Islamic Thought and the Art of Translation

Texts and Studies in Honor of William C. Chittick and Sachiko Murata

Edited by

Mohammed Rustom

BRILL

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The author has no share save the post of translator, and no portion but the trade of speaker.

From the preface of Jāmī, *Lawāʾiḥ*, trans. William C. Chittick in Sachiko Murata, *Chinese gleams of Sufi light: Wang Tai-yü's* Great learning of the pure and real *and Liu Chih's* Displaying the concealment of the real realm, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000, 134

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CHAPTER 22

Historical Imagination: Voicing Silences in Early Sufi Texts through Narrative

Laury Silvers

> "How can narrative embody life in words
> and at the same time respect what we cannot know?"
> SAIDIYA HARTMAN, "Venus in two acts"

1 Introduction

When I started my life as an academic in the study of Sufism, I believed in "objective scholarship" as if it were a pure being that lived in an ivory tower away from the world.[1] I gave my best historical takes on the material before me whether or not the analysis supported my Muslim faith, my Sufi path, and my experiences as a woman, and without a care for its effects beyond the scope of the field and my promotion file. When I diverged from that narrow path, I said so.[2] It was only as I was working on gender in Sufism that I understood my academic writing arose out of my position in the world and objectivity was a fairy tale.[3] I admitted I was telling stories about the past—however crit-

1 Thanks to Saliha DeVoe, Sara Abdel-Latif, Kecia Ali, and Megan Goodwin for their insights and guidance.

2 Silvers, Laury, "'In the book we have left out nothing': The ethical problem of the existence of verse 4:34 in the Qurʾan," in *Comparative Islamic Studies* 2.2 (2006), 171–180, 178n2.

3 While a grounding assumption in fields such as Gender, Post-Colonial, and African American Studies, the impossibility of detached objectivity remains controversial in the field of Islamic studies. See Aaron Hughes, who decries the introduction of "identity politics" into the field of Islam following the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Hughes, Aaron W., *Islam and the tyranny of authenticity: An inquiry into disciplinary apologetics*, Sheffield: Equinox, 2016; Hughes, Aaron W., *Theorizing Islam: Disciplinary deconstruction and reconstruction*, London: Acumen, 2014 and the varied responses to Hughes in Sheedy, Matt (ed.), *Identity, politics and the study of Islam: Current dilemmas in the study of religions*, Sheffield: Equinox, 2018.

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ically analyzed—and my writing had an impact beyond my professional life. Muslims, especially Muslim women, were reading my work on early pious, mystic, and Sufi women. It mattered to them and sometimes it disturbed them. I realized I was little different from the transmitters, editors, and authors of the works I studied. All of us were weaving narratives that might serve as credible resources of thought for our audiences. I just never grasped the breadth of my audience and, to the degree I was able, I needed to take responsibility for the impact of my work on the communities around me. I began to engage with non-academic readers and translate my findings in conversation with them.[4] When I left the academy and turned to writing fiction, the responsibility to critically examine what I wanted to do with history in my stories was even more plain. I write detective novels set in the early 4th/10th-century Sufi communities in Baghdad that not only ask "whodunit," but also how Muslim tradition arises from the social worlds and intentions of its authors, depicts the impact of the authors' work then, and, by analogy, now, and considers the nature of historical writing in and out of the academy.[5]

Historical authenticity was not the primary value of medieval Muslim accounts of the pious, the saintly, and even the scholarly. Rather, the accounts were intended to tell a good story to a desired end. Najam Haider describes how even historians, like Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), rhetoricized their framing of events, endowing narratives with significance, and presenting them in an edifying form. Haider writes, "The result was a meaningful rendering of the past that was deemed more truthful than a documentary recitation of figures or events."[6] Biographers likewise relied on their audience having a broad familiarity with events, figures, and tropes, allowing them leeway to construct the material at hand to their personal and institutional intentions.[7] So much more

4 I have taken part in public facing scholarship on the "Feminism and Religion" blog, in community talks in the United States, Canada, and South Africa, then later, on Twitter, Facebook, in my novels, and in the blog section of my website (http://www.llsilvers.com/blog).

5 It is not unusual for historians who write fiction to address historical questions in their work. For example, Umberto Eco's *The name of the rose* is a historical mystery about semiotics depicted through debates on interpretation of doctrine and clues to a murder. The mystery is set within a literal archive, a library, and explores the idea of a conceptual archive by asking what books belong there and why. Kecia Ali called my attention to Black authors, such as Beverly Jenkins, who take up historical questions in African American historical romance. See Dandridge, Rita B., "The African American historical romance: An interview with Beverly Jenkins," in *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 1.1 (2010), 1–11.

6 Haider, Najam, *The rebel and the Imām in early Islam: Explorations in Muslim historiography*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 4.

7 See Richardson, Kristina, "The evolving biographical legacy of two late Mamluk Ḥanbalī judges," in Stephan Conermann (ed.), *History and society during the Mamluk period (1250 to*

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the case when we leave behind genres with an assumed concern for historicity, however defined, for Sufi and piety literature in which moral pedagogy is the stated concern and experiences of the unseen are the currency of authenticity and authority.[8]

The compilers, authors, and editors of these early texts contribute these narratives of meaning to an "archive" acting as a credible resource for understanding and action.[9] The archive is not a library, although libraries play a role in its life. Rather, the archive is the sum total of a community's approved texts, oral traditions, material, social, cultural, and ritual practices.[10] Repetition of approved traditions guarantees those meaningful renderings of the past retain their reliability for the future. If a particular rendering is no longer shared textually, orally, in practice, or becomes marginalized or even excluded, it stops being a credible source.[11] But accidents of history also play a role in the life of the archive. Political and institutional change, the effects of floods, worms, and fire on libraries, destruction of mausoleums, changes in oral traditions and regional practices, or the challenge of making meaning out of widespread disease, for instance, does its own work in transforming the resources people have to hand and are encouraged to rely upon.[12]

1517), Bonn: Bonn University Press, 2014, 29–50, and Reid, Megan, *Law and piety in medieval Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013 for a discussion of how changing biographies shape the legacies of their subjects through narrative means.

8 Cooperson, Michael, *Classical Arabic biography: The heirs of the prophets in the age of al-Maʾmūn*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, esp. 154–187; Knight, Michael M., *Muhammad's body: Baraka networks and the Prophetic assemblage*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020.

9 Osborne, Thomas, "The ordinariness of the archive," in *History of the Human Sciences* 12.2 (1999), 51–64.

10 Bora, Fozia, *Writing history in the medieval Islamic world: The value of chronicles as archives*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2019; Knight, *Muhammad's body*; Vansina, Jan, *Oral tradition as history*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985; Vaknin, Judy, Karyn Stukey and Victoria Lane (eds.), *All this stuff: Archiving the artist*, Oxfordshire: Libri Publishing, 2013.

11 Geissinger, [Ash], *Gender and Muslim constructions of exegetical authority: A rereading of the classical genre of Qurʾān commentary*, Leiden: Brill, 2015; Geissinger, [Ash], "Umm al-Dardāʾ sat in *tashahhud* like man: Towards the historical contextualization of a portrayal of female religious authority," in *MW* 103 (2013), 305–319.

12 Biran, Michal, "Libraries, books, and transmission of knowledge in Ilkhanid Baghdad," in *JESHO* 62 (2019), 464–502; Mulder, Stephennie, "The mausoleum of Imam al-Shafiʿi," in *Muqarnas* 23 (2006), 15–46; Safi, Omid, *The politics of knowledge in premodern Islam: Negotiating ideology and religious inquiry*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009; Stearns, Justin K., *Infectious ideas: Contagion in premodern Islamic and Christian thought in the western Mediterranean*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011.

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As historians, we study these living archives and we contribute to them whether we are aware or even interested in their existence. We assess these complexities, intentions, and accidents to produce narratives arising from our considered understanding of what may have happened and what may be at work in a particular text or texts. But no matter how considered and careful we may be, no matter our political, theoretical, religious, or secular loyalties, our scholarly productions are also rhetoricizing acts.[13] By arguing one reading of history is more credible than another, we hope to shape the archive of our field to our desired ends so that it will serve as a resource for future scholars. This is the nature of academic debate, but the stakes in our work extend beyond the state of the field. The stories we tell about history affect real-world consequences in similar ways to the narratives produced by those we study.[14] It may be used by political entities to create or support credible archives for action or attitudes.[15] Even the work of secular or religious scholars in areas such as Sufism, Hadith, Quran, and theology may contribute to a transformation in the structure of the archive of Islamic tradition itself.[16] Thus, I need to take responsibility for how I tell my stories.

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13 See Knysh, Alexander, "Historiography of Sufi Studies in the West," in Youssef M. Choueiri (ed.), *A companion to the history of the Middle East*, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005, 106–132.

14 For instance, see Chaudhry, Ayesha S., "Islamic legal studies: A critical historiography," in Anver M. Emon and Rumee Ahmed (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Islamic law*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 1–40 and Morgenstein Fuerst, Ilyse, "Job ads don't add up: Arabic + Middle East + texts ≠ Islam," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88.4 (2020), 915–946.

15 On the role scholarship on Sufism plays in contemporary North American Sufi communities, see Sharify-Funk, Meena, William R. Dickson, and Merin S. Xavier, *Contemporary Sufism: Piety, politics, and popular culture*, New York: Routledge, 2018; Hamid Dabashi gives a summary of the impact of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Dabashi, Hamid, "Edward Said's *Orientalism*: Forty years later," in *al-Jazeera* (3 May 2018), https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/5/3/edward-saids-orientalism-forty-years-later (last accessed: 24 September 2021)). Finally, see the debate between Graeme Woods and Kecia Ali concerning ethical responsibility and scholarship on ISIS and Slavery in Woods, Graeme, "What ISIS really wants," in *The Atlantic* (2015), https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/ (last accessed: 24 September 2021) and Ali, Kecia, "Redeeming slavery: The 'Islamic State' and the quest for Islamic morality," in *Mizan* 1.1 (2016), https://mizanproject.org/journal-post/redeeming-slavery/ (last accessed: 24 September 2021).

16 Knysh, "Historiography" 211. Also on Sufism see, Hermansen, Marcia, "The academic study of Sufism at American universities," in *AJISS* 24.3 (2007), 24–45; Hammer, Juliane, "Sufism in North America," in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Routledge handbook on Sufism*, London: Routledge, 2020, 514–530; Funk, Dickson, and Xavier, *Contemporary Sufism*. Also see Facebook groups "Studies in Islamic mysticism," "Sufi literature," and "The Muhyiddin Ibn

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After reading *The lover*, the first novel in my series, Saliha DeVoe called my attention to the work of historian, Saidiya Hartman, pointing out echoes of Hartman's work in my own. Hartman's "Venus in two acts" articulates the historical method of critical fabulation at play in her searing memoir of the history and legacy of enslavement in the Americas, *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*. She uses fictional and first-person narrative to call attention to the rhetoricizing acts of slave ship records, slavers' biographies, medical records, and other sources. Her work teases out the history of African women enslaved in the Americas and, at the same time, marks the impossibility of telling their stories at all. Hartman retrieves the lives of enslaved women from an archive meant to erase their humanity, but she does not tell a consoling story of resilience, heroism, or vulnerability. To do that would only erase the history of violence that made the narrative work necessary in the first place. Rather, she tells their stories in such a way as to call attention to their silencing and remark on how that silencing carries forward in time, entrenching racialized violence into the present, and to make space for liberation.

I am limited to broad strokes in my application of Hartman's use of critical fabulation to articulate the work I am doing in my novels. While the accounts of early pious and Sufi women are also mediated by transmitters and silenced in the later historical records, resulting in the structural marginalization of women in Sufism to the present—and even though some of the pious and mystic women depicted were enslaved or, whether free or enslaved, sometimes treated as non-consenting, lesser, objects of inspiration by men—they were, nevertheless, presented as spiritual elites in the texts. By marking the differences, I am not arguing for ethical relativism regarding enslavement in Muslim lands or racism as compared to the Americas. The bulk of this essay will raise a few of the particular vulnerabilities of the lowest status elite women in their social worlds and in the texts. Here, I solely mark that the sources I work with differ from Hartman's because the depicted status of the women in those sources differs. I offer this harrowing selection from "Venus in two acts" to make the point of difference in depiction perfectly clear.

> One cannot ask, "Who is Venus?" because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about

al-Arabi society," for example, in which practitioners of Sufism actively engage academic scholarship on Sufism in understanding and forming their paths.

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> the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been 'in a free state.'[17]

As DeVoe rightly put it, there are only echoes of Hartman's method in the stories I tell but the echoes resound in their own way. The novels in *The Sufi mysteries quartet* act as a non-consoling critical fabulation, a rhetoricizing fictive analysis that brings early mystic women to life in a way that comments on their near erasure from the primary sources and our own scholarship, which diminishes their authority as reliable sources in the archive, and the impact of that silencing over time.

2 Rhetoricizing Sources

Saidiya Hartman writes of the afterlife of slavery, meaning the harm of slavery that continues to this day as thwarted opportunity, structural inequality, and social and institutional brutality.

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.[18]

In Sufism, the near erasure of Sufi women from the biographical literature and manuals has resulted in its own afterlife: women's relative marginalization on the path itself. Biographical and piety literature is mediated by the trans-

17 Hartman, Saidiya, "Venus in two acts," in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 26 (2008), 2–14, 2.

18 Hartman, Saidiya, *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, 6.

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mitters of the reports, then the editors and compilers, and even the copyists of the texts themselves and may be more useful in understanding the world of the men who produced them than the women's lives which they depict. Compilers gathered oral and written reports of an individual's pious behaviour and sayings, assessed their value according to their own methods of historical plausibility and the usefulness of the account to their particular projects, then reframed them for transmission.[19] Women's accounts were treated in significantly different ways than men's.[20] Transmitters, compilers, and editors might change the nature of the account to vouch for a woman's respectability, compile multiple accounts under one broadly acceptable woman's name, place a woman's saying in a man's mouth, or most often let her story go entirely.[21] The written history of women's practices, teachings, and testimonies to their authority are the collateral damage of such efforts, which has after-effects to this day.

Early pious and mystic communities were largely gender inclusive, but the growing scholarly expectation that women should lead lives of private worship affected how Sufis presented the path to the outside world. In one salient example, Sara Abdel-Latif shows that Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) and Abū l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) treated accounts of women in their works in keeping with their distinct approaches to the growing institutionalization of Sufism. While al-Sulamī complied and edited biographies and accounts of both men and women to "create a canon of mystical predecessors

19 See Cornell, Rkia E., *Rabiʿa from narrative to myth: The many faces of Islam's most famous woman saint, Rabiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya*, London: Oneworld Academic, 2019; Reid, *Law and piety*; Geissinger, [Ash], "Female figures, marginality, and Qur'anic exegesis in Ibn al-Jawzi's *Ṣifat al-ṣafwa*," in Yasmin Amin and Nevin Reda (eds.), *Islamic interpretive tradition and gender justice: Processes of canonization, subversion, and change*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020, 151–178; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic biography*; Bashir, Shahzad, *Sufi bodies: Religion and society in medieval Islam*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

20 By women, I mean those who are categorized as such under headings and sections naming them "women," enslaved or free, in the piety and biographical literature. Nevertheless, gender in the premodern sources was not strictly binary in practice and understanding. It was a hierarchy in which elite males, however defined, were "men," and women, young men, the enslaved, and non-elite males of African descent were "not men." These "not men" were also treated differently in the sources no matter the headings under which they are mentioned. While a more inclusive understanding of gender is outside the scope of the discussion in this chapter, the social hierarchy of identities is not. For a full treatment, see Abdel-Latif, Sara, "Narrativizing early mystic and Sufi women: Mechanisms of gendering in Sufi hagiographies in Ridgeon," in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Routledge handbook on Sufism*, London: Routledge, 2020, 132–145.

21 Silvers, Laury, "Early pious, mystic, and Sufi women," in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.), *Cambridge companion to Sufism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 24–52, 24–29.

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from whom to draw chains of transmissions," al-Qushayrī seems to have limited "that pool of predecessors to those he could definitively argue were in alignment with the ethics and moral values of Shafiʿī Islamic jurisprudence."[22] In fact, Abdel-Latif shows that al-Qushayrī treats al-Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj (d. 309/922) similarly to the women, dropping him from the biographical section as well, thus excluding him as predecessor, but including his aphorisms in the manual section. Al-Qushayrī seems to have found women and al-Ḥallāj too controversial for comprehensive inclusion due to the tense scholarly factionalism of Khurasan.[23] Compound editorial acts like these with broader institutional disinterest over the years in copying al-Sulamī's biographical work on women, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt al-ṣūfiyyāt* (*Memorial of Sufi Women Devotees*) compared to the wide reception of *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (*al-Qushayri's Epistle*), and much of women's practices, teaching, and authority were no longer in view.[24]

While early pious and mystic women taught men and women in public and private, formally and informally, and accounts of their lives and teachings were eagerly sought out, they are almost entirely absent from the later tradition, excluding them from the foundational texts that came to define Sufism.[25] This may seem equivocal as men's sayings underwent the same kinds of intervention, including their names being dropped from the primary sources, but as I point out in my piece on the social worlds of early pious, mystic, Sufi women, there is a difference.

> Certainly, men's names have been dropped from the sources. But the sheer number of extant reports of men compared to women in the formative literature means that women are read as marginal to the development, transmission, and preservation of Sufi practices, knowledge, and teaching.[26]

If women are marginal, then only men are necessary for the successful transmission of Sufism. The result is that women are effectively removed from the

22 Abdel-Latif, "Narrativizing" 134–135.

23 Abdel-Latif, "Narrativizing" 134–135. On Sulamī's willingness to include even the most controversial Sufis in his works and an analysis of his biographical collection *Dhikr al-niswa*, see Salamah-Qudsi, Arin, *Sufism and early Islamic piety: Personal and communal dynamics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 60–77.

24 Al-Sulamī, Abū ʿAbd ar-Raḥmān, *Early Sufi women*: Dhikr an-niswa al-mutaʿabbidāt aṣ-ṣūfiyyāt, trans. Rkia E. Cornell, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2000, 43–47.

25 For exact numbers, see Silvers, "Early pious" 24n2.

26 Silvers, "Early pious" 25.

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archival history of predecessors and exist only as exceptions. Such exclusions work alongside with and reinforce gendered social segregation in worship and learning that developed in the first century after the Prophet's death.[27] The afterlife of the mediated silencing of women in the sources has resulted in systematic measures over time that have almost entirely barred women from institutional authority within Sufism, have in some cases sidelined them from rituals and access to in-person guidance, and have restricted their entrance onto the path at all.[28]

3 Rhetoricizing Silences

Saidiya Hartman uses the term "silences" to indicate gaps in the sources that need to be voiced using the historical tools available to us and to point to the process of erasure. She writes,

> The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.[29]

In my scholarly work, I recovered aspects of early pious and mystic women's lives from the silences in the texts by reading against the transmitters' rhetoricizing grain. To read and write academically against the grain, one must be familiar with the primary sources, obviously, but also the social, political, and religious worlds in which they were produced, and the editorial efforts at work in the text. To write fiction against the grain, I must reframe those probabilities

27 See Halevi, Leor, *Muhammad's grave: Death rites and the making of Islamic society*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2007; Sadeghi, Behnam, "The traveling tradition test: A method for dating traditions," in *Der Islam* 85.1 (2009), 203–242; Geissinger, "Umm al-Dardāʾ;" Sayeed, Asma, *Women and the transmission of religious knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Katz, Marion, *Women in the mosque: A history of legal thought and social practice*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

28 Bashir, *Sufi bodies*, 148–163; Malamud, Margaret, "Gender and spiritual self-fashioning: The master-disciple relationship in classical Sufism," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64.1 (1996), 89–117.

29 Hartman, "Venus" 11.

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in my own rhetoricized fictional narrative to bring these hidden lives to light in a way that keeps the historical erasure in view and even comments on their silencing. A critical fabulation is not a story that helps us forget by reclaiming lost lives, but on the contrary, asks us to remember critically the processes of erasure and its systemic afterlife.

All four novels in the series tell the story of women's marginalization from the centre of the Sufi authority to its edge. This narrative arc begins in *The lover* with the introduction of my main characters' mother, a famed ecstatic who wandered the empire, preaching in the streets and graveyards before settling in the Sufi community of Baghdad with her twin children, Zaytuna and Tein (pronounced "teen"). Her character, her dialogue, and the events of her life are adapted from the accounts of named and unnamed early pious and mystic women, reference narrative tropes that have disembodied women from their social worlds and experiences and speak to the systemic loss of women's authority in Sufism over time. Their mother is known only by the sobriquet, "al-Ashiqa as-Sawda." But I do not just withhold their mother's personal name, she does not share her history, even with her own children. She has told Tein and Zaytuna that she is Nubian and she left her home to wander alone with God. Her only possessions are the beads she brought with her on the road that she bartered for food, clothing, or lodging when necessary, and a cherished drum she received as a gift.

In the following passage, I give Zaytuna and Tein the worry that their mother will be forgotten by the Sufis. I hoped passages like this would evoke worry in the reader about her memory and cause them to come to grieve her loss along with Zaytuna and Tein.

> [Tein is sleeping in his sister Zaytuna's rented room, and it is dark.]
> "I don't know if I can sleep anymore. Do you have any oil for the lamp?"
> Tein laughed. "I have to tell you, Zay, your sainthood game is off. Shouldn't you be lighting up the room at night with your luminous soul already?"
> "Mother never lit up at night. If any woman's soul was going to be a lamp, it would have been hers. I complained to Uncle Nuri about these stories once. He laughed at me, thinking they were talking about earthly light. He said, 'When dawn breaks, one no longer needs a lamp.'"
> "Well," Tein replied, "she couldn't see in the dark, either."
> "That's not what he meant."
> "Zay, do you think people will tell stories about her someday?"

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She found the lamp. “Sorry Tein. I’ve got the lamp but no oil. We’re stuck in the dark. What did you say?”

“Stories. Will people tell stories of Mother? Will anyone know her name?”

“Why did she never tell us stories of her life before she wandered?” Zaytuna asked, “We know nothing about who we come from. Our family. We’ve got nothing other than her drum and the beads.”

“If we should’ve known,” he said, “she’d have told us. She left all that behind.”

“For God.”

“Maybe for a different reason.”

“I wish I could’ve asked her.”

“Listen, Zaytuna. I meant will the Sufis tell stories about her?”

“I’ve always heard the aunts and uncles tell stories of the women. Mustafa said he heard an auntie reciting Mother’s poetry recently. I can’t imagine them forgetting about her, forgetting about the women. If they go the way of the scholars, though … Women are no better than donkeys and dogs to the likes of them.”

“Mustafa is not like that,” Tein insisted.

“True, but it seems like the ones who are like that get control of everything.”[30]

I could have given al-Ashiqa as-Sawda a name. I could have filled out her details and, as will be discussed below, softened the difficult moments that women like her probably experienced. But for Hartman, narrative restraint and a refusal to provide closure is at the heart of this kind of writing.[31] One should not console the reader with assurances that women like their mother were remembered, thus permitting the reader to forget the silencing of these women’s lives. Had I done so, the novel would reiterate the rhetoricizing methods of the early sources: Tell a story heralding mystic women that makes no one uncomfortable. Such a story allows us to forget their loss and uphold women’s continued marginalization as natural and necessary to the transmission of Sufi teaching now.

30 Silvers, Laury, *The lover*, Toronto: Self-published, 2019, 101–102.

31 Hartman, “Venus” 12.

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4 Rhetoricizing Consolation

For Hartman, voicing silences should never come at the cost of producing consoling narratives. Literary acts of reclamation can erase the experiences and the systems of violence that created them. She considered writing the story of two enslaved girls as if they existed in a free state, but realized she could not. It would have been a betrayal of the fact of their lives only to console herself over their loss.

> But the consolation of this vision—a life recognized and mourned in the embrace of two girls—was at odds with the annihilating violence of the slave ship and with virtually everything I had ever written. Initially I thought I wanted to represent the affiliations severed and remade in the hollow of the slave ship by imagining the two girls as friends, by giving them one another. But in the end I was forced to admit that I wanted to console myself and to escape the slave hold with a vision of something other than the bodies of two girls settling on the floor of the Atlantic. In the end, I could say no more about Venus than I had said about her friend: "I am unsure if it is possible to salvage an existence from a handful of words: the supposed murder of a negro girl." I could not change anything: "The girl 'never will have any existence outside the precarious domicile of words' that allowed her to be murdered." I could not have arrived at another conclusion. So it was better to leave them as I had found them. Two girls, alone.[32]

Interestingly, the transmitters of accounts of early pious and Sufi women did a kind of consoling themselves when faced with the fact of women's experience. As discussed above, the social and political pressures required handling women's narratives with care as their inclusion became controversial. When transmitters retold accounts of women, their narratives tended to vouch for the women's sanctity by assuring the audience that, despite their public behaviour and keeping company with men, they were above sexual reproof. Stories of women upbraiding great men, refusing marriage, ruining their beauty, being honorary men, or having luminous souls that transform sexed bodies into disembodied lamps acted as consoling frames for transmissions of women's wisdom.[33] The transmitters sought to convince their audience that the women and their wisdom should be taken seriously. While these accounts demonstrate the

32 Hartman, "Venus" 8–9.

33 On vouching, see Silvers, "Early pious" 45–47, 50 and Silvers, Laury, "Disappearing women:

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highest respect for these women and a desire to preserve their legacies, a long-term effect is stories that distance women from their experiences and the social realities that shaped them.

All of al-Ashiqa as-Sawda's dialogue, history, and behaviour is adapted from these surviving accounts, but also wide-ranging scholarship on the social realities of the day.[34] Zaytuna and Tein's mother is based on accounts of early women who roamed the empire to be alone with the divine lover, who fell into ecstasy and preached in mixed-gender circles in graveyards, on the street, and in private homes, inspiring followers to weep and love God through their own love. Some of these named or unnamed women lived, while others may be inventions or even composites of several women. No matter the case, the accounts are evidence that such women existed and acted as models upon which to construct a tale.[35] While al-Ashiqa as-Sawda is a composite of several early pious and mystic women, African, Arab, and Persian, I want to discuss the consoling account of one woman in particular, Maymūna al-Sawdāʾ, and the possible afterlife of her story today.

Maymūna al-Sawdāʾ was a Black woman consumed with love of God, who sought solitude with her divine lover as a shepherd.[36] She is described as "mad," meaning one who has lost her rational faculties by reason of her behaviour, her unwillingness to conform to social roles, and her language, speaking about God in ways that confuse others. As she wandered alone with her sheep, her mother would come to check on her and bring her food. There would be no record of her except that ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd (d. 176/793) dreamt she would be his wife

Hafsa bint Sirin and the textual seclusion of early pious and Sufi women," presented at Boston University, February 16, 2012. On the trope of women as honorary men, see Sharify-Funk, Dickson, and Xavier, *Contemporary Sufism* 192–194 and Dakake, Maria, "Walking upon the path of God like men? Women and the feminine in the Islamic mystical tradition," in Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani (eds.), *Sufism: Love and wisdom*, Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006, 137–140. Gender is employed at multiple levels of meaning in these accounts, on the qualitative meaning of calling a woman a "man" on the path, rather than the social meaning, which is my point here, see Murata, Sachiko, *The Tao of Islam: A sourcebook of gender relations in Islamic thought*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992, 316–319.

34 For examples of the primary and secondary sources, see the acknowledgement sections of my novels *The lover*, *The jealous*, *The unseen*, and *The peace* (forthcoming).

35 See El-Cheikh, Nadia M., "Women's history: A study of al-Tanūkhī," in Manuela Marín and Randi Deguilhem (eds.), *Writing the feminine: Women in Arab sources*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, 130–148; Geissinger, *Gender*; Bashir, *Sufi bodies*.

36 Black skin is typically marked in the sources with an observation or, like here, with a *laqab*, "The Black Woman." But the *laqab* does not just describe her skin color, it also denotes a distinctive social characteristic of Blackness. As discussed in this section, Blackness in these sources is less a natural descriptor than a social category. Thus, I capitalize "Black" and "Blackness" in these contexts.

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in paradise and sought her out.[37] Given what we know about the lives of women like Maymūna, they typically slept rough outdoors, in mosques open to travellers or caravansaries, and under the roofs of strangers. Whether on the road, in cities, or in Maymūna's case, in the countryside, these women would have been subject to fascination, praise, and condemnation, as well as physical and sexual violence.[38]

Maymūna's account hints at the physical violence a woman like her might have experienced as she wandered with her sheep. She reportedly wore a woollen garment embroidered with the words "Not for buying or selling."[39] Maymūna was not alone; a formerly enslaved woman was said to have worn a woollen *jubba* with the same message.[40] The words could be read as a shared statement on the anti-mercantilism of their paths in keeping with the verse, "Those are they that have bought error at the price of guidance, and their commerce has not profited them, and they are not right-guided" (Q 2:16). But if we limit it to that meaning, we miss a more socially grounded message, one possibly intended for those whom the women expected to encounter while wandering. The historical record demonstrates that even in Muslim lands, gangs would abduct vulnerable people off the road, especially targeting Black travellers, and would sell them into slavery.[41]

37 On ʿAbd al-Wāḥid, see Javad Shams, Mohammad, "ʿAbd al-Wāḥid b. Zayd al-Baṣrī," trans. S. Umar, in *Encyclopaedia Islamica*.

38 For general remarks on the danger women faced while traveling, see Tolmacheva, Marina, "Medieval Muslim women's travel: Defying distance and danger," in *World History Connected* (2013), n.p., https://worldhistoryconnected.press.uillinois.edu/10.2/forum_tolmacheva.html (last accessed: 22 September 2021). Likewise, see the trope of good rule being marked by the ability of a woman to travel alone safely in Fierro, Maribel, "Violence against women in Andalusi historical sources (third/ninth-seventh/thirteenth centuries)," in Robert Gleave and Istvan Kristo-Nagy (eds.), *Violence in Islamic thought from the Qurʾan to the Mongols*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 155–174, 161. On the violent treatment of women who had lost their rational faculties, see Dols, Michael W., Majnūn: *The madman in medieval Islamic society*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 396. Rape was ubiquitous enough in all walks of life that medieval Muslim jurists conceived of multiple categories of offence to narrow down the particularities of each assault. See Badr, Yasmine, *Defining and categorizing "rape": A study of some pre-modern and early modern Islamic legal sources*, Montreal (PhD Diss.): Institute of Islamic Studies McGill University, 2018 and Azam, Hina, *Sexual violation in Islamic law: Substance, evidence, and procedure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. On sexual violence in warfare, attitudes towards sexual assault in historical literature, and for a plethora of footnotes detailing sexual violence in multiple contexts, see Fierro, "Violence against women," 161.

39 Silvers, "Early pious" 45.

40 Silvers, "Early pious" 45.

41 Bruning, Jelle, "Slave trade dynamics in Abbasid Egypt: The papyrological evidence," in

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Maymūna would have been at risk, and the account offers a metaphor for actual sexual violence. When ʿAbd al-Wāḥid finds Maymūna, he declares with surprise that wolves mingle with her sheep and do not attack them. I would argue this part of her story is not about sheep and wolves. Instead, he is vouching for her. He assures his audience that she is his future wife, albeit in paradise, and more importantly, that she was miraculously protected by God from sexual assault. She upbraids him for visiting her unbidden and his surprise at her intimate relationship with God through which she, the sheep, was protected from men, the wolves.

> He said, "I see the wolves are with the sheep! The sheep do not fear the wolves, nor do the wolves eat the sheep. How could that be?"
>
> "Leave me alone! I fixed what is between me and my Master, and so He has taken care of the wolves and the sheep."[42]

I would argue that anyone hearing Maymūna's story in the early and medieval period would know exactly what was meant by "sheep" and "wolves" and might be reassured by a story that permits her sanctity to go unsullied. But over time, this consoling narrative commits a kind of violence by silencing the fact of what she must surely have experienced. It is made worse by the compounded nature of her historical vulnerability to erasure, not just as a woman, but as a Black woman, a poor woman, and a woman who was not in full control of her rational mind.

I try to rectify this textual silencing by bringing Maymūna's experience to al-Ashiqa as-Sawda's story responsibly. Hartman writes about such textual interventions as "jeopardizing the status of the event": "I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."[43] In *The lover*, I write against the grain of the account of Maymūna's experience by offering a different reading of her words. Words that were once meant to silence her experience as an act of consolation are here said in personal defiance and in narrative recognition of the violence likely perpetrated against her. A defiance that is a mirror of her rejection of the man who interrupts her without invitation and seems to understand so little about God. Further, a defiance that places these Black women, their wisdom, and their

JESHO 63 (2020), 682–742, 689–690n46; Tolmacheva, "Medieval Muslim women's travel" [n.p.]; Fierro, "Violence against women" 162–164.

42 Silvers, "Early pious" 45–47.

43 Hartman, "Venus" 11.

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experiences at the centre of Sufism.[44] The account no longer suggests that sanctity confers protection from hardship, but rather that one is at peace with God and protected by God, no matter the brutalities of life.

> [al-Ashiqa as-Sawda, with young Zaytuna and Tein in tow, has taken refuge in a mosque overnight. A man has followed them and attempts to rape her.]
>
> Zaytuna sat up and leaned over onto her mother as she pulled her clothes straight. Her mother wound an arm around her and brought her in close. "I have fixed what is between me and God, the sheep no longer fear the wolves."[45]

There are those who have said that I should have followed the transmitters with consoling half-truths and that I have diminished Sufi women by exposing the likelihood of these incidents. But were those early women ashamed that we should cover it up now? Did ʿAbd al-Wāḥid depict her as a woman ashamed? In my reading, his concern was with the assumptions of his audience, not with Maymūna. One account after another of these early mystics depict saintly women who cared about God alone, never sinking to the idolatry of what others think of them. Thus, continuing to uphold these consoling narratives only suggests that the social and bodily vulnerabilities these women experienced are shameful, and further deflects from pointing to an ever-absent perpetrator. To have been raped should not diminish her accomplishments or sanctity. To have fixed what is between her and God in the face of rape is instead an aspirational story for those who have suffered similarly.

5 Rhetoricizing Voicing

For Hartman, the histories of those written out of the archive cannot be told by giving voice to the women, but by giving voice to the impossibility of telling the story itself. But one can write a critical fabulation from the sources, a story that sharpens the point of the losses in articulating what could have been.

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44 On the role of defiance in telling the histories of Black lives in pre-modern critical race studies, see Hendricks, Margo, "Coloring the past, rewriting our future: RaceB4Race," https://www.folger.edu/institute/scholarly-programs/race-periodization/margo-hendricks (last accessed: 22 September 2021).

45 Silvers, *The lover* 51.

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> The intent of this practice is not to *give voice* to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.[46]

In that vein, why did I choose to depict al-Ashiqa as-Sawda as a woman of Nubian heritage rather than Arab, Persian, or Turkmen? In short, because it is Black Muslims whose histories and presence are silenced most in the Muslim community now.[47] If we were to ask non-Black Muslims living in North America to imagine an early Muslim saint, my guess is that few would imagine a Black woman.[48] Most likely, they would imagine the nearly legendary Rābiʿa al-ʿAdawiyya, who is described as a Persian or Arab woman in the sources and even with fairer skin in some popular depictions.[49] I hoped that al-Ashiqa as-Sawda would pose the question of "what could have been" in a history of Sufi tradition that in large part has not favoured women, Black women, or Blackness.[50]

The low social status of Black people became a metaphor for sanctity in Sufism itself, but this is not favouring Blackness. There is no shortage of proof that Blackness was a social and moral stain in early and medieval Islam. A report that the Prophet Muhammad advised his community in his farewell pilgrimage that they should follow a leader, "*even if* he were an enslaved Abyssin-

46 Hartman, "Venus" 12.

47 On contemporary anti-Blackness in North America and the diaspora, see Curtis Edward E., *The call of Bilal: Islam in the African diaspora*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014; Hill, Margari et al. (eds.), *Study of intra-Muslim ethnic relations: Muslim American views on race relations, for the Muslim anti-racism collaborative*, Alta Loma: Muslim ARC, 2015 (https://www.muslimarc.org/interethnic; last accessed: 21 September 2021); Abdul-Khabeer, Suʿad, *Muslim cool: Race, religion, and Hip Hop in the United States*, New York: New York University Press, 2016; Abdullah-Poulos, Layla (ed.), *Black Muslim reads*, New York: NbA Muslims, 2020.

48 I mention these locales because my intention was directed toward my likely readers who, as I expected, overwhelmingly live in the United States and Canada.

49 On Rabiʿa's likely racial background, See Cornell, *Rabiʿa* 45–48.

50 Obviously, this observation only holds in those locales where people of African descent were/are in the minority and/or are marginalized. For the recognition of Black female Sufi guides in Senegal, see, for example, Hill, Joseph, *Wrapping authority women Islamic leaders in a Sufi movement in Dakar, Senegal*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018.

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ian with a head like a raisin," was relayed widely to enforce political quietism.[51] The mention of sin with darkened skin or darkness in the heart in the Quran and Hadith inspired punishments for crimes. Along with other humiliations, non-Black criminals would have their skin blackened with coal and would be paraded through the streets.[52] A Black person might transcend their Blackness through noble Arab lineage, as long as they were among those who knew them well enough to overlook their Blackness for their Arabness.[53] Otherwise, all bets were off. In Sufism, this low worldly status, enslavement too, represented complete subjection to God, the highest aspiration of every ascetic or mystic.[54] Consider the retort of the early mystic Shaʿwāna in the face of unwelcome praise, "I am a sinful black slave."[55] But the subversion of Blackness in Sufism and piety literature is not praise of Black people. On the contrary, it amounts to praise of the subjection of Black people as it only makes sense in a social order in which Blackness is associated with the lowest of the low.[56]

51 Al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (*Arabic-English*), trans. Muhammad M. Khan, 9 vols., Medina: Dar Ahya [sic] Us-Sunnah Al-Nabawiýa [sic], 1979, Book 93, *ḥadīth* 6 [emphasis is mine]. Crone, Patricia, "Even an Ethiopian slave: The transformation of a Sunnī tradition," in *BSOAS* 57.1 (1994), 59–67, 60–61.

52 Lange, Christian, "Legal and cultural aspects of ignominious parading (*tashhīr*) in Islam," in *Islamic Law and Society* 14.1 (2007), 84–85; Q 3:106 and Q 10:27; Ibn Māja, Abū ʿAbdallāh Muḥammad b. Yazīd al-Qazwīnī, *Sunan Ibn Māja*, ed. Muḥammad F. ʿAbd al-Bāqī, 2 vols., Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1975, Book 37, Chapter 29, *ḥadīth* 145.

53 Schine, Rachel, "The racialized other in early Arabic literature: Literature as an institution of community," in Zain Abdullah (ed.), *Routledge handbook on Islam and race*, New York: Routledge (forthcoming). On notions of race relevant to this discussion, also see Richardson, Kristina, *Difference and disability in the medieval Islamic world: Blighted bodies*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012; McLeod, Nicholas C., *Race rebellion, and Arab Muslim slavery: The Zanj rebellion in Iraq 869–883 C.E.*, Louisville (PhD Diss.): University of Louisville, 2016; El Hamel, Chouki, *Black Morocco: A history of slavery, race, and Islam*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

54 On the significance of the color black in Sufism with examples see Orfali, Bilal and Nada Saab (eds.), *Sufism, black and white: A critical edition of* Kitāb al-Bayāḍ wa-l-sawād *by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sīrjānī* (*d. ca. 470/1077*), Leiden: Brill, 2012, 12–17; Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical dimensions of Islam*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, 123–124. For two more illustrative examples, see Salamah-Qudsi, *Sufism* 245, 257. In some cases, blackening the skin in Sufism refers to mourning rituals in which one blackens the face with coal. For an example see al-Qushayrī, ʿAbd al-Karīm, *al-Qushayri's epistle on Sufism*, trans. Alexander Knysh, Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2007, 137.

55 Silvers, "Early pious" 43. It is an open question whether or not Shaʿwāna was a Black woman, formerly enslaved, enslaved still, or a free Persian woman. The depth of intention in the words would differ given the identity of the speaker and consideration must be given to the role of the transmitter in the wording, but the equivalence between Blackness and perfected humility is the same.

56 Abdel-Latif makes this point and expands the conversation about the gendered depiction

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If I were to portray Blackness in keeping with the common subversion trope in Sufism in my novels, I would only embed those widely-held negative associations even further. Instead, I sought out positive associations of Blackness in Sufism spurred by a diagram used by a contemporary Rifaʿi Sufi order. The diagram associates a color with each stage on the path. Black is assigned to the perfected human being (*al-insān al-kāmil*) with the explanation that only black can be fully receptive to the undifferentiated light of God.[57] In his commentary of the Quran, Sahl al-Tustarī (d. ca. 293/896) explains that "night" in the verse, "And by the night when it passes away," refers to "the great blackness," meaning those members of the Prophet's community who are not tainted by this world, unharmed by sin, know only God, and will enter paradise without judgment.[58] Further, some Sufis associate black or an experience of a "black light" with higher levels of the path, and sometimes with human perfection.[59] The conception of the color black as low-thus-high is similar in these schemes, yet different in a crucial way. While black as perfection in these examples results from the abasement of the self in God's self, it has the potential to do so without reference to demeaning social hierarchies, whether or not those who made the association held those views. These interpretations thus displace the oft-used subversion trope as the "credible resource" in the imagined world of my novels with what "could have been" at the centre of the Sufi tradition instead.

In the novels, I adopted the Rifaʿi diagram's colors associated with the distinct levels of the soul and their characteristics. These associations come into play in a number of ways, most notably in a crucial dream sequence. In *The lover*, after Zaytuna wades past colored river stones representing the other stages and psychological challenges she will encounter on the path, she finds

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of non-elites in early and medieval Sufism, "When women, youths, slaves and black individuals are cast as deviations from the free, elite male norm in these sources, they serve as props for male spiritual advancement." Abdel-Latif, "Narrativizing" 133.

57 The diagram and its interpretation were given to the author at the Canadian Institute of Sufi Studies, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2018. This particular diagram is also used by the Helveti-Jerrahi Order of Toronto.

58 Q 89:4; al-Tustarī, Sahl b. ʿAbdallāh, *Tafsīr al-Tustarī*, trans. Annabel Keeler and Ali Keeler, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011, 282–283.

59 On "black light," see Corbin, Henry, *Man of light in Iranian Sufism*, New Hampshire: Omega Publications, 1994, 99–110. On the black ink of the Quran, see Rustom, Mohammed, *Inrushes of the heart: The Sufi philosophy of ʿAyn al-Quḍāt*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2023, ch. 8. On the significance of color, including black, in early Kubrawi Sufism from the 7th/13th century, see Abuali, Eyad, "Words clothed in light: *Dhikr* (recollection), color and synaesthesia in early Kubrawi Sufism," in *Iran* 58.2 (2020), 279–292. I am indebted to Alan Godlas for resources and conversation on the color black, "the black light," and the subversion trope in Sufism.

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her perfected, Black mother waiting for her. In Zaytuna's dream state, it was as if her mother were the angel Gabriel, inviting her to cross to a higher station.

> The stream's light dimmed as she walked. The city fell away behind her. The world fell away around her. The stones in the bed darkened. A pool was ahead. She could just see it. She walked to it. The water deepened. She was up to her waist in it. The water had no light. The sky had no features. Blackness embraced her. A blackness that accepted all light, rejecting nothing. The edge of the pool went to the horizon. First light arrived in the distance, only a thread of golden blackness illuminating the far, far edge of all things. It grew, the deepest brown, red and golden, slowly filling the sky with its warmth and clarity. Her eyes adjusted, taking in more, taking in every moment until she saw that the golden encompassing blackness was her mother. Her arms filled the horizon from East to West. Her mother's body held every direction.[60]

The scene is an emotional breaking point for Zaytuna, where she finds her connection to her lost mother through the dreamworld and is invited to come to terms with her past in her present moment. Her mother speaks, as if relaying a message from God, telling her to take care of the children at the centre of the case Zaytuna is investigating. "Her words were like a bell sounding, pealing through Zaytuna's every cell. 'My babies. Take care of them.' "[61] Every emotion of the novel has been leading to this moment in which Zaytuna begins to accept the losses of her past, most especially the childhood loss of her mother, to join her mother on a path towards sanctity, and to receive her mother's blessing for her own path seeking justice for the most vulnerable. Rather than a consoling narrative of the sort that Hartman warns against, in the context of the novel to this point, the scene honours the complex lives of mother and daughter with intimacy between themselves and with God.

6 Conclusion

While I intended my mysteries to first and foremost entertain, I also hoped that the historically grounded plots, settings, and character arcs would prompt the reader to question their assumptions about the history of Islam. As discussed in

60 Silvers, *The lover* 139.
61 Silvers, *The lover* 139.

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this chapter, my novels are filled with the complexities of gendered and racial hierarchies, popular and elite interpretive communities, ritual practices, social mores, political agendas, doctrines, legal theory and practice, and ethics, but do not try to force a neat story out of them. Whether it be disputes within and between the early Sufi and Hanbali communities in Baghdad arising from internal and external pressures (*The lover*), the nature of justice in ʿAbbasid-era military, jurisprudential, and even popular court systems (*The jealous*), the questions facing a Baghdadi Shiʿa community whose Imam is in hiding (*The unseen*), or the diversity of and tensions within popular and elite Quran culture (*The peace*), my main interest is in depicting the diverse efforts of human beings to make sense of it all. I wanted to explore the Muslim past for the present, perhaps offering a way of thinking that does not look away from the difficulties while celebrating its possibilities.[62] As Hartman writes, "The necessity of trying to represent what we cannot, rather than leading to pessimism or despair must be embraced as the impossibility that conditions our knowledge of the past and animates our desire for a liberated future."[63]

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62 For an academically critical reconstruction of gender and sexuality in Sufism, see Shaikh, Saʿdiyya, *Sufi narratives of intimacy: Ibn ʿArabi, gender, and sexuality*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

63 Hartman, "Venus" 12–13.

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