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Karen N Salt

Living and practicing
radical movement within
a limited world

*Feel it get down, right there, though
it keeps on moving, right there, where
difference and givenness are inseparable
in never being one. Its diplopic print
is not marked "before and after" but shows
up as smudge, bend, ecstatic shift,
common and impure.*

Fred Moten¹

Freedom is not a secret. It's a practice.

Alexis Pauline Gumbs²

*Sometimes they stopped and marvelled about
how thoroughly they had replaced the story
that was there before, but usually they
just stayed in the practice and watched
the world transform.*

Alexis Pauline Gumbs³

Laying out the Argument

Fred Moten gets it and breathes life into its presence. Alexis Pauline Gumbs incants it, formulating a world in which fugitivity is less an action than a food – a substance to channel and nurture the soul. What Moten describes in *Stolen Life* as the ‘recidivist fringe’ that will not properly behave,⁴ Gumbs images as a practice of freedom. This is, undoubtedly, a way to exist in spaces of inequity or institutions or ground marked out as inaccessible to demarcated ‘others’. What Moten’s riffing and Gumbs’s breathing alongside the archive suggest is that living, creating and doing in the world requires an active centring – not just strategies of survival, but sustaining practices of beingness – especially within

worlds in which being or even humanity for a range of dispossessed peoples remains questioned or constrained.

These are words and gestures for our struggle and our ever-present fatigue in the face of an intriguing and co-joined set of tethers – demands (not always as forms or practices of inclusivity) and processes (not always articulated as long-term and sustainable solutions to inequity) – that seek to challenge and change structures to enact greater justice, power and equity within and amongst communities.

We can see this enacted, every day, in gatherings, large and small, as individuals struggle with being the only or the first from their community within spaces they feel are fundamentally not designed

for them. They also struggle with the short-termism of various projects and inclusion initiatives that are propagated by a desire for action (even without evidence) rather than a careful critique and analysis of the structural systems that tend to feed these machines.

For many folks, especially those who exist at the sharp edge of these tethers – neither originally invited to the table nor able to (fully) withstand the endless entreaties that offer up a conditional seat at the purported centre of power – life remains precarious. Given the limitations that remain present in the cultural and political institutions that set and protect relations between vast numbers of UK and non-UK citizens, we urgently need a new set of methodological tools that will allow

us to creatively respond to a system that, ultimately, we seek to deconstruct on our way to decolonising its very apparatuses. With all of the challenges of practice that occur within and amidst these histories of accumulation and dispossession (not to mention histories of violence), what does a successful transformation mean for those marginalised in an unjust world?

For Moten, a poet, critic and performer, success is entirely the wrong word. In *Stolen Life*, the middle text of his theoretical trilogy collectively known as *consent not to be a single being*, Moten includes an essay called, *Anassignment Letters*. It is addressed, ostensibly, to the university students taking his courses and to all who are grappling with the study of what Moten and Stefano Harney refer to

as ‘the undercommons’ – those places and secretive traces that dislocate and disrupt normative narratives of disempowerment.⁵ In *Assignment Letters*, Moten inspires his intrepid critical investigators to undertake his course – but more importantly, their entire life journeys – as a radical disavowal and refusal to become that which has been shaped as someone else’s thing. Resistance, Moten intones, comes not just from the utterance of the refusal, but also within its practice and its revisions of a static lifeworld:

*Revision is keeping it open, seeking it again, letting it see, remaining at sea, in passage. Revision is rehearsal, hearing it again, playing it again. Practicing. So let’s share our files, share our objects and some moments of our ongoing, revisionary relations to them.*⁶

Gumbs, an educator, poet, trans-media artist and provost of the *Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind*, tackles these same themes but from an ancestral lineage of black feminist radical thought. Part black feminist griot and part Afro-futurist oracle, Gumbs warns of the cost, at first, of re-visioning, course-work planning and practicing within the community.

Gumbs: ‘at first nobody signed up for the courses’.⁷ Gumbs senses that ‘the challenge’ to dis-(re)-membering grand historical narratives that place marginalised and racialised peoples around the world as significantly less creative, political and even human than people racialised as white, brings with it a more difficult present-absence phase. These new narratives of inclusion insert new perspectives (such as

particular celebrated months of inclusivity) into public spaces, but not in any routine, consistent way. As some programmes of inclusion become standardised practice, marginalised people – even if majority populations within other parts of the world – end up being seen, within specific inclusion activities, but not always heard.

As new opportunities appear within these zones of inclusivity, some folks find themselves welcomed into spaces, but far too many are treated by the system as a kind of hyper-realised copy meant to stand in for otherness of all types. To combat this, initial strategies need to vigilantly guard against becoming the ready token – the synecdoche meant to represent an entire village of difference. Gumbs has an antidote for this and calls for a ritual cleansing of

(re)singing, (re)chanting, (re)embodying, (re)symbolising and (re)making in order to inoculate the body against these false doctrines. This type of processing links with what I have articulated in other settings as the energy, creativity and vitality of 'the curve'.