Terminal Moraine

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter deconstructs the Jewish identity as exiles and victims, by comparing their situation to “terminal moraine”—a geologic metaphor for Long Island, USA. American Jews have prospered despite a long history of oppression, not the least of which is the Holocaust. However, during the post-War era there were born plenty of American Jews who felt detached from their history and political identity, a phenomenon termed as “Jewish whiteness.” This can be overcome so long as each person takes the initiative to learn from each other, thereby preserving the memory and the sense of community between them and the land on which they stand.

**Keywords:** terminal moraine, Long Island, American Jews, Jewish whiteness, political identity, Holocaust, post-War era

You can watch people align themselves when trouble is in the air. Some prefer to be close to those at the top and others want to be close to those at the bottom. It's a question of who frightens them more and whom they want to be like.
White Like Us
When I was five or six, I was taken by my parents to a holiday
party for progressive activists and their kids at which Paul
Robeson was the guest of honor. Upon being introduced, I
sang to him. That would have been bad enough (the only tune I
have ever been able to carry is “Teen Angel”), but even worse
is what I chose (or was prodded—the story does not say) to
sing: a song from an album called Little Songs on Big Subjects,
the chorus of which goes, “You get good milk from a brown-
skinned cow./ The color of your skin doesn’t matter no-how./
Ho ho ho, can’t you see/ the color of your skin doesn't matter
to me.”

After the party, my parents went into the city for dinner with
Robeson. At his suggestion, they went to Longchamps, and my
parents worried about whether or not he would be served. As
it turned out, Robeson was recognized—as, of course, he had
expected—and they were shown to the best table and waited
on in ways my parents were certainly not used to. Longchamps
was more Robeson's world than it was my parents’, but if he
thought their solicitude condescending, he certainly gave no
sign of it—much as, I am told, he reacted with apparent
delight to my off-key assurance that I was deigning to treat
one of the towering figures of the twentieth century as my
equal.

The song I sang and my parents’ protectiveness capture the
spirit of the principled, committed antiracism with which I was
raised and that motivated my parents and many other whites
to support and participate in the civil rights movement of the
1940s, 1950s, and 1960s. Anti-Black racism was a terrible
wrong, and white people—especially, for complex reasons,
Jewish white people—had a moral obligation to do what they
could to help those who suffered from it and to work to end it.
Like many other (p.64) “red diaper babies”—the baby boom
children of communists, socialists, and assorted other
“progressives” (the umbrella term that at that time separated
the serious left from what were derisively referred to as
“liberals”)—I was pushed in my carriage on civil rights picket
lines and marches and carried to rallies and meetings. Our
own activism in the 1960s was less a matter of rebellion than
it was the carrying on of a family tradition: We were the dutiful children of courageously rebellious parents.

But with notable differences. Unlike some of my acquaintances, I never got drawn into the more romantically revolutionary activities of the Weather Underground; my only brushes with the law involved several unsuccessful attempts at arrest for civil disobedience. But over the years, my politics diverged in various ways from my parents’, notably around the rethinking of antiracism that characterized the theoretical and political shifts associated with the Black Power movement and subsequent identity politics. From these perspectives, what is most salient about the song I sang to Robeson is the fact that the milk you get from a brown-skinned cow is white: The message is that, under different colored skin, everyone is really just like us white people.

In particular, Blacks were just like us Jews. My parents were not religious, at least not in any institutionally recognizable way. My mother had been raised in a left-wing, secular milieu, attending a Sholom Aleichem schul (a secular Jewish version of Sunday school), at which she studied Yiddish along with Jewish history and literature. My father had been raised in an Orthodox family, but the story in my memory (though not in my mother’s) is that as a young man he swore never to belong to a synagogue again after having to pay for a minyan to say Kaddish for his father. (A minyan is the quorum of ten adult Jewish men required for rituals such as the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead.) My sisters and I were raised with a strong cultural identification with Jewishness, which in our family centered on a commitment to fighting so that others might be liberated, as Jews had been, from the various tyrannies that had enslaved us and continued to enslave others. As the bumper sticker on my car says, “None are free so long as any are oppressed.”

The principal Jewish holiday we observed was Passover, for which my father put up a banner on which he had written the words from the seder service that are inscribed on the Liberty Bell: “Proclaim liberty throughout the land.” We always invited non-Jews to join our seders, which were filled with discussions of current events, especially those involving liberatory struggles in the United States and internationally. When the cup of wine was put out for the prophet Elijah, we understood that he would not be coming yet: The role of the Messiah he
heralded was not to save us from anything but to let us know that we had succeeded at what I later learned to call tikkun olam, the healing of the world. “Next year in Jerusalem,” the words that close the seder, referred not to the possibility of aliyah—moving to Israel—but to the impossible dream that by next (p.65) year the world would be healed and, consequently, but only consequently, our Diaspora ended.¹

My parents were not anti-Zionist, but on the whole, Israel did not loom large in my consciousness (I have still not been there). From time to time, to commemorate some occasion or other, we planted a tree in Israel, and we had relatives living there, one of whom lost two sons in the Six Days’ War, which immediately preceded my wedding in 1967 and lent it an air of somber celebration. But it was clear that our calling as Jews was here, in America, in solidarity with those whose lives here had not yet achieved the success of ours. The displacement of the Diaspora had in my mind less to do with the destruction of the Second Temple than with the anti-Semitism that at the turn of the century had driven my grandparents and so many of their generation from Europe, and that culminated with the Holocaust and the destruction of Europe as a home for Jews. The ending of the Diaspora consequently had less to do with a return to Israel than with an end both to the continuing threat of anti-Semitism, which made the state of Israel an arguable necessity, and to the whole range of other threats that put other groups of people at similar peril. In particular, given the extent to which many Jewish Americans had come to feel—however ambivalently—at home in the United States, it was our responsibility to help make that achievement possible for others, to help make the United States live up to the words in Emma Lazarus’s poem on the Statue of Liberty, promising the safety of home to those in need of it.

In my suburban, Long Island high school, most of the students in the honors track were Jewish, although we were a minority in the school. We jokingly referred to the few Christian students in the program (only one of whom was Black) as “honorary Jews.” A group of us hung out together, listening to Dave Brubeck, Miles Davis, Joan Baez, and Bob Dylan and talking about such things as whether the earth might not be a particle circling the nucleus of some huge atom, until all hours of the night (specifically, until what my parents—in a gesture toward something like but not quite a curfew—referred to as “skeighty-eighty O’clock”). We called ourselves “YID,” an
acronym for “Youth for Intellectual Discussion,” the self-mocking glibness of which marked our blissfully ignorant distance from a world of anti-Semitic slurs. The oppression from which we had been delivered had happened long ago and far away: Adolf Hitler merged in my mind with the Pharaoh to whom Moses had sung “Let my people go.” History was a dangerous place that had been very bad for the Jews; but that was then and there. Here and now we were safe, and our obligation as Jews “never to forget” found concrete expression in a commitment to fighting on behalf of others who here and now were not safe.

One of my mother’s favorite films and books is Gentleman’s Agreement, and she alludes to it when she wants to make the point that one ought not to remain silent in the face of expressions of bigotry. I recently read someone’s sardonic comment on the film: that its lesson is that one ought to be nice to Jews because you never know when one will turn out to be a gentile. That is not, of course, the moral my mother draws; but it is telling that the moral heart of the film, and the point of identification my mother urges, is not the Jewish soldier but the Gregory Peck character whose masquerade as a Jew is aimed both at confronting an injustice and at awakening his fiancée to the moral imperative not to remain silent, even when speaking out is socially uncomfortable or even dangerous.

This lesson is at the heart of the moral identity I associate with Jewishness. My own identifications—in films, novels, television programs, and news stories—tend to be not with those who fight injustice on their own behalf, but with those who, from positions of privileged safety, fight on behalf of others. That I grew up with a sense of privileged safety—especially during the McCarthy era—is a source of wonderment to me. Even as native-born Americans, my parents hardly experienced the world as a safe place for Jews. Not only had anti-Semitism been a reality in their New York lives, but also they had been antifascist activists, aware of what was happening in Europe and fully cognizant that it was, in some cases quite literally, our relatives to whom it was happening.

I was conceived two months after my father’s return from the War, and when I was eighteen months old, we moved from Brooklyn to Long Island, where I lived for the next sixteen years and where I sang to Robeson, assuring him of my
generous color blindness. I want to explore what that story encodes, as well as what it hides and distorts, not just about my own quite particular post-War suburban Jewish girlhood, but about the whiteness of Jews in post-War America and about the complex and diverse meanings of the relationships between Black Americans and their Jewish allies in those years. My guiding image is that of terminal moraine, which is what, geologically, Long Island is.

Then and There; Here and Now

Just a few Yiddish words, the very sound of the language evokes very strong feelings and memories. So I am determined that Yiddish will never be a barrier, as it has been for many Jews (p.67) whose parents spoke it only az di kinder zoln nisht farshteyn, so the children won't understand.

Irena Klepfisz (on her choice to use Yiddish but not to write in Yiddish only), *Dreams of an Insomniac*

Somewhere else, the earth lies in narratable formations—the familiar list of igneous, stratified, and metamorphic. Geologists and paleontologists can read the mineral and fossil stories preserved in place in the layers of rock. But sometime in the distant past, a glacier came along and broke some of the rock-narratives into fragments, called moraine, which it carried along as it moved south. As the ice age ended, the glacier receded, leaving a line of “terminal” moraine marking its furthest edge. That strip of terminal moraine is Long Island, in contrast to Manhattan, which is bedrock. Significantly, one speaks of living not “in,” but “on” Long Island—or even “on the Island,” as opposed to “in the City,” which is, of course, also an island. (Brooklyn and Queens, which are geologically on Long Island but geographically in New York City, are, in common parlance, neither on the Island nor in the City.)

To grow up on terminal moraine is to grow up on the unnarratable fragments of other people's stories. Or so it seemed from the perspective of those of us who had been brought to or birthed on Long Island because it was “a good place to bring up children”; in contrast to the City, it was “safe,” lacking in the sort of stories and histories that clashed with the wide-open possibilities that we were supposed to see ahead of us.
In reality, of course, Long Island had a great deal of history, but it belonged to other people. Many of the place names are American Indian: Ronkonkoma, Massapequa, Patchogue, and Montauk; but I do not recall that our education included learning who or what they were names of, or which nations lived there or what happened to them. Slightly less obscure in my mind is the colonial and revolutionary history of Long Island: In the seventeenth century, Manhattan was not the center of that part of the world, and communities far to the east, which are now sleepy outposts, were thriving ports. The town to which my family moved the summer before I went off to the City to go to college is steeped in revolutionary history, though what I know of it is anecdotal. Nathan Hale gave his one life just down the road (in Halesite); and, so we were told, colonists shipped off a bunch of cattle from our beach to General George Washington’s forces on the other side of Long Island Sound under the noses of the British troops, who were sleeping off a drunken stupor, the consequence of a Christmas party the locals had thrown for them.

But I do not recall knowing anyone (though surely I must have) whose parents, let alone more distant ancestors, had been born on the Island. Nor, for that matter, do I remember knowing anyone whose parents had been born in Europe (though most of my friends’ grandparents had been). My experience as a post-War American Jew is very different from the experiences of those who were born here of parents who had fled or survived the Holocaust. The experience for which I am evoking the image of terminal moraine is that of having the ground under one’s feet be that of other people’s stories, other people whom one may be exhorted to honor—never to forget—but whose lives are neither vivid nor individualized but, rather, fragmented and jumbled, out of place and time.

The move to Long Island was, I think, the move to just such a place, a place where the possibilities of the present and future were unconstrained by history, where anyone could grow up to be anything. Jews of my generation ought to be haunted by history, as those who are the children of survivors typically are, deeply aware of the strenuous efforts to make sure that no one like us was ever born, aware of carrying the burden of all the lives that in fact never were, or that were cut off. But I think something other than the sheer unimaginability of the Holocaust accounts for why—along with, I believe, many if not most who share the relevant parts of my history—I am not
haunted, do not perceive the world as personally dangerous, and do not viscerally think of the Holocaust as something that happened to people just like us, not so far away and not so long ago.⁶

Films like *Amityville Horror* and, especially, *Poltergeist* suggest that the suburbs are, in fact, haunted—in *Poltergeist* by the ghosts of those buried in a long-forgotten cemetery over which the town was built, with homes for people who knew nothing of the strangers under their feet. The moral—that history does not stay buried, that what you do not know can hurt you, that the past requires remembering—is one that is deeply familiar to Jews.⁷ It is at the heart of the traditional Passover seder—the knowledge that all over the world, today as for thousands of years, Jews are saying the same words, telling the same story—as well as of post-Holocaust Jewish identity. But the imperative to remember was oddly but understandably muted in post-War suburbia: If we too vividly had in mind what it was we were exhorted never to forget, we could hardly have moved in the world with the sense of entitlement to self-invention that our parents meant to give us in the safety of the suburbs.

From Victims to Saviors

Jewish Israeli national identity⁸ was forged largely in defiant opposition to the image of the Jew as persecuted victim. In a country of “tough Jews,”⁹ Holocaust survivors were an embarrassing presence: a particularly chilling epithet for them was the Hebrew word for soap.¹⁰ But however much Israel’s claim to legitimacy might be internally buttressed by appeals to its being the historical, original home of the Jews—to which we all had, biblically, a right of return—in the eyes of the world its legitimacy rested on the need for sanctuary for those who had found themselves turned away from the shores of the countries where they had sought refuge from persecution and extermination. If, in Robert Frost’s words (1914), “Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,” the failure of the world to take in the refugees from Hitler was an overwhelming argument for a Jewish homeland. Throughout the many subsequent years of conflict, Jewish American support for Israel has been an odd mix of anxious protectiveness toward a precarious, threatened homeland in a
hostile world and pride in the military might of the swaggering sabra.

The material, social, and cultural success of Jews in the United States has been the source of deep ambivalence. In a Christian country, with an enduring history of anti-Semitism, that success has inevitably been linked with danger, as it has been at least since the medieval and early modern association of European Jews with usury. (Money-lending being a necessity but forbidden at that time to Christians, some wealthy Jews became far wealthier under the protection of various courts, even while that wealth and protection marked them as marginal—the clear sign of their refusal to convert to the one true religion—and left them vulnerable to resentment, especially in bad times.) One important strain of diasporic Jewish consciousness has been, since the nineteenth century, a continuing identification with liberatory struggles and an internationalist commitment to social justice; and in the United States, especially in the prosperity after World War II, that commitment became one of the avenues of expression for the ambivalence about material success, a way to deal with the discomfort of being comfortable, as well as a way of distancing oneself from the stereotypes of the Jewish parvenu.

Different attitudes about Jewish success—whether Israeli or American—shape our responses to the linked fates of others. In relation to Israel the belief in Jewish exceptionalism has facilitated moral accommodation to the plight of the Palestinians and Israel’s responsibility for that plight, helping to rationalize away the parallels of dispossession, while for some Israeli and American Jews those parallels are increasingly, heartbreakingly salient. In the United States, these attitudes have diversely played themselves out in complex sets of identifications and disidentifications with African Americans. The phenomenon of Jewish right-ward defection from the Democratic Party has in large measure been a response to affirmative action, with its supposed echoes of anti-Semitic quotas, and a resentment of those who seemed to need more from the government than the formal abolition of barriers. For Jews on the left, relationships with Blacks have been more complicated, in part because seeing ourselves as the “good whites,” antiracist savior-heroes, has
been one of the ways of dealing with the ambivalences of success, success that had at its heart the achievement of whiteness (see Berger 1999).

Many, though by no means all, of the barriers that had kept Blacks out of the precincts of white America had also kept Jews out, and the fight to break through those barriers was one of the formative experiences of my parents’ generation. The achievement was an ambiguous one: Along with the lowering of barriers came the actual or threatened loss of much of Jewish (p.71) culture, both secular and religious. Identification with those for whom the barriers still stood became in part an expression of the ambivalence of that loss, including the loss of the solidarity of struggle and the moral clarity of victimization. At the same time, there were the children to think about. Our birth after the War represented the survival of the Jewish people and of Jewish memory, but our lives were meant to be shaped by the confidence that we were among the rightful heirs to the American dream.

Children always pose a dilemma for parents whose commitments or passions would lead them toward lives of instability or risk, but in the case of our parents there were especially poignant—and morally and politically complex—aspects to these tensions, summed up in the notion of safety, one of the prime virtues of the suburbs as a place in which to raise children. The dangers of the city were many, but central among them was the fact that many Jewish neighborhoods were “changing,” that is, becoming largely Black. It was difficult to think about “them” whose allies we were as the same “them” whose presence in our old neighborhoods made those neighborhoods unsafe. One “resolution” of the difficulty was color blindness: The neighborhoods were dangerous because of poverty and the attendant problems of crime, alcohol, and drugs; and the appropriate response was integration, especially in education and in housing (in safe, stably integrated suburbs—always, however, more of an ambivalently embraced dream than a reality).

But if the suburbs remained for the most part resistant to racial integration, they did not necessarily feel like home in any deeply resonant sense for many of those who were brought up there and for whose sake the burgeoning communities were being built. From my—specifically middle-class—perspective, feeling at home on Long Island has always
seemed like feeling at home in your elementary school—understandable but something to outgrow. When the ground under your feet strikes you as fragmented and haphazard (however comfortably cocooned you might be upon it), you are likely to long for something more “authentic,” more substantial, something with more soul—the bedrock of Manhattan, for example. It was urban Blacks—those who lived in the dangerous neighborhoods—not the few who achieved a middle-class integrated suburban life—who filled the imagination of assimilated, rootless post-War Jews, as we exercised one of the ironic privileges of whiteness: the appropriation of cultures of color. The courageously principled participation of Jews in the civil rights movement, some at the risk or cost of their lives, was mirrored by the phenomenon of wanna-be Black hipsters.

The political affiliation of Jews with African Americans was—I want to and largely do believe—a basically, if ambiguously, honorable one. But even as they acknowledge the value and sincerity of Jewish support, most Blacks remember the alliance far more ambivalently than Jews tend to, (p.72) largely because they recognized better than we did both the elements of condescension on our part, our tendency toward white-horsed knighthood, and—especially after the rise of the Black Power movement—our unacknowledged privileging of whiteness as an aspirational ideal. What I want to suggest is that part of what was going on was that for progressive Jews the affiliation served to assuage some of the anxieties of post-War Jewish American life (displaced onto the unstable combination of ideological color blindness with an attraction to the cultural distinctness that flourished in the ghettos we had so recently quit) and to guide the reforging of the moral core of diasporic identity after the formation and increasing stability of the state of Israel.

Furthermore, the contradictions between the imperative to remember and the necessarily hazy indistinctness of our own history—which, had we vividly remembered it, would have made us unable to take up the inheritance our parents had won for us—drew us to the role of savior: identifying with those who were oppressed even as we certified our own membership among the privileged by our ability to offer a helping hand. If we were ambivalent about being at home in America, one way to mitigate that unease was by undertaking to make good on the promises that had drawn our
grandparents—the offer of a home to the “huddled masses, yearning to breathe free”—on behalf of those whose ancestors had been brought in chains, centuries earlier, to these shores and to whom the offer of home had never been made in good faith.

By the Railroad to Babylon (Not Quite Remembering Zion) Baldwin, Freeport, Merrick, Belmore, Wantagh, Seaford, Massapequa, Massapequa Park, Amityville, Copague, Lindenhurst, aaaaand...Babylon

Stations on the South Shore line of the Long Island Railroad

Should we conclude that terminal moraine does not afford a reliable ground for responsible political identity? That such an identity needs to be grounded in the solidity of individual and collective memory, in a nonfragmented, stable narrative? It would be dangerous to draw such a conclusion. Not only are such narratives, for a wide range of reasons, unavailable to many people, but also the conviction that they are necessary leads to bloody, brutal, and brutalizing attempts to secure the ground in which such narratives are believed to be rooted. As Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin (1993) argue, a diasporic reading of Jewish identity can help all of us refigure responsible political agency as not requiring a homeland—as even, they argue, incompatible with any homeland that needs to be secured by the force of arms.

What we need, I want to suggest, is to learn how to lovingly tend, as we responsibly stand on, the fragments of our own and each other's narratives. (p.73) A broken, scattered past is more, not less, in need of our attention and our recollection: Responsibility lies not in rootedness but in a willingness to take seriously the contingencies of our connections to each other and to the fragments of stories that have turned up under our feet. It is too glib to conclude, from the failure of various foundationalisms, that the whole idea of ground is somehow suspect, or that there is no important difference between terminal moraine and quicksand. There is actual ground under all our feet, and its failure to live up to our demands of solidity does not absolve us of the responsibility to attend to it and to what we do upon it.
What might such exhortations actually, concretely mean? For one, it seems to me that, of the options available for how to be a Jew, especially in the relatively comfortable Diaspora, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the choice to define oneself in solidarity with those who are oppressed is the most honorable. The other prominent options—militaristic toughness, insistence on our continuing status as victims, or assimilation to the ranks of the privileged—are neither morally defensible nor, in the long run, effective guarantors of the safety they promise. None is really “good for the Jews.” A historical reading of the “chosenness” of the Jews suggests that we were chosen for victimization; and the moral and practical faults with those options come from thinking either that we can escape that condition or that we have a preemptive claim on it. We can never be sufficiently tough to keep ourselves safe, and the attempt to do so exacts an unacceptable toll on others. Nor will our claim to special tugging rights on the world’s heartstrings protect us from those who choose not to be moved, while defending that claim hardens us to the cries of those who are otherwise harmed, including by us. Adopting the protective coloration of country clubs and the Republican Party will not successfully make us other than Other in a Christian country, but it will make us complicit in the continuing exclusion and marginalization of those who lack our privilege.

If recognizing a liability to victimization as an ineliminable aspect of Jewishness seems unacceptable—as it does to me—the honorable response, I want to suggest, is not to try to eliminate the specific connection between Jewishness and victimization, to make Jews safe in an unsafe world. Even if this were (as I doubt) a prudentially reasonable strategy, the core of what I have learned as Jewishness tells me that it is an immoral one. Rather, if being a potential victim because of who you are (not just because anyone, randomly, could be attacked or killed, but because people like you are likely to be singled out) is not okay for the Jews, it is not okay for anyone. Put this way, a world that is safe for the Jews is a world that is safe for everyone: a world in which people are not singled out for attack or mistreatment because they are Black or gay or female or Tutsi or indigenous or Albanian or Palestinian. It is a world in which homes are not defined (p.74) by who is excluded from them, a world in which attentive concern does
not stop at some imaginary line, but also a world in which the stranger who has come, for whatever reason, to live among you has a special claim on that concern.

It is equally a world in which those who prosper in the Diaspora have special responsibilities toward those whose homes they live in. To live diasporically is not to live as a tourist or as a guest; one is not on vacation, and one has no home to return to. But the Diaspora is not exile; one is not a refugee, often not even an immigrant, but a native-born child, even of native-born parents, a citizen of this place that is not home. One could even, maybe, grow up to be president. So what does it mean not to be at home?

I have been trying to figure this question out in relation to my not feeling at home in Minneapolis, where I have lived for twenty years, with a wonderful job and friends I love. I say this not because home is New York (I am beginning to think that is not the right explanation). Rather, I suspect that nowhere I was could be home, that the Diaspora is my way of life, that I am that figure, the Wandering Jew, cosmopolitan to the core. Perhaps the appeal of New York is not that it is home, but that it is a place whose meaning is constructed largely by uprooted or rootless cosmopolitans. As bedrock, it will endure, solidly, as people come and go, changing its architecture and its streets—unlike the Midwest, which is, it seems to me, meant for those who are at home there and who, through their labor, change the very shape of the earth beneath their feet.

Though (because?) I am not at home anywhere, there are a great many places where I could live, and many places where I do, in fact, have important pieces of my life; and I move around with ease, among widely scattered friends, but am also comfortable in the presence of strangers—more comfortable at times than I am with those I am close to. Such ease in the world is, of course, the product of privilege. Many who are, in Lugones's terms (1987) "'world' travelers" may come to be extraordinarily adept but are less likely to be at ease. But I need to not overplay the privilege of my ease while failing to acknowledge the value of their adeptness: One of the risks of thinking of oneself as a savior of the less-well-off is that one is likely to miss out on what one could learn through a more interactive relationship; even a conscientious acknowledgment of inequality may leave that inequality intact.
More recent work of Lugones is also relevant here. In working on issues of multicultural pedagogy, she has been developing notions of “long” and “wide” selves. Our long selves are our histories: From whom and from where do we come; what were our ancestors doing at different points in history; and how, as their descendants, do we relate to that history? Our wide selves are our relationships to and with other long selves: How and where do we stand in relation to others currently in our various “worlds”; and how are those relationships shaped both by our different, often conflicting, histories and by the material circumstances of our present interactions? To live on terminal moraine (and one way of understanding the “postmodern condition” is that all of us who are in some sense “in” that condition are living on terminal moraine) means that one's long self cannot be tapped by digging beneath one's own feet. One's history is dispersed and survives in fragments, while the real ground under one's feet is made up of the pasts that shape the long selves of others.

We have all become in real, material ways the keepers of each other's long selves, and our ability to recover and remember ourselves is, literally, in each other's hands. Only by undertaking the hard work of responsibility as wide selves, as people who need to learn from and with each other, to figure out how to be not victims and saviors but allies, can we hope to obey the injunction never to forget. I cannot remember my history, lying now under your feet, unless I learn how to take responsibility, with you, for the interactions between us, on the ground, however fragmented, on which we now stand.

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to my mother, Blanche Scheman, for her critical reading of this essay and her uncritical love of its author, as well as for several corrections of fact, her memory being at the time better than mine. (p.76)

Notes:

(1.) On the socialist internationalist culture of Yidishkayt, see Klepfisz (1990). On the view of the Diaspora as not ending with the formation of the state of Israel, see Boyarin and Boyarin (1993).

(2.) According to Judith Weisenfeld (in conversation), the remark is attributed to Ring Lardner.
(3.) I similarly wonder at my having had an immediate sense of entitlement to philosophy, despite being both a Jew and a woman; and I have written about what it meant that the generation of my teachers—overwhelmingly women and Jewish men—gave me the ambiguous gift of empowering ignorance. See chapter 1—a Festschrift for one of those teachers, Burton Dreben, of blessed memory.

(4.) My father—upon enlisting to fight the Nazis—had been posted to the China/Burma/India theater, as an officially designated “premature antifascist,” that is, someone whose left-wing political sympathies made him unfit to serve in Europe because of concerns about what would happen when Russian forces met up with the other Allied forces on the eastern front.

(5.) Certainly others whose external circumstances were similar to mine were more susceptible to the stories that surrounded us and felt the Holocaust as more immediately related to their own lives (in particular, the Diary of Anne Frank played a central role in bringing the Holocaust within our imaginative scope). I am working on the presumption that my sense of detachment—as though all of history were long ago and far away—is not just a piece of my own psychology but reflects something more general, something that speaks to the construction of “Jewish whiteness.” I am gambling that some significant number of readers will find in my stories resonances of theirs.
(6.) This sense of inexpressible distance from the Holocaust is not, of course, confined to post-War American Jews. In an interview, Kershaw (1999), the English author of *Hitler, 1889–1936: Hubris*, the first volume of a two-volume biography, says of the Nazi era: “This is not very long ago, and yet it seems to be on another planet.” The archiving of survivors’ memories is driven in part by the awareness of how hard it is for others really to comprehend the enormity of what happened and the consequent danger that the deniers, having credibility on their side, will win. (See Root (1998), for an argument, based on Hume's remarks on miracles, that we ought to believe what another tells us just in case the improbability that they are lying or mistaken is greater than the improbability of what they are reporting. If their report strikes us as unimaginable, the epistemic weight borne by their credibility is enormous.) The specific, disorienting irony I want to focus on is how this incomprehension figures in the lives of those for whom the injunction never to forget is meant to provide a moral compass and to orient us in the world.

(7.) It is also the moral of John Sayles's film *Lone Star*, in which history literally comes unburied and needs to be faced—as the Chicana schoolteacher has been urging in the face of Anglo community resistance—before reconciliation and the recognition and embracing of (literal) kinship are possible. The myth such stories play on is a very deep one in American cultural life: Suburbia is a recapitulation of earlier frontier myths of a vast, minimally populated wilderness, whose few inhabitants had no real claim to the land. Following a Lockean model, private ownership and forms of government based upon it were what turned space into place. Those places that are suburbs came into official existence as they were “developed.” The sorts of instantly fabricated towns of which Levittown is the prototype are in fact referred to as “developments.”

(8.) See Bar On (1994), for the importance of the term “Jewish Israeli,” as a contestation of the idea of Israel as a Jewish state, according to which all other Israelis, but not Jews, are marked by modifiers, such as “Arab Israeli.”

(9.) For the articulation of this image, especially as it resonates in the consciousness of American Jews, see Breines (1990).
(10.) Bat-Ami Bar On informs me that another, possibly stronger, association with soap was with the pale skin derided by sabras as associated with urban diasporic life. See Almog (1997, p. 143).

(11.) Riv-Ellen Prell has explored this ambivalence especially as it has played itself out in the edgy relationships between Jewish men and women. See especially Prell (1999).

(12.) The social location of such wealthy and powerful Jews—whether in medieval and early modern Europe, in Germany before the Nuremberg Laws, or, to an obviously lesser extent, in the present-day United States—is an example of what I call “privileged marginality.” See chapter 8. I use the term to refer to forms of privilege that are constructed specifically on the margins and thus carry with them complex amalgams of material and epistemic advantages and risks; another example is the position of tenured academics in a fundamentally anti-intellectual society. One of the defining features of privileged marginality is the particularly fraught relationship of those in that position to others with whom they share the marginality but not the privilege. Consider, for example, the debate over the protection of poorer Jews negotiated by those with relationships to various courts and state powers. See Arendt (1973, pp. 11–53) and Biale (1986, pp. 58–86).

(13.) On the parvenu and the pariah, as well as for the historical background for the situation of Jews as “privileged marginals,” see Arendt (1978).

(14.) See Bar On (1994) for a discussion of coming to full awareness of the bearing of Palestinian dispossession on Jewish Israeli national identity through her friendship with a Palestinian Israeli woman.

(15.) On the different psychic and social meanings and effects of anti-Semitism (epitomized by the Holocaust) and anti-Black racism (epitomized by slavery), see Thomas (1993).

(16.) Thanks to Lata Mani for bringing this point to my attention many years ago.

(17.) I have discussed the illusoriness of “safety for the Jews” in chapter 7.
(18.) For an exploration of the differences between exile and diaspora, see Kaminsky (1999).

(19.) I explored these issues in Scheman (1992b).

(20.) Binder (2000) addressed the epistemological implications of thinking about movement through actual and imaginative space in her University of Minnesota dissertation.

(21.) Thanks to María Lugones for calling into question common assumptions about the benefits of privilege in discussion at a meeting of the Midwest Society for Women in Philosophy [SWIP] in Madison, Wisconsin, March, 1999. See Lugones (1991) for a discussion of the ways in which a theoretical embrace of “difference” on the part of white feminists masked a failure to interact with women of color around issues of racism.

(22.) I learned about this work at the March 1999 Midwest SWIP meeting; see footnote 21.