

ABIODUN OYEWOLE

OYEWOLE: *Alafia*.

STUDENTS: *Alafia*.

OYEWOLE: *Alafia* is an expression that means, "peace," and it's a Yoruba expression, and if you were to call me at my house, that's how I would answer my phone. I like to use that expression because that's the language that I'm into, that's the language of my name, and it's got a nice flavor to it, and it means, "peace." And as a matter of fact, I'm sure that all of you are familiar with expression if I give you the entire chant. Have you ever heard this chant before?

♪ *Fanga alafia* ♪

♪ *Ashe, ashe* ♪

WRIGHT-LEWIS: Abiodun Oyewole is one of the original members of The Last Poets. What's special about Dun is that he's made it his life's work to go into the classrooms, into schools, into jails, and to touch as many young people as possible.

OYEWOLE: So now you're all into some poetry now, huh? Yeah? You know, I want to say, I'm really proud of the fact if you're really and truly into poetry, not just for the moment, but for real, I'm extremely proud of that, because we have been living in a world of bastardization of words for some time, where we are not really getting the sacredness out of the word that we deserve, that we need, and poetry is the only sacred language that we've got left. But the fact is that we have a lot of folks who need to express themselves, and poetry is still that language that allows us to tell the truth and at the same time give it some flavor and some spice. So what have you all been talking about? What have you learned about?

STUDENT: In class we made the statement that—I wanted to know if when you said on the subway, did you actually mean on the subway, or was "on the subway" symbolic for a journey?

OYEWOLE: Okay, that's good, because "On the Subway," we meant on the subway, because we used the subway as the metaphor to talk about life, to talk about what was happening with black people throughout our entire existence here. I mean, we have—it's like, a long time ago, a brother named Ralph Ellison wrote a book called "The Invisible Man, and so that's still in existence. That story was about—"The Invisible Man" was about us being here in all of our splendor and our color and our creativity and our

size and our mouths and energy and everything, but you can't see me. You know, I'm still invisible to you.

STUDENT: We were talking about griots, right? Because, as you know, a griot is someone that tells a story or whatever. And I want to know, do you consider yourself a griot?

OYEWOLE: Yes, I'm a griot, in short, yes. And I strive to be a better griot every time I write, because really what the poet really does, what the griot does, he simply just exposes you to things that are there in your face that you just don't recognize. You know, and as poets our job is to take what is a regular day, a normal situation that we've kind of taken for granted, and reshape it and re—actually give it back to the people in a way that they have never looked at it before.

STUDENT: Can you please recite one of your poems for us?

OYEWOLE: Be glad to. I think that doing "Jones Comin' Down" would be appropriate simply because that was a poem that was actually written together, and it was done in freestyle. "Day breaks, got the shakes, joint dripping, mind slipping, body aches, my jones is down on me, got an attitude, fighting bad, feeling sad, funeral sad, another 24 hour drag. I needs me some skag, pawn my brother's do rag to cop me a transparent thin bag, you see, because I'm strung out on that white witch..."

WRIGHT-LEWIS: Years ago I would have been very leery of using "Jones Comin' Down," but the students, they already know what's going on. They see this in the street all the time.

OYEWOLE: Let's do this—I know you guys are poets, and I'm very pleased and proud to share my stuff with you, but it's your turn now. "As I ride on the subway, sitting on the A Train, next stop Notion Ave., I see the same Asian man selling his batteries, trying to make a quick buck, sitting across from the pregnant lady, slapping her screaming child. But I'm here in my zone listening to the Roots and Jill Scott. The car door opens and out steps the evangelist telling me that the way I live my life is wrong and the only way to get salvation is to give her a dollar. Sister, I respect your faith, but I think I'll pass..."

WRIGHT-LEWIS: The spoken word class has accomplished a great deal in this term. They've learned the language, they've learned how to use it, so they've enhanced their vocabularies immensely. They've become real wordsmiths and great orators.

STUDENT: So the rude man with the ruder mouth allows me my peace of mind and heart. I've gotten in the zone. Next stop Hyde Street. Damn, I missed my stop.

OYEWOLE: Oh! [Cheers and applause] That's great, baby. That's excellent! Excellent! Wow. Well, you know, I'd been pre-warned that you all were really poets. I had been pre-warned. Excellent, excellent. That's what poetry is supposed to do. You see, that's—you know, Shakespeare had his poetry for his people and his time, and it was wonderful, and everything you have to say is just as magnificent as whatever Shakespeare had to say. And we need to recognize that our words are worthy. And that's a worthy poem.

STUDENT: "I've been around the world. I visited China yesterday and saw black planes and smoke. I sat with Nelson Mandela in the Cape of Hope. In England I was the one in the back seat of Diana's car. In Jerusalem, Aaliyah was rebirthed into Allah. I spoke of reparations and true colors with Tupac in L.A. Took pictures of Egypt and chat with Somalia in Mali..."

WRIGHT-LEWIS: They've become so conscious! Because of spoken word, they stay on top of the news all the time. They stay on top of everything that's happening. So it's done a great deal for their lives.

STUDENT: "Although some are skeptical and do not believe I've been around the world, I just say, "Hello, my name is Eve."

OYEWOLE: Oh. [Cheers and applause] Excellent, excellent, excellent. I just I know I'm speaking on everything, and I just want to say, of course, right away, the thing that came to my mind was "Ego Tripping" by Nikki Giovanni. And I always try to tell folks, you know, like, some people get knocked out the box when somebody does a poem that's so magnificent and it's just got all this richness in it and all the great metaphors and you can feel it and see it, but those poems should serve as just foundations for others to write other poems, because that subject is so big, and it's not dealt with enough, and we need to recognize that we are everywhere and that those experiences that have come from our ancestors are in us. That's a classic, classic piece. I mean, all of you got some work that's ridiculously great, and it needs to be published, no doubt about it. Your turn.

STUDENT: My poem is called, "My People." "My people, when are we

going to realize that our confinement is only caused by our blindness and black-on-black crime stems from a lack of kindness? We've been fighting a battle to which there's no victor now that they've stopped calling our men 'boy' and start using 'Hey, mister.' There is no rite of passage, but yet we haven't the right to pass..."

WRIGHT-LEWIS: As you listen to the children, you see that they're so strong, you know, and powerful and confident in what they're saying. Everyone's always surprised, but you have all these thoughts all your life -- you don't just start thinking when you become an adult.

STUDENT:

"I guess we're that exception to this land of the free. What has this great land ever done for me?" [Cheers and applause]

OYEWOLE: Has Russell Simmons been in touch with y'all to be on "Def Poetry Jam"? God. And you know what, even though I—I know your energy, your energy is like, you're running and you got a machine gun in your mouth, all right, but the fact is, you can slow it down a tad, you can slow it down a tad in the future. Just 'cause, 'cause you know why? Because you're saying so many wealthy things, brother.

STUDENT: This is the one called "Downtown." Like the concept was, you know, God has gone commercial. So it goes —"Get your hands out of my pocket. God has gone downtown. Watching to mix you a profit. Shakes you, salesmen turn into prophets for profit. Teachers is preaching for dollars. God has gone downtown. Bullhorn sounds full of empty quotes and hopes for the second coming of a better paycheck. Peace, God, what's today's mathematics? The wisdom of equality equals the power of knowledge divided by infinity. Damn, I just wanted to walk, not be forced to choose my divinity." [Cheers and applause]

OYEWOLE: You have a wonderful paintbrush in your hand when you are writing poetry, my brother, and that's a special gift. And that's the idea -- poetry is like, you know, you want to always create the image that people can see, touch, taste, smell, or hear, and take us on a journey with that so we can fly. And you do it very, very well.

STUDENT: "Negativity, the lack of creativity and no intensity to reclaim my lost integrity. Negativity, my street brother with his AK-47 and his hot ammunition, unaware of the white man's mental ammunition for his destined destruction. Negativity—didn't our brother Bob Marley tell you to emancipate yourself? But I guess it's so deep in your skin like that beautiful

melanin that makes your skin glisten that you glisten with the stupid slave mentality. Negativity, the lack of sensitivity to destroy and rebuild to restore our lost nation. Negativity—you sitting here thinking about Saddam Hussein when you done lost half your brain to the medicine of the street pharmacist. What is this? I don't know about you, but I elevated out of my state of negativity and took full responsibility of bringing you sincerity about negativity." [Cheers and applause]

OYEWOLE: I just realized what's happening here—you're all old people. [Laughter] Ain't nobody here a child. Y'all ain't no kids. You're ancient spirits come back in the form of a child. I'm so glad that you all have gotten together, because it's very lonely out there if you're talking to kids that are talking that stupid bubble-gum madness all day. You know? No, this is what you're feeling, and I'm digging that, I mean, that's what it's all about. That's beautiful, that's beautiful.

WRIGHT-LEWIS: When Abiodun made the comments at the end, the students got such a kick out of it. For them to have been affirmed by a poet of his stature from way, way back makes them feel like they're nonstoppable now. They don't think they're poets—they *know* they're poets now.