> (Jerrahi Sufi Order, n.d.).

⁵⁰ <https://suficentersanfrancisco.org/> (Nimatullahi Sufi Order, 2011).

⁵¹ <https://suficommunities.org/community-connections/our-communities/northern-california/> (Shadhiliyya Sufi Center, 2025)

⁵² The lineage that Vaughn-Lee offers in his interview with Dickson (2020) provides a depth that I haven’t seen elsewhere. Vaughn-Lee’s teacher was Tweedie, referred to in footnote 31, whose own teacher was Radha Mohan Lal (d. 1966), who Tweedie referred to as Bhai Sahib. Radha Mohan Lal was the student of Abdul Ghani Khan, who was taught by Ahmad Khan (d. 1907) (Dickson, 2020, pp. 31–32; Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi Order, 1998).

Sufi Centre is of particular relevance to this case study because his teacher, Tweedie, wrote a book called *Daughter of Fire* (2006) that Mahmoud has referred to for many years.⁵³

The question of whether California Sufism or particular varieties of California Sufism are as authentic an expression of Sufism as others, such as Persian Sufism for example, will come to mind for many. In his work, Dickson acknowledges that ‘California Sufism’ has occasionally been designated as inauthentic and shallow because it is often not Islamic or not practiced by Muslims, which divorces it, seemingly, from classical and traditional varieties Sufism (2020, pp. 27–28). But scholarship is beginning to demonstrate that it is factually accurate to say “that not all non-Islamic Sufism can be so easily written off as “New Age,” “pseudo,” “neo,” or “invented” (Dickson, 2020, p. 28). The reason doing so would be inaccurate is that there have been many manifestations of Sufism across time (transhistorically) and across geography (transnationally); like all religions, Sufism is evolving.

I would argue, similarly, that the different approaches to Sufism can all “be conceived of as different understandings of the degree to which Sufism can be adapted to suit different times, places, and people” (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017, p. 26). Marcia Hermansen, contemporary scholar of Sufism and Islam speaks to this adaptation with the term ‘post-tariqa.’ Post-tariqa refers to Sufi movements with a Sufi background or that espouse some aspects of Sufism but that no longer require formal ceremonies or initiation (*bay’a*) or use the manes of existing Sufis tariqas

In the aforementioned interview, Vaughn-Lee describes the cultural and religious context of the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Sufi order lineage that he worked in, which began as Islamic and that, in a sense, fused with Hinduism in India in the 18th and 19th century. One of the circumstances and laid the foundation for this synthesis was the prominent Mujaddidi scholar and saint, Mirza Jan-i Janan (d. 1780) expressing his belief that Hinduism is “rooted in an authentic divine revelation” and that Hindus are ‘People of the Book’ too. This openness spread to the Northern Indian Mujaddidis and culminated in an early 20th century Mujaddidi Sufi teacher, Ahmad Khan, discouraging his Hindu disciples from converting to Islam, and affirming clearly that Sufism could be practiced outside of Islamic identity and adherence (Dickson, 2020, pp. 31–32).

⁵³ I go into more details about the significance of Tweedie’s book with relation to Mahmoud’s expression of Sufism in chapter 5, “On Storytellers and Stories.”

(Hermansen, 2014, p. 137). This categorization, were a categorization required for pinpointing Mahmoud's expression of Sufism, may fit it in some regards, but not in others. Hermansen's scholarship also proposes categorizing Sufi movements according to their internal features and religious orientation, i.e. based on their level of acculturation, their orientation to Islam and their underlying ethnic element. This typology consists of three types: hybrids; perennials; transplants. The hybrid category refers to Sufi movements that are oriented towards Islam but make accommodations for certain aspects of the 'Western' culture. The 'perennial' category emphasizes the universal spirituality that transcends Islam and the third category refers to the Sufi movements of ethnic Muslim immigrants who practice the traditional Sufism of their homelands and have not adjusted those practices (Hazen, 2016, pp. 45–46; Hermansen, 2014).

While Mahmoud's expression of Sufism is based in California, Mahmoud himself comes from a profoundly religious, Muslim background and Persian culture. The question that I will then leave here, unanswered, is whether the Sufism that is described in this work should be classified as Persian Sufism, California Sufism, or simply Sufism that is practiced in California. This discussion of California Sufism, as well as the comments supplied on ambiguity in the section above provide a practical segue into the question of authenticity as it relates to Mahmoud's lack of institutional affiliation.

Authenticity

A common question that arises amidst practitioners and leaders in the religious context is around authenticity. In the context of Sufism, questions of authenticity often arise around Islamic and non-Islamic forms of Sufism.⁵⁴ As observed by Sharify-Funk and Dickson, when exploring

⁵⁴ For an example and explanation of one variety of 'non-Islamic' forms of Sufism, please refer to the section above on California Sufism.

diverse understandings of Sufism in relation to Islam, some Traditionalist scholars and practitioners of Sufism reportedly assert that “those who claim to practice non-Islamic Sufism are simply fooling themselves;” that non-Islamic Sufism is “pseudo-Sufism” (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017, p. 24). And while this dissertation does not take on the question of authenticity directly, questions of authenticity might arise for some readers for two reasons: (1) because Mahmoud is not associated with an institutionalized Sufi order and (2) he does not openly declare himself to ‘be a Sufi.’

Mahmoud’s lack of a relationship to Sufi institutions is not unique. A similar non-institutionalized leadership is evidenced in Seema Golestaneh’s study of contemporary Sufism in Iran (2023). Golestaneh explores authority in conversation with two interlocutors who are both Sufi teachers and leaders of localized, congregation-like reading circles, and who both identify themselves as ‘*darvish*,’ i.e. a follower of Sufism, “even though they are currently not part of any larger order” (Golestaneh, 2023, p. 59). These two teachers demonstrate that like Mahmoud, being part of a Sufi order is not central to being a Sufi. Another similarity between these teachers and Mahmoud comes from their titles as teachers. In the case of Golestaneh’s interlocutors, “the title of ‘sheikh’ was thus not bestowed upon either by a more senior authority figure, but by their followers. Neither remembers exactly when they began to be referred to as such” (Golestaneh, 2023, p. 60). In many ways, this is the same for Mahmoud. Given this, I will highlight some scholarship of authenticity and further clarify my perspective and approach by leveraging conceptions about authenticity that have to do with Sufism in particular.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Authenticity is another theoretical subfield entirely that cannot be addressed in toto here. Instead, I endeavour to point to some definitions, concepts, and resources that inform my own approach and that could be used by others for further study should they choose.

In the study of religion, authenticity is constructed and contextual (Gauthier, 2021), but investigations of authenticity in this scholarly context are generally related to the ways that practices and rituals are deployed, and traditions are maintained. The difficulty with this association is that traditions, practices and rituals aren't stable, they are always evolving and being reformulated. The edited volume *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1989) takes this perspective a step further, demonstrating the ways that much of Britain's cultural tradition has literally been invented in colonies with the aim of differentiating the colonial forces from the indigenous populations.⁵⁶ Laura Spinney's recent text, *Proto: How One Ancient Language Went Global* (2025), explores a similarly analogous theme: the evolution of the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language. The PIE language is at the root of languages like English, French, Farsi, Armenian and Lithuanian, to name a few. Spinney highlights the ways that the speakers of this language were influenced by the different geographic areas, people and cultures that they encountered, and in turn their language evolved too. If neither tradition nor language are static and are always evolving or being reinvented amidst diversity, and authenticity is then a moving target, wouldn't religion, another by-product of human culture be the same?⁵⁷ How can anyone make assumptions about authenticity in the study of religion?

Questions about authenticity live alongside questions of legitimacy, of genuineness. Questions about authenticity are asked sometimes, to discredit people, movements, and ideas because the implication is that something that is inauthentic is deficient. And this search for the

⁵⁶ Terence Ranger's case study in chapter 6 of the Hobsbawm text, *The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa* (1989) provides an useful example of this phenomenon.

⁵⁷ I explore conceptions of culture, in particular the Persian culture and Mahmoud's perspectives on culture in chapter 4, "On *Adab* and Companionship."

‘authentic’ is a very real human impulse: human beings are searching for the truth, they want to know what is true and what is real, at least to them.⁵⁸

The difficulty with authenticity, though, is that not only is it a moving target and intangible, but it is also subjective. We also know, both from the literature as well as from our own lived experiences, that diversity and transformation do not equate to dilution, as some scholars suggest (Dickson, 2015, pp. 170–173; Lewisohn & Morgan, 1999b, pp. 50–51; Trimmingham & Voll, 1998, pp. 246–259). In his text that explores the religious lives of transnational migrants (2008), Tweed develops the terms ‘crossing’ and ‘dwelling’, to address themes of movement, relation, and position, to point out that religion is not a static phenomenon (2008, p. 5).⁵⁹ In this work, Tweed asserts that religion acts much like compasses and watches: as a tool to help people situate people in their bodies, their homes, and homelands, and within the cosmos. Religious studies scholar Nancy Ammerman argues, similarly, that using the term ‘spirituality’ as an alternative to organized ‘religion’ is based on an either/or distinction that fails to capture the empirical reality of American religion, and does no justice to the complexity of spirituality (2013). She suggests that this either/or distinction not only fails to capture the empirical reality of American religion, but it also does no justice to the complexity of spirituality.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The study of authenticity is interesting on a personal level that informs this project and my relationship to my interlocutor because before I ever became interested in religion or philosophy, as a young person I had this desire to find something that felt authentic for me too. I looked for authenticity mostly to books and poetry and music; art that made me *feel* something and reflected the world back to me in a way that felt authentic to my own limited experience. Hindsight allows me to recognize that this desire resulted in a particular kind of inflexibility: I was looking for something subjective and under the presumption that authenticity could be, but all the same, I was looking. The same way that the 21 year old version of me wanted to have an authentic experience when listening to the Byrds in her friend’s van outside a club in Atlanta, so too is the seeker who encounters a Sufi teacher, wondering if this is the authentic version of some perhaps unnameable phenomenon that will take them to God or Truth or a better version of themselves.

⁵⁹ Tweed defines ‘dwelling’ in relation to place, as in, where a religion is practiced. He defines ‘crossing’ in terms of travel and exile (2008).

⁶⁰ Similarly, the scholarship in Sutcliffe’s *Children of the New Age* (2003) demonstrates that regardless of the definition of ‘religion’ as a concept, and regardless of the intentions of organized religious institutions, people who

Whereas in his work on authenticity and Islam in religious studies, Aaron Hughes clarifies the tension between the academy's allocations of authenticity and inauthenticity, by referring us back to the intentions of the religious individuals being studied:

Groups like Boko Haram and ISIS, thus, create and perform their identities in the public domain based on what they perceive to be the actualization of timeless and eternal truths. These acts of identification, though their actors may perceive them to exist outside the realm of history, are preeminently historical and necessarily social (Hughes, 2015, p. xii).

He uses extremist groups to make his point, but the point remains. How can scholars ordain authenticity or inauthenticity? To take this one step further, the impulse towards authenticity is understandable but it also has the unintended effect of transforming the religion into a monolith that doesn't actually exist. Similar questions arise in the scholarship of Sufism too, though. At the end of the 20th century, a scholar of Sufism, Leonard Lewisohn, argued the same point that Hujwiri referred to in the quote that opens my definition of Sufism above, that Sufism is in decline: "Persian Sufism has failed to maintain, indeed, in many senses, has fallen far from the high ethical standards previously attained during the renaissance of Sufism in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries" (1999b, pp. 50–51).⁶¹

Trimingham made a similar argument: that the golden age of Sufism has passed, is in decline and beyond repair (1998, pp. 246–259). And in an interview with Dickson in 2015, the scholar-practitioner of Sufism, Seyyed Hossein Nasr who was previously associated with the Maryamiyya Sufi Order, differentiates between what he terms as "orthodox Sufism" which he contrasts with "another phenomenon [...] which is called Sufism, [but] which is a kind of New

live religiously are, themselves, expanding the category of 'religion.' They conclude that religion is a social and cultural category (Gilhus & Sutcliffe, 2014).

⁶¹ This is explored in greater detail in the section above, "Persian Sufism and California Sufism."

Age Sufism. That is Sufism cut off from the Islamic tradition, presented as if it had nothing to do with the Islamic tradition” (Dickson, 2015, pp. 170–173).⁶²

Other scholars provide a different perspective to disentangle the assumptions upon which statements like Nasr and Lewisohn’s are founded. Contemporary Canadian scholars of Sufism, gender and Islam, Meena Sharify-Funk, William Rory Dickson and Merin Shobhana Xavier contend that “seekers and scholars in the West engage with the question of what Sufism authentically is [...] and whether or not Western engagements with Sufism are authentically Sufi” (2017, pp. 245–247). These three scholars implicate the 19th century Romantic movement in quests for authenticity, which prized the ‘ancient’ and ‘tradition’ in and of itself as “bastions of authenticity” (2017, p. 246). This belief ties authenticity explicitly and implicitly with tradition, with genesis, with precursors, with the concept of lineage and casts the “modern,” as superficial, systematized, and ugly.⁶³

These scholars go on to suggest a connection between this Romantic anti-modernism perspective and those held by Orientalists and ‘Western’ Sufi Traditionalists who view Sufism as waning in the modern era due to the overwhelming influence of materialism and consumerism. It is this perspective though, which limits the possibilities of Sufism (2017, p. 247) as a living tradition that can evolve for its context, and as a whole. Is authenticity relative, then? While the scholarship seems to suggest that it could be considered as such, I know that Mahmoud would say it’s not, and so it would seem that the answer to this question also depends on who is answering it.

⁶² Much scholarship on contemporary Sufism is proving this to be false beyond any doubt. See Bazzano & Hermansen (2020); Dickson (2015); Neubauer (2013); Sharify-Funk et al. (2017); Xavier (2018, 2023)

⁶³ Lineage is a central theme in chapter 3, “On Lineage and Transmission.”

Conclusion

It took me several months to wrap my head around the fact that Mahmoud, the classroom professor, was dedicated to a kind of teaching beyond the scholastic and even then my understanding was limited. Here was a man who was teaching classes on philosophy and religion, but whose philosophical foundation was a lifetime spent studying and living the Sufi tradition. It is apparent, too, that Mahmoud's expression of Sufism is deeply rooted in his Persian identity, and while he does have perspectives on authenticity and occasionally makes statements about longing for a past golden age that no longer exists, the coming chapters show that his approach to Sufism makes a case for the dynamism of wisdom and of Sufism, that neither are static.

The concepts and format of Mahmoud's definition of Sufism, and even the way that he answers questions in the classroom or at gatherings at his house, is referential to the *tabaqat*. Rather than providing a single linear statement, he points to the nuances, the philosophical depths of the tradition and some of the central figures. And so, while the definition of Sufism has become relatively stable, what we find in this chapter is a figure who is engaging with and expressing Sufi *tabaqat* in real time. He reminds his listeners and students of the people and stories that make up the Sufi tradition, but a limitation of this approach is that many of his students over the years, both in the classroom and outside of it, have had little knowledge of the Sufi tradition beyond their relationship with him. In other words, the references that he makes are lost on many people. This is a challenge of the geographic, religious and cultural context that he lives in.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ As indicated previously, details about Mahmoud's students are provided throughout the text, but because the focus of this study is Mahmoud's philosophical and pedagogical approach to Sufism, this research does not focus on his students in any detail.

The definitions explored in this chapter provide a conceptual foundation for the rest of this project, where Sufi philosophy and Mahmoud's pedagogy as a Sufi teacher are explored in more detail. In the next chapter, Mahmoud's philosophy of love is explored, including a six-stage framework that describes the progression of the Sufi student's emotional relationship to their teacher. I also highlight some of the negative aspects of love that can occur in Sufism as well.

Chapter 2: On Love

Love (*muhabba*; *ishq*) is a central concept in Sufism, and I begin with it because it is a crucial mechanism for moving the Sufi along the Sufi path towards God. It has been theorized and analyzed by Sufis at length over the centuries; the *tabaqat* manual of an early Sufi master, Qushayri, describes love in relation to God as a state (*hal*):⁶⁵

As for the servant's love to God, it is a state experienced in his heart, too subtle for words. This state brings him to glorify God and to try to gain His pleasure. He has little patience in separation from Him, feels an urgent longing for Him, finds no comfort in anything other than Him, and experiences intimacy in his heart by making continual remembrance of Him (Qushayri, 1990, pp. 327–328).

Love is an almost inarticulable subtle state, Qushayri asserts, that encompasses positive conditions and aspects, but also negative ones. He refers to feelings of longing and separation (*farq*), and a necessity to strive for continual remembrance (*dhikr*). The *tabaqat* of another medieval Sufi master, Hujwiri, defines love around the love that God has for the human being instead:

God's love towards Man consists in showing much favour to him, and giving him a recompense in this world and the next, and making secure from punishment and keeping him safe from sin, and bestowing him to turn his thoughts away from all that is other than God. When God peculiarly distinguishes anyone in this way, that specialization of His will is called love (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 307).

Each of these definitions of love refer us to God, each from a different perspective. Both of these Sufi masters propose etymological explanations for *muhabba* that also provide clarity about the

⁶⁵ While not explored in this dissertation, states (*hal*) are a central theological concept in Sufism. These are understood to be gifts from God as a person moves through stations (*maqam*) on the Sufi path. Stations are a sister concept to states, and are progressive and distinct zones of the Sufi path that is taking the Sufi in the direction of God. States and stations are both explored in Qushayri's *Principles of Sufism* (1990) and Hujwiri's *Revelation of the Mystery* (1999) biographical Sufi manuals which are both referred to in this text, as well as Javad Nurbakhsh's *Spiritual poverty in Sufism* (1984), among many other texts on Sufism.

nuances of love in Sufism. Qushayri points to the Arabic term *hubab*, for example, which refers to “the bubbles that form on the water’s surface during a strong rainstorm, so ‘love’ is the bubbling up of the heart when it thirsts and is desperate to meet the beloved” (Qushayri, 1990, p. 328).⁶⁶ Hujwiri suggests another Arabic etymological connection to the term *hibbat*, which are the seeds that fall to the earth in the desert.

The name *hubb* (love) was given to such desert seeds (*hibb*) because love is the source of life just as seeds are the origin of plants. As, when they are scattered in the desert, they become hidden in the earth, and rain falls upon them and the sun shines upon them and cold and heat pass over them, yet they are not corrupted by the changing seasons but grow up and bear flowers and give fruit, so love, when it takes its dwelling in the heart, is not corrupted by presence or absence, by pleasure or pain, by separation or union (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 305).

In Sufism, love can be understood as an emotional response that is related to God, but as the initial quotation from Qushayri suggests, the human being’s relationship to God is also simply beyond words. It is beyond our capacity to accurately or fully articulate. But love in Sufism is also expressed in the earthly relationship between the Sufi student and their teacher.⁶⁷ This is a relationship that is described in medieval Sufi manuals and expressed in Sufi lodges where Sufis gather: it is an important relationship that has the potential to help novices progress on the Sufi

⁶⁶ In Sufism, the term ‘Beloved’ is used to refer to God.

⁶⁷ A Sufi student can be referred to as a novice, *pir*, *murid*, *salik* or disciple. This is someone who is committed to walking the Sufi path, but still requires guidance. Each of these terms is intertwined in meaning. The terms *murid* and *salik* are synonyms, both referring to a seeker on the spiritual journey towards the truth that Sufism offers. Similarly, the terms disciple and novice both refer to the *murid*’s relationship as a student to their teacher; as a ‘beginner’ who is in the process of learning. ‘Novice’ is especially interesting because this term can be employed in a relational way, as in a *murid* is a novice in the presence of their teacher, but that same teacher would likely consider themselves a novice in the presence of a teacher or leader with more wisdom, experience, or hierarchical power. A Sufi teacher can be referred to as a master, a spiritual leader (*shaykh(a)* or *sheikh(a)*), *murshid* (spiritual master or guide), or *hoca* (spiritual teacher) (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017, pp. 214–215). The role of spiritual teachers is to guide disciples along the path towards God. One definition of a teacher suggests that they need not be a person who has completed their journey, whether this is even possible is debatable in itself, rather a Sufi teacher should be a person who is one or several steps ahead of the disciple on the path. In his “Revelations of the Unseen” (*Futuh al-ghayb*), Sufi Shaykh Abd al-Qadir compared the spiritual mentor to a wet nurse, insisting on the necessity of a guide so long as one possesses desires of the world, and that once a novice has been weaned from these ‘base’ appetites, the need for the guide dissipates (Nasr, 1997, p. 18).

path in the direction of God.⁶⁸ It is also referred to in contemporary scholarship and literature on Sufism.⁶⁹ And Mahmoud explores this type of love in a framework comprising six stages, that he refers to as the ‘Stages of Love’ and which he recounts in the Humanities and Philosophy classes he teaches.

One of Mahmoud’s classes provides a narrative backdrop for this chapter as well as its central data source.⁷⁰ And the focus of the first section of this chapter are Mahmoud’s six ‘Stages of Love.’ Mahmoud conceived of the six stages over the course of many years, to help explain the way that the Sufi student falls in love with their teacher and the function of this love. These stages were developed as a result of his own personal experiences with his teacher, but they also were refined over the years as he lived the role of the Sufi teacher.

The second part of this chapter explores two modes for expressing love in Sufism, either in an intoxicated (*sukr*) way or more soberly (*sahwa*); and the final section of this chapter investigates the negative aspects of love, touching on concepts such as separation (*farq*) and

⁶⁸ The Sufi path, which is also referred to as the *tariqa* and explored in these opening pages of this dissertation, can be understood in a variety of ways, but the 20th century scholar of Sufism, Annemarie Schimmel, defined the symbolic path upon which the way-farer is proceeding in their never-ending quest for God (Schimmel, 1975, p. 4).

⁶⁹ In one study of Sufism in Pakistan, a student describes their teacher as “our guide, a spiritual master. He guided people to God, through love, and by taking a deep interest in them” (Rozeenal, 2007, p. 135). In another study that focuses on Sufism in Iran, a teacher is described by their student in the following way: “[his humility] is exactly what makes him a true *arif*! He has no arrogance at all, despite all of his learning. Some of these other [clergy], all they want to do is find an audience and feel self-important. But not our sheikh, he is much too humble, and that is that [*sic*] proof that makes him a true man of God. He has a pure heart” (Golestaneh, 2023, p. 71). And in the recently published collection of lectures by the beloved and celebrated contemporary Turkish Mevlevi Sufi master, Cemalnur Sargut (2018), we find constant references to Sargut’s own teacher, Kenan Rifa’i. Sargut’s references to her teacher are filled with love and attachment, and in these published lecture transcriptions, Sargut often opens her statements with attributions to Rifa’i, using statements like, “For Kenan Rifa’i,” or “he says,” referring to his teachings. In answering a question about God, Sargut responds

In my opinion, what is of utmost importance here is that Kenan Rifa’i rescued [the term] “love of God” from being reduced to an abstract concept and brought it into the concrete realm of this world and into creation. This is to say, he transformed a potentially into a de facto lifestyle., and changed intention into action (2018, p. 27).

What all of these references have in common is a Sufi student’s strong and positive emotional arousal for their teacher.

⁷⁰ This data is informed by several other lectures that Mahmoud has given in his college classes, as well as some private conversations we have had.

union (*wasl*), annihilation (*fana*). This analysis investigates the more challenging aspects of love in Sufism: the feelings of loneliness and alienation; the power imbalances that come with love, and the potential impacts of this vulnerability when it is in the wrong hands. These analyses supported by interpretations from Sufi *tabaqat* manuals and contemporary scholarship illuminate the Oakland case study, and lead to my chapter's conclusion: that love is an especially complicated but important component that is expressed and refined within the context of the relationship between the Sufi student and teacher.

Stages of Love

I can't remember the first time that I heard Mahmoud talk about love in the classroom, but I do remember being a bit uncomfortable with it initially. I come from a context where love and emotional intensity is generally associated with romance and sex, so it took some time to begin to understand the kind of love he was talking about and how it was different. The love that he talks about is something that grows between two people who spend a lot of time talking, thinking and listening together; and it blossoms based on respect, intentionality, and intellectual intimacy.

Mahmoud's theorizing on love reflects his long-standing engagement with Sufi philosophy and over the years, the 'Stages of Love' framework that he developed, has helped him to articulate the progression of the Sufi student/novice's love for their teacher.⁷¹ He talks about these six stages with some frequency in his college classes, in large part because students often ask him questions about romantic love, and he uses these moments to answer by engaging with Sufi philosophical concepts. But the emphasis on the Student-Teacher relationship in this

⁷¹ Mahmoud is one of many individuals who has expressed Sufi concepts using typology and levels of concepts to elucidate complex theories. For example, the Stations (*maqam*) of the Soul were described by various Sufi thinkers such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Al-Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910). Contemporary scholar of Sufism, William C. Chittick, explores the Islamic cosmology in his text "Science of the cosmos, science of the soul: the pertinence of Islamic cosmology in the modern world" (Chittick, 2007).

first chapter is a reflection of its importance in the way that Mahmoud ‘does’ Sufism. When Mahmoud is teaching Sufism, he teaches in a one-to-one manner, where the students that he takes on demonstrate a keen and continued interest in him and the ideas that he teaches.

Mahmoud’s classes generally open with him asking if anyone has any questions. Even if students have sat in the room together for an entire semester, this question often elicits several moments of silence, sometimes more than several moments. As with any classroom, there are students who are not engaged with the class and genuinely do not have any questions, and there are students who are engaged with the class and have questions but aren’t ready to ask them. The seats in Mahmoud’s classes often hold a third subtype of students, a rotating cast of about fifteen people who are not enrolled but audit Mahmoud’s classes with his permission. These people return week after week to listen to Mahmoud speak, and to see if he will answer their questions. This third category of student usually has questions ready but waits to ask until Mahmoud solicits for their questions.

This third category of students in Mahmoud’s classes employ language that is as vague as Mahmoud’s around who they are in relation to Mahmoud, and who Mahmoud is to them. It is clear that the ambiguity that he employs around his function and work as a teacher of Sufism is mirrored by these students. These individuals go to Mahmoud’s classes because they are intellectually engaged in the ways that he expresses ideas, but equally, there is little doubt that these people like Mahmoud very much; they are extremely attached to him. This is evidenced by the ways that they greet him: their tones of voice are quiet and their body language is subdued, there is a respect in the way that some of them will not put their backs to him or speak when he is speaking, or without having been spoken to.⁷² But over the years that I have spent in Mahmoud’s

⁷² Over the years I have had many exchanges with Mahmoud’s Sufi students as well as the students in his college classes, discussing the impacts that he has had on their lives. In a conversation that I had with two of Mahmoud’s

classes, I have witnessed all three categories of students ask questions about love. It is no surprise that questions about romantic relationships are top of mind since love and attachment have always had a central place in the human experience.

As the semester progresses and students become more familiar with one another, people generally become more open, but at some point in the middle of the semester, Mahmoud usually suggests to students that they should bring food to the class's next meeting. Mahmoud describes this class as people 'breaking bread' together, functions as an accelerant for intellectual connection and community. Mahmoud even goes so far as to tell students explicitly that food works as a glue for individuals, creating friends and communities, and because there is a sense of familiarity within communities, people can be more open. This serves Mahmoud well, as it allows students to be more comfortable asking questions.

During these classes, where people bring food to share, students will file in and whoever has been able to bring something will leave their offerings on the table at the front of the classroom. There are bags of chips and 2-liter bottles of soda, there are freshly baked muffins and crudites and sometimes even sandwiches or fruit breads. As students arrive Mahmoud greets everyone, making jokes and exaggeratedly exclaiming about the food. Once everyone seems to be present, students are invited to come to the front and serve the older members of the class and then themselves.

Once students have made their plates at the front of the room, they move back to their seats and get settled in. They mingle in a way that isn't possible when class is in session and

students in 2019, they each described going back to school to get master's degrees and both ended up teaching classes in colleges and universities. One of Mahmoud's other students has completed a doctoral degree and continues to spend time with him more than a decade after initially meeting him. An evident commonality that all of these students share is their scholastic achievements. This is logical given Mahmoud's emphasis on obtaining higher-ed qualifications and degrees, and striving for stability in life.

because they have something to talk about. During these classes, once people have started eating, Mahmoud is generally quiet, only engaging when he's spoken to, and after about half an hour or so, he'll make some remarks amidst the din, that food is a glue that brings people together. He has been known to say that he hopes that the students in the class will get together outside of classroom hours and become friends; especially those students who share an interest in the ideas that he expresses in the classroom. I have heard him say often that these ideas are difficult ones to live with, and that having a community of like-minded friends is important.⁷³ When everyone has had some time to eat and chat, class begins.

During one of the 'breaking bread' classes in 2017, a student asked him a vaguely worded question about love. The answer Mahmoud provided described some aspects of the relationship between teachers and students in Sufism, and serves as a functional overview to his six Stages of Love.

The human body is designed to be complacent. The spiritual/intellectual journey is so difficult because the body desires to sit and have things given to it. Philosophy goes against life; it goes against the human body. The idea of transformation is nearly impossible because of the tendencies of the body. In Hinduism there is this concept called *tapas*. It basically means, 'to generate heat.' In the Student-Teacher Relationship, the teacher generates heat and the student gets infected by that heat, in many different ways. There is something about the student, and the student doesn't know what it is, and there is something about a teacher and the teacher knows it. And somehow the student gravitates towards the teacher. There's this desire, then the [desire] turns into a need, and the moment it turns into a need, a person is physically, emotionally, mentally, very much engaged. And again, you don't have to do anything. Before you realize it, something about you is on the rise.

In the Student-Teacher Relationship, the only way you can achieve this [single-mindedness] is love. There is no other way. You don't have to make this into anything spiritual or esoteric. Anyone [...] who's ever been in love knows this. You can have sex with other people, but it just won't feel good. You can go to a

⁷³ Community is further explored in the chapter, "On *Adab* and Companionship."

party and dance, but you're still thinking about this other person. Love baptizes your intellect and emotions. You cannot do it alone. Especially you, in America, because it's intensely secular. You don't have the right images to get an emotional or spiritual arousal (Malamatian, 2017).

In the way that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, the Swiss-American psychiatrist and scholar of near-death experiences, unpacked and illuminated the nonlinear but relatively consistent stages of grief and loss (Kubler-Ross et al., 2014), Mahmoud teaches that so too can love be broken open and observed. The stages that he describes have different qualities, with the aim of moving the lover in the direction of wisdom. The six stages are attraction; curiosity; interest; infatuation; obsession; and love. And while a person's evolution from one stage to the next is not necessarily clearly visible in the moment, this theoretical framework does provide a clear description of the Sufi student's emotional transformation as their relationship with their teacher deepens over time.

Mahmoud often points to the relationship between Socrates, the 4th century Greek philosopher and his student Plato when he is describing the relationship between a Sufi teacher and student. There are a number of reasons that Mahmoud gives for this analogy. In the first place, Socrates's philosophy is based around love, humour and irony, and secondly, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates approaches deep philosophical questions by working to answer his companions' questions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Socrates is known for the Socratic paradox which is based around his assertion that he doesn't know anything: "I neither know nor think I know" (Plato, 1999). This assertion, made recorded by Plato in his final oration in Ancient Greece, can ultimately be understood as a paradox: the more a person understands, the more they realize the limits of their understanding and the amount that there is to learn.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Socrates' statement about knowing nothing also aligns with the statement that is referred to in the section on ambiguity in the introduction of this work, in which Sufis will not refer to themselves as Sufis. A Sufi who

In the following sections, I detail and analyze Mahmoud's description of the six Stages of Love that he gave in a lecture in his college class in 2022. In his lecture, Mahmoud described the six stages with reference to Socrates and to a lesser extent, Plato.

Attraction

Attraction is the first of Mahmoud's six Stages of Love framework. At this stage, the person who may eventually fall in love is instinctively attracted to another person. Mahmoud explains that this beginning stage is attraction because

[if] you are not attracted to something, you will never, ever, ever want to be intimate with it. [...] There is something profoundly magical in the attraction stage, because inside attraction lies the world of beauty. [...] You're not really attracted to the thing out there, you're attracted to the thing that it represents: beauty (Malamatian, 2022).

The teacher is one embodiment of beauty and wisdom on the Sufi path. As Mahmoud describes in the quotation above that refers to Hinduism, there is something in the teacher that the student, or the lover as he refers to them, is attracted to, and something in the student that the teacher is attracted to. The Teacher-Student relationship can be traced back to the early stages of the tradition, where the Sufi novice's progression on the Sufi path is supported by a relationship with an authoritative teacher (Trimingham & Voll, 1998, p. 3). At its core, this relationship has similar elements to a mentor-mentee relationship, where the Sufi teacher guides the Sufi student along the path, giving them recommendations, companionship and acting as a role model. In another class, Mahmoud describes the quality of the attraction more particularly with reference to Socrates.

If, for example, you were to become attracted to Socrates. And again, remember one of the nice things about Socrates, he does not look like Brad Pitt. He looks

understands the depth of the Sufi's journey on the path to God, the complexity and relentlessness of the Sufi's aim, to break down the ego, might choose to not refer to themselves as a Sufi despite their efforts on the path.

like Snoop Dogg. Brad Pitt can deceive you with his looks. Instinctively, something about you comes up and says, “Wow, this is such a good-looking man.” You look at Snoop Dog, something's inspired inside you and you say, “Wow, what a horrifically ugly looking man.” It's easy to fall in love with Brad Pitt. It's difficult to fall in love with Snoop. Or Kanye (Malamatian, 2022).

In this quotation, Mahmoud is describing the intangible quality of attraction between the Sufi novice and the teacher; an attraction that is not related to the physical body, but related to ideas or charisma, perhaps. Within the context of Sufism and the Student-Teacher relationship, an attraction towards beauty as it pertains to wisdom has little to do with the physical aspect of the teacher. The teacher is a container through which the student can begin to love, which can help them to understand aspects of themselves, of others, and then, potentially, generalize those understandings into knowledge of people at large, universal wisdom. But in the Attraction stage, the connection is more tenuous, and can be compared to shopping for desserts: when one doesn't have something in mind, one can find many cakes compelling, but once a favourite is settled upon, the draw of the other options dissipates.

There are several somewhat paradoxical challenges with this initial stage of the student's love for their Sufi teacher. One is that attraction itself has no longevity; it lacks the history and substance of a longer-term friendship, and so it can easily be forgotten or discarded if a strong enough distraction appears. Another challenge with the Attraction stage is that if the teacher, the object of attraction, is not able to protect that attraction, the connection will be lost. One of the ways that attraction can be protected and nourished is through the potential student spending time with the teacher. Herein lies the crux of the paradox: according to Mahmoud, the teacher does not pursue students, they are the pursued, and so while they are responsible for nurturing the attraction of the student, they will not chase them. Mahmoud explains the paradox this way:

Now if you're [encountering teachers] like Socrates and Jesus Christ, they're not going to email you saying, “Hey, do you remember me?” They're far too old to

spend their energy like that. They will wait for your call, your texts, your email. They want to make sure their time, their energy is being used and spent wisely (Malamatian, 2022).

This aspect of the relationship is essential. Rather than pursue students or spend resources on advertising themselves, Sufi teachers who are masterful will rely on their experience and wisdom, which will act as a filter for potential students. They will have the capacity to watch closely and listen carefully and recognize that potential students don't necessarily look a particular way, but that they have certain qualities and characteristics.

Curiosity

The second of Mahmoud's Stages of Love is Curiosity. At this point the potential student, the pursuer, begins asking questions; seeking knowledge and answers: what am I doing; what am I looking for? But in this stage the pursuer remains in the dark about what it is that they're attracted to exactly. They may wonder 'why do I keep coming back to this person again and again?' but the answer is not necessarily always forthcoming. In the context of Mahmoud's teaching of Sufism, the reason an answer would not be forthcoming would be, in part, because he does not expressly advertise himself as a Sufi teacher.

According to Mahmoud's framework, the stage of Curiosity also demands more time and attention than the Attraction stage: in Curiosity, the seed of attraction is beginning to germinate in the presence of the teacher. In order for Curiosity to germinate at this stage, the potential student must continue to pursue the teacher, the holder of beauty and wisdom, because without roots the germinated seed has no chance of surviving amidst the distractions of life, be they work, family or school. One of the ways to nurture the seed of Curiosity growing in the potential student is through continued connection with the teacher. Practically, the modes of connection

available today include technologies like email and text, in addition to spending time in the same physical space (Malamatian, 2022).

Often when Mahmoud describes these first two stages, students in the classroom listen attentively. Everyone wants to understand the Stages of Love, and despite his attempts to distinguish the type of love he's describing from romantic love, the distinction is elusive. Attraction and Curiosity, as well as the next stages, Interest and Infatuation, can be recognized in romantic love as well.

Interest

With the right amount of connection, Curiosity begins to take root, and the potential student, the pursuer, advances to the Interest stage of love. Mahmoud describes this stage in reference to time spent as well, "In one minute you can be attracted. But for it to be turned into Curiosity, you need about 20 minutes. Interest, you need at least an hour. [...] You need to spend time with this person so that you can move to this place called Interest" (Malamatian, 2022). At the Interest stage, the teacher, the carrier of wisdom, begins to take more time and more space in the student's life and their psyche. Mahmoud uses the Christian gospel's Parable of the Sower as an analogy to illustrate these early stages of this his pedagogical model for the development of the student's love for their teacher:

You have a farmer. He has a bag, he has seeds in his bag, and the bag has a hole. As he is walking, seeds fall to the ground. Some on concrete, some on wood, some on good ground, and some on better ground. Seeds can never grow if they fall on wood; they will never grow if they fall on concrete. They will never grow if they fall on hard land. Even if they were to fall on good land you have vultures out there (Malamatian, 2022).⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Mahmoud has been teaching classes on the 'world religions' for decades and as a young man, at his own teacher's suggestion, learned the contents of the Christian Gospels by heart. In 2022 he published an introductory book on religions, but I am not including the name of this text here because we have agreed to use pseudonyms for this project. In this publication he interprets stories from the Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions, but also touches on Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and even the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

This is to say that while a person may be very interested in seeking beauty or wisdom, life is extremely busy, and even genuine interest can be smothered and eliminated. Just the basics of life: having a job and going to school, maintaining important relationships, having relatively nourishing food relatively frequently, protecting one's health, all of these vital necessities require so much time, effort and resources.

Mahmoud also emphasizes that if any of these elements are unfulfilled, the pursuit of the teacher, which is ultimately the pursuit of wisdom or progress on the Sufi path towards God, becomes much more difficult. For example, if a person has a chronic health condition, they may desire to pursue ideas and they may even find someone who wishes to lead them, but with the chronic health condition, a person's life becomes even busier and more complex. There are doctor's appointments and medications, visits to pharmacies and days when their focus is on their body instead of their pursuit of wisdom. Perhaps a person with a chronic health condition can be in a position where the challenges that they are facing do not get in the way of their pursuits, but in many cases the challenges of a physical body that is sick have the real possibility of becoming an impediment.

In order for the inspiration that begins as Attraction to grow eventually into Curiosity and then into Interest, there needs to be time invested, as well as consistent space in a person's life and psyche for the object of their attraction to become lodged. In the case of the Parable of the Sower, the farmer's seeds need the right conditions to germinate and put down a small root.

Infatuation

The fourth stage of this pedagogical approach to love is Infatuation.

When Interest is nourished and protected, something really, really, really awful will happen. Infatuation. In Attraction, you think about Socrates about maybe a half hour a day. In curiosity you think about Socrates, Plato or Jesus Christ or Malcolm X about maybe 2 or 3 hours a day. In Interest you spend about five hours. But when you are infatuated, your physical life, emotional life,

psychological life, intellectual life that has to do with your physical body, they all disappear. They go to the background. You are infatuated with Socrates, with Malcolm X, with Mahatma Gandhi. All [...] good teachers will eventually want to get you to the place of Infatuation. It's really, really difficult to get rid of (Malamatian, 2022).

In his explanation of the Infatuation stage of love, Mahmoud returns to Socrates' relationship with Plato. In the Infatuation stage, the novice has become attached to the teacher and thinks about that person all of the time. It is at this stage, according to Mahmoud, that suffering can also begin to come into play. Many of the Sufi saints and philosophers have written about the suffering that accompanies love, but in the stages before Infatuation, there is not enough of a connection for too much friction to arise.

Mahmoud explains that at this stage, the teacher has taken root in the student's psyche in a substantial way and the Sufi teacher begins to function like the sun for the student: their presence can be comforting and calming, it can be, in a sense, warming, referring us back to Mahmoud's reference to *tapas* in Hinduism at the beginning of this chapter. That comfort and heat can also be destabilizing too, though: when a student is away from their teacher, that student may feel loneliness, darkness or restlessness. These aspects that come about at the Infatuation stage create a push and a pull within the student. Relationships, interests, and projects that used to be important might begin to fall to the wayside. This is because at the Infatuation stage, Mahmoud explains, the priorities of the student have shifted: the only person who can hold the attention of the student is the object of their infatuation, the teacher.

Another difficulty at this stage of entanglement lies in the reciprocity of the relationship. As with the description of the Attraction stage, the teacher is not the pursuer but the pursued. Further, despite potentially becoming dedicated to the student, the teacher does not reciprocate in kind emotionally. Where the student is falling in love with the philosophy and ideas of their

teacher, and potentially becoming attached to the physical form of that teacher, if the teacher is balanced and humble and if their ego is tamed, they will not become emotionally engaged. They will keep the progress of the student as a central motive for the relationship.⁷⁶

Obsession

With additional nourishment, and as time passes, infatuation can intensify to become Obsession.

In the lecture he gave in 2022 on the six Stages, Mahmoud described Obsession in this way:

If you are profoundly unfortunate, cursed by the gods, Infatuation turns into Obsession. You [can't] focus on your physical life, emotional life, psychological or intellectual life. Why? Obsession means that every ounce of your being is consumed. Do you know how rare that is? (Malamatian, 2022).

This stage can be understood as a heightened, extreme version of the previous stage. In the Obsession stage, the student is consumed by their teacher; the teacher is the place of psychological and emotional rest. “There is only one person who can give you any nourishment, and that’s the person who put [Obsession] inside you [in the form of a] seed of attraction, cared for it to become curiosity, cared for it to become interest, and then infatuation” (Malamatian, 2022).⁷⁷

This stage and its title will have negative connotations for some people. For many, obsession is an unhealthy state of mind, and this is true in such contexts as relationships that are abusive or an addiction to unhealthy substances. If a person with addiction to dangerous substances is at the mercy of their obsession, their life is in danger and the possibility for destruction arises. But there can also be positive varieties of obsession: when a person becomes passionate about their craft of writing or playing the piano; when they undertake research that

⁷⁶ Various difficulties of the relationship between the Sufi teacher and student are further elaborated on in the section of this chapter below, ‘The Dark Side of Love.’

⁷⁷ The potential for jealousy and how it is understood in the context of this case study is further explored in the chapter, “On Lineage and Transmission.”

makes a positive change in the world, or when someone focuses all of their energy and resources on caring for a loved one. If a person becomes addicted to the philosophy, perspective, and approach to life of a person with integrity, and who keeps in mind the capacities of the addicted person, there is real potential for that relationship to make lasting change in the obsessed person. Obsession of this kind inherently eliminates many aspects of life, but their benefits and potential rewards are undeniable.

A pedagogical framework that acknowledges the utility and presence of Obsession can be challenging to accept, in large part because there is room for error and misuse. But there is room for error in most types of relationships and most types of processes for change, including, for example, therapy or addictions counseling, or even classroom learning, where some students learn in ways that their teacher does not have the capacity to accommodate.⁷⁸ There is also room for abuse in all relationships. The ultimate function of Mahmoud's six stage framework is to push the student deeper into their relationship with their teacher, which is meant to help with personal refinement and pushing them further along the Sufi path. Mahmoud's six stages of love is a framework that helps a student change in a fundamental way and in the case of this framework, if the elements in the equation are right, Obsession might bloom into the final stage, which is Love.

Love

Love is the final stage of Mahmoud's six stages of love. The differentiation between Obsession and Love is murky, but the distinction seems to be found in a quieting of the student, which Mahmoud described in the following way:

The most important aspect of love is faith and trust. It's called 'submission.'
When you surrender, you become what we call a Daoist. You become an empty

⁷⁸ In 'Western' therapy, phenomena like obsession are referred to as 'transference.'

cup. And the person with whom you fall in love is the only one who can fill your cup. No one else. They are the only ones who can give you commandments and their commandments are the only ones worth following, listening to, applying. So if I was to ask you, 'How does someone change?' It starts with attraction (Malamatian, 2022).

This means that love is the ingredient that can prompt and quicken change within the Sufi student, which is the whole point of the relationship between a Sufi student and their teacher. Because "love organically creates patience, excitement, commitment, forgiveness, sacrifice" (Malamatian, 2019). Further, if a student gets to the Love stage, they are no longer autonomous but are in a codependent relationship with their teacher. Their teacher is the one who provides them with lessons and ideas on how to move through the world; how to think; how to act. As such, one hopes that in the early stages of this entanglement, the student vetted the teacher and found them to be worthy of such a strong bond and so much faith.

When I was finally able to comprehend that these stages aren't about romantic love, I still couldn't wrap my head around how one person could rely on another to such a degree. I have witnessed similar reactions from students in classes too: "that sounds toxic;" "how can someone know what's good for another person?;" "I would never trust someone else that much." And the fact is, these responses aren't incorrect in most contexts, but the love that Mahmoud is describing isn't 'most' contexts. And the six stages described above arise within the context of both the relationship between the novice and their teacher and could likely be recognized in the development of the Sufi's love for God. A crucial aspect of the Teacher-Student relationship and its evolution that is being described here, is that the relationship functions as a pedagogical tool to educate the Sufi student on the proper way to move along the Sufi path, how to be consumed with love for and live in constant attentiveness to God. The teacher functions as a stand-in for God, in a sense, and the student is not necessarily meant to have such a strong attachment to their

teacher forever. Qushayri differentiated between understandings of love, which can be helpful for understanding the depth and type of love that Sufi teachers are working with, in contrast with more academic understandings of the concept:

It is the scholars' opinion that love means volition or desire. But the Sufis mean something other than simple desire when they speak of love. Desire cannot be attributed to the Eternal unless, by using that term, one means desire for bringing man near to God and for honoring Him (Qushayri, 1990, p. 326).

This love that the Sufi teacher is educating the student in, besides other components of the Sufi way, Qushayri describes love in Sufism as having components of desire but contains elements of the perennial or boundless. The intensity of love in Sufism is illustrated well in the story of an 8th century Sufi figure, Maryam of Basra. She is said to have gone into ecstatic fits whenever she would listen to lectures on the doctrine of love, and that she died because her spleen ruptured due to the ferocity of her physical and emotional response to a preacher's teachings on love (Sulami, 2000, p. 84). But Mahmoud addresses the eternal aspect of Qushayri's definition, and the intensity of Maryam of Basra's love, using a Buddhist story.

There was a young woman who fell in love with the moon, and she wanted to know how to reach this light in the night sky. She would walk for miles around the countryside, asking anyone she came across about how she might reach it. No one could help her until one day, she met an old woman who said she could help her. The young woman began spending every day with the old woman, and as the days and the years passed, the young woman became more and more attached to the old woman. And as time passed, the young woman's obsession with the moon, and the old woman's promise began to recede in her mind. The young woman began taking on the qualities of the old woman: the ways that she ate and walked, and the ways that she thought and spoke. After ten years passed, one evening after the sun had set, the old woman asked the young woman, "Do you remember when we first met you had fallen in love with the moon. You never look up anymore. Do you see the moon up there in the sky?" And as she was pointing, the young woman looked at her, her constant companion and the person who had formed the person that she was in that moment. The young woman looked at the old woman's face and then up at the old woman's arm, and then her hand, until she was looking up at the moon again for the first time in years. The young woman was taken,

once again, by its profound beauty. When she looked back to tell the old woman, she was gone.

While this story provides little in the way of detail regarding the relationship between the young woman and the old woman, it subtly emphasizes the way that the relationship between the teacher and the student functions. Once the teacher has selected a student and the student proves themselves worthy of that selection, the teacher works to bring about love in the student, to teach them and at the right time, refocus the student on their aim while taking a step back.⁷⁹

Further, while the relationship that Mahmoud is outlining in these stages appears to be all-consuming, in his own community he insists that students maintain external relationships and fulfill obligations, such as jobs to earn money and attending classes for school to earn degrees, for example. The 11th century Persian Sufi master, Abu l-Najib Abd al-Qahir al-Suhrawardi (d. 1168), is said to have taken a similar approach with lay people who were unable to sever themselves from their physical lives but had become attached.⁸⁰ Suhrawardi applied a dispensation to these ‘lovers’ which absolved them from the more severe Sufi requirements and allowed these people to be associated with the Sufi order in some ways, without rejecting their lives (Knysh, 2000, pp. 194–195).

⁷⁹ Mahmoud will also use an analogy of a paperclip and a magnet to describe the relationship between a student and their teacher. There are paperclips that are made of plastic, of mixed metals, and of pure metal. When placed in proximity to a magnet, only the paperclip that is made up of metal will be attracted. Initially the attracted paperclip is drawn close to the magnet on a cellular level, choice and will are irrelevant; for years the paperclip will stick to the magnet and may eventually become magnetized itself, and pushed away from the magnet. At this point it is possible that the paperclip becomes a magnet itself.

⁸⁰ Suhrawardi and the Suhrawardiyya Sufi Order, a Persian-based Sunni Sufi order, is mentioned several times in this work, as such there are some clarifications which must be made. The Suhrawardi mentioned here, Abu l-Najib Abd al-Qahir al-Suhrawardi (d. 1168) was born in the Persian province of Jibal and moved to Bahdad as a young man to train with his uncle who is said to have been the disciple of the brother of the important Sufi philosopher, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Tusi al-Ghazali (d. 1111), who wrote on mysticism, theology and jurisprudence, among other subjects. Abu Najib Suhrawardi founded a cloister (*ribat*) for training the body and mind, but is best known for the manual he wrote called *The Manners of Sufi Novices (Adab al-muridin)*, which focused entirely on the ethics and manners of Sufis as opposed to doctrinal matters. Abu Najib Suhrawardi’s manual became better known by his ambitious nephew, Abu Hafs ‘Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234), whose work to grow the Suhrawardiyya order included sharing his uncle’s manual (Knysh, 2000, pp. 194–195).

Mahmoud developed his six-stage framework as a result of trying to understand his own experiences as a student with his Sufi teacher, but these days he experiences the Stages of Love from the other side of the equation.⁸¹ Over the years as a college professor he has experienced push and pull of the Attraction stage regularly. Students who are attracted to these ideas approach him to ask questions; they ask for clarification and recommendations and advice. He has told me that as a younger man he would engage with these people. He would hold dinners and invite anyone who was interested, and they would engage intellectually. After about thirty years of being a college teacher, he says he has become less and less generous with his time and ideas outside the classroom. But he continues to write and go to his job in the classroom where he talks about ideas. Compared with his activities in his younger years, he orchestrates many fewer gatherings with people who he doesn't already know well, and most of those gatherings are set in his home. He has expressed both publicly and privately, without remorse or unhappiness, that 'it' just isn't worth it. 'It' being the effort required to actually work with anyone in any kind of meaningful way. Life is short and energy is finite, yet he remains charismatic and compelling enough to continue to attract potential students despite his ambivalence.

This class in which Mahmoud explains the six Stages of Love over a shared meal in the classroom is no different from others that I have witnessed. The classroom is quiet, and students began slowly leaving; standing awkwardly and saying goodbye to those who they'd been chatting with. At this point, usually Mahmoud began trying to give food to the students who were leaving. I watched as he tried to give whole bags of muffins and wheat buns to people to eat on the way to the BART train or the next morning. And when the room was finally empty of

⁸¹ Mahmoud's relationship with his own teacher is discussed in particular, in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission."

students he put the few extra cans of sparkling water in the pockets of his sport coat, to bring up to his office and keep in the fridge for students and colleagues who come by.

This practice of bringing food to the classroom is an extension of his family's home environment. Anyone who comes to Mahmoud and Rozaneh's home is treated with the utmost care. This practice of care that extends beyond the home and into Mahmoud's place of work is a reflection of the social and cultural practices of his Persian origins, but they are also a reflection of his years and relationship with his own teacher who, despite his occasionally rough manners, showed profound generosity and love to his students. For Mahmoud, this practice of sharing food and sharing ideas is a practice of gratitude and love, honouring the memory of his own teacher in his own composed, sober expression of love and Sufism.

Intoxication and Sobriety

These six Stages of Love express the emotional evolution of the Sufi student for their teacher which itself is a pedagogical tool that is meant to help them move along the Sufi path towards God, and divine love. There are two types of expressions of divine love that are described in Sufi literature. These types of expressions of love are categorized as two ends of an extreme spectrum: as either Intoxicated (*sukr*), where Sufis express their love through elation, ecstasy, in rapture (*ghalabat*). On the other end of the spectrum for expressing divine love are the Sober (*sahwa*) Sufis. These Sufis who express divine love in a more composed (*tamkin*), restrained, mild and discrete way.⁸²

⁸² Much has been written about the distinction between 'ecstatic' Sufis and 'sober' Sufis, historically situating expressions of divine love, and in relation to Sufi figures over the years. Some scholarship that provides in-depth analysis and description of these concepts includes the scholarship on the Sufi figure Junayd (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017, pp. 186–187); mid 20th century scholar of Sufism Anne-Marie Schimmel's work on intoxication and sobriety (1975, p. 58; p. 83; p. 206); the recent publication by scholar Robert Rozeznal's, in which he describes the 20th century Pakistani Chishti Sufi Zauqi Shah (2007, pp. 56–57).

Poetry is one of the most opportune arenas in which to find evidence and descriptions of intoxicated love for God in Sufism.⁸³ In his *Divan*, the Persian poet Hafiz expresses the intensity of the relationship with God in terms of ‘drunkenness.’ In 2018, Omid Safi, contemporary Persian-American scholar of Islam and Sufism, translated a selection of Sufi poetry from Persian and Arabic into English. One such translation of Hafiz’s poems is titled, “Beloved in Embrace, Wine at Hand,” and ends with the following lines:⁸⁴

We are:
 Drunk
 head-whirling
 rogue
 love-glance playing

Who in this whole town isn’t like us
 like this?

Hafez:
 Don’t sit for a moment
 without wine
 And a beloved for the ages

These are the days for roses
 and jasmines

Holy days (Safi, 2018, p. 156).

In this poem, Hafiz is describing the deep love that the Sufis have for God. In Persian literature, Hafiz’s collected poems are considered sacred literature which reflect a faithful expression of God the Beloved’s countenance. These references to intoxication are more clearly understood

⁸³ In his *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (2011) Carl W. Ernst offers an entire chapter on Sufi poetry, with a section focusing on the specific themes and metaphors found in Persian Sufi poetry (p. 157).

⁸⁴ I introduce Hafiz for the first time in chapter 1, where Mahmoud refers to him as a central figure in Sufism.

when viewed as metaphorical references to “the theophany of beauty in the raiment of mortal beings” (Ilahi-Ghomshei, 2010, p. 84).

Safi translates another poem attributed to the 11th century Sufi master Abu l-Hasan Kharraqani, titled “Don’t be Meek in this Love.”

Don’t be meek in this love

Be kind to people,
receive the wisdom of the Prophet

but don’t be meek in this love
For God is bold
and likes those
who are bold in adoration...

This path is for the bold
the intoxicated
the love-crazed

With God
being love-crazed
intoxicated
and bold
Works (Safi, 2018, p. 106).

These poetic examples of the intoxication of love are further illustrated in philosophical treatises by Sufis such as the 11th century Sufi master and poet Aishah bint Yusuf Ba‘uniyah, who described love in the following way:

Some say that love is to be love-mad in the absence of the beloved, such that were one to catch sight of the beloved, one would be like a stammering drunkard. Some say that love is intoxication without sobering up, and utter astonishment when meeting the beloved, one that prevents any conscious perception. Some say that love is an affliction without hope of a remedy, and an illness with no known cure (Ba'uniyah, 2016, p. 63).

Ba'uniyah also quotes another Sufi master as having said “If you do not leave all of yourself behind, you will never reach even the edge of love” (Ba'uniyah, 2016, p. 64). Ba'uniyah is pointing to the all-encompassing nature of the Sufi love for the God, which can appear as intoxication, and originates in the attachment to the teacher. This intoxication has also been investigated and explained by contemporary scholars of Sufism. In his beginner’s guide to Sufism, Chittick describes love in Sufism in the context of observing social norms:

The world is the domain of doing what is right and proper, and this needs to be established in terms of a clear distinction between do’s and don’t’s. Observing the necessary distinctions demands sober awareness of our actual situation in the world and society. Inwardly, however, those who have reached sobriety after drunkenness (Chittick, 2000, p. 45).

The importance that Chittick is placing on the social context of love recalls Mahmoud’s insistence that individuals in his community maintain relationships and obligations that were significant prior to meeting him. Chittick’s words serve as a reminder that despite the intensity of the feelings and emotions that the student has for their teacher or for God, students remain human beings in the physical world who must behave according to the ‘actual situation.’ That is, according to the spaces that they occupy, the relationships that they have with their family members and the jobs that they hold, for example.

This call for outward appearances of stability is a reference to the aforementioned concept of sobriety. In the context of Mahmoud’s group specifically, regardless of a novice’s enthusiasm, I have witnessed Mahmoud’s preference for restraint in emotional expressions. Hujwiri supplies a helpful description of the sobriety, or restraint of the kind that Mahmoud prefers, in his *Revelation of the Mystery* (1999):

for the saint, being enraptured, pays no heed to the people and does not call upon them to follow him, while the prophet, being sober, exerts himself to attain his object and challenges the people to rival what he has done. Moreover, the prophet may choose whether he will manifest or conceal his extraordinary powers, but the

saints have no choice [...]. The prophet is a man of law, and the saint is a man of inward feeling (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 226).

In this explanation, Hujwiri is suggesting that those who express themselves ecstatically are less advanced than those who act soberly. This perspective aligns with the quotation from Chittick above, but intoxication is not always seen as less advanced than sobriety. Regardless of the mode of expression of divine love, experiences of love on the Sufi path are not always positive. Sufis who experience divine love also experience the opposite feelings: emptiness; separation; anxiety; doubt.

The Dark Side of Love

The Buddhist story about the woman who fell in love with the moon that was summarized above illustrates one aspect of the darker side of love and traveling the Sufi spiritual path: the difficulty and pain of loving someone whose aim is to teach you as opposed to catering to attachment. Entire chapters in Sufi treatises have also been written about suffering and pain in relation to love in Sufism, and one early Iraqi Sufi saint and ascetic, Rabia (d. 801), clearly articulated some of these aspects. She wrote that,

my sickness is from within my breast, so that all the physicians in the world are powerless to cure it, and the plaster for my wound is union with my Friend; (only so) shall I be soothed. Not to-morrow (i.e. not yet) shall I attain my purpose. But since pain is not affecting me, I appear to be in pain, I cannot do less than this (Smith, 2010, p. 42).⁸⁵

Rabia's religious depth is storied in the Sufi religion and in her view, to be a lover of God is to experience separation from the object of one's love throughout this life. Rumi's 'The Song of the

⁸⁵ Tradition has it that Hasan al-Basri, a pious ascetic Muslim preacher who lived in Basra, Iraq at the same time as Rabia is said to have passed a day and a night with her, after which he is supposed to have said "When I looked at her I saw myself as bankrupt and Rabia as truly sincere" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 96).

Reed,' a lamenting poem from Book one of his *Masnavi*, provides an apt description of the feelings that come up in these two states:

Now listen to this reed-flute's deep lament
About the headache being apart has meant:
'Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
My song's expressed each human's agony,
A breast which separation's split in two
Is what I seek, to share this pain with you:
When kept from their true origin, all yearn
For union on the day they return (Rumi, 2004, p. 4).

This excerpt illustrates a central metaphor: that when the reed, symbolizing the human being, is born they are uprooted from the reedbed, i.e. their connection to the divine is all but severed.

This birth produces a state of separation from God, and the reed is, as a result, hollowed out. The human being is yearning to return to their original state of nearness with God. Qushayri defines distance as being “disgraced through opposition to Him and withdrawn from obedience to Him” (Qushayri, 2002, p. 102).

Attar also explores Separation and Union in the framing story of his allegorical poem, *Conference of the Birds* (Attar, 2011), which follows a group of birds undertaking a journey to meet their king, Simorgh. Each bird represents a human failing, i.e. the beautiful and proud peacock is attached to its physical form and would rather retain these qualities than find its king, and the duck, content with and adept at performing ablutions in the river, does not believe that the ideal king would bring salvation. Ultimately, the flock of birds travel from their home through seven valleys, each representing a stage on the Sufi path. These valleys are called the Quest; Love; Understanding; Independence and Detachment; Unity; Astonishment and Bewilderment; and Deprivation and Death. As the birds travel through each valley they experience pain, grief and many lose their lives. When the thirty birds that remain alive after their journey finally arrive at Mount Qaf, a mythical mountain that wraps around the world,

instead of meeting some ‘ideal king,’ they are shown a mirror with their own reflections. In Farsi, ‘*si morgh*’ translates to ‘thirty birds.’ Those who completed the journey gaze into the mirror and find that they themselves are an ideal king.⁸⁶ In this story, Attar teaches that the journey to self-understanding is composed of many states, including states like separation and unity.

It is sometimes suggested that these states of distance and nearness can be brought about by effort or lack of effort on the part of the student. For example, if a student prays very hard or well, or doesn’t act in a particular way, they will be pushed into a psycho-emotional state of nearness or distance. For those who believe this, suffering and pain might serve as motivation to improve practices. But the 10th century Persian Sufi Kalabadhi had a different view, that God cannot be so easily moved by human beings. He asserted that “thou art too mighty to be joined by prayer, or to be separated from by omitting to: for separation and union are not personal notions, they follow a course preordained in eternity” (Kalabadhi, 1977, p. 144). This view aligns more with the perspective that these waves of expansion and contraction transpire by the grace of God.⁸⁷ In fact, it is not the student who can see clearly what is required to work on their own ego (*nafs*), that role belongs to their teacher.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ This text works similarly to Hujwiri’s *Revelation of the Mystery* (1999) in that it can be used as a manual for understanding and moving through Sufism when one does not have a spiritual teacher.

⁸⁷ Like separation and union, the states of expansion (*bast*) and Contraction (*qabd*) are involuntary. Hujwiri describes these states where Contraction “denotes the contraction of the heart in the state of being veiled, and *bast* denotes the expansion of the heart in the state of revelation” (Nicholson, Hujwiri, 374). Qushayri describes contraction similarly, as the “arrival in the heart of a feeling brought on by a sign of divine reproof or a hint that one deserves punishment” (Qushayri, 2002, p. 77). Qushayri goes on to explain that if a person attempts to try to overcome the feeling or state of contraction, the contraction will increase, whereas if the person experiencing the feeling or state surrenders to the feeling, it will soon vanish (Qushayri, 2002, p. 77). Whereas Qushayri’s description of Expansion sheds lights on a slightly sinister aspect: while it comes with positive feelings, Qushayri warns that is should not be delighted in too much, as these moments can feed the seeker’s ego become a distraction (Qushayri, 2002, pp. 77-78).

⁸⁸ The ego and the Sufi concept of the *nafs* are touched on in chapter 3, “On *Adab* and Companionship,” in the section on ‘Inner *adab*.’

One of the central aims of the Sufi teacher is to break down various aspects of the human beings' character, or ego. The contemporary Turkish leader of the Rifa'i Jerrahi Sufi order, Cemalnur Sargut, shares the approach of her own teacher when asked about training the ego.⁸⁹ She shares that her late Qur'an teacher, Hayri Bilecik would say, "Do not shut the main valves; rather, cut the smaller pipes so you can easily control the water flow" (Sargut, 2018, p. 55). Sargut's teacher is saying that it is the job of the teacher to recognize which specific parts of the student's ego attachments can be severed, and as Mahmoud suggests, without love, there is likely little chance that the student will become attached enough to their teacher to internalize their advice.

In Sufism, the transformational process that the student is put through, including the work on diminishing their ego, is described as alchemical or as occurring only by the grace (*baraka*) of God, but the changes that occur are influenced by psychological processes. Llewelyn Vaughn-Lee, the head of the Golden Sufi Centre based in California in the United States, also provides helpful explanations of the dark side of love in Sufism:

I was made to bow low again and again, until nothing was left, and then that nothing was also destroyed. Little can really be said of the violence and pain of this process. It is more, far more than the dark night of the soul. Colder than the coldest night, abandoned, lost, bewildered. Thrown into the void. These are just words to describe a process that the Sufis have mastered, a process that is called devastation, '*fana*,' friendship with God when "I am the friend of the One who slaughters His friend." This is the dark side of divine love (Dickson, 2020, p. 42).

Vaughn-Lee is referring to the brutality of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order's spiritual path and the transmission of teachings from master to disciple. The Naqshbandi approach relies heavily on love for the master and for God, and over time, works to dissolve the disciple's ego. Vaughn-Lee's description of this dissolution process is disconcerting, but if one attempts to imagine even

⁸⁹ The English translation for *shaykha* is 'spiritual leader.'

some of the different activities that must be undertaken to dismantle an ego, the darkness of his description makes sense.

But what is the ego, really? How is it developed and on what is it founded? The human being's ego is a, if not the, central component to one's understanding of themselves, and thinkers from across a variety of fields have endeavored to answer this question. Qushayri wrote that for Sufis, the ego is composed of the qualities of that student which are 'diseased,' and whichever parts of their character and actions that are 'blameable.' Qushayri goes on to explain that there are two types of diseased qualities. The first sort are disobediences and oppositions to God's orders, these are brought on to the student by their own fault. The second type of disease that Qushayri characterizes are made up of low character traits that are 'blameworthy.' Qushayri asserts that this second variety of traits can be countered "through a program of concentrated effort, [and] by consistency of habit" (Qushayri, 2002, pp. 108-109).

Hujwiri wrote similarly that through the ego, "base qualities are manifested and that [the ego] is the immediate cause of blameworthy actions" (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 196). Hujwiri goes on to explain, using very similar language to Qushayri's explanation above, that these blameworthy actions are manifested in two varieties: in sin (*maasi*) and base qualities, such as pride, envy, and anger. Hujwiri attests too, that these varieties of ego manifestations can be removed by discipline (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 196).

Over the years, I have also heard Mahmoud investigate the ego a number of times. He uses analogies common in Sufism, such as God or the teacher shaping the ego the same way that a metalsmith creates a sword: by heating it up, beating it into shape and then plunging it into cool water to provide relief and set the work that's been done. He also describes some of the factors that influence how the ego is formed, through aspects such as beliefs which are produced by the

culture and geographic location that the human being lives in. It is also influenced by the seminal relationships of the human being's life. The ego is also formed by the time period in which the human being is living; whether they have access to financial resources; choices. The ego that is formed in these early experiences in life is altered by later-life experiences, such as extra-familial relationships that come in the form of friendships and romantic relationships, etc. But fundamentally, the ego will be formed through the repetition of ideas and experiences in the vicinity of, and to the human being. Repeated experiences create beliefs, i.e. the way that a person understands themselves and the world around them, including limiting beliefs and potential, as well as habits. If this is so, then the taming of the ego, or attempts at dissolving it would be incredibly painful.

Annihilation

The dissolving of the ego is also related conceptually to the Sufi's aim of 'annihilation' (*fana*). Qushayri defines annihilation as "passing away" and "the disappearance of blameworthy characteristics" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 86), while Hujwiri describes annihilation in relation to poverty. He states that to be poor is to be completely free from "that which contaminates the essence" (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 28). Annihilation in Sufism is also connected to the Qur'anic Sura 27:34, "Kings destroy a town when they enter it" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 130). Jafar ibn Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sadiq (d. 765), the last-agreed upon Imam of Twelver Shia Islam, interprets the verse in the following way: "(In this) [verse], He alluded to the hearts of the believers. For when gnosis enters hearts, it removes from them all demands and all desires—so that there is no place in the heart for anything other than God most high" (Sadiq, 2011, p. 108).⁹⁰ Some might also say that Hallaj, who was executed for publicly stating, "I am God," may have

⁹⁰ While articulating the backgrounds of the scholars and religious philosophers is essential for identifying their context, it is outside the bounds of this project to explore the varieties of Shiism and Islam.

been so far along the Sufi path as to be considered annihilated, while others might suggest that Rabia, whose love was so widely recognized, may be considered to be annihilated. Ultimately, annihilation in Sufism is a mysterious, dark side of love.

Hujwiri has also defined annihilation in relation to subsistence (*baqa*), explaining that “the annihilation of one attribute through the subsistence of another attribute” and goes on to explain that “whoever is annihilated from his own will subsists in the will of God, because thy will is perishable and the will of God is everlasting” (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 245).⁹¹ Knowledge of annihilation, Hujwiri explains, lies in the recognition that this world, the physical world, is perishable and the knowledge of subsistence consists of recognizing that the next world is everlasting (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 242).

Because many of the lectures that Mahmoud gives are in classrooms in downtown Oakland, where students deal mostly with the pain of life like poverty or relational issues, as opposed to spiritual pains like the expansion and contraction that Hujwiri is articulating above, Mahmoud’s explanation of annihilation has a more secular quality. In his lectures, Mahmoud also tries to provide a practical solution to the pains of secular life as well:

Everything will betray us. Everything falls victim to the cycle of inspiration, boredom, loss. And nothing in life is going to bring consistent, long-term contentment. This is a fundamental fact of being human: we are just poor, depressed and alone. But we’re not bad because we’re broken, we’re bad because to be human is to be stupid. We are victims of our own ignorance. Pain and poverty are what makes us human. And so, we must fall in love with our pain (Malamatian, 2019b).

⁹¹ Hujwiri begins his section on subsistence and annihilation by stating that these states and terms are puzzling for Sufis, and challenging to define, but he goes on to provide three interpretations: “(1) a subsistence that begins and ends in annihilation, e.g. this world, which had a beginning and will have an end, and is not subsistent; (2) a subsistence that came into being and will never be annihilated, viz. Paradise and Hell and the next world and its inhabitants; (3) a subsistence that always was and always will be, viz. the subsistence of God and His eternal attributes” (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 242).

This expression of pain describes the difficulties of being a human being in this physical world where everything ultimately loses its luster, and the solution that he provides is to fall in love with one's pain. This solution is a reference to the work on the Sufi path and the refinement that occurs when a person becomes profoundly curious about themselves, their pain and life.

Mahmoud is stating that to fall in love with pain means to face the desolation of what life has to offer, and instead of becoming attached to those things that fade, one could begin to attempt to understand the ego, its context, and perhaps the pain that lives in other people. This type of troublesome insight and the discomfort that comes from becoming intimately engaged with pain entangled with love is an inevitable part of love in Sufism and in the relationship between the Sufi student and teacher too.

Imbalance of Power

A practical and significant aspect that can create difficulties in the Sufi relationship between a novice and teacher is the intentional imbalance of power. While power dynamics are a central concept discussed in chapter 6, "On Power and Gender," features of this imbalance lie in the relationship's love component, and the fact that the novice wants something from the teacher and in order to potentially obtain what they desire, they must submit themselves to that teacher.

The imbalance of power between the Sufi student and teacher allows for the teacher to remain inaccessible to the student in many ways. This distance can reinforce the beliefs that the student holds about their teacher, because a lack of intimacy creates the psychological space for the imagination of the student to conceive of fantastical notions about their teacher.⁹²

⁹² A very practical analogy here can be found in the analysis and speculation that occurs in romantic dating. Where one person, for example, is waiting for the other to call after a first date. When the person who is waiting does not receive a phone call they begin to speculate and theorize about the reasons they have not heard from their date yet. Because the two people do not know one another in any real or intimate way yet, because they do not have many experiences together, the only way to fill the 'gaps' where communication would have been useful, is to imagine. In the same way, when a Sufi student does not or cannot know their teacher, they are left to speculate, imagine and

A powerful example of the pain associated with the imbalance of power in the Sufi Student-Teacher relationship is found in the published diary of the 20th century Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiya Sufi teacher Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire: A Diary of Spiritual Training with a Sufi Master* (Tweedie, 2006).⁹³ According to this 800-page diary, Tweedie's feelings for her teacher range from love, attachment, obsession, anger, frustration and alienation, to name only a few. This text describes the relationship between the darker side of love and the ego of the novice in Sufism. In the fiftieth chapter of her book, titled "The Pain of Love" (Tweedie, 2006, p. 449), Tweedie articulates the relationship between love and the process of dissolving the ego on the Sufi path:

[My teacher, Bhai Sahib,] looked up when he saw me passing. I quickened the step. But this look from behind the [screen] remained in my heart. Love flared up, and I went to bed aching with it. Noticed that there was a difference in the feeling quality. It was more painful. The longing, always difficult to bear, was killing. [...] I am small and silly and I was a fool to waste my life. I am nobody and You won't even look at me. But I throw myself before You, imploring You to love me for myself. My whole being went out to Him in unending sorrow, to Him who knows and guides our destinies (Tweedie, 2006, p. 450).

Tweedie is referring to feelings of distance from God ('Him'; 'You'), she is expressing physical sensations of love that are palpably uncomfortable, and in the final sentences of this quotation, she is articulating a belief or recognition that the version of herself that she was before she was with her teacher, was inadequate. This might be understood as part of the process of the ego dissolving.

theorize about their intentions. In the context of the Sufi Student-Teacher relationship, this can be used by the teacher to provoke emotional states of contraction or expansion, for example.

⁹³ Tweedie was also the teacher of Lewellyn-Vaughn-Lee, the head of the Golden Sufi Centre, referred to in chapter 1, in the section on Persian and California Sufism. Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire* (2006) is written in a diary form and thus can only truly depict her own perspectives, not those of any of the other individuals involved in her journey.

These remarks reflect that change process that she is undergoing: the adjustments to her ego which are creating new beliefs and perspectives. But Tweedie's relationship with her teacher is not, according to her, a generally very positive one. Throughout the lengthy text, Tweedie reiterates that her teacher treats her badly. Over the years that Tweedie is with her teacher she is ignored, reprimanded, reproached, both publicly and in private, and sent away. And yet she stays and after being sent away, she returns. This is, no doubt, in part due to Tweedie's belief that her Sufi teacher can get her further along the Sufi path. Sulami also expresses this belief in relation to *adab*:⁹⁴

Nobody can practice *adab* properly unless he follows the example of a guide of great knowledge and experience, who may show him his shortcomings, his errors, and his missteps. In fact, he who consumes himself with struggle (along the mystical path) and devotes his moments to the renunciation [of the world] (sic.), is constantly accompanied by his own [ego] and thus becomes proud of it. Such a person cannot be aware of the flaws in his behaviour unless they are shown to him by [an experienced guide]. He shall lead the novice on his path and teach him how to distinguish his right moments from his bad ones, and he shall tell him what is good for him and what is not (Sulami, 2010, p. 58).

Like Tweedie, Sulami asserts that in order for a student to learn to practice *adab*, that is, to act, speak, and perhaps even think properly, a Sufi teacher is required. This guide should be able to see which of the student's actions are manifestations of their ego, and then properly direct that student to overcome those ego manifestations. Without a guide, both Tweedie and Sulami assert that the student will not be able to progress on the path. But Tweedie's diary describes the importance of love in this equation. Without love and respect for their teacher, the novice would not submit to the difficulties of the process of ego dissolution; as Mahmoud insists, without love "nothing is possible" (Malamatian, 2022).

⁹⁴ *Adab* is defined in footnote 26. This complex spiritual, social and philosophical Sufi concept is also explored in detail in chapter 4, "On *Adab* and Companionship."

The harsh pedagogical methods that Tweedie describes are challenging to accept, and yet psychologists have shown the impact of negative experiences on the human being's capacity to make memories. Scholars of memory have found that human memories are made malleable by emotional experiences, and that memories encoded as a result of negative experiences is "often remembered with exceptional vividness and accuracy" (Conway et al., 1994; Levine & Pizarro, 2004; Phelps & Sharot, 2008). Contemporary scholar of psychology and neuroscience, Elizabeth A. Kensinger, describes this phenomenon in the following way:

Negative affect, in particular, is more likely to lead to focal memory enhancements, whereas positive affect often conveys little benefit to memory accuracy. These differential effects of valence on memory seem critically tied to the types of processes that are recruited during the initial encoding of an emotional experience, and that are re-engaged during the event's retrieval (Kensinger, 2007, p. 100).

Psychologists have found these negative experiences make more resilient memories, and if one aim of the love relationship between the Sufi teacher and their student is dissolving the ego, long-lasting memories that clearly show the student what they have been doing wrong or what they should be doing instead may help change how the student acts or reacts in the future.

Mahmoud has also been known to speak on the power imbalance in this relationship: that the teacher has most, if not all the power in the relationship, and so when the student is looking for teachers, they must be watching carefully to see, among other things, if the environment that the teacher creates is one that that student would want to be a part of. How does that teacher's family and community relate to the student and to one another? Further, the student must also ask many pointed questions and listen to the answers very carefully: do they add up, in that student's mind? Do they reflect the actions of that teacher and the environment that they have created? He teaches with the recognition that learning and change, steps on the Sufi path, literally cannot use a 'one size fits all' approach. It's for this reason that he is skeptical, if not

outright critical of the advertisements of many teachers and spiritual groups; he suggests that they are misleading.

Mahmoud explains this in another way: that to have a better chance at finding what they are looking for, students should not be searching for a guide from a place of emptiness or brokenness. Potential students and students should have, he has suggested, figured out their relationships with their families; they should have a relatively healthy body and mind; they should have a job, or in income so that they can afford housing to protect their body from the elements. Mahmoud suggests these types of requirements for students so that they can come to their journey relatively whole.

However, abuse, and spiritual abuse in this case of Sufism and religion generally, is always an unfortunate possibility. Mahmoud asserts that while components like those listed above are helpful in creating a healthy foundation from which to seek a spiritual path, nothing is set in stone. On the one hand, once a student has been accepted into a relationship with a teacher, the power imbalance can be incredibly uncomfortable, but if that teacher is sincere, adept, and experienced, they will have the student's progress and character in mind. On the other hand, spiritual abuse and charlatans in the spirituality space could emerge.⁹⁵ Mahmoud has made some remarks, when pressed, on this subject too. He has said that individuals who are seeking wisdom must be incredibly cunning. Just because one teacher seems to have answers does not mean that they are the correct teacher for that student. Similarly, the first teacher that a student comes across is not necessarily the correct teacher for that student.

⁹⁵ Love in religious contexts does not occur without potential for vulnerability and understanding and acknowledging the ways that power dynamics function in these emotionally charged contexts is vital. There are a number of publications and stories exposing abuse in various religions including Sufism. These stories are important to share and are, we all know, only a sliver of occurrences like these. Sa'diyya Shaikh explores this topic in depth in her recently published article, "Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism" (2023). The bibliography for this article serves as a useful reading list on this topic. Issues around gender and power are also explored in more depth in chapter 6, "On Power and Gender."

The issue of charlatans in spirituality and mentor-mentee relationships is also related to questions around authenticity.⁹⁶ Anyone can claim to be a teacher, and anyone can desire to be a student, but these claims and desires do not necessarily amount to anything. Just because someone speaks well or even comes from a known lineage of teachers does not necessarily mean that that person has the makings of a teacher. In other words, they may have good intentions and have had access to wisdom, but they may not have been gifted in the art of understanding, for example. Similarly, because there are, functionally, no barriers to entry into becoming a student except desires and the acceptance of a teacher, some people who desire to become a student may not have the qualities that align them with either becoming a student with a particular teacher, or a Sufi student at all. Ultimately, the teacher should love the student and value their progress more than their own ego.

Conclusion

In a candid conversation that I had with Mahmoud about love and Sufism, he said to me that teachers “can’t write on the hearts of their students. That is God. It is up to the teacher to create the right environment [for students to be receptive]” (Malamatian, November 26, 2021). Love is a central component in the relationship that Mahmoud is referring to, and he teaches that this type of love can serve as a container in which transformation is possible. The caveat being that the relationship is genuine and based on a spiritual understanding, wherein a teacher cares for their student and has an authentic belief in their capacity to learn and a student who loves, respects and believes in their teacher.

The significance of love in Sufism cannot be underplayed and has been expounded upon and explored for centuries, but the contribution of this chapter lies in its introduction of

⁹⁶ Various aspects of the concept of authenticity are explored in chapter 1.

Mahmoud's pedagogical framework. The six Stages of Love illustrate the psycho-emotional development of the Sufi student in relation to their teacher. Clarifying these concepts allows us to better understand the psychological attachment of the student to the Sufi teacher, including the darker, more difficult aspects of the relationship. These stages also provide a foundation for perceiving how transformation of the novice is possible as a result of the relationship with the Sufi teacher.

Understanding love in the relationship between the Sufi novice and their teacher sets the foundation for the following chapter which explores spiritual lineage and spiritual transmission (*silsilah*), both historically and in the contemporary Oakland context. The discussion of lineage that follows further elucidates Mahmoud's own lineage, highlighting his relationship with his own teacher and the small community where he was a novice, as well as the institutional setting where he spent some of his youth. The understanding of the Teacher-Student relationship described in this chapter also provides an opening for my analysis of transmission of wisdom and the chain of authority in Sufism.

Chapter 3: On Lineage and Transmission

In Sufism, the term '*silsilah*' translates to 'link' or 'chain,' and describes two interconnected and significant concepts. The first concept, lineage, is related to Sufism's spiritual genealogy or chain of authority (*isnad*).⁹⁷ These are the connections between individuals and Sufi orders. The second concept is transmission, which refers to the 'passing on' of teachings between individuals, between teachers and students. Lineage and transmission are also highlighted in the *tabaqat* literature, where an order's genealogy is listed in the first pages of manuals and spiritual texts.⁹⁸ These lineages often trace back to the Prophet Muhammad himself or one of his companions, thereby situating Sufi masters and Sufi orders on the chain of spiritual genealogy. Understood this way, the concept of *silsilah* also points to a temporal relationship. It is the transhistorical transmission of knowledge that connects present-day Sufism to the origin of Islam itself; the term points to the way that knowledge is created, absorbed, and preserved. These concepts form the underpinning for this chapter and given that Mahmoud is not affiliated with any Sufi order, builds on the definitions of religious institutionalization and authenticity described in the first chapter.

The first section of this chapter explores lineage. I begin by analyzing the difference between the roles of Sufi leaders and teachers. This is useful because it differentiates between a Sufi order's institutional leader (who may also be a teacher), who may appear in the order's lineage, and a Sufi teacher. Scholars have differentiated between these types of authorities and

⁹⁷ The Sufis ultimately connect their lineage to before creation and the Covenant of Alast, when God is said to have called the future humanity and addressed them, 'Am I not your Lord?' and the future humanity is said to have responded, 'Yes, we witness it.' Schimmel asserts that "the goal of the mystic is to return to the experience of the 'Day of *Alastu*,' when only God existed, before he led future creatures out of the abyss of not-being and endowed them with life, love and understanding" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 24).

⁹⁸ Part 1 of Qushayri's *The Risalah: Principles of Sufism* (2002) provides an extensive list of Sufi masters, their own lineages and a list of their works. Each of these succinct genealogies contextualizes and defines not only the individual being referred to, but their expression of Sufism.

Mahmoud also clarifies their differences as well. This analysis provides a segue into the section that explores Mahmoud's relationship with his own teacher. In this part he tells the story of how he and his family met Mohammad and Mahmoud describes the early developmental stages of their relationship. He also describes the way that their gatherings were organized and the way that friendship, jealousy and dreams functioned in their relationship. In this part on lineage, I also provide an examination of the international Sufi order that was originally from Iran, the M.T.O. because Mahmoud was briefly involved with this order in his youth. M.T.O. also played a role in Mahmoud's teacher's life as well; for some years he learned from the order's 41st master, Hazrat Shah Maghsoud Sadeqh Angha.

The second portion of this chapter explores the concept of transmission. I begin by historically situating the transmission of teachings via text, with reference to the *tabaqat* genre of literature defined in the introduction of this work. In this section I also explore the relationship between the transmission of Sufi philosophy and love, highlighting Mahmoud's teachings on the three 'Varieties of Love,' Eros, Philo and Agape, and clarifying the relationship between these terms and the Greek philosophical concepts. And I conclude that transmission as it is illustrated in this case study of contemporary Sufism can exist without explicitly answering questions of medieval lineage.

Lineage and Authority

Do you really think that lineage is relevant today? In Oakland? Mahmoud asks me.

I had been asking Mahmoud about who his teacher, Mohammad, had learned from because in Sufism, the teacher's teacher, and the Sufi's lineage are used to answer questions about the religious practices performed and of religious and organizational genealogy. These expressions

of pedigree are an important tool for understanding Sufi institutions but may not be as helpful in understanding the passing of the less tangible, spiritual aspects of a religious tradition from one person to another. Because while lineage is institutional history, it should also be understood as reconstitutions. In “the early centuries of Sufi history, this construction of a tradition in some cases involved the retrospective claiming as Sufis pious forebears who lived before the term *sufi* was even used” (Green, 2012, p. 4). But I can’t help myself: I’m asking about lineage because I am curious. But also, learning about Mohammad helps me better understand the way that Mahmoud does Sufism. When I ask Mahmoud about lineage again, he tells me

lineage is an ancient idea that isn’t really relevant for this time, when people can read and write, [when] there’s the internet. But maybe lineage can exist in the context of the story of the four moths.⁹⁹ One moth gets consumed and the rest... some are singed, some feel the heat, some see the flame. The difficulty with the idea of lineage is that those who are consumed by the flame, they will inevitably separate from their teacher and create new teachings. That will occur because [they are] teaching at a different time, in a different context, to different people, and because they have a different temperament and approach (Malamatian, October 11, 2021).

I am also asking about lineage because I understand the scholarly necessity to place Mahmoud’s Sufism amidst Sufism’s institutional ecosystem to make it legible, but also because I recognize that despite Mahmoud’s lack of institutional affiliation, his way of practicing Sufism is not entirely novel. That is to say that there are other Sufi teachers and Sufis who practice outside of the tradition’s institutions.

Sufism originated as a set of simple world-renouncing teachings, practices and institutions that emerged in the shadow of God’s revelation of the Qur’an to the Prophet Muhammad. Between the seventh and fourteenth centuries, the religion developed into a highly

⁹⁹ This story is detailed in the chapter “On Stories and Storytellers.”

sophisticated set of doctrines and philosophies, that often included hierarchical institutions (Green, 2012, p. 4; Knysh, 2000, p. 2). One 19th century scholar developed a four-stage framework to describe Sufism's development (Trimingham, 1971), which has since been faulted for suggesting an impossible linearity to a multifaceted, transnational religion. But it does 'work' as a concise overview of some of the central aspects of Sufism which have endured over time.¹⁰⁰

The first of this four-stage framework is called the *Khanaqah* stage and can be seen as a precursor for non-institutional forms of Sufism. In this stage, Sufi life developed around a particular teacher and was organized within small residential centers (Trimingham, 1971). These types of non-institutional groups continue to exist, but because they are less visible, they are not documented as often as institutionalized Sufism.¹⁰¹ For example, these include wandering dervishes, disciples who followed a variety of teachers, and women practitioners who were often excluded from the mystical branch of Islam.¹⁰² There were also Sufis like the 12th century Andalusian master, Ibn Arabi, considered by some to be the greatest Muslim philosopher, and referred to as *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, the Greatest Master.¹⁰³ Ibn Arabi studied with many teachers

¹⁰⁰ Trimingham has been described as an "unfriendly enquirer into the nature of the Sufi orders" (Lawrence, 1978, p. 172); as myopic and "obsessed with what can only be termed as a compulsion to interpret the evolution of Sufism (and, in fact, Islam itself) as subject to an unchanging law of irreversible decline. The decline for Trimingham, does not begin in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries; its seeds are already planted in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, at the time when the major orders are founded" (Lawrence, 1978, p. 175). Regardless of one's perspective on Trimingham's framework, his work provides a basis from which to conceptualize some of the ways that Sufism has evolved, including some of the ways that Mahmoud does Sufism which originates in traditions pre-dating *tariqas*.

¹⁰¹ See Seema Golestaneh's example referred to in chapter 1, in the section on Authenticity.

¹⁰² While this may be true for some, if not the majority of Sufi women, Rkia Cornell's text, *Early Sufi Women* (Sulami, 2000), a translation of Sulami's *Dhikr an-niswa al-muta 'abbidat as sufiyyat*, provides evidence of the presence and importance of women Sufis in the religion. Her important contribution stands alongside the Margaret Smith's "Rabi'a the Mystic and her Fellow-Saints in Islam" (Smith, 2010), which provides access to Rabi'a's words, has recently been followed by her next important text, also about Rabi'a, *Rabi'a, from Narrative to Myth* (Cornell, 2019). Rabi'a is a central and important character in Sufism's history, but her presence in the religion's lore should not be taken as an overarching rule that women were traditionally, generally accepted as Sufi practitioners. The exception does not make the rule. Camille Helminski's *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (2003) is another compelling addition to the aforementioned list.

¹⁰³ Ibn Arabi's (1165-1240) full name was Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad Ibn Arabi (*The British Museum*, 2025). Ibn Arabi was a prolific writer with 850 works attributed to him, on complex cosmological concepts. Much has also

in Andalus, North Africa, Iraq, and Anatolia, before settling in Damascus in 1223.

In these non-institutional contexts, lineage and authority become a fuzzier matter. A novice may become a teacher when others begin to come to them consistently, but a novice may also be given authority to teach from their teacher. But in the context of institutionalized Sufi communities, the status as a teacher in Sufism can be bestowed or determined by the leaders when a novice is deemed ‘ready.’ Whereas leadership is generally assumed through a successorship determined by bloodlines, as is demonstrated in the case of the Inayatiyya Sufi order and the M.T.O. Sufi Order, that will be discussed later on in this chapter, or through discipleship as it occurred with the Golden Sufi Centre.¹⁰⁴

One Saturday afternoon I joined Mahmoud and Rozaneh to take their kids to Farsi lessons in Berkeley.¹⁰⁵ After drop-off we went to get some coffees and I got to speak with Mahmoud about some of the Turkish Sufi leaders I’d been reading about. I was talking through my attempts to understand the actual impact of the lectures that are given by the leaders of Sufi orders. Like the heads of many religious organizations, the heads of Sufi orders give talks that discuss religious concepts like forgiveness and self-reflection, which have profoundly complicated practical applications and implications. What is the function of these talks? And these leaders, are they teachers or are they heads of an organization who are meant to inspire? Further, if most of the followers of these Sufi leaders don’t have a personal relationship with these leaders, how do their sermons actually affect change in the lives of these novices? Is that even the aim or the sermons?

been written about him, such as Bashier’s *The Story of Islamic Philosophy* (2012) and Sharify-Funk and Dickson’s chapter that investigates panentheism in Islam using Ibn Arabi, and what they refer to as his ‘Kaleidoscope of Being’ as a case study (2014).

¹⁰⁴ Tweedie handed leadership of the order to her disciple Lewellyn Vaugh-Lee, who then gave leadership to his own son, Emmanuel.

¹⁰⁵ This episode occurred during a visit with Mahmoud and Rozaneh’s family in November 2021.

Yes. These lecturers. The problem with their sermons is that they're silly. Their [ideas] can't be applied. There will need to be another construction crew to come through and help make things applicable (Malamatian, November 26, 2021).

The question and line of thinking that I was discussing with Mahmoud will have an obvious answer to many: that these sermons do serve as inspiration for many followers and that they provide direction for the rest of the organization, but there are Sufi groups that are much, much less hierarchical. The pertinent example in this case is Mahmoud's group. And what I was really asking was: does the transmission of teachings happen in the context of these lectures or sermons? Mahmoud's answer is clearly 'no,' that it doesn't; that in order for teachings to take root in a person, a 'construction crew' is required. The construction crew that Mahmoud is referring to is an experienced teacher who not only has access to teachings and the Sufi tradition, but agrees to take on the student as their own. In the assertion above, Mahmoud is differentiating between the function of the leaders of Sufi orders, who provide their followers with ideas, and the job of Sufi teachers who work to refine a person. He is explaining that most of the ideas that are expounded in public talks are not applicable, they are theoretical concepts.

It can be understood, then, that there are two kinds of guides on the Sufi path. The first type of teacher that I was asking Mahmoud about, the institutional leaders are 'teaching guides' or 'masters' (*shuykuh al-ta'lim; ustadh*). Masters and teaching guides have less of a personal relationship with novices, who might come to their talks to listen and absorb inspiration. They are specialists in matters of doctrine and formal Islamic sciences. Whereas teachers who are more involved with the direction of the novice's spiritual life can be referred to as 'training guides' or 'mentors' (*shuykuh al-tarbiya; mu'addiba*). Mentors and training guides are specialists in personal training and transmit forms of knowledge that are practical. They have traditionally expected an oath of initiation (*bay'a*), which, functionally, is commitment and

obedience to that teacher (Cornell, 2000, p. 59; Silvers-Alario, 2003).

In his lectures in the college classroom, Mahmoud often distinguishes between the theory and practices of religious and philosophical ideas. For example: working to understand the anger issues of a friend. While it may be an intellectually useful and compassionate exercise to understand why that friend might do horrible things as a result of their life experiences but then feel guilty about it afterwards and repent, in practice that understanding may not be as functional as eliminating the friendship. But when the leader of a religious organization, considered to have prestige and authority, is speaking about the religious idea that compassion is central to progressing on the spiritual path, it's understandable that that leader's followers may take on that teaching without understanding its limitations for their own circumstances.

Perhaps having compassion is useful in one relationship and not another, but functionally, compassion is not a behaviour that develops organically for many. Rather, compassion must be learned and applied in context. Mahmoud's comments also imply the importance of a one-to-one teaching approach, referred to above, as opposed to a 'one size fits all' approach. I have heard Mahmoud say on many occasions that to understand anything at all, one must first work to understand oneself. In many Sufi orders, as with many organized religious groups, there are various, sometimes numerous hierarchical levels in the organization. A pedagogical layer that exists between novices and Sufi leaders are the Sufi teachers. Teachers are individuals who help novices apply ideas and progress on their path, but if this is the case, the point remains. In order for novices to learn to apply religious ideas and philosophical concepts, they need training.

The training techniques of Sufi teachers are known as their spiritual 'way,' or 'method' (*tariq*, or *tariqa*). Once a student is accepted into the ranks of a Sufi teacher, that teacher's method, which is made up of a set of rules, rituals and pious formulas, will guide disciples so

that they have refined their ego and are purified of their mundane concerns. Sufi disciples who are liberated from the mundane world may become more receptive to more esoteric, spiritual, or metaphysical aspects of the religion (Knysh, 2000, p. 172).

Ghazali, the 11th century Sufi philosopher referred to above, describes this process in a similar way: the human ‘self’ is made up of various attributes that must be brought into balance in order to reach perfection and bring the human being to the feet of God. Two of the attributes that Ghazali refers to are the human beings’ ‘lordly’ tendencies and their ‘satanic’ tendencies. Lordly tendencies are characterized by a person’s inner light which recognizes God, the Beloved, and the teachings of the prophets.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, the ‘satanic’ tendencies pull human beings away from God and keep the soul preoccupied with the outer world and forgetfulness of God (Murata & Schimmel, 1992, p. 258). Sufi teachers should be able to recognize their disciples’ tendencies, and direct them appropriately.

According to Mahmoud, masters, or ‘lecturers’ as he refers to them, are useful for creating inspiration but less adept at affecting profound change. Whereas a training guide must assess a student, their psychology, their beliefs, their assumptions, and figure out what aspects within them must be razed in order to create emptiness in that student, to allow space for God; to allow the light to come in; to create a longing and yearning for God. In one of his classroom lectures, Mahmoud elaborated,

Remember one of the most inspiring sayings that comes from the New Testament, ‘I’m not here for the righteous, I’m here for the sinners.’ Imagine that Jesus Christ is a flashlight, and the righteous are those who believe that they are in the sun, that everything around them is light. And Jesus is saying, ‘Listen. If you feel that you have light inside you, my flashlight is not going to do anything for you, because you already imagine that you possess light.’ He is here for, and enjoys,

¹⁰⁶ In Sufism, God is referred to as the true ‘Beloved’ of the human being (Helminski, 2003, p. xxv).

the sinners because those are the people he can illuminate.

The task of any good teacher is to create a good amount of [calamity] inside the student. And then the student will weep or long or yearn for some light to be shown inside them. Remember that the word ‘guru’ in Hinduism means, ‘someone who removes darkness, and replaces it with light’ (Malamatian, 2017).

In this explanation that leans on the New Testament and Jesus Christ as well as the Hindu tradition, Mahmoud is reiterating the importance of the Sufi teacher and their function in relation to the novice: to show them who they really are and to help them deal with that, with the aim of self-improvement so that they can continue along the Sufi path in the direction of God. A novice who desires to walk the Sufi Path “is in need of a guide to lead him [...] and to point the way toward the goal” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 100). The relationship that Mahmoud is describing is expressed in a Qur’anic story that Sufis draw upon, featuring the Prophet Musa, (the Prophet Moses in the Torah and Christian Bible), and a (literally) green figure known as Khidr (“Surah 60-82,” 2016).

In the story, Khidr agrees to be Musa’s spiritual guide only if he does not question him about any of the events that would occur while they were together, or the decisions that Khidr would make; Musa agrees. As the story progresses, Khidr proceeds to damage a ship at sea, murder a child, and build a wall without asking for payment from inhospitable townspeople. Despite their agreement, Musa argues with Khidr every step of the way, mortified by his teacher’s actions. When Khidr finally explains his actions, Musa finds out that had the ship remained in good condition it would have been seized by a tyrant, with negative repercussions; the child would have grown up to become a killer; and the wall was built upon a treasure, which needed to be shielded for a time. There are many morals that can be taken from this story, but two that the Sufis traditionally take from is (1) that none of us can have access to the full truth of any set of events, and (2) if a novice trusts their guide, that novice should accept their counsel

and actions.

I have witnessed Mahmoud tell this story a number of times in his classes. Most of the students respond that they would have acted in the same way that Musa acted when witnessing such clearly terrible behaviour. Further, Musa's response is understandable and highlights some of the psychological and intellectual issues that arise for Sufi students. While some individuals, in the presence of a teacher who they wish to follow, are more able to submit, others have a more challenging time doing this. There are Sufi stories that tell of students who rebel the way that Musa did, and make marked progress on the Sufi path, for example Tweedie, introduced in the previous chapter, who struggled often with surrendering to her teacher. There are also stories that apparently demonstrate student's total surrender to their teacher.

Mahmoud's emphasis on the personal relationship between the teacher and the novice as central to the progress and evolution of a student comes as a result of his own experiences. As a young man, by chance he encountered a man who changed the trajectory of his life. "Without Mohammad I would have spent my life working at my family's car wash, which wouldn't have been a bad life. Or I'd be in jail" (Malamatian, November 26, 2021). Instead of a life washing cars or being in jail, Mahmoud is a philosophy teacher with a wife and kids, and we are getting back into the family van. The two kids have finished their Farsi lessons, and we're all heading back to the house.

Mahmoud's Teacher, Jealousy and Dreams

The first time that I asked Mahmoud about his teacher, Mohammad, we were sitting on the back deck at his and Rozaneh's house. We'd spent the morning working in the garden, moving paving stones and pulling weeds. Early into our friendship, Rozaneh had learned that I was working weekends as a florist, so she'd let me prune shrubs and help with decisions about flowers and

trees on their property. On this particular afternoon the sun was beating down from a cloudless sky, and Mahmoud asked me, in response to my question about Mohammad, what it was that I wanted to know. I specified: who was Mohammad to him, how had they met, and how had they spent their time together. What I was really trying to find out about was lineage and transmission: ‘how did you come to learn what you know and become the person that you are today?’ I knew that Mahmoud was not and is not affiliated with any institutional Sufi order, but his reverence for his own teacher was a topic that came up with some frequency.

Despite this, I had never asked him so directly about Mohammad. The relationships between novices and their teachers are sacred and private, but knowing more about Mahmoud’s teacher would help situate the type of Sufism that Mahmoud practices. What I did know was that Mohammad and Mahmoud met when Mahmoud was in his late teens and Mohammad was in his mid-thirties.

In response to my questions, Mahmoud told me a story about how his cousin, named Ahmad, had met Mohammad at a casino in Reno, Nevada. Ahmad had been playing blackjack, when a man with a big bushy mustache and a big belly approached him asking “Are you Iranian? Where are you from?” Apparently the previous week Mohammad and his wife had moved from the Bay Area to Sacramento. When Mohammad discovered that Ahmad was Iranian and that they lived in the same neighbourhood, Mohammad told him about his Persian market, the first in the area, and suggested that they get together.¹⁰⁷

One day my cousin called my father and told him ‘Mohammad has gatherings at his house.’ And my father said, ‘Of course we’ll go.’ We don’t ask, ‘What’s the gathering

¹⁰⁷ Mahmoud recalls that Mohammad had the first Persian shop in Roseville, “I loved ice cream and faloodeh, so I asked him, ‘So do you also have ice cream and faloodeh?’ And he said, ‘Of course we do.’ And so once in a while I would go, but I knew that if I showed up he would talk to me for about three hours. He would say, ‘Oh, no, you don’t need to pay. It’s okay.’ It’s part of the culture. And then I’d say, ‘Oh, no, no, please. I have it,’ and Mohammad would finally respond, ‘Okay, so pay then.’

about?’ We're Persian so it's either politics or religion, usually it's both. I actually don't even remember the first four or five months of the gatherings. But there was a lot of intellectual wrestling. Mohammad would pin everybody down and he would scream at them, tell them they were stupid. He was young, 36 or 37, and he was on fire. It didn't matter who was on the opposing end, he would just crucify them. That was his temperament.

After my cousin met Mohammad, he said there was something about him that was very offensive. That he was kind of a no-nonsense sort of a fellow. He wasn't sensitive to where people were inwardly. If my mom had died and I was crying, for example, he'd tell me ‘That's enough crying, Baba. I'm trying to give a talk. So, your mom died. Everybody dies. Be quiet now.’ That is the kind of person that he was. And of course, that changed as he got older.

He was also quite heavy-set, and because he knew I played tennis, he said, ‘Mahmoud, I'm trying to lose some weight, can you help me?’ He asked me to play tennis with him, so we'd go swimming and then play tennis and we'd go swimming again (Malamatian, November 26, 2021).

There are numerous stories of novices and their teachers in the Sufi tradition, but one of the most widely shared tells of the initial meeting between Rumi and his teacher Shams-e Tabrizi. When Rumi met Shams, he was already a celebrated theologian from a well-respected family in what is present-day Konya, Turkey. A haggard looking stranger, Shams, is said to have approached Rumi in a public park, and the stranger asked Rumi what it was that he was doing. Rumi, who was reading, replied, ‘Something that you do not understand,’ and at that moment the book in Rumi's hands is said to have caught fire. When Rumi asked Shams what it was that had happened, Shams is said to have responded, fittingly, ‘Something you do not understand’ (Lewis, 2007, pp. 154–161).¹⁰⁸

This legendary Student-Teacher relationship was the inspiration and basis for Rumi's most important works, *Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi*; *Divan-I Kabir* and the *Masnavi*. But it is also

¹⁰⁸ There are many different stories describing the first meeting between Rumi and his teacher. I chose one that is commonly told, but other stories are easily discoverable.

understood that Rumi, as with most Sufi students, was immensely attached to Shams, spending the next few years with him at the expense of almost every other aspect of his life. This aspect of the relationship feeds into the traditional notion that Shams was eventually murdered by one of Rumi's jealous students.¹⁰⁹ While this is an extreme example of jealousy in Sufism, this emotion is a relatively common one in communities that surround teachers. Mahmoud spoke of this as well.

Ahmad and I were always at Mohammad's gatherings. And there was a subtle competition between my cousin and me. Whenever Mohammad's cup was empty, Ahmad would jump up and say, 'Mohammad, can I get you something?' 'Yes, please get me some tea.' After he would drink, I would ask. This is what happens when you really just like someone. A simple gaze from them can either ruin your day or it can inspire your day. And for the first maybe, I dunno, 15, 16 years, we saw no flaws in him. At least I didn't. And without you really knowing you inherit a lot of things. It's just placed inside you. You think that you're just going there, you're having tea, you're having a conversation and that's it. But that's actually not true. Without your own awareness, you begin to adopt certain mannerisms. You begin to fantasize about certain things, and 30 years later you realize you're very much acting like him. But you have no idea of what happens to you when you interact with someone for five, six months, two, three times a week.

I think it may be true for everything, really. You begin to slowly adopt some of the things that live inside them. For almost ten years we had formal meetings twice a week from five in the afternoon, always until two, three in the morning. His wife would never be there, and once in a while we would have other people come, and Mohammad would tell them they were stupid and they would never return.¹¹⁰

For the next ten years, with a few exceptions, all of my dreams were about him. And I would tell him most of them. And I would write poetry for him, and he would always say, 'This is junk. You should get rid of it because your Persian is so poor, and if anybody reads it, they'll say 'This is what your teacher taught you? They must be very

¹⁰⁹ Much scholarship about Rumi and Shams exists. Some of these include H. Nur Artiran's *Rumi: L'épreuve de l'amour* (2020); the recently published *Dervishes of the North* (Xavier, 2023), which traces the way Rumi-based Sufi communities in Canada understand the ritual practice of turning, among other things. Schimmel's *The Triumphal Sun* (1993) and Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Love* (1983) are both English-language translations of Rumi's works that are meant to allow Rumi's writing to speak for itself. Similarly, Omid Safi's translations of various Sufi poetry, *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* (2018), includes poetry from a variety of Sufi personalities, including Rumi.

¹¹⁰ Sufi pedagogy is elaborated on in the chapters "On *Adab* and Companionship," and "On Love."

incompetent' (Malamatian, October 17, 2021).

In this anecdote, Mahmoud refers to jealousy, a known and studied occurrence in Sufism, that is understood to come in at least two forms. One of these forms is called 'divine jealousy' (*ghayr*), and refers to the jealousy that comes about in God when the human soul is in relationship with anything other than God (Rustom, 2018). In this case, the Arabic word for 'jealousy' is also translated as 'other' and 'alien' (Hujwiri, 1999, pp. 62, 274), pointing to the possessiveness and duality that appears in the divine type of jealousy: the one who diverts Sufis from their quest for God is a problem, a foul distraction who will not be tolerated. Qushayri also differentiates between the divine and the earthlier kind of jealousy: "Jealousy is the work of students, not of those who know the realities;" "Jealousy is two jealousies: human jealousy, which is hard upon egos, and divine jealousy, which is hard upon hearts" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 309). More concretely put: the Sufi should not allow anything to come between them and God, and to be jealous of another person is a sign of inexperience and lack of knowledge. And yet jealousy and possessiveness exist wherever there are attachment and desire.

Mahmoud's explanation also refers to dreams, which hold an important place in Sufism. Dreams can be related to the Sufi concept of vigilance (*muraqaba*). Qushayri notes that vigilance is to "oblige yourself to devote your attention to God Most High and that your outer aspect be in conformity with religious knowledge" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 231). He also referred to a saying that he attributed to Sulami: "whoever does not establish awe of duty and vigilance in his relationship with God will not arrive at disclosure of the unseen or contemplation of the divine" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 230). But the significance of dreams and visions for medieval Muslims can be understood through the many autobiographical documents containing dream narrations. There are also a number of Sufi works on practical ethics and moral counsel that refer to dream

citations (Hermansen, 1997, p. 4).¹¹¹ Qushayri's manual also includes a section on dreams, which defines them as "ideas that come over the heart and states that take shape in the imagination when sleep does not entirely overwhelm perception. [...] The state of sleep is like the person in the lamplight" (Qushayri, 2002, pp. 461-2).¹¹²

Sufi novices are generally instructed by their teachers to share their dreams exclusively with their teachers, and these teachers will, in turn, interpret the dreams while gaining access to their students' psyches and their most pressing concerns.¹¹³ While Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical interpretation of dreams points meaning exclusively inwardly, the tradition of dream interpretation in Sufi and Muslim societies suggests also that dreams can tell the dreamer things about the world that could not otherwise be known (Knysh & Felek, 2012, p. 2). Qushayri wrote about dreams that "these stories and thoughts that come over the heart in the state of sleep may at one time come from Satan, another time from the fancies of the ego, and at another time from the ideas inspired by the angels. At still another time they may be instructions given by God Most High" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 462). In the introduction to his volume about dreams and visions in Islam, Knysh wrote that "people should dream in order to grasp the true state of affairs in this world and the next and to remain tuned to the ever-changing modes of divine self-disclosure in

¹¹¹ See Kinberg's translation of Dunya's (d. 894) compendium of 350 Muslim dream narratives, for example (Dunya & Kinberg, 2022).

¹¹² One of the first books that Mahmoud and Rozaneh shared with me was Ahmet Hilmi's *Awakened Dreams* (Hilmi, 1993). This contemporary publication, produced by Camille Helminski, one of the heads of a Mevlevi Sufi Order, and Refik Algan, a Turkish Sufi teacher, is a translation of a 19th century Bulgarian text by Ahmet Hilmi. When Raji, the protagonist, meets Dede, a spiritual doctor, in a cemetery in Izmir, Turkey, their friendship is the beginning of instruction by way of dreams. Through his dreams that are orchestrated by Dede, Raji moves beyond a destructive existential and spiritual depression, and into a new understanding of life. The dreams that Ahmet Hilmi shares in this book are spiritual and deep, hallucinatory and awesome. In one dream, the character Raji climbs a mountain towards the heavens, and when he is distracted by earthly desires from his aim for God, he is thrown backward to earth. The experiences and dreams described in the book are a description of the author's own experiences.

¹¹³ One twelfth century Sufi manual indicates that Sufi teachers will interpret the dreams and visions of the students under their supervision, among other things (Schimmel, 1975, p. 255).

the objects and phenomena of the empirical universe” (Knysh & Felek, 2012, p. 1). It seems that for Mahmoud, as a novice, giving his dreams to his teacher was an act of devoted vulnerability, and something that deepened the relationship.

I think what was interesting about those times, Emily, was that Mohammad was not only a person from whom we were learning. He was also a friend.¹¹⁴ He would call the car wash and I would tell him, ‘Mohammad, I’m not really doing that well.’ And he’d say ‘I’m coming to the car wash this afternoon. We can sit and talk.’ And then once in a while he would call the car wash and say, ‘Mahmoud, I was thinking about you and I felt as if I needed to check up on you. You doing okay? Get in the car and come here, we’ll sit, we’ll talk.’

You know, it took me about 20 years or so, maybe more, to kind of figure out what was happening. When we went there, you knew we all had questions. We would ask the questions, we write our questions and take our notebooks. Then we had no questions and no notebooks. And we would just sit there and Mohammad would talk (Malamatian, November 26, 2021).

Dreams are not the only tool accessible to Sufi teachers who are supporting novices along the Sufi path. The incredibly strong friendship attachment between Sufi teachers and their disciples is also a tool at the disposal of Sufi teachers, and is often referred to in Sufi literature. This is a psychological type of attachment but scholars of Sufism also attempt to explain the more elusive aspects of this friendship, sometimes referring to it as ‘intuition.’ Sachiko Murata, explores the ‘sensory’ aspects of intuition in relationships. She writes that sensory intuition can “perceive particular meanings, but not universal meanings. Perhaps this means that it can grasp certain states of a person’s soul, such as love or hate, but it cannot perceive the universal mercy and vengeance that pertain to the divine realm.” Murata’s definition goes on to specify that sensory intuition is present in all animals, and is therefore less significant than the ability to reflect,¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ For more on friendship in Sufism, see Chittick’s article, “Friendship and Love in Islamic Spirituality” (2012).

¹¹⁵ Islamic and Sufi philosophy sometimes refers to a hierarchical structure not unlike Christianity’s ‘Great Chain of Being.’ In these hierarchies, human beings are located somewhere in the middle, relatively speaking, above plants and animals and stones, but below angels, spirits, and God, of course. There are also many references to plants, animals, and nature in the *Hadith*.

and further, should not be conflated with mystical knowledge (*'irfan*) (Murata & Schimmel, 1992, p. 273).¹¹⁶

But at its core, the Islamic understanding of intuition is defined as the capacity of the human soul to know or understand without rational processes: the spiritual heart (*qalb*) can perceive knowledge without mental efforts, as a result, the duality of this life on earth disappears, and all is united (Aqil & Mujib, 2022, p. 17). Whether intuition can be developed or is innate is a matter of opinion, but the relationship between a Sufi novice and their teacher is a fundamental component in advancement on the Sufi path, and there are many stories of Sufis 'knowing' that they are meant to work with someone.

Intuition and the spiritual heart serve as one explanation for how one human being can be attracted to another without knowing them or communicating with them, but I did ask Mahmoud, one time, what 'all of this stuff is', and his response, which was given in a particularly quiet way, was that "Emily, some of these things are none of our business" (Malamatian, October 17, 2021). Some aspects are too nuanced or private or potentially esoteric to be discussed so openly. But ultimately, regardless of its spiritual dimension, this relationship is one that is based in companionship, mutual care and generosity. Mahmoud summarized his relationship to Mohammad in this way:

After some years passed I bought a santur, an instrument, and then Farhad bought an instrument, then Ahmad got an instrument. And near the end of it, at our gatherings we played music. And even though Mohammad didn't have a very good voice... he would sing. We would go to his house two or three times a week. And we would have music gatherings. We would also have gatherings where parents and friends would be around. And without exception all the gatherings contained philosophy, religion and politics.

¹¹⁶ Another definition of the strong friendship attachment or connection between Sufi students and their teachers refers to its intuitive aspects, and breaks it down into various parts including moral, creative, social and spiritual (Aqil & Mujib, 2022, p. 12).

All of them.

But the most important thing that you should know, Emily, is that I was 19. Uneducated, confused. I had no idea where my life was going. He made me like him. And then he made me like his ideas. Then those ideas made me like philosophy. Then I got a few degrees, then I got a job. And 30 some odd years later, here I am. Everything you see today is because of something that happened to me when I was 19. And this is something I tell Rozaneh all the time: that Mohammad is the foundation upon which everything of my life is built. Everything. Whether it's financial, emotional. Whatever parts of Mohammad that lives inside me, it has also benefited the people who come here once in a while.

That's an incredible social impact. That someone comes with certain social components inside them, and they are removed and different components go inside and all of a sudden your life gets in a different track. You have no idea how your life is going to be, or how it's going to turn out, but in a few years, once you finish a Ph.D., you're gonna find yourself in the classroom, have a house, you'll have your own group of students. You'll write, you'll publish, you'll give lectures. All because, you know, five, six years ago, you first came to this house and that meeting started something.

But, you know, the nice thing about Mohammad was that he always eventually wanted us to go away. He never wanted anyone to stay. In some ways he really made us ready for just some of the more ridiculous things in life. Rozaneh? Do you have any sweets like cookies or ice cream? (Malamatian, October 17, 2021).

The story of this novice, Mahmoud, and his teacher, Mohammad, provides an example of the form that transmission can take in the contemporary moment. The conveyance of teachings through relationship, intimacy, and love, that can exist between a teacher and their student in the Sufi tradition but outside the confines of Sufism's institutionalized orders. Lineage is also evident in their relational exchange: Mahmoud has said on many occasions, in private conversations and in lectures in the classroom, that he attributes 'everything' that he has in his life to his teacher, and has focused his life around expressing the teachings that he received from Mohammad. This relationship is an example of a unique experience in which a teacher can inspire a more refined version of a student. This is one of the central aspects of *tariqa*: Sufi

orders and the Sufi path.¹¹⁷

Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi

In this section I explore some of Mahmoud's experiences with the institutional Sufis order, M.T.O. Over the decade that Mahmoud was actively working with Mohammad, he would attend gatherings at Mohammad's house with two other young men, including a paternal cousin Ahmad and their friend Hamid. But at one point during those years, Ahmad clandestinely began to attend a Sufi gathering held by M.T.O. an established Sufi order, and after a short time Mahmoud began to join him. M.T.O.'s meetings were different; Mahmoud describes them as 'exotic.' He has described them to me as opening with a lecture that lasted about forty-five minutes or an hour,¹¹⁸ after which point the lights would be turned off. For the next two hours everyone would sit and no one was meant to get up or move from their places. At some point, singing would commence, and begin to intensify. Some attendees' would start lolling their heads back and forth to the rhythm of the music, and others would begin to weep loudly throughout the darkened room. Sometimes, these sessions would extend from two hours to three or four, but eventually the music would begin to decrescendo and the session would finish. Then the lights would be turned on, tea would be served and everyone would leave.

Mahmoud has described M.T.O.'s gathering space as equally striking. At the front of the gathering space were photographs of the teacher and the teacher's teacher, and below them were three cushions, with the one in the center designated as the spot for the Master. Upon entering the space, novices were meant to bow to the seats of the master and then walk backwards, away from the front of the room, and sit.

We went to this other gathering. We stayed there for about six or seven months. Maybe a

¹¹⁷ A definition of *tariqa* is provided in the initial paragraphs of this work's introduction.

¹¹⁸ Mahmoud explained that at the time he was attending these gatherings, the public lectures were given by one of M.T.O.'s leaders or guides. These lectures were recorded and then sent to M.T.O.'s Sufi Master.

bit more. We were initiated. We had gone and seen the teacher [of the organization], Nader Angha.

I ask Mahmoud, Nader Angha was in Oakland?

He was in Natomas. There is a burial site there for his father, but he's not buried there. I don't know where he is... some people say Iran. But we went to the burial site and we sat there for about 8 hours. Then we went to this other place... It was like a warehouse. It was dark, candles were lit. [Nader Angha] was sitting on the stage way up front and he had this really awful looking beard. And there was a guy, I forget his name. He would call me every week. He would say, 'Mahmoud, have you had any dreams? Is there anything that you need to tell me?' And I'd tell him, 'I had this dream... and if you guys need anything, let me know I'm more than happy to help.' And this guy would write down our conversations, I didn't know this at the time, but he would pass them to the two guys who managed the meetings, and then those two people would send a message to Nader Angha. And then one day during this huge gathering, they told us 'Everything you do is recorded. Everything. And it's important for you to tell us everything because then we'll know what you need. Even Mr. Malamatian said that he's willing to do whatever's requested. That has gone all the way to Nader Angha and he's very pleased.'

I'm not saying this as a negative thing about [M.T.O.], because we need those kinds of things (Malamatian, October 17, 2021).

M.T.O. is an international Sufi order that originates in Iran.¹¹⁹ They are known for their white uniforms and their ecstatic rituals, like the *sama* described in the gathering above. The order has a publishing house, M.T.O. Publications (Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi, 2015); a Sufi Psychology Association (Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi, 2017); and a mobile meditation app called 'Tamarkoz' (Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi, 2025). The order delivers support to communities where their Sufi lodges (*khanegahs*) are located, they are actively involved in environmental sustainability efforts, and they provide Persian language lessons. And on a weekly basis, the order's master gives lectures which are broadcast on their website in Persian, English, French, and German. Despite M.T.O.'s impressive accolades,

¹¹⁹ Details about Oveys are provided in chapter 1, in the section titled 'Sufism and Ambiguity.' Additionally, over the centuries since Oveys's life, there are some Sufis who claim to have been taught directly by Oveys himself, these individuals are referred to as Uwaysis (Hussaini, 1967).

Mahmoud and his friends ended up returning to Mohammad.

After seven or eight months I went back to Mohammad's shop. He said to me, 'So Mahmoud, it's been a while since I last saw you, what's going on? How's that place you're going to?' I told him it was ok. Then we had some tea, we talked, and I don't know what happened but there was something about the conversation that made me uncomfortable about this other group. And I remember the next meeting I attended, when I raised my hand and asked a couple of questions, the two people up front said, 'Are you really asking these questions? These are questions for the un-initiates. You have been initiated. We have given you the outfit, the books, the emblem. You should not be asking these questions.' And their answers didn't satisfy me, so that was the last night.

The following day I went to Mohammad and asked if I could come to his house. He told me, 'Okay. You'll come to my house three nights a week. You'll sit for 2 hours. Don't be late and you can't stay past 11. I'll tell you when you need to leave.' We would sit in his office, in the back room, on the floor, cross-legged, and whenever I said anything ridiculous, he would say, 'Don't be stupid. You need to be a bit more educated' (Malamatian, October 17, 2021).

M.T.O.'s reputation and their massive following affirm the continued importance and relevance of institutional Sufi orders. Institutional Sufi orders like M.T.O. are like any other religious community. It provides a place for socializing with like-minded people, for religious practices and ideals to be exercised and for individuals to connect with teachers and ideas that they might not otherwise get access to. But not everyone can or wants to fit into these communities, and not all students need the same context and elements from their learning environments. Some people have the good fortune of meeting a teacher in a different context, who wants to teach a student in a more individualized, one-to-one situation. This was the situation for Mahmoud and his friends.

Transmission via Text

Carl C. Ernst, the 20th century scholar of Sufism, situates the concept of transmission

historically:

direct teaching used to happen much more through personal networks, sometimes overlapping with family and kin structures and so forth, or simply through

pilgrimages to shrines, but events like the shift from handwritten manuscript to the printed book changed things. [...] Print hit the Middle East and Asia in the 19th century. Until then, these were manuscript cultures. Partly through missionaries and through colonial administrations, printing came to India, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. And Sufi communities were very interested, partly because of the prominence of Sufism in the literatures of the Persian and Arabic world, where many Sufi writings were considered classics, and were soon published and distributed as books. [...] Now we're seeing the spread of Sufi websites. Some Sufi groups in India put up a very basic, simple website about their shrine, about the history of their order; others have a very interactive presence, with messages, updates, and downloadable audio talks and videos. There are even interesting discussions among one group on whether people can be initiated via email [laughs]. And that's all I'll say about that (Ernst & Smith, 2014).

Ernst is describing the development of the transmission of teachings in Sufism: with transmission originally occurring by way of a teaching relationship, but evolving into less personal modes as the proliferation of books and other technologies became more prevalent. While Ernst's ironical reference to contemporary methods of initiation via email suggests the potentially dubious nature of impersonal initiation, which can be understood as a variety of transmission, his words functionally broaden our understanding of what transmission can look like.

Equivalently, the significance of the textual tradition in Sufism cannot be understated, and is evidenced in the previously introduced *tabaqat* literary genre of Sufi biographical manuals. *Tabaqat* manuals played a significant role in textual transmission, with Sulami being the first biographer to systematically include details of the lineage and chain of authority (transmission) to illustrate the transmission and origins of a reported saying (Sulami, 2010, p. xvii). In addition to the details of lineage, these *tabaqat* texts collected other biographical details, sayings and teachings of Sufi individuals, and brought together the outer teachings of Islam (*shariah*) with the mystical, inner teachings of Islam (*tariqah*), ultimately producing

manuals for the Science of Sufism (*'ilm al-tasawwuf*). These texts include practical teachings for cultivation of inner self, in the form of sayings and stories that direct readers on the rules of conduct in Sufism, and virtues are meant to lead human beings to consciousness and perfection on the Sufi path (Sulami, 1991, p. 6).

Texts were an important part of the teachings that Mahmoud received from Mohammad as well. While Mahmoud describes Mohammad's meetings as unembellished, particularly in comparison to the gatherings that he attended at M.T.O., he does emphasize the importance that Mohammad placed upon the readings and recitations, particularly from the Qur'an, Hafiz and Rumi. Mohammad's emphasis on the Qur'an was based in his own Muslim background, but his intimacy with Hafiz and Rumi were the result of his Persian background.¹²⁰ Hafiz is a significant lyric poet from Shiraz, and his *Divan*, sometimes referred to as the Persian Qur'an, is a love poem to God (Hafiz, 1970; Safi, 2018). In this *Divan*, Hafiz explores a variety of themes, like the previously mentioned states of Separation and Union with God, and he relies on the Sufi symbols of wine and drunkenness to describe the relationship to God (Lewisohn, 2010).¹²¹ Mohammad knew many passages from these texts, had studied them extensively and would analyze and interpret them, both in his gatherings with his students, and at community gatherings as well.

The Sufi tradition of textual interpretation is often relied upon in gatherings, as it allows teachers to provide dynamic and personalized lessons to their students. Because Sufi poetry and stories are enigmatic and rich in metaphor, texts can be employed to teach various lessons, with

¹²⁰ I explore aspects of the Persian culture and its relationship to Sufism in chapter 4, "On Adab and Companionship."

¹²¹ In his *Divan* (1970) Hafiz tells a story that is also found in Attar's *Conference of the Birds* (2011), in which a Muslim teacher falls in love with a Christian girl. This story describes a highly educated Sufi teacher traveling to another city and upon seeing a particular girl, he falls in love. In the story, the girl abuses him, including requesting that he pour wine on his prayer rug and that he burns his prayer shawl. This layered and complex story is difficult to read from a feminist perspective, but allegorically, it explores the role of lived experience in Sufism: when one upholds the superficial aspects of a tradition, this does not denote understanding or wisdom, rather it suggests attachment and a quality of 'asleep-ness' that is not aligned with Sufi aims.

each retelling emphasizing new and different aspects based on the needs of the listeners. They can be interpreted using internal meanings (*batin*) and their external meanings (*zahir*), and they can be approached from literary, philosophical or philological perspectives. “The text is in a sense endless, its words able to convey countless ideas that lead to ever deeper philosophical musings the further one goes in one’s analysis” (Golestaneh, 2023, pp. 67–68). This practice remains common. An example of this can be found in the Turkish Mevlevi teacher Nur Artiran’s circles. Nur Artiran’s knowledge of Rumi’s texts, and her interpretation of said texts, is legendary. Mohammad’s textual interpretation was an integral pedagogical tool of transmission, and as a result, is one that Mahmoud employs too.

Besides requiring Mahmoud and the other novices to learn and recite passages from Hafiz, the Qur’an, and Rumi, Mohammad required that the young men pray five times a day. In contrast to this, while Mahmoud has mentioned God to me in private conversation, I have rarely witnessed Mahmoud discussing God or recommending prayer to his students. I have not asked him about this distinction specifically, but when we have spoken about the fact that Mahmoud does not work particularly with Muslim students or even students who are religious, he has said that individuals who are religious come to his philosophy with preconceived notions and conclusions. He has said that this can make teaching them more difficult, as it requires potentially changing their minds about ideas that are strongly held. He did not say, however, that he avoids students who are religious. He also makes a point of speaking with students in language that they can understand. One can discern from these views that while Mahmoud’s foundation in Sufism is profoundly religious, i.e. Islamic, he does not make a point of requiring God or Islam a part of any of his students’ experiences with his Sufi philosophy. This seemingly agnostic approach to God and divinity reflect Mark Sedgwick’s writings on ‘Western Sufism’

(2016), where Sedgwick refers to the universalism that appears in Western expressions of Sufism (2016, 6). I go into more detail about Sedgwick's notions of Western Sufism in chapter 1, in the section on Persian and California Sufism.

He was transmitting to them the teachings of the Islamic tradition. And when Mahmoud talks about the short time that he left Mohammad to learn from M.T.O., his explanation is simple: "We like things to be entertaining, and M.T.O.'s gatherings were. We changed venues because Mohammad had none of the exotic things. You know... No one enjoys things being difficult the way Mohammad made them" (Malamatian, October 17, 2021). But Mahmoud and the others did return to Mohammad, eventually staying with him as his students for more than a decade.

Transmission via Love: Varieties of Love

In Sufism, knowledge and wisdom are relational: Mahmoud's teachings are an expression of his own teacher's transmissions and Mohammad's teacher's transmissions. And in the context of the Sufi Student-Teacher relationship, transmission is related in part to the student's love for their teacher, but the student's capacity to absorb and understand their teacher's transmissions also changes if their capacity develops with time.¹²² There can also be a point of saturation. As Mahmoud conveyed to me, "the nice thing about Mohammad was that he always eventually wanted us to go away. He never wanted anyone to stay. In some ways he really made us ready for just some of the more ridiculous things in life" (Malamatian, November 26, 2021).

In chapter two I analyze Mahmoud's six-stage framework that describes the development of the Sufi student's love for their teacher. This framework illustrates the evolution of the student's emotional attachment to their teacher as time passes. One limitation of this framework,

¹²² This relationality, with an emphasis on love, is explored in detail in chapter 1, "On Love" and in the section above about Mahmoud's teacher, "Mahmoud's Teacher, Jealousy and Dreams."

though, is that it does not take into account intellectual evolution of the Teacher-Student relationship. In other words, as the student matures in their relationship to their teacher, their capacity to receive and understand transmissions or teachings from their teacher will also evolve. Over the years, Mahmoud has developed a model to explore the intellectual evolution of the transmission of ideas, and the student's capacity to receive these ideas, that he calls the 'Varieties of Love.' I have heard Mahmoud explain that this model is also based around love because the etymology of the word 'philosophy' refers to the 'love of wisdom.' Ultimately, in Mahmoud's view, one's complex relationship with wisdom, with philosophy, with ideas and with questions, all of which can be understood as linked, is based in love.

Mahmoud's model borrows terminology and related definitions from Greek philosophy to describe the evolution of the relationship between the emotional and intellectual conditions as the pedagogical transmission of Sufism occurs over time between a Sufi student and their teacher. The first 'Variety' of love is Eros, which is followed by Philo and then Agape. I will explore each of the varieties here in turn.

Eros: The first variety of love is 'Eros.' Mahmoud has described this variety of love in relation to Socrates, in the following way:

Just because you love Socrates doesn't mean you understand him. It means attraction has turned into obsession. You just want to be around him. Some of you in this class, maybe you have a love affair with Jesus Christ. Maybe you read the Gospels. Just because you read, it doesn't mean you understand. It just means you know how to read. Plato enjoys being around the physical presence of Socrates. And [don't forget,] Socrates does not promise him a house or a job or money or marriage. Plato is in love with the mystery that lives inside Socrates (Malamatian, 2022).

According to Mahmoud, the focus of the Eros variety of love is the student's desire to occupy the same space as their teacher. This stage is characterized by a fevered type of enthusiasm. In this

first variety of love, transmission is not the priority, but the creation of a strong attachment between two human beings will set the stage for transmission. Mahmoud teaches that learning of the kind that changes a person's perspectives and impacts their ego is only when strong psychological and emotional attachment is present, because without these elements the relationship will not have a deep enough impact on the student. Mahmoud elaborates on this idea in the analogy about Christians that he employs above. In this analogy he refers to some Christians as 'lovers of Christ,' to explain that just because a person is drawn to particular teachings does not necessarily mean that they understand those teachings. It is important to note that the way that Mahmoud phrases this explanation, it is not meant to disparage Christians in particular, but to use Christianity as a recognizable reference that many would likely understand. This example makes the description of religious fervour and eros-love more accessible: just because a person encounters, reads about and talks about a set of ideas does not mean that they understand those ideas or can employ those ideas properly.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Eros is defined as erotic desire and passionate love (Plato, 1951, line 249E). Similarly, in Plato's *Symposium* (Plato, 1951), Socrates posits that Erotic Love, the love of beautiful bodies, is a starting point for a person who is looking to obtain wisdom and virtue. That if Erotic Love is pursued in the right manner and sequence, it can generate wisdom and virtue. Socrates goes on to elucidate the 'manner' and 'sequence' that he recommends, which begins with an attraction to a single person by way of an appreciation for beautiful bodies. This appreciation allows for beautiful discourses to be produced between the Lover and the Beloved, and once these beautiful discourses are established, the Lover will begin to recognize that all bodies are relatively similar, which should allow the Lover to love all bodies and persons (Plato, 1951, p. 92). This definition is, of course, in direct contrast with Mahmoud's teachings about the

‘Attraction’ stage of love described above, which asserts that the physical appearance of the teacher is irrelevant in the context of the Sufi Student-Teacher relationship. Regardless, Mahmoud asserts that this stage is ephemeral, it is only a starting point. “If a teacher is good, they will push you to Philo” (Malamatian, 2022).

Philo: The second variety of love is ‘Philo.’ This variety is based on a particular kind of friendship wherein the novice needs to graduate from simply liking a teacher to working to understand them. It is, therefore, not related to an attachment of the body, as with Eros, but is related to the mind. In this variety of love, the transmission of teachings can begin in earnest. Mahmoud describes Philo in the following way:

Plato wants to understand how Socrates is able to think the way he does. It's not difficult to fall in love with someone's body. But to find a brain that has depth, understanding and wisdom and then to fall in love with that, despite all the fears and conflicts and contradictions that it creates, it is truly divine. And Plato [never] interrupts [Socrates] while he talks. Because remember what love does: it pushes you into a place of submissiveness. You don't exist. You have no thoughts. You have no emotions except the ones related to Socrates (Malamatian, 2022).

In this second variety of love, a friendship of the mind begins to take room. In the relationship that Mahmoud is using to describe this variety of love, the relationship between Plato and Socrates, Plato is not only attached to the body of his teacher but drawn to his mind. The fears and conflicts and contradictions that Mahmoud refers to are multifaceted. On the one hand, the conflicts and contradictions that Mahmoud refers to may have to do with the byproducts of a novice’s changes in priorities. As they become more attached to their teacher, their attachment to other aspects of their life lessens, and their habits begin to change too. It is inevitable that these changes will create disturbances in other relationships. Similarly, the novice may begin to abandon other obligations that they have. Mahmoud’s description of Plato’s Philo also contains the aspect of submissiveness. This comes about because the student should believe that the

teacher has something that they do not: access to wisdom. In this context, submissiveness functions as a path to humility in the novice.

On the other hand, the student, Plato, loves his teacher and needs his teacher; he has become attached and infatuated. But Socrates does not need Plato in the same way that Plato needs Socrates. Socrates is the object of love and not the lover and so if he even is attached to Plato, the love between them is distinctly one-sided.

In Book VIII of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Philo is described as love infused with friendship, virtue and respect (Aristotle, 1954, part IV). Plato also describes Philo similarly in *Symposium* as the stage in which the lover moves on from appreciating the beautiful bodies, and into appreciating minds. Once a novice has reached this stage, they have the potential to begin seeing beauty in knowledge, not just in the human body; the novice can begin to fall in love with ideas (Plato, 1951, p. 93). At this stage, the teacher should work to nudge the student to the third variety of love.

Agape: The last of the three Varieties of Love is 'Agape.' In this variety, the novice understands who they are and what they want, but they also understand the 'why's' of who they are and what they want. At this stage, these understandings should change a novice's perspectives because they will have been altered entirely. Their ego, their sense of self, their desires and perspectives will all have been impacted by moving through these three varieties of love, and as a result, the novice's life will have a very different quality. This change has come about due to the deep and intellectually intimate relationship with their teacher (Malamatian, 2017).

Agape is also referred to in Plato's *Symposium*, where Socrates explains this final step in the movement towards Love as "absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal, and all other beautiful things as partaking of it" (Plato, 1951, p. 94). According to Socrates, a novice should

ascend from “physical beauty to moral beauty, and from moral beauty to the beauty of knowledge, until from knowledge of various kinds one arrives at the supreme knowledge whose sole object is that absolute beauty, and [the novice will know] at last what absolute beauty is” (Plato, 1951, p. 94).

The difficulty of this phase, Mahmoud asserts, lies in the inevitable separation between the novice and their teacher. It is a point of culmination of transmission: teachers with any worth will not wish for their students to remain with them forever, and should have the capacity to recognize when the relationship has reached its conclusion. Once students have progressed as far as they can, when the student has reached their capacity, the teacher should release them back into the world to sink or swim. These types of relationships are not easily established or found. “We have so many Western [philosophers]. There is only one Socrates and one Plato. That's how rare these things are” (Malamatian, 2022), but they are one of the precious ways that love serves as the foundation for transmission between a Sufi teacher and a novice.

Conclusion

Transmission can be related to lineage and the chain of authority, but it is not necessarily always clearcut. The concept of ‘transmission’ can be used to answer questions of whether a Sufi has studied with a particular teacher who has an established lineage. But transmission can also be related to memory, and the act of striving to remember the transmission of truth that Sufism expresses (Xavier, 2023, p. 116). Transmission is also related to the evolution of the Sufi student’s relationship to their teacher, which can impact their capacity to receive teachings. As Mahmoud asserts in his three-part model, the ‘Varieties of Love.’ Transmission can be consummated in ways that reflect the evolution of technology, as Ernst expressed ironically above, but with these new kinds of transmission come questions of legitimacy and authenticity.

However, questions of legitimacy and authenticity are not really so new if, as Green suggests, some aspects of lineage are not always accurate. If in some cases there was “retrospective claiming” of historical connections to pious medieval Sufis where there might not have been (Green, 2012, p. 4), then lineage and transmission might be more useful for theoretical connections as opposed to practical or even factual relationships.

Given this variety of interrelated questions and concepts, I assert that this case study provides evidence of transmission outside the bounds of institutionalized Sufism or medieval lineage. Because while explicit lines of lineage are useful for understanding how transmission might occur, the process or action of transmission itself is not necessarily palpable or clearly detectable; it is not based necessarily on bloodlines or even proximity.

While lineage and transmission are well-established and documented aspects of Sufism, they can present in alternative ways, as in this case study, where Mahmoud is not affiliated with an institutionalized Sufi order. This chapter revealed a form of lineage and transmission in Sufism that exists outside the bounds of traditional institutional religiosity. The first section highlights lineage, exploring the different perspectives on, and expressions of leadership and authority in Sufism, with Mahmoud suggesting that teachers function as a ‘construction crew’ that works to demolish and rebuild the ego of the Sufi student, as opposed to leaders of institutional Sufi orders, who provide inspiration. There is a section dedicated to Mahmoud’s relationship with his teacher, Mohammad, that explores their lineage in a more abstract fashion. In this section there is also discussion of the Sufi concepts of jealousy, dreams and intuition, as well as Mahmoud’s stint with M.T.O.

These sections on lineage demonstrated that institutionalized lineage is not irrelevant in this case study, but that lineage is at play in a more significant way in the relationship between

the teacher, Mohammad, and his student, Mahmoud. Further, it is the relationship between teacher and student which serves as the foundation for a transmission based on a shared culture of philosophy, wisdom, and love.

The second part of this chapter begins by exploring transmission in Sufism via text. I start with contextualizing Sufi *tabaqat* manuals historically amidst the proliferation of the printing press and other technology and demonstrating their significance. By providing Sufi novices with access to the tradition's teachings, these manuals and the textual transmission of Sufi teachings supported the propagation of Sufism, but textual transmission can also be said to have diminished the need for novices to have a teacher. In this section on transmission, I also explore the relationship between transmission and love. In this part, Mahmoud's pedagogical model is called the 'Varieties of Love.' These three varieties, Eros, Philo and Agape, borrow from Greek philosophy, and explore the student's capacity to receive the transmission of ideas as they mature in their relationship with their teacher and with respect to Sufism. The model of the three Varieties of Love suggests that the transmission of teachings can be possible where deep love exists between the student and the teacher.

These clarify Mahmoud's background and relationship with his teacher, i.e. his lineage, and the pedagogical methods of transmission that he both experienced personally and employs himself. Mahmoud emphasized that Mohammad's aim was to give his students the tools to go out into the world, no longer as students; to refine them and allow them to grow into the most virtuous, ethical versions of themselves that they could be.

This aim provides a foundation for the following chapter where I explore *adab* and companionship, beginning with a brief investigation of various aspects of Persian culture. I also explore the Sufi concepts of chivalry and servitude, as these concepts are deeply rooted in

Persian Sufism, and influence not only the ways that Mahmoud teaches, but also the way that he conducts himself. I also explore *adab* practically, providing an autoethnographic narrative to express such Sufi concepts as friendship and self-reflection, companionship and spiritual conversation.

Chapter 4: On *Adab* and Companionship

Adab is a complex philosophical and religious concept with a variety of interlinked meanings.

While it is often loosely translated from Arabic into English, as ‘etiquette,’ this rendering is incomplete because *adab* also refers to the ‘height of moral behaviour,’ or ‘ethical behaviour at its highest’ and Arabic literature. The term can also be seen in the names of Middle Eastern schools, i.e. ‘Adab School,’ associating moral behaviour with eloquence and erudition. *Adab* is also addressed extensively in the *tabaqat* literature. Sulami produced entire manuals where he uses the term ‘*adab*’ to refer to rules of conduct. He was also known to have connected *adab* to the Prophet Muhammad’s moral character and behaviour, as they are expressed in the Qur’an, and invited others to imitate (Biagi, 2010, p. xix). Qushayri employs *adab* as ‘model behaviour,’ (Qushayri, 2002, p. 343), and Hujwiri, similarly, uses *adab* to mean ‘correct behaviour’ (Hujwiri, 1990, p. 308). Despite the variety of similar definitions, the standards for the principle of *adab* denote that embodying this principle is an ambitious and ever-evolving challenge.

In the following chapter, I will show how *adab* is based around a refined ability to perceive and function from a place of awareness. I will also explore how it is an attitude teachers train through example and word, that it is learned through the striving or effort (*mujahada*), and hopefully, finally, embodied and enacted by the student. It is also imperative to recognize that perfect *adab* is not a final, static ‘place’ of knowing for the human being, but a continual attempt, a decision, an attitude of humility in the face of life and dynamism of life.

In the previous chapter I investigated the Sufi concepts of lineage and transmission and how they are expressed philosophically and practically by Mahmoud. That analysis relates to this chapter in that *adab* is a significant tenet in Sufism’s philosophical expressions of lineage and transmission. In this chapter, as with the last, these concepts are correlated with the stories and

definitions related in the Sufi *tabaqat* literature with the intent to highlight Mahmoud's deeply traditional Sufi methods.

In the first half of this chapter, I highlight the 'outer' aspects of *adab*, i.e. the ways that it manifests culturally, through social norms and historically, by exploring Persian culture and Sufism. I also analyze outer *adab* as it is expressed through the Sufi concepts of chivalry (*futuwwah*) and servitude (*ubudiyya*), with reference to the Sufi manuals and the *tabaqat* genre of Islamic biographies discussed in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission."¹²³ In the second half of this chapter, I investigate 'inner' *adab*: the ways that *adab* manifests behaviourally, psychologically, and relationally, using my own experiences over the course of a particularly long gathering with Mahmoud and some members of his community. I illustrate the application and limitations of the practices of self-reflection (*muhāsaba*), companionship (*suhbah*), spiritual conversation (*sohbet*) and meditation (*mushahada*). And I conclude that when *adab* is understood as a practice that works simultaneously on the 'outer' behaviours and 'inner' worlds of novices, it has the potential to support Sufis' efforts at self-improvement by regulating and refining patterns of thought, and their capacities to be communal.

It is important to note too, that I distinguish between the 'outer' and 'inner' expressions of *adab* because there are subtle differences between these varieties, but the cultural and social norms of outer *adab* are inextricably linked with the critical self-awareness of inner *adab*.¹²⁴ Despite their commonalities, I distinguish the two types because there are a number of differences worth highlighting. Given this, though, there will necessarily be some overlap

¹²³ Some examples of *futuwwah* can be found in Abraham who was willing to sacrifice Ishmail to Allah; Yusuf who pardoned his brothers who tried to kill him out of jealousy; Ali, the Prophet's brother-in-law, who was martyred for his love of the Prophet (Sulami, 1991, p. 20).

¹²⁴ To act well requires one to think well, and to think well likely requires a person to have tried to act well, but that person would only be trying to act well if they had been considering that their actions had been lacking up to that point. This cycle of critical self-reflection, action, and then awareness through critical self-reflection, is one simplistic example of a practical way to understand one aspect of the way *adab* can be 'worked on.'

between the analysis of two types. Ultimately, this chapter will explore how *adab*, like the concepts of transmission and love, is intimately linked to Mahmoud's pedagogy.

Outer *Adab*

In this section on 'Outer *adab*,' I explore the ways that *adab* has been expressed historically, within Persian culture and expressed through the Sufi theory and social practices of chivalry and servitude. Cemalnur Sargut quotes her own shaikh, Kenan Rifa'i, who defined Sufism in light of *adab*, saying that Sufism is

beautiful conduct; it is to enjoy oneself with *adab* internally and externally. Inner *adab* is the ability to see God with awe and admiration in everything and everywhere. [Outer] *adab* is to treat every person and every thing with moderation, equity, veneration, and loving tolerance, all of which stem from inner *adab* (Sargut, 2018, p. 27).

This elegant explanation situates our understanding of *adab* in the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual planes. The idea of *adab* has the potential to deceive in its simplicity, suggesting that it is 'only' related to 'good' behaviour. However, to enact *consistently* 'beautiful' or appropriate inner and outer *adab* requires self-discipline, awareness, a renunciation of the ego, and an ability to overcome and quiet one's human reactions to allow for moments of objectivity, or wisdom to occur. These are only some of the requirements that Sargut's teacher is referring to. The annihilation of the self that's also required: to polish away one's own learned behavior, one's psychology is, literally, incredible.

Sufis see *adab* as an act of continuous devotion because to consciously act well is to act in alignment with the Prophet's perfect behaviour, but contemporary scholarship has traced the principle back to medieval Arabic literature. In the introduction to her translation of Sulami's collection of *Sufi Rules of Conduct* (2010), scholar of Arabic, Elena Biagi, clarifies that the original meaning of *adab* was a 'customary procedure or practice,' as an 'ancestral custom,' but

that *adab* as a concept is almost synonymous with the body of Islamic customs and practice based on the Prophet's words and deeds, the Islamic *Sunna* (2010, p. XXV). Biagi clarifies the association of *adab* with social and ethical virtuosity by referring us to two texts, one 8th century manual about Persian manners and court etiquette, *Kitab al-adab al-saghir* by the Persian Muqaffa (d. 757), and a 9th century anthology of Bedouin poetry.

Together, these texts demonstrate the evolution of *adab* to mean 'way of behaving' and 'beauty of character.' Similarly, Bukhari (d. 870), the 9th century Persian Muslim *Hadith* scholar, described *adab* as 'practical morals and social rules' (Biagi, 2010, p. XXVI).¹²⁵ These morals and social rules of *adab* are evident in expressions of outer *adab*, which are described below in Mahmoud's cultural and religious expression of Persian Sufism.

During one of my visits, I asked Mahmoud about *adab* and etiquette, and how Mohammad taught his students. Mahmoud told me,

you know, in all the years with Mohammad, and there are many, I don't think we ever spoke about etiquette. And I think part of it, [was our shared] cultural background. When we went to school in Iran, every time the teacher would walk in, all the students would stand. So, from the age five, you just knew that if there's a teacher in any branch of life, we just kind of have to occupy that space very cautiously, respectfully. And you're not aware of any of this, these things just go inside you and then you get to be thirty or forty, and you find yourself in a similar situation, you go back to all the things that the culture taught you (Malamatian, November 26, 2021).

Mahmoud's response to my question didn't come as a surprise. Mohammad's pedagogical approach to Sufism was profoundly subtle in some ways, as described above, and heavy-handed and brash in other ways. But *adab* was foundational to the way that Mahmoud learned Sufism and the way that he continues to teach and practice. This is evidenced by those of us who spend

¹²⁵ *Hadith* translates literally as 'reports.' These books, referred to as the *Hadith*, are reports of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

time in Mahmoud's classroom or his home, in that it is paramount to learn to act appropriately and in ways that allow for the flow of knowledge from Mahmoud to his students, to occur as unimpeded as possible. The subtlety of this approach to *adab* is based largely on Mahmoud and Mohammad's Persian backgrounds.

Persian Culture and Sufism

It's very helpful if you come from a culture that gives you the basic stuff because then when you find the school for the mind, you already have the basics
(Malamatian, November 26, 2023).

On a drive from Oakland to Sacramento Mahmoud asked me, "We've got some time. Do you want to talk about your project?" He glanced at me in the rear-view mirror.¹²⁶ "I'm trying to understand what it means to be communal," I told him. I tell him that from what I have understood it is integral for the Sufi novice to have a community of people who are moving in the same direction, so to speak, and who share a common tongue and set of ideals. If a novice on the Sufi Path does not have relationships with others following the path, for most people there is only faltering progress at best. At worst, a person can become warped by their ego and if blind to their own faults, stray not only from the ultimate aim, but into false superiority that can border on dangerous. There is danger in this situation because the realm of religion and spirituality is a space where competitive friendships and hierarchical relationships, which have potential for abuse, are the norm. I'm asking about community because it is not only complex, but contextual.

Mahmoud said to me, while the kids' were shouting and as music played on the radio, "It's good, but you're not there yet. You need to fully adopt the culture of the teacher. Study their culture for ten years and then improvise." In response I asked him if someone with a

¹²⁶ This discussion of Persian Sufism section builds on the definitions and historical context in chapter 1.

different culture can do anything besides mimic and can they hope for something to click eventually? And I ask, how does someone adopt the teacher's culture?

Just imitate. The imitation will be eventually filled with substance. The mimicking begins to create a shell and overtime your temperament and maturity will refine and come into play and at that point you'll be able to see what works. Because a person can't live in two cultures at once for a long time, [and because] they don't have the capacity to adopt the teacher's culture, [they will] continue to live in their own reality (Malamatian, October 16, 2021).

In his *tabaqat* manual, Hujwiri refers to imitation (*tahalli*) in the following way: "imitation of praiseworthy people in word and deed" and "that which sinks deep into the heart is verified by action," and finally, as imitation "without really acting like [the object of imitation]" (1999, p. 389).

Mahmoud expands on his use of the word 'imitation' in our discussion in the car as well, using an analogy that amplifies Hujwiri's definition. The analogy was about a musician learning the basics of their craft. Mahmoud said that this development takes many years, after which, should that musician become proficient, they can begin to improvise. But that improvisation will only really be enjoyable to the ear if the musician has talent, if they make continued efforts to maintain their level of skill, and if they have a teacher or a mentor from whom they can continue to learn. This mentor should tell the student about their shortcomings, which will serve as a shortcut for the musician, if they are able to hear these critiques and overcome them.

Mahmoud casually refers to adopting a different culture, but this point is central to the way that Sufism is happening in Mahmoud's community.¹²⁷ When one is attempting to follow a Sufi teacher and learn from them, culture will likely be central to that teacher's approach,

¹²⁷ These words are similar to cultural appropriation or exploitation, but Mahmoud's intention and meaning is different here. His meaning revolves around appreciating and learning from someone who is willing to teach about their own culture.

especially in a transnational context like this one. Mahmoud is teaching Sufism in late-stage capitalist Oakland, to primarily Caucasian students with various relationships to religion.¹²⁸

Some of the novices he works with, for example, have never participated in religious communities. This can create a profound difference in understanding how religious communities operate, including religious traditions based in ancient symbols, language, norms, and values.

With [my teacher] Mohammad, one benefit was that there were no Westerners. Immigrants who know how to work the American culture... system to their advantage. For these people the American culture has nothing to offer except the comforts of the physical life. But the Western culture is a 'wing it' culture. Other, older ones, when things happen there are particular ways to handle them. In my own teacher's house, we never laughed. It wasn't appropriate (Malamatian, November 26, 2023).

When Mahmoud refers to adopting a teacher's culture, in this particular context, he is suggesting that a student might observe the way their teacher moves through the world as a Persian man, in his fifties, with a profoundly religious upbringing. Mohammad was Persian; Mahmoud is also Persian. Persian-ness is one of the original medieval roots of Sufism, but it is also central to the way that Sufism is done in this transnational, diasporic context. Mohammad immigrated to California following the Iranian revolution in 1979. He opened one of the first Iranian shops in Roseville and had a major influence on the initially small Iranian population in the area. When Mahmoud was a boy, his parents sent him and his brother to school in India, and then to live with their aunt in the Bay Area. Within a few years, Mahmoud's family was reunited in northern California and had put together their savings to buy a car wash which would serve as the family

¹²⁸ The ethnicity and cultural backgrounds of Mahmoud's students correlates to the individuals who attend his Philosophy and Humanities at the college where he teaches. While the classes have students with many different backgrounds, the majority of students who engage deeply with Mahmoud's teachings, in my experience, have been Caucasian. For more scholarship that addresses the development of Sufism and the ways that this is being evidenced in the racial and religious make up of Sufi groups, see the works of Celia Genn (2004) and Bruce Lawrence (2010), for example.

business for decades to come. When Mahmoud and Mohammad's paths crossed, it was at a Persian gathering; for all intents and purposes, that Persian-ness is central to their identities.

Persian Sufism is a variety of Islamic mysticism that is localized to Iran and has proliferated. It is permeated by dominant Persian themes and cultural products such as poetry, music and Farsi, and has been infused with Iranian virtues such as chivalry (*javanmardi*) and *adab* (Milani, 2013). The relationship between Iran, Persia and Islam is layered, but various scholars have produced elegant analogies to describe it. One analogy employs the image of a tree as a representation of Persian Sufism, with its canopy extending from Albania to Malaysia, and its roots in Persian soil, which includes present-day Iran and Afghanistan.¹²⁹

But spirituality in contemporary Iran dates as far back as 6000 years, to the Proto-Indo-Europeans (PIEs) who lived in the territory that spans modern day Ukraine to western Kazakhstan. Because this population relied on oral traditions, little remains archaeologically of the PIEs, but these people were known to have migrated to the Iranian plateau, where they were influenced by the 8th century B.C.E. Hindu text, the Rig Veda. In the following centuries, Zoroastrianism, which emphasizes the never-ending struggle between good and evil, became the most important religious tradition, but in the 8th century Zoroastrian Iran was overthrown by Muslim Arabs and in 751 C.E. the Iranian Islamic Abbasid empire came into power. Thus, the

¹²⁹ The contemporary Persian Australian scholar of Sufism, Milad Milani, makes a similar kind of analogy about Islam and Twelver Shiism, suggesting that Islam is a being a bedsheet that has been tucked over the Iranian cultural landscape, a mattress, forming its own expression through Twelver Shiism (Newman, 2013). Shiism was the official religion of Iran for approximately five centuries, beginning in the 16th century (1501ish) when the Iranian Safavid dynasty reunified Iran as an independent state. There are two branches of Shiism, Twelver Shiism (Imamism) and Sevener Shiism (Ismailism). Both branches venerated the same line of Imams up to the 7th, Imam Ismail, who died as a boy. The death of this boy created a schism, where Shiites who believed that the boy was invested by his father, the 6th Imam, Jafar al-Sadiq, before he died follow the tradition that is referred to as Twelver Shiism, and those who do not believe in the investiture broke off and follow what is referred to as Sevener Shiism (Corbin, 2014, pp. 30–32). For example, one scholar, the 20th century French philosopher and scholar of Sufism Henri Corbin, asserts that “the conclusion to be drawn from the texts themselves, and above all from the teaching of the Imams, is that Shiism is, in essence, the esotericism of Islam” (2014, p. 36); “it is impossible, historically speaking, to go back further than the teachings of the Imams in seeking for the sources of Islamic esotericism” (2014, p. 38).

multi-faceted character of Iran's religiosity is a synthesis of Iranian and Arab Islamic elements. While the current population is majority Shiite, there remain followers of Christianity, Judaism and Zoroastrianism (Corbin, 2014; Foltz, 2004; Milani, 2014; Newman, 1999; Zarrinkoob, 2017).

Definitions of culture lean on concepts like language, values, tradition and heritage, but scholarship about Persian Sufism works equally hard to explain this variety of Islam. Iran borders on the Persian Sea and shares borders with Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey, among other countries. Its geographic location is a natural crossing point for travelers moving between the east and the west. Over the centuries, Iran has been invaded by Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Mongol armies, not to mention the more recent imperial and ongoing efforts by Britain and the United States. Iran's violent and complex history, as well its ongoing struggles, have a direct impact on Iranian philosophy and politics. This culture, with its traditional and profoundly religious roots defines the way that Mohammad, and thus Mahmoud, approach philosophy and the world. Stories from the Qur'an and poetry from Hafiz and Rumi permeate their work and lives, and Mahmoud brings them into his classroom and into his teaching relationships.

A novice with an entirely different cultural and socio-religious background might become attracted to this type of Sufism, and if they work to adopt the Persian culture by sincerely trying to mimic the way that this person does it, they can begin to move through the world the way that he does, to a certain extent. This will require them to make small changes in their own lives, which will reverberate, eventually becoming bigger changes. One example of this can be as small as abstaining from drinking alcohol. This will be more challenging for some people than it might be for others, but this change will impact the way that they do or don't spend their money; it will impact who they spend their time with (people who consume alcohol or people who do

not). The change will impact how their mornings are spent (hung over or not), and with time, this adjustment may have significant impacts on the novice's life. All these changes that come as a result of abstaining from alcohol also have the potential to create more space in a novice's life for Sufism; for potentially attending Mahmoud's classes and learning about philosophy and religious ideas and stories. This may lead that novice to self-reflect on a deeper level, asking more questions of themselves and their life, for example. This is just one superficial example of a way that the teacher can be a shortcut for students.¹³⁰ Mahmoud's approach to Sufism is rooted in his Persian heritage.

Chivalry and Servitude

Whenever I am at Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house, as soon as I walk in the door they offer me tea. They ask about how my parents are doing and how my family is, and they listen to my answers. They always offer snacks and cook meals for their guests. There are neighbours and family and visitors stopping by and each time a new person appears, the sequence begins again and introductions are made when necessary but frequent visitors to the house are usually acquainted, Everyone is invited to catch up and there are no pretenses about creating a space that is anything other than hospitable and comfortable for those who are invited in.

¹³⁰ I provide the example here of abstaining from alcohol as a concrete example. Another example might be reading particular books. In the final chapter of Meredith B. McGuire's book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (2008) discusses the concept of religious hybridity, which she defines as "religious blending and within-group religious heterogeneity" (p. 186). One of the varieties of religious blending or combination that she describes is 'creolization' which she refers to as a "useful metaphor for describing cultural intermixture [...]. Like the creolization of language, much of the creolization of religion has occurred under conditions of subjugation, such as slavery, conquest and colonialism" (p. 193). She goes on to describe a concrete example of cultural mixing in the arts, though, that helps bring theory down to practice. The example that she gives of this cultural interpenetration is 'world music' in North America and Europe, for which she refers to Paul Simon's musical album *Graceland* (1986). She writes, "A new synthesis occurs when serious musicians from widely differing cultural traditions make music together [...]. Perhaps not overtly political, this cultural synthesis was extraordinary, considering the context of the politically repressive South African apartheid regime at the time" (p. 194). MacGuire's inclusion of this example, I think, is a similar type of example to the one that I provide in the text above. Perhaps not the first example that might come to mind, but a clear, concrete example that is, fundamentally illustrative. The Lived Religion methodology in which McGuire works, and which inspired my own methodological approach, is explored in greater detail in the Methodological Appendix.

Both Rozaneh and Mahmoud bring this ethic with them beyond the house too. In the summer of 2019, my life was changing dramatically, and Rozaneh would pick me up at my apartment in their family minivan with the kids strapped into their car seats. She would bring me along on whatever errands she was doing that day, we would visit with her parents or we'd go grocery shopping or sit while the kids played in the park.

The conscious care that these two people take in thoroughly washing hands before cooking, in providing clean towels for guests, felt noteworthy from the first time that I met them. And so, when I read about the Sufi principles of chivalry and service, I realized that all of these examples I was witnessing in real time, of relationality and care, of attention and intention, are founded in medieval Islamic culture and the Sufi tradition of chivalry (Ar. *futuwwah*; Pers. *javanmard*) and service.¹³¹

In Sufism, the principle of *adab* is closely related to chivalry. The traditional understanding of virtue (*muruwwat*) involved a loyalty to and protection for one's tribe that required retaliation in the form of an eye for an eye, but this retaliatory approach transformed in the wake of the Prophet Muhammad's Qur'anic teachings which advocated that 'evil' should be repaid with something better, i.e. leniency and forgiveness (Goldziher, 1967, p. 7).¹³²

The Sufi tradition of chivalry is based on a code of honorable conduct which follows the example of the Prophet Muhammad and the Sufi sages. Some scholars believe that this code of Islamic chivalry existed alongside a non-Islamic type of Sufism in ancient Iran for some 3000 years (Malik & Hinnells, 2006, p. 59), while another suggests that in Persia, the code originated with the poetry of the *suluk*.¹³³ This poetry would have reached the Arab Peninsula before Islam

¹³¹ *Javamard* can be translated loosely from Persian to mean 'youth' or 'youthfulness.'

¹³² Examples of virtue (*muruwwat*) can also be found in Pre-Islamic Arab poetry (Goldziher, 1967, p. 22).

¹³³ *Su'luk* (pl. *sa'alik*) is a term with Persian origin that refers to an individual in the Persian region who existed outside the tribal culture and had to therefore resort to thieving. These types of individuals were memorialized in

and would then have been brought back to Iran with the Prophet's idealized Qur'anic version and with the Arab version of virtue (Ridgeon, 2010, pp. 7–8).

Fundamentally, chivalry works as a foundation for the moral and ethical frameworks of Sufi social and religious life. And the depth and cultural significance of the concept of chivalry can be found, in part, in Persian Sufi texts beginning in the 10th and 11th century. Sulami's *Kitab al-futuwwat*, for example, is an entire manual on Sufi chivalry and Qushayri's *Al-Risala al-qushayriyya fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* includes a chapter on chivalry (2002, p. 275). Chivalry is also discussed in Hallaj's *Tawasin* (Massignon, 2019; Sells, 1996). And while the most comprehensive medieval Persian treatise on chivalry is attributed to Husayn Vaciz-i Kashifi (d. 910) (Loewen, 2003), Suhrawardi is credited as being the first Persian Sufi to have written on the subject (Loewen, 2003, pp. 543–544; Suhrawardi, 2022).¹³⁴ Suhrawardi suggested that “*futuwwah* is the particular form which the relationship between esotericism and social reality takes in Islam” (Sulami, 1991, p. 290); and that “the *futuwwah* aspires to confer a sacred quality on all professions, transforming their activities into so many liturgical acts” (1991, p. 290).¹³⁵ In other words, chivalry is an esoteric practice that is expressed in the social realm.

And while all of these scholars were men and described chivalry as the domain of men, Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* (2000) helps us to better understand that chivalry and *adab* were exercised by Sufi women too.¹³⁶ The biographies in Sulami's work challenge the idea that

poetry that professed themes of endurance in poverty and hunger, loneliness. One *su'luk* figure was 'Urwa' ibn al-Ward (d. 615) who wrote about stealing from the rich to give to the poor (Ridgeon, 2010, p. 7).

¹³⁴ Some details of Suhrawardi's life are provided in footnote 80.

¹³⁵ According to Henri Corbin's work, every companion is a *javanmard*, and the activities of these companions, who are bound by a pact of fraternity, are elevated through this fraternity to chivalric service (Corbin, 2014, p. 290). The *javanmard*'s code of conduct invokes Qu'ranic stories, such as the one of the prophet Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his own son Ishmail to Allah. Similarly, the story of Yusuf, son of Yakub (Jacob), who pardoned his brothers even after they attempted to take his life out of jealousy.

¹³⁶ Rabia may serve as an obvious archetype for the female ethic of chivalry that will be unpacked in the coming paragraphs, but the tradition officially came about after her death. Notably, in Cornell's most recent book, *Rabia: From Narrative to Myth* (2019), there is no explicit mention of *niswan*.

women were excluded from the public aspects of spiritual life during Sufism's formative period (Cornell, 2000, pp. 19–20). In fact, the text is organized regionally into three primary geographic clusters, suggesting that there were women across the Middle Eastern region who were working within the tradition of chivalry.¹³⁷ And while Sulami identifies many of the women in these biographical vignettes as the wives, daughters, sisters, and associates of famous Sufi men, Cornell clarifies that Sulami was referring to these associations to illustrate a religious and cultural 'scene,' a type of loosely related syndicate, rather than insinuating that these Sufi women were noteworthy as a result of their relationships. Rather, these Sufi women are remarkable in their own right, and worthy of memorial in Sulami's work because of their own achievements (Cornell, 2000, p. 46).

Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* (1999) also highlights the Sufi tradition of *niswan*. *Niswan* is similar to chivalry in that where *futuwwat* is a practice that is mostly associated with Sufi men, the *niswan* tradition is associated more commonly with Sufi women. The *niswan* tradition was a significant development in the Sufi tradition that occurred after the 9th century CE and can be understood as a distinct counterpart to male chivalry (Kuehn & Pokorny, 2018, p. 62).

A central component of the *niswan* tradition is its relation to the notion of servitude, which is expressed similarly to chivalry: through actions and attitude. Servitude can be understood as a combination of four traits (1) being true to one's covenants; (2) preserving moral rectitude; (3) being satisfied with whatever one finds; and (4) patiently bearing what has been lost (Cornell, 2000, p. 55). And in his chapter of servitude, Qushayri provides a similar definition,

Servitude is establishing true acts of obedience, performing them without limit,

¹³⁷ The three geographic clusters are (1) Basra and Syria; (2) Baghdad, Damaghan, and Egypt; and (3) Nishapur and Khuransan (Sulami, 2000).

ascribing little worth to whatever you offer, and being aware that your virtuous deeds come only by means of God's prior decree [...] Servitude is abandoning personal choice in the face of divine fate (Qushayri, 1990, p. 170).

It can be interpreted then, that these women practitioners, besides being saintly, were employing accepted religious practices and attitudes to work around society's impositions. They were subalterns who were creating their own subculture in order to move through the world in ways that they preferred.¹³⁸ Because "once women have become practitioners of servitude they cannot be told they are deficient in religion because the Qur'an states: servitude is the truest form of submission to God" (Cornell, 2000, p. 58). Sufi women who made vocations out of chivalry and servitude to their divine Masters could be freed from the socio-cultural constraints imposed on their gender.

The practice of servitude 'worked' in several ways. It functioned as a way to transcend the imposition of religious and cultural structures of authority and institutionalization and challenge the known status quo. The practice of servitude simultaneously refined the outward and inward natures of the practitioners, that is, outward natures such as patience and humility (*khushu*), and inward qualities such as fear, gratitude, and reliance on God (Cornell, 2000, pp. 56-59). Servitude requires the practitioner to be concentrated on God and trust Him completely, and "strive to attain total harmony between his exterior and his interior conduct" (Biagi, 2010, p. XXI). Qushayri clarifies the Sufi principle of humility in the following way: "no one in whose heart is a grain of pride will enter the fire" (2002, p. 173), he also recorded the saying, "the devil

¹³⁸ The term 'subaltern' was originally used by Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, in what is now considered 'post-colonial theory.' The term 'subaltern' describes groups in society who are outside the power structure. These groups lack a voice in their own representation and are systematically marginalized within the dominant power structures. The concept of the 'subaltern' highlights issues of representation, agency, and the complexities of intersecting forms of oppression (Gramsci, 1971).

will not come near to one whose heart is humble” (1990, p. 86). To express this principle, a Sufi must remember that they are not superior to others.¹³⁹

Given that the principle of servitude is synonymous with slavery, it is no surprise that these explanations also surface the concept of submission (*tawadu*) (Cornell, 2000, p. 55): servitude was a practice with the aim of embodying the highest form of submission. Qushayri suggested that “pride toward the rich and submissiveness towards the poor are part of submissiveness” (Qushayri, 1990, p. 90). This may suggest that those who are rich cannot understand the fundamental nature of faith and obedience to God because their riches evidence a passion for the physical world. On the other hand, this quotation assumes, poor people, this quotation assumes, should receive submissiveness from Sufis because their poverty evinces a detachment from this world’s riches.¹⁴⁰

Chivalry, both the masculine and feminine versions, and its related concepts: servitude, submission and humility, are traditions that have helped Sufis along the path, regardless of gender. And on one summer afternoon during the deep part of summer when even the North Bay of California gets too hot, Mahmoud evoked these concepts for me in real time.¹⁴¹

I was at a kid’s playground with Rozaneh and Mahmoud and their children near Lake Merritt in Oakland. I had been dealing with the fallout of an abusive marriage and as I stood next to Mahmoud, he told me that we can only be responsible for ‘so much’ of the decisions that we make, and that life is a series of interplays between cause and effect. He was referring to fate and faith, without using those words. And for the foreseeable future, he told me, I would be in a

¹³⁹ This principle is reminiscent of the assertion that Socrates’ makes in his *Apology*, that he knows nothing.

¹⁴⁰ This quotation from Qushayri and my analysis that follows makes many assumptions about wealth, poverty, and the perspectives of those who live those experiences. For the sake of simplicity, this reading of the quotation and my interpretation of its meaning are superficial.

¹⁴¹ The exchange detailed here occurred in July 2019. I share it with Mahmoud’s permission.

period of dealing with the effects of the compromises and concessions that I'd made in the preceding years. Without judgment or contempt, he used Christian terms for me so that I could really understand, "you'll spend some time paying for your sins. Remember, pray and tie your camel. Be patient."¹⁴²

Those words were an act of chivalry, of service to me that day. Giving me permission to be angry with myself for allowing another person to diminish me but acknowledging that my mistakes were only human, that I'm not omnipotent. Now it was my job to accept the consequences of my actions as courageously as I could. Whether or not he believed what he told me, he took a small part of the burden off my shoulders and he was only able to do that because he understood that that was what I needed at that moment, and I trusted him.

In this section, Persian cultural, historical and religious concepts were described, alongside Persian Sufism in relation to the term 'outer' *adab*; these are the historical and cultural manifestations of *adab*, which are expressed socially and religiously. These aspects of the outer variety of *adab* provide the basis from which inner aspects of *adab* can be explored. In the following section I analyze the Sufi principles of companionship, spiritual conversation and self-reflection, using an autoethnographic narrative, describing a day that I spent with Mahmoud and Rozaneh's family, where I attended one of Mahmoud's classes and participated in a gathering with some of his students and acquaintances in the evening.

Inner *Adab*

In comparison to 'outer' *adab*, 'inner' *adab* can be understood as the less tangible expression of the practice. Manifestations of inner *adab* can be found in the interactions between individuals,

¹⁴² This Islamic saying is from the Hadith on Tawakkul, in which a man asks the Prophet if he should tie his camel *and* trust in Allah, or leave the camel untied and trust in Allah. The Prophet told this man to tie his camel and trust (Jami' at-Tirmidhi 2517, n.d.).

the actions that individuals take and the reactions that they have. It is in the wars waged in the inner worlds of novices and Sufis; in their thoughts, reflections, and their articulation of ideas. In this second section, I detail the activities of a day I spent with Mahmoud and his community. The events that occur over the course of this day and my own shortcomings provide a useful illustration of the interplay between outer and inner *adab* in practice. The events of the day that are described also provide a way to explore some of the teachings that are dispensed in this community, and its practices, including friendship and self-reflection, and spiritual conversation and meditation. I also explore the significance of companionship between the novice and the Sufi teacher as it relates to inner *adab*. I conclude that inner *adab* has the potential to support Sufis' efforts at self-improvement by regulating and refining patterns of thought, and their relationship with outer *adab*.

Companionship and Self-Reflection

You cannot teach yourself Sufism or develop spiritually by yourself any more than you can become a doctor or an engineer by yourself (Frager & Fadiman, 1999, p. 5).

I woke up at 8:30 one morning during one of my visits with Mahmoud and Rozaneh. Rozaneh was already up, and Mahmoud had left for school. A friend, Mia, had been sleeping on the floor across the room from me, and another woman, Camilla, one of the older novices who had been around for a decade or more, was sleeping in another room. That particular day was one of the only times during my visit when I was going to be able to attend Mahmoud's classes at the college where he teaches, so I was up and ready to go in about ten minutes, having coffee and toast with Rozaneh in the front room. As we waited for the other women to be ready, Rozaneh was asking me about my impending trip home, but I was barely listening. Within about twenty

minutes I began to get impatient; it seemed like it was taking the other women ages to be ready to leave.

Over the years that I lived in Oakland, I organized my life in order to be able to attend Mahmoud's classes. I found the questions that students asked and the way that he answered them to be compelling. But living across the continent now, opportunities to witness these exchanges were few and far between, so being late because the people who were driving me were moving slowly was aggravating. But finally, Mia and Camilla emerged and we could leave.

Despite the fact that we were using GPS and the other women had driven from the house to the college many times, we somehow got lost and what should have been a short side trip turned into a thirty-minute journey. When we pulled up to the school, I hopped out, paid for parking with my credit card and began power walking to the classroom. After what was probably fifteen seconds, I looked back unthinkingly and saw my friends. I finally had a moment outside of my own frustrations and desires and saw what was really happening and I was ashamed. I recognized that my friends were both at least twenty years my senior. They were tired from staying up late the night before, and neither of them was all that used to driving in the city.

I slowed down to join them in the last steps to the classroom, for which we were only somewhat late, as it turned out. My response to my friends, while both natural and organic, demonstrated a lack of patience and a lack of awareness. Sulami provides a useful lesson about how to treat people: "As you wish people to come to you, go to them" (Sulami, 1991, p. 44). And Qushayri provides three definitions of companionship in his *Risalah*: keeping company with those who are above you, which is a service; keeping company with those who are below you, which requires sympathy and compassion; and keeping company with peers and equals which is based on preferring others over one's own self, and maintaining the standards of chivalry (2002,

p. 357). What he is describing in this definition is the challenges that come with all three types of relationships. I have found that community and companionship are often incredibly abrasive agents; they are efficacious as mirrors, coaches, and buffers, and that was one of the reasons it was intense having so many people at the house that day. He also wrote more specifically about keeping company with peers, suggesting that

When you keep company with someone who is at your own level, the proper course is to try to be blind to his faults. You should give what you see in him a beautiful interpretation insofar as it is possible. If you cannot find such an interpretation, you should keep your suspicions to yourself and look at your own faults, as you are obliged to do (2002, p. 358).

Hopefully my friends were able to give me some of this kind of grace that day. I also asked Mahmoud about *adab* and etiquette on that visit, and his response referred me to his cultural background and religious upbringing.

It's just part of the Persian culture, that if there is someone sitting behind you, you say, "I'm sorry for my back being to you." The cultural etiquette has been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, the moment you're born, you see it everywhere. When people who are older than you are talking, you just keep your mouth shut. Here, you have to learn it like anything else. And the problem with learning is that its counterpart is forgetfulness. You get distracted. Teachers are connected to a culture, but they're also connected to their own ways of teaching, their own temperament, their own ways of doing things. And so there are two kinds of etiquettes that need to be observed, let's say the observation of cultural etiquette and the general Sufi etiquette, if there is such a thing (Malamatian, November 26, 2023).

As a boy Mahmoud was taught to be conscientious of others and I believe that I was too, to a certain extent. But over the years of living away from my family, alone in various countries without strong connections, my reflex to prioritize my desires over a community that I'm connected with can take over. While my frustration with the circumstances and my friends was normal that morning before classes, if I shared the Sufi aim of refinement as opposed to giving in to impulses and reactions, my reactions would be a useful example of the way that human

impulses can so easily work against the aim of self-awareness. In an attempt to combat individualistic impulses like the one that I expressed in the episode described above, Mahmoud teaches two particular practices which are meant to work harmoniously together. They are companionship and self-reflection.

The practice of companionship, which I also refer to here as community and friendship, can function as an antidote to arrogance. Dickson conducted an interview with *Shaykha* Fariha Friedrich al-Jerrahi, a leader of the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order based in New York City, and she makes similar connections in their discussion on companionship and community. She is emphatic:

[community] is *very* important for the path. Again, it goes against that individualism. So individualism not only becomes a trap on one's own personal path, but it can be a hindrance to forming a community, which is the vessel, after all, where this all takes place. This is not seen as we come into the path – I didn't see it, the importance of community and I'm sure most of the dervishes who come in at first (I assume) don't see it. It's something that grows on you. I mean, traditional culture is totally communal! They don't think for themselves, they think in terms of their families, their grandparents, their cousins. They think as a community and here we just think as myself. That's a big one. Here we're still rowing away upstream to form community. I think we're doing better (Dickson, 2015, p. 147).

Even something as seemingly simple as community requires active consideration and practice in Sufism, as is evidenced by my own shortcomings. Practically and in this context, as previously stated, to be relatively adept at being communal and having long-standing friendships requires a critical self-awareness, repetition but also training and direction. Given this, it is logical that this practice should be taught and exercised alongside the practice of self-reflection (*muhasaba*).

Mahmoud's philosophy centers on a kind of searing self-reflection, which is meant to leave no part of the psyche in the dark. Qushayri defines self-reflection in the context of vigilance, asserting that "the best thing to which a person can attach himself in this Way is self-

observation, attentiveness, and governance of his works” (Qushayri, 2002, p. 232). The three aspects that Qushayri is referring to, if practiced conscientiously, would certainly lead to progress in personal refinement. Sulami also refers to vigilance and relates it to the concept of piety (*taqwa*), in the context of *adab*. Sulami quotes that “the proper *adab* is that his devotion to knowledge be without pause, his renunciation without desires, his vigilance without negligence, his certitude without doubts, and his gratitude without conditions” (Sulami, 2010, p. 55).

The practice of intense self-examination, if undertaken with sincerity (*sidq*) and intention (*niyyah*), has the potential to produce a type of meditation, asceticism and seclusion (*khalwat*) from the world; it is the enzyme that works to begin breaking down the self. This is because profound self-reflection pushes one into oneself and away from the stuff of the world. The practice of self-reflection requires constant observation and consideration, unavoidably creating self-absorption in the wake of questions like “why did I react that way?” or “where is this feeling coming from?” or “what is this thought pattern?” These types of questions, if asked and answered as honestly as possible, allow a novice to dig deeper into themselves. This practice is meant to wash some of the dust from the doors of perception, eventually allowing light and clarity to shine through in the form of self-knowledge.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ The practice of self-reflection has limitations, of course. This work is based on the Prophet Muhammad’s teaching that man’s worst enemy is the lower *nafs*, and the struggle against it is the greatest *jihad* (Schimmel, 1997, p. 70). ‘*Nafs*’ is a commonly used short-form for *al-nafs al-ammārah bi’l-su*, which translates from Arabic to ‘that part of the soul that incites evil.’ This is the lowest of the three Islamic stages of the soul and is the one that is most commonly associated with human beings who are overcome with forgetfulness (Murata & Schimmel, 1992, p. 254); individuals who are thoughtlessly driven by reactions and urges. The *nafs* can also be understood as the ego or the lower self. The practice of self-reflection might be considered ‘successful’ when the detachment from a particular idea, reaction, or false belief is achieved; when the pattern of attachment is no longer being repeated, i.e. a reaction to a particular stimulus no longer occurs.

The previously mentioned Sufi master, Suhrawardi, distinguishes three levels of the soul in his text “The Wisdom of Illumination” (*Hikmat al-Ishrāq*): (1) the Vegetative Soul (*Nafs Nabātiyya*) is responsible for growth and reproduction; (2) the Animal Soul (*Nafs Ḥayawāniyya*) is associated with sensory perception and movement; and (3) the Human Soul (*Nafs Nātiqa*) is capable of rational thought and intellectual perception. Each of these levels of the soul will have different desires and associations with the *nafs*. There is much scholarship written about the *nafs*, some work to consider is Rika E. Cornell’s chapter, “The Soul of a Woman was Created Below: Woman as the Lower Soul (*Nafs*) in Islam” (2007) and Sachiko Murata in *The Tao of Islam* (1992).

But where do these blinders come from and why is it so difficult to honestly observe oneself? One answer comes to us from Henri Corbin, a French philosopher, whose essay on Sufism, *Sophia and wisdom*, asserts that “to seek refuge from the Self [...] is the instinctive reaction of the novice, a fear fostered by orthodoxy and conformity” (Corbin, 1998, p. 229).

Corbin is asserting that human beings have less ability to see their own deficiencies because we fundamentally wish to be a part of the mainstream and conform within the parameters of what is considered socially acceptable, producing an internal, psychological environment wherein we are blind to ourselves, that is, our desires, trauma, and motivations. If this is the case, the practice of self-reflection is made more difficult, Corbin is suggesting, because to be truly self-aware, one must accept one’s true desires; traumas; motivations. And one must accept the potential that these may be profoundly different from the desires of the mainstream, or paradoxically, they may be the same as so many others’ and therefore lackluster. This potential lack of excitement would certainly be at odds with the American value that each person has the potential to be exceptional.¹⁴⁴

There are some additional reasons that community and being communal are supportive of *adab*’s and its related work of refinement through self-reflection. In the first place, in order to see what requires refinement, a person has to have external factors imposing on them. Communities of individuals who share the same teacher are not necessarily communities of people who share many other similarities. Differences can create tension which can eventually illuminate flaws in

The Prophet Muhammad taught that the struggle against one’s lower *nafs* is the greatest *jihad* for various reasons: life is full of distractions and temptations and true requirements, that pull a novice away from the Sufi path and back into forgetfulness. Also, each novice is also limited by their own experiences and knowledge: a person cannot have access to the things that they don’t know. Any novice, any human being for that matter, has blinders when it comes to themselves. I provide this limited definition, recognizing that the Sufi concept of the *nafs* has a greater historical and conceptual significance than can be addressed here.

¹⁴⁴ There is also the perspective that human beings prefer to remain blind to their faults because to be ignorant of one’s shortcomings means that said limitations do not need to be dealt with.

thinking or action that require refinement. Similarly, people who are undertaking a practice to refine their ways of thinking and their behaviour can become extremely self-absorbed, as the practice of self-awareness is consuming. An attempt at constant self-awareness does not make an enjoyable companion; spontaneity and light-heartedness take flight in the face of intense self-reflection and struggles at self-awareness. At least a companion or friend who is a part of the same community and with the same teacher and aims might be less impacted by the Sufi novice's attempts.

When Mahmoud's morning classes were over, I sat in the courtyard outside the classroom with some of the people I'd come to know when I lived in Oakland. The small talk and catching up went on and on, and around 2:30 I drove back to the house with Mia and Camilla and a young man who had been attending Mahmoud's classes for several years but who had never been invited to the house. For some time, we all sat in the living room chatting with the children and Rozaneh, while Mahmoud was nowhere to be seen.

After another hour or perhaps two, Mahmoud appeared in the living room where we were all sitting and suggested that we all go to the back room, the office, to chat. Mia, Camilla and I went with the young man, and sat on the cushions on the floor. Camilla took a book by Khalil Gibran down from the shelf and read some passages, and then discussions began.¹⁴⁵ The young man began speaking about various academic philosophical topics at length, and after some hours passed, I realized that the day that I'd thought was going to quiet down at dinner time was, in fact, going to keep going and going. At around 5:30, the dinner Rozaneh had been making all

¹⁴⁵ Khalil Gibran (d. 1931) was a Lebanese-American poet whose work explores themes of death, love and longing and is influenced by the religious and philosophical texts. One of his widely known works in English is *The Prophet* (Gibran, 1923). Another of his texts is *Jesus, Son of Man* (Gibran, 2010).

afternoon was served. She had made bahdemjan, tahdig served with yogurt, roasted sweet potatoes, and a salad. She was feeding twelve people, as it turned out.¹⁴⁶

The sound in the living room quickly became deafening. I had witnessed tumultuous gatherings at the house before, but only when Mahmoud and Rozaneh's families were visiting. I watched Mahmoud make his singular and unsuccessful attempt of the evening to remediate the tone of that evening's gathering, when he told everyone as they were serving themselves that it would be a quiet meal, and yet the sound continued to intensify as people gossiped and chatted and caught up.¹⁴⁷ The mood of the evening unraveled over the course of the meal, and even people who had been visiting the house for years were speaking loudly. When students and novices from Mahmoud's classes are visiting the house, the volume of people's voices is low, and the mood is deferential. Visitors are usually oriented towards Mahmoud as opposed to one another, the way they were on this particular evening.

And as dinner was winding down, I noticed that Camilla was taking cushions from the front sitting room and bringing them to the back room. I went to help Camilla, and she told me that she was setting up for a sitting. We turned on a single lamp in the corner of the room and brought in another five or six cushions so that we could make a space that normally accommodates four or five people, accommodate ten.

One of the challenges that was arising in the long day that is being described here, is that the particular type of *adab* is generally enacted and observed by visitors in Mahmoud and

¹⁴⁶ On many occasions I have helped Rozaneh with preparing meals, as have other guests. Helping in the kitchen becomes part of the guest experience once a person becomes familiar enough with Rozaneh and Mahmoud to be asked to participate in the intimacy of the kitchen space.

¹⁴⁷ *Hadra* is explained in the *tabaqat* literature as 'Sufi gathering,' and is defined in connection with the principle of silence (*samt*). Qushayri notes that "silence is one of the manners proper in attending the *hadra*, for God Most High said, 'When the Qu'ran is recited, listen to it with attention and hold your peace that ye may receive mercy' (7:204)" (1990, pp. 47-48). While the Qu'ran was not being recited this evening, the teacher is meant to be considered a placeholder or representative of the transmission of Sufi lineage and wisdom. To be casual in the teacher's presence is not necessarily upholding proper *adab*.

Rozaneh's house is subtly demonstrated as opposed to being explicitly taught. This expression of *adab* took me, a Canadian, or Westerner, for lack of a better term, some time to learn to observe at least on a superficial level, and I continue to fumble with regularity. This outward expression of *adab* is composed of subtle niceties and a self-awareness behind actions that are not always taught in the American/ North American culture. One example is to follow the lead of the host in terms of behavior, tone and volume of voice so that others may converse unimpeded by others' conversations: to keep one's backs to the walls and not to other people.

This *adab* is particular to the environment at Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house, but it is based on the cultural norms of Persian culture, and it is central to the way that things unfold and Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house. In another conversation about *adab* and etiquette, Mahmoud used cultural and social norms as the foundation for his explanation:

You know when [my family has] gatherings, the moment anyone new enters, for the most part, everybody stops what they're doing. It doesn't matter what the conversation is. And everybody stands. And they remain standing until the guest comes [their] way, shakes [their] hand, and finds a place to sit. And then you can sit. It's not something that people are aware of, it's cultural; people just stop whatever it is that they're doing. Imagine if you were in a very intense conversation, and the doorbell rings. When someone walks in, you have to... and this happens unconsciously, exercise a good amount of detachment, all of a sudden realizing, perhaps, that your conversation is irrelevant, and you need to just be quiet (Malamatian, November 26, 2023).

The imposition of cultural protocols and social norms produces a type of humility: that the coherence of the group is a necessity, and that it's more important than the expression of the lone individual. Correspondingly, in Dickson's interview with *Shaykha* Fariha al Jerrahi, she described the community as a vessel within which spiritual transformation takes place. "It is something like [a] container wherein various elements are alchemically combined to produce a transformative reaction" (Dickson, 2015, p. 147).

The protocols within the community and at the house, like any other Sufi communal space, provide a foundation of respect, courtesy, and an awareness of others and one's own self. And with these codes of behavior in place, which can be understood as outer *adab*, it is fathomable that a person might more easily begin to adopt the more subtle customs, inner *adab*, required of Sufi communities. These two conditions work in tandem to help support refinement of the self by regulating and honing patterns of thought, psychology, and self-awareness, which are manifested in actions and speech, and thus in the context of companionship. Put another way, if one understands that actions reflect a person's beliefs, then regulating and refining those actions will necessarily regulate and refine that person's beliefs as well.

Spiritual Conversation and Meditation

Once Camilla and I had finished setting up the back room, Mahmoud, who seemed to have given up trying to suggest a quiet atmosphere to the group over dinner, moved from one cluster of people to another, telling everyone to go sit in the back room. I wasn't sure what time it was at this point; the house doesn't have clocks in the main rooms, except for the stove, which automatically turns off when it's not in use or can be turned off manually. It was dark outside the windows and may have been around 8pm.

I sat down on a cushion next to the door. The young man who had discussed academic philosophy with me earlier was sitting next to me with his girlfriend, who had arrived in time for dinner. They were chatting about going outside to the car to get him a different shirt because the room was warm and was likely to only get warmer, and I told them, unsolicited, irritated, that once they were in the back room, it was time to quiet down, not to be coming and going. He asked me, in what seemed like an equally irritated tone, "What if we have to go to the bathroom?" People continued to chat casually and loudly, and at some point, Mahmoud came in

and sat down and the room was finally silent. He had a white blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

This portion of the sittings generally begins with an extended period of silence.¹⁴⁸ Silence (*samt*) is a principle that is defined in the *tabaqat* literature as consisting of two parts, outer quiet and the quiet of the heart and mind. “Silence does not pertain exclusively to the tongue but to the heart and all the limbs as well” (Qushayri, 2002, p. 149). This definition aligns, to a certain extent, with my interpretation of the way that silence functions in Mahmoud’s gatherings which works to set a psychological and intellectual space between the present moment and the rest of the day and its activities, I think. It quiets the mind and the body, as well as creating a contemplative tone.

After some time, Mahmoud generally prompts someone to ask a question, and then he will respond at length.¹⁴⁹ The questions and answers will continue for several hours until another silence falls, and then we will ‘sit.’ People will ask questions about learning or dreams or self-hatred, among other things. That evening someone asked about love and Mahmoud responded at length.¹⁵⁰ And then at some point the lights were turned off, and music was turned on. For the next several hours, we sat, unmoving, in the room lit by some streetlights beaming in through the window.

¹⁴⁸ About silence, Sulami conveyed a saying that was attributed to Junayd, that “We founded our teachings on three basic rules: that we only eat when starving, we only sleep when overpowered (by slumber) and we only speak when necessary” (Sulami, 2010, p. 25).

¹⁴⁹ This approach is common in Sufism. In Tehseen Thaver’s short essay that introduces Cemalnur Sargut’s *Beauty and Light: Mystical Discourses by a Contemporary Female Sufi Master* (2017), Thaver describes a similar scenario: “the themes of [Sargut’s post-breakfast] sermons are often determined by specific questions suggested by the students, animated by challenges from their daily lives” (Thaver, p. 17). This approach also aligns with the rules of conduct outlined by Hujwiri, when he indicates that “the rule in speaking is not to speak unless bidden, and then only of the thing that is bidden; and the rule in silence is not to be ignorant or satisfied with ignorance or forgetfulness. The disciple must not interrupt the speech of spiritual directors, or let his personal judgement intrude therein” (Hujwiri, 1999, p. 357).

¹⁵⁰ Students in the classroom and in Mahmoud’s inner circle ask questions about love with frequency. I have witnessed him provide answers based on the context, on the specifics of the question and on aspects that appear to be unsaid as well.

There is no way to tell how much time passes. I often find that the music becomes relentless, and then, somehow, the music finally stops and the sitting ends. Within several minutes, people were out the front door and, in their cars, driving away, with Mahmoud and Rozaneh waving to them from the driveway. That night Mia and I slept on the floor again.

There were two particular Sufi principles and practices related to inner *adab* at play during this evening gathering: spiritual conversation (*sohbet*) and meditation (*mushahada*). I address each one of them here in turn.

Spiritual conversation, or dialogue between a teacher and student, is an essential practice. It is both a transmission and a transaction that provides students and novices the opportunity to engage with their teacher intellectually. These dialogues also rely on an oral tradition of stories in an attempt to help the student move beyond simple, rational understanding of the topic being discussed, to a profound understanding. The Rifa'i Sufi order describes *sohbet* as

a cleansing of the soul and a meeting of the hearts. It is held in total sincerity, respect and trust. Sohbet with the murshid heals, educates and matures the murid.¹⁵¹ Through Sohbet, the murshid works on his murid like a gardener tending to his garden with utmost care and compassion. From the metaphysical to the very physical, Sohbet helps us reflect on our daily lives and our inner states, to guide us in our search for a sense of unity with Allah (Rifai Sufi Order, 2024).

Sohbet, then, can be understood as a practice that engages both the body and the mind. It provides a venue for psychological, intellectual, and emotional intimacy between a Sufi teacher and their student. In the context of this case study, I relate the practice of *sohbet* with another Sufi practice of listening (*sama*).¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Remember that *murshid* is defined as 'teacher', and *murid* is defined as student.

¹⁵² The Sufi whirling practice known as *sama*, was added to the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2005 (UNESCO, 2005). This richly symbolic physical practice is attributed to the Mevlevi Sufi order and to Rumi. In her newest publication, *The Dervishes of the North* (Xavier, 2023), contemporary scholar of Sufism and Islam, Xavier, provides an extensive overview of the making of Sufism in Canada, with a focus on the influence of the Sufi mystic, Rumi. In this book, Xavier describes the *sama* practice as

The act of listening that is taking place in Mahmoud's gathering, and within the context of the spiritual conversation, requires a one-pointed, disciplined focus; an awareness of one's own self and of those who are also in the environment; both of these aspects have the potential to put the listener into a profound, even trance-like state of focus. Contemplation (*mushahada*) is described in the *tabaqat* in relation to God, with Qushayri explaining that in contemplation the Sufi finds "the presence of the Real without any remaining doubt" (Qushayri, 2002, p. 96).¹⁵³ Hujwiri defines contemplation similarly, asserting that "by 'contemplation,' the Sufis mean spiritual vision of God in public and private without asking how or in what manner" (1999, p. 329). These explanations provide what is likely a more advanced variety of contemplation than what was being achieved by any of the novices in Mahmoud's gathering that day, but the practice of meditation is related to that of contemplation.

Meditation (*muraqaba* or *fikra*) is practiced across various religious traditions but is a fundamental Sufi practice and can be conceptually linked to spiritual conversation and listening. Each of these practices require discipline and repetition, but their aim is to produce a type of one-pointed focus, a type of presence in the current moment, and an awareness.

a practice of *zikr* (remembrance of God) and is understood by Sufis to be bidden in the Quran, which asks the reader to remember God constantly. Historically, 'aural stimulation' was used to 'induce altered states,' especially through 'music, poetry and recitation of the Quran,' both in ritual and social contexts [...]. *Sama*, then, is active listening (or sacred audition) with the 'ear of the heart' (Xavier, 2023, pp. 87–88).

Xavier goes on to refer to scholar of Sufism, Leonard Lewisohn's article on sacred music in Islam (1997), that *sama* is "an attitude of reverently listening to music and/or singing of mystical poetry with the intent of increasing awareness and understanding of the divine object described; it is a type of meditation focusing on musical melody, by use of instruments, mystical songs or combining both" (Lewisohn, 1997, p. 4). Xavier and Lewisohn's definitions of *sama* as a practice of listening clarify the practice being described in this chapter, in that the experience underlying the sacred whirling movement as well as the practice or act of listening produce arguably similar effects, which are described in the gathering described here.

¹⁵³ The Sufi principle of contemplation is generally referred to in the *tabaqat* literature in conjunction with two other principles, awareness (*muhadara*) and unveiling (*mukashafa*). I refer to those two principles in chapter 4, "On Storytellers and Stories," in a section titled 'Counterculturalism ('Bad Behaviour) and the Dervish Tradition,' that explores the pedagogical function of Mahmoud's occasionally off-putting behaviour described in that chapter.

In his case study of 21st century Islamic Sufism in Pakistan, Robert Rozehnal explores the history, contemporary cultural milieu, teachings, and practices of the branch of the Chishti Sabiri order. He found that in addition to daily prayers, devotional exercises, and recitations, the more advanced disciples practice both remembrance of God (*zikr*) and meditation. In this context, meditation is primarily described as a visual experience. “As with dreams, disciples view [meditation] as a vehicle for states of consciousness beyond the limits of the rational, discursive mind and the descriptive power of language” (Rozehnal, 2007, p. 196).

In Rozehnal’s example of meditation in the institutionalized Chishti Sabiti context, disciples demonstrate their piety and affirm their faith by proving their devotion to the Sufi path in a variety of ways over time and through relationships and actions. The Chishti Sabiri expression of Sufism is similar to the Sufism that is occurring in this Oakland home, in that both require demonstrations of devotion. Where the Chishti Sabiri disciples must, for example, practice single-pointed meditation, Mahmoud’s community, should they wish to be taught by him, must accept his occasional invitations and perform outer and inner *adab* without much clear direction: they must be observant, thoughtful, and demonstrably committed. The Inayatiyya Sufi order similarly advises a daily meditation practice (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017, p. 47).

In both of these institutionalized environments, disciples are given deeper, more intensive practices once they have shown their commitment to their orders, but how is interest or commitment determined, or how is someone deemed worthy of being invited to Mahmoud and Rozaneh’s house and involved in the sittings? How does someone get involved in these gatherings that are, relatively speaking, pretty intimate? I’ve asked Mahmoud about this, and his response is simple: only people who they like are invited to the house, and only people who

demonstrate a type of awareness of the environment, other people and the flow of the gatherings, will be invited into their home and invited back to join the collective.

All of this comes down to *adab*: how does a person act when they meet Mahmoud and Rozaneh? What kinds of questions do they ask? How do they interact with the people who are around, are they considerate, thoughtful, curious? It may seem simple at first, but these investigations of inner and outer *adab* prove that the answers to these questions are anything but simple.

Conclusion

Adab engages the inner world of the Sufi, that is, the way that they think, their faith and beliefs, their philosophical perspective and approaches, but it also implicates the human being in the social world too. Aspects such as a person's voice and the language they use, the way that they take up space, their awareness of themselves and their environment are all expressions of the Sufi and Sufism itself.

Throughout this very long day, a variety of Sufi practices were enacted. Expressions of companionship (*suhbat*), self-reflection (*muhasaba*), spiritual conversation (*sohbet*) and meditation (*mushahada*). At the foundation of all of these practices is *adab*, which is taught through companionship. Teachings are dispensed verbally, but also by example: a type of exposure therapy. But a few years later, when I was asked by Mahmoud about this particular day, he told me that it had been too long, too difficult. Mahmoud's manifestation of *adab* is based on Persian culture, as well as the Persian expressions of Sufism, because Mahmoud is Persian.

I understood Mahmoud's concession as a recognition that the way the group came together at the house that day lacked outer *adab*. Without a common understanding of how to

act, the glue that holds communities together, gatherings can lack coherence, the general lack of awareness that was manifesting as inappropriately boisterous socializing was equally misguided and lacking in *adab*. The way that I had acted in the morning also was lacking in *adab*, both the inner and outer varieties.

In the next chapter, I build in the concept of *adab* as it relates to social behaviour, but also erudite literature. I build upon this analysis of outer and inner *adab* by investigating the tradition of Sufi storytellers. I examine the way that storytelling methods impact the way that stories are received with a particular emphasis on storytellers subverting expectations as a pedagogical tool. I also explore a number of stories that Mahmoud tells and interpret them historically, socially and metaphysically, to demonstrate that ultimately, the way a story is told is as important as the story itself.

Chapter 5: On Storytellers and Stories

This chapter describes a gathering that was held at a gazebo in Nevada City. This conference brought together seventeen people for two days of lectures and discussions. Using descriptions of my own experiences at the gathering as a frame, I explore the impact that storytellers themselves have on the way that stories can be heard and understood.¹⁵⁴ In the first half of the chapter, I use the case of the Nevada City gathering to contextualize storytellers historically within the Sufi tradition. I also use the Nevada City gathering to demonstrate and analyze Mahmoud's behaviour and approach to storytelling. Specifically, I situate these behaviours historically, as well as in conversation with Sufi principles described in the *tabaqat* literature, relating his behaviour to the tradition of Sufi teachers who use a negative persona as a pedagogical tool.

In the second half of this chapter, I illuminate the history and tradition of stories as pedagogical tools within the Sufi tradition. I begin by recounting Mahmoud's telling of the Sufi story about the four moths, and then explore two methods that can be used to interpret the story: the first being metaphysics and second, a practice sometimes referred to as 'Sufi psychology.'¹⁵⁵ I then explore Mahmoud's telling of a classic Islamic tale about Mulla Nasrudeen losing his keys,¹⁵⁶ and two epics that Mahmoud referred to at the gathering as well, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

¹⁵⁴ There is a massive scholarship on narrative and storytelling in the context of religion and beyond that. While this chapter, like the previous ones, focuses on situating Mahmoud's philosophy, pedagogy and practices within the varied tradition of Sufism, some scholarship that is of particular relevance here is Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort et. al.'s *Religious stories we live by: narrative approaches in theology and religious studies* (2014) and Sarah Iles Johnston's edited volume *Religion: narrating religion* (2017). Some other relevant texts include Stephen Pilaja's *Narrative and religion in the superdiverse city* (2024); Leyla Ozgur Alhassan's *How the Qur'an works: reading sacred narrative* (2023). Additionally, Theodore R. Sarbin's edited volume *Narrative Psychology. The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (1986) provides a number of interesting chapters that explore the relationship between narrative and the science of psychology.

¹⁵⁵ The Sufi story of the Four Moths has been referred to twice previously in this project. The first reference is found in the introductory chapter of this project, where Mahmoud is providing four different definitions for 'Sufism,' and the second reference is made in the chapter "On Lineage and Transmission." I do not provide extensive interpretations for the story in either of these cases, and will be doing so in this chapter.

¹⁵⁶ Mulla Nasrudeen is a fictional character in Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian folklore, known for his wit and wisdom. He is often depicted in anecdotes, stories, and jokes, portraying a wise fool or trickster who uses cleverness and humor, often engaging in absurd activities, all of which ultimately expose moral lessons and

and the previously mentioned book by Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire* (2006).¹⁵⁷

Storytellers

I cleared my schedule when Mahmoud and Rozaneh told me what they had planned. I was intrigued because for the most part I had only listened to Mahmoud's lectures in his classroom and at the house. I had a feeling that this gathering would be different, but I wasn't sure how, except that I had heard that the gazebo where we'd be sitting was beautiful. The drive from Oakland to Nevada City was about two hours long, and a few of the other people I was acquainted with from Mahmoud's classes planned to make the trek and were willing to have me come along.¹⁵⁸

In preparation for the gathering, I'd made a large pot of jeweled rice that had dried fruit and julienned carrots and saffron, butter, cardamom and turmeric. As we made the trek, I sat with the lukewarm pot of rice, the top wrapped in a dishcloth to absorb extra moisture and steam. We were fortunate that one of Mahmoud's long-time students lived near the site of the gathering and had agreed to let us sleep on the floor in the basement of her family home. The springtime drive was rainy and when we arrived at our host's home, we freshened up and then drove another forty minutes to the gazebo where the gathering would be held.

The gazebo was located at the bottom of a narrow dirt driveway, lined with ferns and eucalyptus trees and dogwoods in flower. The dense forest muffled any traffic sounds and after making several hairpin turns, we parked tightly next to a row of cars. Besides the glass gazebo there was a small wooden building with a bathroom and a sauna. The gazebo was owned by a

insights about society and the human condition.

¹⁵⁷ Tweedie was previously mentioned in chapter 1, "On Love," in the section that describes the imbalance of power that exists between a Sufi student and their teacher, and in chapter 2, "On Lineage and Transmission," in the section that describes authority in light of lineage. Additional details about Tweedie are provided in footnotes 31, 52 and 182.

¹⁵⁸ This gathering occurred in April 2018.

woman named Helen, who had known Tweedie. Helen's tangential appearance in Mahmoud's proximity was strangely coincidental: my friend Mia was working as a caretaker and hospice worker, and Helen had hired Mia. As they got to know one another better Helen showed Mia some objects and papers and Mia recognized a photo of Tweedie. Helen confirmed that she is the 'H' that Tweedie refers to in her book, *Daughter of Fire* (2006).¹⁵⁹

This chapter builds on the concept of *adab* described in the previous chapter, in particular the religious and cultural teachings of service and humility. I conclude that the way that a story is told is just as important as the story that is selected to be told. Masterful storytellers, often Sufi teachers in the context of Sufism, are telling stories in a particular way because they want to impart a variety of lessons to their listeners.

When the caravan of cars arrived at the gazebo, the gray evening light was settling. Rozaneh, Olivia and Mahmoud were already there putting food in the fridge and setting up the space, and as we put out chairs and some blankets in a circle, other people began to arrive. Helen had invited some of her friends who, we were told, identified as Sufis. She had also invited a couple who had apparently owned the publishing house that was responsible for publishing Tweedie's book before the Golden Sufi Centre Publishing house. There were others who came too, Mahmoud's previous students, people who had seen the advertisement for the gathering on Facebook, and Mahmoud's father, his brother, and his brother-in-law. Once casual introductions had been made, people had been given cups of tea, and some of the initial nervous energy and excitement had dissipated, people began to sit in the chairs and quiet.

The focus of the gathering was listening to Mahmoud speak, but it seemed to me that he

¹⁵⁹ The information that Mia shared with me was that Helen had spent time with Tweedie when she was in California near the end of her life. Helen's connection with Tweedie was exciting because Mahmoud has been referring to Tweedie's book frequently for more than a decade, and will be further elucidated in the section below on epics.

wasn't entirely comfortable with the attention. There was a long silence as everyone waited for Mahmoud to say something, or someone to say something, and then a young man finally asked a question about learning as a means for transformation. Instead of answering the question, Mahmoud began to speak at length and in detail about his many ex-wives, an addiction to alcohol and drugs, and all of the mistakes he'd made over the years. Those of us who knew him and his family were aware that he'd grown up in a religious environment, and that most, if not all of the stories that he was going on and on about weren't true. But these stories were shocking to hear regardless, and especially so for the uninformed participants who had come with the expectation that they'd get to witness a wise or at least compelling person speaking.

I stifled uncomfortable laughs and looked around the room for reactions. The faces of Mahmoud's family members were unreadable and the energy in the room was shifting from open to discomfort. Helen's friends, the three men who apparently identified as Sufis, were visibly upset. In hindsight, I have guessed that Mahmoud's behaviour was in part related to the guests who self-identified as Sufis, in large part because Mahmoud has said a number of times over the years that to identify as anything spiritual is arrogant. Mahmoud's perspective is supported by many Sufi sayings, for example, "among the requirements of the actualized Sufi is not to beg, not to aggrandize oneself through anything, not to reject a windfall when it is not from a doubtful source, and not to put off one time for another or for any time at all" (Sulami, 1999, p. 226).

Counterculturalism ('Bad' Behaviour) and the Dervish Tradition

Mahmoud's apparently rude behaviour was particularly jarring because when he isn't teaching or answering questions, he can mostly be observed quietly watching things from the margins.¹⁶⁰ But

¹⁶⁰ While I don't highlight cases of Mahmoud's quiet lack of participation in social functions in this project because they are not the subject of this study, the analysis of instances referring to *adab* provides some examples of an antithesis to the rudeness described at the gathering. I explore some aspects of Persian culture and Persian Sufism,

this wasn't the first instance where I'd witnessed Mahmoud speak badly of himself. It is something that he does with relative frequency in the classroom, especially if someone asks him a question that he doesn't want to answer. There are any number of reasons that he might not want to answer a question, but over the years I've seen him respond with ridiculous and off-putting statements when he didn't seem to have the patience to provide an answer or if he seemed to be in a bad mood. In other instances, he would answer in this way and then mention amidst his statements that the person asking the question 'isn't ready' for the answer, or that it wasn't any of their business. He has responded to me in this way on a number of occasions too, "this question isn't for you."¹⁶¹

While Mahmoud's actions and words in the gazebo can most certainly be attributed to his temperament, they can also be historically contextualized in the tradition of the Sufi dervish. While many may associate 'dervishes' with the whirling prayer practice of the Mevlevi Sufi order's 'Whirling Dervishes,' the tradition of Sufi dervishes is also known for an entirely different set of characteristics. Sufi dervishes are known for a lack of affiliation with institutionalized Sufi orders (Knysh, 2000, p. 272) and taking countercultural or more 'rustic' approaches to the Sufi tradition. The term 'wandering' is also often a descriptor for dervishes, 'the wandering dervish.' This qualifier refers to the itinerant lifestyle that many dervishes are

which integrate notions of religious chivalry, service, and humility, suggesting that Sufis, and Persian Sufis in particular, aim to conduct themselves in accordance with particular principles.

¹⁶¹ On the occasions when I've asked Mahmoud why he answers this way sometimes, brusquely or cutting off lines of discussion, he's often equally evasive, but one time he spoke to me about the energy that is required to answer questions. The creativity to draw on more than fifty years of stories, to create analogies that are appropriate for the person who is listening, which requires an understanding of the questioner's cultural background and worldview, knowledge or assumptions about the reason behind their line of questioning. And sometimes people do not ask their questions clearly, or sometimes there is so much anger or frustration behind their question, or impertinence, that an answer would be irrelevant because they do not have the ears to hear anything; nothing can be as loud as the emotions that they are living with in that moment. These factors all impact the ways that Mahmoud responds to questions, and while the Sufi tradition does emphasize qualities such as humility, compassion, and respect for others, the tradition also has a documented history of teachers behaving in ways that could be considered unconventional or seemingly antisocial.

known to have lived (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017, pp. 114–155).¹⁶²

Counterculturalism is found beyond the dervish tradition too. The Persian Sufi teacher and poet Mansour al-Hallaj (d. 922), was executed because of his public exclamation, “I am Truth.” The establishment saw Hallaj’s statement as arrogant and blasphemous, but Hallaj’s apparently brash exclamation was understood by some as an expression of one-ness with God. Sarmad Kashani (d. 1661), a lesser-known Persian figure who converted from Judaism to Islam later in his life, moved to India amidst the Mughal empire and began practicing rituals that were deemed antisocial. He would wander naked, apparently as a symbol of his rejection of worldly attachments and quest for purity. When Kashani’s behaviour was finally deemed too bold he was accused of heresy and apostasy, and executed (Katz, 2000). Rumi and his teacher Shams are also said to have similarly rejected the ‘establishment:’

Neither Shams nor the mature Rumi had much patience with the preoccupations of scholars. Both held that the true purpose of knowledge was to guide people on the path of self-realization, that is, the path of coming to know and love God and to achieve spiritual transformation. Scholarship, even in their time, was too caught up with the outward appearance of knowledge rather than its essence and purpose. More often than not it was considered a means to acquire respect from the community and to earn a nice stipend from a school or a university (Chittick, 2011, p. 12).

Evidently, this countercultural, sometimes incendiary behaviour and perspectives are well-documented across the Sufi tradition.

This countercultural, antiauthoritarian approach taken up by Sufi teachers and storytellers could also be related to the storytellers’ temperament. Temperament is occasionally referred to in Sufi hagiographies and scholarship. Chittick, for example, has written extensively about the spiritual teachings of Sufi masters such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi, and his works contain anecdotes

¹⁶² Mahmoud has never identified himself as a dervish, but his behaviour and religious-philosophical approaches do align his methods with the dervish tradition.

and stories that illuminate the sometimes unconventional temperament and behavior of Sufi teachers (Chittick, 2011, 2013). Similarly, Vincent J. Cornell's *Realm of the Saint: Power and Authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Cornell, 1998) explores the cultural and social dynamics of Sufi communities, including the relationship between Sufi teachers and their students.

The Sufi figures mentioned above express their religiosity in ways that do not prize social norms or expectations. And when Mahmoud speaks badly of himself, as he has been known to do in almost all of the public settings where he is meant to speak eloquently and be taken seriously, he is placing himself within a certain tradition.

The approach of subverting people's expectations has created problems for him in the past though, and continues to deter people. But this is the point. Mahmoud is actively distinguishing between his listeners: the people that get what he's doing get it, and the people that don't. He isn't trying to be the teacher for every person.

Besides placing himself within a particular Sufi tradition, the practice of speaking badly about himself also functions as a pedagogical tool that intended to shock his audience and subvert their expectations. Generally, expectations are a result of actions based on patterns, and the pedagogical aim of Mahmoud's effort was to force people out of those patterns, into the present moment (*waqt*), and to see beyond their expectations.¹⁶³ Being in the present moment, as opposed to living in the constructed world of expectations based on assumptions provides people with the opportunity to see their environment in different or new ways. He was reminding the gathering's attendees that expectations are false narratives which hold people back from

¹⁶³ The edited volume, *How expectancies shape experience* (Kirsch, 1999) provides a relatively recent and useful overview of this fact. In particular, James E. Maddux's first chapter of the edited volume, "Expectancies and the social — cognitive perspective: Basic principles, processes, and variables" (1999) provides an accessible discussion as well as a useful reading list in its bibliography.

experiencing the full possibilities of the present moment. In other words: Mahmoud's behaviour was an acknowledgement and subversion of audience expectations that he 'be' a particular way, e.g. wise or soft-spoken or even well-mannered.

Mahmoud's countercultural behavior might also be understood as a cryptic expression of various Sufi principles referred to in the *tabaqat* literature, such as veiling (*sitr*), unveiling (*mukashafa*) and awareness (*muhadara*).¹⁶⁴ Qushayri defines veiling, as it relates to not experiencing God's self-disclosure, as "a punishment for most people" (2002, p. 95). Whereas awareness and unveiling are expressed in this way: "awareness is presence of heart, which may be produced by the coming together of innumerable small proofs of what is real. It is still behind the veil, even if the heart is present with the overwhelming practice of God. After this disclosure which is presence which has the quality of proof itself" (2002, p. 96). Hujwiri also defines the principles of unveiling and awareness (1999, pp. 373-374). Awareness "refers to the evidence of God's signs, and [unveiling] to the evidence of contemplation" (1999, p. 373).

In the *tabaqat*, Qushayri and Hujwiri define awareness and unveiling in relation to God, but these principles could be interpreted more basically for novices too. Instead of relating awareness and unveiling to God, they could be interpreted to be related psychologically or socially, in relation to a person's capacity to dynamically analyze and discern their context.¹⁶⁵ In the case of Mahmoud's off-putting stories at the Nevada City gathering, his audience's expectations are ultimately a veil which prevents them from seeing what is in front of them. In fact, expectations around a Sufi teacher's behaviour limit a person's ability to fully experience

¹⁶⁴ The Sufi principles of unveiling and awareness are generally expressed in the *tabaqat* literature in conjunction with the concept of contemplation. I investigate the principle of contemplation in chapter 3, "On *Adab* and Companionship" in a section that describes the practice of spiritual conversation and meditation.

¹⁶⁵ Which, in turn, could be understood as a step on the path towards awareness and unveiling in relation to God, as defined in the *tabaqat*.

the teacher who is in front of them, regardless of whether that teacher's behaviour is as expected or unexpected.¹⁶⁶

Mahmoud's conduct can also be understood in the context of 'unknowing,' a term recently coined by Seema Golestaneh, contemporary scholar of Near Eastern studies. In her ethnography of contemporary Sufism in Iran (2023) Golestaneh defines unknowing as an intellectual and spiritual approach to the world that recognizes the limits of human thought as a beginning point rather than an end. Golestaneh explains that while the mode of thought that she classifies as unknowing is often referred to in the context of Sufism as 'gnosis' (*ma'rifat*), this term actually does not encompass the breadth that unknowing does (Golestaneh, 2023, p. 3). Unknowing, rather than gnosis, recognizes the limits of human knowledge in the face of the awesomeness of what Golestaneh refers to as God's esoteric majesty. Mahmoud's behaviour at the Nevada City gathering can be interpreted as an expression of Golestaneh's unknowing concept. He was playing with the limitations of human thought and dismantling them. He was engaging with people's assumptions and, perhaps, specifically with the assumptions of the attendees who publicly identified themselves as Sufis, to see if he could identify what their limitations were.

It is important to recognize the shortcomings of Mahmoud's pedagogical approach described here, too. His behaviour and its implications bring with them their own set of expectations: he expected or hoped that the gatherings' attendees could be there with him in a state of awareness. Aware of the nuances of the Sufi tradition and the ways that it can be expressed, and with the ability to discern what it was that he was doing. He also seemed to

¹⁶⁶ Taking this interpretation further, Mahmoud's conduct could also be understood as an expression of a type of humility too. By acting badly, he is reminding his listeners that despite their expectations he is limited too; he is on the path too.

expect, or at least hope that the people at the gathering would be self-reflective enough to recognize their own patterns of thought. Perhaps he hoped for a kind of internal, psychological and emotional ritual washing that might allow a person to see clearly what is before them. Mahmoud's expectation was not necessarily realistic, and his hope that people show up to be with him without expectations is one that is not necessarily easy or even possible for each person.

The fallout of Mahmoud's behaviour was minimal, all things considered. The people who he appeared to be testing did not return for the second day of the gathering. Anyone who did stay either knew that he was not telling true stories about himself or, one can guess, was comfortable, relatively speaking, with not knowing whether the stories he told were true or not. But what this episode does demonstrate is that the manner in which storytellers tell their stories has an impact on the way that listeners take in, understand and potentially interpret the stories. In the next section I explore some of the stories that were told at the Nevada City gathering, and some of the ways that they, and other stories in Sufism, can be interpreted.

Stories

As a result of the orality of Islam and Sufism, the practice of employing stories, anecdotes and parables as a pedagogical tool has deep historical roots in these traditions.¹⁶⁷ In reference to Rumi's *Masnavi*, Chittick helps situate the practice historically, socially and pedagogically:

when [Muslims] wanted to understand the secret of human embodiment and the nature of the human soul, most of them sought answers from the Sufis. Moreover,

¹⁶⁷ The oral tradition in Islam has been studied extensively. Some relatively recent scholarship that touches on the topic includes Schoeler et al.'s "The oral and the written in early Islam" (2006) which suggests the ways that the written and oral traditions interacted in Muslim societies in the first two centuries of the Hijra; Harald Motzki's edited volume includes a section comparing the orality of the Jewish Torah with the Islamic *Hadith* (Motzki, 2004); and the central argument of Werner Kelber and Paula A. Sanders' edited volume is that the scriptures were originally experienced primarily as an oral phenomenon (2016). Recently, too, Sara Abdel-Latif has published a chapter investigating the Sufi storytelling of three Canadian Sufis (2025).

Sufism had an extremely broad appeal, because its teachers spoke to everyone, not just to scholars, and they offered the means to intensify one's personal engagement with God. In contrast, jurisprudence and Kalam were scholarly pursuits. Jurists, to the extent that they did address the common people, instructed them how to act in accordance with God's commandments. Experts in Kalam had nothing to do with non-experts other than to tell them in rather dogmatic terms what they should think about God. As for Sufi teachers, they explained to both the elite and the commoners how to find God's presence in everyday life (Chittick, 2011, p. 11).

Interpretive Tools

Interpreting stories is the way that the stories become accessible, constructive, and applicable, but it requires experience and insight. There are a number of interpretive tools that can be employed, two of which will be explored in this section and two of them, metaphysics and Sufi psychology, will be described here.

Mahmoud's interpretation of the four moths story incorporates the concept of capacity, for which I provided a definition that relates to intuition. An alternative way to understand intuition is through the metaphysical concepts given to us by French phenomenological philosopher, Henri Corbin.¹⁶⁸ Corbin's numerous works on Sufi philosophy give language to some of the slippery and sublime metaphysical concepts of Sufis like Rumi and Attar. To that end, one of Corbin's important contributions is his writing on the *mundus imaginalis*, or the Imaginal World (Ar. *alam al-mithal*).¹⁶⁹ The *mundus imaginalis* was developed by Suhrawardi, and was reinterpreted by Corbin as a world that

¹⁶⁸ While many scholars of Sufism refers to Henri Corbin's work (Golestaneh, 2023; Murata & Schimmel, 1992; Schimmel, 1975; Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017; Xavier, 2018), critiques of his perspective and approaches have begun to surface more recently (Bostani, 2022; Khoubbin Khoshnazar & Fazeli, 2024) as continental and Orientalist. American scholar of South Asia and Islamic history, Nile Green, provides some context and critiques of Corbin that are useful here. He writes that "Corbin sought to approach Islamic philosophical and mystical thought as a philosopher and thinker. In a world where the subject is examined and taught almost exclusively by historians [...], this inevitably causes conflict. [...] As a philosopher rather than a historian, Corbin sought out only the idea *an sich*, the idea in itself. Unrepentantly ahistorical in his own approach, Corbin believed passionately that ideas are always potentially alive and remained ever suspicious of what he saw as the dustbin of history" (Green, 2005, p. 220).

¹⁶⁹ The *mundus imaginalis* is a term Corbin derived from Islamic mysticism, in particular the works of Suhrawardi and the later Persian tradition.

gives meaning and reality to the visions of prophets, the experiences of mystics [...]. When this world disappears from our philosophy, we become incapable of understanding any of these things. Everything becomes myth or allegory, in the sense of something unreal. Suhrawardi says that this intermediate world between sense-perception and intellective intuition is a world which retains all the spatial extension and color of the physical world, but in a spiritual state (Corbin, 1998, p. 166).¹⁷⁰

The Imaginal Realm, or third realm, is in other words a deeply personal, existential, and ontological third realm or way of understanding. It is somewhere between the material sensory world and the intelligible, spiritual realm and is accessed through the imaginative faculty.¹⁷¹ In this context, the imagination is not related to fantasy or fiction, but should be understood, rather, as a way of perceiving real entities that exist. This third realm helps seekers and Sufis to interpret and understand spiritual texts and symbols. It is where the deeper meanings of religious symbols and metaphors are revealed and understood, hence its connection to intuition and capacity. The metaphysical *mundus imaginalis* third realm refers to the Sufi perspective that understanding can come from the intellect but in other ways too.

Rumi, like Suhrawardi and his commentator Corbin, employ metaphysical concepts extensively as well, many of which are found in Sufi stories. Central to Rumi's work is the complex relationship between the Sufi teacher and their disciple. This relationship is illustrated using a variety of metaphysical characterizations, such as the conceit of the sun and an onlooker. This analogy is particularly appropriate because Rumi's own beloved teacher was named Shams, which translates from Farsi and Arabic to 'Sun,' and tradition has it Rumi was drawn to Shams at

¹⁷⁰ Suhrawardi is mentioned throughout this project, but particularly in chapter 3, "On *Adab* and Companionship," in the section on chivalry and servitude. Some aspects of Suhrawardi's life are also described in footnote 80.

¹⁷¹ Some might describe this way of understanding as the 'instinctual,' but to categorize the Imaginal Realm as purely instinctual secularizes a concept that, in Sufism, straddles one's ability to know and learn experientially, which is also believed to involve divine beneficence, according to Corbin's interpretation of Suhrawardi's philosophy.

the exclusion of all else.¹⁷²

Another of Rumi's characterizations of the Sufi teacher and their disciple is described in book three of his *Masnavi*, in the story of a chickpea. In the story, the chickpea is put in a pot of hot water, and when it begins to boil it asks the one who is cooking 'Why are you doing this to me? Why are you setting me on fire?' The one who is cooking the chickpea responds,

boil nicely and don't jump away from one who makes the fire.
I do not boil you because you are hateful to me:
nay, it is that you may get taste and savoir,
So that you may become nutriment and mingle with the spirit:
this affliction of yours is not on account of being despised (Rumi, 2013, p. 252).

This theological allegory describes the work of the Sufi teacher and the student's resistance to the pain of transformation that occurs on the Sufi path as the student and their ego are refined.

The story also suggests that transformation is painful, demands time (simmering) and cannot be done on one's own: each of us requires a cook to contain the spirited chickpeas from escaping.

The heart is another metaphysical concept that Rumi and other Sufis work within their poetry and philosophy and that shows up in Sufi stories. Chittick illuminates the distinctions between the Heart, the Spirit and the Intellect in Rumi's metaphysics by providing insights into their distinct roles in Sufism's spiritual journey (Rumi & Chittick, 1983, pp. 30–39). He explains that the spirit (Ar. *ruh*) is understood as the divine spark within each human being that originates from God, and how Rumi views the spirit as the essence of human identity and the source of spiritual longing and aspiration. Chittick links the intellect (Ar. *aql*) with rational understanding and discernment, and describes how Rumi emphasized that true spiritual knowledge transcends the limitations of intellectual reasoning; that spiritual knowledge requires a direct experience of the divine that transcends the intellect and is grasped through the heart (Ar. *qalb*). And the heart,

¹⁷² The way that a flower's face follows the sun as it moves through the sky. The Sufi teacher is also described sometimes as the moon, which reflects the light and wisdom of the sun, meant to represent God.

in Sufism, is understood as the seat of spiritual consciousness or the center of human existence. Chittick clarifies Rumi's teaching that the heart is not merely a physical organ but a locus of divine presence within each individual. The heart is seen as the faculty through which one experiences spiritual insights, intuition, and divine love. It is through the purification and opening of the heart that one can attain union with the Divine.¹⁷³

The Sufi metaphysical understanding of the heart is related to many other concepts, but of particular relevance here is the concept of transformation. Transformation is sometimes described in the Sufi understanding as a process initiated by love, but which creates incredible pain, loneliness and alienation. These attributes are commonly understood as negative ones, but in Sufism, the transformational process, i.e. being cooked like a chickpea, all mean that a seeker is getting close to their ultimate aim.

Ultimately, an ability to engage with the metaphysical level of Sufi stories, such as by understanding the idea of the *mundus imaginalis* and the metaphysical symbolism of such concepts as the sun, heart and even a chickpea in a pot of hot water allow the listener to delve deeper into the stories and interpret spiritual aspects as well.

Besides using metaphysical understandings to interpret stories, teaching stories can also be interpreted using a methodology that is currently referred to as 'Sufi psychology.'¹⁷⁴ One

¹⁷³ Chittick's analysis of Rumi metaphysics of the heart are elaborated on by one of his students, Muhammad Rustom in an article titled "The Metaphysics of the Heart in the Sufi Doctrine of Rumi" (2008). In this text, Rustom examines Rumi's core metaphysical teachings on the heart as a mirror that needs to be shined in order to reflect God's image back to itself. This explanation carries similarities to the teacher as the moon or the sun described above.

¹⁷⁴ Sufi psychology has been developed in various Sufi orders in different ways over the years. It is often related to the concept of the *nafs*, referred to in chapter 4, "On *Adab* and Companionship," in the section on inner *adab*. M.T.O., the Sufi order described in chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission," has recently published a number of pieces about Sufi psychology. Laleh Bakhtiar is another scholar of Sufism who has written on Sufi psychology, referring to it as 'traditional psychology' in a three-part volume that aims to demonstrate the origins of the Enneagram as rooted in Sufism. The first of the three volumes is called *Traditional Psychoethics and Personality Paradigm* (1993). Another figure who has written on subjects related to Sufi psychology is Idries Shah, the 19th century British personality.

scholar of Sufism refers to Sufi psychology as ‘traditional psychology’ or ‘psychoethics’ and defines it in relation to balance. “Balancing ourselves comes from disciplining our animal qualities, our passions and nurturing our angelic energies or reasoning abilities according to traditional psychology. When we have succeeded in doing this, we are balanced, centered” (Bakhtiar, 1996, 6). She also suggests that “self-purification, the goal of the commitment to inner change in traditional psychology, is effected when our animal energy of avoidance of harm disciplines our attraction to pleasure” (Bakhtiar, 1996, p. 6).

Over the centuries, Sufi masters have developed sophisticated methods for understanding and navigating the complexities of the mind and emotions, drawing upon insights from the Qur’an, *Hadith*, and the teachings of early Sufis. ‘Sufi psychology’ is a modern term that applies the words of the Prophet Muhammad’s cousin Amir al Mo’menin Ali, “Whoever sets right his inward self, God sets right his outward self” (Wilcox, 2020, p. 2301).¹⁷⁵

The principles that are referred to today as ‘Sufi psychology’ have been refined over the course of 1400 years and support the Sufi’s spiritual aims. Sufi psychology is meant to integrate the spiritual, emotional and intellectual dimensions of the human experience, leading to a deeper understanding of oneself. This practice is based on the premise that human beings’ identities are formed primarily through identification with external patterns, such as life experiences and acquired knowledge, external/imposed expectations and societal roles. These patterns become the basis for a human being’s ego and identity which, according to Sufi psychology and Sufi beliefs, distract the human being from their true self, aims, and connection to God. In Sufism,

¹⁷⁵ Carl Ernst emphasizes that Sufism provides a rich framework for understanding the human psyche and spiritual development, clarifying that Sufi psychology draws upon the teachings of Sufi masters and the wisdom of Islamic mysticism to offer profound insights into the inner workings of the mind, emotions, and soul (Wilcox, 2020). The ‘outward self’ that Wilcox refers to here can be understood as the social expressions of the Prophet Muhammad’s teachings. In other words, if a person thinks well for the most part, they will more than likely also act well.

this disconnection and lack of awareness is said to produce a sense of separation and longing, the feeling of being entrapped.

This methodological approach to interpreting stories employs Sufi teachings and practices to illuminate and refine the spiritual aspects of the human psyche. In the context of interpreting stories, Sufi psychology may support improved self-reflection and self-awareness so that a disciple might, for example, consider why a teacher would be telling them a particular story. The marriage of Sufi psychology and teaching stories often occurs in the context of the Teacher-Student relationship. The Sufi teacher, who is further ahead on the Sufi path, the journey of self-knowledge and reflection, instructs the disciple in the science of exploring one's own being and the vast, infinite knowledge within. And while not everyone has the capacity to attain unification and at-oneness, any progress is beneficial (Wilcox, 2020).¹⁷⁶

As indicated above, interpreting stories requires experience and capacity, but there is another side to storytelling: that of the storyteller. A Sufi teacher must be adept to have the capacity to select a story for a particular disciple based on their needs in that moment, that aligns with the student's capacity to self-reflect and investigate using these tools or others like them. To choose a story that would be appropriate for any particular context or the application of particular interpretive tools, a storyteller would require access to a number of aspects. For example, they would need to have a vast repertoire of stories, the context and history of those stories and the metaphysical or psychological concepts that would be extracted from them.

¹⁷⁶ Sufi practices such as meditation, dhikr (remembrance of God), are some of the spiritual exercises that work alongside Sufi psychology to purify the heart, cultivate virtues, and promote self-awareness and self-reflection. These practices, when exercised within the context of Sufi psychology, can promote inner peace, personal growth, and spiritual fulfillment. This psychological approach encompasses the inner dimensions of the human psyche, and emphasizes the potential that the practice has in promoting self-awareness and self-reflection (Ernst, 1997, 2003).

The Four Moths

After speaking truly at length about his many apparent faults, at some point, Mahmoud finally stopped describing his past and began to answer the young man's question about learning and transformation. But for anyone who was listening carefully, when Mahmoud began telling the Sufi story of the four moths, Mahmoud's answer only made the gathering more awkward.

One night at dusk, standing at the top of the tallest spire in the land, the king of the moths noticed a light in the distance. Curious, he summoned his four wisest citizens and showed them the light. Then he asked them to journey to it and return with its knowledge to enrich the kingdom. At their king's behest, each of the four moths left the kingdom in succession to investigate. The first moth returned with tales of a light hitherto unknown: beautiful and ethereal; the king was impressed but wanted to know more. The second moth returned recounting a heat as warming as it was illuminating. The third moth came back singed, describing the pain and the smell of burning when one moved too close to the light source. The king was inspired by this new physical element and excitedly sent out the fourth moth. The king waited and waited for the fourth moth to return, but weeks passed and then months, with no word and no sign.

While the origins of this well-known Sufi story are not entirely clear, it has been recounted and interpreted over the centuries by scholars and Sufis alike. Such Sufis as Rumi, Attar and Ibn Arabi have also all written about themes that appear in this story, themes such as longing, transformation, and union with the divine, but in this story, the four moths represent four seekers, each one trying to make their way to God: seeking annihilation, a reprieve from the duality of the physical world. Each one, in turn, makes their way to the light (Attar, 2011, pp. 221–222; Ibn Arabi, 2009; Schimmel, 1993, pp. 24, 98, 111).

When Mahmoud interprets this story, he will sometimes describe the four moths in the following way: the first moth who sees and then reports back on the light only has the capacity to understand how it looks. Perhaps this kind of seeker would be analogous to a person who reads sacred texts. The second moth who experiences the light's warmth could be understood as

someone who reads sacred texts and attends sacred gatherings, but when they leave those gatherings, their life remains unchanged. And the third moth who gets burnt might be understood as a person who reads and attends gatherings, as well as participating in rituals on their own, but these practices do not change their psychology or the way they function in the world.

Whereas the fourth moth who becomes consumed by the flame is a seeker who becomes absorbed to the point that their philosophy of life and perspectives are all touched and adjusted by a set of ideas. This person is changed by their interaction with fire, which is beautiful and compelling; it warms us and lights the darkness, but it is also dangerous and consuming; it can create agony and reduce what once was, to ash. This annihilation (*fana*) is important because it demonstrates a willingness to surrender one's assumptions, beliefs and perspectives, and to extinguish the ego in order to become nothing before God. If the ultimate goal of the Sufi is annihilation in God, only the moth who burnt up in the flame and never returned to the kingdom attained the desired end.

Mahmoud once told another version of the story where each of the moths came back and wrote a book about their experiences, and each of these books created a following. With time, the followers of each of the sects that were created because of each of these books, fought and destroyed one another. And in another version still, the king kills each of the three seekers after they come back because he understands that they fundamentally misunderstood the light in the distance, and does not want them to share wrong information, which has the potential to create division and strife. In a conversation in November 2021, he described the four seekers to me in greater detail:

You're either looking at the fire from a distance; you're close enough to experience the heat; you're close enough to have parts of your body burnt; or you're so close that the fire ultimately consumes you. But it can be a gradual process too: one that begins with looking, and getting closer, and feeling the heat,

and getting burnt and eventually being annihilated by the fire. The people who stand outside and look at the fire, though, have one perspective, and they can't really have a friendship with the people who get burnt or consumed, because the people who get parts of them burnt, they get heartbroken; they're confused, they're scarred. As long as you're just getting the warmth of the fire, you'll just say positive things. It's when you get burnt that you begin to say negative things. Each type of person has a different language, a different awareness. The people that exist in the fourth group know who's been consumed by fire, or not. They just know (Malamatian, November 18, 2021).

These four moths represent different archetypes, and each of these archetypes has a different kind of understanding of themselves, the world, and the religious philosophy that they have been exposed to. Further, Mahmoud's interpretation of the story suggests that communication between the archetypes is almost impossible because their experiences are profoundly different. What each of the moths does have in common though, is effort and desire. These components are just expressed differently.

Qushayri's *tabaqat* defines this effort as striving (*mujahadah*), and quotes one Islamic philosopher as having said, "If someone beautifies his outer being by struggling against the passions of his ego, God will beautify his inner being with the vision of Him. God Most High said, '*Those who struggle for Us we will certainly guide in Our ways*' (29:69)" (2002, p. 119). Another philosopher tells the following story,

[for] twelve years I was the blacksmith of my ego and for five years the mirror of my heart. One year I was looking between the two of them and there around my waist was an obvious belt of dualism! So for twelve years I worked to cut it. Then I looked again, and inside me was another belt of dualism. So I worked to cut that. For five years I looked for how it could be done and it was revealed to me. Then I looked at the people, and saw them to be dead. So I said 'God is Greater' (2002, p. 119).

These Islamic philosophers clarify the ways that effort is expressed and expended in Sufism. One must make efforts towards the desired end and trust, or have faith, that God will recognize those

efforts. Sulami describes this process similarly, as “[striving] to recognize the inner voices inspiring [your] heart (*dawa 'i*) and [pursuing] in every moment the *adab* of what the inner voice of that moment inspires [you] to do” (Sulami, 2010, p. 52). These definitions reflect the efforts of the moths, but do not account for the varieties of effort that may be possible. This is where the story of the four moths can be useful.

Besides describing the limitations of efforts, the story of the four moths illustrates the concept of capacity, which can be understood as the idea that each person has their personal limitations that cannot be overcome. Capacity refers to the maximum amount that can be produced or contained and is generally referred to in the physical sense: the capacity of a cup, or of a bag. The idea of capacity can also be used in reference to a person’s intellectual strengths: one person has immense capacities in the Humanities, while another person has immense gifts and capacities in Mathematics. But the concept of capacity is also used in an esoteric context to refer to each person’s ability to comprehend and absorb more subtle things like teachings and ideas, cultural sensibilities, and perhaps also intangible, unnameable spiritual aspects beyond the human beings’ grasp. One study examines how the human heart informs the brain, concluding that when the heart’s rhythm becomes stable and coherent, through emotional regulation and meditation, the human body becomes receptive (McCraty & Zayas, 2014, p. 6).

This receptivity can be understood as one of the many kinds of intuition.¹⁷⁷ While there is intuition on the mental level that works by processing information consciously, another kind of intuition doesn’t depend “on sensation, feeling, or thought related to a specific-domain problem or situation. It is such a ‘gift’ to receive prepackages of information from somewhere” (Aqil & Mujib, 2022, p. 15). Within the context of Sufism, I interpret this variety of intuition as

¹⁷⁷ I also explore the concept of intuition in Sufism and more broadly in chapter 1, “On Lineage and Transmission,” with reference to Mahmoud’s teacher.

connected to the concept of esoteric or spiritual ‘capacity:’ where the ears of the head hear the sounds of the physical world, the ears of the heart can, if attuned, be open to the ‘prepackages’ described here.¹⁷⁸ And this capacity of the heart to hear is dependent upon the human being’s own capacity to be open and receive.

And so what makes the story of the Four Moths difficult to hear, and what made its telling at the Nevada City gathering awkward, is its dismissal of the efforts that individuals make on the spiritual path, in favor of blind passion, intensity and fervor. The story can be understood to be saying that, ultimately, efforts made on the Sufi path to understand oneself or learn and change are futile because without the appropriate capacity for these things, the seeker cannot achieve the desired aim. As such, if this story is heard with any self-awareness, it is an acid poured on the ego: you can make efforts, you can desire, you can make a good show of understanding and people can believe you but only the chosen few will get where they’re trying to go.

Mahmoud’s interpretation of the story of the four moths is an indirect articulation of his perspectives on the transformation of the self. Based on his comments, one can discern that in order to be transformed, one must destroy or lose or stop believing in ideas that had previously been held in order to make room for something new. This idea reflects the Sufi notion of annihilation of the self that is described in some detail in chapter 2, in the section on annihilation, but I have heard, relatedly, Mahmoud answer questions about change in his college classroom using various Biblical references. One that he refers to with some degree of regularity is the saying attributed to Jesus that one cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24), which he often

¹⁷⁸ The hearts of some Sufi masters or teachers or adepts may be understood to have a different kind of capacity to hear than the ears of the head, according to Sufi literature. This belief can be related to the *tabaqat* terms referred to and defined in previous sections, such as unveiling, awareness, contemplation and vigilance, for example.

interprets in the moment, saying that individuals can hold their own beliefs or learn his, but holding both is near impossible.

Mahmoud's telling of the story of the four moths at the Nevada City gathering was meant to push each of us out of our comfort zones so that we could reflect on our deficiencies. Perhaps we might use metaphysics to interpret the story, or some form of psychology, or another means of interpretation, but the intent as I understood it, was that we might face ourselves and continue our efforts in learning. And so, after Mahmoud had discussed the story of the four moths at length, there were some moments of silence. We began to be aware of how much time had passed with the realization that the once blue gray evening light outside had been replaced with pitch black. The air in the gazebo had chilled, and eventually some of the older women began to head to the small adjoining kitchen to warm up plates of food and turn on the electric kettle to boil water for tea. The jeweled rice that I had so carefully made that morning, which seemed like days ago at that point, was turned over onto a plate, and I cried out with joy to see that the rice at the bottom of the pot had successfully turned into a *tahdig*, a crispy rice in Persian.

People filled their plates with salad and cookies and rice and pasta with tomato sauce and gathered in small groups to eat and drink and chat, and then slowly they began to leave. Rozaneh got in the car to leave with the children, and one of the van's tires had settled into a pit of wet earth so I joined a few men to push it out while she tapped the gas pedal until she was able to back out. I scraped my knee on a rock and bled through my skirt, but eventually all of the folks I didn't know left, and I got in a car with the women I'd driven up with and headed back to our host's house. We slept in a room in the basement on various cots and air mattresses.

Mulla Nasrudeen

I felt hung over when I woke up the next morning on a mattress in Camilla's basement. Over the

years I'd spent with these people, I'd learned that this sensation wasn't abnormal after evenings of intense discussion and that black tea with several teaspoons of sugar helped. We all drank our tea and then got back in the cars to drive to the gazebo for the second and final day of the gathering.

It was misty and raining when we arrived around 10:30 am, and it was easy to see that not everyone had returned for the second day. Notably, Helen's three friends, the self-proclaimed Sufis, were not present. This was almost certainly due to the way that Mahmoud had been describing himself on the previous day. But there was a soft sense of familiarity between the attendees on that second morning which comes from recognizing people who have had a shared experience.

We drank more tea that Rozaneh had made before we'd arrived and ate pastries and fruit and began to find seats on the floor amidst small talk and greetings. On the second morning Mahmoud seemed more open and the talk began with an Islamic story about Mulla Nasrudeen when he lost keys.

One night a man was walking home from a gathering and came across his neighbor rustling around in the bushes between their two homes. He asked him, "What are you doing? It's pitch black out," and the neighbor told him that he lost his keys, and so the men continued the search together. Searching in the flower beds, and on the driveway, in the grass of the vast lawn and in the compost heap. Finally, the first man asked his neighbor, "Where did you leave the keys?" and the man responded, "In the house." The first man was baffled and frustrated, "So why don't we go look in there?" and his neighbors responded, "Because it's too dark."

Mulla Nasrudeen is a fictional character in Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and South Asian folklore. He is often portrayed as a wise fool or trickster who engages in absurd activities, all of which ultimately expose moral lessons and insights about society and the human condition. This well-known story about the lost keys and looking for them in the dark is no different. At this

gathering and in the intervening years since, Mahmoud has clarified various components of the story, including that in this story, Mulla, the man who is searching, can be understood as a seeker, and the keys are Truth, or God, or understanding, an ultimate aim of some kind.

In the story that Mahmoud told, there are two types of darkness: there is the literal darkness that can be found outside at night which makes it impossible to see or find anything; the second darkness is the one that exists within a human being, which is symbolic for a lack of self-understanding. This second darkness makes it impossible for someone to learn about themselves by seeing themselves and other things in different ways. If a person lacks self-understanding and also is in the dark, i.e. does not have the capacity to reflect or an openness of spirit that would allow them to change their minds about their previously held beliefs, they are in the dark. In another context I heard Mahmoud express disdain for the story too:

The story suggests that someone should be able to look within, to illuminate their own homes, and that it's ridiculous to be looking outside in the dark. But you can't expect someone to be able to find anything in themselves. They should be looking for someone outside of themselves, a keymaster who holds a lot of keys and who can open doors for them; windows and perspectives (Malamatian, November 26, 2023).

In Mahmoud's interpretation, the keymaster represents a teacher who can guide the way by providing a perspective that is only possible when one person looks with clear eyes at another's deficiencies.

This Mulla Nasrudeen story is told in other contexts too, as a means of helping people understand and navigate life's complexities (Mijares, 2015; Naji & Hashim, 2017; Shahrukh Husain, 2011). For example, in Gabor Maté's text on the relationship between stress and disease, *When the Body Says No: The Hidden Cost of Stress* (2004), he tells the story in a section that explores methods for healing. He is emphasizing the importance of what he refers to as the 'creative self' in the healing process, and he notes that

Health rests on three pillars: the body, the psyche and the spirit connection. To ignore any one of them is to invite imbalance and dis-ease. When it comes to healing, if we look only in the easy places, we usually find what Nasrudeen and his neighbours found under the street light: *nothing*. Nasrudeen, in his role as fool, did not know that. In his role as sage and teacher, he did. Nasrudeen, fool and sage, exists in all of us (Maté, 2004, p. 281).

Maté's reference to Mulla Nasrudeen emphasizes the relationship between the spirit, the mind, and the physical body. The path to healing is not necessarily linear and, he says, requires searching in darkneses. This moral is similar to that described in the first of Mahmoud's interpretations above. Nasrudeen stories can be interpreted and told in a number of ways or emphasizing various elements. When Mahmoud tells these stories he will often emphasize their irony and humour.

Nasrudeen's persona is based around irony, the unexpected, but also light-heartedness. When these stories are told aloud there is something about their absurdity, bordering on nonsense, that can create spaces for learning. The absurdity of the Nasrudeen stories allow the listener to reflect on the absurdity of human life.¹⁷⁹

This type of humour is a known component of the Sufi tradition and could arguably be a necessary ingredient on the Sufi path. Humour can be a powerful tool in the learning process where storytelling is at play (Zebiri, 2012) because it implies "finding pleasure in the incongruous and paradoxical" (Bellini, 2004, p. iv). When individuals are working to refine their ways of thinking and being the world, they will invariably begin to closely examine everything around them, and through this action, begin to see experiences and patterns that 'don't make sense.' How could the child of a pious Sufi develop an incurable disease? Why would someone from the Sufi community who is in a good marriage and practices gratitude and prayer also be

¹⁷⁹ This space of humour also refers to Golestaneh's concept, unknowing, defined in the section above, 'Subverting Expectations and Unveiling.'

infertile? What about the generous family whose home gets broken into and robbed? On the other hand, how is it that for some people life seems to be easy, with all good things lined up in front of them?

These practical existential questions cannot be answered by human beings, and for some Sufis this limitation, this space of ‘Unknowing’ (Golestaneh, 2023) is a reference to God. These existential questions point us to, for lack of a better term, God’s territory. Because this void of understanding is with us at all times in the process of learning on the Sufi path; because there is so much in this life that is unknown, humour and light-heartedness can certainly be understood as helpful ingredients for surviving in the constant state of Unknowing. But more simply, humour can also be a tool to lighten difficult situations and conversations.

Most often, I have witnessed humour arise amidst moments of despair and their aftermath. At the Sufi community’s gatherings that he hosts and in the classroom at the school where he teaches, when students or attendees ask about heartbreak or family problems, Mahmoud will almost always use humour to bring levity to the answers that he provides.

Practically speaking, given the limits of human knowledge, light-heartedness is an extremely logical response to these limitations. If, in life, human beings are constantly running up against the limits of their control and understanding, is humour not a rational and reasonable response, when the alternative, depression, is paralyzing? The saying that a person can either approach life’s fluxes with despair or a resigned acceptance expressed through laughter (tears or laughter) is a fitting expression in the context of Sufism as well. The Mulla Nasrudeen stories are helpful tools for bringing humour into answers to questions that are complex and difficult, including on that second day of the Nevada City gathering.

After the morning’s discussion of the Mulla Nasrudeen story, Mahmoud suggested a

break for coffee. People began circulating and a young man I had met for the first time the day before began speaking with Mahmoud intensely and at length. After about ten minutes I went to insert myself because I guessed that Mahmoud might need a break after speaking for almost two hours during that first session. Mahmoud excused himself to get some coffee and I led the young man out onto the narrow deck that lines the outside gazebo. He told me about how he used to attend Mahmoud's classes and how it was for him, and how he works at a coffee shop now. Eventually we finished our drinks, and shortly thereafter everyone sat down for the final portion of the gathering. Mahmoud asked if there were any questions. In the following hours he responded clearly and directly to the questions that were asked, mostly about *the Epic of Gilgamesh*. One person asked, "Would you talk about the love between Gilgamesh and Enkidu?"

Epics

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is another important story in Mahmoud's arsenal of teaching stories. Originating 3000 years ago in what is modern-day Iraq, the epic is thought to be humankind's oldest story (Mitchell, 2004, p. 1). The scrolls containing the epic about one of Uruk's ancient historical kings were found by archaeologists who excavated the library of King Ashurbanipal (Helle, 2021, p. vii). The *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of a king who was half-man, half-god and so terrible to the people in his kingdom that they pleaded with the gods to give them some relief. Upon hearing these prayers, the gods created Enkidu, a man who would be equal to Gilgamesh in strength and beauty, and sent him to Uruk. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu met they realized their equality in strength and in all things and became best friends.

When Mahmoud tells the story, he emphasizes that Enkidu was a teacher for Gilgamesh. After Enkidu showed up, Gilgamesh was tempered, in a sense, or was able to focus his strength into their shared journeys and adventures. Enkidu's presence changed Gilgamesh. But Enkidu's death was the true catalyst for Gilgamesh to begin to ask existential questions and search

fervently for their answers.

Mahmoud has often said, ‘epics have everything.’ I have heard him expand on this a number of times, explaining that they describe love, death, transformation, they ask profound questions and leave room for the answers to be discovered. In other words, these texts provide room for retelling and interpretation. Contemporary scholar of religion, Karen Armstrong explains that myths and stories like *Gilgamesh* describe an event which, in some sense, happened once, but which also happens all the time (2022, pp. 20-22). This is supported by the historical context. *Gilgamesh* was originally an oral tale that was finally written down in the very early years in the history of literacy, when writing was transforming from a tool of commerce into a tool with more nuance that served the conceptual needs of social institutions and bureaucracies (*Gilgamesh*, 2012, p. xxiv).¹⁸⁰ Ultimately, *Gilgamesh* is a story that would lay the foundation for all of humanity’s epics, including stories in the Bible, the Persian epic the *Shah-na-meh*, and the Arabian *1001 Nights*.¹⁸¹

Epics like *Gilgamesh* and myths allow us to go beyond the chaotic flux of historical events to what is timeless in human life, helping us glimpse the stable core of reality. They are also rooted in what we call the unconscious mind. Epics are an ancient form of psychology. When people told tales of heroes descending into the underworld, struggling through labyrinths or fighting with monsters, they were bringing to light fears and desires from the obscure regions

¹⁸⁰ I go into more detail about the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in this project’s conclusion.

¹⁸¹ Some recent scholarship on the evolution of epic form includes Bates’ *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (2010), which surveys over four thousand years of epic poetry from the Babylonian Epic of *Gilgamesh* to Derek Walcott’s postcolonial *Omeros* (Walcott, 1990). And some scholars who have worked to highlight the ways that *Gilgamesh* has influenced epics and stories include Esther J. Hamori explores the parallels between the *Gilgamesh* story and the story of Jacob in the Bible (Gen 32:23–33) (2011); Tommaso Tesei highlights the portions of the Alexander and the Fountain of Life that employ themes from *Gilgamesh* (2010); Stephanie Dalley (1991) refers to the connections between the *Arabian Nights* epic and *Gilgamesh*; and Louise Pryke (2019) points to even more recent epic stories that build on *Gilgamesh*’s stories (200-210), including reminding us of the Star Trek Next Generation episode titled *Darmok* (Roddenberry et al. & Kolbe, 1991) in which the character Jean Luc Picard, played by Patrick Stewart tells the story of *Gilgamesh*.

of the subconscious mind, which is not accessible by purely local investigation but has a profound effect on our experience and behaviour. Epics and myths cannot be supported by rational proof; their insights are intuitive, like those of art and poetry (Armstrong, 2022, pp. 21–22).

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, like the myths that Armstrong is pointing to, touches on fundamental (as well as existential) themes relating to the human condition including death and loss, arrogance and acceptance. Because of the question that was posed to him at the Nevada City gathering, the theme from the Gilgamesh story that Mahmoud focused on was love and the Teacher-Student relationship as a lens to explore the ways that Gilgamesh and Enkidu interact. What he was drawing from the story at the time was the deep connection between a trusted teacher and an open-hearted seeker and the fact that it allows the teacher to come to know the subtle qualities of the seeker, with the aim of pointing them in the direction of the most brutal, honest self-reflection. This self-reflection might lead the seeker to revelations, and further along the Sufi path.

At the gathering, the question about love between the two principal characters in the epic and the ways that it can be interpreted as a transformative relationship also gave Mahmoud the opportunity to discuss the Teacher-Student, pedagogical relationship more broadly. In the context of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Mahmoud explored how the relationship has similar elements to Plato's relationship with Socrates. These two friendships function similarly, in that Enkidu's friendship with Gilgamesh created fundamental changes in the way that Gilgamesh thought about himself and the world. Gilgamesh was permanently changed as a result of their having met.

This analysis served as a segue for Mahmoud to move to the final topic of the gathering,

Tweedie's story described in *Daughter of Fire* (2006).¹⁸² This epic describes almost a decade of a relationship between a Sufi student, Tweedie, and her Indian Naqshbandiyya-Mujadiddiya Sufi teacher, Bhai Sahib.¹⁸³ While Tweedie's massive book has not been officially referred to as an epic anywhere, I suggest that it fits some of the criteria as being an epic. In the first chapter of his text *The Idea of Epic* (1991), 20th century scholar J. B. Hainsworth explores the concept of epics in detail and some of the characteristics that would fit in this case include eulogy which "implies the hero whose successful struggles are celebrated" (1991, p. 5); a non-magical hero with moral strength who is capable of development and refinement, and who must rely on their own strength and wits to fight against monsters or natural forces. I am using the label of 'epic' loosely and creatively, but the characteristics of epics that Hainsworth's work covers does make a case for Tweedie's text to live if not within the genre then adjacent to it.

Over the course of eight hundred pages, Tweedie describes the emotional, psychological, practical, and spiritual aspects of Tweedie's training with her teacher. This diary, written from Tweedie's perspective, includes direct teachings from her teacher, rendered in bold script. It is

¹⁸² This book serves as a manual of sorts. It provides a clear depiction of what is possible between a Sufi teacher and student. It demonstrates the type of respect, love, and even submission that is required to learn the ways of a religious system from another person. The difference between the training that goes on between Tweedie and her teacher, and the type of teaching that Mahmoud does is that Bhai Sahib, Tweedie's teacher, has a publicly known spiritual teaching practice and Mahmoud does not. Further, Bhai Sahib works explicitly on the spirit and the souls of his students, whereas in my experience, Mahmoud is better known for advice and work on the way that people understand their physical life. This is not to say that he does not engage with people on the spiritual level, rather that his approach is extremely practical and 'of this world.' This may be evidence of the two different contexts. While Bhai Sahib is a Sufi teacher situated in 1950s Kanpur, India, Mahmoud is teaching in 21st century Oakland. The former context has deeply religious, traditional roots that date back thousands of years, whereas the latter context is less than 250 years old. Bhai Sahib is working with students who have a cultural foundation to understand the Sufi spiritual path, whereas novices in Oakland, today, regardless of their background, race, age, or life experiences, are subject to the forces of American individualism, consumerism and capitalism, and contemporary technologies, all of which serve as profound distractions on top of the timeless obligations of life such as family life and work. Where Bhai Sahib is using tools such as meditation, one of Mahmoud's primary teaching tools is Maslow's hierarchy to hammer home the notion that without the foundations of stable physical life, good relationships and a job that pays for one's needs, spiritual attainment is literally an impossible, if not an absurd goal for most people. And yet, he shares this book with people and recommends it.

¹⁸³ The relationship between the Sufi student and teacher is also referred to in the chapters "On Lineage and Transmission" and "On *Adab* and Companionship."

illuminating, but it is also repetitive, and sometimes boring, but these apparently negative qualities are part of the book's unique significance. Tweedie's descriptions of various types of suffering, and of the depth of love she has for her teacher, for example, are many.

I'd heard from Rozaneh that for several years Mahmoud had given out copies of *Daughter of Fire* (2006) to people who had been interested in his classes, but this practice had ended before I met their family -Mahmoud ran out of copies. In a conversation with him in November 2021, I asked him when he had first encountered the book.

I had a friend named Jean Coffee, who I met through a family friend. She was very good friends with Mohammad and his wife. When Jean was going through a divorce, our friend suggested she come to my parents' house. We became good friends and she began coming to the car wash three or four times a week. One day she brought me *Daughter of Fire*. There was a picture of this woman on the book cover, and this was a time where I didn't enjoy people putting their pictures on book covers, and anything that said 'Sufi' I would just walk away from. For me, I think, way back then... it was far too sacred a word to just be put out there like that. So I just kind of laughed at the book and at Jean. But later, when I had a gift certificate to Barnes and Noble, I remember walking the store aisles. Some books were a hundred pages and they cost twenty or twenty-five dollars. Then I saw *Daughter of Fire*, and it was twenty dollars for about nine hundred pages. I remember thinking that I might as well buy the biggest book. When I finally read it I really liked the book so I called the Golden Sufi Centre and told them that I teach and would like to get the books for my class. I asked them if they would give me a discount, and they ended up giving me damaged copies for five dollars each, so I bought about fifty books. I gave all of them away freely. So it was through Jean that the book was introduced. I haven't spoken with her in a long time (Malamatian, November 18, 2021).

As previously mentioned, the book is interesting for a number of reasons, but one in particular is the clear demonstration of the way that change can happen in a person. The repetitiveness in the book is a direct demonstration of what is required for a person to change on a fundamental level. Again, for many, these aspects of learning in Sufism are unknown. Individuals say that they would like to change but are given no roadmap to move through that process. Even with a book

as a manual, the process of change is impossible for most without a mentor. But change is a non-linear, subtle and monotonous process that takes years of effort, discipline, and failed attempts at self-awareness that may eventually lead to new thought processes and actions. In a chapter called 'The Most Difficult Year of my Life,' an entry from several days after the anniversary of her first year with her teacher,

When I was coming, I saw he was sitting alone in the garden, but as I came in through the gate, he got up, went inside, and closed the door. He will avoid me now, to increase the loneliness. The mind gave me some trouble last night. In the last days the mind does not work well at all. Blankness, complete emptiness periodically, difficulties of thinking and of understanding the most simple, elementary things. Events from the past kept coming into my mind: stupidities, blunders made in the past, things so far away, when I was hurt and had no sense of proportion and suffered from it. Injustices real or imaginary crept up, crowded in. I regretted all those faults and blunders. Felt dirty and small. 'To regret well is to live afresh,' said Thoreau. Is it? So much pride in me. Pride of what? Of all my life which has been wasted? Stupidly wasted? Pride of learning? Which learning? Where is it now? What is the learning; where is the mind? Is it all worth it? No, I have to change, to quicken the process. I am tired of myself (Tweedie, 2006, p. 308).

In this diary entry, dated October 8th, Tweedie is expressing several concepts that are repeated throughout the eight hundred plus pages of her published diary. One of those concepts is her grappling with the relationship with her teacher, one aspect of which is her strong attachment to him and her shame. Her attachment is an obsession, and is one expression of the kind of love that can arise in a student for their teacher in the Sufi context.¹⁸⁴ Tweedie's expression of shame and remorse for past actions. While expressions of this kind are not always healthy or useful, readers of Tweedie's published diary witness in these statements the slow steps of change within a

¹⁸⁴ While some might consider this type of attachment to be dangerous, this kind of openness towards a Sufi teacher can be a useful tool that has the potential to transform a student if the teacher has integrity and respect for the Sufi Way and the student's spiritual journey. That is to say, that student's attachment can be transformative if the teacher recognizes their own weaknesses and is able to put those weaknesses aside in the face of their student's desires for spiritual attainment.

person. For example, she changes from someone who is self-absorbed into a person who is reflective, self-aware, and deliberate. What is also present within this statement and in the text surrounding, actually the entire book, are the progressions and regressions that are characteristic of the nonlinear path of change.

But this process of change, of refinement that leads to understanding the self and others in an attempt to journey towards God, provides no guarantees. In the same way that some are gifted in the science of mathematics and some aren't, so too are some people adept at understanding themselves or proficient at being honest with themselves so that they are able to see what they are doing and thinking, and the various reasons why, so that with time their deficiencies might be overcome, at least some of the time. Sufi manuals are filled with teachings, alluding to the pitfalls to which seekers are prone: teachings regarding humility point to the potential for unchecked egos (Qushayri, 2002, p. 108); the teachings on backbiting (Qushayri, 2002, p. 189); on shame (Qushayri, 2002, p. 261); and on jealousy (Qushayri, 2002, p. 307).

Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire* (2006) is not only epic in length, like *Gilgamesh*, it has everything: love, death and transformation, and it makes room for readers to ask existential questions and attempt to approach their answers. What makes Tweedie's epic particularly compelling, at least for some, is how detailed it is. The illustration of change as subtle, slow, painful and full of false starts gives readers an actual example of where their quest for change might begin or how it might look.

That afternoon at the Nevada City gathering Mahmoud spoke at length about Tweedie and the Student-Teacher relationship in Sufism, and at about 3:30pm, he stopped abruptly. There was a sense of coming back 'into' time and everyone began to slowly put things away and sweep the

space. Dirty dishes were packed into bags to be brought home and cleaned off site, and after giving my thanks to Mahmoud and Rozaneh, I finally got back into the car to be driven home.

All the women that I was driving with were exhausted and I tried to be quiet about my irritability. Being with people in such an intense environment was difficult. We drove back to Oakland listening to Omar Faruk Tekbilek's *Mystical Garden* (1996).¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

There was something fascinating about the two days that Mahmoud and Rozaneh organized at the gazebo in Nevada City. Maybe it had to do with the fact that some attendees had never met before, or that it was held in an almost magical setting surrounded by soft green and water. Or maybe it was that some people had driven more than several hours to be there. Really though, the two aspects that ended up being one of the most compelling about the gathering were (1) the way that Mahmoud drew together this small crowd of people with the promise of some philosophy and possibly some wisdom, and then proceeded to dismantle the whole thing with falsities. And (2) the stories he told. There are stories that I'd heard him tell several times already at that point, but in this setting they were potent. Time passed without anyone really realizing it.

In this chapter I explored the role of storytellers and stories within the context of contemporary Sufism, and suggested that the way stories are told is just as important as the story itself. I historically situated the unexpected or rude behaviour of storytellers in the Sufi dervish tradition. I also highlighted the ways that unexpected behaviour works as a pedagogical tool by subverting expectations, forcing audience members out of the imagined world of assumptions and expectations and into the current moment.

¹⁸⁵ Omar Faruk Tekbilek is a contemporary Turkish musician who creates music in a style that builds on traditional Sufi music.

Storytellers and the practice of storytelling also rely on the capacity and creativity of their audience members: are they able discern the subtler aspects of the storyteller's behaviour and what those actions are trying to impart? And can the audience employ various interpretive methods to hear the stories that they are being told in a variety of ways?

I also explored how stories serve as vessels through which listeners can attempt to understand themselves. They provide a means to get new perspectives on our existential questions, and glimpses of answers to those questions. I examined some of the ways that stories function in Sufism generally, as well as two methods for interpreting stories in Sufism: metaphysics and Sufi psychology. I briefly retold and analyzed the four stories that Mahmoud told at the Nevada City gathering: the Sufi story of the four moths; a Mulla Nasrudeen tale, and two epics, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Tweedie's *Daughter of Fire* (2006).

This chapter on storytellers and stories provides an opening for the final chapter of this dissertation, "On Power and Gender." This last chapter builds on some of the metaphysical concepts and the interpretation of stories in general. The interpretation of stories and sacred texts have served as the basis for cultural rules around gender for centuries, and in the following chapter, I highlight some of Mahmoud's ideas around these concepts, as well as their evolution over time, as I perceived it. I put these ideas in conversation with some of the scholarship that explores notions of power and gender in Sufism and in Islam more broadly, investigating the relationship between the Sufi metaphysical concept of the Perfect Human (*insan al-Kamil*) and the implication of interpretations of sacred literature.

Chapter 6: On Power and Gender

When I shared with Rozaneh that the final chapter of this project would grapple with the relationship between gender and power that I see in some aspects of Sufism, she laughed at me and said that it is a fitting place to stop given that these were the first preoccupations I brought to Sufism. I have been interested in this topic since my first encounters with Mahmoud and with Sufism in large part because of the way that he speaks about women and men: women are biologically compelled to have children and are more connected to family and relationships (than men) as a result of their biological predestination; men are visual, analytical animals who have fewer social needs; women make good students; men make good teachers.¹⁸⁶ These assertions that I have never entirely agreed with and which I have considered to be limited, serve as the impetus for this inquiry.

Sufi tradition teaches that all humankind has fallen from the primordial state of nearness to God and that the Sufi path is a return towards that primordial state of union with God (Nasr, 2007, p. 92).¹⁸⁷ And “like the Bible and the Torah, the Qur’an states that humans are created in the image (*surah* or form) of God.” (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017, p. 186). Given that these assertions and many like them are about human beings, not men or women in particular, it is curious that some sources on Sufism and Sufi teachers, like Mahoud, insist on characterizing people based on their sex. Mahmoud also expresses inequitable views about men and women with relative regularity that I find equally contentious. Given this, the final chapter of this project explores the theme of gender and power in Sufism and Islam, more broadly.

¹⁸⁶ These are summaries of statements that I have heard Mahmoud make many times, in different contexts over the between 2017 and 2022.

¹⁸⁷ Sufism, at its highest level, is a path of knowledge whose highest object is the Truth, that is, God, “and subsequently, the knowledge of things in relation to God” (Nasr, 2007, p. 30).

In the first section, I begin by providing examples of characterizations of gender in Sufi and Muslim religious texts and metaphysical ideas. I explore the ways that Sufi and Muslim religious and metaphysical ideas have been interpreted to uphold patriarchal paradigms. Additionally, I point out some of the origins of perceptions about gender in Islam, to whom those perceptions can be attributed and when those perceptions come about.

In the second section I explore the implications of those stories and metaphysics: their interpretations and practical consequences in life. I highlight contemporary scholarship that clarifies the historical contexts of interpretative or exegetical work that has been used over the centuries to limit or exercise power over women. I also provide examples that counter the perspectives perpetuated by the stories and metaphysics described in the first section.

In the third section I describe the Sufi doctrine of the Perfect Human (*insan al-kamil*), which provides some perspectives on spiritual attainment in Sufism, and clarifies that once a Sufi reaches a particular level of realization, gender actually becomes irrelevant. This text is important too, because Mahmoud published a translation of one Persian Sufi's doctrine of the Perfect Human. I conclude the section with an alternative approach to categorizing these religious metaphysical qualities. This chapter is concluded with a lack of resolution.

Characterizations of Masculine and Feminine

The first question that I ever posed to Mahmoud was related to the ethics of having children. During my first visit to his college classroom in 2016, he prompted me as he does with visitors, to see if I had any questions, and I asked this question because I had been grappling with it. I wondered if he, as a professor of philosophy, might be able to provide some insight and his response proved to be helpful in many ways. He spoke about familial relations and obligations, and he spoke about love and death. But Mahmoud also spoke about men being a particular way

and women being another particular and different way, and women as an all-encompassing category who are biologically determined to desire children. I wanted to talk back to him often: ‘Not every woman *wants* children,’ but I didn’t because I was curious about what he had to say; I also didn’t hide my distaste from my face.

Attending Mahmoud’s classes wasn’t always a positive experience; some of his perspectives on things were contradictory to mine, as a 29 year old woman who believed that each of us determines our life’s path.¹⁸⁸ Over the years I heard Mahmoud say many times that women make better students than men, but men make better teachers than women, and that women, in fact, for the most part, can’t be good teachers.¹⁸⁹ At first, I didn’t understand that he was speaking specifically about Sufi teachers, but of course even after I understood what he was talking about I remained offended and reactive.

He would talk about how women, because of their bodies, are bound to relationships through children, and for the most part can’t really leave their children; that when they are pregnant or healing from pregnancy they are less interested in or capable of being in the world; that their bodies count down childbearing years. He also would refer to the fact that women are culturally bound to care for family members too. By contrast, he would say that men need to care for their families especially when women are pregnant or postpartum, but that because they do

¹⁸⁸ I started regularly attending Mahmoud’s college classes on philosophy, religion and the humanities when I had a lot of free time in my life. I had moved to Oakland and didn’t have a work visa yet, so I didn’t have a job to go to every day; I was looking for things to do. In addition to going to Mahmoud’s classes I attended ceramics classes, I tried ballet and I volunteered with a small floral designer in Berkeley. Within eight months of living in Oakland I had received a temporary work visa and was hired to work part-time as a Reference Librarian at the public library in Alameda and the floral studio also hired me to make flower arrangements for weddings when they needed extra hands. Amidst these things I attended Mahmoud’s classes on an almost daily basis at the college near where I lived because I was interested in the way that he unpacked ideas.

¹⁸⁹ For the purposes of this discussion, references to gender and biological sex will refer to CIS heterosexual women and CIS heterosexual men. While this approach is limited in intersectionality, it clarifies the subject matter and it allows me to address the experiences that I had and attempted to understand in the field without treading into territory that is beyond me.

not grow their children in their bodies, their connection is one which is grown over time and it is not as organic for them to feel deeply for their families or anyone. He would also often say that men do not have bodies that are time bound the way that women do, and as a result, can spend more time intellectualizing things than women.

On this point, Mahmoud would clarify that this type of intellectualizing was not necessarily a benefit to learning, i.e. refinement and progress on the Sufi path. He would say that being ‘in the mind’ might allow a person to keep life’s experiences and understanding those experiences deeply, at arm’s length and that this was no way to learn. Whereas women, who were in their bodies and forced into relationships were more saturated by their experiences and were better at learning than men, i.e. better students. But if a man could truly understand things, both experientially and intellectually, Mahmoud said that he would be better suited to teach because he would be able to communicate concepts more clearly.

As time passed, when Mahmoud said things that I found offensive I began to be able to set my negative reactions aside and hear him out. I rationalized that we have different backgrounds, we are different ages, we have lived in different countries and experienced entirely different things. I decided that it made some sense that we would see things differently. But when he spoke about women not being able to be ‘good’ teachers, his comments seemed sincere to me and these assertions felt too personal to ignore. More than that, I knew from speaking with other people who had spent many years with him that he had been saying these things for a long time.

Even though Mahmoud never admitted it, I sometimes wondered if maybe he was saying these things to light fires under the women students who spent time with him; to get them

thinking.¹⁹⁰ I have no evidence for this interpretation, but given the surprising ways that he sometimes articulates ideas, this approach has some potential to be true. In my own case, these comments strengthened my desire to learn about the ways that gender is characterized in Sufi texts and scholarship, and the different ways that women and ‘the feminine’ are given voice and space in literature about Sufism. I also set out to prove him wrong, at least for myself.

In this section I provide examples of passages from Sufi and Muslim religious texts that have been employed over the centuries by some people as (1) evidence of women’s limitations in intellect and religion and (2) as evidence of women’s powers to corrupt men. These examples are analyzed using historical and textual analysis from a critical feminist perspective.¹⁹¹ To some extent, I believe that the stories and metaphysics described below clarify the historical, religious and cultural roots of Mahmoud’s perspectives on gender that I find contentious.

Contemporary scholar of Sufism and Arabic, Rkia E. Cornell, points to the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries as some of the initial moments when interpretation of religious texts were beginning to equate the female gender with negative characteristics. Cornell begins by referring to the cultural historian, Abu Muhammad Abd Allah ibn Muslim ibn Qutayba al-Dinawari al-Marwazi (d. 889), who wrote about the evils of women based on 7th and 8th century readings of the Qur’an and the *Hadith* that were supplemented by rulings from the Islamic jurisprudential tradition (*fiqh*) (2007, p. 263). Cornell points out the way that Qutayba associated women with ‘evils’ that were defined in part by a list of ten characteristic faults which included hardship at birth; menstrual cramps;

¹⁹⁰ In chapter 4, “On Storytellers and Stories,” I explore the tactic of shocking listeners and subverting expectations as a pedagogical tool.

¹⁹¹ Of particular importance is Amina Wadud’s *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from the Woman’s Perspective* (1999). A selection of other scholarship that engages gender, feminism and Islam’s textual tradition includes Leila Ahmed’s *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (2011); Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* (2017); Justine Howe’s *The Rutledge handbook of Islam and Gender* (2021); Saba Mahmood’s *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (2011); Meena Sharify-Funk’s article “Gender and Sufism in Western Scholarship: Contemporary Constructions and Contestations” (2020) and Lana Sirri’s *Islamic feminism: Discourses on gender and sexuality in contemporary Islam* (2021).

impurity of her inner parts and sexual organs; and her deficiency in intellect and religion because she cannot pray during her menstrual periods (Cornell, 2007, pp. 263–264; Qutaybah & Muhammad, 1999, pp. 398–399).

Some Islamic philosophy conceptualizes the metaphysical qualities of human beings in a way that is analogous to the Chinese philosophy of ‘yin and yang,’ where one variety of metaphysical qualities are considered receptive, surrendering, and acquiescent, and the mirror images of these qualities are active, controlling, dominant. In this perspective, each polarity requires the other to exist and to define the other. This binary is expressed in the Qur’anic story of Adam and Eve (7:189). In his aloneness, Adam could not be comforted by his own self and not even by God. It was only the other half of Adam’s soul, Eve, who could bring him back to comfort, to balance. This can be understood to hearken back to Schimmel’s analogy of the heart. The idea that none of us can find comfort in this world, find home, alone. Another interpretation is that none of us can be made whole without outside influence, that the systole requires the diastole (Schimmel, 1992, p. viii) to be whole.

This story has served to demonstrate that women are an unscrupulous and untrustworthy force who distract men from spiritual purity. But one historical and textual analysis of the story demonstrates that this ‘crooked’ characterization of Eve does not actually align with the way she was portrayed in the text. Contemporary scholars of Sufism, Milad Milani and Marley Krok, clarify that it was sometime between the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the compilers of the *Hadith*, in the modern Islamic era, that Eve was ‘corrupted.’ She began to be portrayed as “easily tempted and the source of Adam’s transgression” (al-Bukhari, 169; Ibn Maja, 1980;

Milani & Krok, 2021, p. 162), thus rewriting characterizations in the Islamic mind of all women who came after her.¹⁹²

Eve is also described in some detail by the Sufi master Suhrawardi in his text, *The Wisdom of Illumination (Ḥikmat al-Ishraq)*.¹⁹³ Suhrawardi connects the character of Eve with the metaphysical concept ‘the Animal Soul’ due to her perceived interference with Adam’s and the divine creation. In this text, Suhrawardi draws an ontological distinction between Adam and Eve that was later extended into the moral dimension in popular stories (Cornell, 2007, p. 268).¹⁹⁴

Suhrawardi was influenced by the Stoic and Platonic Greek philosophies that distinguish between the world of the senses (*kosmos aisthetos*), which are portrayed as female, and the world of the intellect (*kosmos noetos*), which are portrayed as male. And according to the metaphysics he established, God is the father of the world of the intellect, nourishing the intellect with ideas, whereas Wisdom is the mother of the world of the senses. She nourishes creation with the virtues and the practical application of ideas (Cornell, 2007, p. 268).

Cornell clarifies that for Suhrawardi [...], the male principle belongs to the transcendent world of divine creativity. Adam, as representative of the male principle, possesses a soul that can conceive of higher ideas. Consequently, the male soul possesses a soul that can conceive of discernment, which is one of the most important functions of the intellect (*alq*). Eve, on the other hand, belongs to the non-transcendent, and animal world of earthly creation. Her full potential

¹⁹² This corruption of Eve’s character occurred in the modern Islamic tradition, in the same way that she was in the Jewish and Christian traditions as well.

¹⁹³ Some details of Suhrawardi’s life are outlined in footnote 80. His philosophy is also referred to in chapter 1, in the section that describes love as the sixth of Mahmoud’s six stages of love framework; in chapter 3 in the part that describes chivalry and servitude and in chapter 4, where I explore some interpretive tools that can be employed to interpret stories.

¹⁹⁴ In this text Suhrawardi describes the Animal Soul as the source of sensory experiences and desires. It is what animates and provides life to animals, enabling them to perceive, desire, and move.

can only be realized through the mediation of Adam, who raises her up from the category of animals to a secondary echelon of humanity. Eve's secondary and non-transcendent status is something that she must accept without question, because she is constitutionally unable to do otherwise. Representing the creaturely (*bashari*) aspects of the soul and spirit, she can rise above her position only through practical works of devotional worship and service to her fellow human beings" (Cornell, 2007, pp. 269-270)

Instead of the philosophical, yin yang binary providing a basis for mutuality and equitability, there are Qur'anic passages that have been continued to be taken literally by some. For example, one passage suggests that two women are required to give testimony in court in place of one man (2:282) and that a daughter will only inherit half the share of a son (4:11). These verses (*ayat*) have been used historically to demonstrate that women should be understood as 'deficient' in religion and intellect.

These characterizations of the masculine and the feminine, or, as Cornell's analysis of Suhrawardi's metaphysics points out, ontological distinctions between men and women, can be found in other the stories of Layla and Majnun (Nizami, 1997), as well as the story of the Christian Girl and Sufi teacher that appears in Attar's *Conference of the Birds* (2011), among others. In these stories, female characters are employed as metaphors for the Divine Being that is yearned for. Female characters also sometimes appear as old women who are despised for their age and are seen as disgusting. For example, in a scene in *Awakened Dreams* (Hilmi, 1993), that borders on comical, the main character Raji is seduced by a young woman who turns into a disgusting, shrieking old witch when he kisses her. After her transformation from beautiful to horrifying, she throws him down a mountain as the walls of a heavenly castle fall around him (1993, p. 17). And in Book 1 of Rumi's *Masnavi* (Rumi, 2004), there is a story about a man who

killed his mother because she was having sex with many men. The prose translation of Rumi's poetry, produced by 20th century British scholar of Islam and Persian, A. J. Arberry, explains the story in the following way:

That depraved mother is your carnal soul, pervading every part of you with it corruption. [...] It is your carnal soul that makes this fair world distressful to you; on its account you are at war with God and men. Mortify the flesh, and you will have done with lame excuses; you will no longer have a single enemy in the world (Rumi & Arberry, 1961, p. 108).

Rumi is also known to have drawn comparisons between the physical world and with woman: the seductive, distracting, world that creates sleepwalkers out of even the most ambitious seekers; is equated to women.

What is apparent in the stories and characterizations of the masculine and the feminine described above, is that 'woman' as a metaphor represents several things. Woman can represent an object to be desired who can help a male seeker by inspiring him with her beauty to seek the beauty of God in this life; 'she' can also play a part in the downfall of the male seeker as a result of her tempting and distracting beauty, and therefore is a body that should be admonished. Further, because beauty is ephemeral, the beauty associated with women will inevitably fade to the point of no longer being desired by the male's gaze, at which time she will be further vilified.

While these are clearly analogies, when these stories are told in the context of a socio-religious culture where both the Qur'an and *Hadith*, texts that are connected directly with the Muslim Prophet, seemingly justify physical violence against wives (Sahih Muslim, 4:2127; Surah An-Nisa 4:34), these stories have a horrific literal side.

The perspective on the gender binary that Murata and Mahmoud share with many other Sufi philosophers and scholars has been useful in articulating some abstract ideas but it is also undeniable that it has limited human understanding, human relationships and human potential. It

is undeniable too, that there is a “strong relationship [between] seemingly abstract constructs of religious anthropology, ontology, and cosmology on the one hand and the realpolitik of gender on the other” (Shaikh, 2012, p. 7).¹⁹⁵ And if Sufism is a ‘living tradition,’ why do its thinkers and adherents continue to lean on the idea of the masculine and feminine metaphysical aspects to understand the intangible elements of the human essence, given the limitations and falsities of these categories? One supposes that a reason might be that this is the way that things have always been done. But if the Sufi tradition asserts that all human beings can progress on the path, then why continue to use language that creates prejudice?

In the next section I will point to some of the growing body of evidence of women embodying qualities attributed to the metaphysical ‘masculine,’ and, conversely, men who embody qualities that have been attributed to the metaphysical ‘feminine.’ And if this is so, how can these categories even be correct? What actually is masculine or feminine? If the Sufi’s aim is learning and perfection through a balance of self-awareness and what Sufis would consider to be God’s grace, and each person has their own particular flaws regardless of their gender, one wonders how one gender expression can be more valued than another.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁵ Scholars of Islam and gender and feminism point to Sulami’s *tabaqat*, *Early Sufi Women* (1999) and Ibn Arabi, who asserted that “the universe depends on two orders” (Al-Hakim, 2006, p. 8) to suggest that women did play an important role in Sufism. But these references aren’t as clearcut as they may seem. Jason Welle writes about the spiritual progress of early Sufi women and Sulami’s aforementioned text (1999) and points out that many of Sulami’s other writings “manifest the presumptions of his male scholarly contemporaries: he describes women as deficient in intellect and religion, and encourages men to avoid their company, which jeopardizes men’s spiritual progress” (2020, p. 96). But why was Sulami’s *tabaqat* about women separated from the stories about men? Is it a reflection of the social and cultural separation of men and women? Or is it something else?

¹⁹⁶ I base the use of the concept of balance with regards to refinement as an aim on the Sufi path in relation to the concept of character, or natural disposition (*khulq*), which Sulami explains in the following way: “The Sufi’s *adab* is based directly on the behaviour of the Prophet himself, whose character represents the highest degree of conformity to God’s precepts as laid down in the Qu’ran and is therefore the model which it is incumbent upon the Sufis to follow. The notion of character is a basic one in Sufi literature: the mystic must know the qualities and potentialities of human beings [...] character traits [are] the innate temperament of a person, though that temperament can change through the cultivation of certain habitual practices [...]. Working on one’s temperament is therefore a duty for the mystic, who must ‘elaborate’ his own *khuluq* constantly in order to perfect it and purify it” (Sulami, 2010, p. 105). Murata provides a similar explanation of balance in her writing on human equilibrium: “God’s presence in the world and oneself must be recognized and acknowledged, and then one must act as God would act, as God’s representative

Given all of this evidence, I cannot help but wonder why Mahmoud continues to make statements about fundamental differences between men and women, when women are demonstrably active and embodying characteristics associated with metaphysical and literal socio-religious conceptions of men? And men, too, are evidently embodying characteristics associated with metaphysical and literal socio-religious conceptions of ‘woman.’ Is it habit? Is it closed-mindedness? Perhaps I just don’t ‘get it.’

Interpretation and its Implications

At another dinner that Mahmoud and Rozaneh held early in our friendship, I arrived to a living room of strangers of various ages and genders and some acquaintances I had met in Mahmoud’s classes. I perched awkwardly on one of the couches and tried to make conversation. Rozaneh was in the kitchen cooking dinner and after about a half hour Mahmoud announced that it was time for ‘the men’ to go outside and help him with things in the yard. The women would stay inside and play with his and Rozaneh’s new baby. My immediate thought was, “I’m strong, I can work in the garden.” I tried not to show it, but I was incredibly uncomfortable. In part because this division of labour based on gender was strange to me, I liked working in the yard, but also because I didn’t know anyone inside. I didn’t want to sit around making small talk.

Years later, when I knew Rozaneh better, I reminded her about this day, and she remembered it right away. I told her how much I’d disliked this gender segregation based on perceived physical abilities that had been made, and she started laughing and rebuked me. She told me that she’d been cooking dinner for this big group of people and wanted company and help with her daughter. She also said that she wanted to get to know me better because I was

must act” (1992, p. 15). This idea of aiming for balance as an expression of refinement of the self is also defined in chapter 2, in the section on lineage and authority. The concept of *adab* is defined and explored in detail in chapter 3, “On *Adab* and Companionship.”

relatively new to coming to the house and she wanted to determine what she thought of me. The way to do these things, she said, was to keep me close by and listen to what I said to people and watch how I acted. Rozaneh also reminded me that she has often worked in the yard with Mahmoud for hours on end and so did some of the other women who came to their Sufi gatherings. “If you want to hear what someone has to say sometimes you have to get them to hold the baby,” she told me. My interpretation of that day had been completely wrong at the time. And now I too have spent many hours doing physical work in the garden and yard with Mahmoud and Rozaneh. Pruning hedges, killing black widow spiders along the side of the house and carrying tall stacks of bricks up and down the steep stairs in the back garden.

This section builds on the previous one by exploring the implications of the stories referred to above, and the characterizations of ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine.’ I also highlight several ways that the stories referred to above have been interpreted and the practical implications of those interpretations. In particular, I highlight contemporary scholarship that clarifies the historical contexts of interpretative or exegetical work, which have sometimes been used to limit or exercise power over historically, persistently and systemically marginalized communities, including women.¹⁹⁷

Interpretation is a central method that human beings use to make meaning of religious texts and philosophy, and the Sufi tradition is no exception.¹⁹⁸ Interpretations of the Qur’an and

¹⁹⁷ My critical perspective of religion and religious institutions has been shaped by an awareness of the many atrocious abuses committed over the years against women and other persecuted people by people claiming to be religious and ultimately sheltered by religious institutions. I express my personal views on religion and religious institutions in more detail in the introductory chapter of this work, in the section titled ‘Positionality.’

¹⁹⁸ I use the word ‘interpretation’ here instead of ‘exegesis’, because exegesis is defined around aiming for objectivity through historical analysis and attempts at ‘understanding’ a text’s initial intent. I find it difficult to believe that any exegesis could be objective, but use the word ‘interpretation’ here, instead of calling an entire field into question. Regardless, the way that religion and religious culture are shaped by the interpretation of sacred texts is studied across religious scholarship. For example, *Scriptural Exegesis: the shapes of culture and religious imagination* (Green & Lieber, 2009) considers the history of biblical interpretation, asking how exegesis shapes spiritual and cultural creativity; Ryan Szpiech’s edited volume explores the way that exegesis between the 11th to the

the *Hadith* have evolved over the centuries, impacting human beings' relationship and their social standing in Muslim societies. But there is scholarship that calls into question interpretations of the Qur'an and the *Hadiths*. The *Hadiths* have long been understood to be direct quotations from the Prophet Muhammad, or based on direct quotations from the Prophet, thus they have thus served as norm-providing texts that reflect the civilizational reality of Islam's first three centuries. And the challenge with interpretation arises when perspectives become inflexible or resolve that one point of view is correct above all others.

Objectifications of 'woman,' are unsettling particularly because of the ways that female gendered bodies have been cornered socially and culturally in the world. But the superficial understandings of female gendered bodies and the feminine, be they in the metaphorical or metaphysical, is an issue that exists beyond Sufism regardless of religion and its traditional geographical context, and it is especially prominent in the 'Western'/ American culture. The male gaze that objectifies and simplifies the female experience causes the unfortunate result that anything considered 'feminine' or 'woman' must necessarily be objectified and simplified.

It takes little imagination to see that the ways that gender was used in the examples above were not about gender or metaphysical interpretation, but about power. Regardless of intention, when gender is used to classify metaphysical characteristics, power is implicitly and explicitly channeled to one gender over another, necessarily reinforcing a patriarchal cultural structure. The approach that's been taken quiets one of the sexes, making them responsible for keeping the home, food and families running relatively smoothly, while the other sex is allowed, then, to follow their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional passions and egos.

15th centuries as a discourse of cross-cultural and inter-religious conflict across the three Abrahamic traditions (Szpiech, 2015); and Annabel Keeler's book, *The spirit and the letter: approaches to the esoteric interpretation of the Quran* (2016) is based on her Cambridge doctoral dissertation title *Persian Sufism and exegesis* (Keeler, 2001).

But this perspective is not omnipresent. Contemporary scholar of philosophy, Souad al-Hakim, interprets some of Ibn Arabi's work on gender and women, as a declaration that women and men

are absolutely equal in terms of human potentiality. [Ibn Arabi] interpreted the 'degree' which was given to man over woman as an ontological matter, abolishing singular male images of the universe in favour of a binary conjugal conception, where male and female are coupled together in a necessary cosmic unity on the level of both Creation and Gnosis (Al-Hakim, 2006, p. 1).

This is supported by examples in Sulami's *Early Sufi Women* (1999), such as that of Fatima of Nishapur who was sought out by men and women alike for her advice on religious doctrinal matters (1999, p. 42). Similarly, the details about Muadha Bint Abdallah al-Adawiyya suggest that her spiritual practices consisted of not looking up to the sky for forty years and not sleeping at night or eating during the day (1999, p. 88). This discipline could be understood as expressions of will power (*iradah*) and steadfastness (*istiqamah*) that are defined in Sufi *tabaqat*. Qushayri defines will power as "the beginning of the path of spiritual travelers, [that *Iradah* is] the first title given to those who are determined to reach God Most High" (2002, p. 243). And steadfastness is "continuing straight ahead without deviation, [it] is a level that contains the perfection and completion of everything" (2002, p. 249). These rituals and the woman who is practicing them, are proof that women, as a gender, are certainly not deficient in religion.

And while the spiritual lives of these women in the early Islamic period were, in many respects, 'a veiled tradition' where the privacy "claimed by modest and saintly women has in effect conspired to cloak them in mystery" (Ernst, 2000, p. 12), this should not be interpreted to literally mean that they were inactive or unimpressive. In fact, to circumvent the social requirements of the day, Sufi women came up with alternative routes to learn, be taken seriously and attempt spiritual ascension. In other words, just because their activities weren't on grand

display or as well documented as their male counterparts, does not mean that these women weren't intensely engaged.

Sufi women are known to have engaged with one another socially by traveling to gather, share knowledge and practices and worship together (Silvers, 2014, p. 48). Textual evidence reveals that they were not only spiritually advanced but also culturally aware, socially savvy and well-documented contributors to the tradition (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017, pp. 190-191). Shabaka of Basra in Persia, for example, was said to have expertise in religious scrupulousness (*wara*). She was also known to have had rooms in her basement for her female students and disciples where they practiced self-denial and other spiritual practices (Sulami, 1999, p. 90). These women were not only gifted, they were also tenacious, cunning and creative enough to figure out how to quietly outwit society so that they could hope to meet their God. There were the practitioners of servitude (*niswan*) who followed a path that allowed them to sidestep the socio-cultural constraints put on women (Cornell, 2000, p. 56).¹⁹⁹

There are also numerous examples of female Sufis who embody the active, or masculine-gendered metaphysical qualities, such as strength and assertiveness (Ba'uniyah, 2016; Helminski, 2003; Smith, 2010; Sulami, 2000). One example is Rabia, the prominent Sufi saint whose active devotion and words have impacted Sufis for centuries (Smith, 2010).²⁰⁰ Nana Asmau (1793-1864), is another notable Sufi figure who lived in the territory that is now known as Nigeria. Asmau was initially taught by her father and finally acted as a teacher for her entire community. In addition to serving as teachers, Sufi women kept historical and spiritual records of their teachings and lineages (Silvers, 2014, p. 48). Other examples can be found in

¹⁹⁹ The practitioners of *niswan* are described in more detail in chapter 3, "On *Adab* and Companionship."

²⁰⁰ Some significant details of Rabia's life are described in chapter 1, "On Love," in the section on the dark side of love.

Ba'uniyah's recent translation of *The Principles of Sufism* (Ba'uniyah, 2016) and in the work of Sayyida Fatima of Palestine (d. 1978), who wrote texts on Sufi doctrines (Helminski, 2003, pp. 129; 148).

Contemporary female Sufi teachers and authorities are also attested as expressing active traits, i.e. traits that have been traditionally aligned with the metaphysical masculine, and therefore associated with men, including the previously mentioned Tweedie (d. 1999) and contemporary *Shaykha* Fariha Friedrich al-Jerrahi. There is also the teacher and guide Murshida Vera Corda (d. 2002) of the Chishti Sufi order (Helminski, 2003) and Cemalnur Sargut, the president of Turkish Women's Cultural Association in Istanbul, whose mystical discourses have recently been translated and collected for English-speaking audiences (Sargut, 2018), among many others.²⁰¹

And while an analysis of the Qur'anic passages referred to in the section above without context would logically lead one to conclude that women are 'worth' half of a man in truth and intellect, some modernist reformers of Islamic law contend that these verses actually refer to a very specific social context in which women had less access to information than men as a result of cultural restrictions and were therefore less able than men to manage business or significant amounts of property. Amina Wadud, the contemporary Muslim theologian and scholar of the Qur'an, Qur'anic interpretation and gender, similarly problematizes these verses, suggesting that they were "significant to a particular circumstance [which have] become obsolete" (1999, p. 85). In fact, "according to this logic, the Qur'anic restrictions on women's testimony and inheritance

²⁰¹ Camille Helminski provides a comprehensive list in her text *Women of Sufism: A Hidden Treasure* (2003). Another exhaustive list of significant Sufi women can be found in Cornell's translation of Sulami's *tabaqat* text, *Early Sufi Women* (1999).

may be waived if the social conditions of women change so much as to make the reasons for the verses obsolete” (Cornell, 2007, p. 262).²⁰²

But even with these analyses, clarifications and reinterpretations that allow these religious texts and ideas to be better understood, what are the implications of these feminist clarifications of Islamic religious textual interpretation that have explicitly directed cultural and social practices for so many centuries? Sadiyya Shaikh, contemporary South African scholar of Islam and feminist theory, asserts that a “crucial feminist contribution to debates in epistemology relates to the relationship between human subjectivity and power relations in the creation of knowledge” (Shaikh, 2013, p. 15). She contends that by employing gender as part of an analytical approach, feminist scholarship has unmasked the extent to which male subjectivities have been rendered normative and universal within traditional processes of knowledge making and dissemination. She suggests that “whether in the realm of science of humanities, the major feminist epistemological intervention is that almost all knowledge that speaks of and for the universal human condition has in fact been based on partial and selective experiential perspectives of powerful men” (Shaikh, 2013, p. 16).

While this assertion, that the male perspective has been assumed to be the standard and universal one, is indisputable, these alternative interpretations also have their own limitations. One limitation comes in the form of ‘saviourism.’ Feminist theory can, for example, reinterpret Islamic religious philosophy in implicitly or even explicitly condescending ways. Scholar of Sufism, Sachiko Murata, articulates this impediment in the following way:

²⁰² Cornell also critiques the cultural practice in which Muslim men decline to shake hands with women, which, she suggests, is founded on the perspective that women’s bodies make them physically impure, thus spiritually deficient as a result of her/their monthly cycles and their biological sexual organs (Cornell, 2007, pp. 263-264). And Cornell refers to the Qu’ran 49:13 which strongly implies that the most significant difference between men and women is personal piety, rather than a matter of purity or ontological make up, none of which is based on gender (2007, p. 265).

Many [reformist] currents in Western thought have been infused with the [will] to do good for others, even if the others do not realize that good is being done for them. Certain forms of feminism seem to fit into the same old, domineering, and negatively masculine attitude known as proselytism. In the Islamic world – [its] appeal has been heard only by those who have lost touch with their own intellectual and spiritual universe (Murata & Schimmel, 1992, p. 4).

Murata is pointing, at least in part, to the fact that certain forms of feminism can be applied in dominating and presumptuous ways that are actually analogous to the misogynistic interpretations of religious sacred texts and superficial readings of ‘other’ cultures. This is an Occidental imagination that positions itself as the saviour for Muslims and Muslim women (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Saviourism, often white saviourism, leads ‘Western’ human rights and women’s rights activists to offer alternate, so-called non-patriarchal interpretations of the Qur’an and offer adjustments to Muslim culture (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 175) without actually understanding the patriarchal, colonial, imperial and xenophobic ideals that permeate their own cultures and which their saviourism perpetuates.²⁰³

All of these perspectives on interpretation do very little to clarify Mahmoud’s ideas around gender, but if anything, the problematization of interpretation demonstrates that Mahmoud, like all of us, is formed by his experiences and context. And instead of providing answers, this scholarship brings up more questions: what cultural or religious components or undercurrents am I missing in my own interpretation of Mahmoud’s ideas about gender? Do I believe that he has access to a different set of ideas that are, for me, legitimately worth

²⁰³ Saviourism with particular regard to Islam and Muslim cultures also overlooks the imperial and colonial meddling of the ‘West’ in the Middle East, which violently brought about hugely problematic circumstances, to be brief. Further, the ‘West’s’ Islamophobic saviourism implies that its own culture is not similarly flawed by patriarchy, a presumption that lacks basic awareness and is, in itself, at best condescending and patronizing, at worst destructive. To be plain, the demonization of Islam with regards to women’s rights is a result of colonial discourse that attempts to assign civilizational superiority to ‘Western’ civilization, when in fact women are marginalized in every society using many different justifications and methods.

considering? And if I don't, is that an expression of racial or social superiority on my part or just a 'difference of opinion?'

On the other hand, if there is so much evidence showing how society was designed to distribute power along gender lines and we can see that the interpretation of stories and interpersonal experiences is subjective and relative, why does he maintain the view that men and women have innately different strengths?²⁰⁴ And if interpretation relies on perspective, and Mahmoud is quite literally known by his students for being able to provide many different perspectives on a variety of subjects, what does his perspective say about him, the culture that he comes from and the tradition that he draws from?

The Perfect Human

In the first weeks of March of 2020, I was in the process of writing my thesis for the master's degree in Humanities that I was completing at San Francisco State University. I was still attending Mahmoud's classes whenever I wasn't writing or working at the public library in Alameda. In one of the last classes that I sat in before I put all my belongings in cardboard boxes and FedExed them to Ottawa because the pandemic was closing in, Mahmoud spoke again about how 'women can't be good teachers, but men can be.' For the first time I spoke back to him about this publicly:

How can you say these things to the people sitting in this class? Some of these young men, they're taking you seriously. They think that they will be able to learn how to guide people because you're saying that they can. They don't understand what you're saying because they don't have the cultural background or the perspectives that you do and in reality, they can't actually teach anyone anything!

²⁰⁴ There is a section in chapter 4 of this project that explores some interpretive tools that can be applied when using stories and storytelling as a pedagogical tool. I explore metaphysics and Sufi psychology in particular as interpretive tools and point to some conditions that would make the application of these tools more successful. I point to experience and capacity on the part of the person interpreting the story, but also an understanding of the context and history of the story's origins and where that story was told. The same can be said for interpreting the experiences: the person who attempts to interpret an experience, particularly a shared experience, will be more successful if they have access to more information about what is going on and more perspectives.

I was furious and reactive and it was embarrassing to have an outburst like that but after listening to this line of thinking for three years and watching the impact that it had on some of the men, puffing them up, giving them false illusions about themselves, I wasn't able to contain myself. I remember the way he looked at me, not even stunned, and after some silent moments he continued with his lecture. After class some people passing my desk said that they agreed with me, but mostly my reaction went unacknowledged. This wasn't, of course, the last time that Mahmoud and I spoke about gender. We continue to discuss it to this day, without coming to a consensus.

In this final section I highlight various aspects of the metaphysical Sufi doctrine, 'the Perfect Human,' that counters the gender binary that was explored above. In my analysis, I unpack the doctrine's expressions of metaphysical gender with practical examples. The doctrine of the Perfect Human is also significant in the context of this case study because Mahmoud published a translation of one Sufi philosopher's text on the topic in recent years, as such, the metaphysical doctrine can be understood to be related at least in some part to his own Sufi philosophical perspective.

One of the ways that Sufi philosophers and theologians have articulated metaphysical ideas about the feminine and masculine is in the same way that complex concepts have been expressed since time immemorial: via negativa or through binaries (Murata, 2003). In the introduction to Murata's *Tao of Islam* (Murata & Schimmel, 1992), Schimmel states that "there is no life without the systole and the diastole of the heartbeat, without inhaling and exhaling" (Schimmel, 1992, p. viii). There are many ways that the systole and diastole binaries that Schimmel refers to are deployed in Sufism and in Islam more broadly. In the Islamic tradition, for example, the beginning of creation is triggered by Allah commanding that the world "Be."

And in Arabic, the imperative verb ‘be,’ is *kun*, which is composed of two letters, *kaf* and *nun*.

For some, this two-letter verb suggests that metaphysically, life requires two aspects to come into being and in order for existence to be balanced, beautiful. This binary can be understood to be found in humanity as well.

Some Sufi philosophers believe the idea that sainthood was more important than prophethood, that the universe was held together by a hierarchy of saints, and that it owed its continued existence to the existence of a saintly ‘axis’ (*qutb*) known as the Perfect Human (Green, 2012, p. 94).²⁰⁵ Ibn Arabi, for example, wrote that

although God alone is *wujud*,²⁰⁶ human beings have the potential to manifest or reflect *wujud* comprehensively, unlike all other beings and things, which only manifest an aspect of *wujud*. This is the meaning of the Qur’an’s statement that humans are created in the image of God. This potential for human comprehensiveness means that humans can reflect all of God’s qualities of Names. The fully realized human being or *insan al-kamil*, manifests all of God’s qualities, reflecting God’s wisdom and compassion into the world. To do so however, the human has to be emptied of all created qualities, in a sense annihilated (*fana*) to clear the ground for God’s qualities to manifest and subsist (*baqa*) in the perfected person (Sharify-Funk & Dickson, 2017, p. 159).²⁰⁷

All Islamic sectarian groups have a representation of the Perfect Human doctrine and while some schools emphasize its esoteric nature more than others, the doctrine essentially describes a saintly person who holds complete knowledge of God (Green, 2012, p. 240), and suggests that once this subtle human reality attains the fullness of manifestation in the Perfect Human, God is displayed in infinite self-disclosure (Murata, 1992, p. 299). One who attains a level of Perfection

²⁰⁵ According to Green, every corner of the Islamic world had its claimants to be the living cosmic axis who were responsible for holding the universe together. Some of these axes were recognized and others were not (Green, 2012, 94).

²⁰⁶ *Wujud* is most basically translated from Arabic as ‘being,’ but it can also be understood to refer to meanings such as ‘existence;’ ‘presence;’ and ‘substance.’

²⁰⁷ Ibn Arabi, the 12th century Sufi philosopher, was also referred to in chapter 2, “On Lineage and Transmission,” in the section on Lineage and Authority.

is also connected to the Prophet by way of their capacity to reflect God's Ninety-Nine Names (Sharify-Funk et al., 2017, pp. 45, 186).

The doctrine of the Perfect Human is related to literal human bodies as well though. Sufism's "various metaphysical orientations [...] include a play of gendered possibilities, not only the genderless perfected human, the masculine woman, or emasculated man but also the man as woman, in a state of surrender" (Sharify-Funk, et al., 2017, p. 196). But to become 'someone' in Sufism, in the spiritual sense, to become a "perfect mirror of the Divine", a person must transcend their own particularities, not strive to be this person or that person, "but [towards] personhood as such," (Nasr, 2007, p. 24) and ultimately, no one. That is to say, annihilation in God, the Beloved. Given that the Perfect Human him or herself is an embodiment of this principle, an archetypal human being who is beyond gender (Nasr, 2007, p. 110; Schimmel, 1975, p. 82), it makes sense that Sufis should be aiming to identify not with their gender but with their humanity.²⁰⁸

Mahmoud recently published a translation of *The Perfect Being* which came from a 13th century Persian Sufi.²⁰⁹ This translation is a collection of philosophical teachings that explore the nature of existence, the nature and the evolution of the soul, the Teacher-Student relationship and various practical aspects of the Sufi path. The treatise includes sections on 'On the Manners of Solitude,' 'On Love' and 'On Maturity and Freedom,' and begins with a quotation attributed to Ali, the cousin of the Prophet Muhammad,

The greatest Sin: *Fear*

²⁰⁸ Another example of the Prophet's virtues is spiritual poverty. In Sufism, spiritual poverty means to be ontologically and spiritually aware of humanity's need and dependence upon God, and that to be fully human is to be constantly aware of this (Nasr, 2007, p. 19). An awareness of this reliance, which creates the proper conditions for spiritual poverty, arises out of other qualities, such as a profound humility, truthfulness and patience among others (Al-Ghazali, 2018, p. 70).

²⁰⁹ While I want to give credit to Mahmoud for this important contribution, I am not providing bibliographic attributes or more specifics here in an attempt to maintain his anonymity.

The greatest Enjoyment: *Work*
 The greatest Calamity: *Hopelessness*
 The greatest Courage: *Patience*
 The greatest Teacher: *Experience*
 The greatest Secret: *Death*
 The greatest Honor: *Faith*
 The greatest Profit: *A Noble Child*
 The greatest Gift: *Forgiveness*
 The greatest Investment: *Confidence*

The qualities, experiences and aims on a Sufi's path described here were indirectly provided here by Muhammad's cousin, thus connecting the text's teachings, their author, even the person who chose the quotation, Mahmoud, to the Prophet Muhammad. Through this lineage, the list above, including Ali, Muhammad and Allah, even, gestures towards Allah's Ninety-Nine names, some of which include the Merciful (*Raheem*), the Dominant One (*Mutakabeer*), the Forgiving One (*Ghafoor*), and the Loving One (*Wadud*). Some of the qualities and experiences refer, too, to principles defined in Sufi *tabaqat*.

These above-listed names and their associated qualities, as well as the ninety-five others, arguably have both a masculine and a feminine quality to them given that they are observed in all human beings regardless of gender or biological sex. 'The Watchful One' (*Raqeeb*) for example, can be witnessed in a man who is driving someone he loves through traffic to get home. A woman can also be watchful when she is waiting to see if a loved one requires defending.

Gender expressions and personality traits are created by the environment and the culture in which one develops. All of these traits, expressions, and qualities are human made. Even the suggestion that women are cyclical beings as a result of their menstrual cycle and men aren't similarly 'cyclical' beings has been disproven in scientific scholarship.²¹⁰ And so to attribute

²¹⁰ See Rodgers S. et al, "Serum testosterone levels and symptom-based depression subtypes in men" (2015); Snyder PJ, et al., "Effects of testosterone treatment in older men" (2016); Celec P, et al., "On the effects of testosterone on brain behaviour functions" (2015).

particular qualities, metaphysical or otherwise, to either men or women is to point metaphorically to the spokes rather than the hub; it creates a false dichotomy and unnecessarily essentializes the human being's existential experience.

Put another way, the qualities that one must refine or acquire or be rid of on the Sufi path, with the aim of becoming dust at God's feet or a manifestation of the archetypical Perfect Human, are neither masculine nor feminine. Scholar of Islamic studies, Maria Dakake's article "Walking the Path like Men" (2006) takes on the gender dichotomy, by reiterating the concept of balance that is required on the Sufi path. Dakake asserts that a woman seeker must refine and perfect their inherent virtues which are often considered 'feminine,' in addition to acquiring more traditionally masculine virtues. Likewise, men must refine and perfect their own inherent virtues, which are traditionally considered masculine, while acquiring traditionally considered feminine virtues. All of this is done with the aim of finding balance and thus becoming an exemplification of the Perfect Human. A person who, according to Sufis, also happens to be non-gendered. It seems then, that it is we, human beings, who continually get caught up on the gender of the human being and of the metaphysical aspects.

This 'getting caught up' can be witnessed in any human being who is attempting to teach their child or pet how to live with society's rules that are arbitrary but consequential; rules which cannot be known without being learned. When one looks out into the world, into relationality, into the practicalities of human life and human behaviour, biological gender is not representative of any specific qualities. Any person can be aggressive when pushed to be, and every person has the capacity to be gentle too. So, while a superficial reading of gender in Sufism can suggest that the feminine is 'passive,' for example, and the masculine is 'active,' the tradition's metaphysics actually suggest that gender is metaphysically fluid, and so too does human behaviour

demonstrate that behavioural characteristics are not linked to gender or biological sex. And so, in the same way that Amina Wadud and Sadiyyah Shaikh have analyzed the Qur'an's sections on testimony and inheritance and found that they are obsolete, I suggest that readings of behaviour and character as being gendered is irrelevant too.

The capacity for a person to recognize the needs of another human being requires a keen awareness (*muhadara*). In his *tabaqat*, Qushayri defines awareness as “presence of heart, which may be produced by the coming together of innumerable small proofs of what is real” (2002, p. 96). Awareness must be supplemented with an ability to compartmentalize and ignore, even suppress one's own experiences and desires. This ability also requires profound emotional intelligence, a clarity of mind and social abilities, including being able to understand what the moment, or another person requires and then to articulate or action what is required. This can be understood as a profound expression of *adab*.²¹¹ One of the reasons that I was interested in Mahmoud as a human being, and then as a Sufi teacher, is that I have witnessed moments in which he has demonstrated this capacity.

Attributes of emotional intelligence that I have witnessed in Mahmoud, such as patience (*sabr*) and the ability to be receptive to the subtlety of others' emotions, are generally considered to be feminine in Sufi metaphysics. And I have also witnessed and been on the receiving end of Mahmoud's quick and sharp rebukes, attributed to the metaphysical masculine aspect in Sufism. I will never forget sitting with Mahmoud one morning before a class and crying, talking to him about a relationship problem I was having. He turned to me and said, with a harshness bordering on disgust, “Why are you crying? Do you like crying?” Regardless of whether or not his response to me was warranted, I was shocked out of my self-pity. In hindsight, I think it's what I

²¹¹ The Sufi principle of awareness (*muhadara*) and *adab* are both explored in chapter 3, “On *Adab* and Companionship.”

needed at that moment: to get on with my day and figure out what was next instead of feeling sorry for myself.

Conclusion

When I learned about Sufism's divine metaphysical feminine and masculine aspects, I wanted to know more. What are these building blocks that help us learn about the world, about ourselves, about God? What do the Sufis write about them? What I found was a group of erudite scholars who are doing the work to illuminate the tradition of spiritual and powerful women and provide clarity around long-held assumptions and traditions that need no longer hold water. Because regardless of the approach to women and the feminine of the Sufis of the past, those perspectives belong to another era, one that is past. This is not to say that the wisdom of that time should be relegated to the past or left behind, but that the approach to categorizations of people by their sex is no longer relevant.

Rather, that at this point, many perspectives hold the space for the cultural, psychological, physical and perhaps even spiritual recognition that in each person lives the active and the passive, the receptive and the giving, and that to name them as 'masculine' and 'feminine' is fine, but to connect those qualities with biological sex is erroneous. What I am asserting, and what the literature and scholarship proves, what lived experience proves, is that without the feminine none of us can be made whole, and that without examples of the feminine outside of us, can we learn what this aspect is, how to embody it. The way that language is used, the way that gender is discussed, has a direct impact on the way that bodies, with their biological sex, are treated. Metaphysical characterizations of gender have a direct impact on the ways that power is expressed by and upon particular human bodies.

During a visit with Mahmoud and Rozaneh that occurred early in our friendship, I attended a dinner at their house with a group of people. At the end of the evening, Mahmoud and Rozaneh invited me to their office to chat and when I appeared in the doorway, they were sitting on the floor together. I sat down with them and Mahmoud, and I remember feeling glad that Rozaneh was sitting with us because I didn't know either of them well yet and I liked her so far. When I was settled, Mahmoud asked if there was anything I wanted to talk about or if I had any questions.

This felt like the right opportunity to ask about a topic that I hadn't wanted to broach in his classes: I asked him about the oppressive nature of religion. "How can anyone believe that religion is a force for good when we see all the ways that it is used to oppress and hurt people? What is it being used to do to women and kids?" My question was based on my upbringing: I grew up in a household where the murky concept of justice was considered paramount and where we were taught that the ultimate consequence of religion is the alienation of people from one another. I was taught that religion creates the perfect environment for dividing human beings based on ultimately insignificant aspects of human-made belief systems and rather than rely on these systems, people should simply respect one another. These ideas had allowed me to keep religion at an arm's length since I was quite young.

Mahmoud took the time to respond at length. Amidst his response, he asked me rhetorically if there are any human-made systems that do not produce imbalances of power and oppression. He suggested that oppression and violence are a consequence of human beings' organic tendencies and will thus be present in the systems that they create. But he also suggested that religious ideas and systems, all human-made systems in fact, can contain beauty, purity and wisdom. "When things get hard, having a system like religion can help people get through the

day.” For some reason I could actually hear his answers that day and internalize them. They created an opening in my psyche that allowed me to begin exploring religious philosophy in earnest, despite my misgivings about religious institutions. What he was talking about was differentiating between the religious ideas and the ways that they can be used. He was talking about the limitations of human beings in their application of religious ideas, but also about the interpretation of religious ideas.

And as the years have passed and I have spent more time with Mahmoud, I have always witnessed a generous and welcoming person who treats others with openness and kindness regardless of their gender expression or sexuality. I have also witnessed, over the years, some subtle changes in language around gender too, but Mahmoud’s message about men and women and their capacities has ultimately changed very little. In the end, I can’t help but wonder if Mahmoud’s perspective about women being inferior teachers was meant to incite the women who follow him to be even more ambitious than they seem to be. In the same way that he seemed to be testing those three men who came to the Nevada City gathering to see if they could look beyond the superficial, perhaps his words on gender and limitations were a pedagogical approach too. One of the women who has known him for more than a decade has earned a doctoral degree in Religious Studies, and all of the rest of the women who spend time with him are teachers at colleges themselves. But it’s possible too, that Mahmoud’s genuine perspective is that women can’t be good teachers.

After many conversations and much reading, I still don’t truly understand why Mahmoud states that women are ‘better’ students, while men have better capacities to be teachers, but I do know that we have had different lives and have different lenses for the world, despite all that I have learned from him. In recent years, I’ve witnessed small acts of openness that his above-

described beliefs do not account for. For example, he asked me, when I was dating, if I was seeing any “nice men or women.” Also, the gender fluid students who I have witnessed walking through the doors of his classroom have been as welcome as any of the other students, especially if they asked interesting questions. These examples reiterate the central importance of the principle of *adab* in Mahmoud’s manifestation of Sufism. And ultimately, we don’t need to agree on everything.

Project Conclusion

During my most recent visit to Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house, I was sitting with Mia in the front room and she asked me to tell her the story of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.²¹² She knew I had listened to Mahmoud talk about the epic many times and that I had spent some time writing about it for my master's thesis.

I talked to her about the beautiful half-God, half-human king of Uruk who abused the people in his kingdom. How he was so awful that the Mesopotamian gods created Enkidu, a human being designed to be Gilgamesh's equal. The story goes that when the two men met for the first time they wrestled for hours and hours, destroying parts of the city in their intense battle for physical dominance. Finally, Enkidu was defeated but as a result of this wrestling match, something in Gilgamesh opened up and his heart set aflame; the two men became best friends. The epic tells of a number of adventures that the two friends go on together, in one they defeat Humbaba, the monster-guardian of a Cedar forest and in another Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the goddess Ishtar's Bull of Heaven. But there are three interludes that I emphasized to Mia; they hold the most interest for me that come at the end of the epic after Enkidu's death.

As punishment for the death of the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu is killed, and in the face of this loss, Gilgamesh is changed: his arrogance recedes. In its place, an existential crisis arises that prompts a journey to find immortality. This journey begins with Gilgamesh walking for days through a desert, includes an episode in which he has to outrun the sun through a dark tunnel, and is continued by an arrival at the edge of the Waters of Death. With the help of a ferryman, Gilgamesh crosses the waters and encounters Utanapishtim and his wife. The gods had granted

²¹² I refer to Mia in chapter 2; she was the person who first met Helen, the woman who owned the gazebo in the woods where I attended the gathering described in chapter 5. Mia is also mentioned in chapter 3 in a story that helps describe the relationship between self-reflection and friendship, or community in Sufism. This epic is referred to in the section on epics found in chapter 5, "On Storytellers and Stories."

Utanapishtim and his wife immortality and they had subsequently retreated to a secluded island in the middle of the Waters of Death. During their encounter, Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh that if he is able to stay awake for seven days, he will give him the secret to immortality and within moments Gilgamesh has fallen asleep. For each of the days that Gilgamesh is asleep, Utanapishtim's wife bakes a loaf of bread so that when Gilgamesh wakes on the seventh day, the proof of his failure sits in front of him in the form of mouldering loaves.

As Utanapishtim begins sending away an emotionally distraught and defeated Gilgamesh, Utanapishtim's wife pressures her husband to give Gilgamesh something for his efforts regardless of his failure. Utanapishtim's compromise is to point Gilgamesh to a flower at the bottom of the Deep, the ocean. The flower is covered in thorns and grows at such a depth that it is practically unreachable, but whoever is able to retrieve it and consume it will be granted Eternal Youth. And so Gilgamesh dives down to the depths of the Deep and cuts his hands on the thorns of the flower, but returns to the surface with his treasure.

With his prize in hand Gilgamesh begins the return journey to his kingdom and as he nears the kingdom he stops by a stream to bathe. He puts his clothing and the flower on the ground and gets into the water and in a flash Gilgamesh witnesses a snake slither out of the stream, eat the flower, shed its skin and disappear. Despite Gilgamesh's beauty, strength and power, despite his efforts and even the extra help he is given, he is left with nothing. He returns to Uruk empty-handed, and the way that Mahmoud tells it, Gilgamesh writes the story of his journey on the city's walls and spends the remainder of his years ruling compassionately.

There are two themes that I find to be the most meaningful in these devastating scenes. The first is Gilgamesh's trajectory to humility and understanding. In the beginning of the epic, he is awful: this is evidenced by his raping brides on their wedding night so that he is the one to

possess every woman and child in the kingdom, but this is in contrast to the quiet king at the end of the story. Gilgamesh is pushed into humility not by the gods who try to punish him, but because of an existential fear that he actually tried to find a way out of and failed to overcome not once, but twice. Despite all of his advantages, Gilgamesh is as incompetent as every other human being. This is not a story of a hero's successes, but a reminder of humility and the fallibility of humanity; of our own incompetence even when we try our best.

It is significant, I think, that in Mahmoud's retelling Gilgamesh writes his story on the walls of the city instead of trying to tell it to anyone. When the story is told this way, Gilgamesh understands how he got to his state of humility: not by being punished or taught a lesson by those in power, but by trying as hard as he could to find something, and failing. The king who appears in the epic's initial episodes was too arrogant to have respect for anything other than his own desires and if Gilgamesh ended up understanding this about himself, he would also understand that there would be no use in trying to tell his story to anyone. He would understand that people learn through experiencing things themselves, rarely by being told what to do, and so he would write his story on the city walls for those who were seeking to read when it was the right time for them to encounter his story.²¹³ This recognition is a lonely place because Gilgamesh would know the uselessness of speech. One wonders if this is a lesson that Mahmoud is grappling with too.

At some point near the end of my re-telling of the epic for Mia, Mahmoud came into the room. He stood there listening to me as I wrapped up the story. In the silence that followed, Mia and I looked at him from the couch and after a pause he said, "It's not really that great a story,"

²¹³ This is reminiscent of the Islamic saying that only those with the ears to listen 'properly' will have the capacity to hear a message, for everyone else, that same message will fall on deaf ears. This expression, about having 'ears to hear' appears throughout Sufi and Islamic texts, including in the Qur'an, in the story of the Heights (*The Qur'an*, 2016, p. 108 verse 195) and the Pilgrimage (*The Qur'an*, 2016, p. 212 verse 46) and in Rumi's *Masnavi* (Rumi, 2004, pp. 35, 41, 125), for example.

and went to the kitchen. I remember being astonished enough to laugh. Later that evening I asked Mahmoud why he'd said that and he brushed me off, changing the subject. Given his non-response, there are a number of ways that I could interpret his comment. Perhaps it serves as a reminder that we shouldn't get too attached to any one thing; that the story, just like anything else held too tightly, becomes meaningless. Like the part in the Bible where it is said that it is more difficult for a rich man to get into Heaven than for a camel to pass through a needle's eye. The biblical scene suggests that a rich person's obsession with their wealth assures that they are unable to prize anything above it. Perhaps to love the epic may be to miss the point: that it is a story about becoming nothing. And seeing some parts of myself in Gilgamesh's story is fine but we are not the same, I still have a long way to go. Or maybe Mahmoud meant something else entirely.

Despite Mahmoud's cool response to my retelling of the epic, my relationship to the story actually began in his college classroom. The first time I heard about the story was in the first few months of 2017 in his World Religions class. He began telling the story about the half-human, half-God Gilgamesh, and I remember thinking "Oh great. Another story about a man. No thanks, I'm good." At that time I felt strongly that I had heard enough stories about men over the course of my lifetime, and I was only interested in stories written by women about women. But there was something about Gilgamesh that took root in me, and over the years I'd listen to Mahmoud interpret the story every semester that I sat in his classroom.

One of the things that Mahmoud often says about Gilgamesh's epic, and epics in general, is that they 'have everything.' Sometimes when he explains this statement he refers to his interpretation of Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' framework (1972), which consists of five steps: The Call, the Search, the Struggle, the Breakthrough, and the Return. Campbell's steps

describe the trajectory of heroes like Gilgamesh, but Mahmoud reinterprets the framework for the spiritual journey, with the Call initially arising in the form of existential questions, “What am I even doing this for, what is the point?” Or, “Why does this matter, what should I be doing with my life?” Using Campbell’s framework within the context of the spiritual journey, if a human being’s existential questions are asked with sincerity, and in the presence of a spiritual teacher or a companion who is several steps ahead of them on their own spiritual journey, the existential inquirer may take the next step to being their Search.

The way that Mahmoud tells it, the Search stage consists of the efforts made to answer those existential questions. There are no quick answers to these questions, because the questions do not have fixed answers; usually the questions are answered with more questions or with stories. But the questions and stories brought about by the Search, and which are wrestled with in Campbell’s stage called the Struggle, refine the seeker’s thinking and their ego. Like Gilgamesh, whose efforts amount to nothing tangible, it is likely the person who is called to the spiritual path will begin to lose things before they can gain understanding. Their questions might change, their ideas, perspectives and values will likely change, and over time if they are sincere, their ego will deflate in fits and starts because understanding is not a place that can be gotten to, it is a dynamic process. This means that understanding, like prayer for the Sufi, should be the constant aim.²¹⁴

A challenge with overlaying the spiritual journey with Campbell’s framework is that while many stories have relatively positive endings, there are no guarantees on the spiritual path, particularly of achieving the final two stages of the cyclical framework, Breakthrough and

²¹⁴ Qushayri defines remembrance (*dhikr*) as “the practice of remembering God [and] a mainstay of the Way. No one attains to God except through continuous remembrance” (2002, p. 269). The Sufi women in Sulami’s *Early Sufi Women* (1999) who were noted as practicing self-denial (*mujahadat*) were also practicing a form of remembrance. Lubaba al-Muta Abbida, for example, was recorded as having said, “I am ashamed lest God see me preoccupied with other than Him” (1999, p. 82).

Return. Perhaps if a Sufi student or seeker is lucky they will eventually understand how to look at one of the questions that they have been pondering; perhaps they will understand a few things at some point. And as a result of this understanding they may be in a place to, as Mahmoud has characterized it in the past, “become a man of the people, like Macolm X or the Buddha” (Malamatian, 2017). These are two examples of exceptional teachers who worked with the common person, but how many exceptional teachers are there out there? The practical reference serves as a hard truth: most of us will remain at the stage of the Struggle instead of having true Breakthroughs or Returns; a person is lucky to have even the tiniest Breakthrough and catch glimpses of the place of wisdom.

While Gilgamesh did make it back to Uruk, he didn’t Return, I don’t think. And while *The Epic of Gilgamesh* really does have so much, maybe even everything, one of the most important lessons that it teaches is that regardless of whether we are students of life as Gilgamesh could be said to be, or students of Sufi teachers, we should strive for wisdom. The insights that these efforts glean are the only things that stand between us and repeatedly being victims of our own limited understanding.

Key Takeaways

Nine years after my first meeting with Mahmoud, I continue to ask him questions about things that are important to me because I want to hear his perspective. As the years have passed he has encouraged me to make a life in another country with my family close by and to continue to engage with the ideas that he’s taught me but to recognize that I’m in a stage of life that requires attention, focus and devotion, even if there are days when I miss being alone thinking. The flexibility of the Sufism that he teaches does not make it ‘lite.’ Rather, it is an expression of Sufism that honours the requirements of life and community, that it takes a lot of time and effort

to be a decent family-member, to keep a clean house with food in the fridge, where a person needs to work a job that takes up most of their time so that they're able to have money to pay for all of those requirements. But Mahmoud's Sufism also quietly insists that if a person is really invested, if they do truly love, they will return to the ideas and their teacher when the time is right.

This case study illuminates a manifestation of Sufism that is being practiced by a Persian teacher, including his pedagogical approach and philosophical perspectives, and the community he has created around himself and his family in Oakland, California. This work extends the scholarship on contemporary Sufism in three ways: (1) by highlighting and exploring Mahmoud's particular pedagogical approach on a variety of Sufi practices and socio-religious themes, as well as exploring how his teachings and pedagogy are interpreted and received by the people around him; (2) by complexifying conceptions of the 'traditional' in Sufism, particularly as it relates to Sufism being practiced outside the bounds of institutionalized Sufism; and (3) by extending the genre of Islamic spiritual, biographical manuals, *tabaqat*.²¹⁵ These three aims are accomplished by highlighting Mahmoud's philosophies and pedagogical approaches to the themes investigated in each of the six chapters and by contextualizing Mahmoud's philosophies and practices on each of those themes. Amidst these analyses, I critique the significance of lineage in conversations of tradition, interweaving concepts defined in the *tabaqat*, and connecting Mahmoud's approach with medieval Persian Sufi traditions.

Future Scholarship

While this project extends the scholarship of contemporary Sufism in the three ways described above, there are a number of subjects that are touched on which could be further explored. There

²¹⁵ *Tabaqat*, the Islamic genre of biographic religious manuals, is introduced and defined in the Introduction of this work.

are also a number of subjects related to the material here that I would be curious to examine in the future. Three studies that would hinge on the work that I have done here follow:

I would be interested in further exploring Persian poetry and poetics. This project would extend the work in this dissertation by analyzing the Persian poems that Mahmoud teaches. There are two reasons I did not include this work in this dissertation. The first is the chosen focus of this project is the philosophical and pedagogical approaches that Mahmoud employs in his craft, but I also did not learn Farsi for this project.

Another study of interest would employ a sociology of religion approach. As stated above, Mahmoud and the line of teachers that he comes from are all Persian. They are also all Muslim. I do not explore the fact that in the years I have known Mahmoud, none of the students that he has worked with are Muslim.²¹⁶ This line of inquiry was beyond the scope of this particular project but this aspect of the case study would be interesting for some scholars no doubt, and could be explored in relation to a more in-depth study of the community itself, should the community members be open to sharing.

A third study would explicitly lean on the seven dimensions of Lived Religion that Nancy T. Ammerman describes in depth in her text, *Studying Lived Religion: Contexts and Practices* (2021), embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, morality, narrative and spirituality, could provide an interesting and different set of results.

There is also work that could be done which is related to this project but does not rely directly on the same interlocutors. Two projects of interest follow here:

²¹⁶ Mahmoud does not require his students to convert to Islam despite his own roots in Islam, he also does not prescribe particular practices in a blanket manner to his students. This fact, while interesting to study, would have been outside the scope of this study and is addressed as such in footnote 7 of the study's introduction.

While there is some scholarship that explores what makes Sufism traditional or Neo or New Age (Hermansen, 2014; Lawrence, 2010; Piraino, 2021), I would be interested in extending and complexifying this scholarship. In particular, I would be interested in engaging with Sedwick's four characteristics of 'Western' Sufism (2014) within the Canadian and American context specifically. Relatedly, an exploration of Sufism in North America and the relationship that various Sufi orders have to Islam would be useful.

Similarly, I would be interested in exploring non-institutional contemporary Sufism. Mahmoud is not the only person who 'does' Sufism outside the bounds of traditional Sufi orders. In particular I would like to answer questions about (1) how the non-institutionalization of these groups impacts their pedagogy, philosophy, and practices; (2) how and if the teachings in non-institutionalized groups are rooted in medieval Sufi literature, including the *tabaqat* where relevant; and (3) the lineage and transmission of non-institutional expressions of Sufism. The work that could be done in any of the projects described above would help scholars of Sufism and scholars of religious studies better understand the way that religion is manifesting in the lives of individuals in the world today, amidst the global threats of the day and preoccupations of the moment. Preoccupations like the distractions of technology; the influence of late-stage capitalism; the resurgence of authoritarian leaders. As Mahmoud said to me in one of our first conversations, "When things get hard, having a system like religion can help people get through the day."²¹⁷ It is important to have hope, but it can be helpful for some people to also have faith and an aim for their lives that goes beyond everyday practicalities. Studying manifestations of ideas that go beyond everyday practicalities would be compelling to me.

²¹⁷ The conversation referred to here is detailed at the beginning of Chapter 6, "On Gender and Power."

Concluding Reflections

“Emily, be patient. Everything will fall into place.” Effort is a prerequisite to spending time with Mahmoud, but he can often be heard recommending patience too. This recommendation has been hard for me: I’ve gone through life believing that if I pushed hard enough, eventually I could form the world outside of me into something that I found not only recognizable but desirable. But life always does what it wants with each of us regardless of our efforts. In the years that I’ve known Mahmoud, I’ve moved countries, married, moved again, divorced, earned a second master’s degree and moved... again. I’ve also had three surgeries and by the end of 2025, I’ll have gotten married again and completed a Ph.D. in Religious Studies. These events, the good and the more challenging ones, have been the arenas in which the ideas that I learned from Mahmoud were practiced, because what makes the ideas that Mahmoud teaches are meant to be practiced in life.

On February 27th, 2020, my 33rd birthday, I received acceptance to the University of Ottawa’s doctoral program in Religious Studies with a full ride. A few days later I accepted the offer and bought a plane ticket back to Ottawa for April 30th. At the time it felt sudden, but the global COVID-19 pandemic was setting in and I was watching the reports published on the World Health Organization’s website. I was also working as a public librarian in Alameda, California, teaching classes in San Francisco and living precariously in an apartment with a woman I’d met in a Facebook group for renting apartments; I was exposed. And in the days before I moved away from Oakland in 2020, Mahmoud said to me “Don’t think too much. Don’t compare yourself to me or anyone else; man or woman, everything’s going to be ok.” He teaches refinements in thinking, feeling and learning so that each person may discern when they can push past their assumptions and begin to live differently. But he also teaches how to accept that there

is only so much that is in our control and that learning to discern when to submit to that lack of control is equally important.

When teaching the lesson of submission, Mahmoud tells a story about a snowstorm: there are people walking on a tundra when a whiteout comes out of nowhere. “The people don’t keep trying to walk through the storm, they sit down and wait it out.” Otherwise, they would stumble around in the storm, unable to see, wasting energy and becoming more and more exhausted. I’ve heard him tell this story in various contexts over the years: in the college classes where he teaches or informally; when someone is asking which path they should take in life; if they should have faith that the world or God will steer them in the right direction. Another story he’ll tell refers to the saying in the *Hadith*, that a person should tie their camel and pray to God (Jami` at-Tirmidhi 2517).²¹⁸ In both of these stories, human beings are made responsible for themselves and for their actions, but the stories also recommend faith that God or the universe is unfurling in a way that is beyond our control or comprehension regardless of the efforts expended. This is one of the most important lessons that my companion, Mahmoud, taught me.

²¹⁸ This saying is also referred to in chapter 3, “On *Adab* and Companionship,” in the section on chivalry and servitude.

Methodological Appendix

My methodological approach bears some explanation because it is not entirely simple. It begins with my PhD coursework, where I was inspired by Lived Religion. In the theory and methods class, I was introduced to Robert Orsi's work and shown scholarship that brings the religious studies researcher in close to the people they are learning about. I wanted to produce work like this. As my studies progressed, I decided that one of my comprehensive examination areas would be the Lived Religion methodology so that I could understand how it was development and evolution, and some of the ways that method had been applied by different scholars. While Lived Religion did not end up being the methodology that I applied in my work, it did provide the philosophical foundation for the conceptualization of this dissertation.

But as I began my field research I began to realize how important my relationship to my interlocutors was. While this dissertation explores contemporary Sufism in Oakland, the subject is elucidated in large part through *my* perspective. As a woman in her thirties who grew up in a family without religion, who was coming to Mahmoud's expression of Sufism with few religious ideas, the time I spent with Mahmoud and our shared experiences informed how I processed the philosophy that I heard him explain as well as the things we did together, many of which I would come to understand as Sufi practices, some of which were semi-modified. Autoethnography ended up being the way for me to write myself and my relationship to Mahmoud into this work.

The analytical and interpretive work that I do in this dissertation brings my data, particularly unstructured interviews with Mahmoud, recordings of his lectures, my own field notes and journal entries, into conversation with classical Sufi manuals, *tabaqat*; contemporary

scholarship of Sufism and historical scholarship of Sufism. This approach allowed me to situate the way that Mahmoud ‘does’ Sufism through a number of perspectives.

This appendix is meant to function, to a certain extent, as a literature review for Lived Religion and Autoethnography. I begin, though, with a positionality statement and then get into describing the methodological and analytical approach I took. I conclude with a section on how data was collected and interpreted.

Positionality

Since I began working on this project I have had many people ask me if I am a Sufi. To answer this question directly: I do not identify as a Sufi. I have also been asked if Mahmoud is my teacher. The answer to this question is that I consider him to be a trusted friend and companion. I do consider him to be my teacher and the title of this dissertation, ‘Companions on the Way,’ refers to Mahmoud and me. I am not of the opinion that the answers to these two questions are at odds. In the context of Sufism, a friendship between a teacher and a student can be an occasional by-product of the pedagogical relationship, and while he is a Sufi, I am his student. Life is not a black and white affair and neither are these aspects of our human friendship.

And so while the academy has slowly begun to shed its illusions relating to objectivity in scholarship, it is not lost on me that my proximity to my interlocutor and the subject at hand might suggest an inability to observe and analyze critically. Ultimately, this project is the work of an ‘insider’ and my employment of the autoethnographic method engages with that fact.²¹⁹ Further, I would suggest that my friendship with and proximity to the subject affords me access and intimacy where, if someone else were undertaking this work, the ambiguity that Mahmoud

²¹⁹ There are a number of works within the academy that advance scholarly understandings within a field where the scholar has a personal relationship with the subject matter and interlocutors. Within the field of Sufism, Zia Iyat-Khan’s PhD dissertation, “A hybrid Sufi order at the crossroads of modernity: The Sufi order and Sufi movement of Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan” (2006) explores his own family’s Sufi order.

often employs in his philosophical and pedagogical practices, as well as his occasionally off-putting behaviour, could easily be misconstrued or left unexplained.

Methodological and Analytical Approach

My proximity to this case study's primary interlocutor had deep influence on the planning, data gathering, data analysis and interpretation and the writing of this manuscript. The Lived Religion methodology informed the conceptualization and philosophical lens for this project and the way that I gathered data from/with my interlocutor; the autoethnographic method defined the way that I wrote this manuscript; and my qualitative data analysis and interpretation involved historical, classical and contemporary scholarship and sources on Sufism.

This methodological and analytical framework allowed me to get as close as possible, conceptually, to the subject while keeping my own positionality in view, which is an important component of the study.

Lived Religion

Lived Religion helps us “make sense of religious ways of life that were previously hidden or suppressed. By insisting that we begin with experiences among ordinary people in everyday life, our field has been significantly transformed” (Ammerman, 2016, p. 95). Lived Religion is the study of intimate, individual aspects of religion and religious ritual, contributes to making sense of the world at large by confounding certainties, unearthing hidden agendas and calling attention to the desires and fears each of us brings to our own, and others' religions (Orsi, 2003).

Studies that employ Lived Religion help scholars “encounter and engage religious practice and imagination within the circumstances of other people's lives and within the contexts of our own, at all the places where these lives meet, in the archives, in the field, in political crisis, and in contemporary distress” (2003, p. 174). They also generally focus on ordinary, everyday

practitioners as opposed to authorities and figure heads. This theoretical approach influenced the conceptualization of this dissertation as well as my approach for gathering data from my interlocutor. In the section that follows I detail the inception of Lived Religion and outline some aspects of Lived Religion that influenced this dissertation.

Lived Religion is generally traced back to David D. Hall's edited volume *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (1997) where Lived Religion is traced back to the French sociological tradition of *le religion vecue* (Hall, 1997, p. vi) and 'popular religion.' Hall asserts that it was the study of 'popular religion' that made it possible for scholars "to expand [research's] scope of belief and practice beyond what was authorized by the institutional church" (1997, p. viii). This edited volume includes notable Lived Religion scholars Robert Orsi and Nancy Ammerman, who, respectively, use historical and large sets of sociological data informed by interviews to provide particular depth in their work. This approach was further extended by Meredith B. McGuire (2008) when she asserted that "individuals' religious practices, experiences, and expressions, [have] made me extremely doubtful that even mountains of quantitative sociological data (especially data from surveys and other relatively superficial modes of inquiring) can tell us much of any value about individuals' religions" (2008, p. 5). Her solution to this problem emphasizing the individual in studies of religion (2008, 12). These perspectives on the scholarship of religion provided an 'in' for me. They demonstrated that research about someone who might be considered 'on the margins' was not only acceptable in the academy, but important.

One of Orsi's later works, *Between Heaven and Earth* (2016) also asserts that spiritual and religious experiences are real for those who experience them and deserve to be studied without having to determine their plausibility. This sentiment influenced me, in that I am not

intending to critique Mahmoud's philosophies, pedagogy or practices. The aim of this work, rather, is to analyze and interpret the ways that Mahmoud expresses Sufism by engaging with historical, classical Sufi texts, as well as contemporary scholarship of Sufism.

It is important to note that while the use of Lived Religion is growing, there are scholars who question the validity of the way that Lived Religion studies the 'experiential.' Hughes and McCutcheon bring a critical eye to Lived Religion (2021, p. 153), and point to the work of American historian Joan Wallach Scott, who is similarly critical of the study of 'experience.' Scott is critical of attempts at describing the point of view of the interlocutor/subject, asserting that any description of this nature is a "referential notion of experience which denies that it is anything but a reflection of the real" (1991, p. 776).

Scott suggests, for example, that French historian Michel de Certeau takes a better approach in his work *L'invention du quotidien (The Practice of Everyday Life)* (1980). Certeau's work differs from the Lived Religion approach in that he theorizes mundane practices instead of describing them from the point of view of the interlocutor/subject. This critique of Lived Religion lies in questioning the scholar's ability to perceive and communicate the complex and subjective Subject in a neutral, i.e. objective, way, for the reader's consumption. Hughes and McCutcheon extend this perspective, suggesting that a critical revision of the Lived Religion movement would consist of understanding 'experience' as an identity creation strategy or tactic, which is the scholar's responsibility to explain as performative; not natural (2021, pp. 153-158).

I understand this critique, but I do not share it for two reasons. The first reason is that while I agree that it is important to bring a critical eye to scholarship, the undercurrent of the critique, it seems, is based in 'not believing' the perspective of the subject; that the subject/interlocutor is blind to their motives and that any thing that anyone does is natural (as

opposed to a pretense which is put on when being observed). None of this can be assumed, or from the opposing view, if one person can assume this, another perspective based on an assumption is also valid, relatively speaking.

This leads me to my second reasoning: this critique suggests, it seems, that the scholar has the capacity to be objective/neutral/more informed about the subject than the subject themselves. My opinion is different on this matter: I am not of the opinion that scholars or academics are necessarily so self-aware or unbiased or even able to understand nuances of what they are witnessing. In other words, everything is an attempt at interpreting and everything is referential. It is my opinion that to believe otherwise is an extension of academia's colonial and patriarchal past which does not align with the values that I would like to see in the academy.

As such, both of the issues that I take with Scott's perspective are the reason that I employed a Lived Religion approach.

Autoethnography

Auto-ethnographers gather mostly qualitative data using a hybrid approach, employing such methods as participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, field notes, thematic analysis, context, interpretation, and storytelling. This data is then analyzed with the aim of capturing and evoking the researcher's lived experiences, as well as their interlocutors' experiences, where possible (Poulos, 2021, p. 5).

It was important to me to employ autoethnography because of my proximity to the subject matter and because of my relationship with my interlocutors. It did not feel honest to use a methodology that implied any kind of distance from them. In the opening chapter of her text sociological analysis of religion in the United States, scholar Ruth Frackenberg describes an academic impulse, which arises out of the scholarly tradition of 'objectivity,' in a way that spoke

to my own concerns. She suggests that ethnographers and scholars of religion feel it is necessary to distance themselves from their subjects of study. She asserts, though, that qualitative sociological and anthropological, in particular ethnographic work, requires entering into the world of one's subject, and to disavow that foundational connection is to create counterfeit separations between the academy and practitioners; to uphold the idea that the scholar is rational and the believer is perhaps less so. But to begin to dissolve that misleading objectivity is to begin to open up a dialogue (Frackenburg, 2004, p. 14), a dialogical research relationship of respect.

Frackenburg goes on to explain that this

reflexive turn in ethnographic practice [disrupts some] of its well-established categories and separations. But it also revealed some of those very separations as illusory. When the lessons of the reflexive turn are applied to the study of religion and spirituality, another set of binaries can be undone—those between the practitioner and the academician, the recipient of the miraculous and the commentator on it, and more generally that between the world of scholarship and that of religion (Frackenburg, 2004, p. 19).

To be clear: while I do not identify as a Sufi, in this life I am seeking something and the time that I spent with my interlocutors before I began this study was an integral part of my life's path. I continue to see them and speak with them regularly.

Initially, autoethnography arose as a method for ethnographic researchers to incorporate personal insights and experiences into their work. Autoethnography shares characteristics with the literary genres of memoir and creative nonfiction and reflexively uses writing as part of the research process. Practitioners of autoethnography use writing about the cultural milieu and the self to accentuate human social cultural life practices (Jones et al., 2015; Poulos, 2021, p. 4).

This qualitative research method 1) uses a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices and experiences; 2) acknowledges and values a researcher's relationships with others; 3) uses deep and careful self-reflection—typically referred to as 'reflexivity'—to name and interrogate the intersections between self and society, the particular

and the general, the personal and the political; 4) shows people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles; 5) balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and 6) strives for social justice and to make life better. (Jones et al., 2015, p. 2).

While autoethnography is a methodological approach that blends personal narrative with cultural analysis (Weaver-Hightower, 2025), my application of autoethnography primarily emphasizes relationality. Practically, this means that the data centers around a pedagogical relationship between Mahmoud, a Sufi teacher, and me; it focuses on stories and teachings that are primarily being given by Mahmoud to me. As such, this work relies in part on personal anecdotes and stories to illuminate Mahmoud's philosophies, practices and pedagogical approaches. Autoethnography provided a basis through which I could engage with the shared dimension of these pedagogical and philosophical experiences. Given this, the use of autoethnography allows me to highlight, analyze and interpret this central aspect of the study, most of which I recorded in my field notes and journal entries.

As such, this project draws theoretically on the perspective outlined in Andrew F. Herrmann's chapter, "Autoethnography as Acts of Love" (2021). In his chapter, Herrmann engages with Kierkegaard's philosophical ideas about love imperatives, suggesting that they can inform the philosophical basis for autoethnography as a research practice and that these ideas about love can "inform the practical and material aspects of autoethnographic research" (2021, p. 75). Herrmann explores Kierkegaard's three philosophical imperatives of love: the love of the self, preferential love and agape love (2021, p. 67), alongside supporting perspectives from autoethnographers and other theoreticians of Kierkegaard's work, contending that autoethnography is ultimately an act of love.

Herrmann makes analytical textual connections to the works of the father of existentialist philosophy to show that the first of Kierkegaard's love imperatives, the love of the self, is expressed and addressed through the act of introspection and self-reflection:

through the action of self-reflection, I can then make continual personal ethical decisions about who I ought to become, and then act upon these interpretations and reinterpretations, and change what I do in the world and who I am becoming. For Kierkegaard and for autoethnographers, the self is not so much a noun but is a 'selfing': the activity of creating a self. The application of this existentialist idea of continual becoming is one reason personal narratives and autoethnographies are not just narratives of 'retrospective sensemaking' but also future-oriented prospective narratives (2021, p. 70).

The principle or concept that Herrmann is describing above, of self-reflection informing and impacting decisions which are then acted upon, is expressed in the project in a number of places. One example can be found in the chapter on *adab* and companionship where, in an anecdote, I tell a story where I am rushing my friends to get to Mahmoud's classroom and in a moment of self-reflection, realize my rudeness. This realization that was produced by a moment of self-awareness and reflection will, one can hope, have a lasting impact on the way that I treat the people.

The second of Kierkegaard's love imperatives is preferential love, which Herrmann defined as love for family, friends, lovers, colleagues, etc., for "some particular someone" (2021, p. 71). Herrmann goes on to clarify that preferential relationships are based on respect for an individual's capability, mysteriousness, possibility and privacy, and on the equality and mutuality between individuals. He notes that these relationships and this type of love are about edification. Edification is, Herrmann notes, a dialogic practice between two people that allows each participant to build the other up (Herrmann, 2021, p. 72). Without doubt, my project, with its focus on pedagogy and philosophy, on teaching and learning, is an expression of this pedagogical preferential love imperative.

The third of Kierkegaard's love imperatives, agape, is the universal love for all of humankind (2021, p. 72). This is a gift without any expectation of reciprocity, where the lover, in this case the autoethnographer, "sees need in the here and now and acts to alleviate that need" (2021, 73-74). Herrmann provides an example of Kierkegaard's agape love imperative in the context of autoethnography, where an autoethnographer worked in and then wrote about a dysfunctional healthcare system in the United States (2021, p. 74).

My own autoethnographic case study seeks to illustrate Mahmoud's expressions of Sufism which are echoes of his own deep love for his teacher, which are explored in particular in the chapter on love, in the section on transmissions of teachings via love. What I learned through this research is that Mohammad and Mahmoud too, seek to equip their students with the capacity to observe objectively, think clearly and act appropriately. This is an act that I consider to be one of profound love and one that I wanted to better understand and communicate clearly to the academy and readers at large.

While Herrmann's engagement with Kierkegaard's three love imperatives as informing the philosophical basis for autoethnography is unique, other theoreticians of autoethnography take similarly creative approaches to describing the methodology. *The International Review of Qualitative Research* published a special issue on Autoethnography in 2017, including a piece by an American professor, titled "Now is the time for autoethnography" (Lockford, 2017). In this article, Lesa Lockford establishes contextual justification for doing autoethnography and articulates why the methodology matters, concluding with a statement that speaks well to the aims of my own work. She writes,

We need to do autoethnography. Because it matters. [...] It matters because true-to-life tales are the "how" of being and tell us more than the 'what'; it gives us ways of moving through the world as ethical, socially responsible and critical beings. It matters because it allows us to feel into experiences we could never

know otherwise. It matters because it teaches us empathy, the definite characteristic of being socially well-adjusted and compassionate humans. [...] Remember that story is a primary mode of knowledge acquisition not just because what's told is reasonable but because stories move us to see differently, to be different than we were before (2017, pp. 30-31).

This perspective, that stories provide a way into knowledge and knowing, to relationship, is the basis for my employment of autoethnography in this work.

But both autoethnography and narrative theory worked in concert in this dissertation in a variety of ways. They helped me, for example, to add nuance and atmosphere to this dissertation that would be difficult or impossible to illustrate were my presence in the work excluded.

Nuance and atmosphere are important components to the pedagogical lessons being described in this work, as they influence the learner, often me, and allow me to engage philosophically with the ambiguity that many of the stories and lessons employ. Nuance and atmosphere also heightens the anecdotes that I include, bringing the reader into the experiences too. These methodological approaches also afforded me the opportunity to engage with the pedagogical story-telling tools that are employed in Sufism. Sufi teachers will use story-telling to provide their students with layered answers that require their listeners to interpret stories and discern an answer to their question. My use of autoethnography and narrative theory allowed me to engage with this pedagogical ambiguity.

More practically though, this work was influenced by Karen McCarthy-Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Princess in Brooklyn* (2010). While this work is not a pure example of autoethnography, her self-reflexive approach, which I read early in my studies as I was reading theories of Lived Religion, influenced the way I understood religious studies research could be written. In the introduction to her work, she writes, "Putting myself on the line in my field journal and in my relations with Alourdes and with Vodou was, in the end, even more than that.

It was an acknowledgement that ethnographic research, whatever else it is, is a form of human relationship” (2010, p. 12).

There are some significant differences between the work in Brown’s book and my own dissertation, of particular significance is the fact that Brown was introduced to Alourdes, her interlocutor, for the explicit purpose of studying her application of Vodou, whereas I did not enter into friendship with my interlocutor as a researcher, this aspect came later. And while Brown’s work has not been considered acceptable by all members of the academy over the years (Trouillot, 1994), it did provide an innovative and sensitive way to encounter her interlocutor’s world. Ultimately, this project required an established way to write myself into the work and analyze and interpret that pedagogical relationality, and the autoethnographic method allowed for that.

Limitations of Lived Religion and Autoethnography

Lived Religion and autoethnography are methodologies that share a number of similar limitations, I will touch on two here. The first limitation has to do with self-disclosure. When Lived Religion and autoethnography are used in scholarship it is important to have a clear idea of the scholar’s relationship to their subject. While this has the potential to be slightly awkward for scholars, a clear statement of positionality gives readers the ‘whole picture’ of what they’re reading, including the opportunity to be critical of the scholar’s blind spots.

P. T. Mathew’s “Between the Sea and the Sky: Lived Religion on the Seashore” (2020) describes pearl fishing along the Indian coast and provides an especially interesting case in which to consider the merits of self-disclosure in Lived Religion scholarship and in scholarship beyond. Mathew is a member of the Society of Jesus but the only reference to his Catholicism in the book is the SJ suffix following his name on the cover.

In this historical Lived Religion scholarship, Mathew describes how 16th century Portuguese expeditions to India converted people from Hinduism to Catholicism, supposedly because there was an appetite for Christianity. Mathew also refers to archival journal sources of the evangelical priests which stated that there was no real contradiction for the converted Hindus between their old and new faiths.

Mathew then recounts a story from one of the aforementioned journals in which children would betray their parents to the Jesuits if they weren't following their new faith properly. The priests and children would go to the homes of these parents and smash their 'idols.' The text also insinuates that the children would also urinate and defecate on the remains of these sacred objects.

It was at this point in my reading of the book that I investigated Mathew's background and understood the lens from which he was writing: he is a member of the Jesuits writing a history of evangelical Jesuits. Had Mathew's positioning been made explicit in an introductory note, for example, the nuances of his scholarship could have been considered more readily.

While this text contains some interesting facts, the scholar's perspective is challenging for me. This book serves as a reminder that while some advances have been made in scholarship, there is much work to be done.

The second limitation relates to the style of data collection and application of Lived Religion and autoethnography which, in many cases, basically assures that the results of studies are, awkwardly, both ambiguous and specific (Knibbe & Kupari, 2020). The specificity that scholars Knibbe and Kupari describe as a challenge in the application of Lived Religion (2020) is highlighted, in my view, in Jeldtoft's article (2011). This study explores the experiences of 'non-organized' Muslim minorities. To be included in her study, interlocutors must (1) self-

identify as Muslim, and (2) not be active in formal, organized or institutionalized religious contexts. While her findings are novel, that for non-organized, ‘minority’ Muslims, their identity is not centrally defined by their ‘Muslim-ness’, as opposed to ‘active’ Muslims who participate in religious or activist contexts, the micro-level specificity of this work is not particularly compelling, at least for me.

The specificity can also be a strength though. This is evident in Pamela Prickett’s micro-level case study about a Muslim community in Los Angeles, *Believing in South Central: Everyday Islam in the City of Angels* (2021). This study introduces readers to human beings and their stories and then examines her data sociologically. Both scholars used interviews to collect their data, but the texts could not be more different. Prickett’s interlocutors’ stories highlight the critical arguments she is making, whereas Jeldtoft’s interlocutors’ stories are quantified, with their contributions essentially erased.

Lived Religion and autoethnography generally produce small, exclusive case studies. This limitation can be seen as a benefit, as Orsi asserted in his plenary speech in 2001 referred to above: case studies can serve as entry points for understanding larger social processes (Smith, 1987, p. 157). The proposed solution to this limitation is the development and application of guidelines, but I don’t actually believe that every methodological approach needs to have a standardized approach in order to be legitimized.²²⁰ Lived Religion and autoethnography are not

²²⁰ Wuthnow (2020), for example, asserts that Lived Religion is best approached through a study of religious practices (situations; intentions; feelings; and bodies), and proposes that a practice-focused approach shifts the focus away from practitioners’ thoughts and beliefs, which are fundamentally inaccessible and mercurial. Ammerman outlines similar guidelines (2020, 2021): proposing Sociology’s six dimensions of social practice as a framework for studying Lived Religion, these six dimensions are embodiment; materiality; emotions; discourse/ narrative/ aesthetics; and morality, and she proposes including a seventh ‘spiritual’ dimension. Ammerman defines her proposed seventh ‘spiritual’ dimension, i.e. if a person is religious or not, as when they “presume a reality that is perceived to be ‘other than’ everyday in ways that fit the actors’ religious or spiritual ‘province of meaning’” (2021, p. 17).

necessarily meant to produce replicable results. What they are meant to do, though, is highlight nuances and subtleties, and for this project they serve very well.

Ethics and Data

In 2021 I submitted my application to the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board. This application package included, but is not limited to such items as a conflict of interest disclosure explaining my friendship with the project's interlocutors and an explanation of the trust-based relationship between Mahmoud and myself. It also detailed my methods and procedures for obtaining data that answers my research questions, including some information about the locations of data collection; and Informed Consent forms that had been signed by my interlocutors. I was granted approval for this project by the end of 2021.

In the two years following the Research Ethics Board's approval, I visited Oakland for research with Mahmoud and Rozaneh three times. Mahmoud and Rozaneh's home is located on a quiet suburban street about a 15-minute drive from what many consider to be 'downtown' Oakland. The area would likely be categorized as middle-class, suburban. I make this classification because the neighbourhood is well-maintained, the homes have relatively similar facades, although not exactly the same by any means, and many parts of the neighbourhood do not have sidewalks, which means that individuals must drive to circulate in the area instead of walking. One reason for this is that the area is primarily residential, where I have witnessed few, if any, commercial businesses within walking distance. These characteristics suggest a relatively characteristic middle-class suburban residential zone.

During those research visits, Mahmoud and Rozaneh invited me to stay in their home with them and their children as a guest. I had previously visited with them and stayed in their home, and so these visits were not the first to occur. Given that I was visiting as their guest, I did

not pay room and board but, as I would with any other friends or with family, I made sure to help with cleaning, tidying, playing with the children, meal prep and in any other ways that might be useful or make me an enjoyable person to have in their household for the duration of the visits. These favours and this behaviour were not asked for but were gladly given as from one friend to another. Further, I am not the only one who occasionally sleeps over at Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house. I am aware of several of Mahmoud's students who sleep at the house when they visit from out of town. Usually stays are shorter, lasting a day or two at most, because these individuals live within a few hours' drive, whereas I was making international trips.²²¹

Specifically, two of the visits occurred in 2021, with each visit lasting between 5 and 7 days, and once in 2022 for 6 days. During these visits I conducted interviews which I recorded and gathered qualitative observational and empirical data in field notes written when I had moments alone and at the end of each day. Many of the interviews were recorded in informal conversations during quiet moments together.

In some cases, I would ask Mahmoud if we could have an interview while we were sitting in the living room or in the kitchen or on the back deck and if he said yes, I'd take out my phone, turn on the voice recording application and ask him a question. After our interviews I would turn off the voice recording and edit the file title of the recording to reflect the date and time of the interview. There were other times where we would be speaking casually and he or Rozaneh would ask me, "Emily, are you recording this?" At which point I would confirm that they wanted me to begin recording the conversation, and then bring out my phone. There were

²²¹ Some of this documentation and the stories and anecdotes shared in this project refer to Mahmoud's other students. I use pseudonyms for these individuals too, and anything that I share about them obscures personal, identifying information about them. That said, any comments that I make about them are based in reality and are not, then, unconfirmed conclusions. Further, as previously stated the primary focus of the dissertation is Mahmoud's expression of Sufism, not the community.

also portions of the interviews where Mahmoud would tell me, “This part is off the record,” and I would make sure to make a note of that request in the recording’s file title and in my field notes.

The questions that I asked Mahmoud centered on two particular aspects. The first is his pedagogy. The focus of this study is his pedagogical approach as a Sufi teacher and so exploring the way that he articulates that was important. The second aspect that we discussed at length was lineage. Having a solid grasp of his background and his relationship to his teacher, as well as some details about his teacher’s background were important. In the case of each of these aspects, a number of other topics arose that directed the study, but these topics were the focus of the questions I prepared for our interviews.²²²

Interviews were conducted and data was gathered in a variety of places besides the house. In some cases, we conducted interviews while we were driving from one place to another, in other instances observational data was gathered in Mahmoud’s classes or at gatherings with his students. Any lectures that are referred to, those that were recorded or those that I attended myself in person, occurred in the college classroom where he teaches.²²³ I transcribed all interviews and other recordings.

²²² Many of the interview questions that I asked were prepared, but there were always clarifying questions that I asked which were off script or segues that felt important to explore.

²²³ It is my understanding and my experience that Mahmoud mostly meets the individuals who go on to become students who attend gatherings at his home in the college classrooms where he teaches. That said, I have never witnessed any kind of active recruitment-type behaviour. Rather, what I have seen occur is that students enrolled in his courses seem to approach him out of curiosity to learn more about ideas he talks about. As time passes, he might suggest in passing, without any pressure or real emphasis, that these curious individuals become friends with people who attend his classes who also attend gatherings at his house. The process of moving from a formal, enrolled college student to someone who attends gatherings at his house is slow, taking months and sometimes years, and occurs very infrequently, in my experience. Relatedly, I have heard Mahmoud comment many times over the years that he is not interested in taking on more students or trying to ‘teach’ anyone anything because it requires too much effort. These comments seem genuine.

This study is informed by audio recordings of lectures from 2017 and 2018, and observational and empirical data. The personal narratives that are recounted occurred between 2017 and 2022. All of the anecdotes and stories included in this study are included with the explicit permission of my interlocutors, and in all of these cases, identifying information has been removed.²²⁴ I was similarly careful with references to Mahmoud and Rozaneh's children. This study is not about them, but they are present in some of the conversations.

The locations where I gathered data that make up the backdrop for each of the chapters reflects Mahmoud's pedagogical approach. From his college classroom, where he is a full-time tenured professor, to his and Rozaneh's house, the various gatherings that I refer to and attended, to less formal spaces.²²⁵ Each of these milieus are significant because they are spaces where Mahmoud engages with Sufi philosophy and with people. These are the spaces in which he presents and interprets Sufism. What can be seen in Mahmoud's approach to teaching is that there is no requirement for a white board or a projector or a computer, all that's needed is a question.

Analysis and Interpretation

As indicated in the introductory chapter, a primary aim of this project is to explore Mahmoud's Sufi philosophy, pedagogy and practices with the intent to understand the distinctions and similarities between 'traditional' expressions of Sufism. My interpretation and analysis of the data I collected for this purpose can be broken down into three different 'categories.'

The first category is contemporary scholarship of Sufism. This broad category, which includes the scholarship of such thinkers as Annemarie Schimmel, Meena Sharify-Funk, Rkia

²²⁴ For more information on this dissertation's exclusions, including the community members, please see footnote 7.

²²⁵ The less formal space is, for the most part, Mahmoud and Rozaneh's house. They treat anyone who comes to their home as a guest and do not require anyone to pay them fees or make donations.

Cornell and Sadiyya Shaikh provided me with various perspectives to analyze and situate Mahmoud's expression of Sufism within the field of Sufi studies. This category of contemporary scholarship additionally includes the living sources of Sufism, like the Turkish teacher, Cemalnur Sargut and William Rory Dickson's interview material with Golden Sufi Center leader, Llewellyn Vaughn-Lee (2015), for example.

The second category encompasses classical sources such as the *tabaqat* of Hujwiri, Qushayri and Sulami described in the introduction of this dissertation, and which is used to explore the 'traditional-ness' of Mahmoud's expression of Sufism. This category also includes references to the works of other early Sufi masters, such as Ibn Arabi, Ghazali.

The third category of sources that informed my analysis and interpretation are historical sources of scholarship of Sufism. These are such diverse sources as the translation of Ba'uniyah's *Principles of Sufism* (2016), to Henri Corbin's metaphysical interpretations of Sufism (2014; 1998) and the poetics of Rumi (Lewis, 2007; Rumi, 2009, 2013; Rumi & Chittick, 1983; Schimmel, 1993), Attar (Attar, 2011) and Hafiz (Hafiz, 1970; Lewisohn, 2010). The literature of Rumi, Attar and Hafiz are highlighted in this study because Mahmoud refers to these three Persian figures often and because they are also widely understood to be important religious literary figures in the Sufi literary tradition.

Additionally, I work primarily with sources on Persian Sufism, as opposed to Sufism based in other parts of the world such as India or Pakistan or African countries, for a number of reasons. In the first place, I do this because Mahmoud is Persian and because the line of teachers he comes from is Persian too. Mahmoud's teacher, Mohammad, who I write about in-depth chapter 3, "On Lineage and Transmission," and Mohammad's teacher was Persian too. Finally, I also take this approach so that I can highlight the similarities and adaptations between the way

that Mahmoud teaches and practices Sufism and the teachings and practices described by these medieval Persian Sufis.

This ‘triple helix’ approach, where I work with a variety of sources across the various categories described above, allows me to engage seamlessly with conversations about Sufism across the centuries.²²⁶ It situates Mahmoud’s expression of Sufism historically; within the classical works of Sufism; and in conversation with the current, living perspectives and practitioners of Sufism. Using this approach not only provides me with the possibility of analyzing and interpreting the ‘traditional-ness’ of Mahmoud’s philosophy, pedagogy and practices, but it also highlights how Mahmoud fits into the Sufi tradition more broadly and within its facets: within Persian Sufism or California Sufism; and within conversations about gender or lineage, for example.

This project originates in a desire to understand how the Sufism that Mahmoud ‘does’ fits into the Sufi tradition. I wanted to know how Mahmoud’s references to Christiano Renaldo relate to Rumi’s poetry. But I also wanted to tell the story of a pedagogical genealogy based in respect and love: the story of Mahmoud’s relationship to his own teacher and with me. Not only does writing myself into the project help make the sometimes-ambiguous subject more accessible, it also shows the impacts of this kind of teaching over time.

We can consider ourselves lucky if we encounter people who encourage us to be better versions of ourselves. For me, it is almost certain that without having met Mahmoud I would not have undertaken these doctoral studies. My undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and English literature introduced me to stories and voices and then my first graduate degree, a master’s degree where I learned to be an archivist and librarian, was undertaken to get myself the

²²⁶ Dr. Aaron Hughes, one of my dissertation examiners, described my analytical approach using this term.

skills to make money and a stable job. But the work in my second master's degree and in my doctoral studies was different. During the seven years I was enrolled in these graduate studies, I learned to put stories in a dialogue with academic scholarship. I was lucky too, to meet other scholars who value stories as much as I do.

But more than earning a PhD, my time with Mahmoud encouraged me to be less focused on the answers to the questions I was asking, and more curious about the different perspectives that could illuminate those questions. The analytical and interpretive work in this dissertation is based on that spirit: that questions breed more questions, that knowledge isn't a stable state and comes, in part, from self-examination and the examination of one's assumptions. The work of this dissertation is based in the idea that learning is a process of engagement with many perspectives, stories and voices and that it is the continuous work of a whole life.

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