

## **Episode 1: Chrystos interviews Lillian Allen at Wisdom Council**

### **Introduction by Trynne Delaney**

Hello and welcome to TIA House Talks, The Insurgent Architects' House for Creative Writing Podcast series. Today, we present an interview by Chrystos of Lillian Allen. My name is Trynne Delaney and I am a research assistant for the TIA House project at the University of Calgary.

TIA House is honoured to be podcasting to you from Treaty 7 Territory. We specifically acknowledge the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation (comprising the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). We acknowledge also the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

This interview was recorded during a TIA House symposium called Wisdom Council in September 2019. Wisdom Council brought together a small council of senior practitioners in the arts, who are mostly Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, to sit in council over three days to discuss such topics as what our communities need now; memory and forgetting; care of elders in racialized communities; community formations they've experienced; and practices and strategies that might be of use or interest in the present moment. This interview was recorded as part of the gathering's work.

**Chrystos** (from poetry foundation) Menominee poet and activist Chrystos was born in San Francisco. In her work, she examines themes of feminism, social justice, and Native rights... She is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Not Vanishing* (1988), *Dream On* (1991), and *Fire Power* (1995)...Chrystos's work has been featured in the anthologies *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa) and *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology* (1988, edited by Will Roscoe). With Tristan Taormino, she coedited the anthology *Best Lesbian Erotica* 1999 (1999).

**Lillian Allen** (from her website) Lillian Allen is a professor of creative writing at Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD)... Multi-disciplinary and experimental, Allen's creativity crosses many genres including radio, theatre, music and film; as a writer, featured artist and producer/director and national radio show host... Allen is a recognized authority

and activist on issues of diversity in culture, cultural equity, cross cultural collaborations, and the power of arts in education and has worked, locally, nationally and internationally in this capacity. Her eclectic, insightful and inspiring lectures and performances have taken her as far as Jamaica and Switzerland. She has also held the post of distinguished Writer-in-Residence at Canada's Queen's University and University of Windsor.

In this episode Chrystos interviews Lillian about what brings Lillian joy, alternate and biological families, how loving students for who they are is at the core of her teaching philosophy, the problems with seeking approval in creativity, moving from the political to the spiritual, and working in the institutional structure of the university.

**[intro music]**

### **Interview Begins**

**Chrystos (C):** So... I would like to say how wonderful it has been to be in your... beautiful presence. And, ask you the question that I came up with before, which is: what gives you joy.

**Lillian (L):** hmmm. Well, let me say, it is such an honour (laughs) and such a joy, to connect with you again—

**C:** Yeah.

**L:** —And to see that you're still engaged and, um, as the panelists said yesterday: still kicking! Like me!

**Both:** (laughing)

**C:** Yes!

**L:** So I'm really happy and it's been such a lovely weekend.

**C:** Yes!

**L:** You know, I overheard you telling somebody: it's the one academic conference you've come to that you've thoroughly enjoyed.

**C:** I liked every moment.

**L:** Yeah, there's definitely something we were all moving towards, clarity, supporting each other, the challenges were respectful, and so forth...

**C:** Yeah..

**L:** Thanks for reminding us of that. Hmmmm..... What gives me joy, joy joy? Well, a lot of things. So, a lot of things... I can start, forward and go backwards.

**C:** Whichever way.

**L:** I have a granddaughter (laughs), and I look at my, and I'm like: oh, that's my deity! (laughs) and we're very close, and I was there at her birth and everything.

**C:** Oh!

**L:** Yeah, and I spend quite a bit of time with her. And just that exuberance and that life and just to watch the changes as she does things and learns things and tries and find her way in the world, it is like... there's nothing more joyous than that. It's, like, so beautiful to have that gift, right? It makes you wonder why would anybody want to create wars? Or hurt other people or children, right? They must not have experienced that kind of situation.

So, yeah. My daughter, she's, you know, pretty awesome too. You know, had to wrestle a lot in the teenage years, there, but we came through it. Because the one thing is always stay in contact. So, it's not gonna go your way, gotta give that up, it's a sign of maturity, but be there, and love being there.

So, those interconnections, I have some real nice people in my life. I have my own family and I have my alternate family that I built. And that is really great. Doing my work has been a gift, writing my work, doing my work, and getting the kind of responses that I've gotten,

having the kind of impact that I've had, it's... nobody sets out to kind of say "I'm gonna do this" or "I'm gonna do that" or if they do, it's not achievable because it's not a formula, right?

**C:** Right.

**L:** It's something you do. I was doing my work, like you, because it's important, yeah, at one point it's to survive, and at another point it's to keep the mental health in check, you know, and then it gets into some of the loftier things that the PhD students write about, right? (laughing) Oh man, I'm like "wow, I'm so smart!"

(Both laughing)

But, having that voice and you know, knowing (muffled) oh you know it's so cliché to have voice... no it's not. Voice is so important if you understand voice as being distinct and unique.

**C:** Yeah, it's absolutely, I mean, in some ways I would say the voice is the soul because no one's voice is alike. And a lot of times when I'm thinking about someone who's died I can't remember how they sound, and that's so stressful, right? (Lillian agrees) because you want to hear that particular laugh, or that way that they would say something like "peas" you know, or... (Lillian agrees) the voice is, is, really is the soul.

**L:** It is the soul. It is the soul. Yeah, and to be gifted with that... I tell my students, no matter how large you are or small you are, when you have a voice it makes it wholer, and bigger and better and everything. Yeah.

So, I work with my students, right, and that is a particular kind of joy, right? To be able to feel important, right because you're on this earth and so many people, so many... I go in the library and look at all the books and I'm like "oh my god! There's so many books!" (laughing) you know what I mean! So, you know, how do you distinguish yourself, and without a public kind of accolade, because we get used to that. You know, We get used to that, you know the public has to say accolades for you to think it's important. But, to be able to work with these students and to see to their transsumation and to cure them back to self is a particular joy.

**C:** Hmm... (agrees)

**L:** At the end of each term I, and sometimes for term in, I say “thank you for letting me be your teacher” right, and they’re very surprised and they’re “thank you for... I should say that!” and I say “no, thank you,” because not only are they teaching you, but they’re allowing you to grow in your teaching and in yourself, and, so, I love doing that. And for the most part, not all the time, I can’t wait to get to class. To engage and be surprised, and, you know, be challenged, you know, around my own ideas.

**C:** Well, you said, uh, carry them back to themselves?

**L:** Yeah.

**C:** That’s a wonderful phrase. How do you do that?

**L:** Well, first of all, the whole school system and the whole way you move in society, is to go up the echelon, is to take you away from yourself and community. Right? So, when I’m working with students... and I’ll illustrate this by: a young teacher asks me to mentor her in what she said “what is it important?” You know? “Help me how to teach.” And I said “what is the most important thing do you want in life?” Right? And she thought away, and I said, “no joke here, don’t be putting on” and she said to me “to be loved” and I said “That’s what they want! Just love ‘em!” (laughing) the bad ones, the ones who you know, even though where they’re coming from, the ones who confuse you, the ones who might be rude, love ‘em! Just unconditional love. Just get to their core, and just like, their behaviour, their actions if you don’t like that that’s a different story, but just make sure they understand that you value them and you value what they do, what they think, how they carry themselves in the world, and that you think they’re important, and you’re glad that they’re alive and that they’re here in this space with you. I said “you do that, the teachings is a cinch after that.”

And, so, when you do that you bring them back to themselves, because somewhere along the line, and without exception, all the people I’ve encountered in my own experience, somebody somewhere or some experience have taken them away from themselves and made them feel less, made them feel they are not worthy, what they do isn’t good, and whatever... and, I’m saying that you know, first of all, should not have happened, and um, if that, when that happened to you, that happened, people should apologize, for the most part, if they were decent people they wouldn’t want that effect to have the bad effect it’s having on

you now. And apologize. And I apologize on their behalf. And I say you can create yourself and you don't have to be "I can't do this, this isn't worth it, this is gonna be silly." You do what you do. Nothing great, nothing good ever starts off good in terms of practice. You start off and you learn and you practice and you practice and that's how you become good. So I give them that, you know, and that's what made me. You know, just give a little permission! You know, I can't tell them anything about their lives, they tell me. But if you don't create the space you will never know anything about their history and culture because they're all trying to impress, they're all trying to be what they think is normative thing that will get your approval will be. And sometimes it means hiding who they are. Their sex, you know, their sexuality, you know, their culture, their, um, illiterate grandmother, their speaking 5 languages but stumbling with english and they're conscious and feel little because they can't do english as well as they should. So, I'm like, no! All that is crap, you speak fine. Most people here, and I do that as routine, when somebody is having difficulty with english, I'm like I know right away, "how many languages do you speak?" And they speak at least one other, usually 3 or 4 and I say "class!" how many of you speak more than one language?" and usually, it's those people who are struggling. How many people speak one language and can write it? 95% and I say "look! you speak four and five and you can! You know? Put one of them in your situation and I'm sure they can't do as well in english."

So looking for those things to assure them that we're all human and all these trappings that are put on us, we don't have to carry it. (Chrystos agrees) We don't have to carry it. You know. We don't have to carry it. So, yeah. So... they get real and they get comfortable with being themselves.

**C:** And the real beginning of all writing is being in yourself.

**L:** Yes. Sometimes you have to write back to yourself, right, you have to go through that process of actually finding yourself. Because it is so strong to represent what you think will give you approval. Because in that university setting it's about getting a mark.

**C:** Right, a good grade... I think I was very lucky actually that I never got approval from the nuns or my mother or anybody when I was younger so that by the time I was starting to write seriously, approval was not even, you know, it wasn't even an issue... I was completely uninterested in whether other people approved or not. And I think that that's actually been one of the strengths of my ... writing is that approval was never... I never expected to get

any approval! Right? I mean the shock of selling 20,000 copies of *Not Vanishing* was... I'm still getting over that years and years later, because it was not something that I could even conceive of really.

**L:** I know... and you'd sell 20,000 more right now if you republished it.

**C:** Yeah, we're talking about it.

**L:** Yeah, but the important thing is that's once that voice stepped out that's what it symbolized to other people, you know: I'm not begging for approval... I'm not on my knees here! (both laughing)

**C:** And I don't want you on your knees either... which is the part of it I think that a lot of people have not been able to understand, is that I don't want anybody on their knees. I do not want adoration, you know. If you want to go adore somebody, you know, pick someone else, it's not me!

**L:** So, um, but unfortunately when they're in the classroom situation they have to get a degree and so on, much of it is about approval

**C:** So you have a much harder task. When I do a writing workshop they're not going to get a grade, right, it's just a writing workshop and it's sort of voluntary and there's a lot more... although I think that actually... I think it is very interesting that you talked about approval because I've never thought about that before and I think that a lot of times when people take a writing workshop from me what they really want is for me to like them and be their friend and it has nothing to do with writing, so they never turn writing out, so I'm tearing my hair out, you know, and that's not really actually why they're there... but in a school situation it's more constrained and yeah they feel more like they have to write.

**L:** In general, yeah. I mean, you know, in the new program some people are coming to write and some people really want to write but in school in general you have twelve weeks to get a good grade so you can go on and get a degree, right? And I've put... it's about you, it's about learning and growing and connecting to each other and to the world, so yeah, that makes a difference. But why this approval thing is... it's messed up a lot of people

**C:** I actually think that you might have hit upon, you know, I've always said that greed is what drives the world but I'm wondering if it isn't more the desire for approval... (L agrees) that people do crazy things thinking that it's going to get someone's approval

**L:** ...that's gonna get someone's approval. And why do they want approval? They want love. They want to really be approved, they want to be loved for their core self and they figure that's the way they're gonna get it, right.

**C:** And so few children nowadays have that from their families... it strikes me that a lot of people have children not to love the child but to prove something else, some other, some other agenda, that they're a normal family and being a normal family is more important than the child, right, so

**L:** Absolutely dreadful, yeah... But writing... you know, nobody who is normal writes. (laughs) that's my theory. You know—

**C:** That's actually very comforting because I've always felt very abnormal!

**L:** Everything is great in the world and you're great and everything is good, why write?

**C:** Exactly, if you feel like people are listening to you there's no need to write.

**L:** Right, if you feel you don't have anything to critique or share, or you know... I think people come to writing because it's really important for them to engage the kind of process that they're involved in, that they can figure out who they are and they can figure out a few things about the world and a few things nod at them, and somewhere they can get their own vision and ideas out and... somewhere they can reflect on and kind of make some kind of sense that works for them.

**C:** I often feel like writing is more of a science than it is an art... in the way that those things are traditionally described because when you're writing you are burrowing after what is the the central core of whatever is going on and you're trying to grasp meaning that will help it connect to other parts and you know it is very much a science.

**L:** Yeah, I actually agree with that for that and a lot more reasons too, and that it has been mystified over the years.

**C:** Black turtleneck you're an artist.

(both laughing)

**L:** Yeah, and that in fact it's shaping creativity and giving attention to that creativity and working with the soul in language if it's dance in motion, whatever...

**C:** I feel as though there's been a lot of ways in which art has been hijacked, I guess, and given parameters that are not actually accurate, so for instance, you know, writers drink and you know in order to write well you have to be a drunk, or you know famous artists are drunk and or that you have to be mean, you know, if you're an artist, and there's a lot of junk that is draped on artists that actually has nothing to do with art whatsoever.

**L:** Well, yeah, my inspiration for a writer is Louise Bennett, the Jamaican Storyteller-poet. Right? In the... I went up to her house once when I was young, a teenager, she lived on the hill outside Kingston, Jamaica, in Gordontown, and she lived in a fabulous house. So the notion that there was a starving artist was not part of my DNA or in what I was raised. So, I knew when I when I came up on that I couldn't hold a whole lot I couldn't... I knew that it takes time to get good at something to be recognized and in the meantime as you're apprenticing you need to take care of yourself, and there are certain comforts in the world that I wanted so I took a whole different route in terms of that starving artist business...

**C:** I've never been interested in starving. I did that as a child... been there, done it.

**L:** And then, the thing also is, I realized I had to take care of myself. I left home at 17.

**C:** So did I!

**L:** Yeah

**C:** That's interesting...

**L:** Quick stint in Canada and off to New York and, I was surrounded by family but I did see a lot of things from other people and friends and associates who did not take care of themselves. I had an image of myself that didn't fit into any of those things and it was not contradictory to be a writer or a poet, so I've always figured I have to take care of myself first. Right? So, I've gone that route, so um, I did not see myself as having the luxury of just being a writer and being a writer out there with no response with no connection not doing any work that maybe a patron would fund me or anything like that, it never crossed my mind.

**C:** No, me neither. I always worked throughout my life. And actually ended up working as a maid for probably about 40 years and found that work was actually very useful because as a maid you have a bad back. Your mother's sick. You have to go to California to see about your father, you know... so the expectation of a maid is that she will be unreliable.

So, because I was a maid I could go all over the country and the world on these conferences and all this kind of... read everywhere! Because you know, my back was out, or whatever, and because I was very good at being a maid, they would keep me coming back, so I worked for everyone until they died. The last person that I worked for, that's when I quit, was when he died. But... those years of doing that kind of hard labour... I mean the other thing about it is that when you're cleaning a house you can think. Nobody interrupts you, nobody asked you to answer the phone, you know if it's like your mind can... and there's a couple of my poems that literally have the rhythm of a vacuum cleaner because I wrote them while I was vacuuming! That I had a lot of freedom, I didn't have to dress up, I didn't have to spend a lot of money on clothes and I got paid cash and I got paid well, I got \$25 an hour which was a lot of money in those days, so I actually lived a pretty comfortable life.

**L:** You traveled a lot, yeah, you lived the life that you wanted and you're happy with it.

**C:** And I did regret for a long time not having gone to University because I love teaching and I would love to teach but I don't have a degree, right, so that's not possible in the United States. And, um, but now I don't regret it so much because I like this and half of the conference is everyone complaining about the institution and how this that and the other thing and I sort of spaced out when those discussions happened because it's nothing to do with me right, but the pain that everyone is feeling about that is very real to me. I mean I feel the pain. And how the academic world is frequently... perhaps even more cruel than the corporate world. (L agrees).

**L:** Yeah, that's a good point. Yeah, it's true and it's amazing how people survive it. I used to say I survived by ducking.

**C:** That's a great line.

**L:** And it's true. I survived by ducking and I made a decision that this is where I worked. I actually heard an interview that told the story of Sam [Cooke] and his music—

**C:** I just bought an album of his!

**L:** Yeah?

**C:** And I was listening to it and he was doing some very intuitive things way back when...

**L:** Yeah, well he took off. Well, he's the father of soul, right, soul music. Yeah, well, apparently he was quite embarrassed cuz he's from the church, his dad is the minister but he's out there singing this devil music, so you know the time comes he goes to his dad, says "I'm working the club" and his dad says "Son, that's not your religion, that's your profession. (both laughing)

**C:** Oh, that's great.

**L:** So I go, wow! That's it.

So I realized, in the institution, this is where I go to work, I am not going to make it a war zone. I'm gonna go in every day and I'm gonna do my work and I'll be delighted to meet with my students and when I go to those meetings I stand up and so on and so forth, but for the most part I'm chatting to everybody and whatever because for a period of time it was war. Every time I went in it was war. And I figured no, because I have to come here every day. Because the one thing they were not going to do was drive me out. Because when I discovered the privilege of working in a university and having tenure and all the access to the resources, the prestige in the community, and in a good way...

**C:** The free books they send you.

**L:** They have a little budget for books too. Your access to research money, your invitations all around... I'm like! black folks should know about this! I'm on a mission to encourage anyone I know to go back to grad school and be telling them: if you can teach, you love it, if you really want to make an impact, that's what you should be keeping your sights on. And I'm still doing that now. You know, but no. There's no way they're gonna drive me out. There's other people who have left. People who couldn't stand it. I mean I went through the process of a sessional too to get half time and full time but, um, it was too much for them. But I say no, no no, this gate they have for years and some of my friends, they didn't even tell me about it.... once I figured it out I'm like uh uh...

**C:** Duck! Quack quack.

**L:** So yeah, and I still do my grassroots thing. I made clear in all of the meetings I'm representing the grassroots. I mean if they want to call a referendum to grassroots and vote that's up to them but for right now, I'm representing you! (both laugh). You know what I mean? I'm accountable, you can ask me anything anytime. People send to me: can I have permission to use your work? I say no permission. It's your culture. You just need to give me the proper credit. So that's my stance. Yeah. It's been a struggle, I mean the thing is, you know I used to be the youngest person in the room. At one moment. I look around and oh man I'm the youngest person in the room, right... now I'm the oldest person in the room, more or less. So it's been a long struggle. I think for all that struggling at work, I would say that's about three PhDs.

**C:** At least... or something higher than a PHD.

**L:** But it's good to have stuck it out and I can actually see the transformation and see the impact, right. And to see some of the results, some of the fruits of our labour so that is really satisfying.

**C:** So what are you working on now?

**L:** What am I working on now? My life!!! My life!!! My life!!! Yeah... I'll answer that question for you but I normally don't answer that question. You know, really just have a book at your launch and someone asks you what are you working on now?

**C:** I take it back!

**L:** So, um, but I just am working on my life, because I actually made the switch. I made a switch a number years ago... can't remember when... could've been 15-20... from the political to the spiritual. So before that in the political realm, very political, still political but it's spiritually contextualized.... It was, I'm against something, I'm for something, if you're not with me, you know, you're my enemy, etcetera... and I would even be ready to pick up arms! Right?

But as I sort of got older and contemplated more, I realize we're one organism. Everything, right. And that the spiritual values of compassion should be at the centre of my life. And should be in the centre of everybody's life... but that's for them... but that's what I think. So, my work is more turned to be based on the values of: yes there's some things I'm for or somethings I'm against, but there is a possibility that I can work with the people who are not with me, and even if I can't work with them, and either kind of physically or mentally, I let them be. I still, I figure, respect their core existence, and they will stumble through their path, or as Franz Fanon says, from each generation will discover its mission and will either fulfil or betray it. Not for me to judge, but I feel like I'm fulfilling my mission and I feel like there are a lot of folks who are betraying their mission. I think we can be better. Better human beings, better people, better neighbours, better friends, better lovers, etcetera, and those are the values that I bring and I want some sense of connection with everybody. You know, I figure there's light and there's dark... so yeah and to realize that in some ways that's part of the mix of being alive, right? And our job is to carve out that road of authenticity, of compassion, and so on and so forth, so that's what I think about.

**C:** One of the things I've discovered as I've gone around everywhere speaking is that a lot of the young people think of me as brave, which I don't think of myself as brave. It's a convoluted word. Because of course "brave" is... has another significance in the US... but, when I say that to me, I'm always always puzzled about what it is they're talking about and I finally have figured out what they mean is that: to be authentic is brave. (L agrees) And it took me a long time to figure that out because, as I say, in my early life there was no support but there also was no restrictions, right? I raised myself I'm who I decided I was going to be. And my family found out that I was gay when I was like 19 years old and they were all, you

know, went off on their little things about that but that gave me complete freedom! What was the point of being in the closet or pretending?

**L:** With your family, yeah.

**C:** My family knew, so that's that! So a lot of what seems like bravery to others is actually just my circumstances.

**L:** Yeah.

**C:** It wasn't like I worked hard to become brave. I was just living the life that I had been given. And...

**L:** And yeah, but you did make some decisions and you could have made other decisions and other people did. that's why. You know, you hit it right on the head when you said: being your authentic self because that means you are not waiting for somebody to tell you you're nice or they love you or whatever. You were being yourself and that's revolutionary!

**C:** Yeah, I never thought of that before, of that being revolutionary, but you're right, it is.

**L:** Let's read a poem.

**C:** You first. I don't know what I did.... Did I give you one of these books?

**L:** Or we could make a sound poem.

**C:** I might have one here...

**L:** Read some of your own... we could make a sound poem?

**C:** Ok, that's a good idea, let's do that.

**L:** Ok...

[ L and C make a sound poem. ]

**L&C:** (whisper) freeeeeeeeedooooooooommmmmmm, freeeeedom, freeeeeeeeeeedom,  
free, free, free, free, freeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeedom

**C:** So now I push a button I think...

[voices fade out]

### **Outro by Trynne Delaney**

We hope you enjoyed this interview of Lillian Allen by Chrystos. I'm Trynne Delaney and you're listening to TIA House Talks. The interview you just heard was recorded during the TIA House symposium, Wisdom Council.

We recognize the generous support of the Canada Research Chairs program and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. We also appreciate the support of the Faculty of Arts and the Department of English at the University of Calgary, where our offices are housed, as well as the guidance of Marc Stoeckle at the Taylor Family Digital Library. TIA House is run by Larissa Lai, Trynne Delaney, Rebecca Geleyn, Isabelle Michalski, and Joshua Whitehead.

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