



Epilogue

# Sufi Breathing in the Pandemic Ruins of (Anti-Muslim) Racism

Whatever is breathing you, makes your heart beat!

—Khidr, sometime in the spring of 2014

## #COVID-19

11 March 2020. A year had passed since defending my doctoral dissertation. I moved from Sufi breathing to examining the explicit formations of breathing inequalities from Western Europe to a South Asian city. Following the desire line that began with my earlier interests in breathing practices, I traveled to Kolkata, one of the so-called air pollution capitals of India. In this country, the ruling far-right BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) fueled anti-Muslim sentiments, making it impossible for Muslims (and other marginalized communities) to “breathe well” in India. During my brief stay in Kolkata, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the spread of COVID-19 a pandemic. Catching an emergency flight, I returned to Berlin, finding the vibrant city I had left, standing in pandemic ruins (Selim 2022a, 2022b, 2021).

During the first wave of the pandemic in the spring of 2020, I received an email from Minar, a member of the Tūmata-Berlin network. He was a frontline worker in an emergency healthcare team and sounded utterly exhausted. We briefly met to walk and talk together later in the summer, sharing our wayfaring lessons along the Sufi path confronting everyday anti-Muslim racism, postmigrant life after the Hanau terror attack, and the new pandemic reality. We



also discussed how the future of Sufi healing practices remained contested in a place where biomedicine reigned supreme (for good reasons in the pandemic, but its unquestioned dominance was something to be concerned about). I noticed his exhaustion, and it made me wonder how other Sufi breather-wayfarers were coming to terms with the pandemic and the reckoning of (anti-Muslim) racism in German society.

Since March 2020, Inayati teachers have offered digital self-care and healing seminars via Zoom online. In their conversations, I sensed a growing ambivalence due to the unequal socioeconomic effects on individual members and divergent views regarding the pandemic. At around the same time, I received disturbing news from southern Germany, where the Sufi Haqqani-Naqshbandi network of Berlin had relocated in 2014. Feride (a Sufi Muslim woman of Color) informed me that the predominantly white (and Catholic) village (where they moved to) vehemently rejected the neighborhood support that the Sufi Muslim network had offered to elderly neighbors during the pandemic. Anti-Muslim racism seemed to have taken a new turn in pandemic times.

My primary Sufi teacher Khidr passed away in the pre-pandemic year (November 2019; chapter 1). His students and I continued our weekly meetings on Thursday evenings. But the pandemic forced us to shift the gathering to Zoom. In the first pandemic year (2020), these meetings were short, without the cooking/eating together and collective breathing practice. Besides reading Sufi texts that invited us to take refuge in the Elsewhere, our political reflections revolved around the tumultuous events happening in the here and now (the Hanau terror attack, BLM, and the pandemic being recurrent themes of these discussions). We made consistent efforts to transform the Zoom window into an intimate space of breathing companionship during the second and third pandemic years (2021–22). We expanded our meetings by sharing our virtual breath by doing the dhikr together, each taking turns to lead the virtual circle in our efforts to “breathe well.”

## **#breathingwell**

“Breathing well” in the pandemic ruins of (anti-Muslim) racism in Germany requires many more interventions other than Sufi breath-

ing practices. Such interventions involve individual and collective decisions, inflecting (social) scientific imagination with speculative and metaphysical imagination practices, enhancing the struggle for social justice, and ensuring equal access to resources and care, including vaccines, which Sufis in Berlin were able to receive (unlike many other parts of the world where vaccine availability was a matter of grave concern) (Selim 2022a, 2022b, 2020b). Not all of my Sufi interlocutors were immune from the recurring waves of vaccine anxieties and the circulation of conspiracy theories. Although the leaders of all three Sufi networks and the nomadic Sufis generally favored vaccination, opinions varied among individual interlocutors.

The long era of COVID-19 heralded the beginning of an uncertain track of Sufi healing practices in Berlin. Much more can be discussed regarding what it means to “breathe well” in the pandemic ruins. Doing justice to this topic would require further ethnographic attention. As we move closer to a post-pandemic era (until the next pandemic arrives), and with my research and political interests shifting elsewhere, it is necessary to announce a formal closure of my anthropological project about the practices and politics of Sufi healing in Berlin (2013–2021).

“Who is a Sufi?” Reaching the end of this book, I return to the question I asked Pir Zia Inayat-Khan back in 2013, a question with which I began my ethnographic fieldwork, a question with which I started writing this book. “A Sufi is someone who breathes well,” Pir Zia answered. In 2023, amid the global catastrophe of breathing troubles and suffocating atmospheres of (racial and) social injustice that do not allow Muslims to breathe well in Germany (and elsewhere), the question “who is a Sufi?” invites an expansive response centering on social justice. Sufis, like the rest of us, must consistently make efforts to breathe otherwise, regardless of their material circumstances, and in the company of others. Amid the pandemic ruins of (anti-Muslim) racism in Germany, “breathing well” requires *something else* apart from only learning to feel and inhabit the Elsewhere. For Sufis and non-Sufis alike, the imperative is to continue co-creating intersectional conditions of possibilities for and with others; however fragile these conditions for “breathing well” may be.