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Barby Asante – Keynote for Rights in Focus.

Saturday 22nd April 2023

Text	Images / Video/ Sounds
<p>To open I want to invite you to take some time to reflect with me.</p> <p>Take a breath, and get yourself comfortable, you can have your eyes open or closed – I have visuals.</p> <p>(when the song finishes)</p> <p>I hold you with my attention With my belief in your beauty And your right to life I hold you as you unravel, undo, and unlearn As you discover that you are not alone That we are interdependent That we owe each other everything And that through our working together Bringing with us our flaws and vulnerabilities Our bad habits and our viciousness We bring this with our love and our desire to be loved The care we share The joy and laughter that we generate And the visions we want to bring into being And you hold me in becoming my very best self Bringing forth my vision of our collective work Expressing our interdependence Our possibility Our incredible force for transformation Despite it all</p> <p>Thank you for reflecting with me as I hold you in my attention.</p>	<p>Video edit from</p> <p><i>To Make Love is to Create Ourselves Over and Over Again: A Soliloquy to Heartbreak</i></p> <p>With song Images Nina Simone</p>
<p>Today I'm going to present some of the ideas and experiences that underpin my practice. A practice that's slippery existence sometimes makes an appearance in various art worlds and contexts, but like many of us here I</p>	<p>Title slide</p> <p><i>This is for Us: On-doing Undoing and How we Endure.</i></p> <p>F.U.B.U</p>

see what I do as much more than serving these micro-worlds – well at least I hope it does.

The video that I played for the reflection was from a work called

To Make Love is to Create Ourselves Over and Over Again: A Soliloquy to Heartbreak

This work was made in 2020 – with a group of black women and non-binary folx

a loose collective of intergenerational artists, writers, curators, psychotherapists, academics, activists, community organisers, healers, Black feminists, abolitionists, revolutionary mothers, queer rabble-rousers, Debbie downers, bringers of pure unadulterated Black joy, keepers of our stories, co-conspirators always in a praxis of Black liberation.

Together in our separate space's I made the invitation to each of them to share with me a recording of them reading Audre Lorde's Poetry is Not a Luxury and a video of them performing an everyday ritual or practice that is the poetry helps them to endure – despite it all.

This work came out of how we attempted to stay connected and stand in love while we watched as the virus disproportionately kill people like us, because of the underlying conditions we have. The conditions that are more that health conditions. The conditions of the afterlives of hundreds of years of enslavement, coloniality, oppression and racism.

The opening song was Images by Nina Simone

This presentation will concentrate on my ongoing work Declaration of Independence but before I tell you more about this, I want to take a moment to reflect on the title of my presentation here today and invite you into another reflection.

The title

This is for Us: On-doing Undoing and How we Endure.

Some of you might notice that underneath I have the initials of a famous 1990's Streetwear brand – FUBU

For Us By Us – a catchy phrase that evokes the idea of “do for we” or doing for we that comes from movements such as the Pan African Movement, The Black Panthers, Black Feminist and Womanist organising and in fact much anti- colonial movement

But how can we “do for we” in the condition that constantly reorganise in such a way that the social order seems to be open to massive societal shifts (as it seemed to do in 2020) but somehow defaults to “normal” very quickly.

I want to invite you into another reflection

The video clip I have just shown you is of my mum. It's from a 30-minute BBC documentary called Just One Day in the Life of Waterloo Station made in 1983.

My sister found this video when we lost our mum at the end of last year.

As the title says it tells the story of a day in the life of Waterloo Station in 1983.

Video of mum in Just One Day

I am haunted by her words “They pour it on us”

They “Pour it on us” is a reference to the mostly white male commuter’s who got drunk and angry when they missed their trains or their trains we’re delayed throwing their drinks on the staff, as if my mum and her colleagues were responsible for this. I didn’t know as a 12-year-old imagining myself and what I would be doing for my future, making clothes, laughing with peers, hoping to grab the attention of potential suitors, recording the top 40 on cassette tape and doing an awful lot of complaining, that my mum was having drinks and insults poured over her to earn money for us. Lest we forget that these were times of explicit racism and sexism.

I remember that I stand on her shoulders and her endurance, is my endure – ance.

“They pour it on us!” rings in my ears at the moment as I think about this time we live in and how to endure this current moment, as more and more injustices come into focus and the prevailing order attempt to use policies and legislations to either assimilate us into the “normal” or attempt to keep us out. Either way our histories and stories are made invisible, appropriated, assimilated, or completely rejected.

For two minutes I would like you to reflect on these questions.

Who Are We Working For?
What Are We Working For?

(prove you belong image)

<p>Who are we working for? What are we working for?</p>	
<p>I want you to hold these thoughts as I continue</p> <p>I've been thinking about this question for some time and have in a way been exploring these in my practice, particularly as I have experienced many "they pour it on us" moments with institutions, not as extreme as my mum's experience, but as the kind of artist that might be able to come in and address a problem, mostly the problem of racism, representation, or diversity – the "pouring" then is making the problem my issue.</p> <p>Since 2018 I have been thinking about who I'm working for and what I am working for through the reflection on 3 questions posed by my friend Dr Karen Salt at the Creating Interference: making art, developing methods, re-imagining histories/memories conference I was part of organising as part of organising at The University of Westminster.</p> <p>In Karen's keynote address to us as a new research network she asked us to reflect on 3 questions</p>	<p>Who Are We Working For? What Are We Working For? (prove you Belong image) With 2 mins Uhuru Sasa</p>
<p>Can we engender new futures from totalising impulses of old frames?</p> <p>And where and how can we hold open the potential that this re-visioning offers as we move, migrate and grapple</p>	<p>(image)</p> <p>Can we engender new futures from totalising impulses of old frames?</p> <p>And where and how can we hold open the potential that this re-</p>

with the many presences, invisibilities and hypervisibilities that meander through our worlds?

What does it mean to do criticality - and remain whole- in unjust space?

Karen presented these questions in relation to Derek Walcott's idea of the twilight as the space in-between the light of day and the dark of night, how the Caribbean is one such space and how the role of the poet/ artist is to navigate such a space.

How do you hold this space of in-betweenness without the ethical urge of bringing together disparate people?

How do we talk about

ownership

accountability

Caring

Be with

Work with

Work through and alongside others

As practice

What is it to live in twilight? –

To consider twilight as a becoming, a stage a space of potentiality?

What that becoming might mean?

What if that becoming never becomes?

visioning offers as we move, migrate and grapple with the many presences, invisibilities and hypervisibilities that meander through our worlds?

What does it mean to do criticality - and remain whole- in unjust space?

Can we release the seduction of becoming?

Karen asks us to think about being in the twilight as a practice/ much like a practice of mindfulness or breathwork is a practice of sitting with thoughts and discomfort in the body and noticing what is there before reacting to it – being with it. It's in the noticing and noticing again and noticing again that the transformation happens.

And we need to find support in that practicing – spaces like this can be that support. When I was recently asked to respond the question what is support in practice? I wrote

Support in practice is the ultimate offering you can give to another person as they unfold and unlearn. It's like being a doula for another's creative energy. Sometimes I have experienced this support myself, when I hadn't recognised that I was too caught up in the grind that burns us all out – and in fact, does not allow us to produce the ideas or creations we really want to bring into the world. In these moments, one of my dear sistas in creativity, life and love reminds me to breathe, reminds me to rest, asks me to take a walk with them. Then, I remember the beautiful reciprocity in the circle of support – that it's not giving and taking but a never-ending flow from the ones that came before to the ones that will come after. We build on the foundations

<p>and prepare the way. We pay it forward and accept that we too will become ancestors. And our legacy will be the work that those who come after us create, which springs from our own work.</p>	
<p>I want to spend a little time with you reflecting on my ongoing project Declaration of Independence and to do this I am going to play some rolling slides from performances and workshops while reading you some extracts from a chapter I recently wrote for a book that comes out in August, <i>Global Black Feminism: Cross Border Collaboration Through an Ethics of Care</i> and a piece I wrote for the <i>Toward The Not Yet: Art as Public Practice</i></p> <p>Saidiya Hartman’s piece for the Feminist Art Coalition, <i>The Plot of Her Undoing</i> (2019), reveals a plan with many beginnings and continuations that impact the lives of Black women. Her text weaves a story of violence and domination steeped in the enduring legacies of slavery, colonialism, and white supremacy. Reading this piece, I heard resonances with <i>Declaration of Independence</i>. When Hartman shifts the focus of the piece from revealing the <i>plot</i> that <i>un-does</i> us to revealing a trajectory for the <i>plots undoing</i>, she is suggesting that it “proceeds by stealth” (5). It is an <i>undoing</i> that “is almost never recognized as anything at all and certainly never as significant” (5) and “is not for your entertainment, even if it is for your benefit” (5) implying that the work of undoing is for those who need these conditions to be <i>undone</i>. This work is not entertainment in so much as although it may seem increasingly visible, like in the ways in which videos of black people being killed by law enforcement have been captured and distributed, or as in <i>Declaration of Independence</i>, I invite Black and womxn of color to share</p>	<p>Slideshow from DOI Ondoing Undoing</p>

their stories and experiences of living in a world where the legacies of coloniality and enslavement continue to color the lives they live. Although this work has been created and performed in public art galleries and international artistic platforms, this work is for us and by us. It is an artwork about the coming together of Black and womxn of colorⁱ to share ourselves and our struggles so that we might “pledge our love” and share our strategies for the *undoing*.

Declaration of Independence strives to *undo* the prevailing injustices of slavery, colonization, and white supremacy veiled unsuccessfully within the discourse around the development of more diverse art spaces, fueled by an increased awareness of injustice and institutional inequity driven by the clarion call for decolonization and abolition.ⁱⁱ

Within the arts organizations and other artistic platforms I have been invited. to present the work in, *Declaration of Independence*, seen as a project that visibly represents the kind of *diversity* and anti-racist position that such spaces wish to present as an antidote to their implication and complicity in these legacies. But *Declaration of Independence*

*...is our process,
it is not about changing others,
but rather an invitation for us to change our relationship to
ourselves, to our communities.
and to the wider world.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Declaration of Independence is a refusal to be complicit. It is an *undoing* of the plot that acknowledges the many *undoings* that have brought me and more than 70 Black and womxn of color, who have taken part in the project since 2017, to where we are today and into those spaces to disrupt.

We are the “*mothers, lovers, sisters, cousins, daughters, comrades, co-conspirators.*”^{iv} Our presence in these spaces is as much about the visibility that these “diversity” initiatives offer as it is about our refusal of the *tokenistic* gesture toward a historical reconciliation. In this performance work, we come together in a powerful and emotive presentation of ourselves, bringing with us our anger, our grief, and our celebration in a ritual circle that is as much a resource for us as it is an artwork.

We are on a Zoom call. We are in separate spaces, in London, Newcastle, North Wales, Aberdeen, Vancouver and Grenada. We listen to Anna Gayle as she guides us in a ceremony of movement and togetherness. We are not together, but we are surprisingly close. To feel our closeness, I draw on the strength of the memories of our foremothers buried deep within my body.

Listening to each other

As we dance in the twilight

Holding each other in our hearts

While we stamp our feet on the warm dark red earth

Bodies making ancient gyrations and repetitions

Listening with our eyes

Our hands

Our hips

Hips calling other hips to respond to the movement of the stars

And the crackle of the fire and the beat of the drum

The holler of her voice and the curve of her waist

All my cells are jumping with the energy of this light

Drawing nourishment from the blood vessels that originated in the mitochondria of my ancestors

Finding my soul,

Finding your soul as we dance

They restricted us,
But like ancient times
We found ways to do it anyway
We found profound ways to be together

Declaration of Independence does not merely function as a spectral opportunity for the mostly white audiences of the arts organizations, in which the work has been presented, to see Black and womxn of color speak their truths. Rather, it is deeply grounded in the idea of forum, community, and circle as a virtual space that is created to hold us together. The circle is not open, and the forum is not open for comments, although during the performance there is an unspoken invitation for other Black and womxn of color to join. Unspoken in that is not explicitly articulated, but the invitation is in the words we speak. This circle is not open in order to protect the space created for us to tell our stories. It is closed so that the audience become witness to our circle process, so they hear us without invalidating or questioning our declaration. The audience is held in our gaze as we speak our words. We are in the position of power. Our circle has been strengthened and fortified by our togetherness and its connection to the work of other womxn who have come before us and previous iterations of the project. The words we write and speak are our living collective narratives, spoken into reality. These words are the words of our ancestors reborn through the documents that are our bodies:

*I speak in the tongues of my mother and my grandmother
and my grandmothers before her
Although I do not know the words
My very being is the evidence of those languages
It is in these words I will speak*

It is in these words that I will create

It is in these words that I will question^v

At the end of each performance, the circle is opened in the way we move toward the audience to invite them to dance with us and join us to celebrate our declaration.

I present this work and these ideas here today as an offering. As a way to think about the ways we attempt to work in conditions that are not entirely conducive to bringing about the changes we want to see in the world. How we work in conditions that don't recognise what they are "pouring on us," the things that we are enduring to show up, and what we are noticing in the twilight space.

Our Ancestors dreamed us

we are here to continue that work of dreaming

And we are here in the process of becoming Ancestors

To borrow words from Karen's daughter Moira Salt who was one of the many who have taken part in Declaration of Independence

Ask me again,

Where

I

Come

From

Everywhere

Yes, I declare

Everywhere

we grow, we bloom,

we abound.^{vi}

So for me the answer to the questions

Who Are We Working For?

<p>What Are We Working For?</p> <p>I'm working to forward the dreams of those who came before and the ones that come after, so that what seems to be wrong with the world does not continue to be "poured" on them. On us.</p> <p>I am the twilight between the light of day and the darkness of night.</p> <p>And as I sit with what is here, noticing the places of discomfort I attempt to transform them, by noticing again and noticing again.</p> <p>In the spirit of closing the circle as we do in Declaration of Independence that I opened with Nina Simone I would like to invite her back into the room and to invite you all, us all to a celebration, to sing with her, large gathering karaoke style.</p>	
	<p>Nina Simone I wish I knew How it feels to be free.</p>

ⁱ This passage is from the opening address of *Declaration of Independence* 2017–2020.

ⁱⁱ Projects and campaigns such as Decolonise this Place, Cancel the Damn Art Galleries, and The White Pube highlight this neoliberalization on an institutional level.

ⁱⁱⁱ Extract from the opening of *Declaration of Independence*, all performances, 2017–2020.

^{iv} I use womxn as a term to bring together the complex representation of all those who are and have been part of *Declaration of Independence* cis women, trans women, genderqueer, non-binary, and femme people. It is not ideal and is a contested term.

^v From *Declaration of Independence*, Feminist Emergency, Birkbeck College, University of London, and Sonic Soundings Venice, 2017.

^{vi} Extract from piece by Moira Salt, *Declaration of Independence*, Brent Biennale, December 2020.