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ON GERALDINE HENG'S *THE INVENTION OF RACE IN THE EUROPEAN MIDDLE AGES*

Stumbling Upon the Archive

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My title is inspired by the image of the *Stolpersteine*, protruding bricks set into the sidewalks of German cities and commemorating Jews who had lived in those places prior to the Great Destruction, which are intended to interrupt not only a smooth passage through space but also through time. Even those of us whose professional efforts are devoted to documenting and analyzing such interruptions are inevitably, beyond working hours, caught up just like others of our class in the ongoing time-flow of progress (we have no desire to see our retirement accounts forming "constellations" with the Great Recession). Hence evidence from beyond the occasionally claustrophobic discourse of critical theory that time *really* is not only continuous and progressive comes as a bracing reminder.

I am a scholar of modern Jewish studies, with a deep commitment to understanding both the dynamics of Jewish diasporic existence transnationally and transhistorically, and especially the relationship between the politics of Jewish difference inside Europe on one hand and "the colonial encounter" on the other. I therefore read Geraldine Heng's chapter 2, titled "A Case Study of the Racial State: Jews as Internal Minority in England," as an important intervention in a broader conversation about the relations among Christianity, Jewishness, and the rhetorics and techniques of the modern nation-state.[1] Making that intervention as one of a set of case studies of racialization also sets the question of Jewish difference in premodern Europe squarely within another broad conversation about the links between racialization (in the broad definition that Heng proposes) within and beyond Europe's boundaries.[2] Moreover, whatever the critical consensus about the merits of that broad definition may turn out to be, it

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[1] See, for example, Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[2] I am thinking here of studies ranging from Arendt's *The Origins of Imperialism* (Harcourt, Brace, 1951) to *Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism* (*Monthly Review Press*, 1972) to relatively more recent work

certainly has the advantage of helping to blur that periodization that set the "Middle Ages" securely in a superseded past and thereby reinforced the tenuous legitimacy of the modern age.[3]

My reading of this chapter coincided with a semester where I found myself remotely teaching a set of texts by Jacques Derrida, each of which engages with a more or less proximate earlier text. And as I discovered, those earlier texts often seem to recur back further, so that there was already (almost always already) an urgently relevant place where my seminar could not go. One such was our reading of Derrida's *Archive Fever*[4] together with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable.*[5] We could not engage—we were too late, as it were, for—Freud's own *Moses and Monotheism*,[6] let alone the Hebrew Bible. What might, given world enough and time, otherwise have been the chain of Pentateuch-Freud-Yerushalmi-Derrida, each displaying increased enlightenment vis-à-vis the foregoing, became instead an effort to unsettle the very ground of documentary authority on which the premise of enlightenment (here, located especially by Derrida in Yerushalmi) depends.

Derrida calls that ground (aptly enough, given the occasion for both Yerushalmi's talk and Derrida's response was a conference at the Freud archive in London) the "archive," and much of his effort in *Archive Fever* is devoted to an etymological unveiling (yes, an apocalypse!) of the "original" authority of the archons and the arche. Derrida's own effort focuses largely on Yerushalmi's case for "outing" Freud as much more Jewishly informed than Freud generally chose to acknowledge. To what extent Derrida's impulse here is informed by his own resistance to Jewish communitarianism[7] and his care to distinguish himself (in the only conversation I ever had with him) from "real Jews" I leave as not only an open question, but one that is perhaps, by the very terms of *Archive Fever*, impertinent although tempting.

The exchange between Yerushalmi and Derrida may thus be taken to concern the place of archives vis-à-vis the power to decide who and what is properly Jewish. Derrida's discussion of the archons, those who controlled the records, centers on the ancient Greek context in which the words linking notions of origin, record, and authority were first developed. Heng's argument in her chapter 2 focuses rather on the double significance of Jews for English state-building in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In her account, they were both

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such as Barbara Fuchs's *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[3] See, once again not exclusively, Katherine Biddick, *The Typological Imaginary: Circumcision, Technology, History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), in juxtaposition with Hans Blumenberg's *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[5] Published in New Haven, CT by Yale University Press, 1991.

[6] Published in New York by Vintage Books, 1967.

[7] See Sarah Hammerschlag, "The Last Jewish Intellectual: Derrida and His Literary Betrayal of Levinas," in *Jews and the Ends of Theory*, eds. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 88–107.

agents of capital accumulation and increased transferability of land proprietor-ship, and abjected "non-English" collective. She also argues that Christian narratives of Jewish perfidy contributed (not, as she takes pains to stress, for the first time) both to a racialization of Jews via essentialization of Jewish difference and, as it were, to an eventual racialization (as biological descent group) of the "purified" Christian collective. She works carefully to produce a synthetic account of this semiopolitical process over the course of a century or more. In making the case for the relations between the English Crown and church on the one hand, and England's Jews on the other, as an instance of racialization, she may underplay precisely the evidence of fluid identities that, for example, forced the king repeatedly to attempt to enforce the wearing of the Jewish badge as first instituted by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Without further reading in recent specialist studies, her account might lead us back into the "lachrymose" account of Jewish history that Salo Baron identified long ago.[8] More important to my mind, however, Heng deftly and painstakingly avoids the Scylla of a cultur-alism that might otherwise have permitted the excuse that "they were just being medieval" and the Charybdis of some putative suprahistorical universal standard of humanity against which medieval English Christians failed more or less miserably than (say) their twentieth-century descendants.

And what about those *Stolpersteine*? What I stumbled over (it was a *good* stumble!) is the embedded discussion of *archa* towns created by the English Crown to administer and police Jewish agency in the circulation of capital, and eventually, the circulation of Jews throughout England:

> In 1194, after the anti-Jewish riots of 1189–90 saw Christian destruction of documents of debt to Jews, a network of chirography chests or *archae* was installed by the state in all the main centers of Jewish settlement in England to ensure that record keeping would not in future be disrupted. (67)

This system of documentation, an "economic panopticon" as she terms it (67) that was part and parcel of the royal office known as the Exchequer of the Jews, both protected Jewish business interests and fostered the English state's surveillance and exploitation of those interests. Eventually, the 1275 Statute of the Jewry further restricted Jewish *residence* to such towns, a process that Heng provocatively describes as "an ethnoracial process of *herding*" (69) and that in any case, was followed in 1290 by the expulsion from England of all its Jews.

I cannot think through, not here and not yet, the implications of the history of English *archa* towns for Yerushalmi's critique of Freud or Derrida's of Yerush-almi. Derrida's account of the archive combined with the simultaneously pro-ductive and repressive aspects of the *archae* discussed by Heng might lead some to dream of a repudiation of archives as a wild form of liberation. And yet, like Yerushalmi (and like the scholars who learn so much more about the lives of English Jews from these traces of medieval state control), we are drawn to the

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[8] Salo Baron, "Newer Emphases in Jewish History," *Jewish Social Studies* 25.4 (1963): 245–58; Adam Teller, "Revisiting Baron's 'Lachrymose Conception': The Meanings of Violence in Jewish History," *AJS Review* 38.2 (2014): 431–39.

archives once again. How, without them, could we attain precisely that level of respect for the dignity of "medieval people" that leads Heng, repeatedly, to attack the implicit call in English Christendom to "think less; feel more"? "Our" lack of superiority over "them" is adequately demonstrated by the banal observation (mine, not hers) that the exhortation to "think less; feel more" has become ever louder in our Christian twenty-first century, at least in the United States. In Heng's repeated invocation of this phrase one senses a conviction that it is wrong to suppose medieval European Christians (and presumably, all who are identified in her book as complicit with the reassuring fantasies underlying structural racism) were predestined to abandon critical thought. As I would put it, she rejects the notion that *they were too early to think critically.* No, Heng suggests, they were just as smart as we are. They might have thought more. They might have produced a less racist world (and surely some worked to do so). Is this not a call for the retrospective rescue of the dead?

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