

Aaron Kreuter, *Leaving Other People Alone: Diaspora, Zionism, and Palestine in Contemporary Jewish Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2023), 320 pp., ISBN: 978-1772126570.

Aaron Kreuter's *Leaving Other People Alone: Diaspora, Zionism, and Palestine in Contemporary Jewish Fiction* makes the argument that ethical Jewish writing would incorporate what he has termed "diasporic heteroglossia" —one text's ability to hold multiple competing points of view at once. In a certain sense, this review will engage in a similar sort of dialogue, wherein I find so many aspects to feel positively about in Kreuter's monograph, while feeling quite negatively about others.

Kreuter's book is made up of a theory-laden introduction, four analysis chapters devoted to diasporic Jewish authors who write about Israel-Palestine, and a short conclusion. In the first analysis chapter, he discusses Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* (1993); in the second, he engages with Theodor Herzl's *Altneuland* (1902) and Leon Uris's *Exodus* (1958); and in the third and fourth, he deals with Ayelet Tsabari's short story collection *The Best Place on Earth* (2013) and David Bezmozgis's short novel *The Betrayers* (2014), respectively.

In the case of the Jewish writing he's discussing, namely those works of North American (and sometimes European) fiction that deal in some way with Israel-Palestine, diasporic heteroglossia would mean an earnest attempt at incorporating Palestinian voices. To use Kreuter's own words, diasporic heteroglossia "occurs when an author takes the natural heteroglossic structure of the novel form [...] and uses that multivocal, non-centralized structure to challenge national centres, through multiple voices, narratives, viewpoints, and other elements of a diasporic consciousness" (3). Kreuter explains and offers poignant examples of this concept throughout, and he does so with expert skill.

I would like to get any negativity out of the way early, for two reasons: firstly, most of my negative reaction relates to the introduction, so it would be natural to start at the beginning; and secondly, overall, this is a favourable review of Kreuter's monograph, so I would like to move toward that positive direction.

Kreuter is an exceptionally talented reader of Jewish fiction, but his introduction shows that a talented literary theorist does not necessarily make a talented political theorist. The introduction feels nebulous, idealistic bordering on naiveté, and, most importantly to me, it actually betrays some of the brilliant, tangible, down-to-earth, and impeccably executed critiques of the Israeli state that come later in the book.

Kreuter mentions several times that he takes his cues from the anti-Zionist thought of Jewish studies scholars Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, and primarily their 1993 article “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” and while the brothers have plenty of helpful critiques of Zionism, some of the concepts Kreuter borrows feel out of place and so theoretical as to not be constructive in the context of his monograph. For example, Kreuter describes the Boyarins’ idea of reworking the human world into a more just society through diasporic cultural formation, quoting them as saying that they wish to struggle for “a notion of identity in which there are only slaves but no masters” (19). A noble desire, to be sure, but this sort of head-in-the-clouds wish for a reformulation of human interaction feels out of place when Kreuter goes on, in his analysis chapters, to give excellent, pointed, and worldly examples of what he views as unjust about the Zionist outlook.

Kreuter also makes assumptions about the Jewish right to live in their homeland without really offering tangible reasons why he feels that way. For example, comparing First Nations claims to land in Canada against Jewish claims in Palestine, he simply states, “The Second Temple period is not the same thing as First Nations’ attachment to the land; the systems of living are totally different, existing in distinctive epistemological worldviews,” and continues shortly thereafter, “The bald fact is that Jewish people do not have access to autochthonous claims, whereas Indigenous Peoples most certainly do” (23). Sure, he says that some Jews have employed autochthonous claims to the land of Israel in systems of Palestinian oppression, but he does not succinctly articulate why they lack access to those claims in the first place.

Throughout the book Kreuter forcefully makes the point that diaspora is the ethical mode of being for the Jewish people. There are two aspects of this argument that I find problematic, at least insofar as he explains it in *Leaving Other People Alone*. First, his grasp of the historical lived experience of Jews in the diaspora feels incomplete and idealized. In one of many examples, in chapter 1 he quotes the writer Daniel Lazare, in a 1993 review of *Operation Shylock*, as saying that the “neuroticism” of the diaspora Jew is “the result of political ethical engagement with an imperfect, conflict-ridden world, whereas Zionist ‘health’ is the result of the opposite: ethical disengagement and surrender to the amoral realpolitik that governs relations between and among nation-states,” closing the quotation with another short one from Lazare, stating that “In a moral sense, it’s healthier to be neurotic” (50–51). Lazare’s insight is an astute one. But Kreuter’s postscript to Lazare’s argument, that “this neuroticism is yet another facet of the diaspora existence, the need to be aware of the political violence of the world, while not being/becoming a part of it,” feels like a naive and myopic view of Jewish history. Countless generations of Jews living in the diaspora would no doubt have loved to be “aware of the political violence of the world” but not be forced to become part (read: a victim) of it. At times, Kreuter admits that Jewish life in the diaspora was not always great, but his view of that history is not a holistic one.

My second issue with Kreuter's expression of the idea that diaspora is the ethical mode of being for the Jewish people, contrary to the settler-colonial project of the Israeli state, is that the only regions of the diaspora where Jews have not actively been expelled and physically persecuted (unlike Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East) have been in historically settler-colonial states such as Canada, the United States, Argentina, South Africa, and Australia, where Jews enjoy freedom on unceded Indigenous lands. Is it more ethical to live on unceded lands in Canada, a multicultural state where people came from all over to occupy Indigenous lands together, than join a primarily Jewish settler project in Israel?

I think a fair way to summarize my issues with *Leaving Other People Alone* would be to say that I find his broad view of historical realities problematic.

That being said, it is when Kreuter leaves the macrocosmic and enters the microcosmic that his true powers as a thinker and a writer shine through. He exhibits an ability to extrapolate minor aspects of his chosen fictional texts into very specific critiques of the State of Israel, including its claim to be the representative of worldwide Jewry. Chapter 1 contains one of his most pointed critiques, backed up with plenty of evidence and scholarly commentary. This critique centers around the Nazi Collaborators Law used in the trial of John Demjanjuk in Israel in the late 1980s, a historical moment around which part of Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* revolves. Here, Kreuter calls into question two aspects of the State of Israel's behaviour: first, that the rewording from "crimes against humanity" to "crimes against the Jewish people" in that law made the State of Israel the de facto representative of all Jews everywhere, anywhere, any time, whether they liked it or not; and second, that this idea of "crimes against the Jewish people," which was used against perpetrators who were directly involved in the murder and humiliation of thousands (Demjanjuk) or millions (e.g., Adolf Eichmann) of Jews, is now used to prosecute Palestinian teenagers for throwing Molotov cocktails at Israeli soldiers (36). Elsewhere in the chapter he makes another astute critique by exploring the legal system in the West Bank, where two neighbours in the same location at the same time could commit the same crime but be subject to two different court systems: the military court for a Palestinian and under domestic law for an Israeli settler (45).

These are pointed, well-argued critiques of the Israeli state, and they populate much of the book. But anti-Zionist critiques are not the only point of Kreuter's book; rather, concurrent with those critiques in chapters one through four of *Leaving Other People Alone*, he expounds on his concept of diasporic heteroglossia in easy-to-digest detail. What Kreuter desires (or suggests) is a complex of Jewish writing in which multiple divergent points of view are offered equal standing. He claims that *Operation Shylock* offers what might be the best example of this concept, while the others fall short in a variety of ways I point out shortly (with the exception of Ayelet

Tsabari). By giving equal, non-patronizing voice to American Jews, Israeli Jews, and Arab Palestinians (within whom there are multiple divergent viewpoints, namely the former school friend-cum-Palestinian nationalist George Ziad and his wife), Roth has, in Kreuter's estimation, performed ethical Jewish writing on Israel-Palestine.

In the following chapter, Kreuter offers Herzl's *Altneuland* and Uris's *Exodus* as negative examples of how to portray Palestinians in Jewish writing. Though Herzl's novel has a Palestinian Arab voice, it is idealized and conforms to Herzl's Zionist naive vision of a Palestinian Arab population that would be desperate and grateful for the wonders of European enlightenment, and as such does not fit into the idea of diasporic heteroglossia. *Exodus*, Kreuter explains, is highly problematic and deeply racist in character.

In the final two chapters of *Leaving Other People Alone*, Kreuter takes on the Canadian Jewish writers Tsabari, whose work traces the experiences Jews from Arab lands, and Bezmozgis, whose work centers on Jews from the former Soviet Union. These chapters continue where the others left off. In Kreuter's reading of Tsabari's *The Best Place on Earth*, he explores the historical marginalization of Jews of Arab or unknown origin in Israeli society. Praising Tsabari's multivocal work and using it as a springboard to pointed critiques of the Zionist state, he goes into great detail, for example, about the arrival in Israel of Yemenite Jews in 1950, claiming (with evidence) that their treatment was shameful and racist in nature. In his critical reading of Bezmozgis's *The Betrayers*, Kreuter notes a deafening silence in the absence of Palestinian voices in a story about former Soviet Jews in Israel. In his view, Bezmozgis has a keen understanding of the Jewish experience in Canada and of the "depleted Jewish world" of the former Soviet Union, but his lack of understanding about Israel and Palestine lead to a "flawed and troubling" representation of the region (193).

By way of conclusion, I will reiterate something I said earlier, which is the core of my thinking about *Leaving Other People Alone*: Kreuter's nebulous, idyllic view of diaspora in his theoretical sections does a disservice to the impressive analytical work he performs over the majority of the book. What he sets up in the introduction is not the book that follows in his close readings, a book that is measured, detailed, and realist in its parsing of a complex land and a complex time.

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