Symposium: The Work of Verse: Thinking with and Responding to *The Book of Clouds*

Theory in Poetic Form: Responding to *The Book of Clouds*

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پرداخت مطرب از درد محبت عملی می که حکیمان جهان را
مژه خون پالا بود

The musician played a melody from the pain of love

that covered the world's philosophers' eyelashes with blood

Hāfiẓ Shīrāzī

> In philosophy and theology, the use of analogy may be an attempt to deal discursively with the more profound symbolic forms of human expression. Charles Long (1963, 9)

Allow me to begin by professing my profound gratitude to my colleagues for their generous engagement with *The Book of Clouds*, both at the panel at the AAR in 2024 and in this written form. As a poet has said, "It's ears' and hearts' buying that sets words' price, not what the selling tongues and pens devise." I would like to first provide some background to the project's genesis, before engaging with some of my colleagues' responses more specifically, explaining my intentions and hopes for this work.

I was raised and nurtured in a poetic atmosphere: my father was a poet (he actually wrote part of the Nigerian national anthem) and musician, and my first understanding and critiques of what I later came to know as "colonial modernity" came from discussions of Fela Kuti and Bob Marley's lyrics with him. In both my early childhood in Lagos and my upbringing in the diaspora in Delaware, I was surrounded by madīḥ poetry, Christian hymns, reggae, hip-hop, old-school Afrobeats, Yoruba poetic performances at funerals and weddings, discussions of Wole Soyinka's esoteric poetry and plays, and my mother introduced me to James Taylor, made me memorize poems by Langston Hughes, and encouraged me to write my own. But despite this fertile ambience, I somehow never thought of poetry as a means of conducting academic work.

Two events would change this. The first was the beginning of my serious practice of Sufism in college, which involved me singing, reciting, and meditating upon devotional poems in Arabic on a regular basis. This was intensified by my graduate training in African and Islamic studies, which, in addition to studying many of the "classics" of Arabic literature and Sufism, involved taking traditional lessons (*durūs*) with Islamic scholars as well as spending time living with and practicing alongside Sufi communities in Senegal, Nigeria, and Morocco. Poetry was everywhere I looked—my teachers quoted it all the time, it was in virtually all the texts I studied and read, and I spent hours happily reciting it with my friends, and almost as many hours discussing and debating its meanings. As Amadu Kuntaeh explains above, many of the most influential works of "theory" or metaphysics in the Islamic tradition, especially those associated with esoteric and Sufi traditions, are either full of poetry or are simply poetry: figures as diverse as the Sufi martyr Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj and the contrarian philosopher Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'rrī expressed themselves primarily in poetry, Ibn al-'Arabī's massive and massively influential *al-Futūḥāt al-Makiyya* contains around 1428 original poems comprising over 7000 verses (in addition to many other poems by other authors); Ibn al-Fāriḍ's exquisite poem, *Naẓm al-Sulūk*, was hailed by many as being the best exposition of the realities of metaphysics (*al-Ilāhiyyāt*), spiritual anthropology, and the spiritual path leading to the realization of these realities, and Rumi's long poem, the *Mathnawī i-Ma'nawī*, and Hāfiẓ al-Shirāzī's collected *Dīwān* of ghazals, not only have attracted significant theological and philosophical commentaries but also are themselves considered intellectual works of the most profound order. The great Senegalese Sufi master and anticolonial hero, Shaykh Aḥmadu Bamba wrote over 200 works, almost all of which are in verse, and his younger contemporary Shaykh Ibrāhīm Niasse, the most popular Sufi shaykh, scholar, and poet on the African

continent in the twentieth century, described his poetry as "the fruit of all the moments of my life," "licit magic and wine," "my medicine, my gardens, my rest and repose, my treasure and my preparation for every situation," and "my legacy and knowledge, all of it" (See Ogunnaike 2022a, 94). Even philosophers such as Ibn Sīnā and al-Suhrawardī wrote beautiful Arabic poetry that still attracts commentaries and attention.

It is not simply that Islamic intellectuals liked putting their ideas in verse for reasons of style or ease of memorization, but rather as Michael Sells wrote of Ibn al-'Arabī's collection of lyric poetry, *The Translator of Desires* (*Tajūmān al-Ashwāq*),

> Far from being versified philosophy or attractive illustrations of his philosophical ideas arrived at independently, the poems of the *Tarjumān* were in a very real sense generative of Ibn 'Arabī's vision of existence as a *shawq* [longing]-driven process born of the tension between a creator's longing to create and the paradoxical longing of the nonexistent creature's to be and, once existent, to return to its source. (Sells 2021, xxviii)

As I will try to briefly explore later, in these Islamic traditions (as in others), poetry is an important means of conducting inquiries and conveying insights for which academic prose and syllogistic reasoning are often ill-suited. As Ibn al-Fāriḍ wrote, "In allusion (*ishāra*) there is meaning that direct expression (*'ibāra*) cannot contain." In any event, my training and engagement with these Islamic traditions, both professional and devotional, showed me that academic prose is not the only and certainly not always the best way to do intellectual work.

The second event that led to the convergence of my academic and poetic work was the police murders of Ahmaud Arberry, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd in 2020. Witnessing these murders and the often inane and insane responses to them in the media, academic listservs, and Zoom calls was a kind of "Sam Hose" moment for me. During his stay in Atlanta in 1899, W.E.B. DuBois was on his way to deliver an article to the Atlanta *Constitution* offering several corrections of its coverage of the brutal lynching of Sam Hose, a black man accused of killing a white man (which followed all of the familiar tropes we still see in news coverage today—the blaming, criminalization, and dehumanization of the victims)—when he learned that Hose's knuckles were on display in a local grocery store and his liver cooked and sold in strips. DuBois threw his article away, because what use is a carefully reasoned article in the face of that?

Our current norms of academic writing—largely descended from the nineteenth-century German *Wissenschaft* paradigm (from which Kant banished poetry and aesthetic judgments), despite the many critiques and reactions against it—remain firmly rooted in Enlightenment rationalism. As numerous scholars have argued and demonstrated, this paradigm's dangerous pretensions to objectivity, neutrality, and universality mask its markedly provincial, prejudiced, and imperial projects of a profoundly partial ("half-starved" in Césaire's words) understanding of humanity. Such a misprision of humanity, of both the putative subject and object of the humanities and social sciences, is ill-suited, as Charles Long argues (joining a chorus of voices from Black Studies and other intellectual traditions of colonized peoples), to deal with "the ambiguities, tensions, and terrors of the modern world" (1962, 9).[1] So Long poses this question to scholars of religion: "If actual religious expressions cannot be reduced to the conceptual framework of Enlightenment rationalism, then what form of order is appropriate?" (In Walker 2023, 1).

I would like to suggest that one appropriate form of order is poetry. As poet and scholar Joshua Bennett writes, "If Black studies is indeed the rewriting of knowledge itself, an ongoing critique of Western civilization—as Wynter and Robinson and others remind us—then poetry will be absolutely essential. Like the field of Black studies more broadly, the teaching of black poetry is not simply additive, nor is it a niche concern. Historically, poetry is at the very core of black social and intellectual life."[2] It is no accident that so many great Europhone Africana scholars, such as Aimé Césaire, James Baldwin, Wọle Ṣọyinka, Fred Moten, and Audre Lorde, like their Arabophone and other African-language counterparts, were not only poets but also regarded poetry as an essential part or even the backbone of their intellectual life. Lorde famously writes:

> Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives ...
>
> Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have once found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but the true meaning of "it feels right to me." We can train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. (2020, 4–5)

Instead of suffering from what T.S. Eliot called the "dissociation of sensibility," such poetry synthesizes feeling and thought, body and spirit, music and speech, reason, sense, and what lies beyond both. It moves us from the depths of our souls to the tips of our hairs, speaking to us at all levels of our being. As former US poet laureate Robert Pinsky explains

> Poetry is a vocal, which is to say bodily art. The medium of poetry is the human body ... In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing. Moreover, there is a special intimacy to poetry because, in this idea of the art, the medium is not an expert's body, as when one goes to the ballet: in poetry, the medium is the audience's body ... The artist's medium is my breath. (2014, 8)

Or as Stefan Sperl explains in an interview, comparing Neo-Platonism with Sufism:

> The point that Plotinus always makes is that the rational mind is simply a stepping stone towards experiencing something that is impossible to describe in rational terms—the kind of experience which goes beyond the realm that pure reason can capture.
>
> Poetry expresses the emotional state that arises when certain insights are achieved. And that's precisely why it can be a privileged medium to convey the conclusions—the experiential conclusions ... The Islamic mystic/philosopher Ibn 'Arabi is a good example of this. His writings usually take the form of metaphysical exposition, but he breaks into poetry when something happens that his prosaic intellectual exploration can't convey. Poetry is an experience that brings emotion together, whereas rational analysis takes things apart. What makes something poetic is, very simply, that it always points beyond itself; it says something, of course, but it also hints at something beyond what it is trying to say. (2022)

T.S. Eliot similarly declares, "The poet is occupied with the frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail though meaning still exists...the poem means more, not less than ordinary speech can communicate" (2009, 22–23).[3] But I have found no better articulation of the advantages of such "lyric philosophy" than the conclusion of Jane Mikkelson's brilliant study of the Mughal-era Sufi poet and thinker, Bīdel Dehlavī:

> Why do philosophy in lyric? What does lyric do that is beyond the reach of philosophical prose? Perhaps there is a greater measure of honesty in philosophy conducted in lyric: after all, if what George Lakoff and Mark Johnson call the "systematicity of metaphor" (that is, understanding one concept through another concept) necessarily colors all forms of philosophical discourse, then lyric – more openly than systematic prose, or even narrative–is capable of acknowledging the fundamental dependence of thought upon metaphor. As the case of Bīdel reveals, in the quest for certainty, lyric is capable of furnishing us with an extraordinary pairing of analytic rigor with first-personal experience, and it is in this that it diverges from, and perhaps even outperforms systematic prose ... By means of such first-personal figuration, Bīdel's lyric is capable of articulating what truth feels like when attained by a specific embodied individual. Lyric poetry, then, can make philosophy explicitly (1) personal, not impersonal; (2) affect-oriented, not impartial (it admits the unembarrassed participation of emotion in systematic inquiry); (3) beautiful, not aesthetically neutral; (4) intentionally difficult and indirect, instead of (aspirationally) legible, logical, and clear; (5) urgent, not atemporal (it presses the reader into the present moment, compels them to think and act now). (2019, 302–303)

To this I would add that the typical affective stance of the Islamic genres of the qaṣīda and particularly that of the ghazal is one of wonder, awe, bewilderment (as Prof. Heller so beautifully explains), praise, longing, love, bittersweet grief, and recollection. As Michael Sells writes of *ṭarab*, the ideal physio–psycho–spiritual state accompanying the recitation of such poetry:

> There is a moment during the recitation of a poem when the eyes of the reciter and audience moisten from a combination of aesthetic pleasure and remembrance of loss. The Arabic term for this moment—when body, mind, and breathing begin to feel a new, slower, rhythm—is *tarab*. The term has no single equivalent in English. *Ṭarab* refers to a deep sense of aesthetic appreciation, a kind of love intoxication, a sense of being overcome with waves of remembrance of what is at the core of one's being and lies too deep for other modes of thought to engage. (Sells 2001, xii)

This is a far cry from the detached, objective, and far colder stance of mastery and control assumed by the conventions of most academic prose. The upshot of all of this is that poetry is not merely a felicitous means of expressing ideas and insights, but as many poets from various traditions have argued (see Ogunnaike 2022b), a distinct mode of perception, of knowing, of engagement, of being. As Jane Hirshfield explains, "poetry itself, when allowed to, becomes within us a playable organ of perception, sounding out its own forms of knowledge and forms of discovery. Poems do not simply express. They make, they find, they *sound* (in both meanings of that word) things undiscoverable by other means." (2015, 7).

But I was not consciously thinking about all this on that stormy night in May 2020. These prosaic rationalizations and reflections would come later. I stayed up all night writing what became the "Elegy for George Floyd," not because I thought it was an appropriate intellectual response to the latest string of murders, but for the same reason that I cried: because I was grieving with an all-too familiar pain and because I had been trained by my family, spiritual, and even indirectly, academic traditions to fall back on poetry when at a loss for words, when it is all too much, when I cannot respond in a supposedly impersonal, impartial, and merely logical manner.

Sapelo Square graciously agreed to publish the elegy, and the response was very positive, so I began presenting the poem in academic and popular venues, and, encouraged by the continued positive response, I decided that my next book, my first posttenure book, would be a book of poetry. The authors to whom I had been introduced with whom I felt the greatest affinity—Ibn al-'Arabī, Ḥāfiẓ, Chuang Tzu, Nagarjuna, Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba, Fanon, Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse, and Baldwin—all expressed themselves in poetry or extremely poetically when discussing the most important topics, and for the reasons sketched above, I decided to try to do the same. Indeed, I would not know how to approach thinking or speaking about that which is of greatest import: Love, Death, God, Truth, Life, Justice, Joy, Peace (all of which are or are related to Divine Names) in systematic, academic terms without doing incredible violence to them and myself.

As Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī warned, "The truth is that the search for divine knowledge through rational laws and logical demonstrations is the means by which God removed them from the knowledge of the Truth, from drawing near to God, and from the awareness of His majesty." Zachary Wright comments on this quote, noting that for Shaykh al-Tijānī, "the true verification/realization of *tawḥīd* (Divine Oneness) was to be found not in rational disputation, but in direct experience." (2020, 62 and 64). In al-Tijānī's own words, "the reality of *tawḥīd* cannot be grasped, because so long as you are speaking, you exist and God exists, so there are two, and so where is the unity (*tawḥīd*)? There's no *tawḥīd* except that which is by God, through God, and to God. The servant has no entrance to this, and no exit from it." (Inyās, n.d., 60).

This brings me to the cheeky little poem that many of the panelists cited in their responses:

> Theology's pornography
> Philosophy's fan fiction
> I don't want to talk, I want
> Your lips, not their description (38)

Of these verses, Candace Mixon writes, "The idea of unmediated, pure experience denies the embodied context of the author and reader/recipient by offering the phenomenological experience of 'love' on its own: we should trust it is enough, with no obstacles." While I am grateful for the provocation, I have a very different reading of the poem; I hear and feel "wanting lips" not as the denial of an embodied context, but rather an embrace of it. I believe Michael Sells explains the difference between these two readings well, "the notion of the unmediated at the heart of apophatic mysticism contradicts the common opinion that all experience is mediated. If it is true that all experience is constructed, it is equally true that the concept of experience is a modern construct." (1999, 204). I have tried to deal with this issue of how modern constructions of "pure experience" differ from classical Sufi formulations (both contemporary and ancient) elsewhere (Ogunnaike 2017, 17–42), and whereas there is not space here to address the topic fully, I believe that it is important enough to merit a short explanation:

Ma'rifa (direct, unmediated knowledge or recognition) for most Sufi theorists is not an "experience" because it is accompanied precisely by the annihilation of the awareness of the experiencer. This is why a person is said to be a "knower by God" (*'Ārif biLlāh*) and not a knower of God, because only God knows God. As Shaykh Aḥmad al-Tijānī explains:

> Real *ma'rifa* (knowledge, recognition) is that in which the slave is taken by God in such a way that he does not know its origin, or division, or cause, and he is not able to determine its particular means of operation. The awareness of his senses, his witnessing, his will, his desire, and even his disappearance do not remain for him. Rather, *ma'rifa* comes from a divine self-disclosure that has no beginning and no end, nor limit. It effaces the slave such that no awareness of anything, even of the lack of his awareness, of his effacement, remains. (in Ogunnaike 2020, 80)

But such effacement or annihilation is not the end of the path, it is complemented and completed by the annihilation of annihilation (*fanā' al-fanā'*) or *baqā'* (subsistence, abiding) in which this transcendence is transcended to become immanent. It is not the erasure of particulars in a universal, but rather, the universal shining out through each particular, and each particular shining out through the universal.[4] It is a glass of water that takes on any and each form or color, not white-out. In this context, this means that such "direct, unmediated experience" or *dhawq* (tasting) in Sufi parlance is not a denial of particular, embodied contexts, but an embrace of all such contexts, in their particularities.

As British Orientalist R.A. Nicholson observed, "students of Oriental poetry have sometimes to ask themselves, 'Is this a love-poem disguised as a mystical ode, or a mystical ode expressed in the language of human love?' and to acknowledge that they cannot tell." (1911, 7). But, in such literature, this ambiguity is intentional and of the utmost significance, for *'ishq majāzī* ("metaphorical," human love) is not opposed to *'ishq ḥaqīqī* ("real," Divine love), but as this standard terminology suggests, the former is a metaphor for, and included in the latter; moreover, this bridge of metaphor permits two-way traffic, so it is scarcely possible to talk about one without speaking of and in the terms of the other. Or rather, both forms of love are delimitations of the same reality of love: twin mirrors reflecting love and each other, so much of Sufi poetry explores the multifarious and many-splendored reflections and refractions of love across all of these domains. Michael Sells explains, "*Shawq*, eros, is infinite. It cannot be confined into mutually exclusive categories of human and divine" (2021, xxviii). As Cyrus Zargar clarifies above, "Indeed, in order to evoke the underlying sameness between love-of-God and love-of-human that is at the heart of Sufi poetics, any successful Sufi poem must function as a love poem ... [T]he poem must be able to stand on its own. It might represent many things, but if it fails as a love poem, nothing else matters."

Therefore, while it is of course extremely helpful to have a background understanding of the tradition from which this (or any poem or really any piece of writing) springs (and I am grateful to Mohamed Rustom and Cyrus Zargar for their Forewords, which I think do this quite nicely, as do the entries in this roundtable), I do not believe such background is necessary to have an appreciation of a poem—there need only be sufficient overlap between the different contexts of the poem and the reader, and the stretches the reader has

to make across these distances are often enjoyable and instructive.[5] I am very far from understanding the contexts and traditions of Sappho or Lal Ded, and yet their poems, even in translation, hit me straight in the heart. The great Sufi scholar and martyr, ʻAyn al-Quḍāt al-Hamadānī, takes an even more radical position:

> Take these poems to be like a mirror. After all, you know that in a mirror there is no form in itself—but whoever looks at the mirror will be able to see his own form. Likewise, you should know that poetry in itself has no meaning at all—but anyone can discern his present state and own perfection from it. If you were to say that the meaning of poetry is what the poet wants it to be and that others can derive other meanings from it, that would be like someone saying, "The form of the mirror is the face of the polisher whose form first appears in it." (Nāmahā, 260)

Or as these verses from a poem in *The Book of Clouds* (49) puts it

> These mirrors of polished breaths
> forged in love's heaving breasts
> And hung 'round your slim neck
> like pearls of precious sweat
> Can see further than scopes
> on high volcanoes' slopes
> They split atoms and coax
> secrets from tiny motes

Mixon asks, "How can I consider these poems as an expression of ontological truth that *does not* need discursive theorization?" I would reply that the point is not so much that such truths *do not need* discursive theorization, but rather that they exceed it, while flowing through all such discursive theorizations. I would argue that many aspects, the most important aspects, of the ever-shifting, relational, deeply interconnected, mysterious nature of reality are better suited to expression and theorization in poetry and poetic modes of speech than the prosaic modes of so much of modern academic theory. That is why, I believe, so many of us turn to poetry, song, and poetic prose in crisis, while I know precious few who find solace in Emile Durkheim's works. Poems do something very different from Foucault and Bourdieu's prose, while also being foundational to their projects (I forget who said that "technical terms are petrified metaphors," but I agree) and performing something similar, but in a different way. They invite us to attend to aspects of reality in a particular way, as a kind of "seeing-as"—but it is more akin to seeing and pointing out that some clouds look like a herd of charging elephants than classifying them as cirrus or altocumulus.

While explaining a poem can be worse than explaining a joke, I will try to do so here to clarify a different reading of the "theology" poem. Coleridge held that the immediate object of a poem is first pleasure, the delight of the sounds, rhythms, images—the music of the poem—and then the truth, or many truths, are communicated through this delightful music. For me, the music of this poem works through the rhyme and assonance between "theology" and "pornography," whose juxtaposition and sonoral similarity highlights the contrast in meaning. The same goes for the alliteration of "philosophy" and "fan-fiction"—we do not normally think of "philosophy" as a kind of "fan-fiction," or fan-fiction as being particularly philosophical, but here they are presented as united in sound and meaning. The second half of the poem is based on the rhyme/comparison between "fan-fiction" and "description," as well as two simple facts and one irony: (1) lips can be used either to speak or kiss, but (2) not at the same time, so if you are talking, you are not kissing, and vice versa; but the irony here is that the poetic voice is talking about how she or he wants to stop talking. If the poet's lips were locked with the beloved's, the poem could not be uttered. Like the early Sufi Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭamī's famous saying, "I want to not want," or Rūmī signing off hundreds of his ghazals as "Silence!," or Maḥmud Shabistarī's comparison of looking for God through reason to be like "searching for the sun with a candle at noon in the desert," this kind of apophatic paradox turns language against itself to point beyond itself.

As to why theology is equated with pornography, the Korean-German philosopher Byung Chul Han helpfully contrasts the *erotic*—characterized by mystery, ambiguity, veiling, and unveiling—to the *pornographic*—characterized by a lack of interiority, hiddenness, or mystery. He writes, "Such reading is looking for something to be uncovered. It is pornographic. A poem, by contrast, resists providing any kind of 'novelistic satisfaction,' any kind of consumption. Pornographic reading is opposed to an *erotic reading* that *lingers* with the text ... Poems don't sit well with our pornographic and consumerist age. This, in particular, is the reason that we rarely read poems any more." (2022, 60). Here, "Theology" is pornographic because it seeks to strip bare the movements of Divine love, reduce them to the pixels of prosaic conceptual systems, which can lead to a self-congratulatory substitution or consumption of the discursive depiction for the lingering encounter with the Real. In the poetic or erotic mode, every revealing is a veiling, and every veiling a revealing, as Prof. Heller points out in her essay, and the verses of another poem say:

> Her clothing is her nakedness
> *-but when we kiss, we close our eyes*
> and nakedness is her clothing
> *-as truth is only told by lies*
>
> All that I gain, I forfeit
> my disguises, all self-portraits
> All I've tried to hide is opened
> seeds' secrets are spilled by orchids

My love is wholly without shame
and I likewise am shameless
Because we are each other's clothes
we're naked still, yet blameless (24)

Returning to the shorter poem, "Philosophy" is "fan-fiction" because it takes the categories or characters of great mythological traditions, "God," "human," "Being," "Consciousness," "Nature," "Language," "Truth," "Sin," "Love," etc. and imaginatively reconfigures them in different formations, just like fan-fiction authors do with their favorite characters from *Star Wars* or *Lord of the Rings*. The poetic voice here has had enough of such word-games and is employing another kind of word-game—poetry—to request a kiss, that which stops all such word games at their source, while also being their goal.[6]

So while these Sufi contexts would help, I suspect many readers with a familiarity with Chan/Zen traditions, Bhakti poetry, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, neo-Platonism, or even just Emily Dickinson or John Donne could appreciate much of what is going on here, and moreover, it is likely readers from different contexts could read things in the poem of which I am unaware, using the poem as a mirror or "scope" to examine their own contexts and experiences in ways I could not imagine. As poet Jane Hirschfield says, "But a good metaphor isn't a puzzle or a way to convey hidden meanings; it's a way to feel and know something differently ... Metaphors give words a way to go beyond their own meaning. They're handles on the door of what we can know and of what we can imagine." (Hirschfield, n.d.) As Mixon suggests, I believe Haeri's beautiful description of Iranian women's engagement with Persian poetry as a vernacular and existential means of working out and transforming their relationships with God, each other, their society, the state, etc. is a good model for what I am trying to achieve in this work, and I am flattered by the comparison.

Mixon concludes her generous and generative response by arguing that for the poems of *The Book of Clouds* "to form a theory of mystical engagement, they need the context of the traditions involved to be fully appreciated." I would agree, but I would also argue that this is true of any work of theory or literature, of any genre, poetic or not. One could not drop a (translated) J.Z. Smith article into medieval Japan and expect scholars there to be able to appreciate it fully. But I would argue, however, that some appreciation is possible even without a full understanding of such contexts and traditions.[7] For some of the reasons discussed above, poetry, like music, is particularly good at bridging this gap, which is why I think so many of my students love Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and qawwali when first introduced to them, despite having little to no background in South Asian music or Sufism or Urdu poetry. Poetry is what is lost in translation, but it can also be what is found in translation.[8]

As another example, take this verse from the *Elegy for the Migrants*, "Five things have never been seen: water, mirrors, light, dark, and eyes/But I saw them all within the cloud of your lovelorn sigh." (112). The first half of the verse lists five distinct kinds of invisibility: "water,"—that which light passes through, like air, which is hidden by what is behind it; "mirrors"—that which light completely reflects off of, that which is hidden by what it reflects, by what is in front of it; "light"—that which is required for visibility, but cannot be seen by itself; "dark"—the absence of light or visibility, which also cannot be seen by itself; and "eyes"—concretely, we need a mirror in order to see our own eyes, and more abstractly, vision itself is invisible. Given the all-too common metaphor of visibility as intelligibility, these poetic descriptions easily suggest five distinct limiting cases of intelligibility, five distinct domains of what lies beyond the scope of thought or beyond the grasp ordinary awareness: what thought passes through, what reflects thought back upon itself, thought itself, nonthought, and the thinker or witness of thoughts. These cases of invisibility, of the unthinkable or ineffable, cannot be grasped on their own, but only in relationship with others: we only see beams of light when they shine through a cloud or bounce off dust motes; we only see dark when it is contrasted with light (specifically light bouncing off something else); we only see water or air by the differences in the ways they refract light or move other things, we only see eyes in reflective surfaces, we never see mirror's surfaces, but can discern them when they are dirty or by contrast with their surroundings. Like a metaphor, visibility/intelligibility is a coming together of distinct and even opposite things, a bridge, a relational entity that illumines both its banks. Thus far, no specialized knowledge of Islamic philosophy is necessary; just the everyday experience of vision, the common link between vision and awareness, and a little leap of poetic intuition is needed to spark contemplation about the limits of and relationships between various kinds of linguistic, sensory, conceptual, and noetic awareness.

The second half of the verse, "But I saw them all within the cloud of your lovelorn sigh," evokes the standard image of the cloud making the sunbeams visible (even as it is the very light of those sunbeams that makes the cloud itself visible) that appears throughout *The Book of Clouds*. In the context of this particular poem about forced migration, the literal image is that of the invisible breath of the invisible person (the refugee), made visible by the coming together of the opposites of the hot, "lovelorn sigh" and the cold welcome it receives from the frigid air into which both it and its exhaler have been blown. The "refugee"[9] is made both hyper-visible—the obsession of newscasters, nationalists, traffickers, and nervous eyes and ears alert to differences in manner, accent, posture, dress—as well as invisible—nameless, faceless, without history or voice, to those uninterested in listening. On a more abstract level, perhaps it is this

coming together of different and opposite kinds of invisibility that makes them visible.

If we were to bring in some context from the Islamic tradition to enrich our reading of this verse, we could draw on the primordial cloud described in the hadith cited at the beginning of *The Book of Clouds*: "'Where was God before He created creation?' 'He was in a cloud above which was no air, and below which there was no air,'" (vii, xiv) and the image of the *nafas al-Raḥmān*, "the Breath of the All-Merciful," that brings everything into existence. In many sources, the Divine Reality is described as pent-up and "waiting to exhale" manifestation into existence. As Ibn al-'Arabī writes (and Rustom quotes in his Foreword), "The existence of the cosmos was only made manifest in the Breath of the All-Merciful, namely, the Cloud" (xiv). In this context, the "lovelorn sigh" can be understood as the primordial Cloud, the Breath of the All-Merciful, exhaled by "hidden treasure that loved to be recognized" (to cite another hadith), and it is this coming together of nonbeing and being, unlimited, and limited, that allows for intelligibility, that allows for the hidden treasure to be recognized, that allows for the unseen to be "known."

Thus, a great deal of "theorization" can be done in and through this one verse, either with or without a knowledge of the Islamic sources to which it alludes. So my hope is that *The Book of Clouds* would not require a substantial background in Islamic and Sufi poetics to appreciate it (although it would certainly help) but could actually serve as an introduction for Anglophones to the vast worlds of Sufi and Islamic poetry in multiple languages, perhaps, in some ways, an easier on-ramp than standard introductory academic articles and books, as Naomi Shihab Nye reminds us:

> Anyone who feels poetry is an alien or ominous form should consider the style in which human beings think. "How do *you* think?" I ask my students. "Do you think in complete, elaborate sentences? In fully developed paragraphs with careful footnotes? Or in flashes and bursts of images, snatches of lines leaping one to the next, descriptive fragments, sensory details?" We *think* in poetry. But some people pretend poetry is far away (in Brown et al. 2005, 394).

But if such context is indeed needed, readers will find it amply in Amadu Kunateh's brilliant response, which situates the work in the traditions of West African and broader Islamic poetry, Sufi epistemology, and philosophy, writing: "in this context, poetry mediates the limits of human cognition and gestures toward higher spiritual truths; it is simultaneously philosophical, devotional, and performative ... In the broader context of Religious Studies, this work invites us to rethink the boundaries between scholarship and creative output, analysis and praise, theory and *theoria*."

Nicholas Judt's similarly dazzling and erudite commentary and analyses of the work would similarly serve as an outstanding introduction to the book in any class, did I not fear that its superlative assessments would lead the readers to inevitable disappointment. I am reminded of a story about the Arab poet, al-Mutannabī, who, when asked about the meaning of some verses of his, referred the questioner to a scholar who had collected and written about his poems: "Ask him, for he knows my verses better than I do." I think I will likewise refer questions about the verses of *The Book of Clouds* to Judt and Kunateh.

The appreciation of an award-winning poet and artist of Kythe Heller's caliber is a great and humbling gift and to comment on her beautiful and poetic meditations would be like gilding a lily; so all I wish to add to her subtle and penetrating reading is to underscore her profound discussion of bewilderment (*ḥayra*) so central to this collection and Sufi (and broader) poetics in general:

> Bewilderment is an enchantment that follows a complete collapse of reference and reconcilability. It cracks open the dialectic and sees myriads all at once, ... To be bewildered is to be fully present, to have the senses confused so much that they are fully heightened, ethically aligned, and alive. For Ogunnaike, the enchantment of the clouds is a bewilderment aligned with resistance, a realization and a protest against the complacency, or even erasure and violence, experienced in socio-political reality. It allows the poem to have an unknowable, but electrifying, emotional effect, a soulstorm of surrender and agency.

These reflections reminded me of one of W.S. Merwin's descriptions of poetry, "A poem begins to be a poem when a sequence of words starts giving off what you might describe as an electric charge, when it begins to have a life of its own that I sense the way I would if I suddenly picked up a shorted electric wire" (1982, 51–52) as well as Emily Dickinson's account, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?" (in Attridge 2015, 50). Dickinson's description has always rung true for me and recalled Qur'an 21:18, *Nay, we hurl the truth against falsehood and it dashes its brains out, and behold, it vanishes. And woe unto you for that which you describe*! For me, this verse both encapsulates and provokes the profound bewilderment and openness of *ḥayra*, of being pushed beyond any discursive descriptions or conceptual constructions of the Real toward the kind of radical receptivity and presence Heller describes in her essay.

Her brilliant discussion connecting bewilderment to the perpetual renewal and transformation of fire is echoed in Garrett Graddy-Lovelace's observation that the Arabic word for the inner heart/intellect (*fu'ād*) means "flame." For her part, Graddy-Lovelace's stunning and moving reflections reminded me of another W.S. Merwin quotation about poetry, "I think there's a kind of desperate hope built into poetry that one really wants, hopelessly, to save the world. One is trying to say everything that can be said for the things that one loves, while

there's still time." (in Langdell 2024, 319). As we witness the accelerating destruction of lives, communities, languages, cultures, entire peoples, species, and our planet, I agree with Graddy-Lovelace that such desperate grief (love stretched over loss) calls for enlivening words to combat the deadening fog of despair that threatens to engulf everything.

Both Graddy-Lovelace and Anand Vivek Taneja call attention to the book's elegies' urgent engagement with contemporary tragedies, and I cannot help but notice the wide gap in reception between the "Elegy for George Floyd" and those elegies written about the tragedies in Palestine/Israel. Langston Hughes once explained, "I have never known the police of any country to show an interest in lyric poetry as such. But when poems stop talking about the moon and being to mention poverty, trade unions, color lines, and colonies, somebody tells the police." (2002, 270). Even among the elegies I have written that mention the moon alongside color lines and colonies, those describing atrocities in Palestine seem to pique the interest of the police and their informants more than those more explicitly about antiblack and anti-indigenous violence in the United States, about antifemale violence in Iran, or violence against nearly everyone and everything in Sudan or Nigeria.

But as Robert Hass so aptly wrote, "if the ode is about getting in right relationship to the powers that make us feel alive, the elegy is about warding off, or transforming, the powers that want to kill us." (2017, 297). The elegiac qasida was and is a ritual to appease the spirit of the departed, ease its transition, to comfort the bereaved, channel, transmit, and transform our grief, but also to sharpen it and our prayers into a weapon, a call to arms, to resist or transform the forces that took one or many of ours and are threatening to take us. For example, the great Egyptian poet, Ahmed Shawqi's powerful elegy for Omar Mukhtar, the Libyan anti-colonial fighter, reads:

> They planted your body in the sand as a standard
> Which rouses the wadi by day and by night.
> Curses be on them who have built a blood-lighted beacon
> To guide to vengeance the generations of tomorrow
> How would it have harmed them if they had made future ties
> Between nations those of friendship and brotherhood?
> It is a wound which shrieks for ever and a victim
> Who gropes blindly for blood-stained freedom ...
>
> (Evans-Pritchard 1949)

The elegy has been described as a ritual of apocalypse/death and rebirth or new creation of the world, poet, reciter, and audience in each performance. Or in the more poetic words of Lucille Clifton:

> come celebrate
> with me that everyday
> something has tried to kill me
> and has failed (1993, 25).

I also greatly appreciate Graddy-Lovelace's situating of *The Book of Clouds* within the tradition of African decolonial thought and praxis. One of the greatest and earliest explicit theorizers of decolonization in African studies and the study of African Religions, the Ugandan scholar and poet, Okot p'Bitek, is perhaps best known for his masterpiece *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol*, a pair of epic poems forming a dialogue between a traditional wife and her modernized husband, that draw on traditional Acholi dramatic poetic forms. *Song of Lawino* was actually my favorite reading in my introduction to African Studies class as an undergraduate—I even preferred it to Iqbal's comparable *Shikwā* and *Jawāb-e Shikwā* (but that may have been an issue of the translations I was reading). In any event, both works set an example for the *Book of Clouds* in using the genres, forms, and styles of traditional poetic forms to confront, interrogate, and diagnose the contemporary horrors and ills of colonial modernity instead of the more prosaic, immanent critiques one typically finds in academic works. By contrast, in his characteristically beautiful and elegant prose, Taneja's moving response—hyperbolic comparisons to Amir Khusrau aside, *na'ūdhubiLlāh*—beautifully articulates my aspirations for the work.

His and Graddy-Lovelace's responses reminded me of Biodun Jeyifo's brilliant essay on Wọle Ṣoyinka's writing, entitled "*Oguntoyinbo*: Wole Soyinka and *Igilango Geesi*." This titular Yoruba name, born out of the colonial confrontation in West Africa, means "Ogun [the *orișa* of iron, hunting, and war, who is also source of my surname] is equal to or a match for the white man." But Jeyifo explains that "*Oguntoyinbo* is a response to the self-deification of the white man in the colonial period that was rooted in the myth that his dominion or sovereignty over his colonized subjects was a part of the natural order of things ... to the myth that colonial sovereignty is a sort of divine sovereignty. In order words, *Oguntoyinbo* is a counter-myth." (2008, 28–29). Jeyifo then explains the other part of the article's title, *Igilango Geesi*, or "Big English," connecting it to *Oguntoyinbo* and how the projects of Soyinka and other postcolonial authors can be understood through the lens of these two Yoruba terms:

> The crucial element in *Igilango Geesi* lies in the very notion of using the English language in a manner that surpasses the owners of the language themselves, surpasses the objectives they had in mind when they imposed their language on us as colonized subjects ... When you use language in the *Igilango Geesi* manner, you are transforming the English language, you are doing things with it and in it that the owners of the language themselves had not thought imaginable ...
>
> In light of this [*Oguntoyinbo*] dimension, it is not Soyinka's intention to merely wake up the "napping" English language for the edification of Englishmen and women. Rather, his intention is to take the English language to areas of being that its owners either had not imagined or had once thought imaginable but had irrevocably lost, and they can recover it now only if they have the humility, the grace, and, let it be said, the self-interest to

> make themselves receptive to a fundamental aspect of world literary and intellectual history in the twentieth century. In this vein, writers like Soyinka, Achebe, J. P. Clark, Derek Walcott, Toni Morrison, Kamau Braithwaite, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Femi Osofisan, Ben Okri, Ama Ata Aidoo, Niyi Osundare, Odia Ofeimun, and a host of other Anglophone writers around the world are doing things to and with the English language that transcend the things the English had thought their language capable of expressing, bringing about the end of English as a language of colonial sovereignty and dominion over large areas of the world. (29–30)

It is my sincere hope that *The Book of Clouds* can join this constellation of literary works and contribute to this trend of transforming the English language and taking it to new places, or perhaps old places in new ways.

As the Nicholson or Forouzanfar of our day, Cyrus Zargar's kind agreement to write a foreword for *The Book of Clouds* deeply honored me and elevated the book, and he has again extended his scholarly generosity with a brilliant and beautiful commentary upon one of the wine odes of the book. My only addition would be to highlight my favorite verse of that poem, whose irony and self-deprecation are modeled on many of Hafez's closing verses: "Though everyone love's wine's bouquet, who likes the drunkard's belch?/Be quiet, hold your drink, and keep its secrets to yourself." The poem here is likened to a drunk's burp—a slightly embarrassing by-product of the process of getting drunk that reveals something of the aroma of the wine of remembrance and love but disgustingly tainted by the digestive tract and bad breath of the drunkard (the poet's ego). Zargar was gracious enough to overlook this belch of a verse, but I wanted to draw attention to it in order to prevent this poetry or its author being taken too seriously.

If Zargar's response focused on wine and Heller's focused on fire, Youssef Carter's poignant and profound reflections turn to water, as the Qur'anic source of all living things and as a repository of memory connecting the African diaspora across an ocean of tears and years, and connecting us to our Creator and paradisal home. In Haitian Vodou, the two are combined somewhat, with *Giné* (Africa) serving as the home of the ancestors across the waters that both separate and unite the living and the dead. Moreover, part of the cure for one turned into a zombie is to feed the afflicted ocean salt, helping them to remember, recall, and reforge their connections across the ocean, to *Giné*, to the ancestors. As so many forces seek to zombify us today, I pray that our tears and the poetry formed by their tracks will continue to serve as such a wake-up call. Carter's remarks also reminded me of Amiri Baraka's verse, "At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a railroad made of human bones," and the Qur'anically approved response of tears to beauty and truth: *and when they hear what has been sent down to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflow with tears because of the truth they recognize*. (5:83) My own eyes welled up with tears when these reflections were shared at the AAR in San Diego last year and did so again upon reading them here. Carter's response also reminded me of Baldwin's profound words about art and pain:

> You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less. (2010, 52–53)

To all the respondents and the readers of this issue, I would like to thank you for connecting with my pain and helping me to suffer less; I hope it has helped you too in some small way.

In the same speech, James Baldwin argued

> The poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don't. Statesmen don't. Priests don't. Union leaders don't. Only poets ... something awful is happening to a civilization, when it ceases to produce poets, and, what is even more crucial, when it ceases in any way whatever to believe in the report that only the poets can make. (51)

In their poignant, poetic reflections, I believe the respondents have shown why this is the case. Poetry can point to who we are beyond the schemas and doctrines and theories and logics and laws and borders and forces and words that bind and blind us. If we are indeed made in the image of, or upon the form of God, and God transcends all images and forms (and transcends this transcendence to be immanent as all of them), then what is our form? Who are we? Echoing Ibn al-'Arabī, Nicholas Judt calls on us to become a "scholar-as-poem. He has reminded us that our work is not to produce books about poems or even books of poems, but to produce poems in human form ... to realize [our] humanity." Similarly, Matsuo Bashō advises, "What is important is to keep our mind high in the world of true understanding, and, returning to the world of our daily experience, to seek therein the truth of beauty. No matter what we may be doing at a given moment, we must not forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self which is poetry." (1966, 28).

As a pilgrimage to Rumi's grave was the origin of the poems that became *The Book of Clouds*, I feel it is only fitting that Mawlanā be given the final word here:

تا در دل من عشق تو اندوخته شد جز عشق تو هر چه داشتم سوخته شد
عقل و سبق و کتاب بر طاق نهاد شعر و غزل دوبیتی آموخته شد

Since your love was kindled in my heart
Apart from your love, all that I have has burned
My heart put reason and study and books on the shelf
And was taught poetry and ghazals and quatrains
(Rumi, *Divān-i Shams*, Ghazal 6161)

NOTES

[1] Charles Mills bluntly explains that such racist paradigms prescribe an "inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional) producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made." (Mills 2014, 18).

[2] https://x.com/SirJoshBennett/status/1281584506655383554.

[3] Gilbert Murray similarly writes, "Poetry tries to convey truth concerning those subjects about which we care most and know least ... Fierce mysteries were the subjects with which the Greek *molpe* [defined by Murray as "a combination of dance and song like the sweep of a great singing bird"] was concerned—Love, Strife, Death and that which is beyond Death." (qtd. in Louise Bogan 2005, "The Pleasures of Formal Poetry" in *Lofty Dogmas: Poets on Poetry*, ed. Deborah Brown, Annie Finch, Maxine Kumin (University of Arkansas Press, Brown et al. 2005), 241).

[4] Similarly, Aimé Césaire (2010) wrote, "There are two paths to doom: by segregation, by walling yourself up in a particular or by dilution, by thinning off into the emptiness of the 'universal.' I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all." (Aimé Césaire, "Letter to Maurice Thorez," trans. Chike Jeffers. *Social Text 28*:2, 152).

[5] Once Oprah asked Toni Morrison about people who find her writing difficult, "That's what I call reading," she replied.

[6] Moreover, while kissing, the eyes are closed, as one is too close to see, which given the etymology of "theory" from the Greek *theōrin* meaning "to look at," suggests an intimacy or closeness beyond speculative or discursive theorization. Furthermore, in kissing, one's primary senses are taste/smell, feeling, and hearing, the first two of which are mutual (you taste/smell and feel each other in the act of tasting or feeling), while hearing is passive (the sound goes into you whether you like it or not, there is no closing your eyes or turning away) and global when compared to the more active and directional acts of looking or speaking. This different sensorial configuration of intimacy thus signifies a different existential mode of relationship desired by the poet.

[7] For example, in *The Book of Clouds*, the verse, "Don't think you're wise if you haven't chased mirages like me/ you haven't tasted that thirst for her beauty on your breath" (95) is almost a direct translation of a Persian verse by the Indo-Persian poet 'Urfi Shīrāzī (d. 1591), but I believe its message and feeling are clear, even without an knowledge of Urfi's verse or the *aya* of the Qur'an (24:39) to which both verses allude.

On the other hand, the book contains more obscure allusions, such as that of the *Good Will Hunting*-like legend of the poetry contest that the Fifth Chan Patriarch held to determine his successor. The story goes that the leading disciple monastery wrote this poem to illustrate his understanding of the *dharma*:

The body is the bodhi tree
The mins is like a bright mirrors stand
At all times we must strive to polish it
And must not let dust collect

But Huineng, the illiterate monastery cook, corrected the poem by asking someone to write

Bodhi originally has no tree.
The mirror has no stand.
The Buddha-nature is always clear and pure.
Where is there room for dust?

Needless to say, Huineng won the contest and became the Sixth Chan Patriarch. In any event, this famous story and the hadiths "for everything there is a polish and the polish for hearts is the remembrance of God" and "My heavens and My earth cannot contain Me but the heart of My believing servant contains Me" were the inspiration for this verse, "Why polish when dust is just tiny mirrors?/vast heavens in your pupils dots get lost" (96).

The last ghazal of the collection, which begins, "Come lets scatter tears of pearls like the moon/in memry of that face scarred like the moon" (98), was written to mourn the death of Mahsa Amini, whose name in Persian means "moon-like." Persian speakers may get that the *radīf* (refrain) of this poem ("like the moon") is an allusion to her name, but I think the poem can still be appreciated apart from this context.

[8] The wonderful volume, *Sensitive Reading: The Pleasures of South Asian Literature in Translation*, edited by Yigal Bronner and Charles Hallisey, is a wonderful example of this dynamic, with essays from experts and nonexperts responding to David Shulmans translations. Sonam Kachrus essay "Whats Gained in Translation" is particularly instructive.

[9] Another hadith says, "Islam began as a stranger (*gharīb*), and it will return to being a stranger, so *Ṭubā* (felicity, glad tidings, a tree of paradise) is for the strangers." (Sunan Ibn Majah 3986) Ibn al-'Arabī and his school of Sufism describe the heights of human perfection in similarly fugitive terms as the "station of no station," which is a perpetually dynamic journey through all stations, just as water or mirrors perpetually transform according to the colors and forms around them.

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