

*Response to Eliza Slavet*

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*Racial Fever* (Slavet 2009) opens with the story of a Hassidic man who stands on a street corner in Manhattan on Friday afternoons in a quest for “people who look as if they might be Jewish.” Do they “know how to light the candles?” Do they know how “to say the blessings” (1)? For Eliza Slavet this vignette captures an enduring “racial” definition of Jewishness: “[W]ithin Jewish communities and families...there is often an almost obsessive desire to know whether a person is Jewish,” she writes, and what defines a person as Jewish is often “purely genealogical,” and presumably, as the above story indicates, oft times visible (2).

Such racial-genealogical commitments, however, reside uneasily in a post-Holocaust world, Slavet writes. An “unsettledness” surrounds the question of genealogical identification even as it perseveres. As her reading of the scholarly literature on Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* suggests (2009, 2011), that unsettledness reaches into scholarly debates: How could Freud have embraced a racial theory of Jewishness in *Moses and Monotheism*, a work published in the 1930s no less? And such questions are not asked of Freud alone. There was a long-standing reluctance to revisit the centrality of racial thought in early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century “Jewish Social Science” (Hart 2000, see also 2007; Efron 1994), albeit that reluctance has started to abate. Slavet insists that we must find a way “to consider racial thinking without reducing it to racism” (2009: 2), and not just for the sake of a more robust historical understanding, but because of the enduring political and cultural power of racial thought.

As is widely known, in his final work Freud explored the importance of “racial memory” to the persistence of Jewishness. Slavet reads *Moses and Monotheism* without choosing sides between his “bodily” versus “*geistigkeit*” understandings of Jewishness and without transforming Freud’s complex argument into some politically and scientifically more palatable form. *Moses and Monotheism* is not an exception to Freud’s corpus, she argues: It can only be understood within the context of his earlier writings on the nature and origins of religious traditions (2011: 97). More generally, *Moses and Monotheism* is “the culmination of a lifetime spent investigating the relationships between memory and its rivals: heredity, history, and fiction” (2009: 7). In that culmination, Slavet argues, Freud understood the “bodily” and “intellectual/spiritual” (*geistigkeit*) elements of Judaism to be mutually constitutive. It is the contours and logic of that constitutive relationship – and of why Freud might have been invested in it, that is, what intervention he sought to make in the world – that Slavet reads with such care.

If one source of discomfort for scholars of the post-World War II era has been Freud’s general commitment to a racial definition of Jewishness, another is his embrace of Lamarckianism, a biological theory of heredity presumed to have been widely discredited by the time Freud wrote. But as Slavet points out, Freud was far from alone in turning to Lamarck (2009: 71-8). Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jewish intellectual

and political figures took up the mantle of race and they most often did so in Lamarckian terms. Lamarck's belief in the inheritance of acquired traits provided a language through which to counter the terms of anti-Semitic race science. Yes, the "Jewish problem" was real. Yes, Jews were a "degenerate" race. But Jewish race theorists argued that Jewish degeneration was a consequence of historical and environmental circumstances rather than permanent racial traits. They argued that it could be changed (see Hart 2000). In short, among Jewish intellectuals, turning to Lamarck meant recognizing racial *malleability*. And racial malleability gave Jewish race theorists, some of whom were assimilationists (Slavet 2009: 72) but most of whom were Zionists, the scientific grounds on which to insist not just that the Jewish race could be improved, but that the national project was necessary. If generations of living *in exile* and under "difficult conditions" had led to the degeneration of the Jewish race, then only a return to Palestine, a return to "their" geographic-cum-racial origins, would rejuvenate "the Jews." It was in Palestine that the Jewish body would be restored and the New Hebrew born.

Clearly, Slavet's reading is correct: Freud was not unique in turning to Lamarck. To supplement her argument, I want to call attention to the fact that he embraced Lamarckian theory with a twist, at least vis-à-vis fellow Jewish thinkers. Freud invoked the inheritance of acquired traits not to argue for malleability or change but in order to explain how Jewishness *endures*: The "memory-trace" of the murder of the (original) Moses *once acquired* has been passed down from generation to generation. In turn, the transmission of that enduring bodily (if "immaterial") memory has been essential to the continuation of Judaism, whose intellectual-spiritual ideals require "a medium beyond sensory perception" if they are to survive (Slavet 2011: 97). An acquired memory-trace takes on the character of a *permanent* "racial trait." Freud articulates Lamarckian and Weissmannian theories of heredity in a very specific way, in other words: Yes, acquired characteristics can be inherited. But once inherited they seem to become (or they have the potential to become) stable and enduring things.

Freud's genealogical theory of Jewishness was intimately tethered to a racial conception of descent. Nevertheless, not all genealogical theories (of Jewishness) can be subsumed under the sign of race. Slavet's project is framed by an interest in "racial fever:" "the irrepressible desire of individuals and communities to define themselves and others through genealogy." (2009: 6). But why name such a genealogical desire "racial" fever? Throughout Slavet's argument, the "racial" and the "genealogical" are seamlessly assimilated, the former often put in quotation marks so as to signal a looser definition of the term. By way of contrast, I want to suggest that thinking with more historical specificity, that tightening our use of the term "race" and elaborating different understandings of race and genealogy, and of the relationship of one to the other over time, would make her already rich and insightful argument even more powerful. In sum, prior to the rise of the basic contours of racial thought in early modern Europe, and prior to the articulation of a full-blown scientific theory of race in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, genealogy must have meant something very different than what we presume it to mean today. "Descent," yes, but visibility, "character," civilizational stages, and its organic link to geography, no. It is easy to write of Judaism's longstanding commitment to "the genealogical principle" as a history of the same (see

Slavet 2009: 25). But it might be more productive to think about the points at which it is transfigured and becomes a substantively different thing, and to explore the social and political effects of those transformations.

Assimilating the genealogical to the racial vis-à-vis the contemporary Euro-American world seems to me to be a more plausible claim. Following the scientific and political power of race science and eugenics beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the experiences of fascism and genocide in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup>, and quite crucially, the emergence of a Zionist imaginary and Jewish state, the understanding of Jewish genealogy (and Euro-American conceptions of genealogy more broadly, I would venture) has been irrevocably altered. Can we any longer imagine genealogy without the *bodily* trappings of race (as phenotype or genotype, as “a culture” that is always already mine [Slavet 2011: 98; see also Benn Michaels 1992] or a Jewish state to which I can always already stake a national claim)? And can we any longer invest in genealogical self-definitions without being haunted by the specter of the violence(s) committed under the sign of race? The kinds of practices, arguments and anxieties that Slavet traces in her book – among Jewish studies scholars grappling with Freud’s legacy in light of *Moses and Monotheism*, and among Jewish communities and individuals who are attached to genealogical definitions of the Self even as that attachment unsettles them – are evidence of efforts to resolve the perhaps irresolvable legacy of race.

It is important to point out that contrary to a widely accepted argument about the history of the race concept (Slavet 2011: 105), race did not disappear from the biological sciences in the 1950s (see Reardon 2005, see also Abu El-Haj 2012). Neither, however, has it remained simply the same. In writing of the racial, as Slavet shows, we cannot presume we mean phenotype. From the perspective of today, neither can we presume it indexes “degeneration,” or “character,” or any of the other material markers, civilizational values or forms of biological determination attached to early 20<sup>th</sup> century understandings of race. Eliza Slavet is right: Serious pitfalls – and dangers – reside in ignoring “appeals to race” that “continue to shape our everyday lives” (2009: 30). Following the form of nuanced analysis that Slavet achieves – of taking seriously and specifying the terms through which Freud imagined “the Jews” as a race, and of placing his scientific commitments within the corpus of both his broader psychoanalytic work and the social and political imaginaries of his time – what we need to do is give an account of the terms of racial thought today. And that requires recognizing that it takes various forms (even if but variations on a single theme), even within the biological sciences themselves. From the perspective of an epistemological and ethical logic at work in “genetic history” – from the perspective of a scientific field that seeks to understand population-specific origins and genealogies on the basis of genomic evidence and a commercial industry that offers individual genetic ancestry tests – Freud, or more accurately Freud via Slavet’s incisive reading of him, was prescient: “The discomfort – and strength – of Freud’s theory of Jewishness is the notion that the repressed *returns* and that we cannot predetermine whether the return will be for better or for worse. We can, however, *take historical and human actions* to work through these returns and to sustain the more ‘noble and precious’ elements in the future” (106, emphasis added). If from the perspective of genetic history the genome is an historical archive, each of us carries a *material* “memory” of our past(s), collective and individual,

within. Nevertheless, what we make of it—whether or not we “choose” to sustain (now and for the future) a newly discovered Jewish or Mende ancestry, for example—is for each of us to decide (Abu El-Haj 2012), even as our pasts are a material inheritance which we can never shed.

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