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On Writing While Being a Black Woman in Canada

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Panel: The Calling: Writing with Responsibility

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El JONES

On Writing While Being a Black Woman in Canada

The great activist Rocky Jones, whose name is unknown outside of Nova Scotia, who died of a heart attack after years where they burned down his home and tapped his phone, who was on the CSIS watch list, and who sat in the front rows at my first poetry shows throwing up a fist, who died jobless and broke, tells me you young people give me hope, but sometimes I don't know how they haven't shot you in the head.

He meant never forget, they want us dead. It's just these days they'll do it slow. In Canada they won't jail you or throw you into exile, if you talk or think Black they'll smile, even tell you you're brilliant while they're twisting the knife.

When you ask my poet friend Keisha how she's doing she says, I'm alive, and that's a good day because we're not even supposed to exist. Think about our ancestors jumping from the cliffs. Think about the bulldozers in Africville. Let everything we write come back to that fact.

Like most of the Black women spoken word artists I know, she quit. It's just at some point you have to decide, am I telling my story or just bleeding out my life. I say, maybe when we're trying to be human just writing is enough, and Ntombi quotes Drake, motherfuckers never loved us.

I'm writing for my grandmother who never held a mic, for my nameless great grandmothers on the slave ships who had language ripped from their throats. I quote Toni Cade Bambara. Make revolution irresistible. Du Bois says I don't give a damn for any art that isn't propaganda. That isn't black and political, and I say yes, this shit is urgent, like we're in the emergency room so either get out or be a surgeon.

I'm at a poetry festival with "emerging" spoken word artists paired with literary writers and after I read a Governor General award winning poet gets up and says I'm going to change the atmosphere and do something...quieter. And into the pause my friend says racist bitch.

We can't forget they don't want us to exist. It begins with being silenced.

The guys in prison write a poem saying if they were free and had money they'd give it to me to keep me from hurting, and I think, that love right there, it has to be enough to make it worth it.

My friend texts me, what are you up to of late, and I say I'm in the States, and he says I thought nothing would get you to relocate out of Halifax, and I sigh you know white people smile in your face while they stab you in the back, and he says tell them about their invisible brothers and sisters caught in the cold of

Canada's erasure of Blackness. When we're not supposed to exist I guess that poetry is like practice in being. Or maybe escaping.

I identify myself not as a writer who happens to be Black, but as a Black women who happens to be a writer. I say on a panel I don't even like literature but I like people's stories, and someone says that seems pretty hardcore, and I say, well sure, I like the youth down at the studio, I like the inmates that call the radio show and read poems with us, that has meaning, but then people say I tried to listen but there's so much bad language sometimes and I think it's obscene, and I practically scream, I think it's obscene that we still put mentally ill people in solitary confinement, and you're worried about words? If we want to be in the struggle, people come first.

But I once wrote one thing that could have saved somebody's life. They were facing 10-25, I wrote a letter to the judge saying he found poetry inside. So I've seen poetry keep people alive, it's just sometimes I despise our affectation, like a third of the men in my community can't even read or write, we're getting displaced and profiled, Indigenous women are murdered and vanished, it just gets on my nerves when we extol the virtue of words on panels, while out in the street my people are treated like animals. I've sat in lectures and readings by Black authors where everyone in the audience is white. Is our writing really ever political when most of our people are outside?

Sometimes we get together and laugh when we recollect. Remember when they tried to arrest me at Dal, remember when you got death threats, hey remember when they banned you. And every time it happens they say, well, what did you expect.

They might respect our writing but not what we represent. It's the arms of my community that lifts and protects me, holds me up onto stages, and the women around me say well maybe just because it's dangerous doesn't mean you have to say it, and I say I don't have anything left I can't betray myself too, and they say just maybe there's another way to be courageous, you don't always have to fall on your sword and I quote Audre Lorde at them and then we talk about how none of us can pay the rent and our communities are being gentrified out of existence, and even as I speak Deb is getting evicted, and there's bruises on our wrists and faces, and we say, never forget they have a noose around our throat, our bodies, our words, our lives, they're inherently resistance.

But D. calls me from prison and says let me hear what you do, so I kick Zoos for him and say they nearly killed me for that in Calgary, 3 Black guys had to escort me back to my position and he says damn girl, you gotta do a poem for me every day let me call the rest of these brothers over to listen, and they all crowd in whispering, and I think ok maybe this poetry thing makes a difference. I kicked Malcolm X over a prison phone once and that was dope, I'm just not down for any writing that don't give my people hope. Or more importantly, purpose. Just let's not call our shit political if we never scratch the surface.