

Sufi Mythos: Discourses from the Margins



By: Dr. Ali Hussain



“Mythology is not a lie, mythology is poetry, it is metaphorical. It has been well said that mythology is the penultimate truth--penultimate because the ultimate cannot be put into words. It is beyond words. Beyond images, beyond that bounding rim of the Buddhist Wheel of Becoming. Mythology pitches the mind beyond that rim, to what can be known but not told.” – Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Introduction:

In a newly printed edition of *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* (The Meccan Openings), Muḥyī al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabī’s (d. 638/1240) magnum opus, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Maqālīh, who wrote the preface for this edition, begins by stating that “this book is oppressed, yes oppressed. The copiers have oppressed it; so, have publishers [who released it] without corrections.

Narrow terminology that finds sufficiency only in allusion and sentences that have been unable to convey what the pure spirit contains of hidden treasures, has also oppressed it.”¹ The power of such an eye-catching preface to one of the most controversial works in the history of Islamic mysticism (*Sufism/Taṣawwuf*) becomes more vivid once one approaches this entire new edition as a modern entextualized and dramatized engagement with a treasure from the past.

A quick glance on the back covers of the first three – out of nine – volumes in this massive compendium reveals a hardly haphazard selection of quotes from the work itself; as well as statements about Ibn al-‘Arabī himself by later Muslim thinkers. On the back cover of the first volume, one finds the testimony of one Majd al-Din al-Fayrūzabādi (d. 817/1414) on behalf of Ibn al-‘Arabī: “And some misguided groups have transgressed in their accusations against him.

¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* I, 7.

Some of them might even be so ignorant to declare *takfīr* (disbelief) [against him]. All of this is due to naught but their inability to fully comprehend his statements and their meanings.”² Such an exquisite exoneration paves the way by clearing the misgivings about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s name and writings to try and validate – as a worthwhile endeavor – the attempt to reprint his magnum opus.

The second volume features various quotations by the Shaykh that further ground his position as an orthodox Muslim scholar: “*Shar‘* (Divine Law) is the ruling of God, not intellect as some perceive it. Thus, the purity of *sharī‘a* is to perceive it from God, the One and Real. It is for this reason that we should not dismiss the ruling of a *mujtahid* (independent Muslim legislator).”³

If such legalistic terminology is not enough to convince the reader that Ibn al-‘Arabī is an orthodox Muslim scholar, then this final quote certainly will: “Indeed, the *dīn* (Religion) has been completed, and adding to it is not acceptable; just as removing from it is also not allowed.”⁴

Lastly, the back cover of the third volume begins with a clear attempt to pronounce Ibn al-‘Arabī’s opinion on disputes among the companions of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, a contentious debate between Shī‘īs and Sunnis:

Companions [of the Prophet Muhammad]: our opinion of them is beautiful – may God be pleased with all of them – and there is no excuse to belittle them. If some of them had criticized one another, then they’re permitted to do so, but we have no permission to interfere in [the disputes] that arose between them.⁵

² Ibid, back cover.

³ Ibid II, back cover.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid III, back cover.

The series of excerpts then closes with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s statements about another controversial topic in both Shī‘īsm and Sufism: “If a person achieves a state of direct witnessing, then they have been perfected; so, has their gnosis and *‘iṣmatuhu* (divine protection) and Satan has no jurisdiction over them. This protection is called *ḥifẓan* (protection) when used to describe the *walī* (saint) and *‘iṣma* (infallibility) regarding the prophet and messenger. This to distinguish between the saint and prophet.”⁶

An ornamented seal of this new edition’s textual conversation with the work’s author and his thought resides on the lower right corner of the back cover of all the volumes: “Tarīm, the Capital of Islamic Culture for the year 1431/2010”⁷. This lofty status that was granted to this city of saints in the heart of the Hadhramawt valley, in the eastern desert of Yemen, is now further memorialized in this engagement between a prominent emplaced and entexted expressions of sacrality. Indeed, as will be made clear, the controversy that surrounds Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ink blots on paper performs itself in very similar ways on the geographical terrain of Tarīm.

Before undertaking our journey into this textual and spatial nexus of sacrality, we add a second seal to this Tarīm’s invitation to Ibn al-‘Arabī and his *Meccan Openings*. With the following words, the Yemeni minister of culture, Muhammad al-Mifliḥī, ushers this new edition with a brief dedication:

(A book is the memory of a people), and the first principle in our Islamic heritage is *iqra* ‘ [read]...

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

And because Tarīm has always been the Islamic beacon to shine the light of its knowledge to the world, a ‘book’ had to be at the forefront of its [Tarīm’s] inauguration ceremony as the capital of Islamic culture for the year 2010.

This is out of our conviction in the important role of *al-kalima* (word) in creating new horizons for communication and dialogue, so that our world be more luminous and iridescent.

This also so that these new published editions can be a window for the world into the cradle of civilizations, Yemen, and an acknowledgement of the rank of a city [Tarīm] that has ornamented Islamic heritage with its most glittering gems.⁸

With such an eloquent dedication, the Yemeni minister of culture paves the way for our sojourn with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings and the land of Yemen; a journey paved by a third quintessential component in this nexus of sacrality: the embodied collective of Muslims, whose bodily vessels act as a fomenting and then fermenting vessel for the textual and spatial sources of sacrality to become influential agents in the social sphere.

What I propose in the following paragraphs is to replace al-Maqālīh’s term ‘oppression’, in describing Muslims’ engagement with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Meccan Openings*, with ‘obsession’. The type of obsessiveness I’m thinking of specifically is akin to Dufourmantelle’s eloquent description of Derrida’s deconstruction of hospitality:

This is to try to come close to a silence around which discourse is ordered, and that a poem sometimes discovers, but always pulls itself back from unveiling in the very movement of speech or writing. If a part of night is inscribed in language, this is also language’s moment of effacement.

This nocturnal side of speech could be called *obsession*. A forger can imitate a painter’s brush stroke or a writer’s style and make the difference between them imperceptible, but he will never be able to make his own their obsession, what forces them to be always going back toward that silence where the first imprints are sealed.⁹

⁸ Ibid I, 2.

⁹ Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 2.

I propose that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings were – and still are – quintessential tools in Sufis’ repertoire of spiritual obsessiveness; an attempt by mystics to remain at the social (horizontal) and heavenly (vertical) margins or interstices of their communities as mediators who can absorb the nocturnal side of God’s speech, His *baraka* (grace/providence), and then channel it, through their bodies, into the social sphere.

Our journey will take place alongside three signposts. At the first stop, we will delve into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Meccan Openings*, our textual interlocutor so far in this paper. Therein, we will explore the Andalusian mystic’s vision of sacred bodies and their role as mediators between the realms of *malakūt* (spirits/intelligibles) and *nāsūt* (lit. human/material realm).

In this regard, we will focus on the enigmatic sacred flesh of ‘Īsa b. Maryam (Jesus the son of Mary) in this voluminous work, as one such archetypal *barzakh* (isthmus), and as the pivotal returning Messiah for Muslims throughout history.

After that textual sojourn, our journey will halt next at the sacral landscape of modern day Tarīm. In this section, I will discuss some ethnographic observations I made during my trip to this city of saints in the summer of 2013.

Specifically, my research pertains to one enigmatic *ḥabīb* (lit. beloved/Sufi master) in this city who has a peculiar transaction-ritual he performs with his visitors in exchange for *baraka* (divine grace). I will situate ‘experiencing God’ between this *ḥabīb* ‘Abd al-Mawla and other side

conversations I observed while in Tarīm revolving around Ibn al-‘Arabī himself and the son of Mary as the returning messiah.

Our last stop will be an attempt to engage Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings from the past with, what I propose are, a modern bodily and social collective manifestation of his own vision of sacred bodies and their role as mediators between heaven and earth.

Here, I will use Irving Goh’s groundbreaking work, *The Reject*, as a theoretical prism through which to situate both Ibn al-‘Arabī and modern-day Sufis in Tarīm, Yemen as storytellers who use the sacred vessels of their bodies and texts to help their readers and devotees to cross over from the ink on paper or embodied divine utterances to God’s theophanies in the beyond.

The Perplexity of ‘Īsa b. Maryam in the Meccan Openings:

The world of Ibn al-‘Arabī in 12th-13th century Western and Eastern Islamdom was one where Muslims weaved various narratives from the socio-political dwellings in their surroundings to cross the threshold into some larger unknown; in this case, divine providence¹⁰.

Religious scholars (e.g., jurists, theologians or Sufi shaykhs) negotiated their power and legitimacy, as representatives of God, by either becoming pietistic advisors and diplomats for

¹⁰ The term Islamdom was introduced by Marshall Hodgson in *Venture of Islam* as a referent to those geographic territories ruled by Muslims in pre-modern times. Ibn al-‘Arabī spent the first half of his life in Iberia and North Africa – where he was born – and second half of his life in central Islamdom (Anatolia and seat of the Abbasid caliphate). Therefore, Eastern and Western Islamdom are particularly pertinent in his case.

rulers or heads of *madrasas* (religious schools) and *khāniqās* (Sufi lodges). Most often, though, they fulfilled all these roles at once.

However, the garb of political diplomat or righteous teacher never alternated easily for such individuals. As the scholar left the court of the caliph and returned to his *murīds* (students) in the Sufi lodge or school, a trace of his previous engagement always lingered in the vicinity. Thus, for example, the auspicious gifts that the 12th - 13th century Muslim polymath ‘Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) received during a diplomatic assignment to the Ayyubid court in Cairo and Damascus became a source of polemics against him upon his return to Baghdad. How can a pious and God-fearing Muslim scholar and mystic like al-Suhrawardi accept such lavish presents from corrupt rulers?¹¹

Be that as it may, for all the precarious engagements that a figure like al-Suhrawardi was involved in, his cunning lay in the ability to render each of these vocations as a dwelling from which he and his supporters could always crossover to God. For al-Suhrawardi specifically, this meant that his service for the ‘Abbasid caliph as a diplomat was a faithful adherence to the prophet Muhammad’s imperative that the caliphate should remain under the tribe of Quraysh; of whom the ‘Abbasids were a clan.

Similarly, by hierarchically delineating his Sufi lodge, from public to private quarters, al-Suhrawardi transformed this space from a simple worldly dwelling to a mythological return of the

¹¹ Cf. Ohlander, *Sufism*.

first Prophetic community. Among the companions and servants, the figure of the Shaykh becomes an embodiment of the Prophet ﷺ himself.

Fortunately, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s life allows for an even easier perception of dwellings and crossings. Born in Murcia, Spain, this Muslim mystic spent his entire life journeying from one town, teacher, and locale to the next. However, this fact alone does not make Ibn al-‘Arabī particularly unique; for *ṭalab al-‘ilm* (traveling in search for religious knowledge) was the norm for any individual at the time who sought to become a religious scholar. What makes Ibn al-‘Arabī unique is that he always kept the memories of his journey as an ever-expanding toolbox for his very own ‘intellectual bricolage’.

For example, Abu-l-‘Abbas al-‘Uraybi, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s first teacher, remains a recurring name in the latter’s *Meccan Openings*; a work that Ibn al-‘Arabī authored in the second half of his life. Places, events, and people never leave our Muslim mystic; they always seem to find new roles to play here and there in his works. Therefore, the same Abu-l-‘Abbas whom Ibn al-‘Arabī disagreed with at a young age about the identity of the spiritual *quṭb* (pole)¹² returns in the *Meccan Openings* as an example of a *walī* (Muslim saint) who was also *‘īsawī* (a spiritual inheritor from Jesus)¹³.

¹² The term *quṭb* is widely circulated among Sufis and refers to a spiritual status, in a cosmological hierarchy of saints, held by a specific person during every age.

¹³ Cf. Addas, *Quest*, 51, 62. The term *‘īsawī* (Jesus-like) was introduced by Ibn al-‘Arabī to refer to *awliyā’* (Muslim saints) who, during their spiritual journeys towards God, inherited traits, and dispositions from specific prophets. In this case, *‘īsawī* saints are ones who inherit from Jesus. Ibn al-‘Arabī also stated that there are inheritors from every prophet. Thus, there are *mūsawī* (Moses-like) and *yūsufī* (Joseph-like) saints; just to mention a few.

We find the figure of Christ in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s thought in a similar light. The Muslim mystic paints numerous portraits of ‘Īsa b. Maryam (Jesus the son of Mary). Each of these depictions allows Ibn al-‘Arabī to cross back and forth from the dwelling of Jesus’s flesh to some cosmic phenomenon in an ongoing vast mystical narrative. In the *Meccan Openings* alone, Jesus exchanges the garb of teacher, prophet, or saint for that of the Word of God, seal of sainthood and Messiah.

However, like the rest of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s memories that linger and leave their traces in the rest of his writings, the various images of Jesus in this Muslim mystic’s works are not alter egos as much as various angles from which to view Jesus’s unique and incomprehensible essence. In other words, his portrayal as *kalimatu Allah* (Word of God), for example, is inseparable from his virgin birth or status as a messianic seal of sainthood. In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s bricolage, these various images are synchronous events in an unfolding mystical narrative.

Moreover, like any character in a myth, the importance of Jesus lies precisely in how his own tale attaches and converses with the other elements of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s story. It is here that we perceive the most fascinating aspect of the Muslim mystic’s appropriation of Christ’s body: Jesus is a microcosmic human analogue for larger macrocosmic realities in the universe. In other words, it is because Jesus can perform, within his own being, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysic that the former plays such an important role in the other-worldly component of the latter’s thought.

If the sacred bodies of saints and prophets, like Abu-l-‘Abbas al-‘Uraybi and Jesus, correspond in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s world with the macrocosmic reality of the universe; then his writings

are also an isthmus where he could bring these two worlds together. Temporality in all its shades (e.g., past, present, future and even timelessness) as well as ontological realms (e.g., physical, or spiritual dominions) collide in the deafening singularity of ink on paper.

As soon as the reader finds himself in a familiar place, such as a cemetery in Murcia, Spain; Ibn al-‘Arabī lifts the curtain in the following phrase to reveal a meeting he had with Jesus, presumably still at the cemetery, where he repented and “learned the way” at the hands of the son of Mary¹⁴. From there, each word on paper corresponds to vast distances that we are encouraged to traverse, either back to the time of Jesus’s conception and virgin birth, or in the future during his return as the Messiah at the end of times.

Throughout the eight volumes of the *Meccan Openings*, there are approximately 170 mentions of Jesus. Although some of the 560 chapters that are specifically focused on Jesus or *‘isawī* (Jesus-like) saints; in general, the mentions of Jesus are spread uniformly throughout the work. Moreover, there does not seem to be any correlation between a specific chapter and the image of Jesus that is mentioned therein. Often, a single chapter will discuss all the various facets of his persona¹⁵.

Notwithstanding the sporadic mention of Jesus, all these instances can be classified under a few major themes. Before we delve into some of these motifs, an important reminder is in order.

¹⁴ Ibid, 51.

¹⁵ A few scholars tried to reason through Ibn al-‘Arabī’s organization of the *Meccan Openings*. Chodkiewicz’s *Ocean without Shore* posits an esoteric classification of the work based on the Qur’an. On the other hand, Chittick in *Sufi Path of Knowledge* seems to dismiss any underlying principle in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s organization of the work and thinks it should be regarded as an organic stream of consciousness.

There is a tremendous overlap between these strands that does not allow for easy categorization. Be that as it may, these different intersections will allow us to understand how Jesus, as a character in a divine play, fits in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s narrative.

The main motifs are as follows: the physical composition of Jesus, Jesus as Word of God, kinship, and a miscellaneous category which includes mentions of Jesus that do not fall under any of these rubrics, per se, but that are either too few to merit a category of their own or do not correlate directly with the concept of body and embodiment. Of course, each of these groupings includes multiple sub-categories that should be adumbrated separately.

For the purposes of this paper, we will focus mainly on the theme of Jesus as the Word of God and how this pertains to *ṭṣawī* (Jesus-like saints). As we transition from the metaphysical discussion of ‘the Word made flesh’ to its appearance and agency in the social sphere, this will provide us with the textual foundation to approach modern day Sufi masters in the Hadhramawt Valley of Yemen as possible *ṭṣawī* (Jesus-like) saints; or at least as various enigmatic inscriptions of God’s *kalima* upon a disciplined human flesh.

Jesus as Word of God:

Ibn al-‘Arabī describes Jesus as *kalimatu Allah* (the Word of God) in some 14 different places in the *Meccan Openings*. In all these instances, the author remarks that just as Jesus is the Word of God, so is the rest of the cosmos also His Words. However, there is one instance in chapter 198 where the author distinguishes between Jesus as *kalimatu Allah* (the Word of God) and God’s other *kalām* (divine speech): “God said: ‘and His *kalima* (Word) which he sent to Mary’ and it [the *kalima*] is naught but the *‘ayn* (essence) of Jesus; He did not send to her except that. For had

the divine Word that was sent to her been like His speech to Moses, she would have perished [like him].”¹⁶

However, as is usually the case with Ibn al-‘Arabī, there are multiple vantages from which to perceive the concepts in his writings. In chapter 360, he elaborates on this notion of Jesus as *kalimatu Allah* (the Word of God):

And He said as regards Jesus, peace be upon him, that he is: ‘His Word which He sent to Mary’ and He also said about her: ‘she believed in the *kalimāt* (Words) of her lord’ and they [these Words] are not except Jesus. He made him as Words [plural] for her because he is abundant from the perspective of his outward and inward composition. Thus, every part of him is a Word ... It is like a human being when he utters the various letters that form one word that is intended by the speaker who seeks to create these words; so that he might express through them what is in his soul.¹⁷

In a sense, Jesus in this excerpt is a mediating *barzakh* (isthmus) and pedagogical tool to convey a particular understanding to the reader. Just as the son of Mary was the microcosmic analogue for the creative process, through his miracle performance, the author now places the former’s physiological composition, as Word of God, between the human act of speech and divine creation.

However, Ibn al-‘Arabī also uses Jesus as an analogy for writing. In chapter 195 he states: “Another matter is His statement regarding Jesus that he is: ‘the Word of God’. A word is a collection of letters ... and then He said that He gave him the *injīl* (gospel) with which He intends the rank of his [Jesus’s] being, from the perspective that he is a word. For a *kitāb* (book) is a collection of attached letters, to form a word ... so it is for this reason that He gave him the book.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt IV*, 53.

¹⁷ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt V*, 539.

¹⁸ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt IV*, 29.

Like so, Ibn al-‘Arabī presents Jesus as both a spoken and written story. More importantly, the Muslim mystic is keen to highlight the double significance of this Christic narrative: both divine creation and the human acts of speech and writing are analogous processes of a coming-to-be, of poiesis.

In *Crossing and Dwelling*, Thomas Tweed informs us that “Metaphor is a lens and a vehicle. It directs language users’ attention to this and not that... it prompts new sightings and crossings.”¹⁹ Ibn al-‘Arabī has set for the reader the sacred artifacts of Islam, including Jesus, God’s uttered words and eternal speech as allusive steppingstones into the unknown. As we have seen, these various elements have been intricately woven into the narrative to keep the reader in a constant state of traversal and movement, between the tangible and imperceptible and from the present to timeless; all within the comfort of ink on paper.

In the *Meccan Openings*, Ibn al-‘Arabī concurs with Tweed on the pivotal role of language in facilitating a crossing-over from what is apparent to the beyond:

And so, I have opened for you the *i’tibār* (consideration) according to the *sharī‘a* (divine law), and it is the passage from the form which manifests its property in the sensory domain to what is interrelated in your essence, or at the Side of the Real, from among that which signifies God. This is the figurative meaning of *i’tibār*. It is like "You have *‘abarta* (crossed over) the valley when you have forded it and traversed it.

Like Tweed’s metaphor, Ibn al-‘Arabī’s parable-stories direct the reader’s attention to “this and not that” and prompts new sightings and crossings. However, by emphasizing the interrelated signifiers of God within one’s essence, Ibn al-‘Arabī is also setting the standard for his narrative

¹⁹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 46.

as a guide for the reader to set him or herself as a dwelling from which they can cross over to that entire cosmic apparatus within themselves.

The 'Īsawiyya and the Word of God in the Social Sphere:

The image of Jesus, outside the notion of body, in the *Meccan Openings* can be grouped under two main themes: prophethood and sainthood. It is in this specific context that the socio-political ramifications of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s portrayal of Jesus become clearer. Our interest in the following paragraphs will not be to merely adumbrate these various mentions of Jesus under these two rubrics; but also, to see how they correlate with Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Christ’s flesh.

In general, the two notions of prophethood and sainthood are closely related in the Muslim mystic’s writings. In the context of Jesus specifically, the first concept aims to place the son of Mary – and rest of God’s prophets and messengers – under the jurisdiction of the *sharī‘a* of the Prophet ﷺ as the seal of prophets. The second notion seeks to elevate Jesus by granting him the post of *khatm al-walāya al-‘amma* (seal of universal sainthood): a unique status that the son of Mary will hold upon his return as the Messiah and after which there will be no more saints in this world.

However, Ibn al-‘Arabī also provides us with an intricate explanation for connecting the post of ‘seal’ that is occupied by Jesus to his body in the overarching narrative of human creation. Once again, in this excerpt, Ibn al-‘Arabī masterfully constructs a mythic tale that augments the significance of Jesus from the realm of physiology to cosmology:

As for the seal-hood of Jesus, peace be upon him, he has that of the cycle of *mulk* (dominion); for he is the last messenger who appeared in the image of Adam and his formation. This is because he [Adam] had no father and did not resemble his

descendants in composition; for he also did not remain in the womb the allotted time ... Indeed, his birth resembles the resurrection of the dead on the day of Judgment regarding the short period during which they will have the forms that they had in this life ...

Then, when Jesus returns to earth at the end of times, He [God] will give him the seal of greater sainthood, from Adam to the last prophet Muhammad ﷺ, as an honor ... Thus, he [Jesus] has the seal-hood of dominion and universal sainthood.²⁰

Ibn al-‘Arabī constructs yet another connection from the body of Jesus to the spiritual realm. As the latter’s flesh culminates a cycle of bodily births, the intermittence of the Prophet’s ﷺ appearance, in turn, yields another cycle that is completed by Jesus. This occurs, however, through his spiritual soma as the seal of sainthood.

Perhaps the richest discussion of Jesus in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings can be found in his projection of the body and spiritual rank of Jesus upon a particular rank of Muslim saints. These Ibn al-‘Arabī describes as *‘isawiyīn* (Jesus-like). These *awliyā’* (Muslim saints) inherit certain traits, dispositions, and miracles from the son of Mary and they, as Ibn al-‘Arabī describes, “tread on the footsteps of Jesus”²¹.

This social circle of Jesus-like saints is vast and diverse. A good place to begin is with a description that the Muslim mystic gives of an unknown person who is born during every generation who resembles Christ in more than just spiritual dispositions, because "he is the man of the *barzakh* (isthmus) and God protects it through him always."²² The liminal, bodily and spiritual role that Jesus fulfills in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings is now extended into the social realm of

²⁰ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt VI*, 393.

²¹ Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt V*, 402.

²² Ibn al-‘Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt III*, 25. Bilqīs is the Queen of Sheba who is mentioned in the Qur’an in the story of the prophet Solomon.

the human race with this individual who's Jesus-like bodily composition augments him into fulfilling the task of guarding the Christic component of the universe, *'ālam al-barzakh* (the realm of isthmus)²³.

Beyond this singular figure, Ibn al-'Arabī describes numerous other persons who are also Jesus-like, in one way or another. Generally, the Jesus-like saints who are “on the footstep” of Jesus inherit from the latter certain bodily traits and dispositions, most prominently the ability to perform the miracles of Jesus. In chapter 36, devoted to the “Ascertaining the Jesus-like Inheritors, their Poles and Roots”, Ibn al-'Arabī states:

And the Jesus-like ones have an active creative intent, accepted supplication and a heard word. From the signs of the Jesus-like ones, if you want to know them, is when you look upon one of them you will find that they have much mercy and compassion for the world; no matter the condition, religion, or sect it is upon. They also have a tremendous reliance upon God, for they never complain about that which befalls them through the hands of people.²⁴

In a sense, these Christic saints, by receiving a spiritual inheritance from Jesus, are also able to embody his manners and characteristics.

In chapter 20, the author describes in detail another science that was given specifically to Jesus and the saints who inherit from him:

²³ In Ibn al-'Arabī's cosmology, *'ālam al-barzakh* refers to multiple things. First, it can be understood as synonymous with the Christian purgatory, that mediating realm between this life and hereafter. Second, *barzakh* also refers to what Ibn al-'Arabī calls *'ālam al-khayāl* (realm of imagination), an intermediary ontological rank between the world of physical bodies and spirits. There, Ibn al-'Arabī tells us that bodies become spiritualized, and spirits become corporealized so that they can interact with one another. Ibn al-'Arabī also considers dreams to take place in this realm of imagination. In other places in his writings however, he seems to regard the entire cosmos (creation) as a *barzakh* and *'ālam khayāl*, between God, as *al-wujūd al-muṭlaq* (absolute Being) and *al-'adam al-muṭlaq* (absolute non-existence). For more on this concept, cf. Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*.

²⁴ Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt I*, 526.

Know, may God aid you, that the Jesus-like knowledge is the science of letters, and therefore he was given the breath and it is the air that exits from the cavity of the heart, which is the spirit of life. If the air becomes intermittent during its exit through the mouth of the body, then the places where it stops are called letters. This is how, then, the essence of letters appears. Thenceforth, since they were in harmony with one another, life flowed through the senses ...

And so, Jesus was given this science of divine breath and its significance, for he used to blow in the molded form, either in the grave or in the form of a bird that he shapes from clay, and it becomes alive by divine permission that flows through that breath and in that air ... From the breath of the merciful came the Jesus-like science to Jesus and so he was able to resurrect the dead with his breath, peace be upon him.²⁵

This returns us to the overwhelming presence of language in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discourse on Jesus. Here, the Muslim mystic makes it clear that Jesus’s miracles of resurrecting the dead and giving life to a clay bird is essentially the same as giving birth to letters and words in the creative act of speech.

These snippets from the *Meccan Openings* have shown us that for Ibn al-‘Arabī, the body of Jesus is both a bricolage and a tool in a much larger narrative. Between miracle performance, divine utterance and kinship, the son of Mary seems to repeatedly fulfill the role of a cosmic archetype. As the distance of history collapses when Jesus and Eve are made into siblings under the parenthood of Adam and Mary, the reader is thrust once again, after traversing the metaphor, into the procession of history, to find God within.

Speaking Flesh and Silent Vestiges:

In the opening lines to a documentary about his life, Jacques Derrida distinguishes between *le futur*, as that future which is “predictable, programmed, scheduled, and foreseeable” and

²⁵ *Ibid*, 416.

l'avenir, that which is always 'to-come'; the unexpected guest²⁶. The *awliyā*' (sg. *walī*, Muslim Sufi saint²⁷), their bodies and places are always at the liminal juncture between heaven and earth. By negotiating their agency through the temporally 'predictable, programmed and scheduled' material means of the social place – *le futur* – Sufi saints can enrapture their audience, from the loyal disciples to lay affiliates, in a captivating trance as the latter await the arrival of the *wārid* (influx of divine grace), the always unexpected, yet anticipated, heavenly *l'avenir*.

What I hope to capture in the ensuing paragraphs is this juncture between *le futur* and *l'avenir* of the Sufi *awliyā*'. How they utilize their bodies – or allow them to be utilized – as embodiments of God's grace while simultaneously channeling that power in society? Does the contact these bodies have with places facilitate the 'contagious spread of the sacred', as Durkheim tells us, between these two physical artifacts?²⁸ If so, what distinguishes a place-vessel of divine grace from a body-vessel? Are they approached differently or similarly? I will attempt to answer some of these questions by exploring the life of the Sufi master 'Abd al-Mawla b. Tahir, from the valley of Hadhramawt, in modern day Yemen.

²⁶ Dick, *Derrida*.

²⁷ It should be mentioned that the terms saint/sainthood are as fraught with problems as mystic/mysticism when used specifically for Sufis and Sufism. Not least of which being that a Christian saint is only ordained as such post-mortem; whereas Muslim *awliyā*' are often regarded as 'saintly' while still living; either by their disciples or often the society at large. As for the term 'mysticism', the tremendous sociopolitical influence that many Sufis exerted throughout history contrasts with the often-individualized style of mysticism in Christianity or other traditions that, in many instances, involved a mystic's withdrawal from society. Of course, there are exceptions to this trend on both sides. However, in general, the Muslim Sufi perceived his own salvation in a social light; through admonishing himself, community and often ruler as well.

²⁸ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 237.

This *baṣīr* (physically blind) Habib²⁹ belongs to the *sayyid*³⁰ family of Bā ‘Alawī (Bin ‘Alawī or the sons of ‘Alawī). By exploring some anecdotes and events from his life, as a case study, I hope to highlight the various ways Sufis use their bodies and places to negotiate their agency through the act of producing or spreading knowledge and channeling divine grace, to captivate the hearts and minds of those around them.

Sufis usually don’t use the literal Arabic term *a ‘mā* to refer to a physically blind person. Instead, spectacularly, such an individual is described as *baṣīr* (perceptive or, oxymoronically, one who is endowed with sight). This is not simply an attempt to be polite or embrace a linguistic paradox.

On the contrary, the absence of physical sight is seen – pun intended – as a transaction with God whereby one’s *baṣar* (physical sight) is exchanged for *baṣīra* (inner spiritual vision). It is through this spiritual vision that a *baṣīr* is thought to be able to turn away from the elemental or material and utilize a higher imaginal faculty that allows one to communicate with the realm of spirits. Although Sufis describe this *baṣīra* as residing in the heart, it is usually not taken as the physical piece of flesh in the center of the body, but rather the spiritual center of the human soul.³¹

²⁹ The title Habib is commonly used by the Bā ‘Alawī family to refer to a religious scholar who is also a descendant of the Prophet. Although this epithet was not always used by scholars in this family, such as *Shaykh* Abu Bakr b. Salim and *Imam* ‘Abd Allah al-Haddad, it nevertheless harkens to the description of the prophet Muhammad as *ḥabīb allāh* (the beloved of God).

³⁰ In Muslim and particularly Sufi parlance, *sayyid* refers to an individual who can trace his lineage to the prophet Muhammad. In this case, the entire family of Bā ‘Alawī claim a genealogical descentance from the prophet of Islam. For more on the exact details of this lineage and a history of this family, cf. Alatas, “[al]-‘Alawiyya (in Hadhramawt)”.

³¹ However, it is worthwhile mentioning that some contemporary Sufi scholars, most notably Hamza Yusuf, have proposed a possible connection between the spiritual and physical heart. Cf. Yusuf, *Purification of the Heart*.

In this manner, the physical flesh of a human being is seen as a mimesis of their corporealized spiritual body.

I begin the exploration of this Sufi blindness with an ethnographic vignette. During the summer of 2013, I spent my days and nights at the Sufi religious school of Dar al-Mustafa in the ‘saint’ city of Tarīm; in the eastern valley of Hadhramawt, Yemen. The city of Tarīm is the central hub for the *sayyid* Sufi family of Bā ‘Alawī and is ‘filled to the brim’ with all sorts of *awliyā*’ (sg. *walī*, Muslim saint).

These Muslim mystics are, as regarded by their community, prime examples of vessels of divine grace. They each manifest unique aspects of God’s power: there are some who can heal physical injuries, predict the future, others who are able to perceive an inner deficiency in a beginning Sufi adept and many more who have all these skills and can fulfill all these functions for the community.

The social and geographical topography of Tarīm is defined by the presence of these saintly markers. On the one hand, I often heard visitors and enthusiasts say they’re going to visit such and such a saint, while other times they intended to seek the *baraka* (blessing) of this mosque or that *ribāṭ* (Sufi lodge). Many times, however, the architectural place coincided with a Sufi master’s body, since that is where they resided, taught, and entertained visitors.

Moreover, while some of these saints were very mobile and constantly travelled from one lodge, mosque or even region of the valley to another, others confined themselves to a particular

locale, choosing to remain hidden from the eyes of the public and only interacting with the few enthusiasts who sought them.

Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla b. Tahir was one such Sufi from the latter type who had a peculiar ritual engagement with his visitors: he demanded they hand over all the money they carried in their pockets. In exchange, he would give them a piece of paper with – what seems for the *unsaintly* eyes – scribbles.

However, this enigmatic gift was legible by other Sufi masters in Tarīm, who often simply smiled when they looked at such artifacts, a sign which the initiates interpret as a good omen. I was personally reluctant to visit Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla and never did – lest he can tell that I intentionally left my money at the residence. This cowardice on my part contrasts, however, with the gallant bravery of two brothers who migrated from Syria to Tarīm and who visited Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla – seemingly – every day.

Together, these brothers formed a single symbiotic body of sorts, for one of them was also *baṣīr* (physically blind), while the other had a severe injury in his legs, because of torture at the hands of the Syrian regime, and thus had to rely on his brother to walk. As they informed me, their visit to this Sufi master always followed the same mentioned ritual exchange.

Of course, they also visited other Sufi masters in Tarīm, one of whom was particularly skilled at reprimanding his visitors to soften their hearts and encourage them to repent to God. During one such visit, the brothers informed me that they wore turbans and put on fragrance, out

of respect, before visiting this saint. Upon seeing them, he remarked: “*‘imāma wa ṣūra wa mā shī fi-l-maḡṣūra*” (A turban and beautiful form, yet you have not prepared anything [lit. there is nothing] for the grave).

Our interest in these fascinating anecdotes revolves around a central question: what draws enthusiasts to the bodies and presences of such figures whose benefit is not immediately clear? What spiritual use did the two Syrian brothers reap from giving Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla their money in exchange for a piece of paper with ‘writing’ they couldn’t read? Did they simply seek the *baraka* (blessing) of receiving any object whatsoever from a saint, or did they feel particularly blessed to be the transmitters of these saintly textual artifacts from one saint to another?

In *The Gift*, Marcel Mauss provides an important description of the ritual of potlatch in primitive North American societies, one that can elucidate the importance of similar exchanges in our Sufi community:

In the things exchanged at a potlatch there is a certain power which forces them to circulate, to be given away and repaid... Together these precious family articles constitute what one might call the magical legacy of the people; they are conceived as such by their owner, by the initiate he gives them to, by the ancestor who endowed the clan with them, and by the founding hero of the clan to whom the spirits gave them.

In any case in all these clans they are spiritual in origin and nature... Each of these precious things has, moreover, a productive capacity within it. Each, as well as being a sign and surety of life, is also a sign and surety of wealth, a magico-religious guarantee of rank and prosperity... Objects are confounded with the spirits who made them.³²

³² Mauss, *The Gift*, 41-43.

Thus, like these North American tribes, the sacred articles of the Bā ‘Alawi family are made to circulate, through enraptured initiates, from one member of the family to another. These artifacts become sacred, as Durkheim informs us, upon “the most superficial or indirect contact” with another sacred object; in this case their authors, such as Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla³³.

Thus, as a spiritual extension of its original owner, there is a certain power emanating from a circulating Sufi artifact. In the minds of the Sufi initiates the gift giver is, in one sense, the saint and, in another, God as the higher agency acting through the saint. It is for this reason that the enigmatic textual artifact given by a saint like Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla possesses and overwhelms its recipient, much as Dufourmantelle describes in *Of Hospitality*, “in the way that the ghost recalls himself to the living, not letting them forget.”³⁴

In this regard, these illegible textual artifacts are also an extreme example of the allure and influence those Sufi writings, in general, exercise over their readership: they are powerful and effective less so for their content and more so for their respective authors, whose spirit and grace they continue to carry. They are textual representations of the divine grace that is embodied within the author.

³³ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 237.

³⁴ Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, 4. Dufourmantelle’s use of *ghost* here hearkens to Derrida’s obsession with a set of terms: *hospice, hostis, hostage, host, guest, ghost, hostility, hospitality*, etc. Derrida perceives a certain dynamic of “ghostipitality” operating within any guest/host politics; precisely because each holds the other *hostage*. In this regard, we may perceive a Sufi textual artifact, as an entexted vessel of divine grace, to be also a ghost that captivates its own initiate-guests in a mystical trance as hostages are tethered to a hostile hostis; it forever reminds them of God’s grace.

However, I would like to offer a modification of Mauss's description of these objects of exchange. Whereas the author describes them as 'spiritual in origin and nature', for our Sufi interlocutors, these objects are instead 'material in origin and nature, yet spiritual in destination'. As mentioned above, Sufis often negotiate their agency and authority by mediating between the material *le futur* and their bodies' ability to channel the heavenly *l'avenir*, that unexpected deluge of the divine arrival.

Habib 'Abd al-Mawla can enrapture his visitors through such a transaction whereby material wealth is exchanged for illegible scribbles. The incoherence of the gift itself is perceived as a glimpse into this Sufi master's channel of the transcendent, that which is unknowable and ineffable. In this way, the unexpected heavenly guest is tethered to the material artifact, whence they appear in sequence, following the Sufi agent's act of consecration, through a combination of authoring and touching.

Habib 'Abd al-Mawla is also a clear example of Ibn al-'Arabī's Jesus-like *barzakh* (isthmus) between heaven and earth. Just as Christ performed his liminality through an embodied residence between the realms of spirits and bodies, Habib 'Abd al-Mawla also enacts his liminality through a corporealized *baṣar* (sight) that has been delegated to the *baṣīra* (insight) of the spiritual realm (worldly to heavenly ascendance), and a material manifestation of the ineffable in the form of enigmatic written scribbles (heavenly to worldly descendance).

In both terrains, the geography of Tarīm and text of the *Meccan Openings*, a sacred body becomes a performance stage, actor, and inculcating director of the God's infinite Word as it

impregnates the finite boundaries of the stage. This Wordplay takes place through material metaphors that must be simultaneously traversed and occupied, since the ineffable can never be approached except through these emblematic similes.

Therefore, instead of being left behind, they are trodden with one foot upon the material artifact itself and another upon the abyss of allusion. In this way, Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla continues to be an efficacious *barzakh* for Sufi devotees so long as they continue to linger at the significance of his *baṣīra* (insight) and hold on to his enigmatic writings for the duration of the gift exchange.

What remains to be excavated from all this evidence is the full extent to which such liminal bodily artifacts have agency in shaping the religious experience in the social sphere and collective spiritual consciousness of Muslims. Specifically, what insight can Ibn al-‘Arabī’s discussion of Christ’s flesh give us into Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla’s enigmatic persona?

Inversely, how can this present-day Sufi master in Hadhramawt allow us to reinterpret Ibn al-‘Arabī’s writings from a distant past? In other words, to what extent can we engage a liminal bodily signpost from the past with another from the present to gain a glimpse into the timeless meaning residing in both, as believed to be the case by the devotees of both Ibn al-‘Arabī and Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla.

Between the Text and Body: A Glimpse into Timelessness

It was time for the regular *rawḥa* (lit. early journey) class after the ‘*aṣr* (afternoon) prayer at the Dar al-Mustafa seminary in Tarīm. The *rawḥa* has a longstanding tradition in Tarīm, where

every major *ribāṭ* (Sufi lodge) and mosque in the city has a prominent scholar or saint who holds this class currently on a subject matter – often – pertaining to *raqā'iq* (lit. heart softeners), or *tazkiya* (spiritual self-discipline). At Dar al-Mustafa, the seminary and Sufi boarding school where I resided during my stay in Tarīm, Habib 'Umar b. Hafiz, a world-renowned scholar and dean of the school, is the regular teacher at the *rawḥa*.

During one such *rawḥa* session, an old man walks across packed rows of students who were listening attentively to Habib 'Umar. The old man's eyes are hidden behind black sunglasses. Clearly, however, he is not *baṣīr* (physically blind) since he is able to tread over and in-between the seated congregation.

Those sitting in the first rows hurry to make space for him by unfolding a metal chair and leaning it against one of the pillars in the *muṣallā* (prayer hall). The old man takes a seat and begins to listen silently to Habib 'Umar b. Hafiz – who is much younger than him – expound upon the intricacies of spiritual discipline from the famous Sufi text *Qūt al-Qulūb* (The Nourishment of Hearts) by Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 998).

I enquired about the old man, due to his enigmatic persona and character that intrigued me. I turned my curiosity to a friend who, during one of our many strolls down the hallways of Dar al-Mustafa, informed me that the old man is a pious *walī* (saint) from Egypt who teaches Ibn al-'Arabī's *Meccan Openings* regularly in a private *majlis* (gathering).

I also learned that the old man – whose name I never knew – has his own personal copy of the *Meccan Openings* filled with corrections that he believed were either grammatical or theological mistakes infringed upon the author by later copiers and publishers. The silent publicity for this private class was perhaps as mysterious as that for another class on the *Meccan Openings* that is held in a secret location atop one of the mountains overlooking Dar al-Mustafa; a *majlis* (gathering) is only attended by the most advanced students in Tarīm.

This very much agentive veiled presence of Ibn al-‘Arabī in Tarīm parallels the imminent return of ‘Īsa b. Maryam (Jesus the son of Mary) in the minds of the students. While it is true that teachers there regularly discuss the Islamic belief in the inevitable return of Christ as the Messiah at the end of time, there is no expected preparation by the saints of Tarīm for an imminent *le futur* return of Jesus, only within a consistent program of *l’avenir* that exerts a sense of urgency upon the minds of devotees to always be prepared for the possible return of the Messiah, at any moment.

Ironically, while a *l’avenir*, always-to-come, portrayal of Jesus the Messiah occupies the official religious address of Tarīm’s scholars, a mystified and imminent *le futur* apparition of Christ lingers at the margins of these official institutions, in the hallways and between friends, always present but never visible.

In a sense, the city’s entire discourse pertaining to Jesus is a social performance of Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla’s own saintly rituals: in place of his *baṣīra* (physical blindness/spiritual insight) there is the absence of a mystified Christ from the official institutional discourse; and in place of

Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla’s circulated enigmatic writings there is the circulated gossip of an imminent messianic return.

These fascinating snippets allow for a topographical transmutation, from text to body and lastly a community in space/place. What Ibn al-‘Arabī performs in his *Meccan Openings* with Jesus, as a pedagogical conduit that transitions the reader from the world of bodies to spirits takes place, on the one hand, in the encrypted bodily *baṣīra* and circulated enigmatic writings of Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla and, on the other hand, in an official discourse and the marginal conversations taking place inside the city of Tarīm.

The common thread among these three contexts: body, text and place are a symbiotic relationship between an official sobering material emblem or discourse and a marginal ecstatic otherworldly trace or conversation. The former facilitates the transition to the latter and channels it; meanwhile, the latter remains tethered to the former and continuously mystifies it. In this way, the material artifacts act as mediators and a liminal *barzakh* (isthmus) between the worldly and spiritual realms.

We turn now to a theoretical lens that will allow us to situate these mediating material artifacts within the context of a social agency that grants us one more thread with which to connect the writings of a distant past with the convoluted workings of a saint in a contemporary city of saints.

In *The Reject*, Irving Goh provides a reformulation of the post-modern critique of the Kantian ‘subject’, beginning with an acknowledgment of feminisms and contemporary French philosophers’ important contributions to challenging the Enlightenment’s emphasis on a dominant masculine subject. Nevertheless, Goh is convinced that these representations do not go far enough in dethroning Kant’s ‘subject’.

The figure of the ‘reject’, which takes center stage in Goh’s work, comes as a response to the French philosopher’s Jean-Luc Nancy’s question posed in 1986: *Who comes after the subject?*³⁵ Later thinkers, such as Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida each worked the ‘reject’, in one way or another, in response to the dominant ‘subject’.

In each of these reformulations, Goh believes that the ‘reject’ oftentimes becomes a mere reactionary force to the ‘subject’, in which case the new term is identical to the former, just in a different guise, as is the case with feminism. Meanwhile, Goh holds that other thinkers, such as Gilles and Derrida, do not go far enough in challenging the predominant intellectual paradigms supporting the ‘subject’, leaving the ‘reject’ as an inept substitute.

Most importantly, Goh constructs a tripartite pivot of ‘rejection’ around this persona. Whereas the ‘reject’ is usually understood in the sense of ‘passive rejection by the Other’, Goh adds the additional forces of active and auto-rejection. In the first, the ‘reject’ gains the ability to respond to being outcast or marginalized by also defining a bounded social space where things are not allowed and rejected.

³⁵ Goh, *The Reject*, 1.

In the second, perhaps more pertinent for this paper, the ‘reject’ questions his/her own decisions and rejects or accepts them, based on some moral or ethical foundation; this alone makes Goh’s contribution an appropriate lens with which to investigate the social agency and thread connecting Ibn al-‘Arabī’s presentation of Jesus in the *Meccan Openings* and modern-day Sufi saints in Tarīm, Yemen.

In the concluding remarks to this work, Goh outlines a social possibility where this three-pronged ‘reject’ figure can thrive: in a state of impossibility and affirmation of a particular type of ‘abandonment’:

An abandonment of what we think or decide as the best world, and an abandonment of our supposed responsibility to bring about or create that best world. In short, there needs to be an abandonment of all suppositions of the *subject* – the *subject* that would represent to him – or herself what the best world would look like, the *subject* that would consciously decide as his or her position, authority, and responsibility to organize that world according to his or her principles.

With that abandonment, a “new harmony” would be in the air: no longer one where elements have to compromise certain aspects of themselves to “fit” nicely within an existing or presupposed order, but one where elements are free in their dissonant trajectories, free to be radically different, without them needing to add up, or be reduced, to some homogenizing totality.³⁶

This harmonious form of abandonment, which Goh describes is evident in abandoned friendships or love, manifests in a transmitted statement by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ that I heard from an elderly Habib in the tranquil town of Ḥurayḍa, in the valley of Hadhramawt: “oh Muhammad! Love whomever you want, for you shall certainly leave them. Do what you so wish, for you shall certainly be compensated for it. Live as much as you want, for you shall certainly die. Know that the honor of the believer is in

³⁶ Ibid, 240.

their praying in the middle of the night and their pride is in being sufficient and independent of people”.

Ironically, this Habib recounts this *hadith* upon hearing from his grandson that one of the latter’s friends had left Huraydha. Therefore, he wanted to convey to his grandson – who gently bowed his head and leaned against a pillar in emotional contemplation upon hearing this *hadith* – that the departure of friends and close ones in this material world is symbolic of the state of things ‘in reality’: everything dies, perishes and only God remains.

We must not assume that this abandonment *of* the world while still being *in* the world by the Sufis of Hadhramawt is mere lip service to the hadith of the Prophet. On the contrary, the tremendous experiential efficacy of the mystical experience and ascetic practices means that such saints have already died, egoistically, before doing so physically and have already become in-between this world and the next.

It is precisely the conviction in the reality of this ‘death before death’ that such saints have authority in the minds of their devotees. It is also in this regard that they roughly fit Goh’s ‘reject’ figure. As for passive rejection, these Sufis are cognizant of their “originary ‘miserable condition’ of being devoid of any category that could definitively define” their mode of existence.

This is particularly the case once their initiation into the ‘death before death’ ritual is complete³⁷. Their liminal status between the material and spiritual realms is a constant reminder of both, this death of the ego and residence in no single social classification.

These saintly rejects also actively denounce the world and its agency in exchange for some spiritual and cosmic station, at least in the perception of their devotees. Even when Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla is constantly demanding the material wealth of his visitors, they’re convinced that he gives it all to the poor.

In fact, his rather modest living conditions supports this hypothesis. Not only is Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla believed to be free from the temptation of the immense wealth at his disposal, but that very touch is seen as a sacralizing agent of the donation and a source of grace for the remaining wealth of its donors.

Taking this into consideration, Goh’s concept ‘auto-rejection’ perhaps best fits the story of our Sufi interlocutors. If active rejection is the force through which Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla repels the contagions from the outside world, then auto-rejection is how he continuously trains the *nafs* (soul/ego) to rise above the world and its temptations. In this way, for Sufis, auto-rejection is inseparable from active rejection: it is only through firm practice of the former that the latter becomes feasible and easy.

³⁷ Ibid, 249.

Clearly, Goh's theoretical exposition on the reject seems like a crucial theoretical addition to religious studies: the three forces of rejection allow for an extension of the individual's religious experience into the social sphere. However, Goh aids us further. In a chapter titled "The Auto-Reject for 'Posthuman' Futures", the author distinguishes between a corporeal 'enacted body' and virtual 'represented body', the first being one's actual material flesh as felt and sensed and second as it is viewed in the social sphere³⁸.

I propose that a Sufi saint's 'enacted body' is a corporealized root that lies in the spiritual realm and the 'represented body' an effigy or trace of that root that appears in the material realm. In other words, unlike Goh's 'posthuman' reject-figures who are attempting to move beyond any categorization or classifying discourse as pertaining to politics or cultural habituation, Sufi saints are constantly treading beyond the worldly boundaries altogether.

Their residence at the interstices, between the world of intelligible spirits and material bodies heightens their already liminal, marginal, and ambiguous status pertaining to politics and social norms.

These Sufi saints may also be regarded as spiritual instances of Goh's 'animal rejects': those who reside at the margins of the state apparatus³⁹. They neither oppose it from the outside and risk becoming a clear target for extermination nor become entirely

³⁸ Ibid, 236.

³⁹ Ibid, 217.

contained and assimilated within it. Instead, as Goh tells us, they are in constant “transversal ... [a] perpetual, and even uncertain, movement”⁴⁰. Similarly, these saints linger with one foot in their virtual ‘represented body’ of the mundane material world of *le futur*, while the other foot remains with their corporealized ‘enacted body’ of the divine *l’avenir*.

Conclusion

We end our excursion with some comments and concluding questions. First, the use of theory in this paper admittedly departs from the vision of the authors who formulated these paradigms. This is a conscious choice that stems from the conviction that theory in the humanities is a type of itinerary for travel, as Tweed highlights in *Crossing and Dwelling*: every theoretical framework represents an attempt to negotiate a particular problematic with a worldview and given constraints⁴¹.

Thus, an academician travels on an intellectual journey, with a commitment to learn and borrow from other fellow travelers who can aid in the passage but do not hinder or attempt to force path to meander into another.

Secondly, and continuing with the motif ravel motif, this paper itself represents a journey-in-progress towards a doctoral dissertation that revolves around the sacred body

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling*, 9.

of Jesus in the thought of Muḥyī al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabī and the connection between this mystic’s writings from the past in contemporary Sufi communities.

In this regard, this paper has shown glimpses and snapshots from various chapters in the dissertation that will be expounded upon in a greater fashion. The central component currently missing is a sociohistorical investigation into the image of Jesus in the writings of other thinkers during, before and after Ibn al-‘Arabī’s milieu.

With this acknowledgment of a sporadic written itinerary about the sacred body of Christ in Sufism, we emphasize that this paper provides an analogical lens into a parallel performative play between Sufi bodies, places, and texts throughout history. These three artifacts become liminal interstices when deemed significant by a community that projects special significance upon them.

These reside at a perplexing juncture between heaven and earth. On the one hand, they present a virtual body that is subject to the mundane and pragmatic routine of *le futur* while alluding to a corporealized enacted body that resides in a higher spiritual sphere, a realm whose impending arrival is always *l’avenir*.

Irving Goh’s *The Reject* also gave us some tools through which to understand the social agency of Sufi mystics and their individualized religious experience, from the internalized ascetic force of auto-rejection to active and passive rejections on a communal

level. What remains to be explored, however, is how Sufi texts and places perform these three forces of rejection.

Can we perhaps say that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Meccan Openings* and the mentions of Jesus therein, as ink on paper, represent a virtual ‘represented textual-body’ for a corporealized ‘enacted textual-body’ that takes the readers/seekers to a higher spiritual realm? If so, what is the relationship between a Sufi body-reject, text-reject, and place-reject?

Ibn al-‘Arabī, his *Meccan Openings* and the *barzakhī* (liminal) portrayal of Jesus that he outlines continues to live vicariously through the bodily, textual, and spatial artifacts in the valley of Hadhramawt in present day Yemen. Each of these traces serves as a material *dwelling* from which a *crossing* can be made to the spiritual realm.

Just as readers of the *Meccan Openings* can remain at a *barzakh* between the material ink blots on paper and Jesus’s corporealized ‘enacted body’, the paragraphs and sentences of Habib ‘Abd al-Mawla’s *baṣīra* (insight) and enigmatic writings incite a worldly movement that obsesses a silent part of discourse, that which is only heard in the mystical night of the physical world.

Works Cited:

1. Addas, Claude. *Quest for the Red Sulfur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabī*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993.
2. Alatas, Ismail Fajrie, "[al]-'Alāwiyya (in Ḥaḍramawt)." *Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE*. Edited by: Kate Fleet.
3. Campbell, Joseph. *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
4. Chittick, William. *Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.
5. Chodkiewicz, Michel. *Ocean without Shore: Ibn 'Arabī, the Book, and the Law*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.
6. Derrida, Jacques and Anne Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. Stanford: Stanford University, 2000.
7. Dick, Kirby, and Amy Koffman. *Derrida*. Zeitgeist Films, 2014, DVD.
8. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* translated by Carol Cosman. Oxford: Oxford University, 2001.
9. Goh, Irving. *The Reject: Community, Politics, and Religion after the Subject*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015.
10. Hodgson, Marshall. *Venture of Islam*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
11. Ibn al-'Arabī, Muhammad. *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2010.
12. ____, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*. Yemen: Wizārat al-Thaqāfa, 2010.
13. Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Connecticut: Martino Publishing, 2011.
14. Ohlander, Erik. *Sufism in an Age of Transition: 'Umar al-Suhrawardī and the Rise of the Islamic Mystical Brotherhoods*. Boston: Brill, 2008.
15. Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 2006.
16. Yusuf, Hamza. *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms, and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart*. United States: Starlatch, 2004.