

AWP 2022 Event Outline

"If I speak for the dead:" Jewish Poems of Ancestry Poetry Craft and Criticism

Description:

A growing body of contemporary Jewish poetry imagines its way into the worlds of our recent ancestors, whether literal, literary, or in spirit. What are the challenges of writing to investigate or recover these lineages, through layers of diaspora and receded languages? What are the possibilities? Each poet will read their own poems and speak to their writing process and related craft considerations.

Event Organizer & Moderator

Dan Alter's poems and reviews have been published in journals including *Field*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Pank*, and *Zyzyva*; his first collection *My Little Book of Exiles* comes out March 2022 from Eyewear Publishers. He lives with his wife and daughter in Berkeley and makes his living as an IBEW electrician.

Event Participants

Elvira Basevich is a poet and philosophy professor at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. Her first poetry book, *How to Love the World*, was published with *Pank* and was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. Her poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Pleiades*, *On the Seawall*, *Pank*, *Palette Poetry*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *TriQuarterly*, *The Gettysburg Review*, & *Blackbird*.

Daniel Khalastchi is the author of three poetry books: *American Parables* (University of Wisconsin Press, winner of the Brittingham Prize in Poetry), *Tradition* (McSweeney's), and *Manoleria* (Tupelo Press). He is the director of the University of Iowa's Magid Center for Undergraduate Writing and a recent visiting assistant professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Jennifer Kronovet is the author of two books of poetry: *The Wug Test* (Ecco), which was selected for the National Poetry Series, and *Awayward* (BOA Editions). Using the name Jennifer Stern, she co-translated *Empty Chairs* (Graywolf Press), the poetry of Chinese writer and artist Liu Xia. She also co-translated *The Acrobat*, selected poems of experimental Yiddish writer Celia Dropkin. She edits *Circumference Books*, a new press for poetry in translation that she founded.

Gail Newman, child of Holocaust survivors, was born after WW II in a DP. Her new collection, *Blood Memory*, chosen by Marge Piercy for The Marsh Hawk Press Poetry Prize, was published in 2020. The book won the NCPA Gold Award for Poetry. Gail teaches Genocide poetry for educators and students.

Moderator's opening remarks

Marianne Hirsch, writing about the seminal holocaust comic-book *Maus*, used the term “Post-memory” to describe a kind of engagement with the experiences and trauma of generations before us. She defines it as: “[a] connection to the past ... mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation.” This concept has drawn interest for other communities where writing serves as a mode of recovery and communion across historical ruptures. For instance, Japanese-American poet Brandon Shimoda in the course-description of “About our ancestors: the Poetics of Postmemory” talks about this kind of writing as “a ritual, memorial, and postmemorial space; as a form of reclamation and realization; and as the site of a potential collaboration with the dead.”

One common experience of a rupture is the process of becoming “American,” which at least until recent years meant a likely traumatic immigration to the “melting pot.” The problematic of the “melting pot” is an important issue for U.S. writers of diverse backgrounds, as they investigate who was melted down, from where, in their lineages. Jewish poets have a particular stake in this work as part of a group for whom admission to American society retains a liminal or provisional sense.

Finally though, creation, and the creation of poetry, is mysterious, a grappling with the unknown and unknowable. In letting our ancestors into our poems we open ourselves to aspects of this in ways I feel Ilya Kaminsky's poem "Author's Prayer" speaks to better than I could. Notice how the words "madness," "music," and "surrender," for instance, circulate in this ars poetica to the project of these kinds of poems. [Author’s Prayer by Ilya Kaminsky | Poetry Foundation](<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53850/authors-prayer>)

Daniel Khalatschi

- Brief introduction to the question of ancestry and how it relates to religion.
- Turn to discussion of religion as it relates to generational trauma.

- Generational trauma as it connects to writing: there is an anxiety of knowing and an anxiety of *not* knowing—the known unknown.
- Personal response: this exploration is of specific interest to me given my father’s experience in Iraq
 - Destruction of community
 - Persecution
 - Escape
 - Starting life in one new country (Israel) and again in a second (America).
- Quote from *The Forgotten Ones*, a documentary about Mizrahi Jews and their treatment upon arriving in Israel:
 - “The first generation still has memory of the home country. The second generation is the one that tries to fit in with the local culture, works, goes out, and tries to feel at home in the host culture but it lives with a lot of repression in relation to both father and son.” — *The Forgotten Ones*.
- Turn toward my poems/reading: my work seeks to explore that repression while telling the story/sharing the experience that many readers across cultures are or have been living with.

Potential Poems To Read:

- “Deviation on Returns”
- “Poem for my Father”
- “First Generation” (three poems)
- “Laid Land”

Jennifer Kronovet : Peacock Island and the City of X

“For just as there are plants that are said to confer the power to see into the future, so there are places that possess such a virtue... In such places, it seems as if all that lies in store for us has become the past.”

—Walter Benjamin

1. Warning: there is no chronology here

- But first: I heard about Charles K Bliss and the fear of the manipulation of language, of German
- Before that: Celan

- Giving a presentation in German about Bliss and Celan as two models, and then I saw what is still happening now: both from Czernowitz, became a meeting place in my imagination

2. Benjamin and Pure Language

- Finding a home in German for thinking in relation to Yiddish
- Finally a place where everyone is looking at the ground
- My grandfather's birth certificate—the dream place of loss, post-memory
- My grandfather's letter—the languages behind my language

3. Couldn't claim any home yet I had many to choose from, so I made two places for thinking—this is lineage

- Peacock Island and the City of X, both are real places of imagination
- The Mistress is always claiming a place inside (literary) history—always messing with the narrative
- X as intersection, a spot on the map, negated
- Steal from my own history, the way a King can steal an island, name it, the island was always there
- Peacock Island is my Bliss and Czernowitz my Celan—poetry is a place where both can be together again

4. In Conclusion: Poetry can provide narrative that collapses and invents time, where words are a place to be

- What is the shape of lineage—lineated
- Benjamin: “But the island was lost, and with it, the second fatherland: the peacockland.”

Poems:

Accidental Biography

There's No Dead Corner

In Sight

In the Ghetto of the City of X

○

Gail Newman

For the dead and the living, we must bear witness. Not only are we responsible for the memories of the dead, we are responsible for what we do with those memories. Elie Weisel

Intro

What is the role of memory in Jewish culture? Why is it important? Why write about the past, the Holocaust?

The Discussion

1. How can we recover a past and a people who are lost to us?
2. What is the relationship between imagination and memory?
3. How can I write poetry about the Holocaust? What are the considerations of form?

In writing *Blood Memory*, I relied on research, survivor testimony, and my own imagination. I will discuss each of these as well as craft considerations in relation to specific poems from the book.

Elvira Basevich

will read and discuss poems from *How to Love the World*.

Dan Alter

My experience in working in this arena is overwhelmingly one of writing into absence. Persistently encountering a sense of emptiness, of a hollow, perhaps underneath which lies grief...

One way I'm drawn to work here: addressing a kind of abstract "ancestors:"
Read: "My little book of exiles"

Of my actual ancestors I have the most feel for one grandfather.

"Forefathering"

"Traces"

But I keep wanting to try again. Here's a work in progress, an ekphrastic piece about a great grandmother I literally met once for a few minutes.

"Nura moving the knight."