

Chapter 1. Contexts for This Writer's Journey

Each writer develops in a time and place, pursuing perceived opportunities, resources and possibilities. I was born in Brooklyn, New York City on June 30, 1945, at the leading edge of the U.S. baby boom, midway between VE day (May 8) and VJ Day (August 15). I have lived my whole life in the post-World War II United States, apart from periods up to a year teaching abroad. My parents came to Brooklyn from Eastern Europe as children with their Yiddish-speaking parents, with their fathers finding working-class employment. My parents were upwardly mobile, succeeding in assimilating their children into mainstream white middle-class. I lived my life until age 45 largely in and around New York City and after that in California¹, employed as a teacher and professor, and as an adult I can be seen as part of bi-coastal professional culture. In my lifetime I have largely enjoyed unmarked white privilege.

My first language was English, during a period when it became the dominant language globally, in business and finance, diplomacy, entertainment, and (most relevantly for my life) science and the academy. What the linguistic future holds is hard to tell, but in the near term the hold of global English is not weakening. Because of my nuclear family's social mobility and separation from cohesive immigrant communities, I had little need to learn in any depth either my cultural or religious heritage languages, Yiddish or Hebrew. These linguistic accidents allowed me to advance in the educational and academic publication worlds without ever having to become seriously bi-lingual. Although people who grow up multi-lingual have cognitive and linguistic advantages, I have had the benefit of learning and working in a language and dialect that I have used daily since infancy.

“Melting Pot” New York City

Some familiar history is worth remembering in defining my literacy opportunities. New York City had been a multi-cultural, multi-racial center of immigration since its founding. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, it had been viewed as the quintessential melting pot, fostering educational and other programs aimed at Americanization of diverse groups. When I was growing up that meant learning an official version of U.S. history, values, and institutions, as well as white Protestant culture. Other identities and cultures were treated as private, familial, or community concerns, and other immigrant affiliations as secondary

1. Around the age of one my family spent a few months in Mansfield, Ohio where my father managed a bar and grill. And from age 45-48 I spent six months a year commuting from California to Georgia where I taught at Georgia Tech.

to the U.S. identity. As the US rose to international prominence and prosperity New York became its largest city and a financial, intellectual, and artistic center. It also became a place of political ferment and leftist sentiment during the Great Depression. After WWII it was poised for even greater prosperity, becoming a laboratory for the rise of suburbia and car culture. It also had three major league baseball teams, which were key parts of civic identity and competition when I was a child.

Since the late nineteenth century free public education had become increasingly present in American life. Following WWII, high school graduation was becoming the norm and national higher education (and academic employment) expanded, so that the majority of people now have at least some higher education. My academic career began as this expansion was starting to flatten in the early 1970s, but I did benefit from it. In recent decades, however, state funding of public universities has decreased. Budget pressures leading to increased use of contingent labor and over-production of Ph.D.'s have meant that tenured positions have been becoming harder to obtain and are associated with an increasing expectation of publication. The particular employment opportunities in U.S. higher education are part of the larger history of the university since medieval times, its disciplinary research-oriented restructuring since the late eighteenth century, and the particular version developing within the US which has made professorships more common, dispersing disciplinary power among more players.

During the post war period while I went to school, public education was informed by state administrative regulation and funding, with standardized curricula and expectations. In New York State common state exams were required at the secondary level, but there were no nationalized standards and testing, as were later to dominate American education. Further, the New York State Regents exams of the time created space for individual performance and schools rewarded accomplishments apart from the Regents exams. What standardization that occurred was mostly the result of commercially produced large-sales textbooks, which fostered a vision of middle-class suburban and small-town American life. On the other hand, teacher education and classroom practices were influenced by a progressive Deweyian, student-centered philosophy.

Child of Eastern European Jewish Immigrants

My parents, as Jewish immigrant children living in Brooklyn, benefited from public education as their families gained economic security in the new country. Both my parents became English-speaking in schools, and I developed an Americanized school dialect English, which served me well in my academic career. I never learned more than a few Yiddish words. My mother's family remained in the marginal working class and culturally within the immigrant community, as her parents spoke only Yiddish and her father worked as a sweatshop tailor. My uncle Moishe, whom we saw only rarely, was a cab driver; I believe my mother

had an additional sister, whom I may have met once. Our weekly visits to my mother's parents' Williamsburg tenement were accompanied by frequent arguing between my mother and grandmother in a language I could not understand. My mother completed high school and was briefly enrolled in Brooklyn College. My father's family made more socioeconomic headway with his father opening a bakery and his many brothers gaining some success in business, attaining comfortable middle-class lives. My father continued with higher public education, getting a business degree at City College on New York, graduating magna cum laude, second in his class.

As with many New York Jewish immigrants coming of age in the thirties, my parents supported socialist causes. In fact, they met at a Young Communist League picnic. My father in college organized a fair to raise funds for the Lincoln Brigade, for which he was almost expelled, as he told it. My mother at times expressed nostalgia for the picket lines and sense of belonging in her youthful activism. While my parents didn't discuss politics much with me, my mother exposed me to the theater and museums of New York City. She also introduced me to some left-wing folk music, though she rarely discussed the messages in the lyrics with me.

During the war my father and his brothers were engaged in the essential petroleum industry, so they were all exempt from the military. As I was growing up, therefore, military culture and war stories were far from my life—only present on TV through reruns of wartime propaganda films, and comedies about the military experience.² After the war my father became a salesman in construction materials and then owner of a small storm window manufacturing business. My father's friends were also in business, and would often discuss business deals, sales, the character of other people they met in business, and the like. My father would take me into work when I was between about eight and twelve, where I would play with adding machines or do small tasks to earn a few dollars. I also accompanied him on some sales trips and trade shows. At his factory I noticed class and racial differences and felt some class anxiety about my future, as I saw the workers on the shop floor were mostly Puerto Rican, while my father's partners and other front office workers were Italian, Jewish, or other European origin. Shortly after my parents' divorce when I was thirteen, he lost his money in an ill-timed attempt to become a stock broker, and finances were tight for both my parents. He died of a heart attack during my second year in college.

Assimilating in the Post WWII Suburbs

When I was five in 1950, we moved from a Jewish neighborhood in Brooklyn to one of the early post-WWII Long Island suburbs, Forest City, next to Levittown,

2. A further discussion of my family's and my politics and the relation to my career as a writing teacher appears in Bazerman, 2011f.

the first large postwar suburb. The neighborhood was middle-class, totally white, and largely Christian. Even as my parents entered the middle class and moved to the suburbs, they remained Democrats and supported progressive causes. While they were aware of the racial and class inequities of the fifties, they were pleased to have reached the other side of the class divide. I experienced little discrimination (though I once did get in a fight when another six-year-old called me a Christ-killer). With time we were joined by other assimilated Jews. Institutional antisemitic preferences, if they did influence opportunities, did not become visible or important to me. Over my career as I moved into the academy as a student and professor, secular Jews had become an integral part of the intellectual community in the New York area and did not experience the penalties for being marked as “other.”

My father was one of the founders of a reform congregation in the suburbs, called iconically the Suburban Temple (later renamed Temple B’nai Torah). He raised funds for Israel (I remember seeing an award he had gotten for his efforts from Abba Eban, the Israeli ambassador to the US and UN). I attended Sunday school, gained a smattering of Hebrew, and was fed an idealistic view of Israel with the holocaust rarely mentioned. Although the memories of the war and the experience of European Jews must have weighed heavily on the minds of my parents, their families, and their friends, I did not gain any sense of the trauma until I was a college student. It took me a long time to realize what the adults must have been talking about when they sent us kids out of the room. In the life I was leading, however, Jewish identity meant little, and I stopped attending synagogue and Sunday School immediately after my Bar Mitzvah, which I went through to satisfy my parents. For the rest of my teenage years I had some attachment to Yiddish culture, such as the Yiddish theaters on Second Avenue and Jewish delis, but my identification was attenuated.

The one thing that I was certain of, though, was that I was not Christian, although surrounded by a Christian culture. Even in the earliest grades I felt extremely uncomfortable as Christmas approached and we were expected to sing sacred Christmas carols. Awareness that I was passing in a culture that had little to do with my family’s history dawned on me in college when I started to confront the Anglophilia that went with becoming an English major. Why was I studying this literature, this Anglo Saxon or even European culture, when my ancestors had little to do with those traditions, which were hostile to them? Further, they came to the US after living for generations in Eastern Europe, where their families were considered outsiders and were the object of periodic pogroms. My families were not Anglo-Saxon, had never been to the Caucasus mountains, were not Christian. We were not even very pale skinned.

As a suburban child in a white middle class neighborhood with good schools, I enjoyed both the positive privileges of mainstream life and the even greater privileges of not being marked as different, however I might have felt different inside. My political memory started only in the Eisenhower years, when I was

at first happy with the status quo. At the margins, however, I became aware of J. Edgar Hoover, Joseph McCarthy, and the House Un-American Activities Committee. I learned to be cautious so as not to risk my future by being stigmatized by right-wing bullies. Nuclear testing and the cold war also began impinging on my consciousness when I was still in elementary school, and of course the discovery and administration of the polio vaccine was an early memory. At home we subscribed to highly-regarded and progressive local newspaper at that time, *Newsday*, and for a brief period when I was eleven or so I had a newspaper delivery route. By Junior High School I started reading the paper cover to cover every day and became engaged in the issues around me.

My public schooling started in the rapidly expanding Levittown school district. When I entered fourth grade, we moved a few blocks to a more progressive and well-organized Bellmore school district. In my years at the Sawmill River Elementary School, however, I saw only one black student. He was placed in a remedial program and did not interact with the larger group of students. He lived in an older, ramshackle-appearing house on one of the few wooded parcels just down the block and across the street from the school. I later found out that his family, the Jordan's, had lived there as freed slaves since before the Civil War and at one time owned almost all the land on which the school and modern suburbs had been developed. I also later discovered that the forbiddingly fenced-off land a bit further down the road, which we called an "Indian cemetery" and now known as Oakfield Cemetery, was actually the cemetery of the black families who had been living there for a century and a half. Even earlier the Meroke Indians and other Algonquian tribes had lived in the area, though they did not use that burial ground. Some of the indigenous people, however, had intermarried with the black families. The memory of those thriving non-white communities had been almost entirely erased by the suburban growth I had benefitted from.

After Sputnik was launched in 1957, I gained from public programs supporting science education, which I will discuss later. Supported by governmental and private scholarships I was able to enter an Ivy League school, Cornell, which with its state agriculture, industrial and labor relations, and hotel schools and rural atmosphere was more informal and egalitarian than other Ivies of the time. Education scholars have much more to say about the history of U.S. schooling and higher education, and the role of private elite universities, but here I will only mention these things to mark my location.

So I started life in a protected, moderately privileged environment; that is to say, treated with decency and respect while offered opportunities to develop my interests and talents. This kind of privilege is different from the kind of privilege one gets from wealthy parents or legacy entrance to elite institutions and jobs. I was not owed anything or handed anything freely, but neither were unwarranted obstacles placed in my way in a society that offered government sponsored meritocratic pathways, at least for those not excluded or marginalized. As a child this privilege allowed me find my own way through school and engagement with the

world. I shook off the ethnic affiliation demands made on me, and I was protected from the historical traumas of my immigrant ancestors and relatives who were not so fortunate as to immigrate. What happened within my family, however, was another story, a story of disaffiliation and alienation, pushing me to new commitments, largely through education.