

“With Anarcha: A Meditative Diary on Personal Healing and Touching History Through Performance Practice”

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In this essay, I explore the personal and political implications of my work with the Anarcha Project. In the Anarcha Project, Petra Kuppers, Anita Gonzalez, Tiye Giraud, Carrie Sandahl and I use performance methodologies to confront the history of medical experimentation conducted on slave women in Montgomery, Alabama in the 1840s. In the performance spaces we have facilitated through residencies in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Davidson, North Carolina; Berkeley, California and Seattle, Washington, we explore the possibilities for responding to social inequalities, marginalized bodies, racialized medical histories, and our individual and collective memories of pain and trauma.

The Anarcha Project additionally queries the structures of power and oppression that impact how history and knowledge get produced and legitimized. My introduction to the Anarcha Project came through a reading of Petra Kuppers’ Anarcha Project essay on the medical experiments of the man known as the father of gynecology, Marion J. Sims, and Betsy, Lucy, and Anarcha (just three of the women whose names can be found in the medical archive) who were subject to Sims’ operative procedures. Herein, I discuss my subsequent experiences with the Anarcha Project as a core collaborator and performer. I consider the personal healing, pedagogical, solidarity building, and social transformative possibilities opened up through performance.

I. Performance Writing

Reading the email description of the Anarcha Project workshop, I knew it would be impossible for me not to be a part of this work, for simply being made aware of Lucy, Betsy and Anarcha’s horror meant that I already was. I downloaded Petra Kuppers’ essay, Remembering Anarcha: Objection to the Medical Archive, anxious to read a history I was ashamed to know nothing about – a secret so terrible I wondered how it could be that it was only now reaching out to me with its sharp, painful edges. I barely

made it through my first reading of the essay. And only after coming to the last few pages did I realize that I had been squinting the entire time – hoping, maybe, that the blurred text would dull the impact of what was being revealed. The second time I read with fully open eyes.

In the beginning of the essay, Petra asks us, the readers, to consider the difficulty of conveying the stories of these slave women in words. How can you not come up short? Does the project of capturing an experience or a human being in language make the event less real, the person less knowable? To me, this is the excruciating challenge of writing about that which you feel most deeply. The perfect words never come. But, in the naming of the difficulty of performance writing, Petra calls me to participate in the process of remembering, rewriting, reclaiming and voicing with her (with all of us) and, in this process, I am able to decipher the silenced meanings and feel what lies within the spaces between the imperfect words. Reading performance writing is an embodied experience.

During this reading, I also think about the power and powerlessness of language as it relates to the status of Sims and the women whose bodies he used and then buried in his historical record. What does it mean for us to consider the power in Sims' published, public voice alongside the powerlessness of having, like Anarcha, Lucy and Betsy, a black female body that because of its blackness and femaleness is public in a very different way – a body open to public shaming and disgust – vulnerable, unprotected? Vulnerable bodies and the silences that surround them are the reason why finding the words to discuss the Anarcha Project is so critical.

I put down Petra's thirty-four page document, excited and enraged, and call my mother. I talk fast, unconcerned with making sense. Anarcha's story is not a linear

narrative. It curves, winds around and encircles all of us. The power in this covering, however, is that it can either smother us and take our breath away, or protect us and set us free. My mother, I think, could only hear the fistula and the violation and only smell the stink of shame. She had no words to form a question, to inquire what it all meant. She already knew. And, the burden of this knowledge is silence for many black women. I imagine her stomach muscles and the walls of her vagina automatically tensing as mine did at the suggestion of Anarcha's pain. The unspeakable was already verbalized from birth deep within both of our bodies. This unspeakable shame, this mark of race and sex, informs the way we walk, hold our heads and hide or show ourselves to the world.

Wanting to stop myself but unable, I call up my own bodily and social (are they different?) shame as a pre-teen overdeveloped black girl taking ballet classes in Cincinnati, Ohio with a room full of impossibly thin white girls. I was ridiculed everyday in ways that made clear to me that my body was neither acceptable or of any value. And then, immediately, after replaying this memory, I feel doubly shamed. How could I allow myself to conjure up this personal history - so inconsequential and narcissistic in relation to Anarcha's repeated trauma of being physically pulled into shame literally from the inside out. My shame, in comparison, is nothing and yet I can not stop it from coming to mind. I wonder if my petty, privileged experience brings me closer to Anarcha or just creates more distance.

The emotional uncertainty I feel going into my Anarcha workshop at the University of Michigan is really plain old fear. I am afraid of the history I am confronting and afraid of my response to it, and how that response may be interpreted and evaluated by the other participants in the workshop. The email announcement for the workshop

states that we will be “using performance methods to address the memory of experimentation on slave women in Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1840s.” That “theatre, dance, and community poetry would be how we would enter the conversation with the past and make connections to public secrets, women’s bodies, the persistence of pain, racialized medical histories health care inequalities and survival.” Wow. That is a lot to contend with in one sitting, with your body as the primary tool of resistance and in the presence of strangers, nonetheless. Despite the fact, or maybe because of the fact, that I danced professionally with a modern dance company after college and still like to consider myself a performer, there is something unsettling about the prospect of performing in a space where it is not expected that everyone be trained or have any specific type of experience beyond simply being.

I am entering a performance process predicated on the fact that our humanness would be our common ground and the only truly necessary unifying link to begin collaboration. I am afraid that without the structure of choreography and script I have grown so accustomed to I will be utterly lost and identified as a fraud; a non-artist set adrift without notes. What will this mean for Anarcha and how I will be asked to engage with her, and Lucy, and Betsy and the others I have yet to meet? How can we possibly reach back into the past in some meaningful and honorable way? And, will this even be the main point of our work?

In the African American print and television media the question of Black women’s emotional and physical health has recently, like the narrative of the disappearing (extinct is a word that has also been used, comparing black men to an endangered species) straight Black man, become a popular cultural problem to consider.

The toll of playing the role of the mythical superwoman ready to fulfill everyone's needs, the stress of racism and sexism, and lack of supportive partnerships are all believed to generally contribute to a black female population in America that is on the brink of a health crisis. Addictions to food, alcohol, nicotine, and toxic relationships are listed as the primary threats to black women's well being and signs that we are deeply depressed and in need of fixing. In the narratives that surround much of this pop psychology, black women's health issues are treated as signs that we, still, have yet to identify appropriate coping mechanisms to navigate the stress of hostile environments.

I carry with me, at the edge of my consciousness, this relatively new focus on black women's health issues when I enter the Anarcha workshop at the University of Michigan. It is not a connection I deliberately make at the time, but one that I can now see influenced my perceptions of health, healing, privilege and the possibility of addressing these concerns through performance. In being with and performing through Anarcha Lucy and Betsy's history, the contemporary experience of black women's trauma and health takes on a collective dimension rooted in the solidarity that comes from accessing the past through emotion, sense memory and embodied understanding.

## II. Anarcha Workshop, University of Michigan, December 2006

In the Anarcha session at Michigan, there are four other participants aside from myself and not including the three core collaborators who are facilitating the workshop. One of the women, a black woman in her mid-thirties, is an acquaintance and the person who forwarded me the email about the Anarcha Project. However, when we meet in the workshop space, our sense of familiarity is overwhelmed by the sense of the unknown

that hangs in the air and makes us strangers again. We start out warming up our bodies and getting comfortable in the studio by moving through the room using different speeds, levels, and quality of movement. Out of the corner of my eye, I can feel the participants checking each other out perhaps wondering what brought each of us here, and when we will delve into the difficult material of what actually happened to these slave women in Montgomery, Alabama.

We finally come together in a circle of bodies, standing up, facing into the center. Anita, one of the Anarcha core collaborators, leads us in a breathing exercise where we inhale and exhale together as our shoulders touch and heave in rhythm. This breathing exercise leads us into vocalizations where words from Petra's essay and the other collaborators' writing are pushed out from our lips as if we are vomiting them.

*blood.fistula.blot.blood.fistula.blot.* The words rise up from my belly and expel from my mouth in a rush of air that meets the breath of the others in the middle of the circle. There is warmth there. We all seem to recognize this and pull in tighter to close the circle. The uneasiness and skepticism I felt when I first looked at these strangers is slowly fading.

Each of us take turns giving the full weight of our bodies to the group as if we were one of the traumatized slave women seeking solace in our sisters' arms. When I step into the circle, I am confronted with loss, fear, and sadness rising to the surface from the submerged places in my own experience and am completely dependent on the bodies encircling me to hold me up, to genuinely provide care. This is not play acting. I am also reading the individual histories and life journeys of the other workshop participants as they are expressed through Anarcha's story, written on their bodies and carried in their voices. A young white male undergraduate falls into my arms and I am unable to

separate his pain in the current moment on this cold winter's day in Ann Arbor with my own memory of Anarcha's.

At this point in the workshop we still have not spoken or heard the literal story of Anarcha, Lucy and Betsy and their encounter with the father of gynecology, Marion J. Sims. And yet, in performing the words *blot.fistula.blood* that we imagine framed Anarcha's experience, we are, in effect, as Norman Denzin<sup>1</sup> would define, dislodging meaning from performativity, from the act of speaking the words. Tiye and Anita, the workshop facilitators, then move us from improvisation to more structured interactions with the Anarcha material as we learn parts of the song that Tiye has strung together from the words and melodies of the other core collaborators as well as other workshop participants they have worked with in touring with the Anarcha Project. Vocal phrases such as the *shudder and the arrest* resound through my chest cavity as I struggle to find the lower register needed to convey the feeling of quaking vulnerability and immobility induced through trauma. And then, in the next breath, I have to summon the contradictory all knowing innocence that infuses the lines of this chilling melody:

*we all have our crosses to bear*

*and our little dresses to wear*

*heaven lasts always*

*but...(pause)*

*no man has ever seen.*

The experimental performance space that the workshop provides allows us to reconsider the history of slavery and the enduring physical and psychological imprint of

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<sup>1</sup> Denzin outlines the social justice implications of performance practice in *Performance Ethnography: Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (2003). Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

oppression from the perspective of our own encounters with cruelty and domination. This personal interconnectedness with history and individual understanding of collective pain is not, ever, explicitly spoken in the small studio where we move and sing together on the undercurrent of Anarcha's story. And yet, it is implied in the broken sway of our spines and the cracks in our voices as we strain to meet the melodic lilt of Anarcha's song. The women in the group laugh at ourselves when can not quite meet the vocal depth required for us to adequately portray the fear of the *shudder and the arrest* and end up coughing through the words. The one male in the room seems taken off guard by his ability to achieve a high-pitched note as he quietly sings, *our little dresses to wear*.

Sitting in the circle singing together is the first time that I look into the eyes of the other participants and am actually able to scan the faces of these people who just minutes before held me up and supported my physical and emotional journey through Anarcha's history. I think we are all aware of the communion we have built and the fact that it is respectful and caring without being overly optimistic or saccharine. In performing together we have found something quite unexpected: joy. Denzin tells us that "each performance event becomes an occasion for the imagination of a world where things can be different, a radical utopian space where a politics of hope can be experienced (2003:41)." It is debatable whether the eight of us in this studio in Ann Arbor have created a utopian space, but we have located the potential for personal resolution and collective transformation through our work, while also discovering moments of freedom and celebration.

In debriefing with Tiye, Anita and Petra at the end of the workshop, we all agree that the presence of joy was something unanticipated, yet welcomed. Petra joins us in this

discussion sharing with us the writing she produced while watching our small group move and sing together. Despite, or perhaps because of, the circumstances that constrained Betsy, Lucy and Anarcha, there had to have been some lightness and laughter in their lives. They must have looked to each other for comfort, and in the safety of each other's company uncovered something that resembled joy. From my personal experience as black woman, I carried into this workshop the double shame of having been unaware of this particular historical narrative of black slave women, while feeling ill equipped to redress this piece of my (our) revealed history. But, in creatively confronting this past with my own body and with the bodies of others working to challenge what we have come to know as history and how we come to know it, I find the beginning of what feels distinctly like healing.

This personal peacemaking is coupled with the larger collective project of rethinking and rewriting history. Our bodies and voices enable a new telling of the past that pretends to be neither omniscient nor static, but envisions the historical record as comprised of multiple voices and overlapping performances. The work in the Anarcha Project, therefore, is engaged in both locating and disrupting the center of what we have come to know as text, shared history and the production of knowledge. The center shifts to encompass individual sense memory and the emotional and psychic resonances left by those who have come before us as legitimate ways of knowing and writing our world. This new text of embodiment should not be seen as wholly reactive to the dominant narratives of history that we come to know through normative institutions, but as an independently defined methodology for sensing, remembering, and accounting for history while simultaneously deciphering the present.

The process of touching history that happens in the Anarcha Project gains its authority from our willingness to embody experiences that include others' ways of knowing. As we imagine, recreate and relive history through our performance of Anarcha, we build a dynamic experiential archive to house the perspectives that get concealed in traditional treatments of what claims to be our shared history and collective past. I leave the Michigan workshop emboldened by my personal transformation and the collective project of constructing a performance text with potential social justice implications. I have to wonder if mental well being and physical healing for minority women or, in fact, for all non normative bodies in our society must ultimately include engagement in work towards social transformation.

### III. Davidson College, Davidson, North Carolina, February 2007

My second encounter with Anarcha takes place at a three-day residency at Davidson College where I am now a core collaborator alongside Petra, Anita, Tiye and Carrie.<sup>2</sup> Although the class and racial demographics of the student body at Davidson may not be that dissimilar from the University of Michigan, the campus feels extremely cloistered, exclusive and white to me in ways that U of M does not. Now in the role of collaborator, I have to think about the intelligibility of the Anarcha Project in different terms. Although the students have been given Petra's essay and other written materials to familiarize themselves with Anarcha ahead of our arrival, I question their ability to connect with Anarcha, Betsy and Lucy and give themselves over to the workshop process in the way I felt we were at Michigan. The details of the medical experimentation

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<sup>2</sup> After the workshop in Michigan, it was difficult for me to imagine not staying on with the project in some way. I emailed the collaborators asking them how I could continue the work of Anarcha and they invited me into their work as a collaborator.

performed by Marion Sims are stunning to the point that seeking emotional refuge through disengagement can seem like the best self protective option. Will it be possible to make these undergraduate students understand that the only real safety in our work emerges from the vulnerability of performance?

We take the students through our process. The first day, after introductions, we lead the group of approximately 12 students, most of whom are not dancers, actors or performers, through warm-up exercises with the intention of getting them comfortable moving in and using their bodies as vehicles of expression. We put the students into groups of dancers and writers based on the creative medium from which they tell us they have the most comfort using as self expression. The dancers work in pairs improvising movement from the dichotomous words and phrases from the Anarcha script that are called out to them: *fear/safety*, *openness/closed*, *pain/solace*. The dancers contort their bodies in space and flow in and out of shapes to embody the feeling of these words.

I think it is important that I participate in the improvisational movement exercise rather than stand outside as an observer, and when I make this transition from the sidelines to the center of activity with the students, the artificial distinction between instructor and student gets blurred. The artistic and intellectual work of translating words into expressive movement requires a democratic approach and the disruption of traditional roles. I no longer fret over the students' ability to "get it" since it is clear from the intensity of our concentrated, focused efforts together that we are all working to not only get it, but figure out where our getting it will actually lead us; what all of this work means in the context of our present day lives. While we are moving, Petra works with a group of students who are sitting on the stage a few feet in front of us with pen and paper

in hand. These are the writers and their charge is to watch our movement and write from their visual and visceral perceptions. I am only partially aware, while I am moving, that the shape and flow of our bodies is determining a new Anarcha text, another intervention in what we know as our history.

The writers and dancers come together to set the choreography with the text and structure the material for the performance showing in two days. As we do this, we have the opportunity to explain our creative choices and share how we have been inspired by one another; how the dancers' movement ignited a new vocabulary for the writers, and how the dancers, aware of the legibility of their bodies, were compelled to try to move in new ways; to be read differently. We are re-creating ourselves and collectively defining one another through this process. And, in this way, the outsider's gaze, usually characterized as destructive and constraining becomes the collective gaze that builds and strengthens. A critical "other consciousness" emerges from our individual self-consciousness providing fertile ground for the development of a larger political consciousness, a collective gaze. I sense that I am witnessing how the journey to social consciousness begins.

During the question and answer session after our performance showing on the last day of our residency, a woman from the audience asks how the creative process changed us. William, a young white man who happens to be the only male among us, proclaims in a tone that is both unremarkable and revelatory, that this is the first time that he "has brought diversity to a group." Unbelievably, William's white male identity was something I was not fully conscious of until he made this comment. We danced together, clasping hands, embracing, falling to the floor side by side, and William's whiteness and

maleness were never blatant factors in how I viewed or responded to him during this creative process. I don't mean to suggest that I never noticed that William was a white male. But that these usually central aspects of his visible identity, were much less pronounced to me than his full commitment to our movement together and the urgency I felt in his work to decipher how the stories of these slave women construct, in part, his identity and location in the world. William chose the word diversity to define his awareness of being, for the first time a minority and the marker of difference in a room.

If we were approaching the medical experimentation of Marion J. Sims in a tradition classroom setting by reading Sims' text and treating it as the one true account of the past, William may have been just as aware of his distinctiveness in a room of all women, but may not have had the insight to note the significance of this difference, nor summoned the courage to speak it. However, as an active creator, rather than passive consumer of history, William could not objectively delete himself from the creative equation. He, like all of us, had to situate himself before he could fully claim Anarcha's history and participate in the collaborative project of magnifying her silenced voice.

In light of all the anemic diversity efforts being implemented across our American institutions of higher learning, William's statement says a lot about the pedagogical prospects for exploring the implications of difference, identity, and power as more than theoretical concepts in the classroom. Performance work requires students to fearlessly reveal themselves; interrogate their own motivations, intentions and preconceived ideas. They are called to work through the complications that self-conscious critical engagement reveals to uncover deeper truths about themselves and their ability to impact the socially constructed institutions that structure much of their experiences in the world.

One of the last questions asked during the Davidson performance lecture, is a question that comes up often for those who experience the Anarcha Project as audience members and observers. A young black woman from the balcony stands up to ask what we hoped to accomplish with the project, what our point was. In her tone I heard, “so what? What does this have to do with my experience in the world as a young black woman in the year 2007?” Most people want to know if we plan to write a book that would tell this painful part of history from the perspective of the slave women forced to endure Marion J. Sims’ gynecological experiments. A book, to most people, is the only legitimate, and therefore most effective, way to challenge the written record left by a man who had the power of whiteness, maleness, economic and professional status and literacy on his side. Only a text, black words on white paper, bound and published could challenge this normalized authority. The performance text of bodies and voices in action seems too intangible and ephemeral to confront the archive. Books, articles and essays make sense to people as conveyors of fact and knowledge in ways that our bodies do not. And yet, our bodies are often more legible than any academic text.

Performance pedagogy, like that used at Davidson, compels all participants in the process to all individuals to assess their accountability in contributing to systemic oppression, as well as their solidarity with others in combating injustice. Thus, students like William are able to situate their agency within a broader project of social transformation and understand how their freedoms and privileges are inextricably connected to others’ immobility and exclusion. In her text on community performance, Koppers defines community performance as “work that facilitates creative expression of a diverse group of people, for aims of self expression and political change.” Koppers goes

on to emphasize that “community performances are communally created.”<sup>3</sup> Kupperts’ understanding of the power in community performance to affect both the individual and the collective through the communal process of interweaving artistry and social awareness is what we all witnessed embodied through our performance at Davidson. Performance and educational practices that centrally incorporate embodied expression encourage new avenues for dialogue and efficacious action. From my black female perspective, this performance practice also does the additional emotional work of contributing to my sense of well-being now that that the burden for initiating change and political action can shift to include everyone, not just those identified as most affected by injustice or the farthest out on the margins.

The “so what?” question, however, is answered in not just the redressing of the historical record, but in our ability in the present moment to address contemporary acts of oppression and the subjugation of bodies marked as different. The critical race and feminist scholar, Dorothy Roberts<sup>4</sup>, has traced the regulation of black women’s motherhood, sexuality and ability to express and experience intimacy throughout American history. From the slave women whose human capital resided in their ability to breed strong male field workers, to contemporary single teenage mothers coerced into extreme birth control methods that threaten their long-term health, black women’s bodies and ways of being in the world have been labeled deviant and abhorrent to facilitate the legislation of white supremacy.

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<sup>3</sup> Petra Kupperts, *Community Performance: An Introduction*. 2007. Routledge: New York, NY. p. 3-4

<sup>4</sup> See *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty*. 1997. Vintage: New York, NY.

The historical and continual control of non-normative bodies is not confined to black women. Bodies defined as disabled, crippled, and handicapped also occupy liminal spaces that upset the categories upon which power and injustice are built, and thus, also need to be contained and suppressed. Anarcha, Betsy and Lucy straddle the intersection of African American and Disability Studies. Their female slave status makes them outcasts in mainstream society and the debilitating fistulas brought on by Sims' experiments pushes them to the margins of their own black community. These slave women were not just disabled by the painful and debilitating fistulas, but socially and physically through the medical experimentation and their categorization as property. I see an understanding of the intersection of identities and how they shape lived experiences as primary and central to undertaking any social change project. For scholars, activists and artists who are writing, teaching, and mobilizing around issues of power and inequality, our work additionally demands an interrogation of the somewhat artificially constructed boundaries of academic, performance and community practices.

#### IV. The Anarcha Symposium, University of Michigan, April 2007

In April 2007, the Anarcha core collaborators held a symposium where nearly 30 professors, performance artists, community activists, healers and students from around the world convened to wrestle with the theoretical, methodological and applied concerns of working in and across both the boundaries of identity and the boundaries of practice. The symposium participants have spent the great majority of their personal and professional lives contending with the implications of disability, race, gender, and sexuality and how these often overlapping, sometimes fragmented identities inform their

work. The symposium was divided into four strands or thematic categories that were further explored and defined by the participants. These themes included: the development of a performance piece; articulation of a manifesto on working at the intersection of black and crip culture studies, and a healing event or ritual that addresses the need for balance and health in our work.

Other than presenting a performance lecture on the first day of the symposium, the core collaborators' participation was limited to providing the resources necessary for the participants to work together in their thematic groups. In this more administrative role, I was not involved in or privy to the working process the participants followed in their groups. On the last day of the symposium, the participants presented each of the three thematic strands in the black box theatre space, and this became my first viewing of their process and product. Sitting in the audience, I realized that this was the first time I was experiencing Anarcha from the perspective of an observer. As the participants passionately read their words, danced and moved with one another, spoke from projected media images, sang out in ecstasy and pain, laughed and cried from the deepest, most private parts of their being, I moved from observer to participant, propelled by their naked vulnerability and honesty. The performances could only be properly read when the audience members brought themselves fully to the stage with the Anarcha performers, and willingly welcomed the intimacy created there. I was touched physically, as I felt the release of suppressed tension and anger flow through my veins, and emotionally, surprised by the warmth of my tears. Although I am always working towards emotionally vulnerability and the shedding of self-consciousness in my own Anarcha performance, I am operating from a script whose words I know and can anticipate. Approaching Anarcha

from this new ethnographic place of participant-observer, I entered into a realm of intimacy that I could not predict nor necessarily control, and it made me feel both unstable and empowered.

In her work on the portrayal of notions of respectability in African American literature<sup>5</sup>, Candice Jenkins considers how the history of sexual objectification of black women impacts our ability to lead healthy, whole, self-directed, sexually intimate lives in the present. Jenkins argues that the norms of respectability meant to protect blacks in general and black women in particular from being viewed and treated as uncivilized in mainstream society have the power to transcend the public sector and seep into our innermost private lives. Even though I grew up in a family where I was made to understand my right to be free in the broadest sense of the word, and encouraged to express myself from my uniquely raced and gendered perspective, the norms and expectations of the world outside of my home inevitably impacted how I saw myself both outside of and within this intimate, protected space. I understood that my black female meant that my boldness could easily be read as aggression and my sensuality as vulgarity.

Recently in my work with young black women living in low-income communities, I have been thinking about the issue of respectability and its relationship to social mobility especially for those with very few economic and political resources to their avail. Self-imposed behavior management and adherence to normative notions of self-improvement can seem like the best routes to moving towards the center when you are black, female, poor, disabled, homosexual or in any way threatening to the bodily status quo. I wonder how even the most seemingly benign mandates to be normal,

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<sup>5</sup> *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. 2007 University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN

improve and deny our selves in order to “fit in” constrain our attempts to make connections and live fully in this world across boundaries and through difference. How does working to be respectable destroy our capacity for intimacy? This question emerged for me during the symposium performance as a vestige of Marion J. Sims’ work and the work of a society that has valorized him while silencing the women he left broken. How much shame are we all holding on to and what will allow for its release? In being profoundly touched by the symposium participants, I felt that I found an answer in their interactive performances. The performers gave me permission to forgive myself for taking on a societal shame that is not mine, that never really belonged to me. I was also asked to trust in the transformative power of the intimacy and vulnerability that underlies collaborative performance. And, it is from this deeply personal realm that self healing begins and on which the larger collective work of social change relies.

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