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**THIS IS HOW I HEAL: RECLAIMING PLEASURE AND SAFETY IN THE BODY AFTER
TRAUMA**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE
OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR OGASIAN

PROFESSOR MACKO

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Content warning: This document contains a photo of my nude body, and my project deals in subject matter with sexual assault. This is a difficult subject, and I encourage readers to take space to process anything that may come up for them in response to this work.

I. Artist Statement

I've used this project as an opportunity to continue my personal healing journey in the wake of a sexual assault a number of years ago, using the guiding question: how do I reclaim pleasure and safety in my body after trauma? My work explores the process of healing through experiences of joy, playfulness, and connection, asserting that pleasurable experiences are possible in the same body that has experienced trauma. My work involves and celebrates the relationships that have supported me in my healing journey.

These tapestries were created in intimate events between myself and one other person, chosen for the depth of trust, support, and love shared between us. At the start of each session, I shared an intention for what I wished to receive, and allowed that to guide the participant as they painted me. In the end, a print was made from the paint on my body, and resulted in the tapestries that ended up being the tangible result of this project.

My biggest hope for this project is that it will help other survivors of sexual assault feel less alone. Statistically, even on the relatively small 5C campuses, there are hundreds of survivors of sexual assault--yet it wasn't until I started talking about this project that I realized I wasn't alone in my experience. I hope this project can help change that by opening up a broader discourse about sexual assault.

II. Background and Process

My artistic process is a winding one. My final project is a result of extensive and varied experimentation. I have always been interested in topics surrounding healing and spirituality, and when the semester began, I was thinking through concepts related to body-based ritual. I gave myself a set of actions to repeat everyday. For example: go outside and feel the earth on my bare feet first thing when I wake up each morning, move through physical spaces in unconventional ways, end each night with a footbath before going to bed. What arose from this experimentation was a greater sense of connection with my physical body, and an awareness that although most daily actions are largely prescribed, there is no inherent reason they need to be. Just because there is a “normal” way to walk from point A to point B, doesn’t mean that I can’t find some other way to navigate that distance. My interest was captivated by what happened when I entered into experiences that did not have an expected outcome.

In this project, the precursor to body painting was body mud-covering. In a moment of inspiration on a riverbank in rural Tennessee, I took great pleasure in covering myself, head to toe, in mud. I found myself delighted by both the physical sensations, but also by the novelty of the experience. There was no reason to do this other than the fact that I thought it sounded fun and exciting. My takeaway from this was that the limits I perceive about the physical experiences available to me are very often self-imposed. Wanting to share with others the joy and self-exploration I found in this mud covering, I turned to body painting.

I first experimented with body paint in a casual group setting. I invited friends to meet me in a park on a sunny afternoon. We chatted, laughed, and painted ourselves and each other--the joy was palpable. At this time, my plan for my thesis was to host a series of these group painting sessions, and observe what arose from them naturally. But then, I had a novel experience that sent me in a different

direction: One evening, I found myself dancing in a room full of people feeling more loved, supported, celebrated and accepted than I had ever felt before--and I was naked. I was struck by how profoundly healing it felt to be witnessed in my bare form, knowing I was not inviting anything with my appearance, that I was loved exactly as I was, and I was safe. It was from this experience that the concept for my final thesis arose.

III. Early Process Photos



Figure 1: mud painting



Figure 2: body paint experimenting with friends



Figure 3: body paint experimenting



Figure 4: first body paint experiment, details



Figure 5: first body paint to tapestry print experiment

The question guiding my thesis became: how do I restore safety and pleasure in my body after trauma? As a survivor of sexual assault, this project is a direct result of my searching for home in my body after that event. I have found an immense amount of healing through playfulness and curiosity--in a way, proving to myself that in the same body that experienced this event, I also have the capacity for these joyful experiences. I have experienced a lot of healing through the process of sharing about and simply being witnessed as I move through the waves brought about by this confusing, painful, complicated experience with the people closest to me, the people who I know have my back no matter what, and who want nothing but pleasure and safety for my body.

For this project, I asked a handful of people in my life to paint my bare body. We then made a print from the paint that they applied to my body. Each of these prints was made as a result of ephemeral one on one experiences with select people in my life. Before they began painting me, I shared with them something I wanted to embody or receive in that moment--clarity, power, adoration, for example--and asked that they use that to inspire and guide their mark making. In these painting sessions, though the fun-loving part of myself desired to paint my counterpart, I intentionally used this as an opportunity to practice receiving attention, care, and energy, without immediately giving it in return. The end result was multiple large, colorful tapestries.



Figure 6: Seen, Accepted, Believed--before the print was made



Figure 7: Celebrated, Adored body paint to tapestry print process (not included in final installation)

IV. Installation Documentation



Figure 8: full installation



Figure 9: Ease, Comfort, Space



Figure 10: Ease, Comfort, Space detail



Figure 11: Steady, Clear, Wild



Figure 12: Steady, Clear, Wild detail



Figure 13: Seen, Accepted, Believed



Figure 14: Seen, Accepted, Believed detail

V. Related Frameworks

Throughout the course of this project, I intentionally centered my own pleasure. Two people whose work has been influential to the way I approach healing, and led me to this prioritization of pleasure, are Tricia Hersey and adrienne maree brown. In 2016 Tricia Hersey founded the Nap Ministry, of which the guiding framework is “rest is resistance.” The Nap Ministry was born out of necessity due to Hersey herself being too drained to function due to living in a patriarchal, late capitalist society as a Black woman. She created environments that encouraged ease, softness, slowness, and began inviting people to collectively nap or rest while she shared words about the power and value of resting, sleeping, dreaming. These events became a performance piece, a conversation between Hersey and the participants. In adrienne maree brown’s book “Pleasure Activism: the Politics of Feeling Good,” brown “explodes the dour myth that changing the world is just another form of work” (brown). In an interview, she explains that pleasure activism is all about “making justice and liberation the most pleasurable experiences we can have. Learning that pleasure gets lost under the weight of oppression, and it is liberatory work to reclaim it” (brown).

Although using slightly different approaches, the overall messages of brown and Hersey’s work are quite similar: that liberation and healing ought to be a process full of as much ease and pleasure as possible--and that that, in and of itself, is an act of resistance. The influence of these concepts on my thesis is most present in what is absent from my work, rather than what is present. I have video, audio and photographs from the body painting sessions that ultimately resulted in the tapestries I displayed for my thesis. I considered including these in the fall opening, but decided not to. That decision came from choosing my own comfort and ease. Additionally, I prioritized joy, play, comfort and pleasure in small and large ways all throughout this process. Joy and playfulness are

nearly guaranteed when using body paint, and comfort and pleasure played a role in the way I curated the environments where the painting happened. I made sure that it was a comfortable temperature, that there was no pressure for the painting to have a particular outcome, and even that both myself and the participant both had our favorite beverages on hand. Both brown and Hersey's work influenced this thought process.

VI. Related Artists

In this project, I am in conversation with a long lineage of movements, artists and activists who came before me. This includes feminist art theory, sexecology art, performance art, endurance art, body art, and earth art. Specific artists include Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stevens, who are leading voices in the world of sexecology art. There are also the pioneering artists of the Feminist art movement, such as Judy Chicago, the Guerilla Girls, Yoko Ono, Judith Bernstein, and many more. Additionally, Ana Mendieta served as a huge inspiration and pioneer in the areas of endurance art, performance art, body art and earth art.

One piece in particular that my project is in conversation with is Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. First performed in 1964, Ono sits motionless on stage, a pair of scissors next to her. The audience has been instructed that one by one, they may come to her on the stage and cut off a piece of her clothing. The performance ends when Ono decides it is time, having no predetermined ending. She reports that some people approached hesitantly while others approached more boldly, and that part of this piece was wanting to see what people would take when they had full permission to. My project does not engage with such a large audience as Ono's, but it does require intimate participation from another individual. Although that other person has been chosen by myself for the depth of trust and care present in our relationship, it still contains an element of stepping into the unknown, of creating with another person something that has no script, and in this way it is related to the exploration inherent to *Cut Piece*.

Additionally, Ana Mendieta's work has served as a huge inspiration for my thesis project--specifically her project *Silueta*, or "Silhouettes." This project consisted of a series of

performances between her body and the earth. To create each work, she made an impression of her body on the earth, and then further documented her presence by outlining with sticks, mud, flowers, gun powder, fire, paint, and even blood. She documented the process through videos, photographs, and sometimes prints. One work in particular, *Untitled*, directly relates to the project I executed for my thesis. Mendieta covered herself in red paint or blood, and then made a print from the material on her body on what appears to be a white sheet.

While much of my process is similar to Mendieta's, the effect of the final product is quite different. The effect of Mendieta's piece is striking, and immediately brings to mind images of violence and bodily harm due to the intense red color. In my work, I hope to incite mental images of care, joy, and play. The colorful and abstract nature of the prints made from the paint on my body are supportive to this goal. They are at times reminiscent of tie dye, or even free form paintings done by a child--both of which have associations of playfulness and exploration. I hope to convey through my work that these supportive, affirming experiences are available to all of us, even in the wake of a traumatic event.

VII. Reflection

As I have started to speak about more openly about sexual assault, I have been surprised by how many of my friends and peers have experienced something similar. For years I didn't tell anyone that I had been assaulted, and I felt painfully alone in my experience--in the confusion, and the pain, and the grief, and the rage--and it was people sharing their stories of similar experiences that offered me a glimmer of hope. It's for this reason that other survivors, both known and unknown, are my most important audience.

Throughout the course of conducting this project, I have come to a deeper understanding of the significance of prioritizing my own desires. I have come to see in a new light the ways in which prioritizing my needs and wants, as a woman in a patriarchal society, is a real and meaningful act of resistance. My biggest takeaway, however, has been about the inadequacies, the lack of nuance, present in the conversations we as a society are having about sexual experiences--both traumatic and otherwise. I hope that this project sparks conversations that help to change this. This project has been of great value for me, and although I do plan to continue with it, it's become clear to me that the place for me to do so is outside of the bounds of academia, as I am not interested in continuing this project in a way that requires me to intellectualize this traumatic experience.

In the time I have been working on this project, I've had conversations with a number of the people I am closest with, telling them that I am in a phase of life where I need more support. This has been new for me, but not as difficult as I thought it might be. It's cliché, but it's also true that the same burden that would crush an individual is able to be held by community with relative ease. As a society, we have a tendency to turn away from discomfort--grief, rage, suffering--we don't know how

to face it, or what to do with it. This project is an example of what can happen when we cultivate relationships of deep care, and when we trust one another with the most tender, aching and raw parts of ourselves. Whether someone has experienced the same kind of trauma as I have or not, there's value in this example.

VIII. Acknowledgements

I would like to extend the deepest and most heartfelt gratitude to the community that has supported me through this process, without which this project would have never come to be. To my thesis readers, Professors Aly Ogasian and Nancy Macko, thank you for believing in this project, for simultaneously trusting my process while also providing invaluable guidance. Thank you to the friends who listened patiently and who held me, both metaphorically and physically, through the emotional rollercoaster that this project took me on. Thank you for seeing me in grief, and rage, and pain, and not turning away. To the people who agreed to this intimate experiment--Kristen, Jack, McKenna, and my sweet mother Rochelle--the space you held for me means more than you could know. Thank you for stepping into the unknown with me. To the Curiosity Bears community: thank you for the gift of being witnessed. You saw me in the fullest, rawest form I have ever taken, and loved me even more for it. To my family, and my parents especially, thank you for the steady flow of love, support, joy and comfort you add to my life. Thank you to the countless sunsets, gurgling streams, and bowls of tea that reminded me again and again of how sacred and magical this life truly is, as I faced moments of deep grief and pain. Thank you to everyone who came before me who spoke out against sexual assault. Your strength and bravery paved the way for me. And to everybody who learned through this project that I am a survivor of sexual assault, looked me in the eyes, and told me they were sorry that had happened to me--thank you. That will never not be healing.

IX. Annotated Bibliography

Ash, Lauren and Ivory, Deun, hosts. “#24: Mindfulness 101 with Neuroscientist, Artist, and Meditation Guide Nkechi Njaka.” Black Girl in Om. 18 July 2017.
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/black-girl-in-om/id1117951237?i=1000390025897>

In this podcast episode, Nkechi Njaka shares about her experience of anxiety being something that exists in the body even more so than in the mind, and that through moving her body, she was often able to alleviate some of the physical sensations of anxiety. She also shares the idea that the body is smarter, in some ways, than the mind. Both of these concepts have been foundational to the way my ideas around healing have developed, which have in turn been core to my thesis project.

Ash, Lauren and Ivory, Deun, hosts. “#44. Loving, Living, Learning: A Liberated Life Talk with Rev. angel Kyodo williams.” Black Girl in Om. 25 July 2019.
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/black-girl-in-om/id1117951237?i=1000442703026>

Two ideas in particular from this conversation with Buddhist priest angel Kyodo williams have stuck with me: “Our resilience actually comes from a willingness to test the places that are in our souls and our hearts that feel broken and unhealed,” and “You can be love and be fierce.” This project has been an experiment in venturing into the places within myself that felt broken and far from healed, and one of the things I have found through that exploration is that there is actually power and real validity in fierceness and anger.

“Ablutions (1972).” *Suzanne Lacy*, www.suzannelacy.com/ablutions/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

I chose this collaborative performance piece because of how deeply it ties into both the subject matter, but also the method, behind my project. The use of different cloth in this project inspired me to think more closely about the type of fabric I used in my own project, and to further consider the different connotations linked to those materials.

brown. *Pleasure Activism : The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, Ca, Ak Press, 2019.

The ideas, frameworks and stories present in this book truly provide the backbone theory to my project. It was this book that gave me permission to actually enjoy, rather than white-knuckle my way through, the healing process.

Hersey, Tricia. “The Nap Ministry.” *The Nap Ministry*, thenapministry.wordpress.com/page/2/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

Tricia Hersey’s Nap Ministry helped me to understand that there is value in ease, that rest is not indulgent but actually a vital aspect of resistance, liberation, and healing. These are ideas I keep coming back to, and lessons I learn over and over again.

MoMA Learning. “MoMA | Yoko Ono. Cut Piece. 1964.” *Moma.org*, 2019, www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/yoko-ono-cut-piece-1964/. Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* helped me think specifically about the role of the audience in a performance piece. Through learning about this project, I was able to imagine myself in different scenarios with an audience, and it ultimately helped me make the decision to keep the performance aspect of my piece private.

“Naked through the Ages.” *Guerrilla Girls*, www.guerrillagirls.com/naked-through-the-ages.

Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

The Guerrilla Girls have influenced and supported my work throughout this thesis project as feminist artists not afraid to draw attention to themselves, or to make a scene to make a point or bring attention to something that really matters, but no one is talking about.

Trotman, Nat. “Untitled: Silueta Series.” *Guggenheim*, 1978, www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5221.

Accessed 3 Nov. 2022.

Ana Mendieta’s *Silueta Series* is a series of performance pieces, many of which were later turned into prints of some kind. Working with nature and the feminine archetype, I see this series as a pioneering work in the similar subject area and method that my thesis project is in.