

The subject of Sarah Hammerschlag's book is so close to my personal and intellectual passions, and her account so lucid and reasoned, that I can only offer a few scattered remarks in this brief space.

Hammerschlag dramatically sets up her problematic with two epigraphs, one from Edward Said and one from a crowd of Parisian student protesters. Her larger point is well made by stressing the common theme between these two epigraphs, but the gap between them is surely significant as well. I would urge that we interrogate the difference between Said's saying "I am the last Jewish intellectual" (this 'last Jew' trope is a very old one, by the way; neither Said nor Derrida invented it first) and the chant of "We are all German Jews" by an anonymous group of French students (none of whom, to my knowledge, actually renounced their French citizenship) in May 1968. If it matters *who* said it, then we must grant (once again) that "figured" identities are neither arbitrary nor unconstrained identities.

My reaction to both quotes is not like Finkelkraut's. With regard to Said (although I readily grant that Said's rhetoric here, as elsewhere, betrays a blindness to the privileges that were part of his own biography), it seems to me Said did not only intend the provocative claim that the Palestinians have now taken the historical place of the Jews. Rather, I surmise that Said asserts here an affiliation with a tradition of critical thinking from the margins, grounded in an ambivalent embrace of Enlightenment fully aware of its implication in a history of violence—colonial, epistemological and otherwise. It is not so clear that Finkelkraut himself, for example, has displayed a similar awareness in his writings. With regard to the *soixant-huitards*, I remain disappointed that Finkelkraut's primary reaction to his recognition that he, unlike his parents, was *not* a Polish Jew, was disavowal of difference rather than a reconsideration of the politics of memory or even (think of it!) of the responsibility for creative and transformative *inheritance* (on which see Derrida's *Specters of Marx*).

Since Hammerschlag kindly cites my brother's and my essay on diaspora as exemplary of the perspective she wants to work from and move beyond,<sup>1</sup> I must say for now that I have not repented my frustration with Lyotard's deployment of the lower-case "jews." This is not meant as a condemnation, nor yet a Tayloresque claim for recognition (though, for example, the gap between critical theory and academic Jewish studies was even greater then than it is now). Rather, the frustration stems from a perceived non-invitation to critical dialogue. (While Lyotard yet lived, I fantasized inviting him to a conference on "'lyotard' and THE JEWS.") Even in the quote that Hammerschlag brings up at p. 8, "this nonpeople of survivors. Jews and non-jews. . ." one senses a certain largesse (even if you're a Jew you can still be a Jew), perhaps an echo already of the Pauline valorization of "children according to the promise," an echo that, famously, resounds fully in the recent work of Alain Badiou. What still troubles me (admittedly, perhaps a bit more clearly now, almost twenty years on and in the wake of reading Hammerschlag) is Lyotard's failure to recognize the kinds of rhetorical violence inherent in valorizing only the "figural," that is, only the allegorical "Jew." To be sure, and as Hammerschlag notes, that is

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<sup>1</sup> *Pace* Hammerschlag, that essay certainly does point to the dangers of the particular forms of racism fostered by universalism and particularism respectively.

precisely the kind of problem to which Derrida, with his exquisite attention to the very problem of exemplarity, attended closely.

Hammerschlag's largest point that there is a discursive continuity between pre-war anti-Semitic and post-war recuperative discourses on the "figure" of the Jew is simultaneously provocative and instantly plausible (that is a mark of the best historical scholarship). It is too soon to tell whether all of the major strands of her reconstruction of this story will stand unrevised. How much of the figural Jew derives from modern anti-Semitism and how much from older tropes of what Steven Kruger calls "the spectral Jew?" It is not yet clear to me, moreover, how thoroughly we should concur with Hammerschlag's identification of Levinas as the primary (from the introduction alone, one would think almost the only) source of Derrida's late but proliferate writings on "his own" (not)Jewishness (see, for example, the insistent references in *Circonfession* to "my uncircumcised sons"). In particular, and in a text that places considerable theoretical stress on the fruitful contamination of philosophy by literature, the name of Edmond Jabès seems strikingly absent here (at least from the Introduction). Derrida's essay on Jabès ("The Question of the Book") is, in any case, one of the few places in his earlier work where he attends closely to Jewishness—to be sure, along with his both admiring and critical essay on Levinas. But why assume only or primarily literary or philosophical sources? Derrida's Jewishness was, among other things, a *physical* figure, a "sign" or letter cut into his flesh long before he could be responsible, self-critically or otherwise, and his explicit attention to it in late maturity is, in itself, hardly unusual.

The notion that all identities are (like all language) *made* and in that sense "figural" is not novel, but remains a lesson we have indeed not learned well enough inside or outside the academy, and thus a good starting point. For the ethnographer in me, Hammerschlag's perspective remains somewhat hermetic. Outside of literature and philosophy (to be sure, not outside of the text writ large) there are formations that call themselves Jewish communities (in the absence and in the presence of anti- and philo-Semites), necessarily (as it seems) in the business of deciding who is and who isn't, and according to what criteria.

I look forward to learning more from Sarah Hammerschlag's work. Toward continuing and expanding the conversation, I endorse the goal of "ensuring that the revalorization of the figure of the Jew always entails a self-critical operation." I assume Hammerschlag means to apply this stricture to *everyone* who deploys the figure of the Jew, and I endorse that stipulation as well. But I'm not sure whether she's thought through the different implications of that stricture for those who self-identify or are identified by others as Jews, and those who don't and/or aren't ("jews" or not). Oddly, and as much as we continue to understand always better the contingencies of such identifications, I still find that in some troubling and productive way they matter.