In her second monograph *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam*, Stefania Pandolfo presents an “ontological poetics” (Kohn 2015, 313) of the soul in the aftermath of intergenerational trauma and extreme socio-cultural change in Morocco. Pandolfo’s work overlaps and links dialogues of psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, and Islamic philosophy with eschatological ethics. She argues that modern day Qur’anic “cures of the soul”—that is, healing rituals utilizing the Qur’an which aim to relieve spiritual (and/or mental/emotional/psychological) distress—work in concert with, and even answer fundamental questions about, Freudian and Lacanian theories. Pandolfo’s ontological project also takes seriously the Islamic al-gayb (invisible world) to elucidate the “spiritual-metaphysical dimension of the psyche itself” (1). Rather than setting her own research agenda to accomplish this, she allows herself to be led, “pierced and guided by the Other” (19). She intimates that this “Other” is something even more fundamental than anthropology’s focus on ontological realities; every human being, in their own way, is summoned by it (19).

This book is the product of a remarkable feat of fieldwork conducted over a ten-year period. Much like psychoanalysis itself, Pandolfo describes this as a “working through” (10). As we also “work through” the text, Pandolfo’s overarching and nuanced theoretical imaginings emerge organically. We follow Pandolfo across the book’s three parts, moving conceptually through physical and metaphysical spaces. In part one, Pandolfo conducts fieldwork in the more secular world of the mental institution, bound by international diagnostic standards and classificatory psychiatry. In the hospital we meet Amina, Hind, and Reda, young Moroccans dealing with severe mental disorders caught between modern psychiatric logic and a culture which is “suspended in a zone of ‘agony’” (88). Pandolfo suggests that the mad are the mourners of a culture, and that madness is a form of witnessing to this culture in agony (63). Therefore, through these young Moroccans, we also bear witness to a culture’s suffering and come to recognize the other, rather than know or possess them as an object of knowledge (35). Pandolfo refuses to paint inside the lines by presenting her informants as characters of a familiar, Western narrativized framework. Instead, she creates something new, in line with anthropology’s ontological turn. She shows us a way to “think otherwise” about madness, ethnography itself, and the anthropologist and reader as witness to a cultural becoming (Biehl and Locke 2017).

The second part of the text is a conceptual crossing. We move out of the hospital to the realm of hāla, a term meaning both mental illness and an altered mystical state (10). Here we meet the poor couple Samia and Ilyas. While Samia interprets her depressive and delusional symptoms through religion, her husband Ilyas has not sought treatment for his frequent psychotic episodes. In these
“states” or hālas, Ilyas paints elaborate murals on the walls of his emptied apartment before whitewashing and re-painting them during another episode. Through Ilyas and his haunting paintings, Pandolfo finds one of her primary arguments: early on in her text, Pandolfo confides that she is dedicated to ethnography not only as empirical research but also as a philosophical project (22). This philosophical project attempts to move beyond ethnography as “the writing of the Other . . . that fixes the other person or culture in place as an object of knowledge” toward something “more fundamental . . . the enigmatic address of a different kind of Other” (19).

Pandolfo refers not to an anthropological “Other” but to Henri Corbin’s concept of the imaginal, an understanding of the imagination as “an organ of active perception and of cognition of supersensory realities” (175). In the imaginal, we find something much more fundamental that touches on all human life: “the manifestation of forms or semblances [which are] fundamentally anchored in a relationship with truth, the reality of God and the cosmos, and the witnessing of the divine” (176). Differing from Corbin, Pandolfo argues that the “mad” in particular – like Ilyas – exceed our physical world to touch on, or at least see into, this invisible one. These “forms or semblances” are what Ilyas paints, over and over again, on the walls, windows, and doors of his apartment: images of snakes, trees, mermaids, shadowy figures, crosses, and eyes. This imaginal world is not created by some humans or believed in by some of us. Instead, this world sees us, looks back at us.

In the remainder of part two, Pandolfo further explores the hāla of postcolonial Morocco, investigating other emergent forms of healing from unlivable states. We meet Kamal, an unemployed twenty-six-year-old who hopes to migrate to Europe via the deadly crossing of the Mediterranean Sea. Kamal sees the crossing not as a dangerous journey, suicide wish, or challenge to God, but as “an ethical struggle for a better life” (200). Feeling particularly vulnerable to madness due to the trauma of his life circumstances, Kamal understands even the thought of migration as “an antidote of despair” (210), a way to avoid succumbing to madness and ultimately committing suicide.

In the third and final part of the text we dive into the deep end of the metaphysical world in which the Imam performs Qur’anic cures of the soul – in particular the ruqya, a ritual reading of the Qur’an. Ruqya means cure, incantation, and etymologically to elevate or ascend, especially in spiritual terms (223). Called “choking of the soul,” the affliction is a modern one of “existential and moral quicksand” which is simultaneously deeply rooted in Islamic scholarship (232). The Imam’s work of the ruqya both generates new cultural forms that facilitate cultural becoming and allows sufferers to “elevate or ascend” from the modern world to a higher spiritual state. Sufferers find a new subjectivity and meaning for living through the ruqya.

Pandolfo does not attempt to apply a Western anthropological order to contrive familiarity and comfort for the anthropologist/reader by translating and making sense of Otherness. Instead, her aim is for recognition both of another reality, one that goes beyond human perception, and of the people capable of revealing it to us. This makes for a beautiful, compelling, yet difficult read for those not well-versed in psychoanalytic or Islamic theological thought. Therefore, scholars and graduate students interested in ontological and/or psychological anthropology, as well as Islam, are the best suited readership. Despite its difficulty, it is well worth the struggle; Pandolfo moves us beyond the comfortable to create a poetic kind of anthropological philosophy without defined borders or ends, attuned to the reality and power of invisible worlds in all human lives.

WORKS CITED
