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Emily Jeremiah. *Nomadic Ethics in Contemporary Women's Writing in German: Strange Subjects*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012. 232 pp.

Brooke D. Kreitinger

University of North Carolina at Greensboro, bdkreiti@uncg.edu

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Abstract

Review of Emily Jeremiah. *Nomadic Ethics in Contemporary Women's Writing in German: Strange Subjects*. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012. 232 pp.

Keywords

German-language literature, feminist ethics, feminist aesthetics, epistemology, globalization, subjectivity, national identity, postmemory

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Since the end of the Cold War, German Studies scholars have grappled with questions of subjectivity, collective identity, and postnational belonging with a sense of urgency in the contemporary context defined by accelerated globalization, increased migration, worsening ecological disasters, and a continued need to engage with the German past. This urgency motivates *Nomadic Ethics*, in which Emily Jeremiah innovatively tackles such issues as she examines contemporary German and Austrian identities in literary texts by five German-speaking women writers: Birgit Vanderbeke, Dorothea Grünzweig, Antje Ravic Strubel, Anna Mitgutsch, and Barbara Honigmann. The book's central argument is that the authors reveal how sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and disability affect the "status and comfort of the subject" and problematize the nation and gender as restrictive and artificial (1). Jeremiah's selection of authors is especially fruitful insofar as the authors all live abroad or divide their time between Germany and a foreign adopted homeland. Consequently, they bring experiences of different communities as well as encounters of cultures and histories into their writings. Jeremiah justifies both her selection of authors and her use of the label "women's writing" by underscoring the unsettling function of female migrants, who she asserts pose a "potent challenge" to the imagined community of the nation and the gendered discourse of *Heimat* 'homeland.'

While the study's concern with feminist ethics and aesthetics is foregrounded, the book also explores epistemological issues and therefore identifies new models of thinking in an effort to counter masculinist models that have excluded the emotional and sensual. The book is divided into an introduction and five chapters, each of which deals with one author and discusses and theorizes a particular type of nomadism in terms of ethics and epistemology through close readings of several texts by that author. In her introduction, Jeremiah establishes a richly interdisciplinary theoretical framework with a foundation in feminist, queer, and gender theories that enables her to productively engage with several timely discourses including national identity, collective memory, *Heimat*, ecocriticism, and globalization. Drawing primarily on the work of Rosi Braidotti, Sara Ahmed, and Judith Butler, Jeremiah develops her key terms "nomadism" and "strange encounters" in response to lacunae of postmodern thought, in particular claims that postmodernism has no political power nor foundation for ethics and ignores materiality in its play with language, focus on relativism, and insistence on constructedness. In this effort, Jeremiah defines her feminist project of nomadic ethics: "Nomadic ethics involves effortful, ongoing encounters with unknowable others. It entails a rejection of normative thinking and a commitment to open-ended ways of being and becoming. It rests on a view of the subject as a

genealogical, ecological, embodied entity. A nomadic stance counters domination, exclusion, violence, and the denial of difference” (199).

In the first chapter, “Seeing Strangely: Birgit Vanderbeke’s Ways of Knowing,” Jeremiah identifies an “epistemology of connectedness” that challenges the distinctions between knower and known in ways that incorporate understandings of relatedness and obligation to others, which includes an interesting reevaluation of the maternal self. This chapter shows how Vanderbeke’s postmodern writings underscore ways of knowing that pay attention to materiality and senses other than vision to form a gendered ethics of knowing and posit a view of subjectivity as relational, gendered, and implicated in the natural, cultural, and technological.

Chapter two offers a reading of Dorothea Grünzweig’s poetry informed by ecofeminism and green thought to put forth a notion of “Economadism,” which entails a rethinking of the notion of “other” to include nonhuman others and thereby challenges global capitalism and the destruction of the natural environment. Jeremiah constructs this form of nomadism by showing how Grünzweig’s poetry decenters the human subject, relativizes human perception and experience as lacking in comparison to animal perception, incorporates a notion of religious spirituality, and underscores the vulnerability of humans in the face of forces of nature. This chapter is most insightful in its considerations of the role of translation in “strange ethical encounters” that blur the boundaries between self and other. Drawing on Spivak’s work, Jeremiah illustrates how such encounters in Grünzweig’s poetry require an understanding of translation that entails an ethics of specificity, sympathy, and an engagement with “what’s around” a language (76).

The chapter “Disorientations: Queer, East German Nomadism in the work of Antje Ravic Strubel” demonstrates how Strubel employs an “aesthetics of disorientation” to explore East Germans’ experiences of displacement and a post-Wende (post-unification) form of homelessness as well as cast doubt on the possibility of representing East German identity through writing. Grounded in queer phenomenology descending from Althusser’s notion of interpellation, Jeremiah develops the notion of “orientation” as integral to processes of inhabiting space, perceiving the world, and relating to others. Her analysis renders an understanding of queer relationships, for instance those determined by lesbian desire or feminine masculinities, as vulnerable to assault but nevertheless liveable. The chapter concludes that Strubel’s “queer, East German nomadism” exposes the unhappiness of subjects who deviate from set paths of nation and the heteronormative family and points to the complexity and work involved in orienting oneself.

“Uncanny Returns” shifts focus to “Austrian nomadic postmemory” and places Jewish Austrian writer Anna Mitgutsch’s works in the context of debates

about the Austrian past and narratives of Austrian cultural identity. Jeremiah reads Mitgutsch with the intention of elaborating on two areas of Mariane Hirsch's postmemory thesis that have been criticized as lacking, namely the structure of memory as it relates to sociopolitical factors that complicate family and the ethical relationship to the persecuted other. As the chapter title indicates, Freud's notion of the uncanny plays into these analyses to illustrate how the Austrian past returns in Mitgutsch's texts and makes the Austrian *Heimat* simultaneously familiar and strange. Jeremiah argues that Mitgutsch's concern for the repressed histories of female, disabled, and Jewish Austrian others is an uncanny gesture that illustrates the ethical force of the author's work.

The last chapter of the book explores in more depth the notion of a "Jewish nomadic ethics" in the works of Barbara Honigmann, whose "Jewish writing" Jeremiah carefully qualifies to be paradigmatic for a German Jewish woman author who engages with the demise of the GDR. Central to this chapter's approach are the ethical considerations of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the face-to-face encounter with others constitutes an ethics lived in obligation and awareness of the embodied exposure to the other. Jewishness in Honigmann's writings is shown to be an exploratory, relational, collective process involving displacement and transformation, at times associated with shame and discomfort, and in dialogue with Germanness but unable to achieve the so-called German-Jewish symbiosis. Jeremiah asserts that Jewish nomadic ethics honors Honigmann's self-designation as a practicing Jew while stressing the fluidity and multiplicity of (Jewish) identities.

Ultimately, *Nomadic Ethics* offers scholars a productive and flexible analytical multi-tool to grapple with some of the more challenging and unsettling aspects of the current age as they are addressed in literary texts. While Jeremiah takes on an impressive number of theoretical considerations and discourses and deftly uses her literary analyses to likewise inform her reading of critical theory, at times her tour de force through the oeuvre of the respective authors addresses an overabundance of topics. Some clearly relate to her overarching agenda but are not explicitly connected to the framework established at the outset of the respective chapter, hence the central focus on nomadic ethics is somewhat diluted. Nevertheless, Jeremiah achieves her goal of identifying how the selected authors employ "nomadic strategies" to suggest models of more inclusive and nuanced framing of identities as well as subjectivities of fluidity and mobility that incorporate empathy, the bodily, and a heightened awareness of relationality. *Nomadic Ethics* is an insightful, innovative contribution to the larger field of literary studies and in particular the "ethical turn" in German Studies. With its innovative theoretical approach and robust bibliography, it will prove valuable to scholars and students concerned with feminist literary criticism, ethics,

epistemology, phenomenology, postmemory, Women's and Gender Studies, and Queer Studies.

Brooke Kreitinger
University of North Carolina at Greensboro