

## KEITH GILYARD

MAN: Keith is here. Keith Gilyard, poet, professor at Penn State, and he's your teacher now. [Cheers and applause]

GILYARD: [Chuckles] Hello. How you folks doing?

STUDENTS: Good.

GILYARD: All right, who are you? You've got to give me a couple of names or something.

STUDENT: I'm Kimberly.

GILYARD: Kimberly.

STUDENT: I'm Roxanne.

GILYARD: Roxanne.

STUDENT: I'm Felicia.

GILYARD: Okay, good. You've been talking about poetry. I'm going to read you a poem. I think you were talking about this a little bit, too. It's called "The Hatmaker." It's a tribute poem. It's a tribute to my mother, and it's kind of long. I don't always write poems this long, but it's kind of long, but it's trying to illustrate some of the stuff that Alfredo was talking about out here. Trying to pick up on some of the sights and sounds and try to work that. I think that's important, to pick up on sights and sounds and sometimes even smells and try to work that into a poem to make it more convincing. "The Hatmaker." "One cold, cold metal snake down. "A" snake, "E" snake, "F" snake. Cold metal subway down to the district to make hats. Fingers flipping through felt, rifling through ribbon, penny sequins, meshed feathers, hard, tight straw. Didn't matter what style. Hats in 1947. Dark-eyed, dark-faced mama swept north of Georgia or New Hope, swept up to New York, New York, harbor of hope. Swept to this big puzzle town, this half-lit, skyscraper town. This dazzling dark mixed town. This dazzling dull mixed town. This big Rubik's Cube town. Swept north, brown Georgia girl, fingers molding material into hats to sit atop empty heads of ladies who could never have her grace. Hats since 1947. Hats since 1947. Didn't matter what style. She didn't wear much nohow..."

WOMAN: I think "The Hatmaker" represents the theme of the blues, of

despair and struggle.

GILYARD: "Do overtime, didn't matter what style..."

WOMAN: If you read it aloud, you can appreciate the music. The rifts, the refrains, as in the blues.

GILYARD: "Trying to beat this big puzzle town. Beat this big 1947 Jackie Robinson town. Hats since Jackie was rookie of the year. Hats to see the black comet lose his, but not his head..."

WOMAN: And I think that that's something that you can use as a way to engage students. Like what are the struggles of people you see around you? What words in this poem convey that there's an emotional burden that his mother had to carry?

GILYARD: Hats get heavy since '47. Hundreds of thousands of hats get real heavy since '47. Keeping four children in hats gets real heavy. Children get heavy, especially that son-on-the-run-hard-headed boy, that do-it-his-way-boy, that in-one-ear-out-the-other, pants-leg-ripping, too-hard-on-shoes boy..."

GREENE: So I think Keith's poems are reflections on what it was like growing up. His poems are a product of his environment and remembering those writers who came out of the '60s and the Black Arts Movement.

GILYARD: "He wore her pride as his main skimmer in this town. He wore his mother as answer in this big puzzle town. Wears her even now on this cold bitter night in this cold metal town. This big-puzzle-cold-metalsnake-metalmachine-madson-of-a-hatmaker's town. This son-of-a-hatmaker's town." [Applause]

GILYARD: Thank you. Thank you. Okay, are you folks ready to do some poeting? Yes. I'm going to give you a little assignment to get you started. The poem I just read has a lot to do with family, but also it has a lot to do with what's around, like the environment. You heard some of the imagery. It's about the subway, the "A snake," that's like the A Train, right? That kind of stuff. So, it's subway, the city, the skyscrapers. And so I tried to capture in some sense the environment that was around me, because I grew up in New York City. So now, we're out here in the Plaza. This isn't New York City, but it's about the busiest place in Santa Fe this afternoon. I'm going to send you folks around and see if you can capture, capture some of these sounds and sights and sounds and put them in a poem.

I'll talk a little bit about what I think about when I'm writing a poem. A lot of times—I was in a journalism workshop years ago. That's how I first started writing seriously. We had this guy from The New York Times, two reporters, they used to come to a library in my neighborhood every Saturday to work on this newspaper—we put out a newspaper. And so I did a lot of roaming around the neighborhood, looking for stories.

GILYARD: I was trying to give them a sense of how I work as a poet. Like how poems that I write come into being. You know, going back to a journalism background and then also being in tune with a certain musicality, speech rhythm, sounds around me, usually in an urban environment. That was the reason to send them out and to try and actually do that also. To say, okay, this is how you can also operate as a poet. Take advantage, you know, open up the senses, you know, the five senses, and really pay attention to the surrounding environment, and then get it down sort of as a reporter and then begin to talk later about things of shaping particular perspective and so on and so forth. And so again, you're looking for their engagement in the environment. And so this is sort of how I worked. It was always the engagement, and so that's what I was trying to model.

STUDENT: How's this?

ALFREDO: That's cool. All right, what I really like about this is "the nice brisk wind pushing at me." I mean, "blowing" is one thing, you know, it's just like—"going through my hair" is another thing. Some of those are cliché. But "pushing at me" is really nice. "Melted tortilla chips," that's good stuff. You're hitting all your senses right in there. Perfect. Good job.

GILYARD: Okay, let's see what we have. Do we have some volunteers to read? Who wants to read a little bit? Over here.

STUDENT: Okay. Okay. Mine's really long, so I'm just going to read a part of it. "Green metal bench backs with a wooden seat, sitting outside of the green, green grass that is kept in from running free by red fences."

GILYARD: Poetry is really about discovery. And then kids, they're inquisitive. They are naturally inquisitive. And so that is what I was looking to do. I just wanted to connect with them on that level, too, where they say, "Okay, this is possible. There's a sense of possibility in what he does." Even though there is a remove, of course, of decades in terms of age, they feel that they can do—that is possible for them to do.

STUDENT: I feel the nice brisk wind pushing at me. I smell the tortilla chips melting in the burning sun.

GILYARD: Okay. Very good. I'm hearing, I'm seeing, feeling, tasting. You folks got questions? Oh, we got somebody down here. Earlier we were discussing what we thought your Poemographies meant—about biographies or autobiographies, and geography and photography. I was just wondering what you actually wanted that to mean. Now, I'll tell you, when I first thought of it, it was just like stories, and the concept of the book was stories through poetry. But I hadn't put in the geography and the photography part. You know, I was thinking more like autobiography. But now, after what you said, the next time somebody asks me that, I'm going to have all that other stuff in there too. There's more than that now. Don't tell anybody. I'm flattered that you folks thought of all that. You know, you have—certainly, you have your intention—you have an idea of what you wanted to convey. But language is such that it doesn't nail everything down, you know, so, so perfectly. So there's room for interpretation. Once you interpret it, I mean, responsible for interpretation on some level, but once you interpret it, you have as much ownership over that poetry as I do. How does your cultural background affect your poetry?

GILYARD: My cultural background? How does a cultural background play into poetry? Well, it informs it. I mean, obviously, I can't be anything other than what I am. I came from a certain time and place and culture. Now, not to say that you're shaped by that totally, because then everybody who came from the same background would be doing the same thing, and they would write the same poems. So obviously they don't. But it's a big influence. Being from New York, being African American, having parents from the South, being a first-generation New Yorker, uh, it's like those questions—I saw questions back up at the school on the wall like the "Who am I?" "Who am I? Where do I fit in to the world?" questions. You have all those arrows—the country, then the state of New Mexico, then Santa Fe, the school, and so on. That's true—you're located in time and space relative to all of that, and all of that will have something to do with what you produce, but at the same time, you speak back out to the world, right? There's something you can say that no one else will say quite the same way. So, the cultural background is a big part of it, but it's not the whole thing. Because even as a member of any culture, you're also an individual at the same time. That's the tension, right, in life. You're part of a culture, but you're also an individual. So your poetry is going to reflect—to some extent, it's going to reflect a cultural background or it's going to reflect some decision you have made about your cultural background. It's going to reflect that, and it's also going to reflect you as an individual.