A Lit Fuse Ignites the Word
(response to Riddim an' Resistance: Lillian Allen, Clive Robertson)
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Response to a conversation that took place as a live broadcast online video event on 26 February 2021 as part of the speaker series, *Desire Lines: Mapping the Metadata of Toronto Arts Publishing,* hosted by the AGYU in coordination with Artexte and SpokenWeb.

In the spring of 1987 an article I wrote about dub poetry and Canadian reggae occupied two pages of *Fuse* magazine. I was back in Toronto then, the city where I graduated university, attempting to ignite my passion for journalism. Just thirteen months earlier I was departing Kingston, Jamaica, where I lived for six years and where, two decades before that, I came of age. A careless portrayal of my second tour of duty in that Caribbean nation, the land of my parents' birth, would be to describe it as a vacation: I loved how the sea-breeze soothed the searing heat of year-round summer, adored excursions to white-sand beaches, cherished the reggae festivals, poetry recitals, community theatre, and jazz concerts. Those tourist images are just one thread in my Jamaica experience. There was also the organized chaos produced by a byzantine government bureaucracy; the nagging possibility of gang warfare in certain communities; the ingenious survival of the poor; and the pretentious Jamaican upper middle-class with their polished accents and the way they refer to their maids as helpers. While working a modest 9-to-5 at the Ministry of Finance, I was seduced by the library there, allocating so many hours to the study of Jamaican culture that it devoured crucial minutes I should have used for what I was getting paid to do—a situation I managed to make worse by adding to my work day the indulgence of writing bad poetry and composing letters to editors I didn't submit for publication.

Returning to Toronto, my mentality was energized by a collision of disparate inclinations like the reggae, punk-funk ska, boom-bap hip hop, and avant-garde jazz competing for my musical attention. The Marxist-infused Black activism of my youth still attempted to maintain its prominence despite the challenge of an artist-consciousness I was cultivating. It was a new process keen to soak itself in lyrical writing more eclectic than dogmatic yet still progressive. Neither the role of artist nor activist could pay my bills. I became a suit in one of the concrete, glass, and steel office towers in the city's financial district. My developing artist awareness evolved into an insatiable interest in music and cinema, and, more important, the need to write about them in a way that satisfied my history as an activist. But, there I was, a nascent cultural critic and writer swallowed whole by the world of stocks and bonds as they operate within a mutual fund investment.

I discussed my aspirations with poet and recording artist Lillian Allen, someone whose skill in merging her activist and artist personalities remains transcendent. She suggested I consider writing for *Fuse* magazine, an arts periodical unknown to me at the time. I was apprehensive. Allen insisted it would be fine. She was so confident about the positive experience I would encounter that I decided to take the plunge and at least meet with them. Why apprehension? The short answer has to do with how the disease of anti-Black racism that has been ravaging Canada

for centuries can even infect the more progressive, well-meaning spaces. As a Black person seeking an opportunity, I was always hoping to navigate through that. My sense of apprehension wasn't from predicting things wouldn't work out; it was a defence mechanism in case it didn't. The burning desire to begin a writing career and to prove that I had something significant to say were the motivating factors pushing me beyond any anxiety about the prospect of racism.

A longer response requires history and context about Toronto's print media and how it relates to writers of colour. During the 1980s, a few chocolate faces in the staff of the city's mainstream daily newspapers added much needed colour to their reporting and analysis: Philip Mascoll, Hamlin Grange, and, later, literary critic Donna Bailey Nurse were Black writers at the *Toronto Star* crafting sentences sometimes luminous with the experiences of citizens sharing their Caribbean-Canadian heritage. At the beginning of that decade *Fuse* was a new contender in the city's alternative print media universe, an important voice offering a more progressive perspective on the overall life of a diverse city. Though the first issue of *Fuse* arrived in 1980, the magazine found its origins in *Centrefold*, its predecessor which migrated from Calgary to Toronto in 1978. Just a year after *Fuse*'s debut, *Now,* a weekly, became the latest print alternative, one that built a great deal of its reputation by reporting on Toronto's Black culture scene. In comparison to these alternatives, the mainstream papers seemed to be weighted toward a vanilla homogeneity. If visible minority writers desired to craft articles about the city's people who looked like them, it is reasonable to assume that the alternative press, highlighting the city's racial and sexual minorities, would be a better choice. That assumption deserves interrogation.

The chatter in the ether during *Now*'s early years suggested its owners were keen that it be a local version of New York City's alternative weekly *The Village Voice*, a newspaper profoundly popular in Toronto with devoted fans across the racial spectrum. In 1981, the *Voice* was a 26- year-old young adult on the cusp of a golden era for the sometimes hip, sometimes funky, always erudite analysis of several Black writers, many of them regular contributors. They included: Thulani Davis, Lisa Jones, Joan Morgan, Greg Tate, Stanley Crouch, and Nelson George. That was one reason for the *Voice*'s appeal in Toronto. As a writer, what excited me about the *Voice* is described by Greg Tate in "License to Ill," an article he wrote in that paper about the Black writers there. The title of that piece is hip hop speak, which Tate interprets as those writers being given a license to be beautiful and black not just in their point of view but in how they used language. That's what was attractive about his writing and that of Jones and the others. Those kinds of voices (pun intended) did exist here in Toronto but not at *Now*, which for several years was without a regularly appearing Black contributor. Then in 1988, Cameron Bailey (now Artistic Director and Co-Head at the Toronto International Film Festival) became one of its regular film critics. Eventually, there came a revolving door of Black writers, Marva Jackson and Dalton Higgins among them. Matt Galloway (now host of CBC radio's *The Current*) arrived in the late nineties enjoying a longer-term engagement and, after another block of years, Addi 'Mindbender' Stewart experienced a similar tenure.

The approach of *Fuse* was different. It defied the practise of the slow, indefinite drip, drip, drip of Black contributors, instead deciding to welcome an explosion of them. As if that wasn't enough, *Fuse* allowed them significant latitude in what they could submit for publication. *Fuse*'s first Black columnist was the esteemed Norman 'Otis' Richmond who began writing for the magazine in its debut year of 1980. Throughout that decade and

beyond, there is an impressive group of talented Black writers whose work is presented in its pages: Dionne Brand, Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Marva Jackson, Richmond, Richard Fung (a Trinidadian of Chinese heritage), Clifton Joseph, Cameron Bailey (before his time at *Now*), and Rinaldo Walcott.

Any discussion about Black writers in Toronto must consider the dynamic history of the Black press and how it is a crucial piece of the larger alternative media puzzle. In the early eighties, *Contrast*, a weekly newspaper, *Spear, a* monthly—"Canada's Truth and Soul" magazine—and *Share*, another weekly, already animated the alternative terrain. *Contrast* and *Spear* began publishing a decade earlier while *Share* was a more recent arrival. They were ground zero for Black writers, as significant environments where young people of African ancestry eager to develop their craft could kick-start a life in journalism. Dionne Brand, the acclaimed Trinidadian-Canadian poet, novelist, and non-fiction writer, had some of her early work published in *Spear* when she was a teenager. Hamlin Grange was an editor at *Contrast* before his time with the *Toronto Star*. The *Star* also hired Ashante Infantry and Royson James, both "graduates" of the Black press. *Contrast* and *Spear* suffered a premature death during the late eighties, a tragedy killing two institutions where writers of colour could acquire practical training. *Share* and a battalion of new Black or Caribbean-Canadian community papers moved in to fill the void.

There is a critique that, over time, this particular segment of the Black press had become too parochial, too reliant on Caribbean-based news agencies for stories. That the weight of their reporting on the Caribbean should shift more toward its diasporic communities in Toronto. That its writing was in decline. That its layout and design left much to be desired and, more damning: that they didn't cater to a younger generation of readers. *Word*, "Toronto's urban culture" magazine introduced itself to the media landscape in 1992 as a new kind of Black periodical with a fresh take. Its editors secured the work of many of the city's best Black writers. Its layout and design were ground-breaking when compared to the community's newspapers. And its stories were compelling to a younger demographic, striking a better balance between perspectives on the Caribbean and the wider African diaspora, with careful attention to Canadians with African and Caribbean backgrounds. *Word*, with its focus on Black culture and owned by Phil Vassell and Donna McCurvin, a Jamaican-Canadian couple, was clearly a new and exciting example of the Black press. With its use of non-Black writers and its greater focus on the city, *Word* occupied a position on the spectrum of alternative media that was distinct from the attempts at multi-cultural engagement by their white counterparts.

Word's split-personality nature didn't change its relationship to advertising dollars. The persistent poverty experienced by much of the Black press was inspired by the discriminatory practices of businesses more willing to advertise with the white-owned alternative press: a policy condemning newspapers and magazines emerging out of the Black community into a corner where they have little or no money to pay their journalists. The ability of Black writers to earn even a small consistent payment was rare, if not non-existent. Unless an individual engaged in writing as a hobby or as young un-paid intern, they very often craved increased remuneration in addition to the desire to reach a different, more varied readership and an ambition to have many more eyes scanning their work. That's why the prospect of writing for a mainstream or alternative periodical with deeper pockets and a wider audience was very appealing.

I was among the stellar group of writers who penned articles for the *Word*. But five years before the arrival of its first issue, on a day of good fortune in the winter of 1987, I met Lillian Allen at the offices of *Fuse* near the intersection of Queen and Bathurst. She introduced me to Clive Robertson, one of its founders. I remember that his comments and his attitude were warm and welcoming. I remember it wasn't a conventional interview. I also recall he mentioned to me in that first meeting that he really admired the outstanding writing of NourbeSe Philip. At the time, Philip's children and my son attended the same grade school. So, I would see her there from time to time. I'm sure we acknowledged we both wrote for *Fuse.* After a brief but substantial discussion Robertson introduced me to Isobel Harry, the editor assigned to me.

I wrote the previously mentioned piece on dub poetry. Then I submitted a critical evaluation of famine relief charity projects like Live Aid while highlighting a very different Jamaican one involving a reggae album recorded to raise money for Ethiopia's food crisis. A third article discussed Caribbean-Canadian theatre. Harry, also a skilled writer and gifted photographer, displayed a patience with me that, in hindsight, I was probably testing with my neophyte attitude. I recall the intent of Harry's editorial style was to serve what I wanted to convey. She wasn't trying to insert a white perspective or confuse stereotype with reality. Her approach, I suspect, was born out of her work as a journalist covering reggae in Jamaica and Toronto and as a publicist for Truths and Rights, a Black reggae band. I also wrote for a variety of non-mainstream newspapers, some of them examples of the Black press. I can't say that any of those experiences were bad, most were quite positive, but I confess that if I was looking for an extra source of income I would have been disappointed.

I think it's possible to explain relations among many of the city's Black writers, then, as one of a loose-knit family whose paths would intersect every so often. Like all families, the expected prickly or even contentious sibling rivalries sometimes prevailed. This meditation provides a snap-shot of a particular moment in the journey of Toronto's family of Black writers as they negotiate what might as well have been the war zones of the print media. It isn't about issuing an indictment of any magazine or newspaper. It's an attempt to convey how the expedition of those writers was so very different from the one travelled by their white equivalents as to be a completely distinct burden.

Fuse was an important vehicle in that odyssey, providing some Black writers with the opportunity and agency to showcase their craft. I experienced a measure of satisfaction seeing my work in the loving embrace of *Fuse*'s compelling layout. The ribbon bow on that sense of joy occurred one day while I was riding the subway in downtown Toronto when I happened to run into Dionne Brand. We were acquainted with each other as university students participating in different youth programs at the Harriet Tubman Youth Centre on Robina Avenue off St. Clair West and as young adults engaged in community activism. In the brief time we shared on the train that day she mentioned that she noticed my writing in *Fuse*. She conveyed her pleasure that another one of us was there. I felt a connection then to a clan of Black writers because of her use of the inclusive "us," because it was being said by someone that even back then I was very much aware was a special talent. I knew too that was true of Lillian Allen whose generosity provided the initial link with *Fuse*. I felt a sense of validation and confidence from those interactions with Lillian, Dionne and all the other Black artists and writers I knew during that time. They were inspiring examples of possibility.

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Klive Walker is a Jamaican-Canadian author, music historian and cultural critic. His writing is not confined to music, he discusses photography and is an analyst of international cinema with a focus on Caribbean films from the region and the diaspora. His book *Dubwise: Reasoning from the Reggae Underground* was published by Insomniac Press in 2005. His essay "The Journey of Reggae in Canada" appears in *The Global Reggae Reader* edited by Carolyn Cooper (UWI Press, 2012). His "reggae timeline" is showcased in Nadia Hohn's children's book *Music* (Rubicon, 2015). The book *Ears, Eyes, Voice: Black Canadian Photojournalists 1970s–1990s* (BAND, 2019) features his essay "Essential Thermometer." He's written several articles for the CBC Music website and contributed his essay "How the Harder They Come Created Jamaican Cinema" (2017) to the *Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) Review*. He was born in the UK where he attended grade school moved to Jamaica for his high-school education and migrated to Toronto to attend university. After a second adventure in Jamaica he returned to Canada where he now lives and works.