

Ritual Remembrance: Freud's Primal Theory of Collective Memory

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In the final essay of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud infamously claims that civilization began when a band of brothers brutally murdered their father. This postulation leads Freud to conclude that “the beginnings of religion, morals, society and art converge in the Oedipus complex,”¹ and, accordingly, most readers, regardless of their argument, presuppose that the text depicts a “fundamental oedipal revolt.”² This is how Peter Gay characterizes the action of *Totem and Taboo* in his short introduction to the Norton Standard Edition, and this is how the text is generally remembered. While we may forget the moves of Freud's argument and the details of his historical narrative—not to mention the first three essays of the book—we do remember that, according to Freud, in the beginning was the Oedipus complex.

It is not surprising, then, that many readers have felt Freud went too far with *Totem and Taboo*. Its publication incited anthropologists to attack the universality of the Oedipus complex;³ others have turned the tables on Freud and charged him with projecting his own oedipal guilt onto an imagined horde of parricidal sons;⁴ and most in the field of psychoanalysis have come to disregard *Totem and Taboo*, in part because it threatens the validity of the Oedipus complex. As E. B. Spillius explains: “today the idea of the Oedipus complex no longer needs to be defended against rival schools of psychoanalysis, and the use of the Oedipus complex to explain the origin of civilization would do it more harm than good” (187). Clearly, Freud seems to have crossed the line, or lines, in *Totem and Taboo*: whether from Western to universal culture, fantasy to historical reality, or psychoanalytic to anthropological theory, his transposition of the Oedipus complex into realms where it does not belong appears to be the gesture most abhorred by critics.

Yet those sympathetic to *Totem and Taboo* do not deny that the work is fundamentally oedipal. Ernest Jones, for instance, responded to Bronislaw Malinowski's anthropological critique by insisting that Freud had in fact established the Oedipus complex as a universal “*fons et origo*.”⁵ Indeed, Jones even chalked up the composition of *Totem and Taboo* to Freud's own

oedipal fantasies.⁶ And while more recent readings have emphasized different facets of the text, the centrality of the Oedipus complex is still accepted as a given. Rachel Blass, for example, accounts for the apparent incongruities between analytic truth and the form of truth presented in *Totem and Taboo* by explaining why the Oedipus complex had to be historicized.⁷ Julia Kristeva focuses on the seemingly secondary taboo of incest but nevertheless acknowledges that the relationship between Freud's murderous event and the Oedipus complex has been "logically established."⁸ It would seem as though, as Kristeva writes, "[d]ivergences from and even contradictions with this Freudian thesis are finally no more than variants and confirmations" (57).⁹ For critics, regardless of position or disciplinary background, all seem to agree with Peter Gay that "the fact of life on which Freud most insisted in *Totem and Taboo*, and which organizes the book, is the Oedipus complex."¹⁰

But just what sort of Oedipus complex does Freud depict in *Totem and Taboo*? His entire account of the murder and the history it unfolds concerns the actions of a collectivity, not an individual. Freud's primal collectivity is said to be fortified through "homosexual feelings and acts" (144); its members are referred to as "brothers" rather than sons, which emphasizes the fraternal rather than the paternal dynamic; and any relation between the brothers and a mother figure is entirely absent—in fact, there is no mother to be found. In short, the familial structure Freud describes in no way resembles an oedipal triangle, and it even seems like a stretch to domesticate Freud's primal crew under the familiar banner of "family." Nevertheless, in his conclusion, Freud claims that all roads lead to the Oedipus complex. While some critics have lambasted Freud for attempting to explain the origin of civilization psychoanalytically, and others have argued that Freud's thesis must be understood mythologically, Freud's text would seem to raise a less ambitious but perhaps more interesting question than that of whether or not he adequately explains the origin of civilization—namely, does Freud even adequately explain the theoretical murder that he himself posits? Indeed, what would it mean for Freud to fail in his attempt to interpret a historical event he created? And if the supposed "fact of life on which Freud most insisted in *Totem and Taboo*" may actually be incongruous with the narrative through which this fact of life is justified, how, then, are we to read *Totem and Taboo*?

Forgetting Theories

As I have indicated, we could begin by putting a bit of pressure on Freud's construction and subsequent interpretation of "the great event in human prehistory" (152), an event that unfolds as follows: a band of brothers, driven out of the primal horde by their jealous father, return, kill

their father, and—"it goes without saying" (142)—devour his body, ending the patriarchal horde and initiating history and civilization. Small wonder that many critics treat this truly primal scene as the only passage of real interest in the essay. With all its shock and scandal, Freud's theoretical event certainly has a rather transfixing effect. Yet this admittedly "monstrous" (142) origin does not appear until section five of the essay, and we should not forget that Freud begins to theorize the beginning in a much more modest fashion: donning the cap of an anthropological scholar, he reviews the literature, diligently examining and evaluating a wide array of theories that attempt "to penetrate to the original nature of totemism" (107). Hence we shall start where Freud does, summarizing the theories he dismisses and, more particularly, emphasizing those he is drawn to.

Freud begins his review by assessing "nominalist" theories of totemism, which focus on the role of nomenclature in the formation of totemic religions. Writing off most of these as inadequate, he nevertheless goes on to note that "[t]he theory belonging to this group which most deserves attention is that of Andrew Lang" (111). Freud is interested in Lang's theory because Lang, unlike the other nominalists, is initially indifferent to the question of how clans obtained their totemic names. Instead, Lang suggests, in Freud's gloss, that

It is only necessary to assume that they [the clan members] awoke one day to the consciousness that they bore such names and could give no account of how this had come about. *The origin of the names had been forgotten*. They would then attempt to arrive at an explanation by speculating on the subject; and, in view of their belief in the importance of names, they were bound to reach all the ideas contained in the totemic system. (111-2; Freud's emphasis)¹¹

According to Lang, then, totemism cannot be understood as having a definite, locatable origin. Rather, the entire system of totemism arose and progressively developed through the clan members' attempts to explain and interpret the origin of their totemic name, an origin that was itself forgotten. Freud highlights this mnemonic failure and then goes on to summarize the second part of Lang's theory, in which Lang attempts to explain how the totem names in fact originated (since Lang seems to have decided that a forgotten origin is no origin at all). However, Freud dismisses this second part as differing in no essential way from the other nominalist theories, for he is most interested in Lang's initial speculation that totemism arose through the clan's very act of interpreting "the fact of the totems having animal names—always presupposing that the origin of these names had been forgotten" (112).

Next, Freud evaluates sociological and psychological theories of the origins of totemism and exogamy—and systematically refutes them all. Before bringing psychoanalysis to the table, however, he does mention

one last theoretical attempt to crack the enigma of exogamy, namely, Darwin's "historical" hypothesis of the primal horde, a speculative scenario in which the strongest male of the very first group of humans banishes the other males to keep the women of the group to himself.¹² Freud suggests the practical consequence of such a scenario would be exogamy for the rest of the males, and then wraps up his review by noting that Andrew Lang had already in fact accepted Darwin's speculations on the primal horde as explaining the origin of exogamy. Lang, however, also supports Emile Durkheim's theory that exogamy derived from totemic laws, and, as Freud writes, "[i]t is a little difficult to bring these two points of view into harmony: according to the first theory exogamy would have originated before totemism, while according to the second it would have been derived from it" (126). The question is, which came first, totemism or exogamy, and Lang seems to want it both ways. But Freud does not read Lang's apparent chronological confusion as a weakness. Instead, this confusion intrigues him, as he ends section two by footnoting a long citation from Lang's *The Secret of the Totem*, again emphasizing one particular idea of Lang's:

If it be granted that exogamy existed in practice, on the lines of Mr. Darwin's theory, before the totem beliefs lent to the practice a *sacred* sanction, our task is relatively easy. The first practical rule would be that of the jealous Sire, "No males to touch the females in my camp," with expulsion of adolescent sons. *In efflux of time that rule, become habitual*, would be, "No marriage within the local group." Next, let the local groups receive names...and the rule becomes, "No marriage within the local group of animal name..." But, if the primal groups were not exogamous, they would become so, as soon as totemic myths and tabus were developed out of the animal, vegetable, and other names of local groups. (126; the italics in the third sentence are Freud's)¹³

Freud is drawn to Lang's indeterminate chronology because he will later conclude that totemism and exogamy have a simultaneous origin (146). So it seems rather odd that Freud also adds a sentence of his own to the end of the footnote in which he informs us, by citing a later text of Lang's, that Lang eventually "abandoned the idea that exogamy is a consequence of the general totemic taboo" (126). At first glance, Freud's footnote to the footnote would seem to place exogamy in a primary position vis-à-vis totemism, a move that would apparently contradict his later conclusion. However, the half-sentence Freud emphasizes in the first citation clarifies his addition: he wants to highlight the primacy of exogamy in the context of Lang's passage because, there, "exogamy" refers to not only the original prohibition of the "jealous Sire" but also the law this prohibition eventually institutes—and it is precisely the process through which prohibition becomes law that Freud is most interested in. After all, Lang's citation provides Freud with almost everything but the murder, yet

Freud does not emphasize the prohibition of the Sire or the expulsion of the sons, but rather the becoming habitual of this performative prohibition. In Freud's subtle citational reading of Lang, the original prohibitive declaration becomes ritualized and, "*in efflux of time*," instituted as the law of exogamy. Exogamy, in other words, is the product of a sovereign declaration of power that is forgotten as it becomes transfigured into cultural law.

While Freud dismisses nearly every theory he reviews, the two moments he does emphasize, I will argue, inform the theory of history he elaborates in the last three sections of the essay. The first moment, found near the beginning of section two, is Lang's claim (in Freud's words) that the origin of totemism is necessarily a forgotten origin. The second moment, found at the very end of the section in Freud's footnote, is Lang's suggestion (brought out by Freud's emphasis) that the origin of exogamy is an act of power that is forgotten through habituation. Both of these moments are subtle, almost unconscious readings of Andrew Lang, who subsequently disappears entirely from Freud's account. While Darwin's primal horde returns in section five, how might we understand Freud's fascination with Lang's theories of the forgotten origin and the institutionalized performative? Can we say these theories also return in section five? And if so, how?

The Primal Scene

Although Darwin and his horde set the scene for the primal murder, they are not the only ones invited onstage en route to Freud's historic drama.¹⁴ In section three, Freud discusses psychoanalytic observations of animal phobias in children and focuses not on his own "little Hans," but on Sandor Ferenczi's "little Árpád," whose case demonstrates that children with animal phobias have displaced the emotional ambivalence they feel towards their father onto their animal father-substitutes.¹⁵ Then, in section four, Freud turns to the work of the anthropologist William Robertson Smith, who theorizes that the sacramental killing and communal eating of the totem animal of primitive groups was an essential part of totemic religion, but that this ritual could only be performed if all members of the clan collectively participated in the festive deed and mourned the killing of the sacred animal.¹⁶ Freud then unites Ferenczi and Smith in the beginning of section five by suggesting the totem animal is in fact a substitute for the father, which he justifies by noting that an ambivalent emotional complex towards the animal is observed in both totemism and animal phobias. Freud has thereby explained the structural function of totemic sacrifice psychoanalytically. But seeking the very origin of civilization itself, he recognizes that such an account of totemism will not suffice,

for “[a]ny satisfactory explanation should be at once a historical and a psychological one” (108). And this is why he brings Darwin’s primal horde back onstage.

Juxtaposing the primal horde with totemic ritual, Freud is able to glimpse “a hypothesis which may seem fantastic but which offers the advantage of establishing an unsuspected correlation between groups of phenomena that have hitherto been disconnected” (141). The trick, then, is finding a way to connect the two historically:

There is, of course, no place for the beginnings of totemism in Darwin’s primal horde. All that we find there is a violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself and drives away his sons as they grow up. This earliest state of society has never been an object of observation. The most primitive kind of organization that we actually come across—and one that is in force to this day in certain tribes—consists of bands of males; these bands are composed of members with equal rights and are subject to the restrictions of the totemic system...Can this form of organization have developed out of the other one? and if so along what lines? (141)

Freud must account for the transition between a state of society that has never been seen, the primal horde, to an observable form of social organization, totemism. At stake is the passage from the unknown to the known, from prehistory to history. And within this passage Freud posits the event of the primal murder:

If we call the celebration of the totem meal to our help, we shall be able to find an answer. One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end of the patriarchal horde...The totem meal, which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion. (141-2)

Note that Freud narrates the murder and its historical effect before providing any account of the motivations leading to its occurrence. Indeed, even at the level of his narrative, he is only able to arrive at “the beginning” through calling the sacrificial totem meal that historically follows the murder “to our help.” Of course, Freud’s murder, which inaugurates civilization and religious practice, is not itself a sacrifice. When the murder occurs there is no god, no religion, and no totem. Rather, as Freud makes clear, this murder gives rise to the very possibility of sacrifice. Yet, in the next sentence, when Freud attempts to explain the brothers’ psychological motivation for killing the father, he again calls up the totem meal to assist him, suggesting that “we need only suppose that the tumultuous mob of brothers were filled with the same contradictory feelings which we can see at work in the ambivalent father-complexes of our children and of our

neurotic patients. They hated their father, who presented such a formidable obstacle to their craving for power and their sexual desires; but they loved and admired him too" (143). Freud, circling back to the ambivalent father-complexes of children, which he previously connected to the totem meal, thereby assimilates the primal murder within his oedipal-logic so as to justify this event. The brothers killed, we are told, because they hated (and loved) their father who forbade them from having sexual relations with the women of the group. We are now back in the realm of a familiar, familial psychoanalytic framework.

However, if the totem meal allows Freud to imaginatively posit the event of the murder, we might ask whether it can perform the same work in his attempt to explain this event psychologically. For if the ambivalence found in totemic sacrifice is projected into the past as an explanation for why the brothers killed the father, then totemic sacrifice would historically develop out of the same ambivalent psychological framework that this practice offers up as a retroactive justification for the primal murder, effectively justifying itself. In other words, the logic of Freud's explanation is circular: the ambivalent father-complex present in sacrificial totemic rituals is used to explain the psychological motivations for the primal murder, and, in turn, this now primal ambivalence towards the father explains the historical development of totemism, the sacrificial ritual, and the murder and incest taboos. Freud thus presents a historical narrative in which an irrevocable event gives rise to civilization and history; however, he can only explain this irrevocable event through a self-justifying, circular logic.

If Freud's circular explanation betrays the suspect character of his detective work, there are still more obvious reasons why we might doubt the brothers would have had the oedipal motives he imputes to them. For one, Freud's rendition of the primal horde—one powerful male greedily copulating with his sisters and daughters, and a separate band of nomadic, homosexual brothers—is not exactly reminiscent of any social-familial arrangement in which his oedipal formulation would seem contextually appropriate. Moreover, if the band of brothers first became strong and organized through "homosexual feelings and acts, originating perhaps during the period of their expulsion from the horde," then why would sexual desire for the women have been their "chief motive for dispatching their father" (144)? Why, indeed, would it have been a motive at all? The fact that Freud claims "Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them" (144), in the very same paragraph in which he mentions the importance of homosexuality in uniting the brothers, only underscores how forced his hetero-oedipal explanation of the murder truly is.¹⁷ And if we are to take Freud's claim that the brothers became sexually involved with each other as seriously as he did (a claim he repeats nine years later in *Group*

Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego),¹⁸ then it is unclear why they would have even returned to kill the domineering male. All that is clear in Freud's account is that a murder occurred which defies an easy psychological explanation.

I would suggest, therefore, that while the murder in *Totem and Taboo* is a primal event in Freud's historical narrative, this event is also a somewhat primal theoretical construct, as it effectively challenges the very psychoanalytic framework through which Freud attempts to interpret it. Freud's unconvincing oedipal reading may in part be responsible for inciting his critics and unnerving his defenders, but everything in the development of his narrative suggests that oedipal psychology can only be read as the aftermath of the primal murder, not its cause. The function of this psychological aftermath, however, cannot simply be understood within the confines of his historical narrative, for Freud's oedipal explanation of the murder is not only an attempt to justify the brothers' deed, but also an attempt to justify why psychoanalysis has any business at the origin of history and civilization.¹⁹ It is also a justification, that is, for his own act of positing "the great event of human prehistory." As a logic that shores up the historical-textual event of the primal murder, the Oedipus complex makes sense of two different acts within two different registers: Within the context of Freud's historical narrative, the oedipal formulation, manifest in the taboos of totemism (against incest and killing the totem), allows the brothers to comprehend their act of murder within an institutional framework and transition from the primal horde to a totemic form of sociality, a transition that effectively inaugurates history. Within the context of the broader theoretical project of *Totem and Taboo*, the Oedipus complex allows Freud to explain and smooth over the theoretical event that he himself posits, an event that exceeds his own psychoanalytic mode of interpretation. But these two registers are of course constitutively interwoven: the "great event of human prehistory" is the deed of both Freud and the brothers, and the history this event sets into place concerns how they both react to it.

Not a Psychological Institution

Although the primal murder resists the psychoanalytic framework through which Freud explains this event, this event certainly produces the psychoanalytic framework. For soon after Freud narrates the murder a "sense of guilt made its appearance," and the brothers "revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. They thus created out of their filial sense of guilt the two fundamental taboos of totemism, which for that very reason inevi-

tably corresponded to the two repressed wishes of the Oedipus complex" (143). Clearly, the Oedipus complex and its attendant psychology are thoroughly intertwined with totemism as products of the primal murder, though it is not clear whether oedipal guilt is responsible for the rise of totemism or vice-versa. For Freud also states that the brothers instituted the incest taboo to preserve the homoerotic "organization which made them strong" (144); and in light of the brothers' primary object-choice, there is good reason to believe they may have renounced the women for reasons other than guilt. Furthermore, if the brothers' sense of guilt is what led them to institute the taboo against killing the totem, then when was the totem itself created? Are we to believe totemism originated before the guilt-driven taboo on killing the totem was put into place? Or, as in Freud's narrative, did the totem suddenly appear on the scene at the same time as the prohibition against killing it?

Freud gives no account of how and when the totem-as-father-substitute came into being, but he nevertheless goes on to insist that "[totemic religion arose from the filial sense of guilt, in an attempt to allay that feeling" (145). In fact, he even claims that all later religions have arisen in an attempt to solve this very same problem, that they "all have the same end in view and are reactions to the same great event with which civilization began" (145). And yet, if totemic and all other religions originated with the purpose of counteracting feelings of guilt, then religion as such has been remarkably ineffective in fulfilling, or even approaching, its *telos*. As Freud acknowledges, the historic persistence of guilt "has not allowed mankind a moment's rest" (145), for the brothers' original guilt, a "driving factor" in the development of later religions, "never became extinct" (152). And, moreover, he also acknowledges that religion has failed to counteract the ambivalent father-complex as a whole:

There was another feature which was already present in totemism and which has been preserved unaltered in religion. The tension of ambivalence was evidently too great for any contrivance to be able to counteract it; or it is possible that psychological conditions in general are unfavourable to getting rid of these antithetical emotions. However that may be, we find that the ambivalence implicit in the father-complex persists in totemism and in religions generally. (145)

Thus neither totemism nor religion in general has been able to allay or counteract the father psychology that Freud claims it was initially developed to deal with—which is rather remarkable. Freud clearly wants to explain the purposive origin of all religion and religious ritual psychologically; however, the gaps and supplements in his own narrative challenge such an explanation, and his reflections on the history of religion suggest otherwise. Indeed, it very well may be "possible," as Freud suggests, "that psychological conditions in general are unfavourable to getting rid

of these antithetical emotions.” But it also seems quite possible that the primary purpose of totemism may not have been to counteract emotional guilt and ambivalence—in fact, it may not have been psychological at all.

Mnemonic Murder

While Freud continues to insist upon the dubious psychological *arche* and *telos* of totemism, he nevertheless provides other clues as to why totemism may have arisen in the wake of the primal murder. On the one hand, he writes:

Totemic religion not only comprised expressions of remorse and attempts at atonement, it also served as a remembrance of the triumph over the father... Thus it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again in the sacrifice of the totem animal, whenever, as a result of the changing conditions of life, the cherished fruit of the crime—appropriation of the paternal attributes—threatened to disappear. (145)

Here, Freud explicitly contrasts the failed psychological purpose of totemism with a very different purpose, that of ensuring remembrance. Aside from any purpose of atonement, then, totemism functioned to preserve a collective memory of its origin across time. On the other hand, though, Freud also claims that “totemism helped to smooth things over and to make it possible to forget the event to which it owed its origin” (145). He thus suggests that totemic ritual functions so as to allow its origin to be both remembered and forgotten, again and again. How can we account for this seeming contradiction?

We could begin by recalling that Freud was drawn to a theory of forgetting in section two, a theory articulated by Andrew Lang, who seems to be (all but) forgotten in section five. In Freud’s subtle reading of Lang, the origin of totemism was necessarily a forgotten origin, and the origin of exogamy was a performative act that was forgotten as it became ritualized, repeated, and transfigured into institutional law. In the last sentence of section five, Freud explicitly brings these two origins together and concludes that “totemism and exogamy were intimately connected and had a simultaneous origin” (146), the primal murder; and the history this origin puts into place strikingly articulates the forgotten theories of Lang. We are told that, with the institution of totemism, “it became a duty to repeat the crime of parricide again and again” so that “the cherished fruit of the crime—appropriation of the paternal attributes”—did not disappear. The event of the murder thus puts into play a ritualized repetition compulsion that ensures remembrance of the fruit of the crime.²⁰ Tellingly, however, we see that the original “fruits” of the crime mentioned by Freud (the women) have already been forgotten and replaced by a psychological fruit, which, in turn, demands remembrance itself. We are also told that, over time, a deity developed out of the totem

animal. While this deity, like the totem, is also a father-substitute, Freud stresses that the apparently “two-fold presence of the father corresponds to the two chronologically successive meanings of the scene,” for the different meanings attached to each ritual iteration do not, Freud claims, overlap “in a two-dimensional fashion” (149). Rather, these differences must be understood as temporally discrete and successively produced by the ritual itself. It is not surprising, therefore, that “[a]s time went on, the animal lost its sacred character and the sacrifice lost its connection with the totem feast” (150). For the entire history the primal murder puts into place explicitly concerns a form of historical transmission in which a collective memory of this act is continually distorted through the habitual repetition of remembrance rituals.

Freud thus provides two ways in which to understand the rise of totemism in relation to the development of history: On the one hand, he suggests totemism originated in order to allay feelings of guilt and ambivalence towards the murdered father figure, though he has trouble demonstrating how guilt led to the formation of totemism, and, in his own account, totemism, and religion in general, has had little success in fulfilling this psychological purpose. On the other hand, he suggests totemic ritual developed as a means to assimilate and collectively remember the murder, even though this remembrance ritual has effectively allowed the event to be historically distorted and forgotten. While Freud primarily emphasizes the failed psychological function of totemism, and finds himself in phylogenetic territory, flirting with the hereditary transmission of psychic guilt, I would like to emphasize the commemorative function, a function that appears to be even more primary in Freud’s narrative.²¹ I would like to suggest, in other words, that we can understand totemic ritual as an archival technique: as a means to record, understand, and remember (and forget) the great event of human prehistory.²²

As Freud’s text demonstrates, however, understanding totemic ritual as an archival technique does not explain the primal murder or the origin of totemism. Instead, it demonstrates why such an explanation is impossible, for the archival process Freud describes repetitiously re-creates and re-erases collective memory across time. Freud’s unconvincing oedipal explanation of the murder is therefore not simply aberrant; rather, this explanation draws attention to the aberrancy inherent in any attempt to explain the origin of history and civilization. What *Totem and Taboo* thematizes is the impossibility of truly knowing such an origin. And yet, in undermining his own anthropological thesis, Freud actually provides a fairly compelling account of how a prehistoric event would have been culturally recorded. For how else would such an occurrence have been archived if not through dramatic reenactment? Freud’s account of an

event and its performative inscription suggests an archival technique that may indeed be the most legitimately “primal” aspect of his entire argument. However, the primal character of this archival technique does not concern prehistory or evolutionary anthropology. It concerns the primary processes of collective memory.

Ritual Remembrance

The ritual of totemic sacrifice is performed, we are told, whenever memory threatens to disappear. Since this ritual functions to ensure the historical transmission of collective memory, it makes sense that “the less it [the murder] itself was recollected, the more numerous must have been the substitutes to which it gave rise” (155). It is important to note, however, that the totemic remembrance ritual does not exactly recall the past “itself.” In fact, Freud’s entire historical narrative challenges the very concept of remembrance as such, for each ritual repetition is shown to simultaneously erase and refigure the previous understanding of the murder. The so-called substitutes for the primal scene that Freud identifies in religious rituals throughout history are not, therefore, produced by an inability to remember, or by an absence of ritual, or even by psychical repression, primary or proper, as traditionally understood.²³ Rather, these figural iterations are produced by a form of historical forgetting that is itself the product of ritual remembrance.

Remembrance, then, is not an anamnestic practice of recollection in Freud’s narrative, but rather a productive and destructive act that re-creates and re-erases memory through each performative repetition. So we should not be surprised that Freud’s concluding example of this “process of systematic distortion” (156) is not even explicitly commemorative. After narrating a history of religion from totemism to Christianity, he finally cites the performance of Greek tragedy as an “ineradicable trace” (155) of the primal murder, suggesting that the hero of tragedy “had to suffer because he was the primal father, the Hero of the great primeaval tragedy which was being re-enacted with a tendentious twist; and the tragic guilt was the guilt which he had to take on himself in order to relieve the Chorus from theirs” (156). Freud thus twists the tropes of the primal scene in order to trace his connection: he equates tragic suffering with guilt, asserts that the guilt-ridden hero of tragedy is the father and that the members of the chorus are the brothers, and then qualifies this assertion by claiming that the assumption of guilt had been inverted. And yet, however convincing Freud’s tropology may be, the historical significance of his example does not concern the specific content of tragic performance, for Freud tellingly does not refer to any specific tragedy. Instead, he refers to the performance of tragedy in general, underlining

the fact that such rituals are themselves the ineradicable traces of history. "Thus we can trace through the ages the identity of the totem meal with animal sacrifice, with the anthropic human sacrifice and with the Christian Eucharist" (154), as well as with Greek tragedy. For what *is* in fact remembered in Freud's historical narrative is ritual.

Ritual remembrance, then, as an act that necessarily exceeds any individual or individual psyche, is also irreducibly social. While the meanings and emotions individuals may attach to particular performative iterations are inherently fragile, and subject to the same forces of destruction that potentially and inevitably affect the psychic memories of all, rituals persist in Freud's historical narrative because they are not dependent upon or possessed by any individual(s). Freud, eliminating the individual from his theory of historical transmission, has instead "taken as the basis of [his] whole position the existence of a collective mind" (157). But while he believes this to be the central weakness of his argument, I would argue that it is his central insight. The final essay of *Totem and Taboo*, published twelve years before "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad'" (1925), depicts another ingenious Freudian writing machine. In fact, the figure of totemic ritual explicitly illustrates the social drama of memory-writing that Derrida finds implied by the mystic writing pad.²⁴ But whereas the pad requires us to be "several in order to write" (*ibid.*, 226), totemic ritual indicates that writing is even more radically social. Totemic ritual, as an unlocalizable archival technique that historically grounds memory and resists historical determination, ceaselessly disrupting the very tradition it makes possible—totemic ritual is Freud's model for a collective psychic apparatus. And insofar as this model demonstrates the conditions of possibility (and impossibility) of historical memory, we may want to conceive any notion of the archive, and perhaps even memory itself, as irreducibly collective.

Theoretically Forgotten

In my reading of the last essay in *Totem and Taboo*, Freud's theoretical narrative of the primal murder and the history it unfolds is not simply a wild and aberrant evolutionary speculation structured by oedipal guilt. Rather, it is a theoretical narrative in which an event is continually re-written in order to be remembered, and continually erased and forgotten through this very process of re-writing. We should keep in mind, however, that the transgenerational collective in Freud's narrative are not the only ones who ritually re-write the primal murder in *Totem and Taboo*. For just as both Freud and the brothers collectively enact and react to the great event of human prehistory, so too do both Freud and his collective ritually remember and re-write this event. Freud's theoretical acts of interpretation

are also rituals of remembrance: they are inscriptions that are discernible but nevertheless inseparable from the historical acts of his transgenerational collective. And if the last essay of *Totem and Taboo* can be read as a theory of collective memory processes, then it is through Freud's ritual participation in the act of remembrance that the primal character of this theory becomes evident.

One example of such participation can be found in Freud's attempt to explain how the psychological processes of his collective mind are transmitted transgenerationally. Freud addresses this problem in his conclusion by suggesting that "all the customs, ceremonies and dogmas left behind by the original relation to the father may have made it possible for later generations to take over their heritage of emotion" (159). He thereby explicitly formulates what his narrative had already implicitly illustrated—namely, that emotional states are effected through the historic transmission of ritual ceremonies, rather than vice-versa. However, if recalling "the original relation to the father" allows Freud to address a perceived weakness in his theory, this act also demonstrates that any origin or "original relation" cannot be separated from the productive and destructive force of remembrance. After all, the original relation Freud describes above is not the relation he originally described at the beginning of section five. For just as "[t]here is, of course, no place for the beginnings of totemism" (141) in the primal horde, there is also, of course, no place for "customs, ceremonies and dogmas"—all of that came after the father was murdered. Having followed the repetitious tropes and turns of his own historical narrative, Freud forgets and performatively erases the origin of this narrative, and he does so through the very act of recalling it. Just like the transgenerational collective, Freud's repeated acts of remembering and rewriting the primal murder allow him to forget the scene that began his—and their—history.

Yet even more striking is Freud's attempt to explain why human sacrifice historically developed out of animal sacrifice. Positioned at a scene of historic substitution, Freud recalls that "[t]he original animal sacrifice was already a substitute for a human sacrifice—for the ceremonial killing of the father" (151)—and he is thus able to suggest that the historic practice of human sacrifice was simply a return to the primal scene in its least distorted form. "The memory of the first great act of sacrifice thus proved indestructible," Freud then concludes, "in spite of every effort to forget it; and at the very point at which men sought to be at the farthest distance from the motives that led to it, its undistorted reproduction emerged." So, by recalling the murder to explain the human-animal sacrificial substitution, Freud is led to claim that "the ceremonial killing of the father" actually created an "indestructible" historical memory,

a contention that starkly contradicts the rest of his narrative. Yet how “undistorted,” really, is Freud’s “reproduction” of the murder? How “indestructible” is this “memory of the first great act of sacrifice”? For again, the first great act of sacrifice Freud refers to was *not* an act of sacrifice. Nor was it a ceremonial killing. In Freud’s account, the entire ritual of totemic sacrifice and ceremony arose *after* the murder so as to allow this event to be commemorated, smoothed over, and forgotten. Thus, by remembering the murder as a sacrifice, Freud erases and re-creates the originality of his own theoretical event, and he does so by assimilating this event within the very same sacrificial logic used by the brothers in his narrative. In other words, Freud forgets that the sacrificial ritual leads one to forget one’s origin, just as he forgets that the primal murder is not a sacrifice after having ritually and habitually explained this event through the language of psychoanalysis.

The final essay of *Totem and Taboo* thus provides an account of an event which, when historically and theoretically remembered, when archived within the primal and psychoanalytic communities, is collectively distorted, forgotten, remembered, and understood as an oedipal sacrifice. Both Freud and his transgenerational collective ritually recall and interpret their theoretical and historical origins, and through doing so, both repetitiously re-erase and re-create these origins across time. But these non-original origins also constitute what we refer to as *an* origin, for Freud’s theory of history and the history of his transgenerational collective are both the same and not the same: they are separable and inseparable, differentiated but irrevocably implicated. Theory and history, as it were, are ritual inscriptions that can only discover their own historicity through their entanglement with one another. And it is through this collective entanglement that we can begin to discover something called memory.

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Notes

1. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), vol. 13, 156. All citations from *Totem and Taboo* are from this edition and are hereafter cited parenthetically.
2. Peter Gay, introduction to the Norton Standard Edition of *Totem and Taboo* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1950), xxiii.
3. See the following works by Bronislaw Malinowski: “Baloma: The Spirits of the Dead in the Trobriand Islands,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 46 (1916): 353-430; *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (London: Kegan Paul, 1927); *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (New York: Eugenics Publishing Co., 1929); as well as A. L. Kroeber’s “Totem and Taboo: An Ethnologic Psychoanalysis,” *American Anthropologist* 22.1 (1920): 48-55.

4. See, for example, Derek Freeman, "Totem and Taboo: A Reappraisal," in *Man and His Culture: Psychoanalytic Anthropology after 'Totem and Taboo'*, ed. Warner Muensterberger (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1969), 53-78.
5. Ernest Jones, "Mother-Right and Sexual Ignorance of Savages," 128. For an examination of the debate between Malinowski and Jones, see Anne Parsons, "Is the Oedipus Complex Universal? The Jones-Malinowski Debate Revisited and a South Italian 'Nuclear Complex,'" in *Man and His Culture: Psychoanalytic Anthropology after 'Totem and Taboo'*, ed. Warner Muensterberger (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1969), 331-384.
6. Ernest Jones, "The Inception of 'Totem and Taboo,'" 34-5.
7. See Rachel Blass, "The Role of Tradition in Concealing and Grounding Truth: Two Opposing Freudian Legacies on Truth and Tradition."
8. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 57.
9. The most notable reading that contradicts the oedipal thesis is René Girard's "Totem and Taboo and the Incest Prohibition," in *Violence and the Sacred*, 193-222. I briefly discuss Girard's reading below.
10. Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, 332.
11. Freud prints this sentence in spaced type in the German original ("*Der Ursprung dieser namen sei vergessen*"), which he uses throughout *Totem und Tabu* for emphasis, *Gesammelte Werke* (London: Imago Publishing Co., 1940), vol. 9, 136 (GW).
12. For Darwin's account of the primal horde, see *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 361-363.
13. As Freud notes in GW: "*Die Hervorhebung in der Mitte dieser Stelle ist mein Werk*" (154).
14. Indeed, the construction of this drama is itself something of a collective effort. As Andrew Ryder notes, Freud enlists a wide array of scholars in the last essay of *Totem and Taboo*, effectively forming his own alliance of "brothers" in his effort to reveal the illusory quality of God. See "Politics after the Death of the Father: Democracy in Freud and Derrida," *Mosaic* 44:3 (2011), 118.
15. For this case study, see Sandor Ferenczi, "A Little Chanticleer," in *Sex in Psycho-Analysis: Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, translated by Ernest Jones (Boston: The Gorham Press, 1916).
16. See William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites: First Series, The Fundamental Institutions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1894).
17. René Girard also notes that the Oedipus complex provides an insufficient account of the murder in *Totem and Taboo*, and this allows him to rewrite the Freudian myth: the primal murder is, instead, he suggests, a sacrifice of an outsider that puts an end to ongoing mimetic violence between a band of undifferentiated brothers without a sovereign "father." Although I am not interested in attending to the insufficiencies of Girard's myth, I would point out that his central claim—that "mimetic desire" within the band of brothers would necessarily produce endless violence until appeased by a sacrifice—clearly elides Freud's suggestion that such "mimetic desire," far from creating violence, instead leads to social unification through homosexual feelings and acts. By emphasizing Freud's claim that "Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them," Girard ultimately represses the queer elements of Freud's text to a much greater extent than Freud.
18. *SE*, vol. 18, 124. As far as critics are concerned, there seem to be very few who even notice the homosexual element in Freud's primal scene. One exception is Trevor Hope, who highlights the supplementary status of homosexuality in *Totem and Taboo*, but does not fully draw out the implications this supplement has for Freud's overall argument. See "Sexual Indifference and the Homosexual Male Imaginary," *Diacritics* 24, 2.3 (1994): 168-183.
19. That is to say, Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Ernest Jones, *Totem and Taboo* was also designed "to deepen the gap" between the Freudian and Jungian schools of psychoanalysis (see "The Inception of 'Totem and Taboo,'" 34). The fictional history Freud

- narrates thus resonates with his imagined history of psychoanalysis, as Freud envisioned his act of writing the primal murder as itself a disruptive event that would irrevocably determine the future path of psychoanalysis.
20. It should be noted that totemic ritual is, like the *fort-da* game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, another Freudian figure for repetition compulsion. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), provides an excellent reading of the *fort-da* game in which she suggests the importance of this game has to do with the way in which its pattern of departure and return “brings into prominent view a larger conception of historical experience, a conception Freud was grappling with and trying to bring into focus in the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*” (66). My reading of *Totem and Taboo* suggests that *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is already itself a return to and rewriting of this conception of historical experience, a conception which is then, as Caruth elucidates, later rewritten in *Moses and Monotheism*.
 21. Whereas Freud only flirts with phylogenesis in *Totem and Taboo*, he fully embraces such an explanation of historical transmission in *Moses and Monotheism*. Historical tradition in primeval times (and through the present), he argues in the latter text, could only be possible through the phylogenetic inheritance of memory-traces, since oral communication alone could not do the trick. In the rest of this essay, I argue that *Totem and Taboo* offers an alternative and much more compelling way in which to understand tradition and transmission—an alternative that Freud seems to have more or less forgotten in (re-)writing *Moses and Monotheism*.
 22. See Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) for a discussion of the central role of the archive in psychoanalysis. My use of the term “archival” here is in many ways informed by Derrida’s text.
 23. For Freud’s theoretical discussion of primal repression and repression proper, see the 1915 metapsychological essay “Repression,” *SE*, vol. 14.
 24. Jacques Derrida, “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

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