

**EVENT TITLE:** Hybrid Jewish American Poetry, An Intersectional Reading

**Event Description:** This reading explores how Jewish poetics can contribute to intersectional conversations. Using experimental and multimodal forms driven by visuals, intertextuality, and hybridity, these poets examine interfaith and interracial identity, queerness, and working-class culture. Thematic and formal hybridity allows these poets to decenter hegemonic Jewish American narratives by investigating the margins of experience and aesthetics and building solidarity across cultures.

**EVENT CATEGORY:** Poetry Readings

**Event Organizer & Moderator:** Joshua Gottlieb-Miller : Joshua Gottlieb-Miller is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Joshua has been a Fellow at The MacDowell Colony as well as the Tent Writing Conference at the Yiddish Book Center. Now Joshua tutors writing, teaches for Inprint at the JCC and WITS at the Menil Collection.

**Participants:**

**E.G. Asher:** E.G. Asher's first book *Natality* was published by Noemi Press in 2017. Asher received an MFA from Brown University and has held the Stadler Fellowship at Bucknell University, as well as a TENT Creative Writing Fellowship at the Yiddish Book Center. Asher is currently a PhD candidate at NYU.

**Rosebud Ben-Oni:** Rosebud Ben-Oni won the 2019 Alice James Award for *If This Is the Age We End Discovery* and is the author of *turn around, BRXGHT XYXS*. She received fellowships from New York Foundation for the Arts and CantoMundo; her work has been commissioned by the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in NYC.

**Tom Haviv:** Tom Haviv is a Brooklyn-based, Israeli-born writer, multimedia artist, and organizer. His debut book of poetry, *A Flag of No Nation*, was by Jewish Currents Press in 2019. He is the founder of the Hamsa Flag Project, which intends to stimulate conversation about the future of Israel/Palestine.

**Allison Pitinii Davis:** Allison Pitinii Davis is the author of *Line Study of a Motel Clerk*, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in Poetry and the Ohioana Book Award, and *Poppy Seeds*, winner of the Wick Poetry Chapbook Prize. Her work has appeared in *Best American Poetry 2016*, POETS.org, and elsewhere.

**Opening remarks and housekeeping announcements:** Thank you for attending our panel. In alphabetical order, we each will briefly introduce our work and read several representative poems. Following the reading, we'll briefly answer questions posed to the group and then open to audience questions in the chat.

**Panelist Presentations:**

**E.G. Asher:**

I will be reading from *southward*, a maternal oral and intertextual book-length poem (in-progress) that moves between Memphis and New York, interwoven with accounts of medieval Jewish life along the Rhine and the Danube, and the pre-emancipation immigration of Yiddish-speaking Jews to New Orleans and Memphis during Reconstruction. In 1866 there were 300 or so Jewish families in Memphis. The poem is an attempt at a multi-voiced, inter-generational, cross-cultural listening from within the ongoing legacies of colonization and slavery, Jim Crow era apartheid, yellow fever epidemics, the 1927 Mississippi flood, the Shoah, and the southern anti-Zionist movement.

Poems:

“Now in the time to come”

“1866”

“A voyd of light.”

### **Rosebud Ben-Oni**

I come from a mixed background; my Mexican mother converted from Catholicism to Judaism to marry my father, who came from a religious Jewish family. While I grew up in an observant household, if say we were visiting my mother's sisters and served menudo, we ate the menudo because Aba privileged love and family over all else. At the same time, I remember the first time I attempted to fast for Yom Kippur at the age of 8, and wanting water during the morning service, and my abba telling me, look, you either do this or you don't. So I fasted completely, and was very sick by the end of the day, in which my father held and rocked me, regretting his stringency. “Poet Wrestling with Her Empire of Dirt” explores these tangled pullings (one might call them contradictions - I don't) between father and daughter, belief and doubt, devotional faith and earthly love, the empirical and the instinctive, while “Poet Wrestling with Surface Tension” delves into the fractured place that is the U.S.-Mexican border, where my mother's family lives and where I spent a great deal of my childhood, and confronts the idea of visibility, humanity, matrilineal inheritance, and “progress”. If the former poem is obsessed with the transgressions of the past, the latter asks what will become of us. The last poem I'll be reading, “Poet Wrestling with Blood Falling Silent,” for better or worse proves what I've always suspected --and in a strange sense am grateful for-- that even in a pandemic and their own vulnerability and uncertainty on full display, Aba's love for my mother is greater than any he has for anything or anyone-- including his faith and even his own children.

Poems:

“Poet Wrestling with Her Empire of Dirt.” POETRY

“Poet Wrestling with Surface Tension.” POETRY

“Poet Wrestling with Blood Falling Silent” POETRY

### **Tom Haviv:**

About my work, but [not in my words](#) (by writer Arielle Angel):

"Tom Haviv's new book of poetry, *A Flag of No Nation*, [out now](#) from Jewish Currents Press, is preoccupied with the origin story—the trauma-laden, pressurized conditions of its formation, the mysterious moment of its shattering, and the expansive possibilities that emerge in its wake. The son of an Israeli fighter pilot, and the grandson of activists in Istanbul's underground Zionist youth movement, Haviv is all too aware that the story—like matter—cannot be destroyed, only refashioned. That though we cannot spare ourselves the pain, anger, and shame that accompany its collapse, this does not mean a break with our personal histories and identities, nor a negation of the experiences of those we love, but rather a reengagement on altered terms. Using a number of different modes—from allegory to oral history to the lyric poem—Haviv attempts to chart a path through the collective making and unmaking of the Zionist narrative to a proposed remaking in a post-Zionist context, declaring that process as valid and as rooted as the one that created and sustained the original Zionist myth."

I will be reading an excerpt from a "[A Flag of No Nation](#)."

### **Allison Davis:**

My work examines the intersections of Jewish culture, Rust Belt labor, and experimental poetics. I'll read three poems: two are from manuscript *Lordstown Syndrome*, which follows a group of Jewish girls working at a Rust Belt Dairy Queen in the aftermath of the 1972 Lordstown Strike in Northeast Ohio. In the first, the girls discuss their *bubbes* while splitting tips. In the second poem, a line of ampersands running down the side of the page visually depict what the heavily-eyelinered girls look

like from the perspective of Akron's Goodyear Blimp. My final poem, from my collection *Line Study of a Motel Clerk*, is a prose poem examining interfaith relations and labor.

Poems:

Greetings From Across the Counter

The Goodyear Blimp Flies Over a Line of Neighborhood Girls

The Neighborhood Girls Split Tips After Their Shift, Late May

**Joshua Gottlieb-Miller:**

Before writing the manuscript I'm reading from today, *Dybbuk Americana*, I didn't think much about my upbringing: though my father wasn't Jewish, I was raised Jewish, in a largely secular and progressive milieu. A diverse suburb just outside of DC, growing up I thought we were living in 'the future,' because Silver Spring seemed to embody all of the promise that America had always boasted but never before fulfilled. Raising my son, I discovered myself surprisingly ignorant of Jewish history in America, and began to write poems questioning faith, history, art, family legends, as well as constructions of race and ethnicity. My work explores what it means for my son to inherit a Jewish identity I'm still learning, in an America increasingly un-convincing in its commitment to utopian ideals. I'll be reading three poems, time willing, one about my relationship with my father, and two about my relationship with my son. These poems are animated by a formal intervention: my discursive narratives are intertwined with boxes containing a running commentary, in homage to Talmudic disputation (or, more colloquially: 'Two Jews, three opinions'). These include lyric reveries, ironic doubts, counter-myths, and, in the last poem, memories from my first immigrant forebears. If you're able to follow along on your screen while I'm reading, you should know there is no single linear way to read these poems.

Poems:

"Have I always been suspicious of myself?"

"No painter would hide me in a blue flower"

"New prayer book"

**MODERATOR QUESTIONS:**

- "What do you wish people understood about your intersectional Jewish poetry/identity that gets overlooked, or about the way you use form/experimentation?" **Rosebud**
- "Are there other art forms, genres, artists or poets you are in conversation with that might surprise readers?" **E.G., Tom, Allison**
- "How do you understand your work in relation to contemporary Jewish poetics? What traditions does your work add to and/or challenge?" **Josh**

**Appended to this document are the poems shared on screen during the panel. In addition, poems that were not shared on screen during the panel have been added as supplemental files.**

## Allison Poems:

### Greetings from Across the Counter

Generation after generation wake up and worry about business—on my father’s side, a trucking motel; my mother’s side, a laundry. Of my parents, people asked, “Why’s that Pitinii girl marrying a Jew” and vice versa. I’m their firstborn: I’ll tell you why they married. My mother woke up asking “Starch or no starch?” and my father answered, “Smoking room or non?”

-from *Line Study of a Motel Clerk*

### The Goodyear Blimp Flies Over a Line of Neighborhood Girls

*It might divest the gum of its native adhesiveness throughout, which would make it better than the native gum.*

-Charles Goodyear, *Gum-Elastica* (1853)

—& Goodyear is headquartered a city over in Akron  
& gets its name from the first man to vulcanize rubber  
& we do our eyeliner like Chrissie Hynde in Akron  
& she does it so even the blimp can see it  
& from above, are we a line of eyes rung  
& rung with black liner  
& do we not glare back like an alley of ampersands  
& to be honest we don’t know much about tires  
& say “yes Goodyear man please fill  
& rotate” every 6 months or 6,000 miles  
& whichever comes first we say shehecheyanu  
& drive 75 down I-71  
& end up in Akron or Kent or Ravenna  
& we all intimately knew the one Jewish guy living outside of Ravenna  
& what did our grandmas expect when they moved to Ohio  
& let loose a herd of batshit brunettes  
& hey Blimp, how do we look from up there  
& don’t our differences double our native adhesiveness  
& double the fun of our native gum

-from *Paper Brigade*

### The Neighborhood Girls Split Tips After Their Shift, Late May *Dairy Queen on Market Street*

—o downtown do you  
*\$1 for you*

remember them locking up, our bubbes

*\$1 for me*

swallowing homelands, diasporas,

*\$2 for you*

keys to pawn-shop diamonds

*\$2 for me*

hocked by hookers trying to get

*\$3 for you*

honest: collateral catastrophe,

*\$3 for me*

calamity—can you remember

*\$4 for you*

our grandmothers, their safety

*\$4 for me*

deposit boxes shining

*\$5 for you*

bronze with bills, with corn,

*\$5 for me*

with lanes of traffic north?

*\$6 for you*

Generations later, how even

*\$6 for me*

we split into them—

*\$7 you*

how high we stack

*\$7 me*

the presidents' heads.

-From *Construction Magazine*

## Joshua Poems

### HAVE I ALWAYS BEEN SUSPICIOUS OF MYSELF?

The rainy day my parents married,  
my father signed two contracts:  
one with my mother,  
the other with her rabbi.  
Because they loved each other,  
the first contract.  
Because I was raised Jewish,  
the second.  
History moves this way,  
backwards, precarious.  
Not passing  
but passed.  
Almost writing to him about 'your

Why did I ever think I  
would know myself  
like Talmud  
when I don't/know Talmud?

forebears' instead of 'our—'  
My dad asking, "When were Swedes  
considered white?"  
What description isn't  
incomplete? I talk like him, I write  
like him, I too  
have what he calls his father's  
coldness. Pathologically  
consistent, how unfair am I  
to not be him,  
after all? To regret he had  
no real deep faith for me  
to reject. All his life  
he's been a searcher.

Though I am  
~~made beautiful by righteous~~  
anger, it means that from a distance  
I give two names:  
  
I'm selfish,  
I am, I always have been.  
Still there's no consensus  
about my highest point.

Who can blame me?  
Last night I remarked to the snow  
that it doesn't need  
the sky.

NO PAINTER WOULD HIDE ME IN A BLUE FLOWER

“If we’re not gentle  
we can’t play burial,”  
Lauren said, after I shrieked  
from under the pile  
of stuffed animals  
Owen had jumped into.

No, more than pious,  
with the fanaticism

of compassion  
as the apex of justice;

My son loves me  
violently. Laughing,  
he hit me so hard today  
he hurt his arm.  
Laughing and moaning  
he kept swinging.

I hope you’re less damaged  
than me, I’ll tell my son

someday. I hope he is  
better than me.

“You’re fine!” he yelled,  
his mouth open like a shark’s.  
I let him hit me. He had to stand  
on my bed to tackle me.  
“It’s just pretend,” he said,  
bringing me to one knee.

Blessed and creator  
of the etcetera,

and call it  
prayer (etcetera)

NEW PRAYER BOOK

Owen's religious school  
sends us a gift  
for New Year's:  
a prayer book  
under a letter  
topped with honey sticks:  
*ancient teachers  
smeared pages of the Talmud  
with honey  
so children would know  
study was sweet.*

Unearthed letter  
mentions great-grandpa Shalom:  
*For instance, he never resented  
going to his store  
daily with his batch of books  
he intended reading there.  
He kept the door locked, for fear  
a customer would come in.  
And when he did make  
a transaction, it was not always  
profitable financially.  
One time, when mom  
asked him why he sold a few yards  
of material to a woman at 7 cents  
a yard, when it cost him 10 cents,  
he replied, "She needed it."*

I'm greediest  
on the basketball court,  
for assists

*At any rate, after 5 lessons,  
papa decided I was now ready  
to give piano lessons myself.  
So a large sign was put up  
in one of our front windows,  
"Piano lessons-25 cents an hour.  
PRACTICING FREE!" (The come-on.)  
And they came alright (for them,  
not for me.) ragged, barefooted often,  
young and old; and I tried to teach them  
more than I knew myself.  
I practiced and gave lessons in our bare  
living room. But very soon, this was rented out  
to a boarder: a violinist who gave violin lessons.  
So my piano was moved into our adjoining  
dining room. And when my adult pupils came  
in evenings, for their free practicing, there were  
invariably the visitors and the snackers  
at the dining room table, shouting,  
as was the custom.*

I had torn  
the yellow envelope open  
until my hand was sticky:  
One of the honeys  
had been crushed.  
I suspect the tube burst  
in transit, or under piles  
of undelivered mail,  
but I prefer to imagine  
our rabbi broke it  
with his thumb,  
before licking  
the envelope closed.