

BOOK REVIEWS

Clara A.B. Joseph, *The Face of the Other (A Long Poem)* (Brisbane: Interactive Press, 2016); pp. iv + 69; ISBN 978-1-925-23135-9.

The title of Clara A.B. Joseph's book for the poem "The Face of the Other" sets high expectations for the reader who is familiar with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The extensive poem, published by Interactive Press in 2016, is written in the third person where the Other speaks as an "I," leaving the reader to feel as if they are standing in proximity to various dyadic-ethical relations, or attempts at them. More often, the reader is placed in the midst of a failed relation, where the face of the Other is not seen, is overlooked, and as such, an ethical encounter is not witnessed.

It is worth beginning with a quote from Levinas on "the face" and its relation to ethical responsibility for the poem's context, and themes in the poem about which I will comment. In *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (1985), Levinas responds to what it means to say that there is a "height" or "elevation" in the face of the Other, "The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a 'first person,' I am the one who finds the resources to respond to the call." In what can be read as the general tone of the poem, Joseph seems to respond to Levinas, "*Surely such fragility is least becoming, / such weakness is blameworthy, / and the exposed face has asked, / no doubt, to be eaten.*" Responding to the face of the Other in its destitution is to recognize it, but more often Joseph shows, the call is dropped before the commandment binds them.

Various embodied encounters with the vulnerability of being an Other are offered, and the ease with which it is possible to ignore one's ability to respond, or response-ability, are brought to light. "*Thy gaze whips / across my face. / Thou hath defaced.*" The expression heard in these lines is similar to encounters in life where one too often remains faceless, and the ability to make it audible fails that which trauma will leave in silence. More than the dependence of one's own exposed face in an encounter with the Other, and the destabilizing effects it has on one's ego, the unseeing Other

is also glimpsed in its necessary partiality and uncannily familiar aspects. In my reading, the faceless one who does not see the Other is shown as egregious, but no less vulnerable.

Living a life of destitution is one that does not encounter the seeking Other, and as such, evades living up to one's height as an ethical inter-subject. In the poem, many unseeing, faceless ones are shown through their justifications. The suffering of the Other is for "gainful" wars, exploitation of labor is a necessary evil, and all the while, the unseeing one is simultaneously "*learning-to-unlearn my poverty / in you.*" Women and children's bodies are repeatedly raped and inscribed. Textures such as stone slabs describe the unseeing one and its actions. Those who make these enumerated justifications are not afforded a personal pronoun of being a 'him' or 'her.' Joseph refers to these faceless bodies as 'it,' barely sensible as an ethical subject.

There is no doubt that anyone who has made these justifications, any reader at different times in their life, feels a burden of guilt, or shame, from these neglected abilities. The poem's language expresses this neglect most loudly, in my reading. In the act of closing oneself off from the possibility of encountering the face of the Other, many listed and implied atrocities, historic and some still occurring today, appear justified. Joseph echoes the face left in its destitution, closed off from an ethical encounter because of these many justifications that unfortunately, have been rehearsed at some time or another, by all. At times during the telling and re-telling of these justifications, the long poem feels more like a carefully written novel, inducing the reader to turn the page to find out what happens next. As readers, we are lured in as third parties to see these Others, when the face is not seen between them.

Joseph lives up to the central theme in Emmanuel Levinas life's work. Vivid descriptions, not only in the poem's expressed meaning, but also in its lyricism, implicate and make the reader's complicity all too moving. One stanza includes a list of the alphabet, spliced into rhythmic pauses, which to me finds language in its banal or instrumental use, as rote communication. In these, the Other cannot be heard, just like the face of the Other cannot be seen, when one is not open to their breaks and cracks, expressed possibly only as an in-audible whimper.

Finally, it is important to note the occasional bursts of childlike whimsy, the blessing of Namaste, or the hopeful ritualistic turn to Jerusalem that occasionally appear in what is otherwise a wrenching poem.

More than just leaving the reader in despair, Joseph also provides quite literally a shoulder to lean on at the end of the poem as our reminder. Her expression provides a reminder in our ability to respond to that which risks becoming a personal trauma, and a suffering often thought worthy of repeating on another. Depictions of unseemly trauma, rage, and the silence that keep these experiences in tact are contrasted to ethical relations that punctuate the more wrenching scenes. In an all-too-timely piece, we have here a reminder of one's ability to respond to the face of the other, to vulnerability, and to destitution as a mutual condition for becoming who we are in our own lives: ethical. The reminder provided through this poetry made me feel at times, as if Joseph were a close friend, probing me to do and be better.

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Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'ān and Its Biblical Subtext* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010); pp. xii + 304; ISBN 978-0-415-77893-0.

This is a must-have critical edition on the study of Qur'an. It is, as to be expected from studies on the cutting edge of research, a work that challenges the 'dominant scholarly notion' and goes against the grain of academic conservatism in the field of Islamic Studies. Any serious study of the contents of the past of Islam, the contents of Islamic history, must address the facticity of its existence as part of the wider world in which it finds itself. As such, whether studied by the historian, sociologist, or anthropologist, Islam is a religion that has inextricable associations with dominant religions - Christian, Zoroastrian, Buddhist - present at the time of its emergence in the seventh century (to say nothing of Jewish and Gnostic [Manichaeic] correlatives).

To this end, Reynolds presents a comprehensive examination of the object of study that challenges myopic readings to date. The author's thesis is that "the text [Qur'an] is best read in light of Christian and Jewish scripture" (this and subsequent quotations are taken from the synopsis, and for further on this point see Chapter 1). Whilst counter intuitive to

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normative modes of understanding religious content in isolation, this in-depth, and specialised, comparative-historical-textual approach, delivers a reading of the Qur'an that is long overdue.

The core argumentation for Reynolds' thesis is twofold. The first point is drawn out of the text itself. That is, the Qur'an "in its use of allusions, depends on the Biblical knowledge of its audience" (see Chapter 3). The second point is one that underlines the inter-cultural and inter-religious polemics in that "medieval Muslim commentators, working in a context of religious rivalry, developed stories that separate Qur'an and Bible" which Reynolds skilfully restores (see Chapter 4).

Indeed, there is particular merit in paying careful attention to the interaction of ideas, agents, and structures, between the Christian and Islamic worlds. Reynolds does just this in his close-reading and critical analysis of the Qur'an, re-evaluating Muslim exegetical literature through a focus on the literary structure of the Qur'an and its rhetorical strategy, linking early Christian history and Islamic origins.

There are four chapters that expand on the thesis and argumentation of the author. Chapter one unravels the 'crisis' of Qur'anic studies, examining the scholarly conflict over the Qur'an; and it charts the format of the work. Chapter two incorporates thirteen concentrated case-studies from the Qur'an – "involving the devil, Adam, Abraham, Jonah, Mary, and Muhammad among others" (see Chapter 1). Chapter three divulges on the subject of Qur'an and *tafsir*, examining exegetical devices, and the *mufasssirun*. Chapter four closes with the approach to the reading of the Qur'an as homily, addressing problems of translating the Qur'an, homiletic features, comparisons with Christian homily, and, most importantly, its Biblical subtext.

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Gabriel Said Reynolds, *New Perspectives on the Qur'an: The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011); pp. 538; ISBN 978-1-138-78921-0.

This edited volume by Gabriel Said Reynolds is an essential compendium to the study of the Qur'an in its historical context. In this second volume, Reynolds is accompanied by a cast of academic experts from the international professoriate as well as early career academics challenged with the task to examine the Qur'an and its origins "looking beyond medieval Islamic traditions to present the Qur'an's own conversation with the religions and literatures of its day" (p. i). The aim: uncover recent debates and controversies in the field with regards to "uncovering the Qur'an's relationship with Judaism and Christianity" (p. i).

The volume opens with a forward by the distinguished Iranian thinker and diasporic scholar, Abdolkarim Soroush, whose wide-ranging reflections on the study of Qur'an prime the reader for what is to follow in more detail. Yet what is resoundingly refreshing about Soroush's intellectuality is his views on the unspoken that remains hidden in-between "the impact that empirical findings can have on presuppositions" (p. xx). The volume is divided into five exhaustive parts, covering: methodology, material evidence, vocabulary, religious context, and Biblical literature. I will spare the customary summary of the contributions in reprise of the editor's own in the introduction, suffice it to say each chapter within the parts must be read independently and in relation to the whole. That said, the review will be better served by a snapshot of Reynolds' assessment of Qur'anic studies.

Reynolds presents the Qur'an as cardinal in assessing the content of Islamic history. It is from this point that discourse on the nature of Islamic thought and identity emerges, and not the other way around as it is the norm in Islamic studies scholarship. Starting the study of Islam with the Qur'an as text is admittedly unexpected to the reader all too familiar with the literature in the field, but it is an approach that recognises the disparity of context on interpreting *what Islam is* between the early Islamic and later periods. That is to say, Reynolds, following Fred Donner, states that the Qur'an is an "inter-confessional movement of monotheistic believers; the definitive demarcation of Islam from Judaism and Christianity is a later development" (p. 10). Reynolds argues that "What seems to be

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idiosyncratic Biblical material in the Qur'an (often a cause for scholars to speculate that Muhammad was influenced by a heterodox Jewish or Christian sect) can be better understood when the Qur'an's relationship with the tradition of Syriac homilies is appreciated" (p. 10). He further contends that Islamic exegetical literature is best contextualised as part of the product of "later Islamic intellectual culture, and not as an imperfect record of historical events" (p. 10).

Reynolds' arguments are reasoned on a critical analysis of the Qur'an's relationship to earlier literature, a position that departs from the old tradition of Orientalism that instead of beginning research with the Qur'an, commences with a "reading (often polemical or hyperbolic) of the Prophet's biography" (p. 10). My only reservation with Reynolds' thesis is the unavoidable neglect, but not under-estimated, impact of the Prophet on the course of Islamic history as a force *in absentia*.

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Karen Witten and Jamie Pearce (eds), *Geographies of Obesity: Environmental Understandings of the Obesity Epidemic* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010); pp. 356; ISBN 9780754676195.

Karen Witten and Jamie Pearce's edited volume *Geographies of Obesity* is part of Routledge's 'Geographies of Health' series (Routledge acquired its original publisher, Ashgate, some years ago) and contributes to a growing pool of literature in human geography, which is concerned with medical geography. Clear and concise, *Geographies of Obesity* is accessible to the interested layperson while providing a broad scope resource to those working in the medical, social and human geographies and related fields.

Geographies of Obesity explores the sharp incline in developed nations' incidence of obesity. In 2017, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention states that 36.5% of adults in the United States are classified as obese (www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html), in the United Kingdom 27% of adults are obese according to the National Health Service (digital.nhs.uk/media/30781/Statistics-on-Obesity-Physical-Activity-and-

Diet-England-2017-Report-/Any/obes-phys-acti-diet-eng-2017-rep), and in Australia the Australian Bureau of Statistics states that 63.4% of Australians are overweight or obese (www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/4364.0.55.001). In particular this book deals with the difficulty of navigating the complex distribution of obesity across the global population. A discussion of the impact of environment and living conditions on the energy consumption and expenditure of global citizens allows for a range of multidisciplinary contributions which provide a fuller picture than might otherwise be possible. The book is split into sections divided by energy in and energy out, meandering from a global review of the development of perceptions of obesity to the environmental factors that impact consumption behaviours. This improves on previous work which has focused primarily on the effect of behaviours without incorporating environmental analysis. These previous approaches have resulted in programmes and policies which have been restricted in their impact. *Geographies of Obesity* concludes with a series of suggestions for effective approaches and policies which is a valuable exercise.

Recent social geography research in the area of access and particular local food systems in a particular area or, 'micro-environment' (house, shop, workplace etc) is given a platform in the opening chapters, particularly the work of Thornton and Kavanagh in Chapter 5. This analysis confirms assertions that socially disadvantaged areas have populations which experience poorer health outcomes and unequal access to nutritionally beneficial diets. The consequences of obesity include stigmatisation, diabetes and other health issues, in particular problems with the cardiovascular system. The contributors and editors of this book are concerned with shifting focus towards the obesogenic characteristics of local and national environments.

Chapters 9 and 10 deal with policy and stand out as particularly useful for contextualising current practices. The former by Katrina Giskes focuses on obesogenic food environments and the latter, by Mylène Riva and Sarah Curtis, is concerned with physical environments.

Chapter 9 pushes for soft policy changes while noting the tension between policies for the public good and social expectations of privacy and limited government interference with daily life. Chapter 9 suggests alternative programs such as adapted and appropriate food labelling and efforts to change behaviours in personal microenvironments.

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Undertaking an investigation into the impact of the meeting points of biology, psychology, economy, society and culture on the dispersion of obesity is no easy feat and yet *Geographies of Obesity* is a well edited attempt at highlighting the effect of these factors by incorporating consistently applied conceptual frameworks and scales compiled from regarded literature and relevant working groups. *Geographies of Obesity* delves into some discussion of international food spaces but is primarily focused on the United Kingdom, Australia and United States; this focus is slightly narrow however is perhaps necessary to allow for a cohesive volume.

This text deals with an important area of research which must be considered in more academic work, that is, the relationship between physical environment and a great variety of social issues and policies. *Geographies of Obesity* does not claim to be an exhaustive review in itself but instead provides a thorough and reasoned enquiry into a crucial area of social and medical geography and is an excellent primary resource for those interested in the area.

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Anders Ahlqvist and Pamela O'Neill (eds), *Language and Power in the Celtic World: Papers From the Seventh Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, The University of Sydney, 30 September-2 October 2010* (Sydney: Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 10, 2011); pp. ix + 424; ISBN 978-1-74210-234-4.

The Sydney Series in Celtic Studies has, since the publication of Neil McLeod's *Early Irish Contract Law* (1992), maintained a steady stream of quality outputs, the majority of which have been edited volumes from the very successful Celtic Studies conferences that have been held at the University of Sydney since 1993, with some monographs and *Festschriften* for distinguished figures involved in teaching and researching the Celts in Australia. This hefty volume contains a "Preface" from editors Ahlqvist and O'Neill which sheds light on the intriguing stained-glass window from St John's College at University of Sydney that adorns the cover (a thematic

link to *Origins and Revivals*, Gereint Evans, Bernard Martin and Jonathan Wooding's 2000 volume from the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies in 1992, which featured a window from St John's College depicting Virgil of Salzburg contemplating the antipodes). There are nineteen chapters from an array of scholars from Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Finland, the United States, England and Scotland. Three authors address Welsh subject matter: Catherine McKenna's "Reading With Rhydderch: Mabinogion Texts in Manuscript Context," Chris Ridgway's "The Early Welsh Harp Music of the Robert ap Huw Manuscript," and Helen Fulton's "Literary History and the Medieval Canon in Wales." Pierre Noyer's "Language Resilience and Self-Esteem" is focused on the Breton language, and two essays are on Scottish topics; William Gillies' "Some Eighteenth Century Developments in Scottish Gaelic Poetry," and Malachy McKenna's "Is There Vowel Harmony in Irish and Scottish Gaelic?"

The remainder of the volume concentrates on the study of Irish sources, both medieval and modern. Legal texts and issues are prominent: editor O'Neill's "Unravelling Time in Early Irish Law," Neil McLeod's "*Cáin Adomnáin* and the Lombards," Fergus Kelly's "The Place of Women in Early Irish Society, with Special Reference to the Law of Marriage," and Jade Harman's "Causation in Medieval Irish Law" forming a solid contribution to scholarship in this area. Several other authors write on medieval Irish topics, including: Liam Breatnach, "Saint Patrick's Oath," Tomás Ó Cathasaigh's "Conchobor and His Court at Emain," Veronica Phillips' "Exile and Authority in Lebor Gabála Éirenn," and Aindrias Hirt's "The Connection Between Fenian Lays, Liturgical Chant, Recitative, and *Dán Díreach*: A Pre-Medieval Narrative Song Tradition." Two particularly entertaining works are Alexandra Bergholm's "The Drinking of Blood in the Ritual Context of Mourning" and Celia Scott's "Bizarre, Grotesque and Macabre: Gender and Humour in Early Irish Hagiography, which investigate sensationalist phenomena in medieval texts. Modern Irish studies are represented by Gay Lynch and Janette Pelosi's "Lost & Found: Reinstating Playwright Edward Geoghegan (1813-1869) and His Most Controversial Play, *The Hibernian Father* (1844), Val Noone's "Sifting the Wreckage of Gaelic Culture in Victoria," and Andrew Shields' "From Repeal to Revolution: The Evolution of John Mitchel's Political Thought 1843-48." The production of these volumes of proceedings requires a significant effort on the part of a small community of University of Sydney staff, students and associates, and is praiseworthy. This, the tenth volume in

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the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies, maintains the standard set over the previous nineteen years, and augurs well for the future. This volume should be received with interest by scholars and students of both Medieval Studies and Celtic Studies, and deserves a place in learned libraries.

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