



INTERNATIONAL
WRITING PROGRAM

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Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Poetry and Plays

Week 6 Part III Kevin Coval– Transcript

>>[text on screen: Power of the Pen: Identities and Social Issues in Poetry and Plays]

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>>[text on screen: We are very proud to bring you the perspective of authors from around the world, and trust that you will find their perspectives valuable. Because some of our contributing authors are nonnative speakers of English, we suggest that you turn on video captions. You can turn on captions by clicking the “cc” button at the bottom right of the video.]

>>[text on screen: Glossary of terms on Week 6 Page]

>>During our class videos, you may hear our poets and playwrights use terms that are new to you. We have created a list of key terms and definitions that you can refer to at any point during our video lectures. This list is available on the “Videos and Readings” class page where you can read it or download it as a PDF. If you would like to find and review these terms while you watch each class video, you can stop this video go back to the “Videos and Readings” class page and download the PDF. There you can play this video in each of the following class videos. If you have any questions about these terms, we encourage you to ask you teaching team in the weekly class discussions.

>>[text on screen: Week 6 Part III: Kevin Coval]

>>Kevin Coval is the editor of the Break Beat Poets New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop and is the author of Shtick, L-vis Lives, Race Music Poems, Everyday People, Slingshots A Hip-hop Poetica, and the play This is Modern Art co-written with Idris Goodwin. He is a four X HBO Def poet and has written for a wide variety of publications including CNN.com, Huffington Post, and Fake Shore Drive. This Modern Art is forthcoming. He's the founder of Louder Than a Bomb, the Chicago Youth Poetry Festival, and the artistic director of Young Chicago Authors. He teaches hip-hop aesthetics at the University of Illinois Chicago.

>>Hey what's up y'all? I'm Kevin Coval, poet and educator and one of the founders of Louder Than a Bomb the Chicago Youth Poetry Festival. I've been writing for a long time, teaching creative writing for a long time. Not because I wanted to but because I was asked into a classroom in '96 by my buddy Eboo Patel. I myself was not a very good student and didn't think I was going to be a good educator, but I realized I have a love of the story and a love for this work, so my hope is that I'm going to share with you some tips that you might find useful. Forgive my face, by the way. I would never say that because I feel like I'm generally a fairly handsome individual but I recently got some dental surgery so I look more like a chipmunk than the suave gentleman that I normally am. So this is what I want to say, you know I come in a tradition of Chicago letter makers, Chicago poets particularly and one of my mentors mentors was Gwendolyn Brooks, so my mentor, one of my

mentors is Hakim Adabudi and one of his mentors was Gwendolyn Brooks and one of the things that Gwendolyn Brooks would tell young writers all the time and I had the opportunity to see her tell this to me and you know hundreds of other young writers is that our responsibility as young writers is to tell the story that's in front of our nose. And I think that's important right? That poetry and writing in general. Our lives are sites and sources of art and we should make art. We can make art about what's around us, and you know Gwendolyn Brooks of course is a master at this. She would take what was in her front yard and her back alley, she would write about her beloved neighborhood of Bronzeville, the city of Chicago, people she saw there you know every day and she would record and report the lives and the dreams and the horrors of a community, of a people and I think we should do the same. I think that poetry shouldn't necessarily have to be something that is far reaching or that is grandiose in its idea. I think poetry can be something that is more everyday. Poems should be composed about what we know intimately, so you know how you sound is how a poem should sound. How the people around you sound is how a poem should sound. If you can incorporate slang and local tradition and narrative into the poem. I believe in the use of the particular pronoun a lot, so if you are talking very specifically about Wells Park, then say Wells Park. If you're talking about 63rd and Kedzie, or Lawrence and Ashland or whatever spot in your life you're writing about, then name those things very specifically. I think that the world around us is rich. I think that if we don't do the work of telling our stories, of recording, representing our history then inevitably somebody else will do it and we know how history gets written. It gets written by the victors and as we've seen those who have access to capital and you know Eurocentric white supremacist views of history are those histories that are reported, that are recorded and so I think the poem and the narratives that exist in our own lives are really important sites and sources to do this work. Some of my favorite rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli talk about their work and their practice as being real life documentarians. And so this idea that the worlds that we inhabit around us can be sites for this work I think is essential.

All right so Gwendolyn Brooks, tell the stories in front of your nose. Frank O'Hara is a dead white dude who I mess with. I normally do not mess with a lot of dead white dudes in part because when I was being taught poetry in high school I was under the impression given the teachers that I had that poetry was only something done by dead white dudes who got lost in the forest. Now I didn't know any dead white dudes, even though I am white. And I did not live near a forest, and so the notion that poetry could be about you know the world, I was not put on in high school and you know it was rappers specifically that broke down that idea because they were recording and reporting about the worlds around them. You know when Grandmaster Flash's *The Message* in 1982 dropped and you know Melle Mel talked about the south Bronx and the deindustrializing neighborhood. Don't push me 'cause I'm close to the edge. I'm trying not to lose my head huh huh which is a haiku by the way. That I was like yo, that's fascinating. That's very interesting. It's not only the emotion of what is occurring in such a place but it's a thick description about what's happening in that place. So hip-hop of course broke for me that notion that poetry was only done by dead white dudes that got lost in the forest. Frank O'Hara is a dead white dude. I don't think he got lost in too many forests. He did write really beautiful poems about his life. Very I would say you know beautiful, personal love letters to each day or all these people, all of his lovers and all of the things that he liked, he had these beautiful poems about and he wrote an essay that I go back to a lot and I teach from all the time called *Personism* and it's an essay that came out in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* in the fifties. It was some of the first places that the beat poets were published. It was some of the first places that at the time LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka, was published. Allen Ginsberg was in there. Frank has this beautiful essay at the back of the book called *Personism*. In it he talks about the idea of a poem can be... The idea of a poem can exist between two pages as

opposed to between two people. That he could have picked up the telephone, but instead he wrote the poem. And so for me what I garner from this is that you know a poem could be something that's very intimate. That how we talk to one another can also populate the language of a poem. Sometimes I think we get lost in metaphor. That we want to be very clever 'cause we're very smart and we want to you know we want to do these extended metaphors that are like metaphors on top of metaphors and it gets very confusing and convoluted as opposed to just saying what we really mean. And I think sometimes like the simplicity of language, the actual person we're talking to, the various feelings that we're trying to convey, the thing that we really had for dinner, you know what corner we're going to, what flower we're seeing, what movie we're going to see later, what actor we're excited about, what painting we've been you know that we've been turned on by at a museum. All of these things, the particular things, should populate the poem. I often say a lot that it's through the particular that we articulate the universal and what I mean by that is if you tell me that you're happy or that you've had a good day, I don't know what you mean right? That's very broad, it's abstract. But if you tell me for you you know happiness is you know going with your best friend to get a tattoo that's very different than a happiness that is a you know a Sunday at church with your grandma. And it's not necessarily different but it's just particular and so it's through the particular that we get at the universal, so all of these fine things in our lives, all of these fine details in our experience should populate our poems. You know there's no one way a poem should be and there's no one way a poem should sound. I love poems that are just stories that are very narrative and I like poems that rhyme and I like poems that don't rhyme. I do think language is also a musical instrument, and so as much as I'm concerned with how the words are aligning on the page and I love playing with enjambment and where the line breaks and how to get multiple means out of a line break or spacing and having sometimes increasingly playing with how a poem might look on the page, I'm also equally concerned with how the poem sounds. Poetry is you know one of the most ancient of arts and it has historically been an oral art. It's you know it's one of, it's one of a way for a community to keep history by singing the songs of its tribe and so the way that the poem sounds and the way language works is to also delight in its assonance and its consonance to be concerned perhaps with anaphora and the repetition of words that might clue the listener in to what's in between. Similar to how a chorus might work on a pop song, a poem can work in similar ways. And so I think to be at once concerned and maybe foremost concerned with the meaning but then as you are composing as well in your revisions, also think about how the poem is sounding in your ear, sounding in your mouth. You know poems should be read and they should be heard and I think great poems do the work of being read well and understood on the page as well as also delighting the ear and I think that they're equally important.

Yeah so just a note I guess about rhythm in the poem and really kind of sometimes the choice you might make as a performer, to read a poem differently. Now I'll say this, I mean I think that I am trying to do the work as a writer of having any reader be able to pick up my book and read it as I might recite it, but that being said and us living in 2015 I mean you also have you know you have access to audio recordings and so part of what I try to do as a reader of my own work and as a performer of my own work is to make choices that I think will inform the meaning of a poem. And so there's a little example from a poem I wrote that I want to share and just talk through the choice that I made. So there's a poem I have called How to Teach Poetry in Chicago Public Schools and in it, I have this bit that on paper you know it'll read one way but how I perform it is there's a difference in the performance and so in the poem I say start with a rhyme. Something quick, a half note behind west side double time. Their ears picked able to roll with all those syllables. That's how it reads on the page. Now in performance, I might say something like start with a rhyme something quick a half note behind west side double time their ears picked able to roll all those syllables now

read a poem something slow, familiar familiar. And I do that quickness in order to also you know enliven the rhythm of the poem, but also to emphasize the style of rhyming in Chicago that we are accustomed to hearing. So you know the innovation of Twista and Do or Die and Psychodrama and Crucial Conflicts double time that was also popularized by the crew from Cleveland, Bone Thugs-N-Harmony like that idea of rhyming very quickly is something that is also indigenous to Chicago and so in my poem I wanted to get at that. Now double time on the page is interesting in terms of a transliteration and so I might on the page try to put that language closer together, or maybe even like have it represented in some other way textually but as a recitation I'm also trying to you know pay attention to the musicality of it. And those are choices you make as a performer. You know I think that you get more and more comfortable every time you recite a poem and for me I have that poem memorized just because I've done it so much that it's become, it's become part of my practice and every time I say it I hope I'm saying it better and better in part because that is also the practice. And I've learned sometimes I'll edit through a recitation where there's something that doesn't sound right in a poem and so it allows me to take something out, cut out a word, cut out a line, an idea that just is falling flat in recitation even if it's just in my room to myself or to an audience it's also a site to edit. For me I think the poem has to work on the page and it has to work in the ear, and if it isn't working in both places then there's some editing that needs to occur.

>>[text on screen: This program was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the U.S Department of State and by the University of Iowa.]

>>[logos on screen: American Flag, Department of State, University of Iowa]