

AMERICAN MEDUSA: THE PERPETUATION OF A PATRIARCHAL SOCIETY

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

American Medusa: The Perpetuation of a Patriarchal Society

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A feminist, postcolonial reading of the ancient Greek myth of Medusa interprets traditional projections of Medusa as a ‘woman monster’ as, in fact, a projection of patriarchal anxieties about feminine agency. Medusa possesses an extraordinary level of agency that is prohibited to women in patriarchy, and for that reason, she is projected as so monstrous that she must be murdered ‘justifiably’, put back in her place by a heterosexual man. The ‘morality’ of the myth conveys to society (all human beings within it) that any transgressive female agency should be regarded as Other and, therefore, as always deviant, dangerous to social stability. In patriarchy, hence ‘dangerous’ women or their potential to be dangerous must be either conquered or controlled by heterosexual men in Western culture incessantly to maintain heterosexual men’s privilege in that same culture. The logic in the myth of Medusa (Medusa Myth) has profound implications when regarding the impact of historic registers of colonialism in Western culture. As Dorothy Smarrt’s piece suggests, the myth conveys how even more intense forms of violence against women of color, who are considered to be even more deviant, are necessary to control the danger they pose to Western society

throughout history. Thus, the Medusa Myth represents the ways in which patriarchy causally relates heterosexual masculine dominance and privilege in Western culture to their necessary control over all women's bodies. Controlling women's ability to respond, to rebel, to speak their sexuality and so forth leads to their objectification and dehumanization in Western society.

In this thesis, I explore how that same patriarchal control resonates with the control of all women's bodies in the masculine-dominated art of dance in Western culture today. The art of dance in the West is legitimized as an art form in part by its aesthetics, that is, the visual image of the bodies of the dancers, how they 'look' on stage, and the quality of their movement. The control to which women's bodies are subject are themselves historically parallel to the ancestry of women's inherited roles both in Western patriarchy and as a result of the stereotypes of race, class, sex, among other variables, resulting from the era of Western colonialism. These aesthetics also demand women's bodies to conform even more rigorously to certain standards of beauty.

In particular, I relate the misogynist projection of Medusa to the stereotypes of femininity in Western dance culture and the potential effect of patriarchy on females using the art of dance as an example of patriarchal biopolitics, control and power. From the results of this study a new theme emerged – the degree to which demanding silence from women has perpetuated patriarchy, and in this paper, the controls over women's bodies in dance, and how the voices of women have risen to address the objectification of women's bodies by the male gaze.

## **Introduction: Biopower and Western Culture: Colonialism and Patriarchy**

Culture is defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization as “the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs” (UNESCO, 2001). To understand the creation of culture in the West<sup>1</sup>, we must understand the concept of imperialism used by the West to distinguish itself from and to promote itself as superior to “Other” cultures.

According to Edward Said (1993), imperialism is "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (Said, 1993). The practice of domination by a metropolitan center (imperialism) heavily shapes the policies of cultural domination by the West over spaces they colonized and the bodies of color they colonized. The need to control those bodies eventually led to the concretization of what would become standards of gender relations (later) in the West including the consistency and justification of violence ‘necessary’ to maintain Western dominance globally within the center of empire and the spaces it colonized. In the center of empire, particularly in Europe, social controls against humans in lower socio-economic spaces were intensified. In the far reaches of empire in the colonies, a history of violence scarred the new land. Holger Hoock (2017) described mob violence, psychological and physical

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<sup>1</sup> West is defined spaces engaged in colonialism and with a broadly European, racially white demographic globally, mainly industrialized nations.

torture to extract information from loyalists, rape of colonial women and girls, and the destruction and murder of the indigenous Iroquois. Deplorable conditions on British prison ships and other sites of captivity resulted in the highest mortality among prisoners of war in American history; violent seizure of personal property and black soldiers recruited to fight with no compensation only to be returned to slavery after the war are only a few examples of violence justified as necessary to maintain control. (Hooock, 2017)

In what I understand as Western culture in this exploration, the norms of violence rendered acceptable against bodies of color led to the development of standards of norms/deviance in terms of gender, race and class. The violence justified against people of color may generally be gauged by examining how certain bodies are allowed to gain visibility in only certain spaces, rendering them normal to those spaces and the conditions of morality marked by those spaces. The egregious history of slavery and later the segregation of people of color from public gathering places such as restaurants, transportation, and schools, the right to vote and healthcare are reflections of the attitudes of colonialism that leave behind deep scars that remind us that the foundation of our culture was created by and for heterosexual white males. The obsessive need for dominance and control evidenced in the imperialist actions of European global conquest underscores some of the colonial ideations of “lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” (UNESCO, 2001)

In Western patriarchy, loss of control and power to the “Other” is a deeply ingrained fear. To be clear, the use of the term patriarchy refers to “a social system in which men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property” (Malti-Douglas, 2007). Therefore, the

“Other” must be managed, manipulated and controlled. For example, per Edward Said, the West created a theory that stereotypes the Orient as containing the entire Eastern world (1978). This theory, called Orientalism, proposes that in the West as a developing world, the West was privileged with the biopolitical power to define and reconstruct any aspects of the “Other” (the Orient). Western nations today are derived from the Western empires and, hence, have inherited those ideas of Orientalism into their cultures and concepts of nationalism, which means that the control of bodies is still seen as critical to social stability, national security, and the growth of the nation. Bodies of color are still controlled by the influence of societal biopolitics and biopower in order to stabilize society, which leads to objectification of humans. For example, assistance with basic needs for healthcare, education and housing are typically woefully lacking in communities for people of color. This gross lack of concern devalues and dehumanizes people of color, such that action by the people, for example Black Lives Matter, becomes necessary.

This influence of societal biopolitics and biopower must not be underestimated. Foucault proposed “biopower is a technology of power for managing humans in large groups” (1998). Biopower refers to the control of human bodies through societal institutions. Biopower is literally having power over bodies, as Foucault observes, it is “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (1998). The important characteristic of this political technology is that control of entire populations is possible. Essentially, this Western attitude is the cause of colonialism, which Kohn defines as “the extension of a nation’s sovereignty over territory beyond its borders by the establishment of settler

colonies in which indigenous populations are directly ruled or displaced” (2017). The biopolitical power of the heterosexual white male’s attitude of inherent superiority and moral authority by the West through history has been used as justification for violence against bodies of color, which over time had become acceptable and normal.

Stemming from an ancient patriarchal heritage, it follows that the newly founded America would create its own set of norms and myths that would progress as tradition and create its own biopower system to manage ‘deviant’ bodies to cater to its own male gaze to guide what would become American culture. Our American foundation, born in colonial times, created a standard whereby white heterosexual Christian males justified their dominance over humans of any other race, gender, sexuality, and creed in the nation. To concretize that dominance, social stigmas were created to project people of color as less than human. In his article, “Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self”, David Brakke discusses how ancient people understood there was a sliding scale of skin color with the darkest skin being more evil than the lighter skinned bodies (2001). The early American colonists inherited these notions and carried them to the new world. Cultures worldwide have historically judged black skin and black bodies as demons. This belief has manipulated today’s biopower.

According to Ponterotto, if the ‘human’ prototype is male, white, heterosexual and middle class, and the binary reflects the polarity or non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual and non-middle class. In this case, most of the world does not qualify to be fully human! Thus, women carry the heavy burden of constantly having to prove their humanity - that they deserve basic human rights. In “Resisting the Male Gaze: Feminist

Responses to the ‘Normalization’ of the Female Body in Western Culture,” Ponterotto (2016) posits:

The invisibility of women has been accompanied in an extraordinarily inversely proportionate manner by the visual display of her physical appearance, of her body as material object, to be observed, judged, valued, appreciated, rejected, modified and essentially co-modified, for socially-constructed purposes. From a feminist point of view, this purpose can be claimed to be essentially male pleasure, concomitant social benchmarking and commercial profit. (2016)

Those who dare to defy the rules set by patriarchy or who are seen as having the potential to do so are labeled as ‘deviant.’ Those labeled deviant in society are subject to violence to ‘manage’ their ability to destabilize society, that is, to destabilize patriarchy. Thus, any movement that challenge the norms of society, such as gay rights, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, are bound by a single issue: they challenge the unquestionable moral authority imposed on society by patriarchal rule, which in the United States privileges heterosexual, racially white, Christian men of upper-class status.

In our contemporary society, there is a call for change. Within our society, there have been racial and political strides, such as civil rights movements and racial and gender equality. However, because American’s foundation is based in colonialism, our society is in a state of imbalance, particularly with women of color, as examined later.



## **Patriarchy and Women's Bodies in Western Culture**

The management of bodies of color during the recent era of Western colonialism was achieved by using the mechanisms of primary control over women already present in Western culture at the time. For example, Western ideologies about women are very much shaped by pre-historical ancient Greco-Roman civilizations. Ancient Greek mythology was authored by males to instruct humankind about issues of life, including morality, philosophy and nature.

Plato and Aristotle reinforced these beliefs and influenced the church father's views about women in Christian theology, which is also the dominant religion in Western society. Their theories were said to have originated the concept of traditional Christian dualism. Wood (2017) proposed: "...Aristotle's biology gave 'scientific expression' to the basic patriarchal assumption that the male is the normative and representative expression of the human species, and the female is not only secondary and auxiliary to the male but lacks full human status in physical strength, moral self-control, and mental capacity. The lesser 'nature' thus confirms the female subjugation to the male as her 'natural' place in the universe." Aristotle believed that women were defective beings and placed them in the same category as slaves. Wood felt women were created only for procreation and lacked mental capacity; therefore, they should be banned from leadership - both in church and society. A misogynist, Aristotle preached that women were inherently inferior to men (2017).

From 900 BC to 800 BC and onward Greek mythology reflects patriarchal preferences for heterosexual masculinity as evidenced in the narrative wherein Zeus punished mankind through Pandora, the first human woman. Through Pandora the gods

unleashed evil onto the world in the forms of sickness, old age, and death thereby stressing the link that would come to characterize women as the gateway of evil and destabilization within society. Greek philosophers and scholars, whose work is forms the 'of Western culture, supported patriarchy in their theories of the human condition. For example, Plato theorized that souls are implanted in male bodies and given “volition, sensation and emotion.” He believed that women were not fully human and incapable of reasoning with their only hope as returning to the earth reborn as men (Wood, 2017). Aristotle thought of women as a “deformity, an incomplete male” (Srivastava, Chaudhury, Bhat and Sahu, 2017). He wrote that men should always command, and women should always follow since God created them as inferior beings. In accordance with social devaluation of women, women’s roles were restricted to childbearing and housekeeping. This is significant because the restriction of women’s roles barred them from participation in meaningful civic, social and educational endeavors all of which involved making decisions about society.

During Western colonialism, the views of the early Church fathers, their interpretation of Christian scripture and its views of gender and sexuality were shaped by the interpretations of historic Western ideologies about gender and sexuality, namely those of Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. The narrative of Pandora echoed in religious traditions of Western society, which pinpoint the entrance of evil into the world, historically and at all times in the present, as being through women. Srivastava et al. (2017) stated, “Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, said that being a female is a curse given by God and they are the Devil’s Gateway.” In his book, “Prescription Against Heretics” (1910), Tertullian stated that only men are created in the image of God

and, hence, men were innocent victims of the evils of women. He demanded that women cover their heads, and he forbade them to teach, become priests or to speak. There was nothing good about women, and they were responsible for pain, suffering, sin and corruption. Grounded in fear of loss of power, these patriarchal demands and assertions represent an effort to silence women and cover their bodies to avoid any temptation by women's sexuality and their own loss of control.

In the book of Genesis in the *Old Testament* of the Bible, Eve was seen as responsible for original sin. In the story of Adam and Eve, God created Adam and from Adam's rib created Eve to be Adam's companion. Women were equated with Eve thus justifying submission to men. Adam and Eve inhabited a Garden of Eden, which provided for all their needs. God charged Adam to not eat a forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. However, Eve was tempted by the serpent (the devil) to eat the fruit that God had forbidden. Upon eating the fruit, Eve had knowledge that she has committed sin, but she then shares the fruit with Adam. As punishment, Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden to toil the earth for food, protect themselves from nature, and all women forward would endure the pain of childbirth. Eve was disobedient, caused Adam's disobedience, and therefore, she was deviant and evil and did not represent the image of God.

Basing their views on the book of Genesis in the *Old Testament* and as well as on the books of Timothy, subsequent Christian authorities throughout history have affirmed the Western cultural projections between women and deviance. For example, the link between Corinthians and Ephesians in the *New Testament* of the Bible, Church fathers interpreted scripture as pointing to the inferiority of women. The higher intellect

belonged to men while the lower intellect belonged to women. Church fathers used this interpretation to solidify their male dominance. They interpreted women as being responsible for the emergence of sin in society and, therefore, as the root of all evil in the world (Wood, 2017). The Church fathers pointed out that sexuality was a struggle against spirituality. Because of these Church narratives, sexuality was described as natural, pleasurable, irresistible, disgusting and degrading to be used only for the purpose of procreation (Wood, 2017). Religion was essential to stabilize norms; therefore, religion was used to stabilize the norm about the deviance of women. The Church father's biblical interpretations are still accepted today. This is significant because, according to Pew Research Center (2021), 65% of Americans follow some form of Christianity.

Religious narratives about women and their deviance were further concretized by Western historic narrative inherited from Occidental civilization. Hence, Greco-Roman narratives and their moral teachings on society became ingrained in Western culture, including the United States. Founded by heterosexual males who dominated societies globally, the normalization of these concepts privileging the agencies of heterosexual men are perpetuated by social projections that these practices represent 'tradition', which conditions humans to believe myths and the ideas of morality embedded within them without question. Thus, a recurrent theme found throughout my research showed that to challenge patriarchal ideology means to disobey the norms of society. Metaphors such as father, king, lord, and God used as mainstays in religious language are constant reminders of a hierarchy that excludes women. Among the notable divine attributes described in religious language, 'omnipotence' defined as 'perfect power' is a favorite. This definition is associated with domination and 'power over' as it exemplifies the characteristics of

‘ideal masculinity’ (Frankenberry, 2018). Greek philosophy equated the male principle with mind, reason and act; while the female principle was based on the contrasting terms matter, body, passion and potency. Western philosophy describes the meaning of God in relation to the world around oppositions. These are gender coded hierarchical terms such as mind/body, reason/passion, male/female. Feminine terms include body, matter, emotions, instincts and subjectivity while masculine terms are mind, reason, science, objectivity – constructs and symbolism that are the foundation of women’s oppression. (Frankenberry, 2018).

Most critically, the male gaze guides culture and particularly women to base their self-worth in superficial beauty focusing particularly on their bodies. Bluntly, women base their worth on the values rooted in a patriarchal society, as they are guided to think that this is normal and, hence, that this is something to which they have consented. Given the recent era of Western colonialism and its impact on the world, the Western-based myth has become a global phenomenon.

Such projections stress that women’s social value lies in their beauty and is an essential part of fitting into society to gain status and power and to determine the social value of women. *Vogue Magazine*, internationally recognized for their magazine covers and owned by businessman, Conde Nast, has spread the concept of Western beauty standards around the globe. In the 2018 article from *Diggit Magazine* described Vogue’s standard of beauty: “Worldwide beauty standards are to a large extent still dictated by western ideals. Western ideals include features such as round eyes, thin body, light skin, narrow faces, small noses, high cheekbones, etc.” (Yan & Bissell, 2014). The less

‘beautiful’ a woman is, the lower her social value even among other women. Thus, the value of physical beauty is extremely important in American society.

The roles women play in our culture and society are dictated by standards created by men that have been passed down for centuries. The depiction of beauty and our emulation of the superficial or false identity of what we see in media and entertainment is a dehumanizing product. The manipulation and molding by a society of men have created an unreachable illusion of ‘perfection’ that is generally unattainable by most females; worse than that, it is a physical perfection devoid of intellect or maturity – a shell. The male gaze embodies an authoritative and intimidating demeanor that dehumanizes the female form and objectifies it with value only determined by male sexual desire. Women are objects to be controlled particularly regarding women who may hold authority as that threatens the existence of the male gaze. To maintain the illusion of the powerful male gaze, women must remain subservient. (Moeller, 2018).

Linking that gaze to colonialism, Gilman writes of a white man’s gaze upon the world.

The ‘white man’s burden’ thus becomes his sexuality and its control, and it is this which is transferred into the need to control the sexuality of the Other, the Other as sexualized female. The colonial mentality, which sees ‘native’ as needing control is easily transferred to ‘woman’ – but woman as exemplified by the caste of the prostitute. This need for control was a projection of inner fears; thus, its articulation in visual images was in terms, which described the polar opposite of the European male. (1985).

Sexual corruption of the male is the source of political impotence – a projection of a basic internal fear, which is the fear of loss of power. Male observers create the roots and vocabulary of the images of the sexualized female, capturing what they believe to be the essence of the “Other” (Gilman 1985). Thus, the seeds of biopower are superimposed on a society already steeped in patriarchy. In Western society, roots of the male gaze emerge in, for example, the myth of Medusa (layer) theme of the beautiful woman turned into a monster for acting immorally, then being killed for exhibiting transgressive behavior. This myth mirrors a common theme in Western society - to manage the social value of women and, hence, their agencies in society.

In a patriarchal society, a male may judge a female on her appearance and her actions and determine her worth. For a woman, her physical attributes can determine her place in society. The more a woman fits into the generic criteria of society’s definition of ‘beauty’, the more likely she will have worth in life; the more her marriage prospects; the likelihood that she will attract a marriage partner, etc. ‘Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder’; moreover, the attention a woman may receive in a patriarchal society may largely depend on superficial physical beauty. Such judgments are yet another standard imposed on women to strip them of the individually they may have in society and reduces them to value based on patriarchal standards, such as mother and/or wife. The definition of beauty as assimilated in American culture imprints its importance on every generation.

For example, the media is one of the most powerful perpetrators of the myth that women must please the white male gaze. Advertisements on television, in magazines, on social media, and any other platform that reaches women constantly remind women that they must try the most alluring makeup, wear the most seductive clothing, and have the

softest and sexiest hair – all to attract the male gaze and gain approval. The emphasis on physical beauty for American women to succeed and the struggle women endure trying to keep up with icons and superficial images that society deems as beautiful can be overwhelming. Those who cannot fit these beauty norms may be projected as socially deviant, as threatening to society. These myths are empowered by media and the internet – such as the idolization of superficial physicality, which is also present in the Medusa Myth and the link between patriarchal perceptions of the body.

Patriarchy affects our decisions and our choices in living our everyday lives. In Western society, I believe this creates cognitive dissonance between the real lives of women and how they are imagined in patriarchy. For most women in Western society, cognitive dissonance plays out in how women react to patriarchal ideas that subject women to violence and values that contradict our desires for our own lives, including how we feel about our appearance and how we project our personality. Sexist attitudes have persisted to today with the unspoken biopolitics over women's reproductive rights in the battle over abortion and birth control. For example, Catholicism prohibits the use of birth control pills as contraception. Biopolitics is governmental control over the functions and processes of life. Specifically, the control exhibited by biopolitics over women's bodies is a term called biopower. Biopower exists even in the arts, particularly dance. It is obvious, as in the example of the Hottentot Venus, non-white bodies do not fit in with the standard of shapeless young white females required for acceptance in classical ballet.

The contemporary understanding of femininity in our culture relates to ancient notions of the divine and monstrous feminine in many ways. In business, it is the



barring of women from chief executive positions. The same is true in the arts whether it is sculpture, painting, or dance. Generally, men guard the threshold of whether a work is funded or overlooked. Economically, men have had the power. Even in art and literature, “men have shaped the identities of women to such an extent that women have come to believe themselves as they have been defined by men” (Delvecchio 2012). “Men monopolize or dominate all the roles and pursuits that society most values and rewards, such as religious leadership or economic power. Therefore, inequality became one of the first patriarchal demons to be named. Furthermore, men literally ruled over women, setting the rules and limits by which and within which they were expected to operate. Women who did not conform, and many who did, could be subjected to another form of male dominance – physical violence” (Gross, 1996). Men not only hold power over women but there is an issue in the basic concept of having power over others in a patriarchal society. The thought is that patriarchy is linked with militarism, environmental issues, and other concerns that share the attitude of approval in one group having power over another (Gross, 1996).

Frankenberry highlights how feminist philosophers argue that writers trying to avoid sexist language are clearly unsuccessful when they “...declare the concept of God transcends gender, and therefore, ‘he’ is not literally male” (2018). How is it that the concept and divine identity in theism is a male God and yet not recognized as the lynchpin of patriarchal rule? God is ‘the Father’ - the uncontested absolute ruler of the world. Feminist philosophy proposes that this construct justifies social and political patriarchy placing men at the pinnacle of power devaluing all that is not male. This leaves women and “Others” oppressed and dehumanized (Frankenberry, 2018).

## Western Tradition and the Medusa Myth

One of the most popular ancient Greek myths that reflects and perpetuates patriarchal beliefs and fears is the Medusa Myth. There are many translations of the Greek mythology of Medusa. One translation portrays Medusa as a priestess in the temple of the goddess Athena and some say that Medusa was not a priestess but merely a mortal maiden. For the purposes of this paper, we will assume that Medusa was a priestess. We will also assume that as a priestess, her value was placed on her devotion and service to Athena, which would prohibit her from marriage and would require that she maintain her purity as a virgin. In the temple of the Goddess Athena. Medusa was known to be a beautiful virgin maiden and many women were envious of her beauty. Many suitors attempted to draw her gaze, but Medusa was devoted to Athena, and her loyalty never wavered.

At some point, Medusa's beauty caught the attention of the mighty god, Poseidon. Poseidon was the god of the sea. He was one of the three most powerful gods, the other two being his brothers Zeus and Hades. The stories vary at this point. Some say that Poseidon and Medusa engaged in an ill-fated love affair, and others tell that Poseidon raped Medusa in the temple of Athena. Regardless, having occurred in Athena's temple, the goddess was witness to the 'disobedience' of her priestess. Medusa's ill-fated love affair would have compromised her sexual purity, not being married, which would lead to her punishment and finally to her murder – as critical to society for her sexual deviance. In the case of rape, Poseidon was a male god justifying his control over her body; therefore, he could not be blamed. Medusa, no longer pure, was objectified and

dehumanized, carrying the full burden of blame. Athena fully engaged in Medusa's punishment, in essence, participating in violence against other women.

Athena 'justly' punished Medusa by turning her into a monster, a creature with snakes for hair. The effect of her monstrosity was that any man unfortunate enough to catch her gaze would immediately turn into stone. Medusa's punishment takes away her value as a woman, which before this encounter with Poseidon, lies in her beauty. She was marked as no longer desirable because of her sexual transgressions, no longer worthy of being regarded as beautiful and valuable. Doomed to a life of isolation for her transgression, Medusa must face warrior after warrior who seeks to conquer her – each one turned into stone as they meet her gaze. As the story progresses, the City of Argos is under siege by a sea monster, the Kraken, and Andromeda, Perseus' love interest, is being offered as sacrifice. The Greek hero Perseus is armed with winged sandals, a helmet that makes him invisible, a magical sword, and a polished shield. The shield was given to him by the goddess Athena, who had never forgiven Medusa and Poseidon. Although through Perseus' lens Medusa is projected as an unattractive monster, he still engages with her, and this engagement connotes a symbolic sexual tension between them. Perseus slays Medusa by decapitating her while gazing at her reflection in his shield rather than at her directly. He takes the head of Medusa to Argos and holds it up for the Kraken's gaze. Upon meeting the gaze of Medusa, the Kraken immediately turns to stone, and Argos was saved. Perseus hurls Medusa's head into the sea where Poseidon resides never to threaten man again.

Medusa came from the bloodline of the Gorgons. She was the only mortal in the Gorgon lineage, and she was beautiful. The projection of her as beautiful does not

correlate projections of her as a monster, and herein lies my argument. Was Medusa actually a monster; or did the male-led Greek culture producing and perpetuating this myth represent her as a monster fearing that she challenged men in such a way that she could silence them permanently and reveal them as socially devalued and powerless? A contrast from the patriarchal lens that Medusa was a monster that needed to be controlled, I offer a different perspective on the male gaze and the silencing of Medusa. Medusa embodies the ingrained patriarchal fear that the “Other” will challenge their dominance and render them powerless. In mythology, a monster or the “Other” usually heralds the harbinger of change in society. The “Other” must be conquered. By slaying the “Other” or the monster, we slay the possibility of change. Thus, the slaying of Medusa represents the conquering or slaying of the “Other” that challenged male dominance and sought to potentially render males powerless.

### **A Feminist Re-Reading of the Medusa Gaze**

The ancient Greek Myth of Medusa stands out as an example of women’s power, but a closer examination shows that Medusa’s power was neither inherent nor limitless. I propose that Medusa’s power as depicted through the male gaze is, in fact, only a representation of her, an imagery doomed to an existence devoid of any communication with men or sense of self. Instead, I read the space in which she lived as a feminist utopia, a woman-only space that did not need men to survive. That Medusa was the queen of this highly transgressive space accentuated her threat to heterosexual masculinity even more. Thus, Medusa, I suggest, was a powerful woman, not a monster. She was represented as a monster because she posed an excessive threat to patriarchy. Threats to patriarchy were not allowed to exist; hence, by depicting her as a monster, society

justifies its murder of Medusa. Contrary to the patriarchal version of the myth, her projected ability to turn men to stone is simply a projection symbolizing male anxieties about Medusa as a powerful woman who has the power to entirely seduce and control him because of her beauty and, perhaps, enslave men in the land of women. The beheading of Medusa signifies Perseus' excessive violence, which he felt necessary to manage his own desire of her: to kill Medusa is to kill his sexual desire for her and to free himself from her power.

Medusa was from the family of Gorgons. She was the only mortal of the three sisters, and she was beautiful which made her "the Other" in her family. Nonetheless, her blood was Gorgon. The thirst for power was in her bloodline but her role as priestess in Athena's temple and her mortality kept her from her natural tendency to dominate. Medusa was strongly attracted to Poseidon's demeanor of power and dominance ultimately leading to an affair. Athena saw this act as disloyalty, a transgression of her role as spiritual priestess in her temple, who should have remained celibate. Here it is critical to note that Athena chose to punish Medusa, and Poseidon faced no repercussions from this affair as, according to patriarchal standards, he only sexually objectified a woman, which is his right, hence he was not judged as acting immorally.

Through the oral tradition of storytelling and later through written accounts, the Medusa Myth was embraced by the generations that followed and has become deeply embedded in the collective unconscious mind. More than that, it has emerged as truth in our conscious mind as well. New myths or paradigms are accepted only if the old myths no longer function. To begin the process of change, it is important to remember that a

myth is not truth. Therefore, a reimagined myth with new concepts that match our desire for a balanced society must be considered.

The Medusa Myth, created by men, is a warning to women that men have control over any power that women may possess and that men can take away that power (Perseus). Medusa represents the concept of the beautiful and dangerous monster that men fear - the monster that holds the power to render him biopolitically impotent. She is not innocent nor is she controllable or shapeless. Therefore, men must dominate this threat to protect their own illusion of superiority. A feminist lens challenges the Greek patriarchal rendition of Medusa. Medusa speaks for all women who cannot.

The society or culture of American women embodies many of the patriarchal themes contained in the Greek Myth of Medusa. Early North American settlers brought with them the gender-based traditions passed down for generations from their European ancestors – the traditional role of women was included in that society. Today, many American women continue to emulate the roles of womanhood inherited from the history of Greco-Roman myths and Christian religious myths. When women do not conform, are likely subject to additional forms of violence beyond that to which even acceptable women are subject every day. In religious and other historical Occidental myths, violence is often clearly articulated through representations of women in male gaze (representational violence), where women, who are highly transgressive, are projected as undesirable - even monstrous or possessing powers of evil - as they reflect undesirable, forbidden traits to women in Western society. Transgressive women may also be punished in myths, removed from important social positions, or they may be entirely altogether erased from the male gaze as they are too transgressive to even exist within the

gendered moral codes of patriarchy, too much of a threat to heterosexual masculine privilege. All actions serve as examples to women in Western culture that this behavior, this appearance is prohibited for them. This theme emerges in the myth of Medusa.

Similar logic surfaces in the Greek myth of Medusa where women who do not conform to the beauty standards and behaviors demanded of them in patriarchy are re-projected as monsters and as dangerous to society, and then entirely eliminated from it. While the myth may be used in Occidental civilization to ‘teach’ woman how to behave in patriarchy, in fact, as Bowers notes: “Medusa’s mythical image has functioned like a magnifying mirror to reflect and focus Western thought as it relates to women, including how women think about themselves” (1990). Hence, the myth, in fact, uncovers masculine insecurity at the potential agency of women. A feminist, postcolonial re-reading of the Medusa myth suggests men fear that women’s beauty as regarded by men is a trap that would seek to diminish their control over women. Men lose their agency when sexually mesmerized by women. Therefore, it is critical that men violate women to manage women’s sex appeal, to mitigate women’s control over them. As control over women is necessary to the agency of men in patriarchy, women’s agency is likely regarded as an extreme threat to their livelihood, as examined.

In Susan Bowers’ article, “Medusa and the Female Gaze”, the author explores the Medusa Myth through the eyes of Medusa and the concept of the female gaze. Bowers states: “Medusa was a powerful goddess at a time when female authority was dominant and the power to be feared was feminine” (1990). The danger in committing to this loyalty is that dominance in the polarity (female dominance) is still dominance when the

desired goal is balance – not dominance. As Mack describes Medusa’s gaze, she is in full control of men:

The threat posed by the (female) gaze in the image is here made extreme and irreversible: the gaze of Medusa does not simply challenge your own status as subject of the (her) gaze but robs you of it. In the instant that you look upon the monster's face, a hard-and-fast subject-object relation is established in which Medusa monopolizes the position of subject and relegates you, now blind as stone, as only and fully her object. The power of Medusa is quite specific: she does not allow another to occupy the position of subject of the gaze; or, to put the stress elsewhere, she does not allow herself to be the object of another's gaze. (2002)

Mack’s quote proposes that Medusa has not only reversed the power of the male gaze, but has seized for herself in an extreme way the essence of the male gaze and everything it stands for, i.e., authority, domination, power, control, devaluing and dehumanizing women – in her case – men.

Helene Cixous’ article “The Laugh of the Medusa” re-interprets the traditional myth of Medusa to present essentially a feminist revision of that myth. In her version, Medusa is not deadly. Cixous writes:

Almost everything is yet to be written by women about femininity: about their sexuality, that is, its infinite and mobile complexity, about their eroticization, sudden turn-ons of a certain miniscule-immense area of their bodies; not about destiny, but about the adventure of such and such a



drive, about trips, crossings, trudges, abrupt and gradual awakenings,  
discoveries of a zone at one time timorous and soon to be forthright.

(1976)

In this quote, Cixous captures the heart of the challenge of feminism. Seeking balance requires women to discover and unapologetically own every aspect of themselves as females. With the feminist literature written over the past 20 plus years, we have not scratched the surface of inspiring womankind to embrace their sexuality without guilt and without requiring permission from men.

Gods and monsters both come from inside us, and function because of our psychology and our culture – they reflect our own fears. To date, men have dominated almost every written word from philosophy to acceptable ways to live our lives. Hence, in rewriting the Medusa Myth, the challenge is that in reclaiming these narratives, women are rewriting history from a feminist perspective that demands that women be seen as full human beings, not as stereotypes in a male gaze. The purpose is to inspire women to think about why the myth violates them by examining its link to the mistreatment of women in their own societies. Instead of being represented through limited stereotypes, these feminist revisions represent women as multiple individuals with different responses to society, and as those who have the agency to exist in society despite challenging its norms: as individuals with unique footprints. Cixous demands that women write themselves back into history with a genre of independent freethinking rather than suppression. She invites women to live and to participate and contribute to life.

Cixous' proposal is a great start for women to have a voice and take control of their place. However, thinking of Medusa as a beautiful and strong woman with power,

when in fact her power is not her own and prevents her from having any contact with men, and hence, from having any social value in patriarchy, ultimately plays into patriarchal dominance and perpetrates a status quo demanding the subjugation of women. To challenge the myth is not to reference Medusa's beauty as her value, but to demand that she has the right to live and live freely regardless of what she looks like and does. The idea suggests that Medusa's transgressive nature is 'normal' and not threatening to men.

In her article, "The Language of the Black Medusa" Smarrt (2009) re-imagines Medusa. The Black Medusa is unapologetic for her being. Smarrt humanizes Medusa to empower women to reclaim their voice, "In turn, through Medusa's body, face, voice or gestures, black women can reclaim and rewrite their own existence" (2009, p153). The reimagining of this story inspires women of color to align with Medusa's power and in a sense empowers them to establish their value as humans and important members of society.

This feminist re-visioning of the Medusa Myth and other Greek myths, such as Pandora, Hercules and Medusa, were narrated by men and hence catered to male privilege. It is for this reason that the representation of Medusa has perpetuated negative women's stereotypes as the "Other." To understand and discern the superficial quality of women's apparent power and façade of control, I propose to the reader a different perspective of Medusa's power. The basis of an alternative interpretation of Medusa stems from the analysis of the myth of Medusa's power beyond the superficial story. That is, Medusa does have the power to change men to stone; however, that power is neither inherent nor of her own choosing. Does Medusa have power of her own or is she

a slave to that singular power thrust upon her as punishment for being in the crossfire of patriarchy by challenging men's authority? Nonetheless, men's anxiety about women and the possibility that women may rule in their own world - a world devoid of and that functioned well without men - made it necessary to conquer the woman leading such a world - a 'monster' as projected by men, thus making the whole world (men) safe. In his quote, Campbell ties historical times of crises to the need to create myths that seek to re-stabilize society by exerting even more violence against women:

The legend of Perseus beheading Medusa means, specifically, that 'the Hellenes overran the goddess's chief shrines' and 'stripped her priestesses of their Gorgon masks', the latter being apostrophic faces worn to frighten away the profane. That is to say, there occurred in the early thirteenth century B.C. an actual historic rupture, a sort of sociological trauma, which has been registered in this myth, much as what Freud terms the latent content of a neurosis is registered in the manifest content of a dream: registered yet hidden, registered in the unconscious yet unknown or misconstrued by the conscious mind. (1968)

Campbell suggests that the Medusa Myth reflects the sentiment of the time – cementing the idea that women are dangerous and must be controlled. Dehumanizing women justifies any violence used to manage the subversiveness and evil that women bring to the world. This notion has become part of our collective consciousness – the unspoken and accepted truth.

In our contemporary society, Medusa represents a metaphor for women's powerlessness and lack of control. The original myth of Medusa embraces a patriarchal

projection of power and violence, which underscores that any power Medusa possessed was dangerous to society. However, as explored earlier, feminists have interrogated that representation to suggest that negative representation of Medusa's power is really a façade stressing that Medusas' agency was threatening to masculinity and needed to be controlled through negative qualifications of her agency. Thus, the acceptance of seeing Medusa as powerful perpetuates a sexist society because her power, given to her by men, is not her own in the first place. We are not privy to who Medusa was apart from the patriarchal lens because we only know of her through a patriarchal narrative that can only project Medusa in terms of its own patriarchal dictates.

### **The Body and Dance: Patriarchy**

Paralleling Medusa's patriarchal bondage, the dancer is dependent on her conformity to societal norms concerning body type, attitude, obedience and the approval of a patriarchal society for acceptance. Culture as it pertains to dance and today's dance industry as a societal institution dictates the 'normal' and valuable in American culture. Societal institutions also influence how that same culture defines what is deviant from the norm - the "Other." In the United States, the norm generally turns on the image of a racially white, heterosexual man who is Christian and of upper-class status. Hence, deviance in the U.S. is marked by human beings who do not explicitly conform to this norm, including all women, people of color, anyone who is not cisgender, and those who practice any religion but Christianity. This suggests that the 'normal' human body in American culture is the racially white, heterosexual male, of upper-class status.

Most all civilizations of the world use dance to express their worldviews, customs and cultural values. Dance scholars embrace the importance of dance as it reflects our cultural society, including social behavior. Women, comprising most of the dance industry, are underpaid and devalued.

Based on the style of dance, many layers of stereotypes comprise the dance industry - commercial, ballet, modern, hip hop and break dancing to name only a few. Those dancers who progress to professional status may fall into the category of practitioner or scholar/academic. With either category comes stereotypes which have achieved myth status. "If they are teaching dance, they didn't make it in dance." Ironically, 'a thinking' dancer practitioner is not respected in academia or among other dancers. Dancers must focus on the choreography, which is male dominated, and not their individual thought or interpretation of the subject matter, in essence, conform to male gaze projected onto dancers. A practitioner is one who is an active performer within their field. Usually, the practitioner is fully focused on the physicality of the craft.

An academic or scholar studies the psychology of the dancer, the cultural roots of dance movement (anthropology), the physical movement of dance (science), and more. The academic side discovers important statistics that quantifies the value of dance movement. For example, as Desmond (1993) points out: "Dance forms originating in lower -class or non-dominant populations present a trajectory of 'upward mobility' in which the dances are 'refined,' 'polished,' and often desexualized" (1993). The stereotypes associated with either practitioner or academic seem to perpetuate a wide divide between understanding that both will sustain the longevity of dance as a worthy artistic endeavor. If the dancer is a practitioner, the usual stereotype of a dancer's image

is thin, eager, and ready to please; all bodies must fit the dance aesthetic. Females should be beautiful and visually pleasing. A dancer's role in society is, thus, to be subservient to the choreographer, the teachers, and the spectators. Dancers base their self-worth on their accomplishments and the approval of peers and public, "If they tell me I'm great, I must be great." Obsessed with fame and success – dancers are wildly competitive and today's entertainment environment promotes that thinking. In reality, this stereotype is a prototype based on male fantasy.

Performance art in America is usually a reflection of its culture and social philosophy. The defining factor that sets dance apart from other art forms is that the dancer's body is the instrument that communicates almost all manner of expression. The dancer is the canvas, the color, the metal that brings the music and harmony to life. The Medusa Myth is rooted in the Western belief of male supremacy over all women, even more so over women of color. To challenge that belief could warrant ostracization from society and exile as the "Other." Americans boasted about creating a new culture without the shackles of tradition or prior culture when, in fact, the myths and stories they grew up with were deeply imbedded.

In Western society, the physical body, i.e., race, gender, ethnicity, shape, health, all play a role in determining one's social value and place in society. In the dance world, particularly in ballet, the body required for acceptance is not the norm for all human beings. Dance requires a protocol or set of rules, and this protocol consists of respect for your teacher, an attitude of dignity, and a disposition about one's body that becomes a required way of life. In other words, for acceptance as a dancer, one must fully inhabit the world of the dancer in all aspects of life. The way one sees and relates to one's body

will come to depend on the degree to which one's body is remade, reformed, made pliable, and pleasing to the biopower of social institutions relating to dance.

In fact, most human bodies must be reformed, painfully, to fit into the body type that is acceptable even enough to perform. Hence, while the facade of the body looks beautiful (the beautiful satin point shoes and pink ribbons) on the outside, the rigorous discipline required for training borders on violence, i.e., the bruising, bleeding feet, ultimately joint degeneration from years of impact and finally the emotional isolation when one is too old or injured to carry on. Thus, inside of those beautiful shoes are feet that bleed and are deformed from years of training. While the costumes are beautiful, the physical body without the adornment required for dance is a vision of skeleton-like features. According to the National Institute of Health (2014), approximately 37% of ballet dancers (female) were reported to have eating disorders: "The study concluded that dancers had a three times higher risk of suffering from eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa and EDNOS, specifically designed services for this population should be considered" (National Institute of Health, 2014).

In the United States, the dance culture is primarily popular dance such as various forms of hip hop, jazz and commercial dance. The point of most art forms is to communicate. Popular dance as an art form reflects the American value for superficiality. The training is not focused on ballet as a measure of excellence. Acceptance is based on stage presence, charisma, training and networking. Most importantly, these forms of dance are male-dominated. In contrast, concert dance, such as major ballet and contemporary dance companies, i.e., American Ballet Theatre, New York City Ballet, Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre to name a few, uphold the

standards of the elite dancer – for females, the patriarchal image of a ballet dancer, rigorous training and technique.

According to the updated Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre website, the popular company was founded in 1958 by Alvin Ailey and a group of young, black, modern dancers and was created “to carry out his vision of “a company dedicated to enriching the American modern dance heritage and preserving the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience” (2021). Although a contemporary modern dance company, training is rigorously ballet and modern genres, highlighting highly trained male dancers but accepting a balance of primarily black, talented male and female company members. The masterful Alvin Ailey production, *Revelation*, is well known and important because it reflects Ailey’s African-American cultural heritage. One section of this work is entitled “Sinner Man.” The concept of the choreography for “Sinner Man” is that the dancers portray human repentance for their sins. The movement is aggressive and dynamic. “Sinner Man” is a trio of shirtless males wearing long black pants so that the lines of their bodies are evident. The physique of the African-American male is highlighted – strong and athletic yet graceful and powerful. The male- oriented choreography is difficult, testing athleticism and stamina.

Viewing this and other dances made specifically for male dancers led me to question the authority and almost unachievable perfection required by ballet for women. I would inquire, for example, why women dancers continue to strive for the skeleton like appearance and body deforming training? While men are required to undergo rigorous physical training, the image of their physique is one of physical health and strength.



Until recently, men did not undergo the painful and deforming training in pointe – the articulation of the feet to balance on the toes.

Ballet defines a criterion for excellence much like standardized testing provides a measure by which to determine whether one may advance to the next level. The rigidity of the techniques and aesthetics generally associated with dance reflect in the unchanging nature of classical dance and with it, the unspoken ideologies accompanying that unchanging nature. By the standards set in ballet, dancers in all other forms of dance performance may analyze their own skills and abilities.

Today, the dance community is torn between the idea that, while ballet has been accepted as a truly valuable artistic technique that forms the physical standard of training as a base of all other styles and forms of dance, ballet also signifies the continued dominance of white elitists and their biopolitical power within dance in the U.S. Dancers are required to have precision, dedication and passion, but beyond those traits, there is an intense need for acceptance and approval of their body image and movements of their bodies from a world of faceless peers, teachers, and spectators. The intense training required of the physical demands to create artistic and beautiful movement in dance values conformity, but there is an implied loss of individuality. Particularly, as a member of a dance company, conformity plays a main role in success as a dancer. This may lead to one's alienation from the body, especially for women, who are taught to reform their bodies, for example, through heavy dieting, so that they can manipulate their bodies to perform as they 'should' perform. The female dancer soon learns that her body is a form of art and must be 'pleasing' to the eye. Many dance teachers ingrain the idea into the minds of their young students that good bodies, bodies that can handle dance and that are

pleasing to watch in performance, must be a thin silhouette with nothing that would identify that silhouette as female, such as curves.

For dancers, their bodies are not their own but a product of patriarchy rooted in competition. To earn recognition as a dancer is to accept the demands required of them without question. Competition is unhealthy when we wreck our emotional, mental and physical health for the hope of a moment of glory. Karen Schupp's, "Dancing the 'American Dream'", talks about dance competition culture as promoting capitalistic values. Our culture appears to encourage young female dancers to flaunt their bodies by the way they dress and act. Watching young females in competition dance trying to out sparkle and attract the most attention by wearing the skimpiest outfits smacks of exploitation – an early start to confusion about their own self-respect, appropriate self-care that prioritizes their own health and well-being as humans and patriarchal values. Young competitive dancers are groomed as products of patriarchy and the male gaze. Competition dance has evolved into its own culture in the dance community. As Schupp notes: "Dance competition is heavily influenced by trends in commercial dance, or dance used in the service of selling a product" (Schupp, 2018).

Competition is healthy when there is good sportsmanship. Competition encourages us to do the things we need to do to be the best we can be. Nevertheless, the problem is that this competition in dance is rooted in the need to reform one's body and based on the idea that one's body is not good enough unless it conforms to regulations set by others. These values oppose the meaning of dance as an art. The woman's body demands more reformation to be accepted than does the male dancer's body.

The intangible notion of the female body as a commodity to be controlled has been elevated to tradition and incorporated into the rules of biopower that act as a blockage for acceptance to all except the elite white Christian male – the creator of the “Other.” Concepts indelibly etched into tradition are almost impossible to change. No one wants to be labeled as the “Other” for breaking tradition. No one wants to be alone, so we sometimes stay silent.

This feminized body is also racialized in that its demands reflect Western beauty norms. In ballet, the shapeless white body represents a young innocence and purity, a sexual purity and condition allowed only for racially white women in Western culture. A mature female body regardless of color deviates from the image required in ballet. A mature female body distracts from the ‘moral image’ that ballet seeks to portray. Thus, the dark-skinned voluptuous body also does not meet the standard placed for successful acceptance. Moreover, any female regardless of color will not be accepted if the physique does not meet the ballet standard image – a body that men do not fear, a body that implies dependence in its innocence, and is easily controllable. This thinking supports severe eating disorders among female dancers to emulate the thin body type resonant with the imagined, socially acceptable bodies of racially white women. This leads to a rejection of dance bodies that present natural curves or shapes that cannot attain that silhouette form, including those of women of color. In 2016, only approximately, 2.27 percent of female ballerinas in the U.S. were of African-American origin (DATAUSA, 2016).

In American society, it is not enough to have training and proficiency in her craft. Appearance and superficial beauty based on Western norms of beauty can be the deciding

factors for success. In the dance community, a woman's attitude and appearance determine if she will get a job and influences whether or not she will be included in the dance community - her self-worth as a dancer against that of her peers. Such judgments may impact her self-worth ultimately as a person. These judgments resonate with how women are judged in Western society, as the emphasis is placed on superficial beauty and body image to determine their social value. Her success is dependent on the degree to which she buys into this illusion of her self-worth. All these factors point to a modern-day alignment with Medusa and her façade of power.

Dancers create a strong appearance of strength and beauty. They portray the vessel to convey the artist's or choreographer's voice, not that of the dancer. Dancers have self-discipline and self-control but no voice, promoting self-isolation and discouraging individualism. These requirements teach female dancers to "Other" their bodies for the purpose of controlling and managing bodies through violence. How many times has a dancer heard from peers or has she voiced, "As long as I get to dance, I will take what I can get. If I am not treated well and not paid much money, at least I get to dance." For acceptance into the society of dancers and to be able to dance will determine her self-worth.

So, why give up your 'self' to face the disappointments and hardships to be in the 'elite club' of dancers? Most of the time a dancer has trained for so many years, since childhood, that dance is where they feel most proficient and self-confident. Dance has almost become a subservient alter ego. Dancers invest all aspects of their humanity in the art and craft of dance - a perfect scenario to interject patriarchal expectations. Dancers

create the “Other” in themselves to satisfy the male gaze. Professional female dancers are proficient in creating the illusion of beauty and power.

A kaleidoscope of cross discrimination is apparent as much in dance as in any other art or industry. Croft points out: “Other issues that arose around female choreographers were structural: discussions framed women as teachers, not leaders...” (2015). Patriarchy presents only one of the many layers (racial, ethnic, etc.) of discrimination in the dance world. Using my own experience as a choreographer, when I create work, I often question whether my movement is too feminine. Most of the prestigious choreographers who get recognition are male. My fear is that if my choreography is too feminine, the societal institutions responsible for grants and funding, guided by patriarchal biopolitical power, will not accept it. Male choreography is influenced by patriarchy with controlled expression of emotion, physical difficulty in execution and contains an exaggerated and almost rigid precision of movement. Even my name gives me a slight advantage because the reader would not know whether Corey is male or female. Anonymity of gender produces an even playing field in a world of patriarchal rule.

While many women strive to have a stronger voice and to forge a path to greater equality with men, theories have emerged that propose a genderless society. For example, Judith Butler (2007) disagrees with a central assumption of feminist theory, which proposes that there is an identity, and a subject that must be represented in politics and language that is, gendered. For Butler, sex and gender are social constructs and, whether one is born biologically male or female, behavior is a learned concept dictated by social beliefs, in this case, patriarchy. She theorizes that people learn to behave in

ways that will allow them to fit into society. Butler argues that gender is performative, that is, socially constructed by speech and nonverbal communication that defines and maintains identity. No identity exists behind the acts that "express" gender because these acts construct an illusion of stable gender identity. Butler theorizes: "If the appearance of being a gender is thus an effect of culturally influenced acts, then there exists no solid, universal gender: constituted through the practice of performance, the gender 'woman' (like the gender 'man') remains contingent and open to interpretation and re-signification" (Butler, 2007). Butler's theory is important because in western society gender determines one's acceptance and place in society, appropriate normative social behavior and status.

Butler's theory is relevant to some of the issues examined in this thesis because a genderless society would mitigate patriarchy. However, the undoing of patriarchy by the establishment of a genderless society requires the undoing of the Christian dogma that condemns women as evil and subservient to men. Only then can society begin to rethink and rewrite the moral rules of lifestyles, value systems and beliefs. If the art of dance was not influenced by patriarchal tenets, the health and wellbeing of the dancer would be considered in conjunction with the strenuous requirements of the craft. Would the stereotype of the ballet dancer as a young, white, shapeless female silhouette continue to be the norm?

### **Reflections: Women's Voices Unsilenced**

In our contemporary society, many feminists have interpreted the Medusa Myth as a symbol for empowering women when, on the contrary, Medusa has been interpreted in patriarchy as a metaphor for women's powerlessness and lack of control. Women who

emulate Medusa embrace a patriarchal projection that underscores the fact that Medusa's power was given to her by the men who wrote the myth. Her power is a façade rather than the reality that she has no power of her own. Medusa has been depicted in this way by the men who wrote the myth, as seeking negative forms of power in society that aim to destabilize it, to violently manage her potential to dominate men and to prevent women from thinking Medusa might be any sort of role model for their agency. The interpretation and acceptance of this façade as the only means by which women could gain power and the repercussions of such negative choices perpetuate a sexist society that limits the agency of women and their potential in society.

In this paper, I examined how the Medusa Myth as it pertains to women's studies contains themes that have negatively influenced a women's stereotype as the "Other" – one who must be conquered and controlled. As an example of patriarchal influence and control over women's bodies, I analyzed the art of dance as it highlights the need for approval, acceptance of status quo and at times repression of our true nature. I propose that these stereotypes are historically parallel to the ancestry of women's inherited roles in Western culture. Numerically, women have more visual representation in dance, hence, one would think dance would be the one art form that should empower women and be guided by women. Men continue to predominate in roles of moral authority in dance. However, dance is a microcosm of patriarchy where patriarchal control is even more intense. Men, themselves, are subject to intense regulation, making them in return demand of women dancers even more intense regulation of their bodies.

A recurrent theme found throughout my research suggested that to challenge patriarchal ideology means to disobey the norms of society. Those who dare to deviate

from following the rules set by patriarchy are labeled as 'different' and in need of punishment or discipline. This is reflected in the morals proposed by the Medusa Myth, which perpetuates patriarchal ideologies that affirm the violence and lack of control and power attributed to women. In the Medusa Myth, slaying the monster kills the possibility of changing a patriarchal society. Stemming from an ancient patriarchal heritage, it follows that later Western society would create its own set of norms and myths that would progress as tradition and create its own biopower system. Still today, in Western society women are seen as objects with a primary role of pleasing the male gaze. Because of that male gaze, superficial beauty is a significant factor upon which women base their self-worth. Women will never achieve the equality and status we crave as long as there is a biopower of societal institutions influenced by patriarchy that continue to stress women's bodies as central to their self-worth as human beings. In the world of dance, domination by men has created an illusion of 'perfection' unattainable by most females, thus marginalizing their image of self-worth from the moment they enter into dance. Ironically, such intensification results in even more violence against women.

Ancient Greek myth was created by male philosophers to guide humans about how to live. They were the moral authoritarians. The Medusa Myth's message warned women to adhere to their roles or suffer the consequence of turning into a monster or the "Other"; but today's interpretation of the Medusa Myth embodies a message that supersedes that theme. Important and relevant patriarchal themes made possible by silence include: biopolitical power and violent methods of patriarchy necessary to control women; stereotype of the "Other"; religious dogma that women are inferior passed from



generation to generation and accepted as truth by unquestioning women – all are made possible by women’s obedient silence that allows patriarchy to thrive.

Western society has developed many women’s stereotypes, embraced outworn myths and created roles that women should play in Western society in order to maintain patriarchy. Although there have been many changes in the way women think about their place in society, in particular in the U.S. where I reside, women still have a long way to go towards being understood as equal and as being fully human per human rights standards. As a female who was reared and lives in American society, I sometimes fear speaking out about my observations and my experiences as a woman. The backlash and consequences that may ensue if I speak out terrorizes me. Will labeling as an activist cause my voice to disappear in a sea of stereotypes? When a woman speaks up and claims her voice, is she a victim or a villain or both? Patriarchy sees any possible stereotype with no rhyme or reason that connects stereotypes except to ‘manage’ women.

Through hundreds of years, the myth that stepping out of our prescribed gender role (in Medusa’s case as priestess) in patriarchy subjects women to being projected as the “Other” in society lives on. Salyer proposed, “Myth lived and continues to live in literature. Here the advantages of writing come into play as myths are recorded, enhanced, and reimagined in the written word” (Salyer, 2020). The longevity of the Medusa Myth has been preserved through literature and writing through generation after generation. Medusa’s story is supported by patriarchy emphasizing that those rules of society are based in ‘truth’, when in fact they are based in the desires of heterosexual men to remain privileged in patriarchy. Salyer quoted Thomas Kuhn’s observation that “as anomalies multiply, the old paradigm begins to fail and a new one to emerge” (2020). As

society evolves, old myths that reflected the notions of the time fail to instruct humans how to live and new myths are created to concretize updated attitudes and knowledge. Many women have worked hard to change the patriarchal status quo despite at times harsh resistance from both men and women. I propose that a revised myth is in order to introduce a new paradigm supporting balance of male/female power.

Power and status are the drivers of patriarchy; both power and status are displayed by whose words are used and who gets to speak. For men to have power over women - women must be silent; women oblige with their silence beginning at childhood. Female children are taught that, regardless of their true feelings, to be accepted they should act reserved, modest and accommodating. Some of us learned by mere implication that men held the power, that they were superior, stronger and smarter than women. To avoid appearing 'stupid' or 'too loud' females were taught to "suppress our authentic voices" (Kushner, 2019). These assumptions were the cultural norms then and still linger today. Women withhold their personal narrative about what they think of their lives in exchange for approval and inclusion. The concept of powerlessness through silence and the notion that religious patriarchy has been successful in part due to the silence of women cannot be ignored.

Silence does not mitigate oppression. On the contrary, silence supports the status quo. Our voices are essential to our humanity; without a voice, we are dehumanized. Women's history is themed with a history of silence. Solnit observes, "When we women offer our experience as our truth, as human truth, all the maps change...The world changes" (Solnit, 2017).

Silence is the opposite of communication; women's silence separates us from other humans, which lowers the chance of rebellion against the oppression of patriarchy. Having a voice means "the ability to speak up, to participate, to experience oneself..." (Solnit, 2017). Whenever our training 'not to bother people' keeps us from asking for help, or we are passed over at a meeting when we have something to say, or are subjected to criticism for speaking up the unspoken message is that women should not be heard. Speaking out, being heard and being believed are central to our rights as humans.

Silence is utilized as a weapon in patriarchy to allow men to assume power and subordinate females. Ifechelobi quotes *Timothy*, Chapter 2, Verses 11-12 in the *Bible*: "Let a woman learn in quietness, in entire submissiveness. I allow no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to remain in quietness and keep silence" (2014). A person without a voice has no sense of belonging. She cannot determine her life and place in society. Centuries of patriarchy has instilled attitudes of acceptance and non-questioning of male supremacy. Many women mistake religious dogma for spirituality and embrace the devaluation and exclusion as God's will.

Feminism highlights not only women's rights of equality but emphasizes the importance of having a voice that is heard and recognized as fully human. The feminist movement has made progress. With global liberalization the hope was that all social institutions within societies worldwide would become more gender sensitive and provide equal access for women, for example, to education and employment. Feminist activists, educators and authors have worked relentlessly to make strides in securing women's rights and eliminating gender inequality. Actions such as the "Me Too" movement are important to finally bring justice for wrongdoing, and more importantly, because women

are speaking up and insisting that their voices be heard. Fear of stereotyping may cause misplaced conformity that is, interpreting conformity as going along with abuse or degradation for fear of being violated, which is oppression. Silence signifies the status quo of oppression as the experience of women. Women stay silent in patriarchy because they have been subservient throughout history.

Silencers are all around us – peers, teachers, mentors family and friends content to live the status quo may discourage others from speaking out, voicing opinions or making waves. As the Medusa Myth echoes, destruction is necessary to disrupt the status quo. In breaking silence, women hold the power to redefine our societal values to include the significance of women as valuable and contributing members of society. However, a resurgence of religious fundamentalism of all backgrounds, from Christian to Hindu to Islamic societies, mainly in the 1990s, has slowed this progress down (Srivastava et al., 2017). Religious institutions created by men have continued to ingrain religious beliefs, rituals and practices tainted by Christian patriarchy, in relation to this study, that continue to bar women from finding their voice and speaking out.

While there are those who would emulate and draw on what they attribute as Medusa's power, I feel that it may be worthwhile to consider that ascribing to social roles and behaviors meant to manage women's agency in patriarchy can no longer be a choice for women. As females, we have inherent power that will serve us well as we explore and tap into our voices and seize the real power that is our birthright. It is important to talk about these unspoken rules to shed light on how they affect every human and to understand the process of forging a better life for ourselves and for future generations.

Today more than ever before women still struggle to tell their own story and remain marginalized by a dominant male culture (Kushner, 2019).

Fear of stereotyping and exclusion prompts misplaced conformity, that is, going along with abuse or degradation, which is oppression, Humans need to interact with other humans, and the fear of being alone and judged emphasizes the need to conform and to remain silent. Ironically, through our voices, we reclaim power, gain inclusion, and realize recognition as human beings. The challenge is not women rewriting history – the challenge is to inspire women to talk their experiences in an honest and unapologetic way, unashamed of differences from men, emotional make up, and bodies (not the bodies depicted in popular media). As females, we have inherent power to reclaim our voices and discover the latent power that we have always possessed but have not summoned. Thus, emerges in what I strived to examine as the untold narrative of Medusa.

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