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PRECARIOUS PASTS AND JEWISH COLLECTIVE MEMORY: “TRAPPED IN HISTORY” IN 2017 AMERICA

Caroline Light, Harvard University

People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them.
James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1953)

The past does not exist independently of the present.
Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (1994)

An alarming wave of antisemitism kicked off 2017, leaving many American Jews longing for stability, for a sense of identitarian coherence amidst mayhem. The Anti-Defamation League documented an 86 percent increase in antisemitic incidents—including bomb threats, cemetery and synagogue desecrations, and general harassment—compared to the same period in 2016. White nationalist and neo-Nazi mobilization has become increasingly visible nationwide.¹ Against this menacing backdrop, enter DC-Comics inspired *Wonder Woman*—the first major superhero movie directed by a woman and featuring a female lead—in June 2017. The title character, played by Israeli beauty queen and former Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) soldier Gal Gadot, was everything one could want in a twenty-first-century Jewish action figure: intelligent, righteous, beautiful, and more powerful than any man. It was easy to imagine *Wonder Woman*’s appearance in American movie theaters as an answer to many prayers: as a beacon of justice and defender of the innocent in a troubled world; as a figure of feminine power and self-determination after the defeat of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton by a man who bragged about his non-consensual exploits with women; as a symbol of Jewish strength and dignity amidst a disquieting surge of antisemitism.

Wonder Woman’s arrival in movie theaters and the spike in antisemitism together sparked often heated discussions over the nature of Jewish identity, with commentators from a variety of social media and news outlets debating Gadot’s race, and Jewish race identity more generally.² Some insisted on Jewish whiteness and racial privilege, while others asserted that Jewish people are anything but white. In response to criticism that the film’s producers did not cast a non-white lead, comic book authority Matthew Mueller insisted that

Gadot, as an Israeli, is in fact a “person of color.”³ Others took this argument further, claiming that Jewish people—regardless of nationality—should not be characterized as white. In *Forward*, Joel Finkelstein and blogger Dani Ishai Behan argued that to call Jewish people “white” is to deny their historical subjugation and to downplay the persistence of antisemitism. According to Finkelstein, “the poisonous narrative [of Jewish whiteness] forcibly decouples Jewish identities and legitimate suffering from the causes of all other oppressed persons of color.”⁴ Others countered that, while American Jews have been and continue to be targeted by antisemitism, they are often beneficiaries of racial privilege. Noah Berlatsky, also writing in the *Forward*, pointed to the contemporary visibility and acceptance of Jewish actors as leads in mainstream films, compared to the relative scarcity of lead roles for black actors.⁵ Feminist theologian Sarah Emanuel opined, “even if we recognize the racialized Otherness of Jews historically, Jews with light-toned skin have still, in many instances, benefitted from systems of white supremacy, particularly in the United States.”⁶ While Berlatsky’s and Emanuel’s arguments emphasize current privileges and access to representational power, Finkelstein and Behan address a past of “legitimate suffering” that creates a natural alliance between Jewish people and other “oppressed persons of color.”⁷ Both insights carry ethical weight and historical resonance, but they stand at odds regarding Jewish access to race privilege, as if racial identities were fixed in time, or race privilege—and the relative security that comes with it—could not coexist with “legitimate suffering,” past or present.

What might appear at first blush an argument over semantics offers a lens on the role histories of subjugation play in the contemporary construction of Jewish coherence. Amidst a backdrop of rampant antisemitism, growing militarization of American culture, and persistent assaults on racial justice, arguments exempting Jews from white privilege often embrace the similarities between antisemitism and other systems of exclusion without closely interrogating their points of divergence. Fifty years ago, James Baldwin, novelist and social critic wrote in a controversial *New York Times* essay, “One does not wish, in short, to be told by an American Jew that his suffering is as great as the American Negro’s suffering. It isn’t, and one knows that it isn’t from the very tone in which he assures you that it is.”⁸ His point was not to deny the endurance or intensity of antisemitism, but rather to question the appeals to fellowship and commonality from those who participate in or benefit from racial injustice.

Our contemporary moment demands that we take Baldwin’s critique seriously by interrogating the historical and political terms by which Jewish American identities are solidified, often around testimonies of past subjugation and appeals to political innocence. This summer’s feminist superhero blockbuster offers a poignant lens on the contemporary contours of collective memory in the service of Jewish coherence. In the film, Wonder Woman arrives in London during World War I, having played no role in creating the carnage; her violence is purely defensive against an enemy who has threatened to obliterate mankind. Wonder Woman’s representational power as a force of

righteous, defensive violence depends on her innocence of human-generated history as well as her absence of complicity in instigating violence. Her heroism derives persuasive power in large part from her political insouciance—she had no hand in creating the bloodshed she seeks to resolve—and her historical knowledge encompasses only Greek mythology. In this contemporary revisionist fantasy, war is the creation not of human beings but of Ares, the malevolent god of war. Wonder Woman's lethal attack on Ares and his German allies is justified both by her historical innocence and the violent encounter's utopic outcome: a world without war, without genocide.

How do claims to Jewish minority identity depend on collective memories that anchor Jewish coherence in a past of subjugation and slavery? Time-worn histories of Jewish coherence often depend upon silences in the process of history itself, masking the power structures that make such claims resonate with twenty-first-century audiences. How might we rethink our attachments to coherence and historic intelligibility as terms by which we solidify our collective identity as Jewish people and as citizens of an intractably incoherent world? In a nation polarized around conflicting appeals to social vulnerability and to the legacies of—and resistance to—white supremacy, historical testimonies of violence multiply in the service of complex, sometimes competing identity claims. When it comes right down to it, Jewish coherence often depends upon shared appeals to the past that obfuscate alternative, ambivalent narratives, some of which challenge the neat and tidy categories into which we place self and other, Jew and non-Jew. The variegated histories of subjugation on which these claims for coherence are based reveal that the identity politics of today are inextricably entangled with the past, and that the past, in fact, is far from behind us.

Incoherent Testimony: The Silence in the Archive

Merriam-Webster defines “coherence” in two seemingly incongruent registers: “(a) systematic or logical connection or consistency” and “(b) integration of diverse elements, relationships, or values.”⁹ The first emphasizes a preexisting internal logic or stability while the second addresses the process required to unify “diverse elements.” Appeals to shared history help gather a multiplicity of politically and culturally “diverse elements” into an intelligible community, even as American Jewish identity remains stubbornly heterogeneous. As historian Eric Goldstein and others have demonstrated, this process of meaning-making often depends on the assembly of a shared history by which Jewish people—in all their cultural, linguistic, political, and yes, even *racial* diversity—are known as a legible collectivity, one subject to unique forms of exclusion and violence.¹⁰ A shared past of vulnerability and struggle for social inclusion thus becomes a vehicle of coherence by which American Jewish identity claims are realized. For Joel Finkelstein and others, to call Jews “white” is to negate that shared history, to place Jewish people alongside other light-skinned people who have—to varying degrees—benefitted historically from and participated in white supremacist power structures.¹¹

Trained as a cultural historian, I look for insight into contemporary appeals to historical coherence as outcomes of a particular historical *process*, one where power-infused silences shape collectively circulated narratives. I am indebted to the late Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who illuminated the ways in which silence inevitably shapes the multilayered process of historical knowledge-production.¹² As humans live and as their actions affect others and the world around them, so do they narrate the terms of what will become their past. But historical actors do not have equal access to the power of testimony, and not all testimonies carry the same weight or resonance in what eventually becomes “history.” Trouillot’s work demonstrates how the stories that comprise historical truth are always at the mercy of human biases, mistakes, errors of memory, and above all, imbalances of power. Testimony from people who witness or take part in significant events shapes the historical record, but those from powerless and silenced individuals are less likely to find purchase in the traditional archive, and therefore exert less impact in shaping what becomes known as historical truth.

The silencing of certain testimonies is not a matter of deliberate individual control or domination. Rather, we collectively participate in the active manipulation of historical narratives by producing knowledge about the past that reflects prevailing needs, anxieties, and ambitions in the contemporary moment. As Trouillot cautions, “the past does not exist independently from the present.”¹³ As we summon the histories that resonate for us in the present—that help us concretize our collective identities—we necessarily forget (or downplay) those that might challenge our ethical authority. Our collective identities depend upon the shared memories that are meaningful and intelligible to us, and the shared rituals, celebrations, and memorials that invoke the past help bond and solidify communities. Especially as contemporary Jewishness stubbornly resists (ethnic, religious, political, etc.) coherence, our collective belonging as Jewish people requires historical common ground. Jewish intelligibility therefore depends on the capacity to make disparate elements cohere around a shared past of precarity, and our contemporary processes of historical meaning-making retroactively shape what we are able to remember.

The testimonies that substantiate mainstream histories of Jewish coherence depend on the way we make sense of the archival traces left behind by historical precursors. Whose testimony matters in the archives of Jewish coherence? How do archives from the deep past, as well as from our contemporary moment, reflect the creation of collective historical memory in the name of Jewish coherence, and the dependency of that legibility on identification with subjugation? We might observe the ways in which figures of abjection and alterity—of unfreedom and slavery—haunt our most cherished appeals to Jewish coherence-as-freedom and transcendence.

For Trouillot, history is a “sociohistorical process” that leaves material traces in the form of archives, which then provide sources for our efforts to narrate the past, to pass down stories that will lodge themselves in the memories of our children, and our children’s children.¹⁴ Silences inevitably permeate this process, from the moment that a historical act takes place to the point at which

it becomes sedimented in collective consciousness as “history.” Trouillot focuses on four moments in historical production: 1) fact creation or the creation of sources; 2) fact assembly, or the creation of archives; 3) fact retrieval, the production of narratives; and 4) retrospective significance, the production of historical “truth.”¹⁵ Temporal distance from the past grants increasing prestige to the narratives created by those in possession of the power not only to testify, but to be heard or witnessed by those around them—to be “legible” or coherent—in a given moment. Those testimonies that resonate the most, that are coherent to the most influential audience, tend to be the stories that best conform to the urgent needs and ontologies, the ready-made categories by which the world is organized, for those interpreting the past from the present. Attending to silences in the process of historical meaning-making enables us to consider the stubborn *incoherence* of historical truth, in the service of new ways of theorizing identity formation.

Our confidence in historical truth influences the production of contemporary identities, just as it depends on the sources informing that truth. Those who assemble the archive itself—that which contains the very *matter* of history and the material evidence by which the stories congeal into the historical record—are implicated in selecting which experiences are included in that archive, and which are left out. This failure is sometimes one of memory, but more often one of ontology: those collecting history-as-chronology can imagine as historically worthy those facts that validate an accepted or naturalized worldview. In other words, we *see* and internalize only that which is legible, or *coherent*, to us.¹⁶

We are also creatures of mimicry and habit, repeating tales that were told to us as children, but only the stories that catch in our consciousness as legible reflections on the ideological spaces we inhabit. Histories of heroism and resistance, of triumph over oppression, hold particular sway during times of upheaval. Popular fantasies manipulate history itself, as when Wonder Woman’s fictional character slays Ares, the god of war, just in time to prevent the future genocide that we as twenty-first-century viewers know to be looming. In this case, the superhero succeeds as a figure of historical revision and rescue, channeling collective longings into an alternate ending, where war as we know it ends and millions of Jewish lives are spared.

InCredible Witness: The Slave as Figure of Unfreedom

Such a revisionist fantasy answers an archive plagued by violence and loss with a narrative of empowerment and rescue. As Gadot’s Wonder Woman unleashes her self-possessed, righteous fury on the German army, she forecloses the eventuality of Nazi genocide. In sharp contrast to this empowered Jewish superhero, contingency and disempowerment haunt the conceptual framing of many of the narratives and histories that legitimize Jewishness as a bound and intelligible collectivity, recognized from within as well as without. From the deep past to the present, the fetishized figure of the slave has helped con-

cretize the boundaries differentiating Jews from non-Jews. A simultaneously knowable and unknowable figure that resurfaces in the crucial texts used to trace and reaffirm Jewish genealogies, the slave serves often as a symbol of unfreedom against whom Jews might know themselves to be free. We might observe, for example, how the figure of the slave appears as one of three identity-delineating boundaries in the blessings, dating back to antiquity, that observant Jewish men have recited daily upon waking:

Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a gentile.

Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a woman.

Blessed are You, God, our Lord, King of the universe, who has not made me a slave.¹⁷

If knowing ourselves by what we are not is vital to the practice of coherence, the way in which “disparate elements” may cohere into a recognizable collectivity depends upon the boundaries separating us from others, those who constitute the outer limits of subjectivity. These oft-repeated blessings invoked the slave, the woman, and the gentile as recognizable archetypes of otherness against which Jewishness cohered around free and sovereign masculinity. In his historical analysis of the “Three Blessings,” Reform rabbi and religious scholar Yoel Kahn argues that the blessings evinced “the ongoing desire to establish authenticity” by naming the various categories of humanity against whom Jewish manhood defined itself.¹⁸ The slave in these instances of ritualized Jewish coherence is one of intersectional alterity, a figure defined more by its alienation and difference than its distinct personhood. Jewishness as freedom-from-bondage, particularly the freedom to worship God, rather than an earthly ruler, gains coherence from its presumed masculinity in juxtaposition to the feminized subordination of enslavement.

Similarly gendered contrasts—wherein masculinity signifies freedom and sovereignty in contrast to feminized subservience—appear in legal archives as well. In antiquity, Jewish courts defined a viable witness as male, free, and properly Jewish, while excluding slaves, women, apostates, and other presumably untrustworthy individuals from providing legal testimony.¹⁹ According to feminist Talmud scholar Judith Hauptman, “the lack of distinction between a male and a female slave makes clear that ‘slave’ status, not gender, was the issue that could disqualify or qualify them” as witnesses in a particular case.²⁰ But what if social status itself is gendered? Although “women” are differentiated from credible witnesses by their non-masculine gender, and “slaves” are distinguished by their non-freedom, each is similarly excluded from the capacity to offer credible testimony based upon their social subordination and lack of sovereignty. The traditional exclusion of women and slaves from testimony suggests a gendered epistemology of incoherence by which Jewish authenticity coheres in sovereign masculinity.

I invoke the figure of the slave not to suggest an ahistorical or universalizing narrative of slavery, or to presume all forms of slavery politically and economically equivalent. On the contrary, I ask that we think self-critically about the ways in which the enslaved person has been fetishized as an object of historical instrumentality—as a figure of alienation and alterity, of unfreedom—in naturalized narratives of Jewish coherence, many of which persist today. The silences around certain power-infused sources of historical testimony, and the resulting archival absences, must be at the center of critical interrogations of Jewish coherence.

In “Venus in Two Acts,” feminist literary scholar Saidiya Hartman writes “at the limit of the unspeakable and the unknown” to address the absence of any “autobiographical narrative of a female captive who survived the Middle Passage.”²¹ She mines the archives of transatlantic slavery, attending to the silences and lacunae, the erasures that pose the enslaved woman as an unnamed object of sexual violence: “no one remembered her name or recorded the things she said, or observed that she refused to say anything at all. Hers is an untimely story told by a failed witness.”²² Called “Venus,” after the Roman goddess of love, by those who possessed and exploited her, the girl about whom Hartman writes could not testify to her experience, and those who caused and bore witness to her suffering and untimely death did not consider hers a loss worth grieving. Rather, her death appears cursorily in the archive because of the property loss it occasioned, and the possibility of legal malfeasance due to the ship captain’s abuse. We receive “no picture of her everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts”; the violence she suffered recorded as crimes against property.²³

As Hartman’s work demonstrates, the absence of testimony—the words of millions whose lives often ended violently and anonymously in the holds of slave ships, or on whose reproductive labor this nation’s political and economic dominance depended—obfuscates the lived experiences of enslaved women. The absolute absence of firsthand testimony from these historical actors creates a void that gets filled by default depictions of the enslaved by those who owned them. In the case of “Venus,” we witness the invention—by generations of white, male, historical truth-tellers—of a perpetually receptive object of sexual depravity. The figure of the enslaved woman thus gains coherence through her reproduction as the eroticized site of multiplying violence, with catastrophic consequences for contemporary epistemologies of personhood.²⁴

Hartman’s effort to speak to an unrecoverable testimony points to the brutal implications for Trouillot’s fourth layer in the historical process, the creation of retrospective significance of the past. The absence of testimony from “Venus,” the resulting incoherence of an archive in which we cannot access the lived experiences, words, and daily thoughts of millions of enslaved women brutalized in the Middle Passage, reverberates forcefully in the present. Hartman attends to the “afterlife of property . . . the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done, and the ongoing state of emergency in which black life remains in peril.”²⁵ The past still lingers, is not quite past, and the missing matter of history has grim implications for

those living at the volatile intersections of structural and epistemological violence today.

If our historic archives are by design constructed around willful, power-infused silences, then what takes shape as historical truth depends on the relation of the “truth-tellers” to larger structures of power. In Trouillot’s analysis, the composition of archives depends on the deliberate curation of testimonies, those that appear (to the curator) worthy of inclusion. Further, identitarian frames and logics of difference invest the process of archive-construction with power in multiple ways. The voices and circumstances of enslaved people—including the young girls and women who experienced untold violence aboard transatlantic slave ships—were rarely documented directly, nor were their stories deemed worthy of inclusion in what counts as “real history,” unless they were implicated in legal controversy, providing testimony in matters of concern to white power.²⁶ It is in these rare instances we might glimpse the enslaved person’s testimony in the historical record, but even then, their voice is ciphered through the language of those with authority to document what they deem relevant and to leave out that which they deem irrelevant. Or incoherent. Archival assembly has always depended upon someone’s judgment about what makes sense to include, a quest for coherence that inevitably leaves gaping wounds.

The History Trapped in Us

Perhaps ours is not a world in which slavery has ceased to exist; rather, it is one in which dehistoricized gestures to slavery help us tidily and coherently delimit the boundaries of justice. In reply to an English woman’s description of her work as a secretary, Wonder Woman quips, “where I come from, that’s called slavery.” Hers is a convenient shorthand by which contemporary American audiences may imagine the antithesis of the liberated woman. Wonder Woman, representing an earlier era in which Greek slavery prevailed, addresses her twenty-first-century audience from a film set one hundred years ago. We might imagine “Venus”—or, in the Greek case, Aphrodite—as a harried administrative assistant dashing to deliver her boss’s coffee. If women’s liberation from patriarchal power—the core mission of modern liberal feminism—is the antithesis of a historically, geographically, and culturally indeterminate state of slavery, how do we account for the intersecting power structures by which many are excluded from the benefits and protections of full citizenship, and those for whom the binaristic compulsions of normative gender are always-already cross-cut with racialized violence? Our feminist heroine obliterates patriarchal power in the form of a proto-Nazi German army; as novelist Robert Rath writes in the popular culture blog, *Waypoint*, “it’s hard to hate a movie where a Jewish actress rams a sword through a prominent Nazi.”²⁷ Our spectacle of Nazi-killing feminist fury leaves the less visible, normalized traces of contemporary white supremacy comfortably, coherently in place.

The film's contortions of history evince the facility with which we borrow the moral authority of the powerless and silenced even as we resist close interrogation of our own complicity in regimes of domination. Appeals to precarity-based coherence appear and become naturalized in our performative rituals. We might consider the seder, the Jewish annual celebration of liberation from Egyptian slavery. Our leftist, queer, and feminist Haggadah revisions notwithstanding, what political work is done in the service of Jewish coherence when we celebrate our collective freedom by comparing it to a remote past of unfreedom, characterized in a dehistoricized figure of the slave?

The slave looms large in the varied retellings of this ages-old story of subjugation and oppression, of resistance and liberation. In fact, one is hard pressed in the process of multiple retellings across the ages, to particularize the figure of the slave, to ground the slave in a past beyond her biblical abstractions. According to Jewish Studies scholar Catherine Hezser, "The experience of slavery seems to have been such a familiar phenomenon in ancient Jewish society that its terminology was also used metaphorically in the religious, social, psychological, and political realm."²⁸ What does this "familiar phenomenon" mean to us as Jewish people today, and to which "experience of slavery" do our contemporary Haggadot refer? More often than not, the seder's retelling of the story of Exodus naturalizes a decontextualized figure of slavery, one manufactured through the cascading silences of our persistently inadequate archive, a subjugated other whose unfreedom and archival invisibility made certain forms of liberation possible, but only for some. What historical legacies are made and unmade in this process of repeated, performative historical narration, and what silences preserved?

As Hartman shows, the lack of *coherent* testimony from historical actors—those whose bodies were used for grueling menial and reproductive labor, and for sexual gratification, and whose value as commodities nullified their humanity—resonates in the present. For these historical actors, the archive is a mute, occasionally echoing cavern that reverberates in our contemporary world's distorted depictions of black personhood as criminal and threatening, as effortlessly commodifiable, as not-entitled to full humanity. State-sanctioned violence in the service of "national security" and "public safety" continues to claim the lives of a growing multitude of people of color. While activists challenge the state to make good on its hitherto rhetorical commitment to equal justice, insisting "Black Lives Matter," white counter-protesters divert attention away from the historic precarity of blackness. The rejoinder "All Lives Matter" suggests that insistence on life and security for racially minoritized people undermines universal claims to humanity. The claim and subsequent counterclaim share a similar embeddedness in and reliance upon histories of collective vulnerability, but they are based on competing sources of testimonial evidence. Perhaps more perniciously, the counterclaim obfuscates the impact of multilayered historical silence in American archives of precarity. The testimonies of Jewish Americans dating back to our nation's settler colonialist roots echo through this archive, grounding the panoply of Jewish experiences in historical evidence while concretizing the coherence of "Jewish American."

How might Hartman's and Trouillot's exegesis of historical knowledge-production help address the complex relationship between histories of subjugation and contemporary debates about Jewish race identity? What are the ethical implications of collapsing histories of racism and antisemitism, particularly in testimonies by which Jewish people are imagined not only as subject to similar historic harms as African Americans, but also as natural allies in ongoing struggles for racial justice? Such potentially uncomfortable self-reflection is urgent when modern crusaders for intersectional justice in the United States seek common cause with Palestinians while accusing the Israeli government of "genocide" and "apartheid."²⁹ Criticism of this rhetoric was swift and came from left-leaning as well as conservative Jewish commentators, many of whom condemned the 2016 Black Lives Matter platform as antisemitic.³⁰

In his denunciation of the platform's "Vision for Black Lives," *Tablet Magazine* senior writer and former IDF soldier Liel Leibovitz invoked Jewish precarity as the grounds for armed defensive militancy. In an online publication that disguises its corporate sustenance behind a veneer of hipster edginess, Leibovitz described firearms as great equalizers, as levelers of socio-economic, ethnic, gender, and racial difference.³¹ About his multicultural group of IDF trainees, Leibovitz writes, "with guns in hand, we were so evidently and so beautifully equal."³² Here, lethal weapons provide a commonsense solution to two pressing issues: Jewish vulnerability to antisemitic violence and the need for the otherwise elusive "level playing field" for all minoritized people. Leibovitz thus frames armed self-defense as both a right and an urgent necessity for Jewish people, as a shield against antisemitic violence *and* as evidence of a commitment to liberal multiculturalism. Contra the claims of Israel's critics, particularly the framers of "A Vision for Black Life," Leibovitz suggests that Jewish self-defense in the present promises a brighter, more inclusive future, one grounded in a historic triumph over subjugation. One might picture an otherworldly, heroic Wonder Woman in wartime London: no one can question the nobility of her motives because she did not create the catastrophe she has been sent to repair. For Leibovitz, IDF soldiers are the heroic, armed "good guys" coming to the rescue of the weak; their "beautiful equality" a rejoinder to assertions of Israeli complicity in Palestinian suffering. The moral absolutism of this appeal to simultaneous Jewish precarity and heroism silences what Leibovitz dubs the "racist critics" who question the historical logic of militant self-defense and the testimony of Jewish vulnerability on which it is based.

Might our IDF-trained, Jewish Wonder Woman use her golden lasso to help extract painful truths against a rising tide of "alternative facts" and stubbornly widespread historical amnesia? Could the heated discussions her visibility has sparked lead us toward a more honest and forthright politics of remembrance? As an Israeli, Gadot is a foreigner in the United States, just as her on-screen avatar is a foreigner in London, a place she dubs "hideous." In each location—the film world and the real—Gadot's/Wonder Woman's exotic accent and ignorance of the cultural surround mark her as a stranger and non-citizen. She arrives in London mystified by the bloodshed and ignorant of

human history; she has played no role in instigating the war, nor is she aware of its causes beyond the stratagems of a malevolent god whose engine of destruction happens to be the German army. In fact, Wonder Woman's capacity to serve as a savior, to mete out violence in the service of protection, *not* aggression, depends on her capacity to stand outside of history. Wonder Woman's political and historical innocence may be her most resonant superpower, one that rubs off on the actual woman playing her so coherently as heroine whose righteousness is beyond question.

This performance of heroic insouciance resonates in a time of stubborn *in*-coherence, where state-fueled aggression targets the most vulnerable in the name of security for the powerful few, masking the structures that naturalize the murder and criminalization of people excluded from the exonerating power of whiteness. Under these circumstances, what is the relationship of owning (or denying) one's white privilege to owning (or denying) one's complicity in these naturalizing structures? The quandary is by necessity a historical one. People whose ancestors were once excluded from what W.E.B. du Bois famously called "the public and psychological wage" of white privilege might enjoy significant access to those privileges today.³³ Great-grandchildren of European immigrants who fled pogroms and genocidal antisemitism to face literacy tests, discrimination, and poverty in the *goldene medine* (Golden Land) often take for granted the spoils of race privilege in the form of unquestioned voting rights, access to upward mobility, and genial treatment by law enforcement.³⁴ Yet Jewish access to the "wages of whiteness" has been questioned time and time again, and we are reminded of that fragility when Jewish cemeteries and memorials, spaces of worship, and daycare centers are defaced and threatened, when white nationalist protesters wearing swastikas and crying "Jews will not replace us" receive police protection and tacit presidential support in the name of "free speech."³⁵

What kinds of historical testimony will we allow to legitimate our most urgent calls for action? As an epidemic of antisemitism threatens our security, how might we attend to the archival silences that displace alternative visions of social justice at a time when it is most tempting to cling to binaristic framings of "us" versus "them," and when neofascist political assemblages compete for the attention of those caught up in the terror of spectacularized violence? It is precisely at these moments that the call to coherence rings out as a seductive promise of safety, of timeless belonging for those who feel vulnerable. As we explore and question difference and coherence, the slippery line separating "Jew" from "non-Jew," we must return again to the past to revisit and decode our time-honored histories, to read into and beyond the gaping silences. And the methods for excavating them are by necessity complex, interdisciplinary, and disconcertingly inter-implicating.

Perhaps this moment commands us to rethink our privileged relation to testimony, to firsthand evidence from a living witness. We might note that not all testimony matters in the same way. Notwithstanding technological advances, such as iPhones, that allow us to record in-the-moment atrocities as they are experienced, and then to project them endlessly to virtual audienc-

es too numerous to count, much firsthand testimony remains inadequate to shift the wheels of justice. Civilians continue to capture the visual evidence of police violence against African Americans and to preserve them in a vast cyber-archive: Eric Garner's death as a police officer crushed his windpipe even as he pleaded "I can't breathe"; Philando Castile's polite but futile efforts to comply with police commands to retrieve his license; the rough arrest of Sandra Bland after she refused to extinguish her cigarette.³⁶ Our audio-visual archive proliferates, shattering geospatial boundaries, and enlisting us all as witnesses in a seemingly endless cycle of black disposability, a recurring crisis in value. The testimonial proof of police violence against people of color circulates endlessly, spectacularizing black suffering in a world increasingly desensitized to, willfully unanchored from, and in denial of its ongoing investment in white supremacy. And justice for the murdered remains elusive.³⁷

To return to Trouillot, and to echo James Baldwin, we are never more "trapped in history" as when we pretend otherwise. Baldwin's 1953 assertion marks a reciprocal entrapment—not only are we "trapped in history," but "history is trapped in [us]."³⁸ His was a call for a return to, and a meticulous taking stock of, not just a shamefully violent past; he called for self-critical recognition, the antidote to collective white amnesia, of brutal legacies not quite past. He insisted on a return to the silence-infused archive to attend to the unequal uses of testimony to shape historical truth claims and the reverberating effects of these claims in the volatile place and time in which he wrote.

I cannot imagine a more fitting aphorism for today's crisis of identitarian logic, and the pressing anxiety that drives many to rally under the seductive banner of exclusionary nationalism through draconian immigration restrictions, cuts to social welfare, and multiplying appeals to militarized self-defense and armed citizenship. Perhaps Wonder Woman's success as a figure of feminist progressivism can be traced to her political naïveté and historical innocence, not to mention her ignorance of the circumstances that commanded her heroism. As *New York Times* film critic A.O. Scott said of Wonder Woman, "Her sacred duty is to bring peace to the world. Accomplishing it requires a lot of killing, but that's always the superhero paradox."³⁹ A similar paradox rests at the heart of contemporary American Jewish claims to coherence, when they are based in shared histories of precarity that vindicate self-defensive violence in the service of peace. Untangling that paradox requires that we take full stock of the ways in which our routine invocations of past vulnerability may blind us to our complicity with present injustice. My hope is that we might become, as Trouillot suggests, more "suspicious of obvious genealogies," particularly those that impose a tidy coherence on a stubbornly complex, knotty, incoherent, and above all, uncomfortable past.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 "U.S. Anti-Semitic Incidents Spike 86 Percent So Far in 2017 After Surging Last Year, ADL Finds" Anti-Defamation League, April 24, 2017, accessed July 2017, <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/us-anti-semitic-incidents-spike-86-percent-so-far-in-2017>. Ironic-

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- 2 Noah Berlatsky, "Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman is White—Let's Not Pretend Otherwise," *Forward.com*, June 2, 2017; see also, Lara Witt, "Wonder Woman is Your Zionist, White Feminist Action Hero," *Wear Your Voice*, June 2, 2017.
 - 3 Matthew Mueller, "Wonder Woman: There IS a Person of Color in the Lead Role," *comicbook.com*, June 1, 2017.
 - 4 Joel Finkelstein, "Are Gal Gadot and Other Ashkenazi Jews White?" *Forward.com*, June 5, 2017. See also Micha Danzig, "Anti-Semitism in America is Nothing New: Don't Deny Jewish History and Culture by Calling Us 'White,'" *Forward.com*, December 1, 2016; Dani Ishai Behan, "Yes, Ashkenazi Jews (Including Gal Gadot) Are People of Color," *The Times of Israel*, June 4, 2017.
 - 5 Berlatsky, "Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman is White," and Noah Berlatsky, "Why Do White People Get Mad When We Call Wonder Woman 'White'?" *The Forward*, June 7, 2017.
 - 6 Sarah Emanuel, "Feminism, Zionism, and The Question of Compatibility: A Jew's Reflection on Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman," *Feminist Studies of Religion*, August 14, 2017.
 - 7 Finkelstein, "Are Gal Gadot and Other Ashkenazi Jews White?"
 - 8 James Baldwin, "Negroes are Anti-Semitic Because They're Anti-White," *New York Times*, April 9, 1967.
 - 9 "Coherence," *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed July 2017, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coherence>.
 - 10 Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006). See also Beth Wenger, *History Lessons: The Creation of American Jewish Heritage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
 - 11 On the complex processes through which immigrant communities have gained access race privilege in the United States, see David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ian Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).
 - 12 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).
 - 13 *Ibid.*, 15.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, 29.
 - 15 *Ibid.*, 26.
 - 16 For additional insight on human incapacity to see the unintelligible, see James Elkins, "On Blindness" in *The Object Looks Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).
 - 17 For a detailed discussion of the historic origins of these three figures, see Yoel Kahn, *The Three Blessings: Boundaries, Censorship, and Identity in Jewish Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Kahn locates the blessings in the Babylonian Talmud, in the Mishna Berakhot, but also investigates their non-Jewish origins, 62–63.
 - 18 Kahn, *Three Blessings*, 130.
 - 19 There were some occasions in which women and slaves might provide testimony, as in the case of releasing an *agunah* (abandoned woman) from legal limbo so that she could remarry or inherit her deceased husband's property. See Rachel Furst, "Parameters of Credibility: Apostates, Women, and the Definition of 'Otherness' in Medieval Rabbinic Culture," paper presented at "Grammars of Coherence" Workshop, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, May 2–4, 2015.
 - 20 Judith Hauptman, *Rereading the Rabbis: A Woman's Voice* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 202.
 - 21 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 1, 2.
 - 22 *Ibid.*, 2.
 - 23 *Ibid.*
 - 24 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 32.

- 25 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 13.
- 26 See for example Melton McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); and Wendy Warren, "'The Cause of Her Grief': The Rape of a Slave in Early New England," *Journal of American History* 93:4 (March 2007): 1031–1049.
- 27 Robert Rath, "Everything You Need to Know About the Nazi Villain from 'Wonder Woman,'" *Waypoint*, July 6, 2017, accessed August 2017, <https://waypoint.vice.com>.
- 28 Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 377.
- 29 Last August, the over fifty organizations affiliated with the Movement for Black Lives shared their platform statement, "A Vision for Black Lives," which criticized the U.S. government for its support of "the genocide taking place against the Palestinian people," and further asserted, "Israel is an apartheid state with over 50 laws on the books that sanction discrimination against the Palestinian people. "A Vision for Black Lives," platform, August 2016, accessed August 2017, <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>.
- 30 See Mazin Sidahmed, "Critics Denounce Black Lives Matter Platform Accusing Israel of 'Genocide,'" *The Guardian*, August 11, 2016.
- 31 See Zachary Braiterman, "Why I don't 'Like' Tablet Online Magazine—Corporate Money and the New Read on Jewish Life," *JewishPhilosophyPlace.com*, June 4, 2012.
- 32 Liel Leibovitz, "Black Lives Matter to Israel, Not So Much to its Racist Critics," *Tablet Magazine*, August 10, 2016.
- 33 W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1935), 700–701.
- 34 On the complex and contested nature of immigrant access to racial privilege, see Eric Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Karen Brodtkin, *How the Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, Painter, *History of White People*.
- 35 Dalia Lithwack, "They Will Not Replace Us: White Supremacists Can March on My Hometown, But They Can't Win," *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2017.
- 36 Al Baker, J. David Goodman, and Benjamin Mueller, "Beyond the Chokehold: The Path to Eric Garner's Death," *New York Times*, June 13, 2015; Mitch Smith, "Video of Police Killing Philando Castile is Publicly Released," *New York Times*, June 20, 2017; Abby Phillip, "A Trooper Arrested Sandra Bland After She Refused to Put Out a Cigarette. Was it Legal?" *Washington Post*, July 22, 2015.
- 37 Examples of law enforcement officers exonerated after killing black civilians abound; a few examples: Timothy Williams and Mitch Smith, "Cleveland Officer Will Not Face Charges in Tamir Rice Shooting Death," *New York Times*, December 28, 2015; Erik Eckholm and Matt Apuzzo, "Darren Wilson is Cleared of Rights Violation in Ferguson Shooting," *New York Times*, March 4, 2015; Ralph Ellis and Bill Kirkos, "Officer Who Shot Philando Castile Found Not Guilty on All Counts," *CNN*, June 16, 2017; Larry Celona, Kristan Conley, and Bruce Golding, "Cop Cleared in Chokehold Death of Eric Garner," *New York Post*, December 3, 2014; Carolyn Sung and Catherine Soichet, "Freddie Grey Case: Charges Dropped Against Remaining Officers," *CNN*, July 27, 2016.
- 38 James Baldwin, "Stranger in the Village," *Harper's Magazine*, October 1953, 119.
- 39 A.O. Scott, "'Wonder Woman' is a Blockbuster That Lets Itself Have Fun," *New York Times*, May 31, 2017.
- 40 Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xviii.