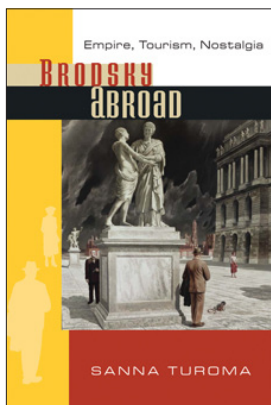


## BOOK REVIEWS

### TRAVELS OF AN EXILED WRITER



**Sanna Turoma. *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia*. Madison, Wis. & London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010. 292 pp.**

This is a book about the Nobel Prize awarded Russian poet Joseph Brodsky's travels after he was expelled from the Soviet Union in 1972. Brodsky was born in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) in 1940 and died in New York after a heart attack in 1996. He has retained a prominent status for people who appreciate Russian and classic world literature.

The author, Sanna Turoma, is a senior researcher at the Aleksanteri Institute (University of Helsinki), Academy of Finland, and the book is based on her doctoral dissertation.

Due to his oppositional stance, Brodsky was repressed in the Soviet Union, sentenced, and later on 'strongly advised' to emigrate. After settling down in the USA and pursuing various academic and non-academic jobs, he had the opportunity to travel around the world. These travels were reflected in his poems, and Sanna Turoma has written a book where Brodsky's writings about four locations – Mexico, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul and Venice – are scrutinised. As a comparison, Brodsky's pre-emigration period poems and essays about his native Leningrad are analysed in the second chapter.

The focus of the book is defined on the fifth page: "The book aims at setting Brodsky in a dialogue with leading representatives of postcolonial and postmodern theories in order to recontextualize the scholarly investigation of his travel poetry and prose." In short, Turoma looks at how places are contextualised and interpreted depending on their cultural and social meaning for Brodsky. Attention is concentrated on how Brodsky links different locations with culture, religion, or history, and how the description of a visited place depends on how the poet positions himself, his cultural background and origin. The self-positioning of Brodsky was determined by different markers; he carried with him the burden of being an emigrant from the Soviet Union who never really adapted to the West. In his travels outside Europe, Brodsky also encountered cultures that were non-European or non-Christian – factors that also changed his self-positioning. The personality and biography of Brodsky is so intensively reflected in his poems that by reading this book I came to realise that the monograph could be seen as a psychoanalytical treatise through travel writing.

The book certainly reveals much about Brodsky's ideas and attitudes through his poetry. By looking at the travel poetry, one perception of the author is that travel writing as such has its roots in colonialism, in the period when Western nobles travelled outside Europe and described the countries they visited as the Other, from the perspective of Orientalism (p. 56). Brodsky, who grew up in Leningrad, had similar attitudes. His writings from that period reflect his strong nostalgia for the empire combined with the

Soviet ‘kitchen dissidents’, typical of *piterskie* (St. Petersburg) intellectuals (p. 69). This imperial nostalgia was apparently also the reason why Brodsky was always hostile to contemporary art and architecture (p. 58). In his later years Brodsky published several poems and essays idealising Leningrad/St. Petersburg’s ‘magnificent’ past (p. 76), even comparing it to the British Empire. In the last pages of the chapter about Leningrad, Turoma introduces another aspect in Brodsky’s philosophy: constant attempts to define Russian national identity, rooted in the imperial past expressed in the architecture of the ‘old Petersburg’. These few pages help to explain why Russian émigrés often failed to adapt in the West. Notwithstanding their anti-Soviet regime stance, they identified themselves with the culture of a country with a great history and significant influence on the world. Turoma here finds traces of post-colonial nostalgia and self-identification with a great empire that has ceased to exist.

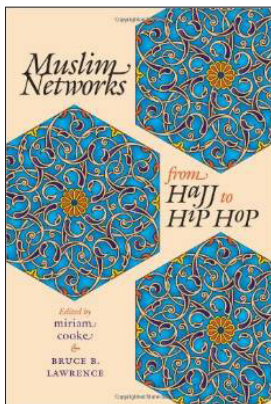
Turoma views Brodsky’s interpretation of other countries through the eyes of the *piterskii* intellectual who never felt comfortable in, and never fully accepted, other cultures. “From Brodsky’s metropolitan Soviet viewpoint” (p. 86) Mexico resembles the Soviet Central Asian republics with its exotica, underdeveloped economy, poverty, and inheritance from a long destroyed native empire. In his poetry, Brodsky takes a strong anti-colonial position condemning the Spanish and American colonialism that destroyed the natives’ dignity, languages and traditions. Turoma draws on other Russian Soviet poets like Mayakovsky and Blok in order to demonstrate how the discourse of “Euro-imperial” and “Russian imperial knowledge” (p. 92) has changed over time. Brodsky’s position is definitely more critical of contemporary Western politics. What makes Brodsky’s ‘Mexican cycle’ different from writing about other places is that he obviously studied the history of the country and the biographies of its rulers. There is a difference in the poet’s position on Brazil, described by Turoma as “the Metropolitan man in the Third World”. The Brazilian writing is even described by Turoma as an “anti-travelogue” (p. 108). Brodsky is disappointed by the “amnesia” (p. 108) he encounters: the past has been wiped clean and the country is trying to modernise itself by building European style cities, roads and large-scale blocks of flats. For Brodsky, Rio de Janeiro appears as a model for future European decay: boring, monotonous, promiscuous, a “jungle” dominated by poverty (pp. 110–111). The Third World perspective is prevalent here: Rio wants to be Europe but fails, it is too backward. However, Istanbul receives a different treatment. Turoma finds in Brodsky’s writings his love of the city’s classical Orientalism: a former capital of the Ottoman Empire, architecture that resembles past victories and once led the world culture. Simultaneously, Istanbul embodies the “Eastern savagery” (p. 139), being erratic, violent, and dirty. Brodsky places Turkey in the Russian imperial framework, seeing it as Caucasian (*kavkazskii*) or Eastern (*vostochnyi*). This discourse seems to be more comfortable and understandable for the poet. Istanbul reflects the uneasy relationship that Russian intellectuals have with Soviet Caucasian and Central Asian republics, in which admiration for impressive cultural and historical inheritance is fused with the arrogance of the culturally and technically superior Christian conqueror. In the travelogue about Turkey, Brodsky slightly gets personal and biographical, comparing Istanbul/Constantinople with St. Petersburg/Leningrad. The chapter about Brodsky’s writings on Venice starts with a brilliant overview about the ambivalent place this city occupies in the 19th and 20th century Russian travelogues. Venice is simultaneously the home of classic European culture and a symbol of European decay with dilapidating palaces and monuments. This chapter is worth reading due to the polemic about Brod-

sky's place in Western literature where he remained "marginal" but not a "marginalised" writer (p. 159). The chapter about Venice also contains more biographical information about Brodsky. In short, this section of the book helps to localise the Russian émigré's disillusionment with the West, where he gained quite a prominent position as a public figure.

Sanna Turoma's book is theoretically well founded and brilliantly analytical. It is not only about Brodsky; it also skilfully reflects his status in the Soviet Russian poetry tradition, with references to other Soviet Russian poets like Mayakovsky, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova, Mandelstam and Blok. Turoma shows the inner confusion of Russian poets about the era where they were unable to find a clear position between the oppositional stance, euphoria about the Soviet might and progress, and nostalgia for the Tsarist empire with its high culture. Currently, when the national soul-seeking of Russian poets and writers has become prominent in Russian mainstream newspapers, the book gives a glimpse into the way of thinking by which such people seem to be influenced. The book is also a great contribution to existing literature about postcolonial writing by showing another angle: the Eastern European emigrant perspective on the Western cultural and economic dominance they wish to deny. Turoma's monograph, however, would have needed more biographical information about Joseph Brodsky at the beginning of the book. Many crucial facts of the poet's life are mentioned throughout the book but, unless the reader already knows who Brodsky was, they can find other sources for a more coherent biography of the poet.

Aimar Ventsel

## ISLAMIC CIVILISATION AND MUSLIM NETWORKS



***Muslim Networks from Hajj to Hip Hop.* Edited by miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005. 344 pp.**

I wanted to review this book for one particular purpose: I know very little about Islam, and the title of the book suggested it could be a good place to begin. Therefore, this review should be seen from that perspective. In general, I have to admit that I was not disappointed.

The main argument of this edited volume is that networks are crucial for understanding Islam. As it appears, Muslim networks enforce a sense of community and help to create common identity on a group level, and in a larger perspective, expanding over continents and supporting the movement of ideas or people. This collection of articles focuses

on the networks that are related mainly to various facets of identity, centred around the common perception of being Muslim. These identities are related to a common

origin, religious group affiliation, gender, or political views, and stretch across time and space. The economic aspect or larger social issues are left out, but the selection of topics is diverse. Geographically the book goes beyond the Orient, discussing Muslim groups and activities in Europe, North America and the World Wide Web. From the 14th-century scholarly travels via politically motivated Mosque networks and various women's groups, to aspects of modern culture like the Internet and hip hop, the reader discovers more about the importance of spiritual interconnection within the worldwide Muslim community. These networks are flexible, in a state of constant recreation, and surprisingly vital. In short, as Taieb Belghazi writes, "we encounter the idea of Islam on the move" (p. 275).

The book is comprised of thirteen chapters, a masterly analytical introduction and an afterword. It is more than a review can grasp and therefore only selected chapters will be discussed below. As a social anthropologist, I found fascinating the view on Muslim networks presented in the Introduction by miriam cooke and Bruce B. Lawrence. Instead of looking at networks as concrete social relationships, the editors describe Muslim networks as a medium, method and metaphor defining the Muslim community '*umma*'. This approach justifies the claim that such networks are fluid, in process. In the Introduction, general network theories are avoided and the Muslim world is presented as a continuum of heterogeneous forms of identities throughout world history, in a situation where Muslims were both a dominant group and a minority. Simultaneously, the Introduction also shows how the following chapters interact with each other in order to form a coherent narrative.

The book is compiled in chronological order, starting in the Middle Ages and progressing into the 21st century. The first chapter by Vincent J. Cornell describes the travels of a 14th-century Moroccan scholar Ibn-Battuta. This chapter exposes how medieval Muslim identity differs from the modern nation state, where loyalties are defined territorially rather than philosophically. The chapter includes a brief but interesting analyses that shows how 'medieval Muslim notables resembled mafia dons' (p. 33), and how hierarchies of loyalties were structured in such states. The travels of Ibn-Battuta are also described as a process revealing the nature of Muslim networks as those of identity and loyalty. Ibn-Battuta, as a typical medieval scholar, lived in different courts, served local sultans as an expert on Islamic law and by necessity changed his patrons. During his lifetime he travelled from Maghreb to India, and in his own way he was the forefather of modern mobile scholars. This chapter points out how the Muslim world was held together by common knowledge and jurisprudence as a global spiritual community and how this spirituality was carried by men of knowledge or '*ulama*'. As the author writes: "The solidarity of '*ulama*' was based in part on a common education and a common epistemology" (p. 43). This made possible Ibn-Battuta's travels and activities in different regions as an expert on Quaranic law.

The next chapter is directly linked to the first one. David Gilmartin gives a detailed overview of how '*ulama*' was involved in the creation of the state of Pakistan. Here the '*ulama*' is shown in a different role, using modern means of communication such as print media and publications in order to foster the creation of a modern nation state. The author goes back to the 19th century and shows how structures of the British colonial empire, separation of the state from society, and the introduction of print media, created an environment different from that of the medieval state, discussed in the previous chapter. In this chapter, '*ulama*' is shown as the network that instrumentalised colonial

structures and modern means of technology in order to mobilise Muslims around the idea of a common Muslim state. Valuable are also remarks that show how, for example, Taliban and organisers of September 11 are directly linked to the networks of political mobilisation established in the 19th century.

Gender in the Muslim world is tackled in several chapters that focus on women in different regions and socio-political contexts. Tayba Hassan Al Khalifa Sharif has contributed a chapter about the Iraqi Shiite women in the Netherlands, and the meaning of the mourning ritual *majlis al-qiraya*, which is a ritual conducted only by women and dedicated to remembrance and mourning of the members of the Prophet's family. A reader unfamiliar with Muslim culture and specific characteristics of different religious schools finds in this chapter an excellent explanation to the main conceptual differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The chapter focuses on a diasporic women's network "that projects female actors as the custodians of hope" (p. 133). Through the detailed ethnographic descriptions, the author paints an excellent picture of the ritual and atmosphere in the room. It is argued that the ritual has a therapeutic meaning for participants who link their new home in Holland not only to the Iraq prior to Iran-Iraq War but also to Iraq history. As a whole, the chapter sheds light on how Muslim refugee communities are able to establish their group solidarity around intimate rituals, using poetry and historical narratives.

The concluding research paper about the Muslim hip hop networks in the USA is rather disappointing. The author H. Samy Alim shows how different American hip hop artists use 'Islamic knowledge' and particularly the Quran to link hip hop with Islam. For someone who has conducted research on hip hop, the chapter contributes too little to what we know about the different forms and ideologies of hip hop culture. Apart from discovering that some of the most notable hip hop artists like Mos Def, Chuck D or RZA are Muslims, the reader will not find any particular new insight into the world of American Muslims and their take on hip hop. It is shown that Afro-American Muslim artists feel part of the global Muslim community '*ummah*' but the chapter does not answer the question 'How?'. At the end of the chapter the author poses questions for 'further research', which are related to the process of Muslim nation building with the help of contemporary urban music culture. I hope that H. Samy Alim will have a chance to explore these issues in the concluding pages and will present us with some new and fascinating research in the future.

In general, this book is a well written and refreshing collection of individual research articles. These articles present a reading alternative to networks, discussing issues of a philosophical, religious and ideological nature rather than strategies or structures. All contributions are theoretically well founded, in some chapters unexpected links are made between different philosophers and analysis of the network. However, the most glaring attribute of the book is how readable it is for people without a deep knowledge of Islam or the Orient. Regional histories, rituals, the essence of different spiritual schools, are elegantly explained and the whole text is perfectly understandable and interesting for a non-expert. Therefore, this book is not only recommended to scholars of the Middle East, Islam, or the Orient, but also to anybody who wishes to get an insight into Muslim culture. Moreover, anybody interested in diasporas, nation building, networks, or identity construction finds in this book some solid case studies of comparative material.

Aimar Ventsel