

## **Event Title: Re-Presenting the Past: Poets Writing the Holocaust Towards a Humane Future**

**Event Description:** What can writing poetry about the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust do to address white supremacy? How can Jewish poets—specifically mothers—rewrite a narrative of exceptionalism for future generations while staying true to the particularities of Holocaust trauma? This panel takes up these questions through the voices of five poets, all mothers, whose writing explores intersections of Jewish trauma, inheritance, motherhood, and poetry’s capacities for antiracist work.

### **Event Organizer & Moderator**

**Maya Pindyck:** Maya Pindyck’s most recent poetry collection, *But the Orange Tree*, won the 2021 Philip Levine Prize in Poetry (Anhinga Press, 2023). She is co-author of *A Poetry Pedagogy for Teachers*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury in 2022. She teaches and directs the writing program at Moore College of Art and Design.

### **Event Participants**

**Elana Bell:** Elana Bell is the author of *Mother Country* (BOA Editions 2020) poems about motherhood, fertility, and mental illness. Her first collection of poetry, *Eyes, Stones*, was selected as the winner of the 2011 Walt Whitman Award. She teaches poetry to actors at the Juilliard School. [www.elanabell.com](http://www.elanabell.com).

**Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach:** Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach is a poet and author of *THE MANY NAMES FOR MOTHER* (Wick Poetry Prize, KSU Press, 2019); *DON'T TOUCH THE BONES* (Lost Horse Press, 2020); and *40 WEEKS* (Yes Yes Book, 2023). She is the Murphy Visiting Fellow in Poetry at Hendrix College in Arkansas.

**Luisa Muradyan:** Luisa Muradyan is the author of *American Radiance*. She earned her PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of Houston where she was the Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*. She was also the recipient of the Prairie Schooner Book Prize.

**Alicia Ostriker:** Alicia Ostriker 's most recent collections of poetry are *Waiting for the Light* (2017), which won a National Jewish Book Award, and *The Volcano and After : Selected and New Poems* (2020). She is an Academy of American Poets Chancellor Emerita, and NY State Poet.

## **Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements**

Good afternoon, and welcome to “Re-Presenting the Past: Poets Writing the Holocaust Towards a Humane Future.”

Thank you all for being here. We really appreciate your presence as we think through this challenging topic together.

This panel came about from a conversation I had with Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach who attended an AWP panel that I moderated in 2017 titled “Poets Writing the Holocaust: The New Generation.” Julia introduced herself after the panel and shared its relevancy to her work, both as a poet and as an academic—she was, at the time, beginning her dissertation “Lyric Witness” Intergenerational (Re)collection of the Holocaust in Contemporary American Poetry.” Then, in 2019, Julia co-organized an AWP panel called “Holocaust Poetics: Writing the Traumatized Past and Present,” which included Luisa.

Some years later, now both mothers, Julia and I reconnected, and she invited me to join a roster of poets whose voices she hoped to include in her dissertation in response to a range of questions, including: “Why do you write about the Holocaust? Why do you turn to poetry to write about this past? Do you consider yourself a witness? Has the contemporary moment changed your relationship to this past atrocity?” We met for coffee in Philly and decided to propose an AWP panel that addressed some of these questions and revived some of the issues and questions that our previous panels opened up about what poetry can do—and perhaps already does—to address the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust as it intersects with our current moment, which is also a historical moment of ongoing racial injustice and brutality against people of color here in the U.S., and also of the Israeli occupation of Palestinians.

We sensed that our position as mothers was important to this work, but we struggled to articulate why. We knew it had to do with inheritance, with responsibility, with love, with fear of indoctrination, and with hope for the future. We wanted to untangle, discuss, and raise questions about what it means to write poetry about the Holocaust today with fellow mother poets we admire who are also

Jewish and engaging similar topics in their own work. Thank you, Alicia, Elana, and Luisa, for sharing this space for that work today.

Before we begin we want to emphasize that the histories that we'll be talking about are still happening. Nothing here is out of date.

### **Participant Opening Remarks, Initial Thoughts, or Readings**

#### **Alicia Ostriker:**

I have written as a Jew, a mother, and a woman for whom the holocaust is a major but not unique exemplar of human evil, for my entire writing life, beginning with "Once More Out of Darkness" in 1965, a poem of pregnancy and birth which includes a line with reference to the holocaust, "whoever has died, I make this child for you." *The Mother/Child papers*, begun in 1970 and published in 1980, located during the Vietnam War, parallels our invasion of Cambodia with the invasion of my body by an exploitive obstetrician. A group of holocaust poems in my later work includes a poem on "righteous gentiles" and one on Shostakovich's Babi Yar symphony, probing the capacity of the imagination to empathize with the victimized Other. Throughout my work, a major task has been to "gather grief like straw,/spin it into something like gold."

#### **Elana Bell:**

My first collection of poems, *Eyes, Stones*, explores the question of how one lives with two narratives inside one body. In this case the narrative I am referring to is the story of Israel I grew up with as the granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, alongside the Palestinian narrative, which I learned much later. What I mean, more specifically, is the story of my grandmother and how she believed that the idea of Israel, of a Jewish homeland, gave her hope enough to survive the camps. What I mean is the story of Daoud Nassar whose entire olive grove of 1500 trees was bulldozed by the Israeli army because he would not sell his land to make settlements. When I wrote that book, I was not yet a mother. I remember a child from Aida refugee camp chasing after our bus with shrapnel in his outstretched palm. I remember seeing houses that had been bulldozed and there were broken toys and stuffed animals split at the seams all piled together. Now that I am a mother I know intimately what it means to co-exist with another narrative inside my body. The story of my son's becoming is still being written. What new future can we write in which we weep for and celebrate each other's children as though they were our own?

Read:

Letter to my son in Utero  
On a Hilltop  
Your Village

**Maya Pindyck:**

My mother's father was born in Palestine in 1913—his parents migrated there from Aleppo. My mother's mother left Poland for Palestine with her sister before the war began. The rest of her family stayed in Poland and perished in the Holocaust. Writing about this past by way of poetry has made a portal for me to seed connections to our present moment— to touch, as I write in my poem “Boy,” “the stammering history & now & here.” Having grown up primarily in the U.S. and also in Tel Aviv, my writing comes from the histories, conflicts, landscapes, losses, and state-sanctioned violences rooted and moving between both places—and also the sea's rhythm, continually reminding me of the interconnectedness of people and histories. Becoming a mother has foregrounded for me the urgency of love in any artistic creation, which is always a political creation carrying histories that demand our attention and repair for future generations. It has also returned me to write about my own mother and her stories, which I try to hold, honor, question, and complicate in my writing.

**Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach & Luisa Muradyan:**

Both mothers of young children, descendants of Holocaust survivors as well as Jewish refugees from Ukraine who came to the United States as young children in the early 1990s, both struggling with the burden of history and the present moment, we began writing poems (structured as letters, from April 2020 through March 2021) as a way to process the overwhelming experience of parenting, writing, and existing in this unique and unprecedented time of pandemic. Our poetry of the immediate present is complicated by our ancestral trauma, and keeps turning back to the past in order to make sense of the present—a past much closer and more felt than we could have anticipated. These poems have been a comfort for us in our identities as both mothers, writers, and intergenerational witnesses. We will share our poems and the process of collaborating on this project, *When the World Stopped Touching*. Our poems of intimate address became a way to continue creating while at the same time giving voice to our struggles of being consumed by care-taking, of continuing to shape the next generation for empathetic survival as we struggle with it ourselves.

**Moderator Questions:**

1. What can writing poetry about the intergenerational trauma of the Holocaust do to address current forms of collective trauma and violence?
2. In what ways does the experiences of motherhood open us to empathy and connecting the past to the present? How does being a mother affect your approach to writing about the Holocaust?
3. In an email exchange, Alicia wrote, “For me, it has always been important to view the holocaust as exemplary of human evil but not unique...” How does your poetry writing practice facilitate and/or reflect this understanding for you?
4. “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.” (William Faulkner). “Memory is the past made present.” (Michael Rothberg). What does repetition mean to you as a poet, and perhaps also as a mother, writing about the Holocaust?