

## BOOK REVIEW

***At Odds in the World: Essays on Jewish Canadian Women Writers.*** Ruth Panofsky. Toronto, Ontario: Inanna Press, 2008; iv +117 pages; ISBN 978-098088224-7; 25.95 (paper).

What does it mean when an author states that she was unable to write in the first person for ten years because the “I” didn't exist” (35)? Exploring works by Jewish Canadian women writers, Ruth Panofsky investigates the ways diaspora, gender, and language inform narratives of embodiment - recounting tales of dislocation and fractured identities (18). Her criticism offers eloquent insights into dominant Canadian culture and contestations of oppression within sub-cultures.

Panofsky's literary criticism examines social isolation as fought through the restructuring of language to allow room for female embodiment. The authors she examines create a “home” through language by changing narrative structure and writing lives formally ostracized. Panofsky notes, for example, that Helen Weizeig's use of structure challenges the erasure of female subject positions through the use of form to reflect new embodied possibilities. She writes: “structurally the work operates as small cyclical narratives framed by a large cyclical action of flight. The form suggests the cycle of the female body, by which women are defined in the text” (53). Panofsky further argues that many Jewish Canadian authors find it “necessary to dismantle linear narrative practices that aim to contain and delimit fictional opportunities for women”(5). In contexts of misogyny and anti-semitism, *At Odds in the World* explores Jewish women writing a sense of self: the “I,” formerly unfathomable.

Using issues of sexuality as a through-line for her discussions, Panofsky explores challenges faced by writers navigating often-hostile dominant cultural climates and misogynist legacies threatening further marginalization. However, her work is startlingly heterosexist. For example, she quotes a story by Miriam Waddington in which a character states she has an “inability to love another Jew... Sometimes I have even thought we Jews are all the same sex” (22). Panofsky frames this in terms of conflicted relationships with Jewish identity without mentioning the erasure of Jewish lesbians embedded in such a statement. Throughout the book she positions heterosexual relationships as encompassing *the* range of women's intimacy. Fortunately, she does provide a more nuanced engagement with perceptions of women in the sex trade.

Panofsky advocates for representations of Jewish sex workers as capable of acting with intelligence and agency. She applauds Wiseman's character, Hoda, a sex worker who

“responds to verbal or sexual provocation with characteristic humour, a limited means of self-protection adopted by Jews throughout history” (79). Panofsky's argument that sex workers should be recognized as part of their Jewish communities provides a much-needed counter to the moralism that ostracizes women for engaging in behaviour deemed “deviant.”

The strength of *At Odds in the World* lies in this type of engagement with complications in seeking ends to alienation. Many characters engage with their heritage(s) while reclaiming female subject positions. For example, Nora Gold's female character's “Resolution of trauma that 'engenders a splitting off of physical and emotional selves’” (68) happens through prayer that has been denied to women in Orthodox contexts. *At Odds in the World* samples ways that Jewish Canadian women writers contest cultural factors that limit full participation in their lives and faiths without a sense of disembodiment and fragmentation. As those with marginalized identities often struggle to balance these challenges, Panofsky's book creates an important legacy.

Anika Stafford  
University of British Columbia