

# Vanessa Hidary's "The Hebrew Mamita"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/vanessa-hidarys-hebrew-mamita>.

### Introduction

"The Hebrew Mamita" is Vanessa Hidary's signature slam poetry piece. Hidary is a Sephardic-Ashkenazic American Jewish performer and writer whose work focuses on stereotypes of race and ethnicity. She consistently returns to a deceptively simple question: What does "Jewish" look like to you? This kit presents resources to help teachers teach the poem and Hidary's performance of it, so as to raise questions about Jewish identity, diversity, and cultural appropriation.

### Subjects

Anti-Semitism, Performance, Poetry, Sephardi, United States, Women Writers

### Reading and Background:

- Vanessa Hidary's description of her background and work, as well as many videos of her performances, are available on her [website](#).
- For an introduction to slam poetry, see Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman's anthology *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe* (1994).
- Hidary's poem was excerpted in *The Tribe*, Tiffany Shlain's short film about Jewish identity in the 21st century, which you can [watch online](#).
- *The Forward* published a Q&A with Hidary shortly after the publication of a "memoir anthology" of her poetry, *The Last Kaiser Roll in the Bodega*.
- For more on the interplay between American Jews' identities and other American minority identities, see Jonathan Freedman's *Klezmer America: Jewishness, Ethnicity, Modernity*, and especially Chapter 5, "Conversos, Marranos, and Crypto-Latinos: Jewish-Hispanic Crossings and the Uses of Ethnicity."

### Resources

#### 1: Poem performance, Vanessa Hidary's "The Hebrew Mamita," 2003.

Hidary performs her signature slam poem on the HBO series showcasing the genre, *Def Poetry Jam*.

**Suggested activity:** Watch the video with your students and have them share their reactions. What does it mean to "look Jewish"? Does Hidary look Jewish to you? What does Hidary's poem say about how one perceives oneself versus how one is perceived by others? Has anyone ever made assumptions about your identity based on the way you look or act?

**Source:** Vanessa Hidary, "The Hebrew Mamita" in *Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry*, season 3, episode 3 (HBO, April 18, 2003; HBO Video, 2005), DVD.

#### 2: Poem excerpt, Vanessa Hidary's "The Hebrew Mamita," 2008.

The poem's finale.

**Suggested activity:** Have students read the excerpt aloud, and then listen again to Hidary performing. How does Hidary's performance add to the meaning or impact of the lines? Read with students a [brief history of slam poetry](#) from the Academy of



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American Poets, clicking through to the work of other slam poets, and comparing their work to Hiday's poem. Have students write and perform their own slam poem describing an aspect of their identity. As they work on their poems, ask students to reflect on how they will use elements of performance—including vocal tone, accent, rhythm, dress, and gesture—to create meaning. You could even hold a poetry slam competition in the classroom, in which students perform their poems and collectively choose a winner.

**Source:** Vanessa Hiday, "The Hebrew Mamita," in *The Last Kaiser Roll in the Bodega* (Brooklyn, NY: Penmanship Books, 2011), 82.

### 3: Screenshot, Google Images search for "Jewish," 2015.

These are the first pictures that have appeared in a search of the word "Jewish" on the Google Images search engine.

**Suggested activity:** Begin by asking students to draw the first thing that comes to mind when they hear the word "Jewish." Ask them to share and discuss what they drew. Then show them these images. What does this say about how Jewishness is imagined/depicted? How do these images match or differ from your own image of who you are (or who a Jew is)?

**Source:** Google Images search, "Jewish," <<https://www.google.com/search?tbm=isch&q=jewish/>>, accessed November 18, 2015.

### 4: Video excerpt, Vanessa Hiday's "The Making of a Hebrew Mamita," 2012.

This is a short excerpt from a talk Hiday gave in which she reflects on her search, as a young woman, for a positive, empowering, "cool" Jewish identity.

**Suggested activity:** Discuss: What is it that the young Hiday was searching for and missing? Do you feel empowered in your cultural identity? Who are your Jewish (female and male) role models?

**Source:** Vanessa Hiday, "The Making of the Hebrew Mamita" (JDOV, December 24, 2012, <<http://jdov.org/talk/the-making-of-the-hebrew-mamita/>>, accessed February 23, 2016), web video.

### 5: Article excerpt, Victor J. Wishna's "Hip-Hop Mameleh," 2003.

The article, concerning Hiday's motivations and her place in the world of slam poetry, is based on an interview she gave to the author in the New York City coffee shop where she writes most of her verses.

**Suggested activity:** Discuss: What is a "non-apologetic Jewish voice"? Why is that kind of voice important?

**Source:** Victor J. Wishna, "Hip Hop Mamelah," *Jewish World Review* (May 13, 2003), <[http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0503/hebrew\\_mamita.asp](http://www.jewishworldreview.com/0503/hebrew_mamita.asp)>, accessed February 23, 2016.

### 6: Video excerpt, Amandla Stenberg and Quinn Masterson's "Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows," 2015.

The teenaged actress Amandla Stenberg explains what "cultural appropriation" is, in a video produced for her and her cowriter's history class.

**Suggested activity:** Ask students what, if anything, in Hiday's performance could be considered "cultural appropriation."

**Source:** Amandla Stenberg and Quinn Masterson, "Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows" (2015, <<http://amandla.tumblr.com/post/107484511963/dont-cash-crop-my-cornrows-a-crash-discourse-on>>, accessed February 23, 2016), web video.

### 7: Video excerpt, Marina Watanabe's "What Is Cultural Appropriation?" 2014.

Feminist vlogger Marina Watanabe explains the concept of "cultural exchange."

**Suggested activity:** Watch the video, and ask students whether Hiday's performance should be considered "cultural appropriation," "cultural exchange," or something else entirely. Is the line between the two blurry? Why is the distinction important?

**Source:** Marina Watanabe (YouTube handle “marinashutup”), “What Is Cultural Appropriation? | Feminist Fridays” (December 5, 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZT1sTYpOJ04>>, accessed February 23, 2016), web video.