

Canadian Jewish Poetry: A Roundtable

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Abstract

Is Canadian Jewish Poetry a meaningful category of study? Are there particular traits that differentiate Canadian Jewish poets from poets of other countries, or from writers in other genres? How do contemporary poets confront the looming legacy of Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen, and A.M. Klein? Six prominent poets and scholars conduct a roundtable discussion to articulate recent developments in the field.

Résumé

La poésie juive canadienne est-elle une catégorie d'étude significative? Y a-t-il des traits particuliers qui différencient les poètes juifs canadiens des poètes d'autres pays, ou des écrivains d'autres genres? Comment les poètes contemporains font-ils face à l'héritage imminent d'Irving Layton, Leonard Cohen et A.M. Klein? Six poètes et universitaires éminents organisent une table ronde pour exposer les développements récents dans ce domaine.

Canadian Jews have been publishing poetry, conducting readings, and arguing about poetic aesthetics in multiple languages for at least a century and a half. Today, Jewish poets are a varied and vibrant group in Canada. From coast to coast, across stylistics and subjects, crossing borders and genres, Canadian Jewish poets have contributed to, and continue to contribute to, a rich and ambitious national and ethno-religious literature. There's plenty of material here to explore. But "Canadian Jewish Poetry" as a field of study has been neglected in scholarship of late. Very little has been published lately in the pages of *Canadian Jewish Studies* about poets and poetry. Few conferences devote much time to the subject and while recent studies have appeared discussing the work of individual poets—Leonard Cohen especially, following his death in 2016—there have been few organized efforts that attempt to draw any conclusions about contemporary Canadian Jewish Poetry or to consider how it got here. The two editors of this Roundtable are hoping to open a discussion in order to begin to remedy that silence: to consider Canadian Jewish Poetry as a meaningful category of study, to see if there is a "there" there, and if so, to re-invigorate discussion of the subject. To that end we reached out to three poets and three scholars (including some who straddle both categories), hoping to generate ideas, ask good questions, and plant some seeds that we hope will bear tasty fruit in the future. The participants are:

- Gary Barwin, a writer, poet, performer, educator and multimedia artist who lives in Hamilton, Ontario
- Michael Greenstein, a retired Professor of English from the University of Sherbrooke
- Ruth Panofsky, a poet and professor in the Department of English at Toronto

Metropolitan University

- Lisa Richter, a Toronto-based author of two books of poetry
- Emily Robins Sharpe, an associate professor of English and an affiliate faculty member of Women's and Gender Studies and Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Keene State College in Keene, New Hampshire
- Rhea Tregebov, the author of seven collections of poetry, most recently *All Souls'*. She is Associate Professor Emerita for the School of Creative Writing at UBC

Our mode of discussion was conceived in the spirit of Talmudic debate:

- We began with a semi-formal **P'shat** (surface) exchange of ideas, with a prompt for our authors to try to define terms and open avenues for further exploration.
- Following the P'shat salvos, the participants were divided into three pairs to address a specific topic, which we're calling a **Drash (inquiry)**. With a bit more space for specific analysis, these are the most formal and in-depth of the offerings.
- Finally, each member responded to their partner's *Drash* with a brief **Chevrutah (discussion or debate)**. The idea here was to amplify points of elaboration or contention, and to point to potential new lines of enquiry. The text that follows has been lightly edited for clarity and flow.

The goal of a roundtable is to open avenues for debate, identify points of complication or conflict, and invite further work by scholars who wish to add to—or take issue with—the assumptions, declarations or positions of our members. We are far from a unified group, but we are also well aware that we don't cover the full range of Canadian Jewish experience—we are all predominantly Anglophone, for example, and while we range in age from our 30s to our 70s, there are certainly demographics we do not adequately represent. The editors hope it goes without saying that we encourage those who follow to challenge us, to point to blind spots in our thinking, and to take it from there. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon: “You are not obliged to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it” (*Pirkei Avot* 2:16).

P'shat

*Let's start with the most basic question, the **p'shat**, a sort of “raison d'être”: Is Canadian Jewish Poetry a meaningful category of study? Does it have its own identity as a subsection of Jewish literature, or of Canadian poetry more generally?*

RUTH PANOFSKY: One might argue that Canadian Jewish literature originated in poetry. Among the Canadian writers who first articulated a Jewish sensibility were the poets A.M. Klein, followed by Irving Layton, Miriam Waddington, and Eli Man-

del, then Leonard Cohen and Seymour Mayne, who wrote out of a distinctive sense of themselves as Jews living in Canada. In fact, Canadian literary modernism, which emerged in the 1940s, was influenced by these poets who probed the interconnections between their Canadian and Jewish identities.

Over the course of the last century and into the present, identity in its multifarious forms continued to preoccupy Canadian Jewish poets and shape their work. As Jewish identifications shifted, changed, and expanded, their verse remained open, constantly in tension with the land and landscape—cultural, racial, geographical, ideological—that is Canada.

To ask, however, if Canadian Jewish poetry has grown into “a meaningful category of study” is to invite a different question: who determines the parameters of categories of study? Typically, such analysis and meaning making is undertaken by scholars and public intellectuals—individuals who might study the works of writers in relation to one another, then identify connections or discern differences among those works. In the process, as these scholars and thinkers develop a body of critical literature, they are also establishing “a meaningful category” or field of study.

Although Jewish poetry lacked the Canadian equivalents of New York intellectuals Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Leslie Fiedler, and Irving Howe as interpretive guides, there has been a consistent scholarly attempt to consider poetry in terms of its Canadian Jewish orientation. The first critics of the 1950s and 1960s, Louis Dudek, John Sutherland, Northrop Frye, Desmond Pacey, and Malcolm Ross, showed a cosmopolitan and incisive understanding of the efforts of then-emerging Canadian Jewish poets. Over the years, a handful of scholars, most notably Rachel Feldhay Brenner, Michael Greenstein, and Norman Ravvin, have undertaken further critical investigation. To my mind, however, the examination of Canadian Jewish poetry has been less than systematic. There are also too few specialists to have established anything resembling a solid critical “category” or field of study.

Today, Canadian Jewish poetry remains vibrant in range and increasingly diverse in form. There are a number of contemporary poets whose work responds imaginatively to that of earlier writers Anna Margolin, A.M. Klein, and Adele Wiseman,¹ which shows an awareness of one’s writerly forebears—European and Canadian—among a literary generation that feels at once settled and free enough in Canada to reflect on its Jewish inheritance. There are other poets for whom “Canadian” and “Jewish” are rich intersecting subject areas. Then there are Jewish poets for whom Canada serves more as residence than subject. But the corpus of Canadian Jewish poetry is still lacking a full critical response and there remains a dearth of public voices to help publicize and interpret Jewish poetry, past and present, for a wider Canadian audience. I am thinking of scholars like Ruth Wisse and Josh Lambert,

Canadian transplants to the United States known for their public commentary on American Jewish literature.

Is this intellectual unwillingness to particularize Jewishness unique to Canada, where cultural openness, though constantly under threat, is now so prized? After all, to particularize is to categorize, to define and delimit. One striking aspect of contemporary Canadian Jewish poetry is its expansiveness as it looks back into history, out on the present, and further outward to the future—across geographies of place and imagination and away from the coherence that categorization generally imposes.

GARY BARWIN: When I think about Canadian Jewish poetry, I think of American poet Charles Bernstein. He wrote something to the effect that he's never more Jewish than when he questions his Jewishness. Canadian Jewish poetry is never more Canadian Jewish poetry than when it questions its Canadianness, Jewishness, and its place in poetry. Likewise, I'm never more of a Jewish Canadian poet than when I question it.

So the mere fact that we're asking this question is perhaps what defines us. Why are there two bitter herbs on the Seder plate? So, the rabbis say, that children will ask questions.

I feel that, as with Jewishness and Jewish identity, there are a number of Jewishnesses in Canadian poetry. There's the candlestick-shmatta-Winnipeg-Montreal-shul-service-smoked meat Jewish poetry . . . and then something else. A deep structure, something like an epistemology or perhaps an ontological vein within the sensibility, powering the connections of words and images. The mohel is the message.

I think of how there are poetries which speak to—what?—Family Compact Canada and its poetic spawn of the 21st century. Oh, how goyishe! (There, I said it. It's a literary term. I think Northrop Frye used it.) There are many poetries which speak against this notional mainstream sensibility and Jewishness is one of them.

Even if we didn't think that there was a meaningful category of Canadian Jewish Poetry, the mere fact of some of us asking would make it so. The fact that other places have *their* Jewish poetry means that there is a gap to be filled, a signified *here* in CanLit for this Canadian Jewish Poetry creature. And also, since there is a more defined category of Jewish Canadian fiction, there is this vacuum (the place of Canadian Jewish Poetry) which fills with poetry that can fill it.

For me, I hear the Jewishness of my poetic colleagues. I think how their Jewishness is expressed or not expressed. I think how they relate to me or not. To each other. To Leonard and Irving. There's a crack in everything. That's how the Jewish Canadian Poetry gets in. So to answer the questions, yes and yes.

MICHAEL GREENSTEIN: With its own usable past and (un) predictable future, Canadian–Jewish Poetry or Jewish–Canadian Poetry is alive and well from coast to coast. Beginning with A.M. Klein, who mixed Hebrew and Yiddish traditions with the Modernism of Joyce and Eliot, and influenced Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen, Montreal established itself as the centre of Canadian–Jewish Poetry for much of the twentieth century. Klein’s legacy also runs through Miriam Waddington who, in turn, initiates a feminist and Western tradition from Winnipeg. His “nth Adam” and Eve take root in other green inventories, while his phosphorus shining at the bottom of the sea resurfaces in Anne Michaels’s “Phosphorus” and “Drowned City” sections of *Fugitive Pieces*. Just as Klein writes in a variety of genres, so the borders and boundaries of Canadian–Jewish Poetry are fluid in the mingled poetry and prose of Michaels, Barwin, Tregebov, Méira Cook, and others.

One turning point appears in *Prairie Fire* (1996), an omnium gatherum devoted to *Jewish–Canadian Writing*. Sandwiched between Cook’s “Fragments” and Tregebov’s “Centring the Margins,” my “Jewish Diagonals / Diagonal Jews” pivots away from a Montreal–centric point of view and gravitates towards the prairies. Cook’s poem includes shattered light, broken law, spark, and other kabbalistic formulations. Irving Howe has described the avant–garde Jew as “a figure apart, perhaps torn away, undertaking a journey of dispersion more radical than that of other Jews.” Cook and Barwin take these radical risks, the latter especially in experimental poems throughout *For It Is a Pleasure and a Surprise to Breathe*. Tamar Rubin’s *Tablet Fragments* also points to the centrality of fragmentation in Canadian–Jewish Poetry.

Gary opens a Jewish chapter that has bigger Frye to fish in Canadian waters and writers. Within a sceptical Jewish tradition his double “yes” may be a maybe, while Molly Bloom’s echo assures a hearty continuity. Poets case the mezuzah at a threshold: on one side, domestic particularism; on the other, a welcome to Otherness and northernness. Or, they may latch it on to a mirror that recuperates the past, as in Lisa Richter’s surreal blending of self with Anna Margolin. Beyond the Pale of Settlement, Canadian–Jewish Poetry appropriates and subverts a postmodern Diaspora between Charles Bernstein’s Jewish question and Cook’s conclusion that the “Jew always runs the risk of being misunderstood.” The risky business of Modernism and postmodernism lies at the heart of Canadian–Jewish Poetry with its endless questioning and misunderstanding.

RHEA TREGEBOV: In “Centring the Margins” (originally composed in 1996) I wrote that “[i]n order to be able to produce a literature in which one’s authentic self, including those elements of self which are engendered by ethnicity, is intrinsic but also organic, a context must exist in the outside world in which the authentic self is acknowledged, even welcomed. It is under such circumstances that we sense ourselves as most readily authorized to speak from our genuine experience.”

This premise sounds naive these days, when identity plays such a prominent and hard-edged role in our literary landscape, and when our understanding of identity is increasingly fractured. I'm a straight, female, 60-something, Winnipeg-raised, secular, Ashkenazi Jew born to first-generation Canadian parents. How does my "genuine experience" parlay with that of a straight, male, 60-something, Montreal-born, spiritually inclined Ashkenazi Jew born to Holocaust survivor Polish/Latvian parents? Much less with that of a 30-something, gay, Israeli-born, Toronto-resident, Sephardi Iraqi Jew who is non-binary?

I may be "readily authorized" to speak to the specifics listed above of my life experience, but to cast that experience under the umbrella of "Canadian Jewish" feels *chutzpahdik* at the least. I am uncomfortable with this category, even when it fits. And I have to be honest and admit that I'm still, after all these years and books, struggling with understanding what it means to be Jewish, though I know that being Jewish is central to both my life and my writing.

In my most recent book, the novel *Rue des Rosiers*, I have my protagonist think "if being Jewish defines her, if it's everything that she is, then it's all that she is." It took me a lot of writing to write that sentence, and a lot of living through my complicated experience of being Jewish. A few sentences on, when her non-Jewish boyfriend offers the gift of a necklace, I write: "She's never worn a Star of David, never wanted that badge: *This is me, this is who I am, Jew. Jewess.* The word swollen to swallow her up, as if she's only *Jew*. Who she is annihilated by what she is. She wants to be more than one thing."

We all are more than just one thing. Certainly more than just two things. "Canadian Jewish Poetry" can however still be a useful category when it allows us to envision and examine the myriad vivid differences within that category.

EMILY ROBINS SHARPE: In considering Canadian Jewish poetry—as meaningful a category of study as we make it—I think the meaning-making comes in part from how the poetry informs our understanding of each of these terms (Canadian, Jewish, Poetry) and vice versa. Ruth's response to Adam and David's initial questions spurs me to think about the possibilities for future literary study. To past literary study as well, especially the longstanding scholarly debate over how to define Jewish literature. Can it only be written by Jews? (And if so, whose definition of a Jew do we use?) Must it depict Jewish characters and/or Jewish topics—the so-called Jewish experience? (And if so, must it depict those characters or topics positively?) Is there a Jewish way of writing—rhythm, rhyme, meter, syntax...? I find Gary's comment on "deep structure" really thought-provoking here.

These debates over the definition of Jewish literature intersect in some interesting ways with discussions of Canadian literature where—questions of colonialism, re-

gional distinctions, and immigration histories all figure in significant ways. And (and perhaps this comes from my having become one of those Canadians who works in the US and incessantly points out famous Canadians), I also want to pay some attention to how and when Jewish Canadian authors either identify (or not) or are acknowledged (or not) as Jewish or as Canadian—when they are subsumed into American Jewish studies, for instance, or, when their Jewishness is represented (by scholars or the writers themselves) as secondary or unimportant, for a host of potential reasons. Here, I really appreciate Rhea's comments on the alternating pressures to both write about Jewish topics and to avoid them.

I also really appreciate Michael's comments about the expansiveness of the poetry genre. This is a debate I'm always trying to get going with my literature undergraduates, to get them to think beyond sonnets and other texts that look like poetry (outside the Canadian Jewish context, I often assign sections from Claudia Rankine's 2014 *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry while also a finalist in the criticism category).

My own approach and interest in Canadian Jewish poetry—and literature more broadly—continues to focus on occasional poetry. Often, these are occasions that might not seem, at least on their surface, to be all that Jewish, but I've found that reading outside the boundaries of Canadian Jewish poetry is what illuminates its Canadian and/or Jewish character. To give one example, most recently, I wrote an article about how, amongst the many, many Canadian poems about the Spanish Civil War, Canadian Jewish poets alone are the ones to connect the war to Spain's longstanding history of antisemitism and the Spanish Inquisition. This is a poetic move common to Jewish poets across languages, but one that only appears in Anglophone Canadian poetry via Jewish poets. Just one way of thinking about the identity of the category.

LISA RICHTER: Growing up in Toronto in the 80s and 90s, there were exactly two Canadian Jewish writers I read and adored: Mordecai Richler and Leonard Cohen. During my first-year Canadian poetry course at McGill University, I was introduced to the work of A.M. Klein and Irving Layton. Klein, the mystic, the academic, who eventually suffered a nervous breakdown and retreated into silence. Layton, the would-be prophet, with his Brando-like intensity and bravado (and yes, I'll say it: casual misogyny). Where was the place for my voice within this lineage? At nineteen, I wrote a poem in response to Klein's "Portrait of the Artist as Landscape" called "Portrait of the Muse as Territory," in which I attempted to reclaim the Muse as a figure in her own right, and give her (though I didn't have the language for it at the time) a sense of agency.

But I'm getting away from the question at hand. I *want* to believe in Canadian Jewish poetry as a meaningful category of study. A poetry that extends beyond Klein, Layton

and Cohen. Poetry by Jews of all genders, queer Jews, working class Jews, disabled Jews, Jews of colour, Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews, non-Zionist Jews, Jews from the Prairies, the West Coast, the Maritimes. But do we, as Canadians, really have our own identity as a subsection within the canon of Jewish literature? For me, this raises two important questions. How do the arbitrarily drawn borders of what is today known as Canada (seen through the lens of settler-colonialism) intersect with Jewishness? To what extent are our poetics unified by our common geographies, histories or nationalities?

I have had the privilege of reading in both Canadian and American Jewish literary spaces. I can't say I felt a greater sense of kinship in the former than I did in the latter. Ultimately, I do think we need to turn our attention to what is happening north of the 49th parallel in Jewish poetry. Not necessarily in search of commonalities—an endeavour which can't help but homogenize us and minimize the realities of our lived experiences—but to explore the beauty and richness of our differences, what happens when we step out of the master's (or prophet's) shadow.

GARY BARWIN:

Exile is not the word
I want to use
so I am inventing songs
with other words

other ways of checking
overtones against
the tuning note, the A, sonority,
bringing
myself back
from X isle.

But is this even true?
If I have to "bring myself back"
perhaps exile is
the word I have to use.

— Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "A Series of Codas"
from *Poetic Realism* (BlazeVox Books, 2020)

I'm enjoying the discussion here, and reading the above words in a recent DuPlessis collection (she's an American Jewish poet, not a Canadian one) I was thinking of "exile," and "diaspora" and a sense of belonging, of being endemic to a place, an identity, a culture and/or one's self. Of course, as Rhea points out, there are diverse identities

folded into being “Jewish” and “Jewish Canadian”— manifold possible hyphenations or interpretations. But what of the sense of belonging to Canadianness, or Jewish Canadianness, or even to Jewish Canadian Poetry?

I feel that it is exactly my “exile” that makes me grounded here. I do feel “exiled” (though that really is much too dramatic a word in this case) from mainstream Canadian culture. I’m not only different because of my distrust of capitalism and its attendant destructive parades of hetero-patriarchal-petro-colonial-etc-ism, but there is something about my specific sense of self as a Jew and as a Jewish writer that makes me “different.”

Sure, I feel “exile” from my birthplace (Northern Ireland), from my parents’ birthplace (South Africa), and my grandparents’ Lithuanian Ashkenazi heritage. I feel the dislocation and extinctions of the Holocaust and earlier persecutions, and the sense of fracture from my historical past. I should say that unlike many, I’m not a Zionist and honestly don’t feel that exile or identity, though of course I understand that powerful pull in our culture. That also makes me different. To me, my Aliyah is to a Canada, a home, a culture where I feel more fully grounded, where my values for each other and society are more fully realized.

The “tongue is not in exile” (*Di tsung iz nit in goles*). I do think of rebuilding, of re-framing— —the rebuilding of a sense in which where you are, where you’re able to speak and express yourself is home. Even to speak of where you’re not is a grounding. One can triangulate identity by locating the places that might have had a pull, or might have been “home,” but aren’t. And where are we then? In the middle of that triangulation (if there were two overlapping triangles, we could take a neat Magen David out of this image.)

I guess I’m trying to articulate my sense of otherness or of difference, even while acknowledging how I share that with so many in Canada. Even the Indigenous, through settler-colonialism, feel an otherness, and they’re from here. They live in a diaspora right in their place of origin. I, too, feel like I’m in a diaspora, not in my place of origin, obviously, but right here where I live as a settler. I’m “from” here, now, with its attendant complications and issues.

I can’t resist feeling kinship with Kafka—“What do I have in common with Jews? I hardly have anything in common with myself.” Yes! We share that. I have this complex lack of commonality with Jews that makes me have things in common with them. I also have such a complex with other Canadians.

But what if I did make that “aliyah” to a place where I didn’t feel different, or “exiled” from, where I didn’t have that “diasporic” feeling. I think I wouldn’t know what to

do. I think I never feel more at home than when I am not at home. When I feel I'm outside looking in, at least at others, not perhaps so much looking in at myself. I'm good with feeling that I live in the centre of myself, even if looking out is part of my central identity.

I feel that my definition of contemporary Canadian Jewish poetry is that it exists in the diaspora of language, of thought, of identity. Even in the diaspora from itself. It can't quite see itself as central but gains its expressive and textual power from its oblique relation. We're never Maimonides or Hafiz, King David or even Sutzkever. *Je(w) est un autre.*

MICHAEL GREENSTEIN: A contemporary geographer has defined "place" as a pause in movement. Jewish geography is the same story, but different too.

GARY BARWIN: Yes. Home sweet spacetime home. We're always in time's diaspora. Or were. Or will be.

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Drash and Chevrutah

DRASH #1: Lisa Richter and Michael Greenstein

Are Canadian Jewish poets still operating under the shadow of the Layton/Cohen/Klein Montreal triumvirate? Have the Prairies, or Vancouver, or Toronto, "taken the mantle" of Jewish poetics in this country, and if so, how has that changed our approach? Do you see other paths forward emerging in the younger Jewish poets writing today?

LISA RICHTER: It's next to impossible to think about Jewish Canadian poetry without thinking about the proverbial triumvirate of A.M. Klein, Irving Layton or Leonard Cohen. Typing in "Jewish Canadian poetry" (a scientific approach, I know), my feed becomes awash in tributes to Leonard Cohen, ranging in true Cohenian fashion from the sacred to the profane ("do the Republicans realize that *Hallelujah* is about sex and Judaism?"); birthday tributes to Klein, born on February 14th, which also happens to be the day my father died; a smattering of Layton poems in quotes and screenshots, with equal parts reverence and contempt for his effortless misogyny. My own images of the Big Three begin with visuals. In the 1965 National Film Board of Canada documentary, *Ladies and Gentlemen . . . Mr. Leonard Cohen*, a young, earnest Cohen reads his poems to an audience of men with black horn-rimmed glasses and ladies in hats and nice gloves. Unconsciously, I scan the crowd for my parents and grandparents, a search that comes up fruitless. Layton, with his fierce Brando-like profile, all pomp and bravado, whose poems I fell hard for. And Klein, the lawyer-turned-poet, novelist, and journalist, who is said to have suffered

a nervous breakdown and retreated into a permanent silence. As an impressionable first-year English major and fledgling poet at McGill University in the mid-90s, it was impossible not to fall under their influence and spell, for better or for worse.

It's hard to generalize about Canadian Jewish poets and whose shadows, exactly, hang over us. I wonder if this could partially be attributed to the fact that for Jewish poets who write on the margins of race, class, gender, and other markers of identity, our *other* intersecting identities are the more salient or defining parts of who we are. Or perhaps our queerness, secularism, gender, skin tone, geography or critical perspectives of Israel-Palestine have made us feel like outsiders within mainstream Jewish communities. How could our poetry not reflect that? Why should our models or influences remain locked in mid-century Montreal modernism? And must it be a binary choice?

I am excited and bolstered by the diversity and range of Jewish voices writing in Canada today, challenging the hegemonic perceptions of what it means to write as a Jewish poet in this country. Poets who actively engage with issues of settler-colonialism and their own positionalit(ies). But how do we begin to classify and catalogue these voices? Should it be along geographical lines? Generationally? By gender or sexuality? Or perhaps by poetic schools themselves, considering aesthetic choices and influences, in which case categorization by religion or ethnicity becomes increasingly complicated. Borders, too, are tricky. Rachel Zolf, for example, with her examination of language, militarism and settler-colonialism might have more in common with C.D. Wright or Layli Long Soldier or Claudia Rankine—none of whom are Jewish or Canadian—than with Jonathan Garfinkel, the award-winning poet and journalist best known, perhaps, for his memoir *Ambivalence: Crossing the Israel/Palestine Divide*. In subject matter and tone, Rachel Rose in Vancouver might have more in common with Montreal poet Sarah Venart or Suzanne Buffam than with Jewish poet Alex Leslie, author of *Vancouver for Beginners*.

Everywhere I look, I see Jewish poets forging new paths, writing as much in resistance as in response to their Jewish identities. There are the poets who have arguably become household names in Canadian poetry, Jewish or otherwise: Rhea Tregebov, Ron Charach, Michael Redhill, Susan Glickman, Stuart Ross, Robyn Sarah, Gary Barwin, Anne Michaels, Jacob Scheier, Adam Sol, Alice Burdick, Ronna Bloom, Myna Wallin, Kenneth Sherman. A new generation of Jewish poets, writing outside the modernist sensibilities of Layton, Cohen and Klein, have been making waves in recent years, amongst readers Jewish and non-Jewish alike: Saskatchewan-born poet Leah Horlick (*Moldovan Hotel*), Newfoundland-based poet Anna Swanson (*The Nights Also, Garbage Poems*), Ruth Panofsky (*Radiant Shards*), Rebecca Păpucaru (*The Panic Room*), Lucas Crawford (*Belated Bris of the Brainsick*), Mark Goldstein (*After Rilke*). Even newer to the scene still, there is Alisha Kaplan (*Qorbanot: Offerings*), Montreal poet Misha

Solomon (whose debut chapbook, *Florals*, came out in 2020), Samantha Sternberg, and Kamila Rina.

When I first began publishing poems in literary journals, I unknowingly followed in the footsteps of the Yiddish poet Anna Margolin, who would eventually become the muse and heart of my second collection, *Nautilus and Bone*: I never hid my Jewish identity, but I didn't embrace it either. I was more interested in writing about the urban world I lived in, about sex and the body and travel and belonging. Without a doubt, I owe a debt of gratitude to Cohen, Klein and Layton (and to Miriam Waddington, and Phyllis Gottlieb, and Adele Wiseman, for that matter), for writing in defiance of antisemitism. These poets were not my primary influences, with the possible exception of Leonard Cohen, who—along with Pablo Neruda, Sharon Olds and E.E. Cummings—espoused a certain embodied way of being in the world. I am not sure we'll ever be entirely out of the shadow of these literary giants. But, as it is in many Jewish spaces, perhaps it is carrying on the conversation, rather than reaching a conclusion, that really matters.

MICHAEL GREENSTEIN: From Klein's encyclopedic reclusiveness to Layton's larger-than-life persona to Cohen's global *hallelujah*, the myth of Montreal casts a long shadow. If younger poets across the land try to avoid it, it will not avoid them.

Consider Klein's "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga." Written in 1945 in the wake of the Shoah, the five formal septets identify the fates of Jews and Aborigines, as a kind of tribal survival. From the perspective of his own childhood in Montreal, the poet examines the reservation, beginning with a series of questions: "Where are the braves, the faces like autumn fruit, / who stared at the child from the coloured frontispiece?" The gaze from book and life is reciprocal as Klein asks, "Where are the tribes ...?" and "kin!" This tribal kinship runs from "Childhood, that wished me Indian" to "This is a grassy ghetto, and no home." Conflating Indigenous and immigrant homelessness, Klein establishes an "I-thou" relationship in a coming-of-age poem that gives rise to coming-of-age prophecy, the ethical dimension of Canadian-Jewish poetry. The other strand in this body of poetry is the priestly ritual or lyrical, and both strands—the priestly and the prophetic—are often braided, like the squaws' black shawls that twine not only with a tallit, but also with the yellow star of the Holocaust.

A few years earlier Klein had written "The Hitleriad," a satire that is also a version of the rage to be found in Irving Layton whose poetry rails against the WASP establishment in Canada. Like his good friend Layton, Leonard Cohen uses satire and irony in his lyrics, while his postmodern second novel, *Beautiful Losers*, turns lyrically and outrageously to Indigenous history and mythology. He tells the story of the seventeenth-century Lily of the Mohawk, Kateri Tekakwitha, who spends her last years in

Caughnawaga and later becomes a saint. In a lecture about Klein, Cohen invokes the dichotomy between priest and prophet, arguing that Klein chose to be a priest and “protect the dead ritual.” Canadian–Jewish poetry seeks to revive dead rituals, even as it aims for prophetic ethics. Cohen writes about this balance: “There must have been a brief time among ancient Hebrews, men who were both prophet and priest in the same office.” Prophets and priests, Cohen’s creatures break into the temple and are eventually incorporated into the ritual.

Multilingual Klein also translated Yiddish and Hebrew poetry as well as French–Canadian culture. Indeed, the act of translation is another feature of Canadian–Jewish poetry. Sheila Fischman, Donald Winkler, David Homel, Robert Majzels, and Sherry Simon are among those who have translated significantly in *Ellipse*, the literary journal of translation that has featured Canadian–Jewish poets in both official languages. Monique Bosco’s feminist poetry combines Hebraic and Hellenic mythologies but has made slight inroads in the Anglophone world. Klein has also been recognized internationally for his scholarly work on James Joyce, while Leon Edel, the acclaimed biographer of Henry James, has paid homage to Klein’s accomplishments as a polymath. This line runs through the poetry of Miriam Waddington, David Solway, Seymour Mayne, Kenneth Sherman, Karen Shenfeld, whose “Canoeing Song” pays tribute to Pauline Johnson, and Susan Glickman, who has been called a “prophet of household immediacy.”

In the transition away from Montreal, Anne Michaels plays a key role: on the one hand, Leonard Cohen is an influence by way of Michael Ondaatje; on the other hand, Adele Wiseman provides another source. In “Ancestor,” Wiseman addresses “Avrom,” the first iconoclast, while in “Mopping Up” she raises her feminism against men “erasing alternate voices.” Her Ukrainian rivers, the Bug and Sinyahu, flow into Winnipeg’s rivers and Michaels’s rivers.

In Michaels’s “Lake of Two Rivers” the six-year-old child listens to her father’s stories about a train carrying him across Poland in 1931. The Polish landscape superimposes on the drive to Algonquin Park: “The moon fell into our car from Grodno. / It fell from Chaya-Elka’s village.” Michael layers and grounds personal history in Europe and Canada: cousin Mashka’s face “floated down the River Neman in my father’s guitar.” By the time the poet comes of age, she understands the difference between her ancestral river and Two Rivers. “When I was twenty-five, I drowned in the River Neman, / fell through when I read that bone-black from the ovens / was discarded there.” Ashes from the Shoah rise and fall on the not-so-innocent Ontario landscape where each river is two rivers for Canadian–Jewish poetry. Two rivers represent the fluidity of genre and identity, the twisted twinning of old and new worlds, and the reconciliation of Indigenous, immigrant, priest, and prophet.

Like Layton and Cohen, Michaels shows an affinity for Greek civilization, partly as an escape from Canadian northernness, partly as a displacement of Hebraic and Hellenic, Apollonian and Dionysiac: “the ornate Greek script, like a twisting twin of Hebrew.”

Méira Cook is another pivotal poet who brings her South African childhood to Winnipeg and the prairies. This vastness carries through to the poetry of J. J. Steinfeld, who lives in Charlottetown and publishes in Victoria. Even more remote is Robin McGrath’s poetry, which covers both Indigenous and Jewish identities in Newfoundland. She begins her “Covenant of Salt” with an epigraph from *Deuteronomy* and concludes with “salt will keep anything.” Her salt preserves prophetic and priestly traditions. Her ethical covenant blends into ritual recipes in “Old Scripture Cake”: “A little *Leviticus 2:13* / Every oblation was seasoned with salt.” Sea salt, salt of the earth, and pillars of salt stretch from St. John’s to Jerusalem. “The Ships of Tarshish” traverse great distances. The ethical and the ritual join together in “The Fast Day” with Yom Kippur on Blackmarsh Road, or in “The Festival of Tilts” where blueberries from Pippy Park contrast with Israeli oranges. During Sukkot the locals are gathered “In the most resilient and substantial sukkah / To be found in North America.” Prophetic and priestly traditions converge “in this cold, wild place called home / Where oranges will never grow.” “Tashlich: Rennie’s River Trail” combines ritual with the local landscape, as the poet casts her sins and bread upon the waters: “An Auntie Crae’s bagel, a heel of challa from Manna Bakery,” make their way to the ocean to be carried by trout to Tarshish, a journey of endless miles and millennia. From Rennie’s to the St. Lawrence, kosher salt carries a precious cargo to be preserved in McGrath’s verse.

In the century since Klein published his first poems, the younger generations have expanded his Hebrew and Yiddish with more experimental forms of postmodern prophecy. His “unity / in the family feature” has given way to a diversity beyond his provinces. Rachel Zolf, Rebecca Păpucaru, and Alisha Kaplan write of the land and languages they sit on, the ones they have left behind, and trail-blaze a future from those places and pasts.

CHEVRUTAH #1: MICHAEL GREENSTEIN AND LISA RICHTER

LISA RICHTER: As I ponder where to begin my response to Michael Greenstein’s thoughtful, insightful commentary, I find myself wondering if perhaps the proverbial “long shadow” cast by the triumvirate of Klein, Layton and Cohen extends beyond the borders of poetry and into the realm of criticism, where I wrestle with questions of authority and subjectivity. Despite being raised by two ex-Montrealers transplanted to Ontario, there was a palpable ambivalence in my household toward the city of my parents’ youth: at once the near-mythical site of familial and historical importance, but also a symbol of the past, just as Toronto embodied the present and

future. Given my highly charged personal history with Montreal, it is hard to write objectively about the influence of three towering poets whose lives and work were forged there. It is harder still to delineate the margins between where that influence ends and my work—as a poet and as a critic—begins.

On Klein's poem "Indian Reservation: Caughnawaga," Michael Greenstein writes: "Conflating Indigenous and immigrant homelessness, Klein establishes an 'I-thou' relationship in a coming-of-age poem that gives rise to coming-of-age prophecy, the ethical dimension of Canadian-Jewish poetry." While Klein might have posited the relationship between his Jewish speaker and Indigenous peoples as one of kinship and understanding, the poem still invokes a Hiawatha-esque "noble savage" trope. In Klein's poem, the "braves" and "squaws" reduced to selling cheap goods on reservations contrasts with an idealized image of the Other, a nostalgia for an imagined past tinged with Orientalism.

What *is*, indeed, the "ethical dimension of Canadian-Jewish poetry"? How does one reconcile the many contradictions of a dual existence, at once living as settlers on Indigenous land, benefiting from the twin specters of settler colonialism and white supremacy, while at the same time reckoning with the horrors of the Shoah and present-day antisemitism? Can we write of our own oppression without acknowledging our complicity in the oppression of Indigenous peoples? A growing number of Canadian-Jewish poets, including Rachel Zolf, Jonathan Garfinkel, Jacob Scheier, and myself, have explored our complex relationships with Israel-Palestine in our writing as well. Perhaps it is these gestures, the unpacking and questioning of ideology and borders, and a mistrust of absolutism—regardless of political stripes—that characterize this ethical dimension.

As Greenstein observes in his discussion of Robin McGrath's lyrical fusion of landscape and body in her 2005 collection *Covenant of Salt*, "the priestly and prophetic" converge, enacting a lineage that can be traced back to Anne Michaels and Leonard Cohen. As I read of the stunning range and diversity of Jewish poets writing beyond the Toronto-Montreal corridor, from Méira Cook in the Prairies to McGrath and Steinfeld in Atlantic Canada, I am struck by how shapeshifting and fluid this body of literature is, how deeply rooted in both physical place and a Diasporic sense of placelessness. Put another way, what it means to be *of* a geography yet not confined to it, to re-invent and re-imagine the Self in relation to Other. In the end, McGrath's image of Tashlich, the High Holiday ritual in which "the poet casts her sins and bread upon the waters," might serve as a better metaphor for the relationship of Klein, Layton and Cohen to Jewish Canadian poetry. Rather than scrambling out from under a shadow in search of light, we are casting our poems—whether confessional, as sins, or not—into a swiftly moving river which moves of its own accord out into the sea, and beyond.

MICHAEL GREENSTEIN: “Jewish is not Jewish.” With Derrida’s paradox we may launch into the multiplicities of postmodernism in Canadian–Jewish Poetry where Lisa Richter’s *Nautilus and Bone* attests to the enduring tenacity of Anna Margolin’s Yiddish and Marianne Moore’s “paper nautilus.” Rachel Zolf’s experimental poetry breaks boundaries of genre and gender, individual voice and poly-vocalism, Jewish and not–Jewish, margins and centres. “Her absence, this wanderer” responds to the Holocaust through palimpsest and erasure, writing poetry after Auschwitz and Adorno by defying the barbaric. This wandering Jew confronts absence at Birkenau: Graffiti of “I WUZ HERE” is scribbled over the Birkenau train tracks—the Z of Zolf bearing and barring witness. A different form of erasure appears in “Masque” where familial trauma is typographically exposed. In her prophetic rage, she overrides the ethics of Buber and Levinas on “Palimpsestine,” and settles on Indijewish reconciliation.

In *The Panic Room* Rebecca Păpucaru explores her Jewish roots and identity in post–modern ways. Her opening poem, “My Anne,” wanders among Hebrew, Greek, and Romanian identities. “I pass the workday in throes of Dadaist delight, / processing parental worry at a children’s toy factory.” Her alliterations and internal rhyme mark a ritual passage between generations amid her own coming of age. Dadaist forms weave through her stanzas with a reminder that one of the origins of Dada is Romanian, meaning “yes yes,” an ironic affirmation of her subversive verse. She plays with the puzzle of names from Anne to Barbara to Rebecca, and Ms. Păpucaru in a shuffling of “Alphabet Cubes” where vowels and consonants take on a life of their own. The letters in her nearly assimilated name are “Brancusi–sculpted,” another reminder of her Modernist Romanian inheritance of “Balkan birdsong” and “Black Sea rustics.”

The poem ends in estrangement in an etymological quest for origins: “Barbara, Greek, / meaning strange; Anne, Hebrew, grace.” Eleven words, loosely / translated: “My grace lies in my strangeness to you, and to me.” Păpucaru makes new and strange the transitions and translations from Modernism to postmodernism. Just as the Greek barbaric is invoked, so too is Pan, the lustful Greek god of pastoral music that turns noisy in panic: “Through the padded wall of a panic room / my voice reaches me.” Her voice in *The Panic Room* is multi-vocal and polyvalent, filling her Golem with sound. She retouches not only personal identity, but also surreal history: “My skin / has been retouched, the veneer / a tone I’ll call *golem*.” That *golem* tone haunts and stalks her poems.

“Prague Fugue” (“*after A.M. Klein*”) comes full circle in its homage to a founder of Canadian–Jewish poetry. Păpucaru’s postmodernism pays tribute to Klein’s modernism, as the younger poet sifts through relics of the Holocaust: “Hebrew notes / indexing echoes.” Hebrew notes, notes, and echoes reverberate in rituals and prophetic utterances, fugues from Kafka to Klein. The poem is preceded by a picture of a

keyhole to the hidden past and to meaning, an icon that also resembles a black coffin with a white body inside. “Prague Fugue” is followed by “Wish You Were Here,” a poem that covers Bucharest, London, Paris, and Toronto—way stations in a Dadaist diaspora with its multiple identities.

Tamar Rubin and Gary Barwin provide an aleph bet gimel of reading, while Talya Rubin’s eco-poetics crosses boundaries from Iceland to Australia. From fugue to chorus, Alisha Kaplan’s *Qorbanot* post-modernizes and feminizes the priestly role, drawing on, and away from, traditional sources. Her offerings from the past prophesy future directions for Canadian-Jewish Poetry.

DRASH #2: Emily Robins Sharpe and Rhea Tregobov

Emily, you have spent considerable time thinking about Canadian Jewish poetry in the context of a broader international movement. I’d like you both to think specifically about the Canadian-ness of the poets who concern you—does the insider-outsider phenomenon we’ve been talking about so far have a specifically Canadian flavour or manifestation? In comparison to the American, European, and Israeli poets you encounter, do Canadian Jewish poets bring a different sensibility to the table?

[Ed. note: the “drash” and “chevrutah” portions of this discussion were combined.]

EMILY ROBINS SHARPE: How to identify or understand the Canadianness of contemporary Jewish poets and poetry? I appreciate how this question inverts the much more common question of how to define Jewish literature—perhaps, even, subtly subverts it. So Canadian! So Jewish!

In the *P’shat*, a few of us (myself included) touched on the thorny topic of defining Jewish literature. At times, I find that this debate can be a distraction from the work of literary analysis—a critical cudgel to reprimand authors whose personal lives or characters aren’t, ostensibly, good for the Jews.

Writing literary criticism about Canadian literature from abroad makes me especially aware of the subjectivity of the category. The questions we might pose—must Canadian poets be Canadian born? Hold Canadian citizenship? Do poems only count as Canadian if set in Canada?—read as parodies of the questions that often arise around Jewish literature: what about Jewish writers who don’t practice? Or self-identify? Or write about Jewish topics?

In thinking about our prompt for this *Drash*, then, I’ve been considering how to gauge Canadianness and Jewishness—the “flavour or manifestation” of the insid-

er-outsider sensibility, to use Adam's helpful terms. In place of a litmus test, what I've come to are a few overlapping characteristics—certainly not unique to Jewish poets, or Canadian poets, but present in various iterations in some of the recent Jewish Canadian poetry I've read.

Specifically, I've noticed some of the intriguing ways in which memory and space are interwoven. As Ruth Panofsky writes in *Laike and Nahum*, "The press of the past / will not abate" (28). Nor is the past separable from the Canadian landscape. I am fascinated by the simultaneity of transnational Jewish history and Canadian history in so much contemporary poetry. What's more, this merging of Canadian and Jewish history takes place in spaces both urban and rural. As Sarah Phillips Casteel writes in a hemispheric study of Jewish North American writers, "This [poetic] emphasis on landscape bespeaks the (now largely forgotten) agrarian past of a number of New World Jewish communities as well as the desire of Jews to participate in—sometimes admiringly and sometimes critically—the discourses around land and belonging that have been foundational for New World settler societies as well as for Zionism" (414).

One iteration of this merging of space and history is in the poetic insistence on certain locations as both Canadian and Jewish via Biblical revision into a vaguely Canadian setting. For instance, in Daniel Goodwin's "Isaac," in which Abraham is "unlike the other fathers [. . .] Didn't listen to our music / or play ball hockey with us on the streets" (7), while in Naomi Guttman's "Lot's Wife," the titular poetic speaker returns to their abandoned apartment before they drive west.

Elsewhere, other poems insist that Canada is also, sometimes (often? always?), a Jewish space. I see this in the cautionary, humorous reminder in Lisa Richter's "How to Write a Hanukkah Poem": "Whatever you do, don't call / the menorah the *hanukkiah* . . . it will sound too specific, too accurate, above—/ board. You will alienate most people, or worse, / charm them with your exoticness" (58). The Hanukkah celebration takes place within a larger social context—one that is, if not specifically Canadian, certainly not Jewish. The poetic speaker's warning suggests that it might be preferable to remain more covertly an outsider. More explicitly Canadian spaces can be irrevocably Jewish too: in Stuart Ross's poems "Meanwhile, Not Far from Keele and Wilson: 1" and "Meanwhile, Not Far from Keele and Wilson: 2," the speaker describes the posthumous thoughts of individuals buried in a Jewish cemetery, claiming as Jewish this specific location, even below ground (22–23, 47). And in Robyn Sarah's "When We Were Slaves in Egypt," the second-person speaker connects "com[ing] from a people of long memory" (54) to life in Québec, where the motto "Je me souviens" refers to others' histories but still offers a "common ground: / a past continuous, a past as presence" (55).

Sometimes Jewish characters bring a different, often clarifying lens to Canadian spaces. In Rhea's own beautiful poem "Country & Western," for instance, the image of the grandfather's "buffalo coat . . . thrown over the hood of the car to keep / the engine warm;" the comparison of the Black Sea and Winnipeg's cold avenues, both "terrible;" and the planting of a Jewish garden, "beets / for the borscht, rhubarb, dill for the pickles, / cukes; we grow peas for the kids to pick and eat, / that never see the table" (57), together emphasize the familial compatibility with Winnipeg. In "Cottage Country," in contrast, Rebecca Păpucaru's speaker recalls an awkward childhood visit to a friend's cottage, her Jewishness and (relative to her parents') privilege rendering her completely unprepared for the outdoors. The poem begins, "Papa sends me to cottage country / with six new toothbrushes; / himself thirteen when first furnished / with one at a DP camp in Germany / run by Jewish Relief" (14). This introduction to the speaker's remembered trip establishes an awkward juxtaposition between the time the speaker's father spent in the woods as a time of danger, and the speaker's own time in a different wood as a posh getaway from the city. Gary Barwin's "Birds" contains another intriguing juxtaposition, as the speaker describes "Courage is me when I strangled the people shouting / Kike who'd assembled on the lawn / Interesting fact #1: I didn't" (185). This non-response to antisemitism on the lawn leads into a series of details about the speaker's grandparents, Eastern European refugees who managed to live long lives in this New World.

Finally, sometimes Canada's spaces are unexpectedly Jewish, as Isa Milman's *Prairie Kaddish* explores through first-person encounters with the history of the Jewish pioneers who settled in Saskatchewan. Milman's visit to the Lipton Hebrew Cemetery expands into a study of the region and its former inhabitants, generating questions—some unanswerable—about the lives the Jewish people who settled there and their relationships with the Cree and Métis peoples.

Milman's book recalls to me Michael Greenstein's assertion that "Jewish writing in Canada reaches out to other marginal groups" (xlvi). This characteristic is also central to Sonja Ruth Greckol's collection *No Line in Time* which, like Milman's, probes histories of diaspora and colonialism. Greckol connects three spaces historically or currently inhabited by Jewish people: pre-Inquisition Spain, Eastern Europe, and Canada. For instance, the poem "Palimpsest" contains the haunting line ". . . now Oka where the tanks came out for a golf course or insistent Burnaby pipelines on sacred grounds there unlayer cemeteries carbon-dated to the 13th through 15th centuries when Jews lived in Sevilla where churches and synagogues occupied mosques and remains languish in museums bedeviling authorities" (104). The confrontations in Québec and British Columbia between different developers and Indigenous communities protecting their historic burial grounds, the treatment of Jewish cemeteries in Sevilla, and the Spanish Jewish and Catholic incursion into mosques, become, as the poem's title suggests, parallel and symbiotic traces of each other.

RHEA TREGEBOV: Emily's eloquent and astute *drash* has given me a very helpful framework in which to respond. I'm grateful as well for her thoughtful reading of my poem "Country & Western," whose subject matter does seem apt to the discussion. The issues Emily raises about "how to gauge Canadianness and Jewishness" are highly pertinent and they certainly do present a conundrum for writers. *Jewish Canadian Poetry*. I will do my best here to figure out how and where the circles in this Venn diagram fruitfully overlap.

I can start with the Jewish element. Is my writing Jewish enough? On the one hand, if I did not articulate my sense of Jewishness in my writing, it would feel false, in some sense a betrayal. If I weren't out as a Jew, it would be as though I were trying to pass as a non-Jew. On the other hand, I do resist being told that I have to write *as* a Jew, with externally prescribed content and style, rather than *out of* my Jewishness as I understand it.

In both my poetry and my prose, I need to write out of who I am, and who I am is indeed profoundly rooted in my Jewish identity. But, as I pointed out in my *pshat*, Jewish identity is anything but singular. While my own sense of myself as a Jew began with many comfortable assumptions (*of course I'm Ashkenazi, secular, third-generation Canadian*), it has become more complex with time and more rewarding.

This doesn't mean there aren't still constraints on my writing that I haven't fully dealt with. I'm thinking of "Abundance," a poem in my 2012 collection *All Souls*'. The poem speaks of a visit to the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague and describes Jewish observances such as inscribing messages for the dead on slips of paper, leaving stones on the tombstones and washing one's hands after visiting. My Author's Note at the back of the book explains that the cemetery was established in the 1400s, as well as the poignant and telling fact that because space was limited by restrictive laws against Jews, the dead were buried in layers. But I never used the word *Jewish* in the poem itself; readers have to go to the Author's Note to realize this. Why? Why omit this word? Was I trying to pass? I'm sure this omission was a subconscious choice, but in retrospect it is concerning.

It's more difficult for me to factor in the Canadian element of the question. To be able to compare, I'd need to be knowledgeable. In terms of contemporary poetry, I'm mostly familiar with US and UK poetry, although because of issues of access, have read less 21st century UK poetry than US poetry. One aspect of the Canadian milieu that does stand out is the bilingual nature of Canada. How fascinating it is that one of the strongest streams of Jewish writing (both in Yiddish and English) has come out of the centre of Quebec culture, Montreal. A.M. Klein, Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen of course are emblematic. If outsider status defines us, in Quebec that status is squared, as the Jewish minority is folded into an Anglophone minority.

But perhaps more pertinent to distinguishing the Canadian context from others is that, unlike poets in the US or UK, Canadian poets have to contend with double issues of colonisation. We are neither American nor British, but theirs is generally the poetry we were educated in. I certainly was. The canon that a writer studies in school does have an impact. It matters that the poems I grew up with, the ones that formed my notion of what a poem was and what it did, were created in a foreign and alienating context. If we understand that “what is a Jew” is a vexed question, the question “what is a poem” is equally vexed. The canon of my secondary and post-secondary education was first British and then American. Within the British canon there was next to no Jewish content, though I might have come across a Siegfried Sassoon poem or two. Nor am I conscious of any contemporary British Jewish poets. Contemporary American Jewish authors, however, were formative. Gertrude Stein was an important early figure for me, though anyone reading my poetry might find that puzzling. Adrienne Rich, Philip Levine, Gerald Stern.

Miriam Waddington was an important Canadian role model to me as a teenage aspiring poet. Like me she was a Winnipegger, like me female. My parents had a hard-cover copy of Waddington’s 1968 coffee table book, *Call Them Canadians*, illustrated with black and white photographs by forty-four different Canadian photographers, including Yousuf Karsh. It seemed to me the height not only of sophistication, but of literary achievement. Here was the poet I could imagine myself glamorously becoming. (I’m still wondering how she got that sweet gig!)

Influence is of course complex. While contemporaries like Anne Michaels, Susan Glickman and Robyn Sarah (the latter both Montrealers) helped me form my own identity as a Canadian Jewish (and female) poet, other non-Canadian and non-Jewish poets were also influential. My poetry was never the same after reading the Italian poet and novelist Cesare Pavese (1908 to 1950). His *Hard Labor* [*Lavorare Stanca*], in William Arrowsmith’s superb translation changed how I understood how poetry could move, what it could do.

These issues of national context and identity have a special importance to poets, whose writing can depend so much on voice, and voice can be enabled or stifled by concerns with authority and authenticity. If there is a way we can feel ourselves at home in our own voices, if we feel authorized to speak by the context in which we write, we can speak with greater fluency and power than when we feel like our speech is an act of ventriloquism, aping others who are our betters.

EMILY ROBINS SHARPE: Rhea’s thoughtful *Drash* has given me so much to consider. The distinction she draws between “being told that I have to write *as* a Jew, with externally prescribed content and style” and writing “*out of* my Jewishness as I understand it,” articulates clearly the problems of categorization and the vital signif-

icance of poetic voice. Her *Drash* recalled to me, too, Miriam Waddington's line in *Call Them Canadians* about the "scarred mosaic" of Canada, a more complicated, even wounded version of the simplistic metaphor of a country composed of interlocking yet discrete communities.

With all of that in mind, I've spent some time reading and rereading the poem she mentions, "Abundance" from *All Souls'*, and considering how the poem and the Author's Note fit together. I appreciate her reflections on the omission of the word "Jewish" and the interplay between the two texts. I wonder whether the absence of "Jewish" is a reclamation rather than an omission. The poem introduces expectations of its reader, to consider the historical conditions—the antisemitism—that led to "three centuries of dead packed close, stacked twelve deep." The tourists who visit the cemetery—and the reader—owe it to the dead to learn about their customs: the notes and the pebbles and the handwashing that form part of the ritual of visiting this cemetery. We are compelled to engage with the poem in a deeper way than just "parad[ing] solemnly by" as the tourists otherwise might. Consulting the Author's Note, we learn, "The older stones were raised as further layers were added"—a heart-wrenching detail about the historic treatment of Jewish people in Prague, and one that suggests something of the excavation efforts needed in order to truly analyze the poem.

Reading "Abundance" has been fascinating, too, in the context of the complex issues around nationality, poetic influence, and writerly identity. I'm struck, in thinking about the intricacies of poetic influence that Rhea traces (and the dominance of American and British poetry on many syllabi), that "Abundance" is also a poem set outside of Canada, but one that invokes Jewishness and Canadianness through its setting and its location in the collection. The speaker's voice as the voice of a tourist is key, to me: they have visited the cemetery purposefully, dutifully, and with a clear understanding of how to pay their respects. Unseen caretakers have (somewhat) maintained the cemetery, including dividing with a string "the path permitted from the path forbidden," but it is the poem's speaker who actually guides the reader through the space of the dead, ending at the rusty tap where we "rinse our hands of them."

In the closing paragraph of Rhea's *Drash*, she comments on the importance of "feel[ing] ourselves at home in our own voices," and in "Abundance" she has created a poignantly poetic voice who brings the reader to a foreign and very unhomey space. The poems in *All Souls'* travel widely, too, across Canada and other countries, and into homes and personal spaces. This simultaneous expansiveness and intimacy also recalls Waddington's "scarred mosaic" of Canada: a multifaceted, varied representation of Jewish Canadian experience that does not require a local location or prescribed content.

DRASH #3: Gary Barwin and Ruth Panofsky:

You are both multi-genre writers, pursuing scholarship, music, fiction, etc. Are there Jewish themes or approaches that poetry is better equipped to tackle than other art forms? Are there other Jewish subjects or approaches that you avoid in poetry? What role does “poetry” (as you define it) have in your own creative trajectory, and in your understanding of “Canadian Jewish Poetry”?

RUTH PANOFSKY: I read the poetry of A.M. Klein for the first time as a high school student in suburban Montreal, where it was my good luck to have an English teacher with a progressive interest in Canadian literature. She suspected that a class of predominantly Jewish adolescents might appreciate Klein’s rendering of the landscape and cultures of the city. I loved Klein’s poetry; so much so that I decided to study Canadian literature as an undergraduate student. I went on to Carleton University and was introduced to the poetry of Irving Layton, Eli Mandel, and Leonard Cohen. Their work left a strong impression, but it also brought home the prevalence of male poets. Surely there were Jewish women whose verse might also resonate with my developing sensibility as a reader?

At the library, exploration led me to the poetry of Miriam Waddington. I read her early books, *Green World*, *The Second Silence*, and *The Season’s Lovers*, in which the poet explores her Winnipeg childhood and Jewish roots, as well as her experiences as a wife, mother, and social worker. I learned that Waddington had participated in the rise of modernist poetry in Montreal; that she was Layton’s peer, but lacked his public profile; and that she had left social work for an academic career as a professor of English at York University.

I pursued my interest in literature and, by the time I enrolled in graduate studies at York, had decided to write my master’s research paper on Waddington’s early verse. At York, Waddington became a mentor. She also facilitated my research by giving me access to her papers housed at Library and Archives Canada.

Thus, I came to Canadian Jewish poetry first as a reader, then as a graduate student, and finally as a scholar. In fact, Canadian Jewish poetry has come to occupy a central place in my teaching and scholarship. My courses on Canadian Jewish literature always include poetry. Among my publications are a two-volume critical edition of Waddington’s collected poetry and two anthologies of contemporary Jewish literature, each of which features poetry by Canadian writers.

In my scholarship, I have concentrated particularly on Jewish women writers of the modern period and how their work came to be published. I have examined their influences, both personal and literary, the obstacles they faced as writers, their relationships

with editors, publishers, and agents that either helped or hindered their progress; how their work was received by the literary establishment, by their fellow writers, and by readers, why they pursued their careers, and what rewards they found as writers.

My study of women writers has been important in another way, for it led to my becoming a poet. I doubt that I would have turned to writing poetry had I not come across the work of Waddington and saw that she wrote as a Jewish woman. Her example was emboldening.

My scholarly work laid the foundation for my poetry, which is largely exploratory. Given my lived experience and proclivity for the lyric, my verse is gendered and hence political in orientation. In several ways, it addresses the systemic structures that have shaped the lives of Jewish women.

I have also come to realize that I can trace a struggle to locate myself as a Canadian Jewish woman through my poetry. My first book, *Lifeline* (2001), addresses the lasting influence of a traditional though secular upbringing, the burden of strict gender expectations and family strife, and the responsibilities that come with adulthood. *Lifeline* is rooted less in the past than in the present.

It is *Laike and Nahum: A Poem in Two Voices* (2007) that foregrounds my ancestral past. Based on the lives of my maternal grandparents, it reimagines their world and provides an intimate portrait of two people determined to build a life against the backdrop of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Laike's voice and Nahum's voice are heard in counterpoint across a poem that probes the hold of culture, tradition, and gender expectations on women and men in the rapidly changing society of twentieth-century Montreal.

Radiant Shards: Hoda's North End Poems (2020) also invokes the past by imagining the interior life of Hoda, the protagonist of Adele Wiseman's 1974 novel *Crackpot*, an overweight Jewish sex worker who services the boys and men of North End Winnipeg during the first half of the twentieth century. In *Radiant Shards*, I give Hoda a lyric voice and the awareness to reflect personally and consciously on her complicated past. In returning to Wiseman's novel—I invoke its structural arc and character development—this creative project aligns with my scholarly focus on Canadian Jewish literature.

In reflecting here on my scholarship and my poetry, I see that both have been animated by attention to the present, a preoccupation with the past, and an interest in Canadian Jewish literature. Moreover, my scholarly connection to Waddington and her work takes on greater significance when I recall the time I visited her in Vancouver, where she lived in retirement, and when I presented her with a copy of *Lifeline*. When Waddington first greeted me in Toronto, I was a graduate student. When we

met in Vancouver for what would prove to be a final visit—Miriam Waddington died in 2004—I had become a scholar and a poet whose writing foregrounded Canadian Jewish experience. I realised, at last, that I had followed in her path.

GARY BARWIN: I'd be averse to saying that any form of writing or art is better equipped than another, although limericks might not be best for grief. Though there once was this rabbi from Sebastopol . . . I'd rather consider the affordances or possibilities inherent in a form.

Poetry. I feel it has the possibility of a certain kind of Jewish music, choreography, thought, of Jewish shapes and shades in its rhythms, sounds, forms, and in the movement of its language. And of course, it can bob and weave through particularly Jewish languages and utterances.

We're famously people of the book. And books are made of letters, words, images, patterns of language. We're also people of speech. The sounds of our articulations. The shapes of our words. The flow of our stories, songs, memories, forgetting.

It is hard for me to imagine Jewish experience without language. Even when something is unutterable or beyond language, the tradition has a way of representing it—by circumlocution, or circumgraphy.

This to me is one of the places where poetry is able to shine. Through Leonard's Kabbalistic crack in not only everything, but in language. We ring the bells that can ring, if by bells we mean language. And we consider the bell itself and the ringing. Again, for me this is the domain of poetry. If by poetry we mean investigation, a questioning, something being very much itself as well as more than itself.

For me poetry can represent—or can aspire to represent—the complex braid of Jewish identity: in space, in time, across culture. It's very suited to wisps, to lacuna, to paradoxes, unanswerable questions, and mysteries. Also, it's both a homeland and a diaspora, good at finding meaning elsewhere and right there, good at waiting for meaning, finding meaning in questions, at arguing with itself and the tradition, with the condensery in exile from exposition, certainty and only denotation. Poetry for me is negative capability (You call that a capability?). It's using the tones, allusions, illusions, images and the inscrutable imaginary.

Poetry is a covenant between itself and the writer, between the I and Thou of the writer, reader, language, meaning, tradition, future, certainty and surprise. It is the suspicion of disbelief.

Are there other Jewish subjects or approaches that you avoid in poetry?

I wouldn't say that there are subjects or approaches that I avoid, particularly. At least not particular to poetry as opposed to any other artforms or genres that I engage in. As a writer, I feel that it is always fruitful to at least imagine that there isn't any subject or approach which I wouldn't be able to, ipso facto, investigate. In fact, that's part of the challenge and enticement. To use poetry as a technology or epistemological tool to allow me to consider approaches, perspectives and subjects that I wouldn't otherwise be able to. Poetry is a kind of dowsing stick that leads me to things that I wouldn't otherwise perceive or know the existence of. There is that oft paraphrased quote from Adorno about poetry after Auschwitz. But for me, this is exactly what poetry is for, whether using the broken and melded language, the *kintsugi* (golden joinery) of Celan, or Edmond Jabès's numinous and oblique questioning or even the direct documentary poetry of witness of Reznikoff. I hope to be able to consider in one way or another, any possible subject, Jewish or not, from the vast and ineffable to the tiny and mundane.

What role does "poetry" (as you define it) have in your own creative trajectory, and in your understanding of "Canadian Jewish Poetry"?

I find it difficult to define or determine the limits of poetry per se. When does night become day? We perhaps know when it happens, but there are no strictly defined borders, especially for poets, if not for civil, nautical and astronomical experts. Where are the borders of poetry? Perhaps, for me, that is one of its delights: many possibilities exist for poetry. For my poetry. As much as I work in various other genres and artforms, poetry is never absent from my writing life, from my days. It is a constant in my personal and writing life. There is the constant allure, surprise, and fascination with words, semantics, meaning, image, form. With the Rube Goldberg language machines that poems are. Poems are always a kind of Möbius strip for me: their insides twisting into their outside and back. So, poetry is a particular kind of expressive tool for me. A particular kind of procedure for investigation and curiosity that is, for me, both a tool and a particular way of being in the world.

Further, my most thorough-going investigations into Jewish themes have been in fiction. Both my novels are explorations of Jewish themes and history. Why? I feel that, at least at present, I am best able to explore the history, characters and their stories and make connections in the extended form of the novel. I am able to build worlds and recreate worlds most richly with the novel form. Further, I have been interested in addressing the broader reading culture in the form of fiction while my more rarified or less accessible investigations have been in the more specialized arena of poetry. That said, I am planning a long poem where I expand my range and breadth of reference. I want to see what is possible for me to explore in poetry with its different resources and alternate ways of knowing.

Where does this fit into “Canadian Jewish Poetry”? To be honest, while I read many Canadian Jewish poets, and, at least in part, my poetry considers Jewish issues, I don’t know whether I am accustomed to considering myself a part of Canadian Jewish Poetry (or, Official Canadian Jewish Verse Culture, to teasingly paraphrase Charles Bernstein.) While I certainly have Canadian Jewish poets who I feel particularly sympathetic with and with whom I have had a long association (for example, Stuart Ross), my pursuit of poetry and my Jewishness in poetry, while influenced by Jewish poets (for example, the aforementioned Charles Bernstein, Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès), has mostly been a solitary practice. Indeed, though I have had associations with synagogues, particularly through family (weddings, bar mitzvahs, funerals, etc.) my Jewishness is mostly practised and felt outside of community as an individual practice and consideration.

RUTH PANOFSKY: Gary Barwin, rather than trying to establish strict parameters for Canadian Jewish poetry, posits that all poetry “is a covenant between itself and the writer, between the I and Thou of the writer, reader, language, meaning, tradition, future, certainty, and surprise.”

Barwin’s description is telling, for it invokes the biblical covenant uniting the Jewish people and God—a covenant that provides for a distinct identity and is rooted in the language of the ten commandments. The metaphor of poetry as covenant thus signals Barwin’s belief that in poetry Jewishness is grounded in a thematic preoccupation with “the complex braid of Jewish identity in space, in time, across culture” and an attendant use of expressive language.

I agree that studying the ways in which poems deploy themes and language is more meaningful—and certainly less reductive—than attempting to delimit the field of Canadian Jewish poetry, a nearly impossible task since there are countless ways in which Canadian experience is written into verse and innumerable ways in which poetry is Jewish in orientation. In Canada, poets address Jewish subjects by treating historical events, probing cultural heritage, scrutinizing gender roles and sexuality, observing or critiquing religious custom. Some return to Europe and the subject of the Holocaust. Many others acknowledge the hold of memory, both communal and individual, but reach beyond the past and grapple with a complex, ever-evolving sense of self.

Like all literature of the Jewish diaspora, Canadian Jewish poetry has emerged from the experiences of displacement, immigration, and settlement. Disruption and isolation are reflected in poems that refer variously to historical trauma and cultural memory, to the lived experience of immigration and settlement, to persistent feelings of exile and marginalization. A growing sense of stability is expressed in poems that focus on the present, but also reflect on the past and look outward to the future.

Today, Canadian Jewish poetry increasingly responds to the intersectional complexities of cultural and national identity, gender and sexuality, age and ability, religious affiliation and/or secular values. It is especially attuned to global shifts that continue to affect demographics and politics, cultures and economies.

It is through an allusive and idiomatic language—what Barwin calls “a certain kind of Jewish music”—that Jewish identity becomes visceral and corporeal. When English is inflected by the lilt and syntax of Yiddish, for instance, the effect is to summon a formative Eastern European past that either will not or cannot be relinquished despite countless border crossings, both real and imagined. For Isa Milman, Yiddish is the “language of my cradlesongs” and a rich inheritance. At the same time, the Yiddish words Milman inserts into her verse are meant to carry the weight “of my parent’s loss” during the Holocaust. Jacob Scheier pays homage to Hebrew, even as he writes in English. Scheier respects Hebrew as the language “of the book” and “of our people,” but laments “that something was, / is, always, / lost in translation.” For Naomi Guttman, the supplication of prayer informs “my blood / and my breath.”

In my view, and despite the losses articulated by individual poets, contemporary Canadian Jewish poetry will continue expanding its thematic range. It will continue-finding new language for particular ways “of being in the world,” as Barwin puts it.

GARY BARWIN: Thinking about my own *drash* in the context of Ruth Panofsky’s words, I realize that I perhaps didn’t say enough about poetry as a means of expressing the complexity of identity, consciousness, and subjectivity. Ruth’s *drash* digs deep into one aspect of this, the intersectionality of Jewish identity and gender. And two aspects of that: examining and articulating one’s own identity to one’s self and reflecting on the social and cultural position of one’s identity. That is, being Jewish with regard to Canada, in relation to being a poet and/or writer, to being a woman, and then in regard to larger frames of reference, including the international context and broader constructs of gender and sexuality.

I think of the work of Jewish-Canadian queer nonbinary poet/academic MLA Chernoff who writes from their own particular subject position, aware of the boisterous charivari of codes of communication crowding around us, which are both a distracting bustle and a celebration. So Canadian Jewish poetry is one node of a larger intersectionality (whose centre is nowhere except perhaps the self and whose circumference is constantly being charted.) It would be impossible to note all the possible intersectionalities. Queer Jews, Jews of colour, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Sephardic and other types of Jews. Straight Jews. CIS and trans Jews. Non-binary Jews. Zionist and non-Zionist Jews. The white-blue rainbow of Jewish congregations from Ultra-Orthodox to Reconstructionist and Secular Jews. Charles Bernstein’s Midrashic Antinomianism, JuBu’s, Jews for Jesus, Karaites and on and on. Not to mention all the

political, national, able, disable and deaf/Deaf identities.

And poets, lyric, experimental, excremental, accidental, adrenal and avant-glad and post happy. How would Noah assemble two of each identity when each identity is so rich in complex intersectionalities? When is a horse just a horse and not an appaloosa? A reform Bengali Jewish-Hindu Indigenous Queer Marxist Polyamorous Deaf Fat Appaloosa Sonneteer? And who would want it otherwise? We celebrate the range of the possible and how these identities intersect in a brilliant kaleidoscope of experience and expression. Including Jewishness, poetry and Canadian-ness.

In other words, the field is a quantum ark. However one attempts to definite its limits or its capacity, its limits appear elsewhere, its capacity illusory. It is the attempt *to define* that is the definition—the field. How Jewish does it have to be to be Jewish? And what does Jewishness look like anyway? How does one define it? I like that it is a moving target. Or an arrow moving through the air over Zeno's Achilles and his tortoise racing, over Heraclitus' river.

Perhaps like Judaism itself, Canadian Jewish poetry, certainly my own poetry, is best defined by its continued and inspiring attempts to define itself. Somehow in the process it offers delight, consolation, inspiration, community, wonder, identity, expression and insight.

1

See Lisa Richter, *Nautilus and Bone: An Auto/biography in Poems* (Calgary: Frontenac House Poetry, 2020); Seymour Mayne and B. Glen Rotchin, editors, *A Rich Garland: Poems for A.M. Klein* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1999); and Ruth Panofsky, *Radiant Shards: Hoda's North End Poems* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2020).