Archives into Art: Jewish Writers Explode the Document

What is this urge that drives us toward oral history, archives, and documents—to turn them into something else we’ve shaped and spun? What are our ethics and motivations? We will read and discuss our documentary poems, plays, librettos, and essays. As descendants of people who fled persecution, we take particular interest in historical record; as a people others attempt(ed) to erase, we explore the impetus to document and save. But, to quote a venerable rabbi: If I am only for myself, who am I?

Event Category

Multiple Literary Genres: Craft and Criticism

Event Organizers

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller and S.L. Wisenberg

Event Moderator

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller: Joshua Gottlieb-Miller has been a MacDowell Fellow, a Tent Fellow at the Yiddish Book Center, and a Yetzirah scholar. His poetry collection, The Art of Bagging, won Conduit’s Marystina Santiestevan First Book Prize. His second book, Dybbuk Americana, is forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press.

Event Participants

S.L. (Sandi) Wisenberg: S.L. (Sandi) Wisenberg is the author of four books, including The Wandering Womb, winner of the 2022 Juniper Prize in nonfiction. Her other books are Holocaust Girls, The Adventures of Cancer
Bitch, and The Sweetheart Is In. She is the editor of Another Chicago Magazine and is a writing coach.

**Hadara Bar-Nadav:** Hadara Bar-Nadav is an NEA fellow and author of several poetry collections, most recently The New Nudity, Lullaby (with Exit Sign), The Frame Called Ruin, and Fountain and Furnace. She is also co-author of Writing Poems. Bar-Nadav is a Professor of English at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

**Leah Lax:** Leah Lax is an author and librettist. Her latest book, Not From Here: Song of America (Pegasus/international) charts how she found her way back into American society by listening to immigrants and refugees tell her their journeys -- a book about making art and (re)discovering the world.

**Tom Haviv:** Tom Haviv is a Brooklyn-based 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.

**Opening Housekeeping Announcements**

Welcome to Archives into Art: Jewish Writers Explode the Document. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, myself, Joshua Gottlieb-Miller, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.

- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.

- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.

- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Opening Moderator Remarks

Welcome to our panel, Archives into Art: Jewish Writers Explode the Document. This panel grew out of a surprising meeting at the last AWP, in Seattle. I had been in touch with the historian Josh Furman, then the curator of the Houston Jewish History Archive, about the Southern Jewish History Conference they were hosting at Rice University. I’d spent time in the Rice archive, and others, and I was interested in participating, even though I am a poet through and through. I thought I was playing in this tiny little corner of poetry, poking around in Jewish archives in Texas, but Josh told me he knew somebody who was doing similar work who I had never met before, S.L. Wisenberg. He put us in touch about the same time we arrived in Seattle, and of course we met up at the conference to discuss our shared interest in archival writing. Once we realized we weren’t alone, we were hungry to reach out to other poets and writers working at these intersections.

I’m honored to be joined by poets, essayists, and librettists whose art has inspired how we think about this subject: Hadara Bar-Nadav, Leah Lax, and Tom Haviv.

We believe it is a universal instinct to use the raw materials of culture and government in a diversity of techniques without subsuming our particular perspective. Beyond our Jewish origins, we speak to an expanding, inclusive documentary tradition.

Each panelist will speak about their craft, process, motivations, and influences, as well as read a related sample of their work, before introducing the next panelist. I will open more discussion with a brief series of prepared questions for the panel, opening as well to audience Q&A.

Before we begin, we want to state that we on the panel are Jewish-Americans, here to speak about how that specific point of view has led each of us to a novel approach to our form. Panel proposals went in months ago.
We intended our title to be playful and eye-catching. We could not have predicted its context today. It is likely that the panelists have a variety of viewpoints on foreign policy, just as all Americans do. We ask that questions and comments speak to our discussion.

Thank you for being here. We hope you enjoy, and we look forward to hearing your questions and remarks.

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

**S.L. Wisenberg:** I have always been interested in biography, since elementary school. I’ve also conducted many interviews as a journalist. As an adult I write mostly prose but I’ve been drawn to poetry that is biographical, sometimes speculative—by Pamela White Hadas, Ursule Molinaro, Rita Dove—as well as work by Ruth Whitman and Stephanie Strickland. I was especially taken with *In Evidence* by Barbara Helfgott Hyett, based on interviews with concentration camp liberators. I’m also in awe of Anna Deavere Smith, who conducts interviews and takes one tiny part of each to reproduce on stage, a synecdoche. One of her first pieces was based on interviews after the Crown Heights riot. She’s interested in the humanity and individuality of her nonfiction characters, not witness statements. I’m also very interested in one-person shows and other theatre based on interviews, such as *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman and the musical *Come From Away*. About ten years ago, while searching for something else in an archive at the University of Texas, I found transcripts of oral histories with Jewish elders in Houston, from 1976. The cadence and pathos struck me, and I started crafting poems from the interviews. I will read some of these poems at the panel. I will also discuss a problem I encountered with a Yiddish term.

**Hadara Bar-Nadav:**

My most recent book, *The Animal Is Chemical*, draws on my previous experience as a medical editor and familial wounds from the Holocaust to explore intergenerational trauma. The central metaphor for this collection is *pharmakon*, that which has the power to heal and kill. These poems explore topics ranging from opioids to Nazi medical experiments, and
challenge our assumptions about healing our bodies, our families, and our shared histories.

I began exploring erasure in this book by researching Nazi medical experiments and looked at the language used by Nazi medical staff who tortured and murdered hundreds of thousands of people in the name of science, people whom they didn’t count as human, including Jews, Roma, Polish prisoners of war, the disabled, those deemed mentally deficient, those who were LGBT, and others. I studied the speech of Nazi medical staff and created erasures of their legal defenses during Nuremberg tribunals, mining the language and hidden speech underneath their words, metaphorically un-erasing those they had erased, looking for the cracks in their phrases, other truths inside the ashes.

What I discovered was that erasures created space for other stories, those of the erased. I have long believed that white space in a poem is never silent—it is active, contains weight, energy, and pulse. Erasure asks: what does the silence say? I consciously write into both of these spaces in a poem: the black lettered space and the white pulse of the page.

I’ll also admit that the heat of this book project was crushing. It was difficult to be so deeply immersed in this speech of denial and hate and then function within a day, teach, talk to my children, even fall asleep. I could not easily turn it off. Erasure forces you to be inside of another language, an immersion that seeps into the skin. So I took the energy of erasure and looked for something adjacent, related but not under the direct heat of that trauma, that sun.

I was a medical editor for several years, prior to becoming a professor. I remember during my interview saying that I believed words could heal, a phrase that still holds true for me. And some of the work I did as a medical editor may have healed people, but mostly I helped pharmaceutical companies sell drugs.

I started creating erasures of pharmaceutical package inserts. Package inserts contain life-saving information but are coded in medical
jargon. Through the erasure form, I rewrite the text of package inserts and create poems—human language in a human tongue. These pharmaceutical poems are a corrective to the trillion-dollar pharmaceutical industry and an act of reconciliation for my work as a former medical editor, when I directly supported “Big Pharma.” I literally dismantle package inserts by crossing out and rearranging the text, working across and into white space. Metaphorically, I dismantle power structures associated with the pharmaceutical industry (marketing specialists, salespeople, pharmaceutical executives, lawyers, lobbyists, etc.) by disrupting their messaging and finding messages underneath and inside of their hard, wooden diction. I hope these poems inform and empower people and perhaps even disarm the pharmaceutical industry, which is invested in selling us drugs that may or may not heal us.

Leah Lax: Being Jewish stamped me with a sort of historical memory of persecution and migration that shaped my approach to this immigrant project and led me to depart in established forms. Ultimately Not From Here took a hybrid form, laced as it is with moments that have the intimacy of memoir. In part because of all that I related to in these accounts, I discerned a great deal of commonality across ethnicities. Ultimately, I placed my family history into this new context. Presented as an integrated whole, which has rarely if ever been done, the collection becomes a macro view of a defining American force.

Tom Haviv:

- I worked with my grandmother over the last five years of her life recording her stories via audio and video, and also via email correspondence. I was doing this, simply, to capture her memory and her legacy, and to help document the under-documented stories of Turkish Jews in the 20th century. I will show some video or share some audio for framing
While doing this I also was working with my dad to help piece together her stories (especially after she passed away in the final moments leading up to publication.

I also found that I was doing that while investigating my relationship to Zionism and Israel/Palestine, and working on The Hamsa Flag Project. I was following clues my grandparents gave me in their storytelling on Turkish nationalism, the Ottoman empire, multilingualism, and Sephardi multi-rootedness etc. that I felt were potential frameworks for reinvestigating what it meant to be a Jew in relation to nationalism and the larger Middle East.

My conversations with my grandmother (and my father), which became the backbone of A Flag of No Nation, were a method of regenerative poetics (in which their voices became interwoven with mine), and reparative to my lineage — and to the erasure of my lineage by many other louder narratives.

This allowed me to speak to the dead and the live and create an organic and shared history, rather than depart or disassociate, I wanted to interweave and deepen our bonds over time (generations, centuries, even), and create a new chapter in Sephardi culture and history...

Joshua Gottlieb-Miller:

I find myself articulating a contradictory, ironized experience as I think about my research and writing on identity, and my own urge towards docupoetry and archival inquiry. When I began writing my dissertation and now forthcoming book, Dybbuk Americana—a hybrid poetry text including prose, oral history, interview fragments, found and archival materials—I was wrestling with Jewish identity in America, and what it means for my son to inherit that identity. It was 2016. I wasn’t the only one.

Driven in part by examples I found in lineages of docupoetry—from Muriel Rukeyser and Charles Reznikoff to Claudia Rankine and Robin Coste-Lewis—I began researching in Houston’s archives: the Special Collections at the University of Houston, the South Texas Jewish History Archive at Rice
University, Congregation Beth Israel's Library and Archive, and the Museum of Fine Arts Houston Hirsch Library and Archive. I’d reconnected with Jewish community in Houston as an adult, and my son was going to a Jewish pre-K, but Houston is also a fascinating synecdoche of the US: wonderfully diverse, a town of wildcatters with zero zoning. The stories I was uncovering in my research turned out to be more complicated than I’d expected: there was no single, coherent history to find.

Texas’s Jewish population grew over several waves of migration, including most notably: Sephardi traveling from New Orleans and points South in the early 19th century, German immigrants in the late 19th century, Eastern European migrants in the early 20th century, and Russian refuseniks in the 1970s. Of course, over that almost 200 years Jews have come to Houston from many other origins as well, and mythic retellings include Jews at the Alamo or even during the first Spanish incursion 450 years ago.

The most controversial of these movements was the Galveston Plan. Galveston, near Houston, was the second biggest immigration hub after Ellis Island. The short version of this epic is that a wealthy German-Jewish New Yorker, echoing the prejudices of his day, was worried there were too many Jews in New York—especially newer Eastern European arrivals, fleeing pogroms, who were seen as more religious and less assimilated—and that the threat of reactionary violence meant newer Jews needed to be re-routed elsewhere in the United States, where they would be diluted into small, rural towns. Many stopped in Houston, instead, or other Texas cities, and some trekked from Texas to New York.

That same racializing drama played out in Houston proper. My synagogue, Temple Emanu El, had split off from Beth Israel, where my son first went to pre-K, because of changing, contested notions of identity. Tensions had brewed especially in the 1930s and 40s when Beth Israel’s original, more assimilated membership, of Germanic origins felt increasingly suspicious of newer and more numerous Eastern European immigrant congregants. That split was a major event in American Jewish life; what was called the Basic Principles controversy in Houston was national Jewish news.

Working as a poet and folklorist, I traced the Jewish migrations in Houston, its shifting geographies and demographics. I took photos and videos of the paths those synagogues and their communities took, but of
course, there were few traces of the past left in the city physically. The history is in us, and our stories.

I was also learning that it wasn’t one Jewish community, but many. I began interviewing Jewish artists and patrons of the arts. Eventually I began interviewing my family members, accidentally starting my own archive.

What I was discovering in myself and my poetry was mirrored in my interviews and archival research, but so were their absences. Conversations with older relatives revealed familial struggles that were familiar from popular history. Some of the earliest pioneers of docupoetry, Rukeyser and Reznikoff, worked with those materials to highlight evidence that contradicted the national legend. Oftentimes it’s the relationship between those documents and the very fact of an official record that docupoetry questions.

There is no monolithic Jewish community, but I think sometimes we forget that there never was. Beth Israel, in classic patriotic Texan fashion, had been zealously anti-Zionist: Texas was their promised land. Synagogues fractured and multiplied across Houston for many reasons, and conflicts that remain with us today have been debated within diasporic Jewish communities for a long time. Though it seems strange to say it, I think sometimes we forget that because the story’s been told, it needs to be told again and again.

List of poems

I’m going to read just a bit from Dybbuk Americana—once again, forthcoming this fall—in the time I have left. The first excerpt is an interstitial text that includes archival materials from the Hirsch papers, a good opportunity to discuss the ethics of archival writing. Then I will read two poems.

“(Interstitial text)” — (thinking about what Hirsch could know and what he couldn’t, the seduction of hindsight, what we owe to our sources, as well as folklorist ethical principles)

“Meet the Teachers Night”
“New Prayer Book”

MODERATOR QUESTIONS
1) Please tell the story of a memorable find while doing archival research.

2) How do the ethical responsibilities of writing and research differ? How much do we prioritize our desire for belonging or sense of ownership over the story being told? How do you balance these priorities? Was there a specific time you weren’t sure what to do?

3) A craft question: When using archival materials, how much do you add, how much do you subtract? Is there a difference in ownership when you use found interviews vs. when you do the interviews yourself? Alternatively, does anyone have a particular archival or docupoetry writing method they’ve found especially useful?

4) Please describe a time you were surprised by an absence in an archive, and where that absence took you.

RESPONSES OF EACH PARTICIPANT TO MODERATOR QUESTIONS

(We have provided representative answers here.)

1) S.L.W: I found the oral history of a woman in Yiddish-inflected English. I realized she was the grandmother of my bat mitzvah partner. Surely I’d met her but I had no memory of it. My mother knew her. This woman had been an active socialist and labor organizer in pre-Soviet Belarus. Her life story was full of drama–she married a man who was visiting his hometown after immigrating to Houston. She stayed in Belarus when her husband returned to Texas. World War I started and they were separated for seven years. (I’ll read verse from this interview.)

2) JGM: My interview training is in folklore, which because of unethical practices early on in its scholarship, now has a fairly strict sense of honoring the interviewee. Contemporary folklorists believe that someone’s words are always their own, even after they’ve been interviewed. I haven’t been taking adversarial interviews, which might change how I look at this, but for me it’s important to make sure my interviewee is comfortable with how I am representing them. For writing, though, I think just about anything is fair game in responding, so long as you are accurately representing your interviewee. I think about this
especially in the context of an interview where a musician talked about being a booster for Houston’s Jewish community. She wasn’t interested in discussing past controversies, but was looking to build community. While I feel that same sense of belonging, I don’t think community can be built without knowing where it’s gone wrong.

3) JGM: Ironically, I feel less ownership over the interviews I’ve done and more freedom with archival research. You can’t check in with a hypothetical. You can honor that spirit by being as accurate as possible, but interpretive work requires risk. I’m interested less in the found materials themselves than in how they’re being transformed. Is an interview presented as part of a sequence? Is a character developed over time? I’ve heard in some of the remarks earlier a focus on specific documentary strategies, such as erasure, and I wonder if we might make more of the shared reliance many of us have on erasures as an archival method. Two of our panelists spoke to erasures directly, already. One thing erasure does is that it compels the reader to become a kind of ventriloquist of what’s unsaid, an active participant.

Are there other ways to represent the evidence that’s visually transformative? Using a different method but the same spirit as erasure, juxtaposition can bring out an underlying rhetoric. Hebrew Studies was initially classed within what was called, and I apologize for the long-outdated term, Oriental Studies. That was the academic discipline where study of Hebrew language, culture, history, etc. occurred. Reading popular histories and looking through archives I’d see mid-twentieth century rabbis reject that problematic label, but there was something jarring about the way they did it, as if they were rejecting their racialization not because it was part of a larger immoral system, but because they were claiming assimilation out of it. I felt less ownership over that history than responsibility to it. That also seemed like something that required the opposite of erasure, though again, juxtaposition activating similar distances between what is and isn’t said.

4) S.L.W: I wasn’t surprised by an absence, but I was surprised that these interviews were already 10 years old before they were transcribed. I
also haven’t been able to figure out what precipitated these series of interviews. There were ten interviews of a group of ten native Jewish elders, and of ten immigrants. The interviewer was a professor of sociology at the University of Houston. Because they were done in 1976, I thought they might have been part of a bicentennial project, but I looked in bicentennial grant lists, and couldn’t find anything. It would have been wonderful to have such interviews among all ethnic groups in Houston. And everywhere else.

Q&A Session

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.)