AWP 2022 Event Outline

Event title
Radical Jewish American Labor Poetry, A Reading

Event Description
This reading explores new work in the tradition of Jewish labor poetry: writing at the nexus of radicalism, labor, and identity. In Jewish poetics, writing about labor spans our international, multilingual literature; emerging poets are (re)interpreting this inheritance in terms of its politics and imaginative possibilities. These poets—including writers from the Rust Belt—write about their work as taxi drivers, electricians, motel staff, retail grocers, and parents. event category

Event Organizers
Allison Pitinii Davis, Joshua Gottlieb-Miller, and Dan Alter

Event Moderator
Allison Pitinii Davis: Allison Pitinii Davis is the author of *Line Study of a Motel Clerk* (Baobab, 2017), a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in Poetry and the Ohioana Poetry Prize. She is working on a manuscript about the 1972 General Motors Lordstown strike.

Event Participants
Dan Alter: Dan Alter's poems and reviews have been published widely; his first collection *My Little Book of Exiles* is out March 1 from Eyewear Press. He has been a fellow of the Arad Arts Project, and is a member of the Community of Writers at Olympic Valley. He lives with his wife and daughter in Berkeley and makes his living as an IBEW electrician.

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller: Joshua Gottlieb-Miller holds an MFA and PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Houston. Recent poetry, prose and hybrid writing at the intersection of Jewishness and labor can be found in MAYDAY Magazine, Grist, miCRo, Talking Writing, Berru Poetry Series, Brooklyn Rail, Concision, and elsewhere.

Joy Katz: Joy Katz's latest poetry collection is *All You Do Is Perceive*, a National Poetry Series Finalist, and new nonfiction,"Tennis is the Opposite of Death: A Proof," is just out in *The Paris Review*. She lives and teaches in Pittsburgh, where she also collaborates in the artist collective

IfYouReallyLoveMe, whose most recent project, OverHere/OverHear, was live music for wage workers.
Sean Singer: Singer is the author of *Discography* (Yale University Press, 2002), winner of the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize, selected by W.S. Merwin, and the Norma Farber First Book Award from the Poetry Society of America; *Honey & Smoke* (Eyewear Publishing, 2015); and *Today in the Taxi* (Tupelo Press, 2022). He runs a manuscript consultation service at www.seansingerpoetry.com

Opening Moderator Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
Welcome to our panel, Radical Jewish American Labor Poetry, A Reading. This panel grew out of long talks that Joshua Gottlieb-Miller and I have had over the years about Judaism, labor, and poetry. With Dan Alter, we further developed this panel, and we're honored to be joined by poets whose art has inspired how we think about this subject: Sean Singer and Joy Katz. Thank you for being here, and we look forward to hearing your questions and remarks.

Each panelist will present for ten minutes. Several poets will begin by sharing poems by Jewish literary predecessors before presenting their own remarks and poetry. We will circulate copies of the poems and collect them after the panel. We'll save the last 20 minutes for audience questions. Thank you.

Participant Opening Remarks, Initial Thoughts, or Readings
Dan Alter: I'll start with "Detroit Grease Shop Poem" by Philip Levine, from *They Feed They Lion.*
(https://www.poeticous.com/philip-levine/detroit-grease-shop-poem)

Levine was one of the first and best to write about working in factories, with your own hands. I probably owe a lot to him, & so I have a quarrel with him. If I had more time I would read "They Feed They Lion," still an inspiration to me, a magnificent alchemy of prophetic voice with reality that includes factory floors. As for my quarrel, maybe it's that it feels to me his labor poetry ossified, form & voice more or less froze. Or maybe it's that the labor experiences he mined stayed in his past, while his career as professor stayed off the page. Or is it that his Jewishness is mostly underground in them?

And not surprisingly, I've had similar problems. I've worked as an electrician for twenty years, and mostly I have felt unable to get this experience into poems. At one point about ten years ago I had a breakthrough using a fragmentary, sonnet-ish form I got from Joshua Beckman, and ended up writing a series of about twenty, a number of which got into my first book.

Read: "Labor Poem # 17 (Life Safety) from My collection My Little Book of Exiles
http://www.star82review.com/6.1/alter-labor.html

The fragmenting method here seemed to give me some freedom to process and recover the often harsh and/or boring experiences of manual wage labor. Like for Levine, Jewishness hardly seems to exist in these poems, with the exception of that one. & like him, it's been hard to get away from the form that allowed me to write on this. So, in a new series, "Window & Workday," I have been pulled back to the fragmenting method & mostly the fourteen lines. I feel unsatisfied with this so far, so I'm still experimenting.

Read: "Window & Workday: with Shakespeare & others"
(if time: "Window & Workday: a caged spiral" or "Window & Workday: at break Matt")

I'll close with one other recent poem which tries a different method:
"Poem beginning in an electrical room"

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller:
This is a selection from Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead," from her collection, U.S. One.

(Reads poem: "Absalom"—text from Poetry Foundation website)
https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/92723/the-book-of-the-dead-absalom

Many of you are likely familiar with this giant in poetry and documentary poetics, Muriel Rukeyser. The selection I've read is from a long poem-sequence centered on the Hawk's Nest Tunnel disaster, in 1931 in Gauley Ridge, West Virginia, interspersed with text from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, an italicized chorus. Mostly she works with survivor interviews, court

transcripts, and other investigative material to write about how a powerful corporation conspired to disadvantage poor (mostly African-American) miners. Rukeyser attempts to both give voice and to add her voice to those suffering, to make their built-community visible. She is an inspiration in terms of her ethics, her methods, her clear vision and powerfully direct style.

Given how compelling that poem was, I needed to read it first and then take a break to give it some context before continuing.

I'm also going to read two poems from a grocery store manuscript, written while I was working at a Trader Joe's in Wisconsin. In the manuscript, I often quote co-workers, and later I would ask them to record the poems they were quoted in, and I'd interview them about their lives. The first poem, "Reincarnation," can be found at Talking Writing, alongside an interview with one of the co-workers I quote in the poem, Bruce Bull Lyon. The second poem, Moral Physics (published in Pleiades), was inspired by Kenneth Koch's poem, "One Train May Hide Another."

(Then I will read my two poems)

List of poems:

Reincarnation

Moral Physics

Joy Katz:
My mother said, "don't adopt," then died. i did, later, adopt a child. Do i belong to my mother? Does my son belong to me?
Poems can't assume how we belong to each other. Especially race lines, lines of kin.
Poems can document, and sometimes that's their labor. But I'm restless. Wanting my son to walk through the world like a free person, I'm restless beyond documenting.
Can poems imagine a world we want to live in, but not be wishy-dreamy?
I am disobedient by nature.
Don't write about your son's first family, his other mother, says ethics, says privacy, say the overseers of imagination.

Batya, pharaoh's daughter, disobeyed. I'm not interested in acts of "saving" or 'did Batya save a baby.'
Disobeying my mother's, my culture's, instruction to grow an offspring has put two targets on my Asian Jewish child's back. how do I square that.
I am helped by the labor of disobedient mothers, including Batya (by weird coincidence my middle name),
and including Laynie Brown's poem "Scorpyn Ode", Julia Dasbach's "Other Women Don't Tell You," and Celia Dropkin's "Suck."

[reads lines from these poems.]

You can't write about your son's first family, that's his story, say the overseers of imagination.
Here are some poems in disobedience. Because she does belong to me, or I am hers, in some way.

[reads two maybe three short poems.]

Sean Singer:
My new book *Today in the Taxi* is about my experiences driving a taxi in New York City.

I drove for nearly six years, from 2014 until Covid started in 2020, working as an independent contractor for ride sharing companies like Uber, Lyft, Juno, and Via. There are a number of reasons why I started driving. Some of them I like to talk about: I have always been interested in cars, I enjoy driving, I liked seeing parts of the city I normally wouldn’t see, and I liked driving people from all over the world. I don’t like to talk about the other reasons: my difficulty finding jobs, my frustration with the academic job market, the multiple stressful circumstances in my life that made driving make sense.

Form and Risk
Making poems, for me, begins with finding the right form. I’d been trying to find the right form for the book for two years when Yusef Komunyakaa suggested I read *Ninety-Nine Stories of God,* a book of short fiction by Joy Williams. Williams’s stories were a revelation for me: her short forms made me realize the prose poem was what I needed to tell my stories.
The prose poem is an oxymoron innovated by Charles Baudelaire—“prose” and “poem” typically describe opposites, so it weighs and questions

contradiction well. The form can accommodate wide ranges of perception and expression. It allowed me to express both the immediacy of experience on the level of the body, and the electricity of language. The prose poem matched the rectangular city blocks and the repetitive motion of the car's moving through them. The form's contradictions mapped the city's contradictions: laws and their transgressions; inside and outside; noise and silence; private and public.

Each of the poems in the book begins with a variation of the phrase "today in the taxi," and each poem describes an actual trip, as it happened. Over the course of the book, this frame establishes a rhythm that serves to reveal the variation of each trip and its metaphors.

This is the first book in which I've written in the first person. The poems are more vulnerable and plain spoken than those in my previous books. My move to first person was essential to conveying the truth of this work. I experienced all the trips I describe in the poems in my body; I drove for sometimes 8, 9, 10, or more hours per day. I did the driving, lifted the suitcases, handled the money, opened the doors. My muscles carried the stress of guarding the riders' safe passage through all the city's hazards: there are cars, trucks, bicycles, horses, people, and objects coming constantly from all directions. I was in accidents, I was hijacked on New Year's Eve, I felt physically unsafe many times, and almost died a number of times, people were drunk, aggressive, lascivious, hateful, demeaning, and demanding.

Characters and Central Themes
Driving was conducive for writing because the car was like a rolling confessional. From the driver's seat, I watched and listened through little windows onto other people's lives. The anonymity and private-public space of a taxi means that the world and all its strange celebration and confrontation passes through all day long. The driver becomes something other than a person: I was able to silently observe and witness a full range of human experience.

In some ways the character of the driver is the person who wrote the poems, but in other ways, he's the person I invented who could write the poems. He's a subterfuge or mask in that he filters my direct responses as a way to approach the subjects of the poems coldly or objectively.

Poems are a truth about a person—not the poet, but the poet as a representative of the person. Whether a poet has readers or not, their responsibility is the same. It's the poet's responsibility to not turn away from what's real; from truth. It's risky to be on a high enough wire in one's life, to be in a place where you can truthfully and clearly transform yourself into language. Then you have to stay healthy enough to get through it; then to be able to tell others what happened and how. It's a responsibility to convert feelings into language, to remake language, to make new ways of thinking.

There are three "main characters" in the book: American bassist and composer Charles Mingus (1922-1979), German-Jewish writer Franz Kafka (1883-1924), and the Lord, who is a female voice. They appear alongside my real-life passengers. The city is seen from the perspective of the driver—me—but the voices of Mingus, Kafka, and the Lord serve as guides, an ethical GPS, allowing the reader to bear witness along with the driver.

The period during which I was driving was a time of considerable upheaval in American life—an intensification of culture wars, a rise of totalitarianism—and a time of great loss in my own life. These poems reflect my living- and thinking-through the problems of this time. Three main themes emerge: what it means to work in the gig economy in a time of sharply intensifying income divide, watching my home of New York City transform through time and history, and charting my relationship to Jewish experience in a time of rising anti-Semitism.

What it means to work in the "gig" economy
Uber turned ordinary cars into taxis, and made getting from place to place a game: the prize, a low-cost ride. But there are hidden costs. The drivers' bodies do the work, and the drivers assume the risk and responsibility, but everyone who lives and works in the ubiquitous systems of surveillance capitalism pays the cost. Passengers and drivers alike are transformed from persons into personal data that is commoditized and sold for profit. How we reckon with our complicity in these systems—and their debilitating human tolls— is one of the most important ethical questions of the 21st century.

These poems address this question by restoring personhood to the driver and passengers. While rideshare companies maintain a parallel book to

mine in the cloud—storing each of the rides as data—I've transformed this data into poems. I've assumed yet another risk in writing more vulnerably, but by writing in my own voice I can better convey the truth and immediacy of my experience, and its dangers and surprises, and its meanings.

Jewish Experience
These poems offer many allusions and references to the Talmud, an Old Testament Lord, Jewish thinkers and artists (such as Martin Buber, Simone Weil, Charlotte Salomon, and Franz Kafka), and Jewish symbols, experiences, and ideas such as the Golem, Hillel, the Shoah (Holocaust), and Yiddish chelm stories—legends about the stupid residents and absurd behavior of a fictional village in Poland. The car became a microcosm of all these ridiculous situations.

One of the tenets of Judaism is uncertainty, or questioning, and I believe these poems try to present the situations described as questions above all else. The relationship between the speaker and the subjects of the poems—often the city itself—is one of questions. These questions are often not resolved or answered definitively.

The time while I was driving, 2014 - 2020, corresponds not only to neoliberalism's increase in the gig economy, but also the rise of fascism, which also meant a huge increase in anti-Semitic crimes. The Anti-Defamation League identified 2,107 anti-Semitic incidents in 2019, an increase of 12 percent from the previous year. That's the highest number since the ADL began tallying hate crimes in 1979. The handful of times when I experienced anti-Semitic passengers was harrowing; I had to get us both safely to the destination, but felt like physical harm could come to me. I kept a screwdriver in the console next to me.

Bert Meyers worked for years as a frame maker. His poem "Twilight at the Shop" is set in the workplace. The grinding physical job makes him feel a kinship with his materials. At the end of the day he "throws himself / out with the dust." [Sean shares the poem.]

This sounds like an allusion to Genesis 3:19 and 3:19: [Sean shares the verses.]

The plural first person in the second stanza are the workers, and they are embodied by three verbs: smile, smoke, and praise. The wood that has

been sawed in the first line returns like the sun in stanza 2: this time from their point of origin, the dark trees. These are connected to the sun's remaining light, now "bottled" like the many beers they drink at the end of day.

Another of his poems, "Some Definitions at Work," all his tools—hammer, table saw, sandpaper, brush, glue, rags, mop, broom, and a motor—become exotic animals, and the man and woman into tools (a broom and mop) like an Eden of work tools. [Sean shares the poem.]

Allison Davis:
The Jewish labor poetry tradition is transnational and multilinguistic. I'm inspired by Leslie Kaplan's French book *Excess—The Factory*, Mani Leib's Yiddish swagger proclaiming:

> I am Mani Leib, whose name is sung—
> In Brownsville, Yeheputz and farther, they know it:
> Among cobblers, a splendid cobbler; among
> Poetical circles a splendid poet.

The Hebrew liturgical poem "Like Clay in the Hand of the Potter / KeChomer B'Yad HaYotzer." Medieval Sephardic poet Judah Halevi's poems of Sabbath rest from the work week. Alicia Ostriker documenting the labor of labor. Charles Reznikoff proclaiming

> Passing the shop after school, he would look up at the sign
> and go on, glad that his own life had to do with books.
> Now at night when he saw the grey in his parents' hair and
> heard their talk of that day's worries and the next:
> lack of orders, if orders, lack of workers, if workers, lack of
> goods, if there were workers and goods, lack of orders
> again,
> for the tenth time he said, "I'm going in with you: there's more
> money in business."

These poets and countless others from diverse Jewish backgrounds have documented labor, its inequalities, and the radical rest of Shabbat. We add our voices to this tradition of Jews arguing that the experiences of workers are vital and deserving of documentation.

My own work focuses on two topics. First is the trucking motel and laundry that my grandfather's opened in the Rust Belt. Second are poems about a group of Jewish girls who work at a Dairy Queen in the aftermath of the 1972 strike at General Motors Lordstown.

Falls in Love, or Reads Spinoza
Song of the Dead Office
In the Beginning the Neighborhood Girls Read Philip Roth Drunk in Their Baths
The Neighborhood Girls Offer Me

Q&A Session
In-person events: at the end of the event, there will be time for a 10–15-minute Q&A session. Please pass the wireless microphone to the person posing the question or repeat all questions into one of the wired microphones.