

sam sax's "Lisp"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sam-saxs-lisp>.

Introduction

sam sax (who styles his name in lowercase) is a queer Jewish poet and educator. His poems, which have been published widely, address the themes of Jewish diasporic inheritance and history—both personal and collective—as well as etymology, mental health, and power. In his poems, he considers how he both possesses and is dispossessed from power as a white Jewish man with an anxiety disorder and a queer identity. His work is also deeply rooted in Jewish culture, linguistics, and storytelling. In his poetry, he gestures to the beauty of a people in perpetual motion and continuous phases of adaptation, year after year, place after place.

In "Lisp," sax contends with the forces of heteronormativity and anti-Semitism, which seek to shame him for his identity as someone both queer and Jewish. The resources in this kit offer students multiple ways to approach sax's poem: in the contexts of Jewish history and religion, homosexuality and queer identity, family dynamics, poetry, mental health, and popular culture.

Note: The poem includes adult content and explicit sexual references.

Cover image: sam sax reading poetry, 2015 (found on *Entropy Magazine*, and used with permission from sam sax).

Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Gender, Poetry, Sexuality, Social Commentary

Reading and Background

- "History of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Social Movements," written by Bonnie J. Morris, and published by the American Psychological Association, is a brief history of the LGBT and queer movements beginning in Ancient Greece and continuing up to our current moment.
- "Queer Theory' Is Entering The Literary Mainstream" by Dinitia Smith was published in the *New York Times* in 1998 when queer theory was making its foray out of the shadows and into the stark white light of institutional academia in a more widespread way. This article features an interview with the historic theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and her thoughts on gender and sexuality as fields of study.
- Michael Kimmel's influential article, "Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity" (2000) comments on the way men are socialized into a rigid and limiting definition of masculinity. In Kimmel's view, men fear being ridiculed by other men, which perpetuates homophobia. Kimmel advocates for a politics of inclusion, and for broadening our collective definition of manhood.
- The *Digital Poet* explains spoken word and slam poetry as a way to disrupt social norms and transform both poet and audience.
- For more on the history and connection between queerness and Judaism, see *Queer Jews*, edited by David Shneer and Caryn Aviv, *Torah Queeries*, edited by Gregg Drinkwater and Joshua Lesser, and *A Rainbow Thread: An Anthology of Queer Jewish Texts from the First Century to 1969*, edited by Noam Sienna with a foreword by Judith Plaskow.
- We use the word "queer" throughout this kit because that is how sam sax self-identifies. For more background on how the meaning of the word queer has evolved over time, check out "How the word 'queer' was adopted by the LGBTQ community ." If students are unfamiliar with the concept of a "queer" identity, it may be helpful to provide some framing before engaging with the resources found in this kit.

Resources



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

1: Audio recording, sam sax's "Lisp," 2018.

Spoken word poetry is an ancient discipline with roots in West Africa and in Ancient Greece. In its modern form, spoken word is often traced back through its foundation in contemporary music to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, the blues, and the Beat Generation of the 1960s, and the rich literary and musical heritage of African Americans. In a broader sense, however, as the term references any kind of poetry recited aloud, spoken word is much older than the written word because the poet existed long before the printing press. Oral traditions were, after all, the first kind of historical record available to human beings, and making history into songs and poems made it easier to remember for the next generation.

Suggested Activity: Listen to the poem once, asking students to pay attention to the overall feeling (tone, volume, rhythm, pauses) of the poem rather than focusing on the specific words or content. Then, distribute a written copy of the poem and ask students to follow along as they listen to the performance once more.

Ask students to reflect on what they gained or lost by first listening to the poem without reading the text. And what did they gain or lose by then reading the text along with the poet?

Ask them: In the performance, what impact does the poet's delivery, intonation, and emphasis on certain words have on your understanding of the poem? In the written poem, what impact do the capitalization, line breaks, and visual shape of the poem have? Ask students to consider which form of delivery—written or spoken—they think is more effective and why.

The poem posits that "sound shapes how we think about objects." Does sound shape how we think about poems? Do you think about the poem differently when it is spoken, instead of written?

Source: sam sax, "Lisp," from *The Poetry Foundation*, September 2018.

Credit goes to sam sax and *Poetry* magazine where the text of the poem was initially published.

2: Documentary trailer, David Thorpe's "Do I Sound Gay," 2014.

Do I Sound Gay? is a 2014 documentary film produced by and starring David Thorpe as he explores the speech patterns of gay men and delves into the mystery of his personal history and voice. The film is part autobiographical and part analytical in its attempt to understand the nuances of gay identity, stereotypes, and culture. Exploring questions of bullying, harassment, and internalized homophobia, Thorpe attempts to reconcile his own story with the ubiquitous narrative of a "gay voice" that is threaded throughout the dominant American culture.

Suggested Activity: Before watching the documentary trailer, ask students to write short reflections on each of the following questions (note that their answers won't be collected and that no one will be put on the spot to share):

- Do you make assumptions about whether a man is gay or straight based on his voice?
- Is it ok to make this kind of assumption? Is it possible that your assumptions are sometimes wrong?
- What kind of voice sounds gay to you? What kind of voice sounds straight?
- What associations do you have with each of these different voices, in terms of personality and attributes?
- Do you have any theories about why the notion of a gay voice exists?

Then watch the trailer together as a class. Ask students to discuss the following:

- What does this film appear to be about?
- What questions is the filmmaker and subject of the film, David Thorpe, asking?
- Based on the trailer, what different theories does Thorpe seem to be positing about "gay voice"?

Then revisit sam sax's poem "Lisp" with particular attention to lines 6–13, which directly address the notion of the lisp as part of the "homosexual mystique" and sax's personal experience with seeing a speech pathologist. As a class, discuss the question of "gay voice" from the poet's perspective. What experience is he describing? What does sax suggest when he writes "i was / schooled / practiced silence"? Why does he describe his voice as "sap in the high branches" and "a spoonful of sugared / semen"? What do these references say about the poet's perspective of the nature and quality of a "gay voice"?

The speaker says, “i licked silk when i spoke / i spilt milk when i sang.” Some speech pathologists will ask patients to practice licking sticky substances like peanut butter from the corners of their mouths as an exercise in tongue lateralization (moving the tongue from side to side). What do you make about the allusion to silk and licking? What significance does sax’s reference to the English idiom “don’t cry over spilt milk” have on your understanding of this line?

Source: David Thorpe, “Do I Sound Gay? Official Trailer 1 (2015) - Documentary HD,” YouTube video, 2:23, posted by “IndieClips,” June 8, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAcgicU_upo&t=76s.

3: TED Talk, “the myth of Sisyphus,” 2018.

sam sax refers to himself in the poem as “sisyphus with the sissiest lips.” The ancient Greek myth of Sisyphus tells the tale of a trickster king who was punished by the gods for his hubristic belief that he was more clever than Zeus himself. Sisyphus’s punishment for his scorn of the gods, hatred of death, and passion for life was being forced to roll an immense boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down when it neared the top. Because of his earthly passions, Sisyphus was doomed to labor pointlessly, pushing the boulder up the hill for eternity, repeatedly exerting himself but accomplishing nothing. The myth has come to symbolize any task that is both futile and interminable.

Suggested Activity: Reflect on the myth of Sisyphus as it relates to the poem. Why might sax refer to himself as Sisyphus? What is the Sisyphean task the poet encounters—the fruitless labor to which he is doomed? Is it about overcoming a speech impediment? Or something else, something more? Point to specific text in the poem that may illuminate the Sisyphus reference.

Ask students to consider the effect of the heavy-handed alliteration in this part of the poem, where sax uses “sisyphus,” “sissiest,” “assassin,” “sassy,” and “passing” all in close proximity—in a poem called “Lisp.” What meaning and tension emerges from some of these juxtapositions? What images and feelings does this collection of s-heavy words evoke? Keeping this sibilance in mind, have students read the last line aloud. Why do they think sax used these particular sounds to end the poem? What do they think this ending means?

Ask students to take a few minutes to reflect on their own lives in light of the Sisyphus myth. Ask them: Do you have a Sisyphean rock? If so, what is it? If time permits, ask students to use the first letter or first sound of their name to write a short poem about their Sisyphean rock. They should use the letter or sound as much as possible throughout the poem. These do not need to be shared, but encourage students to read these aloud (in public or private) and to reflect on the feeling of speaking their name-sound over and over.

Source: Alex Gendler, “The myth of Sisyphus,” filmed November 2018, TED-ed, 4:56, https://www.ted.com/talks/alex_gendler_the_myth_of_sisyphus#t-1180.

4: Biblical excerpts, Genesis 27:1–35, and excerpt from academic article, Lori Hope Lefkowitz, 2002.

In sax’s poem, he makes reference to the Hebrew patriarch Isaac who was nearly sacrificed by his father: “no matter what was sacrificed / the tongued isaac / a son.” Isaac himself then goes on to have two sons, Jacob and Esau, who represent two very different strains of masculinity. As gender studies scholar Lori Hope Lefkowitz has argued, the story of Isaac and his two sons can be read as one of the foundational stories about Jewish masculinity and gender performance.

Suggested Activity: Review the Torah passage depicting Isaac blessing his sons Jacob and Esau, and the passage by scholar Lori Hope Lefkowitz (2002) offering insight into the story. Answer the following questions: If we consider Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau, to be symbolic representations of masculine identity in Jewish culture, how would you describe the man Jacob represents? What about Esau? Lefkowitz suggests that this story should be seen as a narrative about gender performance and, in particular, the need for the effeminate Jewish man to successfully pass as a hyper-masculine figure in order to get his inheritance. sam sax’s poem tells a similar story: that of a gay Jewish man who learns to sound straight in order to be accepted. Can you identify any further parallels between the story and the poem?

Journal your answers, then pair up with another student to share and discuss your thoughts. Did you answer many of the above questions similarly? What can you offer each other from your differing perspectives?

Sources: Genesis 27:1–35. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using sefaria.org, 2019.

Lori Hope Lefkowitz, "Passing as a Man: Narratives of Jewish Gender Performance." *Narrative* 10, no. 1 (2002): 93.

5: Inscription, Moses Altshuler/sam sax, 1596/ 21st century.

Inside the cover of each book sax has published is an inscription in Yiddish:

פֿאַר ווייבער און פֿאַר מאַנסבילן וואָס זײַנען אַזוי ווי ווייבער, דאָס הייסט זיי קענען ניט לערנען.

The transliteration is: "Far vayber un far mansbiln vos zaynen azoy vi vayber, dos heyst zey kenen nit lernen."

In English, this translates to: "For women and men who are like women in that they cannot learn."

Though this phrase has been used many times over, it's thought to have originated in Moses Altshuler's introduction to his 1596 book, *Brantshpigl* (*Burning Mirror*), one of the first Yiddish texts concerned with musar (Jewish ethics). At the time when *Brantshpigl* was written, Yiddish was the vernacular language of Ashkenazi Jews, but Hebrew was the language of scholarship. Altshuler explained that he wrote the book in Yiddish so that the material would be accessible not only to highly educated men, but to women and to men who did not study Torah. Thus, this epigraph references a history of Jewish patriarchy in which women were barred from certain kinds of education, men who deviated from gender norms were considered to be "like women," and both were considered inferior to the class of learned men.

Suggested Activity: After sharing some of the history of the phrase, have students answer the following questions:

1. How do you interpret sax's decision to include this line in each of his books? Why would he include the text in the original Yiddish, without English translation? For whom might the inscription be intended?
2. Do you think it was an insult, when this line originated, for men to be seen as "like women"? Would it be considered an insult today? Why or why not? What new meanings does sax bring to the line by including it in his poetry collections?

Sources: Moses Altshuler, *Brantshpigl* (*Burning Mirror*) (Krakow, 1596).

sam sax, *bury it* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2018).

6: "Los Angeles Review of Books" interview, sam sax and Emily Sernaker, 2018.

This interview was conducted in November 2018, just a few weeks after a mass shooting at a Pittsburgh synagogue. sam sax discusses his Jewish heritage as well as death, grief, and the role poetry can have in responding to tragedy. In the words of Emily Sernaker, the interviewer, "We also discussed how Judaism informs his responses to inherited trauma and his desire to trace lineage through language." This theme of language and lineage is at the heart of sax's poem "Lisp," so the insight into his process and perspective in this interview is a great resource for deepening the reader's understanding of the poem.

Suggested Activity: Read sax's responses to two of Sernaker's questions.

In the first question, Sernaker asks sax whether he explores the Jewish history of exile in his work. sax's response reveals a fascination with estrangement rather than exile, an investigation of what is strange and queer about being Jewish. What does "Lisp" have to say about Jewish queerness and estrangement? What meanings do you find in the line "my swishiness is hebraic" (sax, line 15)? What is sax referring to in the interview when he mentions the "violent settler colonial nation-state?" How does sax see his queer/diasporic identity in relation to Israel and Zionism?

In the second question, Sernaker inquires about the Pittsburgh synagogue shooting, and what role sax believes poetry plays in times of tragedy. sax responds by saying poetry helps articulate and share grief. He also posits that poetry can contextualize grief, and invite readers into a communal experience of processing and grieving together. Lastly, he suggests that poetry serves to locate a tragic event in its historical context. Does "Lisp" seem like a poem of grief? What tragedy, or series of tragedies, might it be gesturing toward? Does it offer any historical context for these tragedies?

Source: sam sax, interviewed by Emily Sernaker, "Grief, Ritual, and Estrangement: An Interview with sam sax," *Los Angeles Review*

of Books, January 23, 2019.