



**INTERNATIONAL
WRITING PROGRAM**

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

Week 6 Part IV El Jones– Transcript

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

>>[text on screen: Week 6 Part IV El Jones]

>>[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 IV El Jones]

>>El Jones is a Canadian spoken word poet who from 2013 to 2015 was the Poet Laureate for Halifax, named a Bold Visionary, one of 23 in her country, she was also the Poet of Honor at the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word in 2015. Her collection of spoken word poetry, *Live From the African Resistance*, appeared in 2014. And in 2015, she was a resident in the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

>>All right, good afternoon or evening, or wherever you're watching this, what's up. I'm El Jones representing Halifax Nova Scotia, Canada. I'm a spoken word artist, a poet. So spoken word is poetry, but I think it's also everything that, anything that you can speak, so anything that's your voice. So it can be anything from like sound poetry with people just putting sounds together. It can be storytelling, so whether that's telling like traditional stories in real culture or telling stories about your life now or whatever storytelling form that takes. Rap and spoken word are really connected, so the people that are into hip-hop. Anything in our oral traditions from our histories, but really anything that's speaking. It can be even like standup comedy, stuff like that. So everything like that is under spoken word. Jessica Care More, who is a really great spoken word artist, doesn't like the term spoken word. She's like, we're poets and stop letting people label you. So you can also just call yourself a poet if you like. So I guess the first thing is that what I like about spoken word, you don't have to publish it. You don't have anybody else that has to look at it. So I know like when you're

thinking of being a writer, when you're going, okay, when do I get to call myself a poet? When do I get to call myself a writer? You know, as a young writer it's like, okay, well, if I'm not published and everything looks really far away, you know, like how do you get your stuff published? Maybe if you already like had stuff published in magazines or teen magazines and stuff, but maybe you haven't, right? And then you look and you think, like, will I ever have a poetry book or whatever? And the good thing about spoken word is right now, like, you are a spoken word artist. There's no really such thing as a professional spoken word artist versus everyone else. You can definitely do slam, there's stuff like Brave New Voices for you, obviously National Poetry Slam. Different things like that. But I think it's about just claiming your own voice and your own poetry, so you know, if you do a spoken word poem then you're a spoken word artist. That's what you are. You can do it on the streets, you can do it, you know, in your classrooms, you don't need to be published. No one else needs to look at it and say, "This is good enough." It's whether you think it's good enough, whether it's something that you feel the need to say and whether it's something that makes your voice significant. So I think that's really important because I think part of finding your voice a lot of times, other people are telling us what our voice should be. You know, you're in school and you're writing papers and your teacher is gonna correct that. You know, suddenly like when you're reading and stuff, people are telling you what to read, people telling you what to think. And I think what spoken word is powerful for is it's you saying to yourself, "What is I need to say at this moment?" So I think that's really powerful for you to sort of take that in yourself and you can speak in your own voices, no proper English, it doesn't matter if you can't spell, it doesn't matter if you can't write. It doesn't have to follow a form, it's not like a sonnet. You could write sonnets if you wanted to, you know there's nothing wrong with that. But it doesn't have to. It can have rhythm and rhyme, it doesn't have to. There's no right way to do it. It can be really dramatic, it can be really quiet. You can yell, you can whisper. You can do a lot of theater, you can dance. All of that stuff is part of it, so it's whatever your body, your voice, your mind, your being, wants to express at that moment. The next thing I would say, too is everybody has a spoken word poem in them and I've seen a lot of poetry, and I would definitely say that everybody has a poem in them and usually everybody's first poem is their story. So it's usually the stuff that's been in you that you haven't had a chance to get out. My first poem was about growing up in white neighborhoods, so being like the only person of color, the only black person in white neighborhoods. And I actually just woke up with the poem in my head. I didn't know what spoken word was, nobody ever told me what it was, nobody ever taught me that. I had never heard it. And then I was listening to a lot of rap and I woke up one morning and I just had this whole kind of rhyme and stuff in my head and I just remembered it and wrote it down. And then I happened to like see somebody in the street and they asked me why I didn't come out to poetry, so I went that night and did it. But that was my story, it was the first thing that I really had to say where I talked about a lot of the double standards. So you know, I talked about people would be like, "We don't like immigrants," but then they like hiring a nanny. Or you know, people that would be like, "Oh, your mom's such a fresh off the boat," like, you know, make fun of that. But then they all wanted to date black guys. So I just kind of talked about that stuff. It was kind of controversial. People were kind of mad at me. But that was my story to say. So I always feel like everybody's first poem is their story, whatever that is. You know, it might be the thing you care about most in the world, it might be speaking your culture, it might be about your name, it might be about your language, it might be about wearing hijab, it might be about racism in your life, it might be about the environment, the coffee shop you like, you know, your teacher, whatever it is, there's so many stories and you have a story and only you have that story. And it's really important to embrace that and give that significance. Especially when you're young, where I think a lot of people feel like their story isn't being heard and their voice isn't significant. And spoken word is like your choice and your chance to embrace that. So along with that is accept the fact that you have a story and embrace your

story and don't tell anybody else the story. A lot of times you see, you know, if you watch slam, which is what is really popular with spoken word, some people are interested in it have often gone and watched different poets and then they want to do the accent like they heard on Brave New Voices. You know, or they want to do whatever they heard, whoever won the poetry slam do, or whatever is hot on YouTube. And you can do that, I mean, that's one way to learn, is to copy other people and kind of take what you like, we all do that. But I think it's also really important not to look at other people and be like, that's what spoken word sounds like, that's what I need to sound like, this is what's getting tens at the slam, I need to do that. Because you don't need to do that. And if you're doing that, you're just doing somebody else's voice. So you kind of need to ask yourself, like, "What is my voice, what is my story?" "When I talk, how do I gesture?" "What is my accent?" You know, like, "What is maybe the language that I speak "when I'm home and I speak with my friends?" "Can I use that language?" "How does my body feel when I perform?" That's really important, too. Like, how do I move? How do I feel comfortable at the microphone? If I don't feel comfortable yelling, I don't need to yell. You know, if I don't feel comfortable running around the stage, I don't need to run around the stage. And those are things to ask yourself.

So yeah, I think it's more than worrying about, you know, what do I write, like okay, is this person gonna tell me how to write down a sentence? No, I'm not gonna tell you that because that's in you. What I'm gonna tell you is to value what you have to say and to give yourself permission to say the things you need to say, whether it's things you're ashamed of or it's things that make you happy, whether it's things that you feel really strongly about, those are things ... that's all you need to do is just find those things and tell people about them and keep telling people about them. And when you've done that, that's a poem. If you want something to sound good, write it out loud as well. Because if you're doing spoken word, if you're talking about poetry, poetry is on the page. But if we're talking about oral poetry, which I guess I am, really, but it helps for any kind of writing, not just spoken word. As you write, say it. Because if it doesn't sound right, it's not gonna sound right when you're saying it. And that will also be your voice and what you're comfortable saying. And if you're gonna speak it out loud, you have to be confident in it, right? It's one thing to write something down and kind of like, be like, here's this thing I wrote, it's another thing when you have to get up and speak it, which means you have to own it. So number one, make sure you're not saying anything that is offensive or stupid or, you know, that you can't really stand by. Because you're gonna have to stand by your words. When you get up and say it, you can't pretend it wasn't you. You know, you can't be like, "No, that wasn't me." So you know, you should mean it and be accountable to your words. You know, speak them and then own them. But also, you know, if it doesn't sound right, you'll know. So then you know, it's like why didn't that sound right? And trust your instincts, you know? You listen to probably a ton of music, probably a ton of lyrics, so you know what you like, right? You know that you like this lyric and that it's dope for this reason, so you already have the ability to think about how language sounds. So it's just like, look at your own stuff and if you don't like how it sounds, try putting in a word ... Like vowel sounds often help. So if you want a line to flow, if you're using a lot of the same vowel sounds throughout the line, that can help connect the line and give it flow. So even if you're not doing rhymes. Or consonant sounds, right? Maybe do this in English class, they talk about like accents and stuff but it doesn't have to be like formal, it just means that, you know, it gives a line some shape if you have words with the same consonant or if you're using the same vowel sound. Like rhythm, you know, so I talk in rhythm. There's times that I take breaths and stuff, so that's what I mean about doing it out loud. You'll find your own rhythm, what sounds good to you. Being able to hear voices in your head like in terms of how you want the poem to sound, what voice it's going to be in. So some of that is just trusting your own instinct about what sounds good and I think reading stuff out loud can really help with that.

But I'll show you what you can do with like one word, okay? So like, and I'll ruin this poem for you before I do it. So I was talking about evictions, right? There's a lot of that going on in my neighborhood, maybe in your neighborhood. So like, with housing, you know, they started putting in all these rules like if you make noise after like 9:00 PM, they'll try and kick you out of housing. Or if like a relative has a criminal record, they can kick you out. So I was thinking about like people's homes being in boxes, so I just went with the word box. And people always get all like, ooh when I do it, but literally I'll just give you like a secret professional tip. I went on Google and Googled box and like made a list of all the stuff and then just plugged them in. So even though when I'm doing the poem it seems like maybe I'm doing something like advanced, like in reality I literally went and took this one word and just put in and took lists and said, okay, this is P.O. Box, penalty box, and just put them in. So what I'm saying is that like, it's actually a really simple poem and it sounds really good because I'm like repeating ... Well, I don't know if it sounds good, I shouldn't say that. But I mean like, I made a whole poem that will go together and tell a story but it just started with one word. So I guess I'll do that poem for you.

/A poor woman evicted is on the sidewalk

/With her home stacked high in cardboard boxes.

/See how they got her out in the cold with the kids beside her

/Surrounded by everything from the jewelry box to her mother's diamond box

/Her engagement ring came in until she pawned it off

/To her box-spring mattress.

/And her landlord got her locked out.

/I tell ya, she's beside herself, because once homeless,

/How can she check the boxes on her welfare form?

/And a PO box don't cut it as a permanent address.

/And down at the shelter, they're saying they don't got space

/Like this woman's life is a gift box that

/Can't be returned if you don't like what's inside

/This poverty cycle, it's like being sent to the penalty box,

/Except it's for life.

/And so she's looking at her cardboard boxes,

/Wondering what it might be like to raise a family inside.

/And there are so many ways that poor women get behind.
/Like maybe she got cancer of the voice box
/From all the chemicals in those bottles and boxes of products used for scrubbing
/Those toilet boxes.
/Or mopping floors of luxury boxes,
/Until they laid her off from her job cleaning office boxes
/And in this box office, the only blockbusters are the cops,
/Who took her baby daddy off the block to put him in a prison box
/So ever since the auction block, we all end up with lives in boxes.
/So this poor woman has got to box her feelings in,
/She's locked up tight like a strong box with
/No time to cry into Kleenex boxes
/She's got to keep on keeping on to send her kids to those public school boxes
/With no food in their lunchboxes,
/And no computers to do homework on and type in the search boxes
/And they come home and beg her for XBOXs and Reebok shoeboxes
/That they see on the TV box.
/She feeds 'em chemicals that come in boxes labeled 'Kraft Dinner'
/And sugary juice boxes
/Because this is the only food dropped off in food bank boxes, it's toxic.
/And it makes 'em sick; it messes with their heart boxes,
/Like breathing without oxygen, and it stops them from doing so well on the test
/Where they fill in the boxes so they can be labeled and put in the right boxes
/And evicted from the classrooms to resource room boxes

/That prepare them from getting locked up.
/This poor life, it's like shadowboxing
/And problems keep popping up like a jack in the box
/So, too many men faced with disappointment end up boxing
/With their girlfriends' faces.
/And there are not enough boxes in the rat race to fill the limited positions
/They fit us in like jocks,
/Who can box their way out of poverty,
/Or by hitting homeruns from the batting box,
/Or beat boxing to get a record deal
/To release a box set to play on those speaker boxes.
/And the deal is, the schools don't lay the building blocks for us
/To build with each other on the block,
/And there is no political soapbox,
/Or our faces in the press box,
/And most of those who are voted in the battle box shake their heads and say
/Those are the brakes, so go to work on that loading deck stacking boxes,
/Or in that drive-thru box,
/Or that supermarket cash box,
/Or clean some big box store where they lock you in after hours,
/And clock your bathroom breaks
/And with that wage, you can't make payment
/So you end up on the pavement with your home stacked high in cardboard boxes.
/They say that in a fiery crash the only thing left intact is the

/Black box from the cockpit but our families are not so indestructible
/And our hearts break when our lives collapse,
/Like in this stock market crash where our jobs are the first to hit
/Like how most of our jobs have been lost to boxes.
/Like ATM boxes and robots with brace brains made of wire boxes
/And you even get a voice recorded into a box when you call emergency,
/And some box-shaped man, behind a box-shaped computer monitor
/Ticks off the boxes to monitor our taxes
/And when there's an absence it sends a man with a toolbox to cut off the fuse box.
/These economic shocks, they're obvious on the sidewalks of our urban projects,
/Littered with cigarette boxes where even the busses don't stop
/In neighbourhoods with no sound boxes to play in.
/They even cut off the public phone boxes,
/The cab drivers sit behind bulletproof boxes
/With guns in their glove boxes
/And refuse to drop you off unless you live in a house with that picket fence
/And mailbox where life is not like a box of chocolates.
/It's more like Pandora's Box, except that there's no hope within
/For victims of a criminal justice,
/An education system designed to stop us from thinking outside of the box
/Because one-by-one, they are putting us into boxes,
/They are boxing us up, boxing us out, and boxing us in.

Thank you. So I'll say a couple of things about that. First is I messed up but I just kept going. I was gonna do a re-take, but just so you can see like, it's not always going to be perfect. Plus, my hair was like stuck to my lip gloss and I had to push it out of my face. But like, that's life. So I

was gonna be like, oh, maybe you should re-take it like I was like, welfare, but that's the thing. When you're performing like, you gotta keep it going. So don't worry about little hiccups, don't worry about it being perfect, so ... and I'm like sitting, too so I'm like, ah, I don't know what to do. Normally I'm standing. But it wasn't a perfect performance and that's fine is what I'm saying. So I'm actually leaving it instead of re-doing it so that you can see like, it doesn't, you're never gonna be perfect, you don't have to be perfect. It's like getting it out. And like I said, that poem, it goes all together. It's telling a story. But it comes from like Googling boxes. But then if you see like, when you learn it and when you start saying it, so there's rhythm in there so I'm like, these economic shocks, they're obvious on the sidewalks of our urban projects. So that's just written out, these economic shocks are obvious on the sidewalks of urban projects, but when you say it yourself, you put your own kind of voice into it. You know, littered with cigarette boxes where even the buses don't stop, right? So I mean, you're taking something that on the page is flat and that would be read across and it's your rhythm and your gesture and you know, whatever it is, and you have that rhythm, it's your rhythm. You know, you're taking that and putting it into the poem so that something that's just like box, box, box, and that's all that it was was literally being like, penalty box, gift box, shoe box, you know, and then I'm like Reebok, computer boxes. So I mean, I literally just took those and it's not that complicated, but when it's said, because it all comes, it sounds like pretty, like it sounds ooh, you did lots of boxes. But it's really just like one thing, it's actually really simple. So that's what I'm saying is like when you see stuff on stage it can look really ... But that's just kind of putting it together in a way, so I guess that's an example of just sort of starting with an image, like a woman with boxes around her, and then just playing with that, which is also important, just playing with words, having fun with words. You know, like flipping words back and forth, you know, using rhyme if you want to. But you know, that can really kind of be fun, too. Like when you're writing, just, you know, I have a poem that I just like flip everything so I go like, if all this is to fight for the brothers instead of fighting over the brothers. For all the brothers to try to love their own instead of trying to own love. And I'm just taking sentences and flipping them around. And that's all it is. And that will get like people into what you're doing. But so like, have fun with language and enjoy language, have fun. The way you talk, your accent, if you have one, but everyone has an accent, you just don't know sometimes. Your personal rhythm, your personal gestures, all of that is what's going to give the poem life and shape, so yeah, I mean, you can tell all kinds of stories whether it's your personal story, you can tell stories about what you actually, what you've been through in first person, you can tell stories about what's around you, you can tell stories, yeah, like about the news, you can tell stories from your culture, you can re-tell stories. You can tell, like, I have poems about my grandmother. You know, I also have poems about like the prison system. It doesn't matter. I have poems about like stupid poems about taking, not stupid, I mean, but like poems about taking the ferry, you know? You can write poems to your friends, just like naming them and what they do and the places you like to go. And what you like to do, all of those are stories. So you know, that is just finding a way to tell that story and just trusting the way that story is. So like I said, like that poem, it's telling a story but just really through one word. Like, I don't usually reveal that I Googled it, but there you go.

>>[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]