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Letters to Medusa

By

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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The truth is,
every monster
you have met
or will ever meet,
was once a human being
with a soul
that was as soft
and light as silk.

Someone stole
that silk from their soul
and turned them
into this.

So when you see
a monster next,
always remember this.

Do not fear
the thing before you.
Fear the thing
that created it
instead.

-Nikita Gill

Everyone thinks they know

Everyone thinks they know the mythological story of Medusa the monster,¹ but my MFA thesis dance film, *Letters to Medusa* (<https://youtu.be/WqAt6eYjPfl>), reclaims this disastrous mythology in a consideration of the depth of her tale and its modern-day significance. *Letters to Medusa* is a coming-of-age story for a contemporized Medusa. The film develops through a series of narrated letters written to her from the sea god Poseidon, as well as letters from her future self. Within this paper, I offer a contemporary analysis of the myth of Medusa, its relevance in the continuing wake of the #MeToo Movement, and the value of inserting a team of Black female lead artists into the dance-for-camera field. I will also provide a detailed process paper that reflects on the evolving nature of a creative process forged within a supportive community, and how collaboration and community remain essential tools for artistic survival in the era of an ongoing pandemic.

Medusa is most often portrayed in renditions as The Villain in someone else's (male) heroic journey, however, in my film I want the audience to view her story from a different perspective. Perseus, the slayer of the Gorgon has no part to play here. Medusa is the hero of her own story, or as the streaming platform search engines might have it, this film falls easily into the category of “strong female lead” or, perhaps even, “angry black woman.” The film includes four chapters that will be explained more in-depth throughout this paper:

- Medusa as a young girl transitioning into womanhood,
- Poseidon’s betrayal,
- Medusa as a monster,

¹ In as much as fellow MFA Gia Mongell stated: “It’s the Greek story about the lady with snakes in her hair.”

- and finally, Medusa as a survivor.

Medusa as a Victim and a Tool of Male Aggression

In the essay “Medusa as a Victim and a Tool of Male Aggression”, William Duffy explores the myth of Medusa and how it exposes issues in society regarding sexual violence and the dynamics of it in a world that originates in a hierarchy. He begins by analyzing Medusa’s story writing, “Like many mythic figures, there are multiple versions of her tale, but they typically follow two threads: Medusa is either the mortal member of the already monstrous Gorgon sisters or a woman transformed into a monster for the crime of defiling Athena’s temple due to (consensual or non-consensual) sex she has with Poseidon” (Duffy, 5). Within his essay, Duffy also analyzes the article “The Ferocious and the Erotic: ‘Beautiful’ Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake,” and writer Miriam Robbins Dexter’s depiction of the relationship between Poseidon and Medusa. Rather than highlighting Medusa's perspective of their relationship and “her own desire or lack thereof” (Duffy, 6), Dexter only emphasizes Poseidon’s lust for her. In Dexter’s depiction (amongst other writers, as well) Medusa’s voice isn't valued, and many writers don’t even acknowledge her interaction with Poseidon as rape. Survivors often don't report the assault because they anticipate that they will be disrespected and be accused of lying in what has commonly come to be known as “victim shaming” or “victim-blaming”. While survivors continue to fear the outcome of reporting the assault, the assaulter escapes the consequences and isn’t required to take responsibility for their actions. This is very similar to the myth of Medusa because Poseidon is not punished for his actions; instead, Medusa bears the brunt of the punishment in the most epic example of victim-blaming.

Roman poet Publius Ovidius (Ovid) Naso's "Metamorphoses" portrays Medusa as being sexually assaulted. However, Duffy describes Ovid's depiction of the myth as not showing any compassion for Medusa. He writes: "In less than a line of text, [Ovid]² reveals that Athena, the supposed protector of her priestess Medusa, instead immediately punishes her. Ovid claims that the goddess of wisdom turns her priestess's hair into snakes so that her sexual assault may not go unpunished (Metamorphoses 4.801), a phrasing that suggests that Medusa is the only person to be held responsible for her assault" (Duffy, 8). Survivors are often blamed for being assaulted because of being too attractive, dressing "suggestively," walking alone, being intoxicated or other any other of a number of reasons that are supposed to validate the assaulter's behavior and make it the victim's fault for simply trying to move through life with free will. When they have the courage to report the assault their reputation is generally tarnished, which is very similar to how Medusa's reputation results in her being deemed from antiquity to the modern era as being a monster.

The so-called hero Perseus kills Medusa by severing her head and he uses her severed head to destroy other enemies. Medusa's severed head continues to be used by Athena to destroy other Gods and, theoretically, shake the patriarchy, instill democracy and bring wisdom to humanity. This is an example of how people use survivors' pain and anguish for their own personal benefit. Duffy states that "When we combine this with the account of Medusa as a rape survivor, we end up with an even more tragic narrative. She is (literally) dehumanized as a result of her assault, isolated from the world until the reaction to her suffering (the petrification that

² "Hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae dicitur: aversa est et castos aegide vultus nata Iovis texit, neve hoc inpune fuisset, Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros." 'It is said that the Lord of the Sea assaulted her in the temple of Minerva: the daughter of Jove turned away and covered her Innocent face with her aegis, and - so that this would not go Unpunished - she changed the Gorgon's hair into ugly snakes.'

comes from viewing her transformed visage) becomes useful to others, and then is transformed into a tool or weapon independent of her wishes (Duffy, 10)". This is shown in society by sex scandals that were created to dismantle politicians and people in higher power, but at a great personal price to those who came forward about their assaults.³ Later in this paper, I will address the contemporary movement, best known as #metoo, which has worked to reframe the notion of victim to that of survivor. It is against this reclamation of power, demand for accountability, and reshaping dominant patriarchal biases, that *Letters to Medusa* was developed.

Many scenes from the film were shot on October 10th, November 20th, and the 21st. The cast includes Kai Smith (young Medusa), Lynnette Paz (adult Medusa), and Alberto "Tito" Del Saz (Poseidon), and it is directed by Niara Seña. Tito Del Saz is a long-time faculty member at Hunter College, artistic director of the Nikolais/Louis Foundation, and a one-time Spanish national ice-skating champion. Niara and I attended SUNY Purchase College together; however, she graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Acting. We have collaborated on a variety of projects since graduation. She created and directed a film called "Sweet Sweet", which I co-choreographed and danced in. It inspired me to create my own film that she directed, "The Evolution of Wombmanhood". We also collaborated on a film that premiered during quarantine on the Hunter website titled "And I Finally See" which was also included in the "Who We Are" exhibit for Hunter College's Research and Public Scholarship Committee for President Jennifer Raab's Anti-Racism Task Force in December 2021. During my process of researching the story of

³ In the most recent example, the testimonies of what Simone Biles and fellow gymnasts experienced from federal investigators shows in a searingly blatant way, how dismissive and cruel those tasked with protecting and serving even an elite community of young women behaved.
<https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/gymnasts-simone-biles-aly-raisman-testify-us-senate-sex-abuse-probe-2021-09-15/>

Medusa, I and Niara selected the parts of her story that I was going to highlight and which aspects were going to be relatable to the viewers. We brainstormed and created multiple storyboards to get a visual of what the viewer will see and also spoke to friends, families, and survivors to see which route would be the most effective and striking. Being open to different perspectives is essential when you are creating a dance work, even if they don't agree with yours.

The Laugh of the Medusa

In the essay "The Laugh of The Medusa", Hélène Cixous wrote about the dynamics of how women are treated or viewed in society and the importance of women expressing our experiences through writing and other art forms. It is imperative for women to reclaim our bodies and experiences, and not let anyone dim the light that's inside of us. In a later scene in the film, I represent this idea, literally, with a free and peaceful older Medusa in a light-filled space, looking out the window. Cixous wrote that women are often underestimated and that success and greatness are only reserved for "great men" (Cixous, 877). Because of patriarchal thinking that women are not worthy of success, we tend to limit ourselves and feel guilty for attempting to reach our full potential. We hide our potential to make men feel more comfortable and so as not to pose as a threat. This manipulation stems from men trying to make us forget about our childhood. Cixous wrote "from childhood, {men} have been trying desperately to make {us} forget, condemning it to "eternal rest". The little girls and ill-mannered bodies emerged, well preserved, intact onto themselves, in the mirror"(Cixous, 877). In the film, Poseidon leaves a letter for Medusa after he has used and abandoned her, in it he explicitly states that his love is nomadic and that she is tainted. She also says that men establish their power by making women hate each other as well as ourselves. "Men have committed the greatest crime against women.

Insidiously violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their men's strength against themselves, to be executant of their virile needs" (Cixous, 878) and also "have constructed the infinite logic of anti-love" (Cixous, 878). If you don't have a love for yourself it's very difficult to share any love with other people. Cixous states that the way to take the power back is by using your voice and experiences as a weapon. In my film, the moment Monster Medusa begins to shed her skin, represented through a scaled, shiny green zip-up full-body suit, we begin a journey towards her self-love, as she rejects the monster of her own self-hatred.

Cixous states that "men say that there are two unreasonable things: death and the feminine sex. That's because they need femininity to be associated with death; it's the jitters that give them a hard-on! For themselves! They need to be afraid of us" (Cixous, 885). During the opening scene of the film, the older Medusa sits on a bench looking at her former self, the voiceover of her letter "men; scoundrels that will devour every part of your soul and say you requested such an action, laying claim to the god-given splendor that lay betwixt our thighs, scorching the garden of my youth, the rivers will run dry eventually, and you will see the world". She later refers to Perseus killing Medusa, which represents him killing the truth. The monster that Medusa became was created by trauma caused by a man. A patriarchal society shames women for telling the truth which results in silencing and the destruction of careers. Fellow Hunter MFA student Eleanor Smith wrote that during the scene showing the dynamics of the relationship between Poseidon and Medusa she reflected "on the archetypes that exist for women and female-identified bodies in western society. These archetypes do not exist in us, but rather are painted onto our bodies by the patriarchy, splattered onto us, "defining" us before we even grow

into ourselves. Medusa is sometimes heralded as a feminist icon because of her story of redemption, her power, her phoenixing. But what if she was already a feminist? What if for us to be heralded as powerful we didn't have to have stories of overcoming? Can't my bravery exist without my rape story? Is my trauma the only way you can humanize me?" (Smith).

Cixous also wrote about the importance of writing and speaking to others and that "it is time for women to start scoring their feats in written and oral language" (Cixous, 880). As an artist, I regularly use poems or texts in my choreographic works. From inception, *Letters to Medusa* was envisioned as a film that was narrated in the form of letters written originally by the creative team for the project. The dance, the visual cinematic language, and the content of the letters are all equally important and Cixous' article affirms to me how meaningful it was to have an original script. "Every woman has known the torment of getting up to speak. Her heart racing, at times entirely lost for words, ground and language slipping away --- no way that's how daring, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak --- even just to open her mouth in public" (Cixous 880-881). Both the process and the product, literally, speak to and speak about letting women tell their own tales.

Later in this paper, I will introduce my research on screenwriter, director, and survivor, Micaela Coel. During one of her lectures, she discusses an experience that she had regarding her fear of speaking up when a man spoke an inappropriate comment. She states that while she was at an after-party "a London producer introduced himself to me I said, "oh yes nice to meet you" and "do you know how much I want to fuck you right now" was his immediate choice of response. I turned from him and went home so quickly" (Edinburgh). Later she questions whether her silence

could “have encouraged this producer to push boundaries with other women and black people further. This thought is uncomfortable but I cannot block it out, I have to face it” (Edinburgh).

In reflecting on the work and the editing process, I can see how finding my voice in collaboration with others and Medusa’s journey to self-love were intertwined. While adding the voiceovers (of the letters) to the film we decided to use Niara's (the director) voice as the narrator. However, fellow MFA Francesca Dominguez suggested using my voice instead. I immediately felt the fear that Cixious described and questioned if my voice was powerful enough to carry the film. After I consulted with friends, family, and important women in my life they encouraged me to use my voice as a tool to show that even through fear and challenges women will still persist. Cixious wrote about how it's critical for women to support each other and that there “always remains in a woman {a} force which produces/is produced by the other-in particular the other woman” (Cixous, 881). Women have propelled me my entire life and the strength of the women surrounding me inspired me to create my film. In this way, Cixous and *The Everyday Work of Art* author Eric Booth converge in the journey of this particular work of mine, and the ongoing everyday work of art that is bringing my voice and the voices of other women of color to the center of the conversation.

My goal as a choreographer is to introduce the audience and dancers to a beautiful world that brings them into a new reality. Booth writes about the process of creating a work of art through *world-making*, *world-exploring*, and *reading the world*. World-Making focuses on what we already know and arranges the knowledge that we’ve gained over time. As is typical in the collaborative nature of dance, my collaborative process in filmmaking, I make, explore and read the world simultaneously. I’m drawn to music that keeps my imagination limitless and I’m

attracted to dancers that dare to be different. I'm enamored with connecting different energies on stage and playing with the dancers' similarities and differences. As the audience views my choreography I want them to experience dynamic movement, a story unfolding, and the process of unveiling their own meaning and connection. Trusting my instincts is a vital element in my choreographic process and I believe that your imagination can allow you to take risks.

Humanizing Medusa

I seek to humanize Medusa and show that there is an essence of Medusa in everyone. The film includes opening and interstitial scenes shot in Central Park and other parts of New York City, to allow the audience to view Medusa as a human being. She lives in our imagination as a monstrous killer of valiant men, turning them to stone with her stare. Although a common interpretation of the story of Medusa states that she was penalized by Athena for an act that was forced upon her, the work argues that the harm of the trauma itself made her the monster, not Athena's curse. Medusa wasn't born into the tragedy that was bestowed upon her. As a child, she was pure, filled with joy, and had a limitless imagination. Throughout the scenes in the film that show her as a child, she writes her wildest dreams in a green notebook and this is used to symbolize her pure heart. Eleanor Smith also wrote that "dancing to dynamic orchestral music, her solo of self, showing "the light that shines so brightly inside you". Dressed in white, utilizing deep plies coupled with expressive spine, neck, and arms she is defiant until her hand moves slowly towards the viewer and the light turns red. She is transported to Medusa's realm, or a space of the psyche, where the two women meet through a mirror bathed in red light. Seated, they begin a duet of blurred recognition and mystery, never connecting in a healing union. The red

light disappears and the film transitions to Medusa's dance, a softer solo of sorrow and remembrance (Smith).

During her transition into adulthood, she was sexually violated and had to shield herself from the residue of the harm that was brought upon her. Cixous wrote that "when the "repressed" of their culture and their society returns, it's an explosive [and] utterly destructive" (Cixous, 887). In *Letters to Medusa*, Medusa's monstrous persona was awakened to protect herself after her innocence and pureness were taken advantage of. Medusa has "a force never yet unleashed and equal to the most forbidding of suppressions" (Cixous, 887). Who was there to protect her? Who was there to save her from the male aggressor? Her choice was taken away from her, therefore, she had to protect herself at all costs. The betrayal, therefore, is mirrored against others without cause or question. Her resulting rage was rooted in fear and was the result of her light and joy being dimmed. Poseidon abused his power and her monstrous rage was her way of taking her power back. However, it begs the question, does rage result in power? Or does rage aid the never-ending cycle of hurt and pain? In a conversation with fellow MFAs, my thesis sponsor, Professor Maura Donohue, asked Darvejon Jones and Thomas Ford what was the low ground that rage is grown in. Darvejon eventually responded: "Hurt." If hurt, or as we commonly say now, trauma is the ground that Medusa's encompassing rage grew in, the question isn't about subduing the monster that is rage. The healing must be directed at the hurt, at the wounding. This rage altered her into someone that she couldn't recognize and no longer able to stand the sight of her own reflection; she has closed the circle of violent aggression by turning it in upon herself. She became stuck in a universe rooted in anguish and this made her evolve into a statue.

Most of the original tales of Medusa result in her being killed by Perseus, however, the ending of *Letters to Medusa* expresses how the power of healing and forgiveness are what ultimately save her. The tale commonly portrays Perseus using a mirror to kill Medusa. The film uses this idea of a mirror as a motif to illuminate the power of self-reflection and how it forces Medusa to face the person that she has become. For example, in Scene 2 (during the first dance piece) we see young Medusa catching a glimpse of herself in a mirror which reveals an older Medusa sitting behind her. From there, we see her sit in a choreographed reflection with older Medusa for a duet sequence. This represents the time passing and young Medusa evolving into a woman. Fellow MFA Thomas Ford wrote that “young Medusa peers into a mirror and sees Medusa sitting in a chair as if she’s been waiting for Young Medusa the whole time. The messaging here was clear: That for all she’d been through, now and forever, she would protect her younger self.” (Ford)

After Medusa evolves into a statue in Scene Four, she gets flashbacks of her childhood and the green notebook. The viewer sees a series of shots of young Medusa walking and writing in Central Park, and dancing in studios at Hunter College. These reflective moments are reminiscent of a time when she viewed life as a playground and with the purity, love, life, and joy that is given at birth. The anger and bitterness that she bestowed upon many are unlike the child that she once was. She sheds layers of fear in order to give herself the grace and mercy needed to be made whole again. She learns to have faith in her strength and not let fear consume her. The painful memory will never completely disappear; however, through healing and forgiveness, Medusa slowly rises to self-love and acceptance.

Medusa and #metoo

In a world where women have to work twice as hard to be visible, my intention for *Letters to Medusa* is to expose these issues that are happening within society and bring them to the forefront. The "#metoo" movement has been one of the most powerful contemporary movements in the past decade, shedding a light on sexual assault and unifying the call to listen to women. The creator of the movement, Tarana Burke's intention is to help women heal from their negative experiences and support them in their future endeavors. It is with the hope that this act of supporting women in all forms is something that the viewers experience while watching the work. Before #metoo was known as a viral hashtag, it began as a campaign from an organization called "Just Be Inc." that was created by Burke. The movement

serves as a convener, innovator, thought leader, and organizer across the mainstream and the grassroots to address systems that allow for the proliferation of sexual violence, specifically in Black, queer, trans, disabled, and all communities of color. Leveraging its model and framework, grounded in existing research and theory, 'me too' centers individual and community healing and transformation, empowerment through empathy, shifting cultural narratives and practices, and advancing a global survivor-led movement to end sexual violence. (Burke, metoomvmt.org)

The movement started by supporting women of color because Burke wanted to focus on helping black women that live in low-income communities. However, as the campaign started to grow, women of other ethnicities and cultures came forward as well.

The "Me Too" movement is a way of interrupting sexual violence, however, many critics or reporters had a different perspective calling the movement a ruthless plot against men that has caused a gender war. These perspectives are highlighted throughout the media to shift the focus away from the survivors and their stories. During a TED Talk Burke spoke about how she was numb because of how the media has portrayed survivors and also how they manipulate the stories

to appease men. She discussed how people have the audacity to tell victims of sexual assault to consider the feelings of the assaulter and how it's going to affect their career if the victim shares their trauma with the world. Although the expectation is that men should take responsibility for their actions, the outcome is that they won't or society won't require them to. *Letters to Medusa* show that women must intentionally give themselves back what was lost; purity, love, life and joy.

The #MeToo movement also concentrates on what survivors need to begin the healing process. Burke says the organization tries “to teach survivors to not lean into their trauma but to lean on the joy that they curated in their lives instead”(TED Talk). After Medusa lets the trauma consume her, she reflects on her past, and the joy of her childhood gives her a different perspective on life. Burke describes trauma saying that it “halt's possibilities, [and that] movement activates it” and also that “possibility is a gift; it births new worlds and it births visions” (TED Talk).

The intention of *Letters to Medusa* is for the audience to be empowered as they watch a woman go through a difficult and powerful journey resulting in her triumph. In my film, Medusa is the hero that changed the narrative and created her own ending to her story. Medusa serves as an advocate for every woman, but I acknowledge that like Tarana Burke's work we serve the larger community. I, my director, and the two Medusas are grounded in how we are also modeling the possibilities for women of color, as well. As we bring a story, with a “strong female lead” to a larger community, we also recognize that our film could fall under “Black women directors/choreographers/stars” as well. In addition to the work that my collaborations with Niara do for using dance and film as a medium for liberation and celebration, we recognize we are

trying to break ground on saturating the world with stories that are often ignored in mainstream dance and film. Both the narrative of the film and the #behindthescenes reality of the production team tell a story that you can rise above your circumstances, be your own hero, and have the power over how your story ends by creating it yourself.

Dancefilm

In the first chapter of "Dancefilm: Choreography and the Moving Image" by Erin Brannigan, she refers to composers being "sound engineers" and choreographers as "dance engineers." (Brannigan, 18) As an engineer you have to combine different ideas and concepts without one overpowering the other, however, there is an energy or force that is obviously lost in films that many filmmakers and choreographers try to convey through close-ups and different perspectives. Film uses this sense of "presence" by taking "a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of duration of the object" (24) to maintain the kind of energy transference that often happens in live performance. Filmmakers and choreographers try to use various tactics to create this energy that is inevitably lost in film. Maya Deren innovated the way dance films were seen within the industry. She used three strategies including verticality, depersonalization, and stylization of gesture. Vertical film form consists of eliminating the narrative and exploring the feeling and actual experience. Stylization of gesture includes the "manipulation of gestural actions" (Brannigan 139). During Scene 5 and 6 where the audience is viewing flashbacks of the sexual assault, close-ups of certain gestures (Poseidon's hand grabbing Medusa's wrist aggressively, etc.) help translate Medusa being taken advantage of by Poseidon. In scene 6 (after the flashbacks) fast and intense gestures emphasize Poseidon taking control of Medusa. Simple gestures can create a powerful impact on how the audience views the story.

Close-ups give the viewer a different perspective and allow us to make specific scenes more intimate to assist in creating a deeper connection between the character and the audience. When I began creating films I rarely used close-ups because I felt that you weren't able to see the movement in its entirety. Brannigan describes close-ups as "being significant in granting access to these bodies" (Brannigan, 64). Close-ups do invade the personal space of the performer's and they can't hide behind other elements or scenery that wide shots provide.

Cutting Rhythms

In "Cutting Rhythms" by Karen Pearlman, she wrote that everything in life is movement and that "movement happens in time, and it is impelled by the energy of the camera but we can't see time and energy. We see movement and use it to understand time and energy" (31). Pearlman described the six components of intuition being expertise, implicit learning, judgment, creativity, sensitivity, and rumination. I'm drawn to a judgment that is "making accurate decisions and categorizations without, at the time, being able to justify them" (Pearlman 28). During my process of creating choreography and films, I have moments where I question the decisions that I made, whether it be to use a wide shot instead of a close-up or change a phrase, etc. I often doubted if what I was creating was dynamic enough to translate the story and this resulted in unnecessary desperation for perfection. However, I've learned throughout the years to trust my instincts and judgment is a huge part of that. Going down the rabbit hole of trying to justify every decision that you make wastes time and limits your creativity.

Fear the thing that created it

Like many other women, Medusa's story has been hidden from society and people only view her as a monster that preyed on men. However, her story is so much deeper than that. As

stated in "The Truth about Monsters," the Nikita Gill poem at the beginning of this paper: "Do not fear the thing before you. Fear the thing that created it instead". The legend of Medusa is very similar to many experiences that women have had and is much more complex than people know. There are many reasons why individuals have various characteristics, however, the clarity is when you begin to define the underlying story behind the choices that people make. You can't place judgment based upon what you see with the human eye nor what is heard.

Dance writer, fellow MFA and survivor Thomas Ford noted in an unpublished review: "Redding's choreography does a masterful job of reminding the viewer why Medusa has become what she's become. The viewer is on Medusa's side, now, willing her to invoke her powers against abusers." Any type of trauma can be a pivotal moment in someone's life. Poseidon is the person that caused Medusa's trauma, however society still glorifies him as a hero in many museums around the world. But, we can join the challenge to champion the voices of the many silenced survivors of sexual assault.

Throughout the process of creating my film "Letters to Medusa", I discovered new ways of gaining inspiration for the movement and the structure of how I wanted to express her story. I decided to go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and visit some exhibits that included artifacts and statues of various gods and goddesses within Greek mythology. While walking throughout the exhibits I saw beautiful pottery, statues, and paintings of Athena, Zeus, Hercules, and even Poseidon. I strolled around for over an hour and became uneasy because I realized that I couldn't find any images of Medusa. In my frustration, I decided to ask a security guard if there were any images of Medusa and he guided me to the other end of the museum and told me that they only had one. As I entered the exhibit I saw an enormous statue of Perseus holding Medusa's head. I

looked around at people that were in awe of the statue, but unlike them I thought "this is the only statue that they have of her!?" The statue of her head gave a negative connotation of fear, anger, and hatred. It angered me to know that one of the most well-known museums in the United States has only one depiction of Medusa. This reminded me of how women who are abused are seen in society today. If a woman shares her story with the world that will be all that society will recognize her for. Not her accomplishments in life but only for her accusing a celebrity or person in power of assault. Similar to Medusa's statue at MET, women who stand up are displayed to the world as Monsters.

The week of my second thesis project showing included obstacles, self-doubt, and a revelation. A week before my showing, the editor and DP decided to remove herself from the project. In spite of that minor setback, someone who we've worked with in the past (and completely trust) agreed to edit the film. However, because of this adjustment, we only had a couple of days to put together. Throughout that time, I began to doubt myself and the film that I was creating. I felt slightly defeated because in spite of all of the work I've put into the project, I wasn't as confident in it as I thought I would be. I was almost transformed into a shadow version of myself. However, feedback from my peers and the faculty helped me and Niara (the director) see the film from a different perspective. I realized that the structure of the beginning of the film wasn't establishing the characters and their importance to the story. As the week continued, the director, myself, and the editor of my film had an editing session every day and made changes that made me feel more confident in the structure of the beginning. Throughout that week I thought about experiences that I've had in the past along with experiences that more established and famous choreographers in the industry have spoken about. All of those experiences weren't

easy and they were confronted with barriers along their journeys. Throughout the process of creating challenges naturally arise, however facing these obstacles is what makes us stronger and feel the most fulfilled. Rather than letting the stress turn me into a monster, it served, as fellow MFA student Francesca Dominguez said to “keep us attached to reality”. Facing this obstacle reignited the passion that I had for the project and it pushed me to work even harder to get to the finish line.

Michaela Coel

While creating *Letters to Medusa*, I began to research British actress, producer, director, and screenwriter Michaela Coel. She is the creator, writer and star of the television series "I May Destroy You." In 2021, Coel made history as the first Black woman to win the Emmy for Outstanding Writing for a Limited Series. “I May Destroy You” follows the story of a young woman that was sexually assaulted in a nightclub, the monstrous choices she makes in the aftermath and how she is compelled to re-evaluate the relationships that she has with the people as a path to healing begins. This show is an example of how to successfully portray trauma and vulnerability through a powerhouse ensemble cast and complex characters. It is also full of fully flawed, humanistic British black women.

In 2018, Coel spoke at the Edinburgh TV Festival’s James MacTaggart Lecture. She spoke about her childhood and her experience writing her first show “Chewing Gum.” She also spoke about her experience of being sexually assaulted and how the first people that she called were the producers of the show (Chewing Gum). It happened during one of her breaks from writing the episodes for the second season. She also discussed how the network gave her a

deadline for the completion of the remaining episodes. As it was a couple of days after she was assaulted, her mental capacity was not stable enough to meet the deadline.

Writing felt as though I was cramped in a third of a trailer, a mind overcrowded by flashbacks. I needed to push back the deadline, it was already tight" however "I wasn't sure how damaging it would be to the company, so I couldn't ask. I was lucky. Someone was transparent with me. "They won't offer you the break", a colleague said, "that's not the way it is, you have to take it". I asked to push the deadline back and for the channel to be informed as to why. The deadline was pushed back, but the head of comedy never found out why. (Coel, Lecture)

This experience became an episode of “I May Destroy You” in a tour-de-force example of women’s capacity to turn sexual trauma into powerfully compelling and critically acclaimed art. We have to continue to break down patriarchal models of pushing through the pain. Coel also spoke about the road to healing and said “it's good to talk and engage with someone else transparently” (Coel, Lecture). In that way, she models art-making as liberatory practice. Much in the way that Medusa sheds her monster skin in my film, *Arabella*, Coel’s character in “I May Destroy You” offers a (wild and messy) path out of self-destruction. She later said that she “found that it's been therapeutic to write about it and actively twist a narrative of pain into one of hope and even humor, and be able to share it with you as part of a fictional drama on television. I think transparency helps.” (Coel, Lecture). Being honest with others, but most importantly, being honest with yourself is a crucial part of healing from trauma, as Medusa reveals in our final scenes.

Misfits

“The term Misfits takes on dual notions: a misfit is one who looks at life differently. Many however, are made into Misfits because life looks at them differently; The UK's black, Asian, and gender communities for example. And there are many other examples. The term Misfits can be cross-generational, and crosses concepts of gender or culture, simply by a desire for transparency, a desire to see another's point of view.”

- Michaela Coel

Letters to Medusa is dedicated to the Misfits. The women who look at life through a different lens, whose voices aren't heard, and whose opinions aren't valued. I hear them because I stand proudly as one of them. I am a misfit and I'm here to tell everyone that we are alive and well. We will break boundaries that are created to keep us in a box, continue to share our stories with the world, and create chaos within the industry. This film celebrates women and how beautiful we are. Society often expects us to play a certain role and also makes us feel that we aren't worthy, valued, or powerful. However, our presence has made such a great impact on the world and will continue to for years to come. Trauma can often change you into a person that you don't recognize, however, transparency and self-love can give you the strength to see the beauty in your scars.

“You only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.” (Cixous).

We are Medusa. Medusa is us.

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