ROUNDTABLE

READING TOGETHER
Schwartz–Reisman Graduate Student Conference, University of Toronto

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The following reflections are excerpted from a roundtable discussion, titled "Reading Together," that concluded the Schwartz–Reisman Graduate Student Conference on April 27, 2015, at the University of Toronto's Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies. John Screnock, a graduate of the University of Toronto and the Kennicott Fellow in Hebrew at the University of Oxford, moderated the discussion.

To what extent does our understanding of the past and present involve fragments? How do we work with those fragments in constructing our idea of Judaism and "Jewishness"?

Joanna Krongold (Department of English)
Much of the work presented at the CJS graduate student conference highlighted the desire to arrive at a whole, as opposed to a fragmented, understanding of texts, identities, historical events, or religious beliefs. However, the presentations questioned whether a whole understanding is ever really achievable. Twenty-first century scholars must acknowledge that as they read, their interpretations and interventions transform their subjects into fragmented texts; scholars will always read from their own perspectives and can never wholly assemble the meanings and values originally associated with these texts. The act of writing, too, necessarily involves fragments, for it privileges one story over another. Scholars therefore assemble those written fragments in ways that are meaningful in the present, layering them to form a palimpsest of interpretation and representation. One of the ways that Jewishness can be formulated and maintained is from these fragments of reading and writing. Passing through different cultures, time periods, languages, and places, Jews have carried fragments of songs, stories, jokes, and faiths forward to the present day. The construction of Jewish identity through both reading and writing can therefore be seen as an assembly of these fragments.

What are the ethics of being "untimely" readers?

Hannah Mayne (Department of Anthropology)
As an anthropologist, being untimely can be a source for concern. In fact, a few years ago, several well-known anthropologists published a volume called *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary*. It included an entire section that discussed the inherent problem of doing

research among people and communities and then only publishing that material months, and more often years, later. If we want to raise awareness of inequalities or give back to the communities with whom we are doing research, and if we want to promote change in policy or structure, then being untimely seems like a rather negative outcome of our methods. If, as anthropologists, we are especially attuned to what is emerging in the present and into the future, do we not fall behind, in a sense, if we are untimely? In response, one of the volume's authors writes, "Anthropology of the contemporary is fated to be derivative … to arrive belatedly and to stay longer."[1] In this sense, being untimely is precisely something to celebrate because it allows the researcher/author to take a step outside the intimacy of what is happening on the ground and consider what they observe and experience with analytical and critical distance.

Following this line of thought, I wonder if, for anthropology, as well as for other fields, we might think with an idea of "unspatiality." In other words, we learn concepts and theories in one place, travel to another location (archives, a neighbourhood, a country) to study social life, and then travel back to process our materials. We might ask, then, what are the ethics of being "unspatial?" After all, Jewish Studies, in particular, involves study across multiple worlds and worldviews in time and space, across many histories and geographies. Following this line of thought, we might also ask, for whom are we reading and writing? Is it possible to ask questions and produce responses that are pertinent to current academic conversations, and also relevant for Jewish communities (distributed temporally and spatially)?

Joanna Krongold

The time in which scholars live inevitably affects the way they understand and order the past. For example, the construction of genres of literature or eras of history depends on present understandings of the past. Therefore scholars' capacity for imagination is crucial. It is only through an imaginative leap that they are able to become untimely readers, for they need the faculty of imagination to transport them back in time. However, scholars are also unable to escape their particular perspectives. Even their imaginations and the possibilities open to them are determined by their own place in time. They need imagination to escape their time, but they need their time to define that imaginative capacity. Embracing and acknowledging this paradox of imagination is central to conducting scholarly reading in an ethical way.

In the complex interplay of reader and text, what is the role or impact of the medium in which a text is presented?

Amir Lavie (Faculty of Information)

The medium, an intermediate agent connecting readers and text, plays a vital role in the understanding, interpretation and communication of texts. In the following remarks, I will

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[1] Paul Rabinow, et al., *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 68.

review some attributes of the digital medium and the impact of digitized and digital documents on textual analysis at large and Jewish textual documentation practices in particular.

As digital documents become more and more dominant, we have to acknowledge their profound difference from paper documents (as well as earlier forms of recorded information). Easily disseminated and reproduced, they offer readers previously unimagined access and retrieval options and are also capable of integrating into them other, non-written (visual, audio) texts. On the other hand, the entirely different economy of production prevents us from speaking about "originals" and "copies" in the digital realm. Also, the ease of manipulation and mobility of digital documents affects both content and context and requires new methods to measure fundamental concepts such as trustworthiness or authenticity of a text. The digital medium also transforms the reading process: consider hyperlinks and tagging, two qualities that redraw the boundaries between author, publisher and reader, or consider the act of reading long digital texts compared to the material qualities of paper. Moreover, digital documents are perceived as containers or carriers of information rather than the "source" itself—as is mostly the case in paper form.

Consider also preservation: popular digitization discourse still tends to partly justify the digital medium as a tool for preserving decaying paper sources. But this is a problematic notion in today's technological climate. File formats and display technologies change constantly and indeed some high-profile digitization projects conducted in the past 15-20 years are almost useless today. Another example is social media files, which are real-time biographical snapshots that can offer immense value to future historians researching the lives and times of global political and cultural leaders to be, currently in their teenage years. However, there is currently no solution for preserving and archiving social media information in a coherent way, in part because the information is presented in extremely complex formats and is "non-archival" by nature. Moreover, private for-profit corporations control and own the information, which they can erase, commodify and sell in the future.

With relation to the rich Jewish documentary heritage and the respect it offers to the written word, I believe that the creation of digital repositories can assist the specific Jewish challenge of structuring cultural and religious identity based mostly on access to shared texts for communities without agreed-upon geographical, linguistic or political centres. Digital repositories can also reflect and maintain the liquid relationship between individual and group identities structured around Jewish community, ethnicity and religion. There seems to be a practical need to digitize existing collections in order to create and enhance access to an infrastructure of primary and secondary sources that will accommodate various user groups: scholars and lay people, Jewish and non-Jewish, and so forth. This must be accomplished on communal, academic, national, and international levels. I find it to be one of the most valuable tasks toward the preservation and progress of Jewish culture.