

Red, Black, and Jew: New Frontiers in Hebrew Literature. By Stephen Katz. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009. 351 pp. \$60.00 cloth.

Between 1910 and the late 1950s, a group of “Hebraist” Jewish writers in the United States, most of whom had trained at traditional yeshivas, created a body of literature in Hebrew that offered an important alternative to the two dominant ways (Zionist and Yiddishist) of conceiving the linguistic, temporal, national, and religious boundaries of Jewish identity in the New World. On one hand, American Zionists, following a nationalist agenda, constructed the frontier of Israel as both a real and an imagined alternative to the materialism of American life. For Zionist writers, Israel, not America, was the “true” frontier, a place where Jewish language and culture could have room to evolve and develop in the modern world. On the other hand, Jewish Yiddishists took the route of exile and used the physical, urban frontiers of America (the streets of New York, the slaughterhouses of the Midwest, the dockyards of Manhattan, the nightclubs of Harlem, the sweatshop) to explore the gap between an archetypal foundational Biblical past and their readers’ perception of that past as exotic, Oriental, and essentially “foreign” to the concerns of “life in America.”

In contrast to the Zionists’ emphasis on the traditionally Jewish themes of renewal and return and the Yiddishists’ post-Enlightenment

concerns with estrangement and assimilation, American Hebraist writers were fascinated by the non-Jewish cultural landscape of America. Because they were drawn to the idea of the frontier as an area of emotional, aesthetic, and material contestation, they chose to represent strange encounters with the exotic, “lost” worlds of Native Americans and Black Americans, two marginalized groups living in a state of internal exile within the borders of a supposedly “free” country. In fact, the spiritual, temporal, and linguistic pull of the idea of the American frontier was so great that these Hebraists often excluded Jewish life from their works altogether, retaining only a resonant, allusive, often archaic Hebrew to convey a Jewish perspective and Jewish concerns. While they regarded Jews as akin to culturally distinct “Others” whose encounters with the force and dominance of New World culture had resulted in violence, loss, and displacement, being in America, if not “being American,” required, in the eyes of these Hebrew writers, an understanding of what Ephraim Lisitzky called the “clash of elements violently torn from their context and matrix and wrenched from their ordered categories and equations” (qtd. in Katz 117).

The main subjects of Stephen Katz’s important study, *Red, Black, and Jew*, B. N. Silkiner, Hillel Bavli, Shim’on Halkin, Ephraim Lisitzky, and Israel Efros, were part of a circle of creative writers and translators who intended to create a center of Jewish studies for the enrichment and expansion of Hebrew culture and literature through an intensive engagement, entirely in Hebrew, with the histories and songs of marginalized “Others.” In their translations, reproductions, and transformations of Native American ritual song, Black American spirituals, elegies, and sermons, and white American narratives of frontier conquest, American Hebraists figured forth an American frontier that resonated with the elegiac themes of betrayal, internal exile, conquest, loss of contact with the sacred, enslavement to the material world, and helpless yearning for the last faint traces of a fast-receding mythical past. American Hebraists thus created for themselves and their Jewish readers “a space between” nationalism and commercialism, a cultural, linguistic, and hermeneutic “frontier” that both preserved the Biblical and midrashic elements of Hebrew literature and enriched it with new themes and new dramas of epic creation.

Their project was largely a failure: these writers have been, for the most part, excluded from the canon of Hebrew literature. As Katz makes clear, American Hebrew writers did not define a new space for Hebrew literature; rather, they fell into a default position that was defined *for* them by the stylistic, thematic, and political conventions of the European Jewish Haskalah (enlightenment) movement and its emphasis on an elevated, allusive, classical (or, as Katz describes it, “effusively flowery” [30]), literary style. In Katz’s view, these writers are “spoken for” by the conventions of the Haskalah. Their thematic and stylistic conservatism, particularly their

tendency to use an allusive, dense Hebrew that, in spite of its attentiveness to complexity, merely reproduces literary and cinematic or stage stereotypes of Native Americans and Black Americans, belies their progressive criticism of the colonizing and imperializing force of American culture. Their Hebrew was too involuted and learned for a readership that was moving away from traditional forms of Jewish learning, and their strange depictions of frontier life could hardly compete with images of the frontier that were readily available in the modern, Americanized forms of dime store novels, moving pictures, photographs, and stage productions. Furthermore, the American frontier was of little interest to those Jewish writers and their readers who were committed to bringing Hebrew culture into the modern world. Representations of the archetypal, Biblically familiar, coherent, and physically sacred terrain of Eretz Yisroel were far more desirable than imagined histories of an expansive American frontier, for it was in Israel that a vernacular language and culture could grow. Indeed, with the exception of the work of Gabriel Priel, it was mostly in Israel that Hebrew moved away from the allusive over-reliance on Biblical archetypes that characterizes the work of American Hebraists.

Ironically, the general, stereotyped terms on which writers such as Silkiner, Efros, and Lisitzky represented the physical and “natural” or “universal” spiritual frontiers of Native and Black culture between 1910 and 1950 left them ill-prepared to contend with immigration to the frontier of Israel itself. In a superb final chapter, “Singing the Song of Zion,” Katz explores the reactions of several American Hebraists as they considered immigrating to Eretz Yisroel in the 1920s and 1930s, visited Israel and returned to the United States, or, in the case of only a few, actually settled in Israel after 1948. His brief readings of poetry by Simon Halkin, the great translator Eisig Siblerschlag, S. L. Blank, Hillel Bavli, Avraham Zvi Halevy, and Moshe Feinstein provide future scholars with an important framework for understanding continuities and major themes of exile in American Hebrew poetry between the 1920s and the 1950s. The stylistic and emotional struggles that Efros, Halkin, Feinstein, and Lisitzky experienced as they attempted to translate the archetypal pilgrimage of the great Jewish poet of medieval Spain, Yehudah Halevi, into American terms spark a superb discussion of the often fraught encounters between Israelis and American Hebraists on American soil. Viewing themselves as Jonahs fleeing towards Tarshish (America) from God’s wrath and love, American Hebraists were caught between “forces that attract and repel” (195), vacillating between viewing themselves as orphans (199) and as “rear-guard pioneers” (188). After spending decades writing about the erosion, displacement, betrayal, and subjugation of other cultures in the New World, American Hebraists, with the exception of Efros, found themselves unable to embrace a new Hebrew culture and a new Hebrew vernacular.

Because Katz centers his attention on explaining the failure of American Hebrew literature to take root in the United States or in Israel, however, he underemphasizes one of the most important contributions that these writers made to Jewish literature and culture between 1910 and 1950: they served as translators and commentators on the world of exotic “Others.” By emphasizing these writers’ “latent *maskilic* propensities” (131) (their concern with universal ethics rather than ethnic or religious identity), and their densely allusive Hebrew, for example, Katz shortchanges the way they used American literary forms to replace European Jewish literary forms, particularly those, like the *poema*, that were formed in the violent crucible of Russia between the 1890s and the 1920s. The translation of and commentary on the world of a divine exotic “Other” has always formed the basis of much Jewish writing, and at the turn of the century, Chaim Bialik and Saul Tshernichowsky insisted, in their vigorous and vibrant Hebrew, on the importance of imagining multiple worlds and multiple contexts for “housing” Jewish culture.

The Hebraists’ insistence on using classical Hebrew, rather than the more popular vernacular, to record and preserve the literary traditions and forms of the New World may have doomed them to irrelevance for a Jewish readership that was more interested in the Zionists’ dynamic modern Hebrew or in the Yiddishists’ multilayered fusion of Yiddish with American slang. Yet the Hebraists clearly felt that the age-old dramas they depicted—the conflict between pastoralists and nomads, between farmers and migrants, between the often destructive material consequences of settlement and the sometimes synthesizing forces of displacement, between pilgrimage and conquest—were part of an epic struggle in which Native Americans, Blacks, and Jews, in addition to white American pioneers, were central players. The densely allusive idiom of a pre-vernacular Hebrew in which they chose to write, while certainly not easily accessible, is nevertheless of increasing interest to scholars wishing to retrace the steps by which the multiple idioms in circulation between the wars were reduced, standardized, and assimilated into normative discourses. Stephen Katz’s thorough, patient, and ground-breaking work opens the way for future critics to explore the movement of Jewish and other European immigrant groups away from traditional, “Old World” literary forms and toward the new frontier of Native American and African-American song.

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