

APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning: Surf & Surrender

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ABSTRACT

Title of Document: MELPOMENE & THE TRINITY OF MOURNING:
SURF & SURRENDER

Leah Clare Michaels, Master of Fine Arts, 2019

Directed By: Associate Professor, Kathy O'Dell
Department of Visual Arts

As an artist, historian, feminist, social Catholic, and lover of the ocean, I pursue feminist mystical storytelling practices and traditions as a form of social justice. In my thesis exhibition, I seek to subvert traumatic patriarchal narratives by connecting the rape of the ocean in ecology to violence against women. I invoke Melpomene, Greek muse of sorrow and tragedy, as a symbolic presence, while I appear in the projected video as a surfer and priestess. In these roles, I perform last-rite rituals for the ocean, accompanying the sea as “she” is dying. As viewers move through and around the video installation, which serves as a contemporary altarpiece, they create metaphoric currents, acting as bodies of water, while bearing witness to the rituals and mourning the ocean’s impending passing.

MELPOMENE & THE TRINITY OF MOURNING: SURF & SURRENDER.

By

Leah Clare Michaels.

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, Baltimore County, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
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Preface

*“What if we were born in a tidepool and our attraction to the sea is a coming home?”*¹

-Jonathan White

As I paddle out on my board to greet the morning waves, I’ve never felt so grounded. It may seem strange to consider the swelling force of the sea as a space of stability, but that’s how I see her. “In the beginning, there was only water,”² a quote that always gives me comfort as I meditate on our oceans and origins. I view the ocean and nature as the great manifestation of the divine feminine.³ I see the existence of the ancient relationship between the moon, the tides, and women and people who bleed.⁴ These sacred cycles between the moon and the ocean have created life. I move with this grand body of water, teeming with so many manifestations of being that have grown and evolved over millennia, and I am reminded that this power has remained in a continuous flow. “Several ancient traditions share an association of the seas with the origins of life,” geographer Nick Ford and sports sociologist David Brown write, citing examples of “‘the deep, the face of the waters’ in Genesis, the ‘primal chaos’ of the Greeks, and the ‘sea of milk’ of Hindu cosmology, which echo the modern scientific notion of the ‘soup of life.’”⁵ I feel this connection in my body as I sway with the sea. Humans are, after all,

¹ Jonathan White, *Tides: The Science and Spirit of the Ocean* (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2017), 27.

² “The First Storytellers,” *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, episode 3, PBS, 1988, viewed November 19, 2018,

<https://www.netflix.com/search?q=joseph%20campbell&jbv=70281117&jbp=0&jbr=0>.

³ See Glossary for my use of “Divine Feminine.”

⁴ See Glossary for my use of “Women and People Who Bleed.”

⁵ Nick Ford and David Brown, *Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment and Narrative of the Dream Glide* (London: Routledge, 2006), 9.

beings made of 70% water, living on a planet of 71% water.⁶ Bodies of water within bodies of water.

One of the biggest parts of surfing is waiting. I sit on my board, my feet dangling in the salt water, as I watch, breathe, and read the sea, waiting for that perfect wave. Thoughts begin to move throughout my consciousness, a mini-ocean of my own, with considerations that focus and flow in a push and pull of outside currents. I move my hands over the rough and sticky wax that covers my grey fiberglass⁷ board, and I begin to imagine the origins of this ancient ritual. My eyes close, and I see: the early people of West Africa gliding on their planks and engaging with Mami Wata;⁸ the Incan people weaving their boards out of reeds as they thank Mama Qucha⁹ for their bounty of fish; and the Hawaiian people performing board-carving ceremonies and singing wave chants led by a kapu¹⁰ for Nāmaka.¹¹ All these ocean deities are feminine, and even more than

⁶ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) National Ocean Service, "How Many Oceans Are There?" June 1, 2013, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/howmanyoceans.html>.

⁷ Fiberglass surf boards are a major part of surf culture; however, they are incredibly dangerous for people and for the environment. A French surf company called NOTOX has developed a cork surf board, and I hope for a strong push toward availability of such boards and an overall more ecological shift in surf culture in the future. "Who We Are | NOTOX Surfboards," accessed April 3, 2019, <http://www.notox.fr/en/who-we-are/>.

⁸ Art historian Henry John Drewal introduces the ocean goddess Mami Wata by stating, "Every child swims in its mother's womb before taking a first breath of air. In this sense and in others 'water is life.' In Africa and the African Atlantic world, people recognize the essential and sacred nature of water by honoring and celebrating a host of water spirits.... Mami Wata, often portrayed with the head and torso of a woman and the tail of a fish, is at once beautiful, jealous, generous, seductive, and potentially deadly.... Mami Wata's very name, which be translated as 'Mother Water' or 'Mistress Water,' is pidgin English, a language developed to lubricate trade." Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2008), 23.

⁹ Mama Qucha is an Incan ocean goddess, often associated with the practice of fishing. For in-depth details, see Paul H. Gelles, *Water and Power in Highland Peru: The Cultural Politics of Irrigation and Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 87.

¹⁰ A kapu is a spiritual leader in Hawaiian tradition. For in-depth details, see Scott Laderman, "The Complicated History of Surfing - Scott Laderman," TED-Ed, November 15, 2017, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/the-complicated-history-of-surfing-scott-laderman>.

¹¹ Nāmaka is a Hawaiian ocean goddess. For in-depth details, see Vivian L. Thompson and Marilyn Kahalewai, *Hawaiian Myths of Earth, Sea, and Sky* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 14.

that, maternal.

As a white woman artist, historian, feminist, and social Catholic, I do not wish to romanticize these cultures. Rather, I wish to state that while each origin culture of surfing has its own complex mysticism practices, gender rules, and hierarchies of who was allowed to surf and where, women were at least included (fig. 1) in spiritual worship as powerful figures in mythology and in surfing as a practice.¹² It is a fact that within the Hawaiian surf practice, for example, women were equally included, there were breaks¹³ reserved for Queens,¹⁴ and these feminine deities were deeply loved, revered, and sometimes feared. These mythologies and stories were passed down through generations, imparting the importance of the ocean as a feminine life force. I see the practice of surfing as many expressions, including ritual and a return to our origins in the ocean.

The following came next in this history: colonization, violence, destruction of cultures,¹⁵ forced conversions to Calvinism, a conservative sect of Christianity, along

¹² Geographer Nick Ford and sociologist David Brown state: "Despite many romanticized narrative accounts, the history of surfing, although mixed sex, is strongly textured by gender hierarchy and power relations. While the origins of surfing remain contested, it is not disputed that men and women have practiced *he'e nalu* (wave-sliding) or surfing in the Polynesian Sandwich Isles since at least the 5th century AD.... [S]urfing was 'a highly regarded and integral part of Hawaiian culture. Kings and queens did it. Princes and princesses did it. Kahunas and warriors did. And so did almost everyone else.'" Ford and Brown, *Surfing and Social Theory*, 93.

¹³ A "break" or a "surf-break" is a permanent or semi-permanent location where waves form in response to sand, rock, and/or reef configurations on the ocean floor.

¹⁴ Regarding Hawaiian female royalty and surfing, it has been reported that when Princess Kaneamuna's burial cave was discovered in 1905, her surfboard was found to be one of the main objects buried with her. Becky Little, "Women Surfers Have Been Riding Waves Since the 1600s," History.com, August 15, 2018, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.history.com/news/women-surfers-1600s-hawaii-princess-gidget>.

¹⁵ The narrator of the 2011 documentary *White Wash* describes this situation well: "When the English explorer James Cook arrived in the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, it was the first time surfing would be witnessed by a Westerner. Because of the European's pale skin and their unfamiliar custom of a hand shake, the Hawaiians believed Cook and his men to be ghosts. To the Hawaiians, they were referred to as Haole or 'breathless.' This marked the beginning of European colonial rule and the destruction of many cultural practices of the Hawaiian people including surfing. What's so unique is that Cook was given a mandate when he left Europe, and that mandate was non-interference with the native peoples and cultures he comes in contact with but he did anything but. Everywhere he killed natives." *White Wash*, dir. by Ted Woods (United States, 2011), film.

with banning of the surf ritual in the case of Hawaii, and a degradation of care and respect for the ocean, as she was no longer considered sacred. Much has been lost and thrown out of balance by this patriarchal history. Women and people who bleed, along with people of color, are removed from contemporary popular culture's surf narrative;¹⁶ rituals and mythologies are missing from a majority of surf practices; and it appears that the life of the ocean itself will soon be extinct. Humans' litany of offenses against the ocean includes massive, penetrative oil drilling, oil spills, pollution, plastic, the floating Great Pacific Garbage Patch,¹⁷ dumping of toxic waste, over-fishing, mass hunts of endangered species, and coral reef bleaching.¹⁸ All these actions – the symbiotic generators and results of climate change – add up to a type of environmental matricide and femicide, or what I call the “rape of the ocean.”

A small wave comes into view, and my focus is brought back to the ocean's presence. I use the weight of my body to turn my board around. I lie my body flush with the board and the surface of the sea and paddle fast enough to catch the wave. In one

¹⁶ More from the documentary *White Wash*: “In the mid 1960s, one of the world's most successful documentaries *The Endless Summer* came out. It really introduced surfing to a lot of people in America; it was a surfing documentary. The concept was following the summer around the world and what that would be like. One of the first places they went to was Africa and they went to Ghana and they filmed a very memorable sequence and in the sequence the two surfers, California surfers, were depicted as introducing surfing to Ghana, and the Ghanaians were so excited about it that they started stripping their shacks apart and taking the pieces of wood going out and surfing. The truth was the Ghanaians were surfing when they got there; they'd been surfing there for generations. Think how different our culture would have been if they would have told us that. People have been traveling the ocean and the seas since day one, to me that is the history of surfing.” Ibid.

¹⁷ The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a mass of trash now twice the size of Texas, floating in the Pacific. National Geographic Society, "Great Pacific Garbage Patch," October 9, 2012, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/great-pacific-garbage-patch/>.

¹⁸ The National Ocean Service explains this bleaching process: “When corals are stressed by changes in conditions such as temperature, light, or nutrients, they expel the symbiotic algae living in their tissues, causing them to turn completely white.” National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA's) National Ocean Service, "What Is Coral Bleaching?" March 15, 2010, accessed April 3, 2019, https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/coral_bleach.html.

motion, I place my hands on the board, push, and rise to stand. For a few moments, I breathe and feel the exhilarating power of the ocean as sparks of energy fly through my being. I simultaneously feel a calm oneness with the wave. My board glides back to the beach, and my feet reach the shore. I turn and carry my board back into the ocean to perform this ritual again.

She is dying.

Mourn with me.



Figure 1. J. G. Wood, *Surf Swimming by Sandwich Islands*, 1878. Engraving of the early surfing scene in Hawai'i. Bishop Museum.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the ocean.

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Chapter 1: Divine Light

*"I also use the camera to pay homage. I honor the thing I'm filming...I feel a bit like I'm a priest. The act of shooting is almost like a prayer."*¹⁹ – Pipilotti Rist

a. Oceans & Origins

My parents met at a social Catholic church community called Relay in Catsonville, Maryland. My Mom saw my Dad wearing a Catholic Worker²⁰ t-shirt after mass and decided to give him her business card. I always tell people that my parents looked good together on paper. They were both the oldest of four, both children of engineer fathers and homemaker mothers, both ambitious, and both social Catholics. Church and activism, in the form of liberal peaceful protests, went hand in hand. During one of these actions, they were arrested in 1989 at a protest²¹ with Philip Berrigan,²² one

¹⁹ Pipilotti Rist, "Interview with Rochelle Steiner," in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012), 542.

²⁰ The Catholic Worker Movement website explains that "On May 1, 1933, in the depths of the Great Depression, *The Catholic Worker* newspaper made its debut with a first issue of twenty-five hundred copies. Dorothy Day and a few others hawked the paper in Union Square for a penny a copy (still the price) to passersby. Today 203 Catholic Worker communities remain committed to nonviolence, voluntary poverty, prayer, and hospitality for the homeless, exiled, hungry, and forsaken. Catholic Workers continue to protest injustice, war, racism, and violence of all forms." "Catholic Worker Movement." The Catholic Worker Movement, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.catholicworker.org/>.

²¹ The protest was in response to Maryland Governor William Schaefer's sending, for the first time in the State's history, Maryland National Guardsmen out of the country to participate in "war games" – in this case to the Nicaraguan/Guatemalan border – as a deliberately provocative move. Schaefer's act took place soon after my parents had returned from a vaccine campaign in Nicaragua, so they were especially interested in joining Philip Berrigan and a handful of others in blocking the entrance to Martin State Airport in Middle River, MD, point of the Guardsmen's departure. Recap Interview with Mom, March 23, 2019.

²² So much has been written about Philip Berrigan that I shall provide the basics here in the form of his entry in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*: "Philip Francis Berrigan, American peace activist and former Roman Catholic priest (born Oct. 5, 1923, Two Harbors, Minn.—died Dec. 6, 2002, Baltimore, Md.), saw combat duty during World War II but later, after having been ordained a priest in 1955 and become active in the civil rights movement, came to be one of the 20th century's most militant pacifists. During the Vietnam War he and his brother, the Rev. Daniel J. Berrigan, engaged in numerous protest activities, were repeatedly imprisoned for their deeds, and served as inspiration for the peace activists of the era. In 1968, in

of our family friends, a former Roman Catholic priest, and an increasingly well-known activist at that time. My parents were also highly involved with covering the Pittston Coal Strike, 1989-1990,²³ along with many other social justice actions.

Incidentally, both of these actions occurred when my mom was pregnant with me.²⁴ While my parents' marriage didn't last, their agreement on my education did. I went to Catholic schools, from kindergarten through senior year of high school. Although there are many things about my all-girls Catholic high school education that were a little strange, the importance of service, social justice, social responsibility,²⁵ civil disobedience, leadership, and certain forms of feminism were always practiced, and that education, all together, is something I still appreciate. Outside of school, my mom took me to museums, one-woman shows about Dorothy Day, writer and social justice Catholic activist who started the Catholic Worker movement, and performances of *Godspell*, while my dad brought me to Pax Christi interfaith community discussions and peaceful anti-war

perhaps their most famous incident, the brothers and seven others—the 'Catonsville Nine,' as they came to be known—carried out a raid on the office of the Catonsville, Md., draft board and used homemade napalm to burn its files in the parking lot. Berrigan and Elizabeth McAlister, a nun, were married in 1973, whereupon both were excommunicated. They founded Jonah House in Baltimore, and in 1980 Berrigan helped found the Plowshares movement, through which he continued his activism.” Editors of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Philip Francis Berrigan," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified January 4, 2019, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Philip-Berrigan>.

²³ My mother, Dr. Melissa McDiarmid, was interviewing miners and workers whose healthcare had been rescinded after the mine had closed. My father, Charles William Michaels, Esq., acted as scribe during this time. Their efforts resulted in the publication of the article: Raymond Y. Demers, C. William Michaels, Robert Frank, Kathy Fagan, Melissa McDiarmid, and Theresa Rohr, "Termination of Health Benefits for Pittston Mine Workers: Impact on the Health and Security of Miners and Their Families," *Journal of Public Health Policy* 11, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 474-80. Interestingly, Wikipedia lists this article as a reference in its entry for the Pittston Coal Strike.

²⁴ Personal Anecdote: My Mom reminds me that she was suffering from severe morning and motion sickness, thanks to me and the tiny puddle jumper plane they were traveling in, as they were on their way to the Pittston Coal Strike.

²⁵ Mercy High School's curriculum included a required Social Responsibility class. I also would like to personally state that often the word "responsibility" can be paired with a negative connotation of forced obligation. I do this work because I *want* to, not because I feel obligated.

protests.²⁶

In addition to these influences, most important to me were the stories and the art, especially the visual narratives in the stained-glass windows of churches and paintings in museums. I became interested in the roles of women in the stories, the art, the institution, and the history of Catholicism – and of other faiths. At the same time, I was fascinated with mythology and astrology. My first Tarot deck was gifted to me on my thirteenth birthday. It wasn't until my late teens that I started to realize that mysticism, Catholicism, and the practice of resistance were more connected than not and that certain stories, which could be considered feminist, had been lost and/or purposefully removed from dominant religious narratives.²⁷ In terms of contemporary gender roles, women and people who bleed are still not allowed to be priests. The Vatican's recent treatment of the Nuns on the Bus²⁸ is yet another example of misogyny and a twisted sense of priorities of

²⁶ I was raised with the understanding that the institutions of Christianity and Catholicism have also lost their own way, as many have been forced to forget that Jesus was a Jewish radical leftist, mystic, storyteller, and healer. He challenged the hierarchies of the Roman Empire and the Pharisees. Gospels written by women were ripped out or left out of our current holy texts, and many are unaware of the history of mysticism within the Catholic Church.

²⁷ For example, the "Gnostic Gospels" – 13 books containing 52 texts, which were discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945 – include poetic writings, myths, and "secret books" that are attributed to Jesus but thought by mainstream Christians not to align with the New Testament. The "Gospel of Mary (Magdalene)" is one of these texts. For more on this topic, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

²⁸ Nuns on the Bus is a Catholic advocacy group in the United States who tour the country on a bus to work on various social justice issues, including universal healthcare. Pope Benedict XVI started a Vatican investigation of the group in 2012. *New York Times* reporter Laurie Goodstein describes the controversy: "The Vatican has appointed an American bishop to rein in the largest and most influential group of Catholic nuns in the United States, saying that an investigation found that the group had 'serious doctrinal problems.' The Vatican's assessment, issued on Wednesday, said that members of the group, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, had challenged church teaching on homosexuality and the male-only priesthood, and promoted 'radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith.' The sisters were also reprimanded for making public statements that 'disagree with or challenge the bishops, who are the church's authentic teachers of faith and morals.' During the debate over the health care overhaul in 2010, American bishops came out in opposition to the health plan, but dozens of sisters, many of whom belong to the Leadership Conference, signed a statement supporting it — support that provided crucial cover for the Obama administration in the battle over health care." Laurie Goodstein, "Vatican Reprimands U.S. Nuns Group," *The New York Times*, April 18, 2012, accessed April 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/19/us/vatican-reprimands-us-nuns-group.html>. I would also like to

power within the institution of the Catholic Church.

Our family also had a connection to Cape May, New Jersey – which figures largely in my thesis project. We spent as much time there as possible when I was growing up. I think of myself as having been raised both by the sea and by a city.

I loved the ocean and also happened to be obsessed with mermaids and siren folklore as a girl. I learned to swim, boogie-boarded, collected seashells, played in tide pools, witnessed horseshoe crabs slowly sauntering on the shore, watched pods of dolphins breaching out of the sea, and watched boys surf. When I was growing up, I never once saw a woman surfing.²⁹

I studied History at the University of Washington in Seattle for my undergraduate education. My focus was Classics, but our degree also required us to take classes on a variety of historical topics and periods. I became more familiar with Greek and Roman mythology during my sophomore year abroad in Ioannina, Greece, where I also created my first short documentary film. Film was used as a teaching tool in many of our classes both at UW and abroad, stimulating my interest in the medium and leading to my pursuit of filmmaking skills, which grew stronger in the co-writing and co-directing of my first

acknowledge that Pope Francis allowed this investigation to continue for the first few years of his term, ending the investigation in 2015.

²⁹ My young self was unaware that woman and people who bleed played an incredibly important role in the history of surfing. They are partially responsible for the revival of surfing. Writer Becky Little shares the history of one radical surf princess: “Princess Ka’iulani also helped revive the sport in Hawaii around that time (the 1800s) and even brought it to England, where she surfed the English Channel. Tragically, she died at age 23 in 1899 of inflammatory rheumatism, just a year after the United States annexed her kingdom.” Little, “Women Surfers Have Been Riding Waves Since the 1600s.” This exclusion of women and people who bleed and people of color continues today in contemporary popular culture and has an effect in day-to-day life. Two years ago, I was on the beach after a surf session talking to a man, also a surfer, and his children about surfing. His teenage son was walking out of the water with his board while his eight-year-old daughter was playing on the beach. I casually asked if his daughter had been surfing yet. He explained that he tried to teach her once, but she fell and choked on sea water. He ended this story with “maybe she does not like surfing because she’s a girl.”

feature-length documentary.³⁰ I have continued to work on technical skills, while gaining knowledge of the medium's history and theory, ever since. All these influences have led me to this moment in my work.

b. The Work

*"Where there is sorrow, there is holy ground."*³¹ – Oscar Wilde

My thesis project, titled, *Melpomene & The Trinity*³² of Mourning: Surf & Surrender, honors the ocean, bears witness to environmental loss, and acts as a final "Hail Mary" for radical change. A ritual of mourning is presented – a feminist surf performance of last rites for the ocean as I accompany her as she is dying. A space is created where viewers may move and mourn together.

As an artist, historian, feminist, social Catholic, and lover of the ocean, I invoke feminist mystical storytelling practices and traditions as a form of social justice. The

³⁰ *Rock, Rage & Self Defense: An Oral History of Seattle's Home Alive*, 2013, dir. Leah Michaels and Rozz Therrien. The film, which focuses on the origin story of a feminist punk grassroots self-defense organization that began in Seattle in the early 1990s, screened internationally at a variety of venues and festivals. See: <http://homealivedocumentary.tumblr.com/>.

³¹ Quoted from a letter that Oscar Wilde wrote in 1897, while imprisoned for homosexuality, and that his executor published posthumously in 1905 under the title *De Profundis*, the first words of Psalm 130 (Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* [1905; repr., Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1996], 38). In the work, Wilde explores his thoughts on Jesus of Nazareth as rebel-hero, romantic artist, along with thoughts on "holiness" and sorrow. In addition, Wilde discusses the Gnostic Gospels, Greek mythology, Eastern wisdom traditions, and many other themes that I address and incorporate into my work. For an analysis of the letter in the context of Wilde's attraction to Catholicism, see Elyse Graham, "Wilde's *De Profundis*," The Victorian Web, last modified December 19, 2008, accessed April 4, 2019, <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/wilde/graham2.html>.

³² The term "trinity" is applicable to this project in a myriad of ways, including the religious connotation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But used in the thesis title, *Trinity* points to the fact that this project comprises three pieces, together titled *Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning*. Each piece, which has a different subtitle, acts as a separate expression of mourning over, and ritual for, specific social justice issues and/or personal experiences. Each is a different manifestation of the same mourning energy. *Surf & Surrender*, the subtitle for the *Trinity* piece that is my M.F.A. thesis, focuses on the impending death of the ocean and lost histories. For descriptions of the other two pieces in *Trinity*, see Appendices I and II.

work seeks to subvert current traumatic patriarchal narratives, addresses the contemporary issues discussed above, and connects the rape of the ocean in ecology to violence against women and people who bleed in the everyday world, all around the world.

The multi-projection video installation includes three free-standing panels situated in the black box space of the Center for Art, Design, and Visual Culture at UMBC. The shapes of the panels make reference to surfboards, stained glass windows, and cathedral portals,³³ together suggesting a contemporary altarpiece, brought down to earth.

Early on in the thesis process, I envisioned my ultimate work, though involving projection of a film,³⁴ functioning as a contemporary altarpiece. In Catholicism,

³³ It has been noted that the shapes could also reference vaginal and phallic outlines. Such symbolism has a rich presence within the discourse of art and art history, but it cannot be justly discussed within the scope of this paper.

³⁴ For me, film – in its simplest form – is projected light revealing moving images on a screen. But there is also, for me, as I go on in this section to discuss, a relationship between projected light in cinema and in historic Catholic paintings, at least metaphorically. Rays of light in these painted works were often symbols of the manifestation of God and often revealed messages or secret truths. This leads me to a question I shall continue to pursue in my future work: Could cinema be a manifestation of God? André Bazin, French New Wave cinema theorist and Catholic, was known for many things, including promotion of realism in film and the “auteur theory,” the idea that the director be considered the author of a film, with that authorship being detectable through the director’s signature style. He also espoused personalism, the philosophy that a director’s film should reference their own personal beliefs. His theories are the topic of a scene in Richard Linklater’s 2001 film *Waking Life*, in which the character Caveh, based on the real-life Iranian-American filmmaker Caveh Zahedi, asserts:

Bazin is like a Christian, so he, like, believes that, you know, God obviously ended up like, everything ... he believes, for him reality and God are the same. You know, like ... and so what film is actually capturing is like God incarnate, creating. And this very moment, God is manifesting as this. And what the film would capture if it was filming us right now would be like God as this table, and God as you, and God as me, and God looking the way we look right now, and saying and thinking what we're thinking right now, because we are all God manifest in that sense. So film is actually like a record of God, or of the face of God, or of the ever-changing face of God.

Though stated in contemporary parlance, the content of the character’s statement aligns with historical accounts of Bazin’s belief system, one that makes sense in the context of art produced following World War II. Why wouldn’t Bazin, a film theorist and Catholic who had just lived through a period of colossal death and destruction, gravitate toward manifestos of belief and a sort of material reality? And why shouldn’t I gravitate toward bolstering and manifesting in my art my belief in resistance and mysticism in this era of impending death of so many forms of nature, including the ocean? If I believe that projected light could be a manifestation of God, does that mean that creating a film could become a form a prayer? A form of divine light? One of my committee members brought up the need to challenge Bazin’s concepts of

altarpieces are works of art that employ panels of paintings and sculptural elements to display visual stories. Altarpieces also have a connection to reliquaries, highly adorned and decorated boxes created to hold bones, hair, or other objects belonging to deceased “holy” people (saints, popes, royalty, or others). “Holiness” can also be tied to “deservedness,” in terms of whose stories “deserve” to be told and “deserve” to be included in a visual, written, or performance narratives. In some cases, an entire church might be considered a reliquary intended to honor the “holy.”



Figure 2. Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *The Ghent Altarpiece*, 1420-1432(?). Polyptych oil painting on wood, 11ft x 15ft. St. Bavo Cathedral.

The famous *Ghent Altarpiece* (fig. 2.) has been a strong influence on my work, both in its

“reality” by looking more closely at Walter Benjamin’s theoretical counterpoints, and I agree – to be pursued in the future.

form and history. The piece, commissioned by the mayor of Ghent, Belgium, and his wife, in the 1420s, was likely completed in 1432 and is attributed to artists Hubert and Jan van Eyck. The large (11 ft x 15 ft) polyptych, which has images on both the backs and fronts of its panels, depicts many Biblical stories and figures, ranging from the (mythical) origin story of Adam and Eve, to the lives of Saint Mary and Saint John the Baptist, and the Annunciation (on the back). The focal point of the piece, comprising the center panels, is the Adoration of the Mystical Lamb. The figures and those considered “holy” are shown with golden halos, crowns, and clothing adorned in jewels. Other figures are outfitted in everyday garb and grouped by their identities as “male martyrs, the pagan writers and Jewish prophets, the male saints, and the female martyrs.”³⁵ Nature plays a major role, with everyone pictured outdoors, with mountains and the ocean appearing in the far background. Blood also plays a role – invisibly, but powerfully. The Mystical Lamb symbolizes Jesus, with blood shown pouring from the Lamb’s heart.³⁶

While the imagery has many meanings, including love, suffering, and salvation, a great deal of historical intrigue surrounds the *Ghent Altarpiece*. Inscriptions made by the artists seem to have been “erased,” the work suffered damage during the Reformation with the rise of Iconoclasm, including the destruction of the frame of the piece, and it was plundered during the French Revolution and World War I. Panels were constantly being stolen and returned – or not. In 1934, the lower left panel, called “The Just Judges,”

³⁵ "Van Eyck, Ghent Altarpiece (1 of 2)," Khan Academy, accessed April 3, 2019, <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/northern-renaissance1/burgundy-netherlands/v/ghent-altarpiece-closed>.

³⁶ This image is placed in the center panel of the polyptych altarpiece to make a metaphorical connection between the flowing of the blood from the Mystical Lamb to the flowing of the wine during Communion, when it “becomes” the “blood” of Christ. This transubstantiation of the wine to the “blood” of Christ, a ritual that takes place at the altar, which sits directly below the altarpiece, is a ritual that can only be performed by a male priest in the eyes of the intuition of the Catholic church. Again, my work challenges the patriarchal hierarchy of the placement of the altarpiece work and who is “allowed” to perform rituals.

which is thought to include portraits of the artists, was stolen and has yet to be discovered. The entire altarpiece was stolen by the Nazis during World War II and hidden in a salt mine until it was rescued by the Allies and returned to Belgium, where it is now housed in Saint Bavo Cathedral in Ghent, behind protective glass.

While an entire thesis could be dedicated to the study of this work of art, there are particular reasons why the altarpiece has been an influence on my thesis work. One is the inclusion of many identities of people and their histories: pagan writers, Jewish prophets, female martyrs. There is a direct visual acknowledgement of the importance of these identities and an acknowledgement of their connection in the history of Catholicism, as they all bear witness to the Mystical Lamb together. This inclusion challenges the typically pervasive and singularly patriarchal “holiness” of altarpieces. The subject matter of the altarpiece and the object in itself represents stories within stories, histories within histories, loss within loss, and holiness within holiness.

Furthermore, altarpieces and reliquaries are usually placed on top of altars, as are the chalice and other Eucharistic objects, suggesting a social hierarchy. Parishioners were meant to look up at the altarpiece in the church, another suggestion of “looking up to” and worshipping not only God, but the priest who stood at the altar above which the altarpiece was placed, as one who was ordained and thus qualified, for example, to perform the sacraments of Holy Communion. The visuals were made to be strong and intricately detailed, because most people were illiterate, unable to read the Bible, and would gain knowledge of its stories only visually and verbally. As someone who struggles with dyslexia, I connected with the visual stories in these paintings, altarpieces, and stained-glass windows more than I did with reading as a child.

In my thesis installation, I wanted to challenge the idea of a social hierarchy and create possibilities for a closer connection to the ideas represented in my contemporary altarpiece. So, I brought the altarpiece down to sea level. The story held in the frames of the three panels is that of the dying of the ocean. The main characters of the film projected onto the panels – the “holy” beings – include the ocean and horseshoe crabs. I act as priestess, channeling the energy of Melpomene, Muse of Sorrow and Tragedy. There is a holiness in that act, as well, a holiness I claim that these beings “deserve.”

Space is left between and behind the panels to encourage viewers to walk around and between them. Sound of slow-motion waves, mixed with the clinking together of horseshoe crab shells and deep breathing, plays in the black-box space. The breathing is a reference both to *prana*, the Hindu concept of life force, and to ancient scientific beliefs that the tides of the ocean were connected to the great lungs of a goddess.³⁷ The slowness of the breathing and the waves indicates that we are running out of time, the ocean’s death is imminent. The only light in the space is that of the digital black-and-white video projection on each panel.

As viewers navigate around the three panels, their physical movement creates a communal current, signaling that we are all connected bodies of water (wall text at the entrance to the installation draws attention to this connection). Moving among the panels and observing the images projected onto them, visitors become witnesses to the ritual of mourning for the ocean. Just as it’s possible to bear witness in religious ceremonies conducted in contemporary life, here the audience is invited to bear witness to last-rites

³⁷ There are many beautiful myths from all over the world about how the tides move, but for this piece I quote the following: “The ancient Greeks...saw the ‘Big Water’ as a living being and the tides, its breath.” White, *Tides*, 61.

rituals for the ocean and is provided a space to engage in mourning, should they so wish.

The digital border projections on the altarpiece provide a minimally designed frame for each panel. Each separate design represents a seashell native to each of the three historical origins of surf history: West Africa (the Cowrie shell) on the left screen; Hawaii and the Polynesian archipelago (Pacific Augers), center; and Peru (the Peruvian scallop), right. This is a purposeful inclusion to show reverence for the histories of surf culture. While the “borders” of these histories may have been colonized or lost, and while the border frames of the Ghent Altarpiece may have been destroyed during the Protestant Reformation, at least with this minimal design element, the origin histories of surfing exist here in the work.

In the visual narrative, I perform the last-rite rituals on the beach at Cape May and in the ocean. The gestures and movements of my body include surfing, anointing the ocean, holding salt water, scraping the sand, covering myself with dead horseshoe crabs, “writing” on horseshoe crab book gills, and building an altar space out of dead horseshoe crabs, whelk egg casings, and other pieces of sea ephemera.

Horseshoe crabs have been mating under the full moon and laying their eggs on beaches for approximately 450 million years, representing the fifth oldest animal species on earth, fourth oldest in the ocean. Their name may suggest that they are a crab, but in fact they are arthropods and are closely related to arachnids, which include scorpions and spiders. Horseshoe crabs molt as they grow, shedding layers of their outer shell, moving through their own life and death cycles, and leaving their shed selves on the shore. They have ten sets of eyes placed around their bodies. Some of these eyes see images, and others only see light. Horseshoe crabs breathe through what are called “book gills.” As I

discovered more about the biology of these creatures, I meditated on what they could see and on their book gills. If horseshoe crabs are one of the oldest living creatures, could they hold histories of the ocean, just as books hold histories? Do their book gills include all the stories of surfing, spirituality, and everything that's ever been stolen? Everything that's ever been lost? If they can see the light and follow it back home to the ocean, could they lead us there? Back to the balance with the divine feminine?

Their species has survived on the shores of Cape May for millions of years, and the answer to how their species has lasted this long lies, in part, in their blood. While humans used to hunt them for fertilizer and fish bait, horseshoe crabs are now captured for use in medicine. They are drained of a significant amount of their copper-based blue blood and then returned to the sea, as pharmaceutical companies cull a protein from the blood to test their products for fever-inducing and fatality-causing endotoxins.³⁸ Though horseshoe crabs are ostensibly a protected species – their eggs serve as food for the bird known as the red knot³⁹ – their survival is increasingly threatened.⁴⁰ Thus, horseshoe

³⁸ “Horseshoe Crab Blood,” Maryland Department of Natural Resources, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://dnr.maryland.gov/ccs/Pages/horseshoecrab-medical.aspx>.

³⁹ Environmental journalist Sarah Zhang writes that Cape May, where “horseshoe crabs come ... every spring to spawn,” is a location where “[y]ou can no longer catch horseshoe crabs ... due to their importance to a threatened migratory bird species called the red knot. These birds show up here in the spring, too. Their migration is timed so that birds flying from South America to the Arctic can gorge themselves on the caviar-like horseshoe-crab eggs. The beaches turn black with crabs, their shells clickety-clacking as females scramble to lay their eggs and males to fertilize them. The red knots scramble to eat. They nearly double in weight for their journey to the Arctic.” Sarah Zhang, “The Last Days of the Blue-Blood Harvest,” *The Atlantic*, (May 9, 2018), accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/05/blood-in-the-water/559229/>.

⁴⁰ See Elizabeth Cox’s TED-Ed talk titled “Why Do We Harvest Horseshoe Crab Blood?” in which she asserts: “Horseshoe crabs survived mass extinction events that wiped out over 90% of life on Earth and killed off the dinosaurs, but they’re not invincible. And the biggest disruptions they’ve faced in millions of years come from us. Studies have shown that up to 15% of horseshoe crabs die in the process of having their blood harvested. And recent research suggests this number may be even higher. Researchers have also observed fewer females returning to spawn at some of the most harvested areas. – Coastal Development destroys spawning sites and horseshoe crabs are also killed for fishing bait. There is ample evidence that their population is shrinking.” Elizabeth Cox, “Why Do We Harvest Horseshoe Crab Blood?” TED-Ed, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://ed.ted.com/lessons/why-do-we-harvest-horseshoe-crab-blood-elizabeth-cox>.

crabs become the anchor of an ecosystem of salvation and survival for various beings, including us. From the blood of the Mystical Lamb to the blood of the Mystical Horseshoe Crab.

These threats helped shape the gestures I chose to perform in the mourning rituals projected onto the panels in my installation. The gestures are also connected to Catholicism and mysticism practices. But they were mainly what my soul needed to do, what my body needed to do, as I pondered the loss of the ocean.

My body mourns by wanting to slow time.

My body mourns by gathering.

My body mourns by holding.

My body mourns by caressing.

My body mourns by scraping.

My body mourns by grasping.

My body mourns by crying.

My body mourns by cutting.⁴¹

My body mourns by cleaning.⁴²

c. Influences

I knew when I started the IMDA program that I wanted my thesis to be about surfing, climate change's effect on the ocean, and other related issues. I didn't know that

⁴¹ See Appendix I: *Cut All the Telephone Cords*

⁴² See Appendix II: *Clean All the Stolpersteine*

multiple personal losses during this time period would prompt me to turn to performance art as a form of expression. I didn't know that my ensuing creative production would be grounded in grief or that mysticism and mourning would together become the cornerstone of an entire body of work. I didn't know that Linda Montano, feminist Catholic mystic, former nun, and performance artist, existed. Exploring her art and written work during my final year of the program proved essential to the conceptual core of my work.

In an interview with artist and writer Paul Couillard, Montano discusses her connection to performance art, ritual, and Catholicism:

Couillard: Why was it important for you to identify what you were doing as art?

Montano: Art gave me the same kinds of pleasures and aesthetic ecstasy as the Church used to give me. And because a woman is denied priesthood in Roman Catholicism, I knew instinctively that I would never be able to be a ritual-maker.

Couillard: Within the Church –

Montano: Yes, in the Church. I took that aesthetic ritual-making paradigm and placed it in art. Not as a second best, but as deep as – and as wonderful as – experiences I was having in the Church.⁴³

Not only has Montano's arc of experience been influential, but so too have her dealings with death. Her video piece *Mitchell's Death*, 1977 (fig. 3), was one of the works that gave me proverbial permission⁴⁴ to focus on mourning and ritual as themes in my work. *Mitchell's Death* is a black-and-white video featuring a close-up of Montano's face, situated in the center of the frame, for the full 22 minute-20 second duration of the

⁴³ Linda M. Montano, *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (Florence: Taylor & Francis, 2012), 49-50.

⁴⁴ Montano has written: "The concept of permission is the ocean, and the waves are how that manifests." Montano, *Letters*, *Ibid.*, 59.

performance. Her face is pierced with acupuncture needles and her eyes are closed, as she chants the story of how she grieved the tragic accidental death of her ex-husband Mitchell. While my work does not have dialogue, there are frames in the video that feature a similar close-up of my face (fig. 4) – a simple and humble homage to Montano.



Figure 3. Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*, 1977.
Still from video, 22:20 mins.



Figure 4. Still from *Surf & Surrender*,
2019.

Ana Mendieta has also been an influence on my work. Montano interviewed Mendieta on Catholicism, ritual, death, and art:

Montano: Do you feel that there is Catholic imagery in your work?

Mendieta: I was raised Catholic and can't deny my heritage. I like very much the idea of history, and I admit that the Catholic religion has made a rich cultural contribution to the world but, they've also destroyed a lot of things. When I first started working this way, I felt a very strong Catholic connection, but as I continue to work, I felt closer to the Neolithic. Now I believe in water, air, and earth. They are all deities. They also speak. I am connected with the goddess of sweet water—this has been her year, and it is raining a lot. Those are the things that are powerful and important. I don't know why people have gotten away from these ideas.

Montano: Are you using death and burial images consciously?

Mendieta: I don't think that you can separate death and life. All of my work is about those two things—it's about eros and death and life.⁴⁵

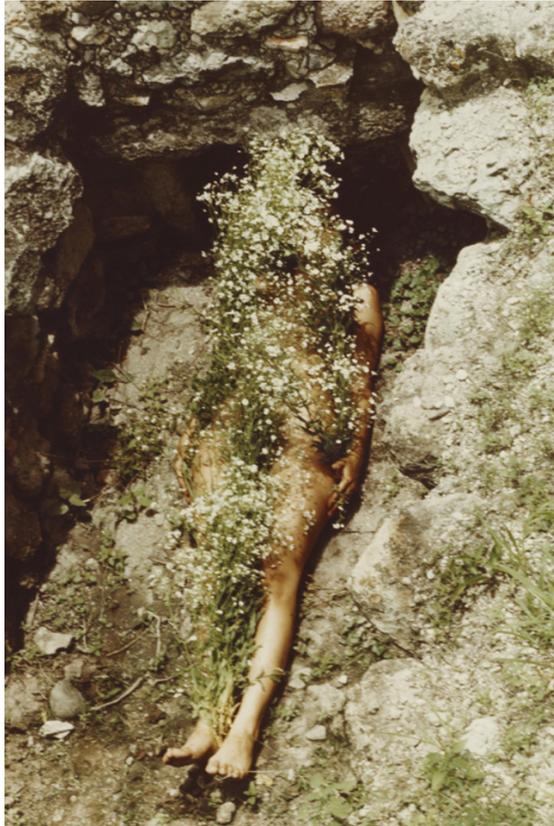


Figure 5. Ana Mendieta, *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973.

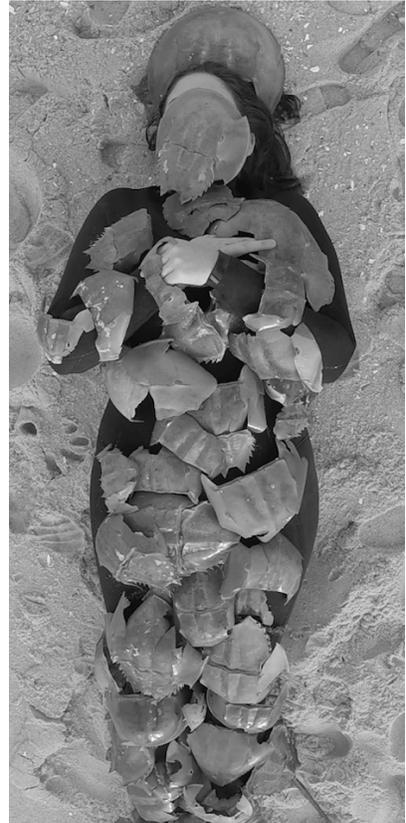


Figure 6. “Horseshoe Crab Halo.”
Still from *Surf & Surrender*, 2019.

Within this conversation, Mendieta mentions her struggles with Catholicism's history and her connection to pre-Christian spirituality. In *Imagen de Yagul*, 1973, (fig. 5) and her *Silueta Series*, 1973-1980, she combines ritual, death, body forms (including her own), nature, and mysticism. While I feel I may share with Mendieta an interest in struggling

⁴⁵ Ana Mendieta being interviewed by Linda Montano, “Ana Mendieta,” in Linda M. Montano, *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 396.

with the history of Catholicism, practicing mysticism, and spiritual seeking within our work, I feel like my work, at this point, is more about surrender. In a significant portion of my film, I cover myself, including my face, with dead horseshoe crabs and create a horseshoe crab “halo” around my head, continuing the last-rite ritual and embodying the death and potential extinction of one of the world’s oldest creatures and all the histories they carry (fig. 6). I directed my friend Liz to film me and after I saw the footage I thought, “oh my God...Ana Mendieta.”

Maya Deren, experimental and avant-garde filmmaker of the 1940s and 1950s, also explored the themes of ritual, death, and mysticism in her films. While there are many aspects of her work that have been influential – her use of multiple selves, direct gazes into the camera, odd angles, inclusion of shadows – of primary importance for me was her incorporation of the ocean (fig. 7). As Lauren Rabinovitz writes in *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71*, Deren’s films *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943, and *At Land*, 1944, tie “self-discovery to the sea—*At Land* allowing the character whose physical identity flows unperturbed throughout the film to originate from and return to the sea.”⁴⁶ While the sea is a constant in my work, there is an emergence from and a return to or a “staying with” it, because the sea itself is a character, an energy, and my “self,” acting as priestess and an embodiment of Melpomene, is constantly engaging with the sea. The surfer-priestess is in the water, on the water, caressing the water (fig. 8), holding the water, surfing the water, “drinking” the water. Rabinovitz also states that in *Meshes of the Afternoon*, Maya’s character interacts with the ocean as “the woman’s bold attempt to overthrow external

⁴⁶ Lauren Rabinovitz, *Points of Resistance: Women, Power & Politics in the New York Avant-garde Cinema, 1943-71* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 66.

representations of herself and to create her own self-image leads her literally to sea, a metaphor for rebirth frequently used in women's writing."⁴⁷ While I too see the connection to the ocean (and the moon) as a symbol of rebirth, she cannot represent this if she is dead.

So, I return to mourning.



Figure 7. Maya Deren, *At Land*, 1944.
Still from film, 14:47 mins.



Figure 8. "Caressing the water."
Still from *Surf & Surrender*, 2019.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 64-65.

Chapter 2: Melpomene: Performing Rituals of Resistance, Memory, and Mourning

*“I began to think that if women ran religion, they would do things differently. There would be much more process, much more emotion, much more catharsis, much more wailing—particularly about death.”*⁴⁸ – Cheri Gaulke

a. Muses & Meeting Melpomene

In Greek mythology, the nine Muses are the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, the goddess of Memory. The ancient Greeks believed that the Muses inspired artists to create works rooted in the medium that each Muse represented. Last summer, 2018, I visited Greece again, this time to volunteer at a youth media festival and participate in an artist residency while attempting to work on my thesis. But it was three months after the tragic death of one of my best friends, and there were days when I felt I could not leave the apartment. Between sobbing, screaming into sheets so no one else in the house could hear me, and staring into space, I had no idea how deeply entrenched in grief I was. Then it dawned on me that grief comes in waves, and I had to find a way to surf this ocean of grief.

When I finally made it out of my room and to the art studio on the other side of the island, I grabbed a couple books and went back to my room. As I was reading *The*

⁴⁸ Cheri Gaulke being interviewed by Linda Montano, “Cheri Gaulke,” in Montano, ed., *Performance Artists Talking in the Eighties*, 362.

Nine Muses: A Mythological Path to Creativity,⁴⁹ I came to the chapter about Melpomene⁵⁰ and how to invoke her. She is the Muse of sorrow and tragedy and mother of sirens. I felt a release in the energy centers in my body. Things slowly started to click.

Melpomene & Me

*I don't need to invoke her
She's already here
She follows me throughout my day, visiting as she pleases
She walks with me as I wander down to the sea, waiting for me on the shore
She stands by my side as I pick bay leaves to burn,
desperately seeking answers as solace for my sorrow
She sits on my bed as she watches me sleep and softly strokes my hair, as I dream
of you*

b. Sacrament of Last Rites & Rituals of Mourning

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” – The Beatitudes, Gospel of St. Matthew 5:4 (World English Bible)

There are many spiritual rituals from wisdom traditions around the world that are acts of accompaniment for those who are about to pass. In Catholicism, the act of Last

⁴⁹ Angeles Arrien, *The Nine Muses: A Mythological Path to Creativity* (New York: J. P. Tarcher/Putnam), 2000.

⁵⁰ Cultural anthropologist Angeles Arrien describes Melpomene, the Muse of Tragedy, as “the songstress of suffering, sorrow, and sweet laments... Melpomene relieves the human suffering through authentic and poignant expressions of grief, disappointment, loss, injustice, fear, anger, failure, unwise choices, and tragic circumstances. Melpomene’s name comes from the Greek *melpin*, to sing sacred songs of sorrow. Poet Simone Weil states Melpomene’s primary function when she writes: ‘Affliction causes everything to be called into question.’ Melpomene reminds us that grieving is necessary to emotional health and that affliction is a natural process of bringing new life and hope out of loss, painful disappointments, and tragic choices.” *Ibid.*, 95.

Rites is a sacrament, a sacred mystery. This sacrament may only be performed by a male priest. In my work, I act as the surfer priestess, subverting this patriarchal practice by creating my own rituals, and accompanying the ocean as she is dying.

By embodying Melpomene,⁵¹ I connect a lineage of divine feminine energy, history, mourning, and the ocean:

Mnemosyne (the goddess of Memory) & Mother of →Melpomene (Muse of sorrow and tragedy) & Mother of →Sirens⁵² (female ocean spirits)

We mourn as an act of remembrance. We mourn because we know what we've lost. We mourn because we know that nothing will ever be the same again.

Montano creates a list of rites and rituals of death and mourning and at the end of this list she asks: "If you had permission to mourn any way you would like, what would you do or not do?"⁵³ I remember feeling angry with myself during some of those moments on the island. I thought I wasn't making enough work and that I was running out of time. But I later realized how important it was to have had that space to mourn. It was reading Montano's words, for the first time months later, that helped me understand,

⁵¹ Arrien continues her description of the intention of the muse's energy by writing "Melpomene helps heartfelt mortals to contend nobly against overwhelming odds and tragic situations, no matter what the outcome. Tragedy is Melpomene's way to initiate us into emotional integrity and the unyielding embrace of authentic suffering, in order to renew courage and character.... Melpomene is the ultimate teacher of service, compassion, forgiveness, and humility that are motivated in unusual creative responses to tragic events and unexpected losses." Ibid, 96.

⁵² In addition, Arrien reminds the reader of the connection Melpomene has to the ocean by explaining, "In Greek mythology, Maenads are unrestrained and sensual spirits who dismember and fracture what is complacent, remote, contrived, apathetic, controlled, and indifferent in anyone's nature. Melpomene was a free-spirited Maenad who gave birth to the Sirens, who tested character and courage with their seductive songs, irresistible sexuality, and haunting soulfulness. Both the Maenads and Sirens tore apart or tested anything weak. They destroyed and exposed ruthless ambition, arrogant will, and narcissistic vanity." Ibid., 99.

⁵³ Montano, *Letters*, 244.

in retrospect, I had been making work, had been making steps toward this work, the entire time. She describes performance as:

...the disturbing relative of disembodied fine art. As practiced by first generation artists of the 1960s and 1970s, it took incredible risks that not only stretched the artist-practitioner with its content, fantasies, dreams, and neediness, but also surprised audiences. In so doing, it became an art for the brave. It instructed, infuriated, bored, and nourished the audience. Who would do this kind of non-right-wing, unable-to-be-funded, on-the-edge kind of work? Actually, those you might expect, because early performance was by and for women, the transgendered, people of color, the survivors of the atom bomb, the disenfranchised, ethnic minorities, the ill, the non-commodified, mystics, gays and lesbians, risk-takers, and those sensitive willing to be vulnerably present.⁵⁴

In this way, the act of performance, of mourning, of holding memories, of honoring hidden histories, of being vulnerably present comprises resistance, as these actions fight against the status quo. Accompanying mourning is a struggle between recognition and refusal of loss. In the ritual I perform in my piece, there is an invitation to bear witness, with the audience functioning as a form of community. In my everyday life, as I struggle against the status quo, as I continue to have experiences of swimming through trash, picking up refuse on the beach, and reading countless articles about how human-induced climate change is destroying the ocean, I can't help but wonder: Does nature mourn?

⁵⁴ Montano, *Letters*, 131.

c. Tahlequah



Figure 9. Tahlequah's mourning as she pushes her dead calf to the surface, 2018.

The story of a female Orca, whom National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) researchers call Tahlequah, went viral last summer. A member of what NOAA has designated the "J pod," Tahlequah gave birth to a calf on July 24, 2018. Unfortunately, the calf lived for only 30 minutes, at which point Tahlequah began the most unprecedented mourning ritual researchers had ever seen. She pushed her baby's body with her nose, balanced the baby on her head, carried her in her mouth, would briefly release her to move underwater, and then push her to the surface again to receive air (fig. 9). Tahlequah carried her baby's body with her for 17 days, as if to force us all to

see her, as if telling us to look. “*Look at my dead baby,*” she seems to say in her performance.

“You cannot interpret it any other way,” Deborah Giles, a killer whale biologist, asserted. “This is an animal that is grieving for its dead baby, and she doesn’t want to let it go. She’s not ready.”⁵⁵ Journalist Avi Selk added: “The cause is no mystery: Humans have netted up the whales’ salmon, driven ships through their hunting lanes and polluted their water, to the point that researchers fear Tahlequah’s generation may be the last of her family.”⁵⁶ Tahlequah’s was the first live birth her pod had experienced since 2015. I followed the coverage of her tour of grief from the East Coast, mourning with her, thinking of the Orcas I had seen while living and studying in Seattle, wondering if they were part of Tahlequah’s pod. Yet another example of human’s assaults on the ocean.

Other marine mammals are washing up on beaches all over the world, due to sound pollution from the military and commercial ships interfering with their echolocation system. There are many other sea creatures that are currently at risk as well, including some of the oldest in known history.

Again: Does nature mourn? It appears the answer is yes.

⁵⁵ Avi Selk, “Update: Orca Abandons Body of Her Dead Calf after a Heartbreaking, Weeks-long Journey,” *Washington Post*, August 12, 2018, accessed November 14, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2018/08/10/the-stunning-devastating-weeks-long-journey-of-an-orca-and-her-dead-calf/?utm_term=.0af906bb4632.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

d. Horseshoe Crab Rescue Committee



Figure 10. “Horseshoe crab harvest for fertilizer production, 1928.”
Delaware Public Archives.

As I was filming for this thesis project in the fall of 2018 at Cape May Point, I stumbled upon a live horseshoe crab, flipped onto its back and stuck in the sand. A woman and her daughter were looking at the tiny ancient being. The woman first tried forcefully to push it over with her foot, but she was not aware that its tail was stuck in the sand. Worried that she would break its tail, which crucially functions as its rudder, I asked if I could take on the task of caring for the creature.

I put my surfboard down and carefully knelt next to this majestic living fossil.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ “Horseshoe crabs are sometimes called ‘living fossils,’” health-science writer Sarah Zhang explains, “because they have been around in some form for more than 450 million years. In this time, the Earth has gone through multiple major ice ages, a Great Dying, the formation and subsequent breaking up of Pangaea, and an asteroid impact that killed the dinosaurs and most of life on Earth yet again. In other words, horseshoe crabs have truly seen some shit.” Sarah Zhang, “The Last Days of the Blue-Blood Harvest,” *The Atlantic*, May 9, 2018, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2018/05/blood-in-the-water/559229/>.

As its claws moved in a wandering fashion, searching for sand and sea, I placed my hands on its brittle helmet-shaped exoskeleton and slowly tried to extract its tail from the wet sand, but it was wedged too tightly into the shore. I let go of the creature and etched inch-deep trenches around its tail, removing any excess grains of sand that might contribute to its captivity. I tried to pull again, this time succeeding, and then carefully flipped it over. A few waves washed in, and I thought this would help move the horseshoe crab back into the ocean, but the surge wasn't strong enough. When the next wave came, I picked up the horseshoe crab, waded into the water, and gently returned it to the sea.

As I walked home, my feet still covered in salt and sand, I couldn't help but think that perhaps all we have left are these small acts of care and salvation for each another, in the continued realization that we humans are one with animals, each mini-manifestations of the Divine, and with all that is. Their destruction is our destruction (fig. 10), and their salvation is our salvation (fig. 11).



Figure 11. Rescuing the Horseshoe Crab, 2018.

Chapter 3: The Intention: Surf & Surrender

“...[E]ven if we stopped all greenhouse emissions today, the momentum of global warming and sea level rise is locked in for at least the next several centuries. That could mean a rise in sea level of fifteen feet—and much more, much faster, if melting ice caps reach a tipping point.... [A]lmost all the world’s coastal cities will become intertidal zones in the coming decades.”⁵⁸ – Jonathan White

As we face the realities of human-induced climate change, paired with the histories of colonialism, patriarchy, violence, and the current rise of fascism in America, it is easy for an overwhelming energy of hopelessness to take over our consciousness. However, one of the intentions behind my M.F.A. project is to share an embodied experience of mourning, with the hope that the experience will translate into bodies taking social action. Each subtitle of the three works involves *action*: surf & surrender; cut; and clean. Each action acknowledges the pain, acknowledges what has been and what will be lost, and channels all of that into further action while facing harsh realities.

I will continue to make work about these topics. I will continue to pick up trash on the beach, to rescue horseshoe crabs, and to participate in community days of planting sea grass and beach cacti seeds. I will continue to support many environmental and social justice organizations, including Brown Girls Surf and Black Girls Surf. I will continue to challenge racist patriarchal narratives and to work toward policy change.

Surfing, for me, is a performative action, a ritual of resistance, and an act of

⁵⁸ White, *Tides*, 285.

struggle.⁵⁹ Resistance against patriarchal narratives that demean the divine feminine, and a struggle to find balance in riding the waves of all the current conflict and all the possible peace. Surrender, for me, is not an act of giving up but an act of giving over. With this work and all these actions mentioned, I acknowledge that this is all I can do – to give over, to use whatever amount of power or resources I have to enact any possibility of positive social change, however minute, during a time in human history that will become increasingly difficult. I will continue to surf and surrender (fig. 12).

I surrender to the sacred mystery of the ocean

I surrender to the sacred mystery of death

I surrender to the sacred mystery of you

I surrender to the sacred

I surrender

I surrender

I surrender

⁵⁹ A quote from a 2002 surfing-related art exhibition catalog resonates for me: “Many of the works of art in *Surf Culture* were made by artists who identify themselves primarily as surfers, others were made by artists who surf. As surfers, artist, or surfer-artists, they are united by the idea that rules are made to be broken.” Bolton T. Colburn, *Surf Culture: The Art History of Surfing* (Laguna Beach, CA: Laguna Art Museum, in association with Gingko Press, 2002), 5.



Figure 12. Catching my first little wave, 2017.

Appendix I: Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning: Cut All the Telephone Cords

“To whom could I put this question (with any hope of an answer?) Does being able to live without someone you loved mean you loved her less than you thought...?”⁶⁰

— Roland Barthes

Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning is a series of three mourning rituals inspired by Melpomene, the Greek Muse of sorrow and tragedy.

In the piece *Cut All the Telephone Cords*, I dress in black and cut the telephone cords of 30 black telephones that are hung in a straight line on a white wall.

This is a memorial piece for a friend that I first performed a month after her death in 2018. It will be performed this year on April 13, the anniversary of her death, at the Lion Brothers Studios, Baltimore, MD. I plan to continue performing *Cut All the Telephone Cords* every year on April 13 wherever I am.

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, Richard Howard, and Nathalie Léger, *Mourning Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012), 68.

Appendix II: Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning: Clean All the Stolpersteine

Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning is a series of three mourning rituals inspired by Melpomene, the Greek Muse of sorrow and tragedy.

In the piece *Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning: Clean All the Stolpersteine*, I dress in black, and with white rags, clean individual brass cobblestone memorials in Berlin and Rome that are dedicated to victims of the Holocaust. The memorials are called *Stolpersteine* and have been created by German artist Gunter Demnig since the early 1990s. *Stolpersteine* act as intimate memorials embedded in the streets outside the houses where people lived when they were kidnapped and taken to concentration and extermination camps. To date, Demnig has placed over 70,000 individual stones throughout Europe.

As an American with European ancestry, including German and Italian, my act of cleaning and mourning aims to: honor the individuals who were lost to the Holocaust; draw attention to political cycles we have seen before that are occurring again; raise awareness of the role the United States has played in turning away Jewish immigrants and others seeking asylum, as well as carrying out the internment of Japanese immigrants and United States citizens of Japanese descent during World War II; and discuss the United States' lack of memorials to the atrocities our government has enacted.

Melpomene & The Trinity of Mourning: Clean All the Stolpersteine focuses on the role of public space, public memory, and rituals of mourning. Documentation of this performance to date is on view at Full Circle, Baltimore, MD, April 6-May 5, 2019, with a reception held on April 14, Palm Sunday. I plan to continue cleaning *Stolpersteine* wherever and whenever I stumble upon them.

Glossary

In order of their appearance in the text:

Divine Feminine: While my use of this phrase appears to privilege gender binarism, I am invoking the belief of many ancient cultures that everyone, regardless of their gender identity or sex ascribed at birth, holds both “feminine” and “masculine” energies inside them. Moreover, nature is a manifestation of those energies, as Jonathan White discusses in *Tides: The Science and Spirit of the Ocean*, relying on the scholarship of literary theorist and Jungian analyst Jules Cashford:

The sun and the moon were often considered a pair—sister and brother, husband and wife—so in cultures in which the moon was male, the sun was female, and vice versa. Differences in gender, however, were not so distinct as they are today. In *The Moon: Myth and Image*, Jules Cashford writes, “It seems clear that ‘the feminine principle,’ when referred to the Moon, can take male *or* female form, preventing us from identifying the feminine principle with the human female and the masculine principles with the human male.” Whether viewed as male or female, the moon has always been imbued with feminine principles, perhaps due to part of the close linkage with women’s reproductive cycles. In classical Chinese science, the moon was *yin*, meaning soft, yielding, dark, wet, and cold. The sun was *yang*, meaning hard, focused, aggressive, dry, and hot. In Taoist thinking, yin and yang are not opposites but complements—two parts making a whole.⁶¹

The moon and ocean belong to everyone. In this paper, I argue that with the rise of patriarchy, it is our loss of balance and our rejection of the divine feminine from the equation, in forms of exclusion and violence against women and people who bleed, that has also led to climate change and our horrid treatment of the ocean, a type of

⁶¹ White, *Tides*, 154. Internal quote: Jules Cashford, *The Moon: Myth and Image* (London: Cassell, 2002), 154.

metaphorical matricide and femicide.

Women & People Who Bleed: I use this combined terminology to evoke scientific and mystical connections between and among the moon, ocean, and menstrual cycles, as well as to acknowledge that people of various gender identities may or may not cycle – i.e., bleed. Regardless, all humans come from this sacred cycle of connections. I include the word “women” because throughout history and in our contemporary times, persons with that assigned sex and/or gender expression have tended to be more targeted as victims of physical violence and exclusionary violence including, but not limited to the fields of religion, art, and surfing.

Social Catholicism: Put as simply as possible, Social Catholicism is a kind of socialist belief, paired with actions toward peace including civil disobedience, within Catholicism. Social Catholics argue that Jesus was a peace activist and storyteller who challenged the hierarchies of the Pharisees both within Judaism and under Roman rule, and that as Catholics, we should be carrying out the same kind of challenges to hierarchy. This is also the foundation of radical leftist Catholic protests against war, capitalism, and colonialism. A local example was the “Catonsville 9,” a group that burned draft records during the Vietnam War. All nine protestors were Catholics, one of them a practicing priest and one a former priest, plus former nuns. During their action, they prayed together outside the building that housed the draft records they had removed and then burned in the parking lot.

Mysticism: Wikipedia calls on the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and *The Stanford Dictionary of Philosophy* to define mysticism as “a practice of religious and/or spiritual ecstasies (alternate states of consciousness), together with whatever ideologies, ethics, rites, myths, legends, and magic may be related to them. It may also refer to the attainment of insight in ultimate or hidden truths, and to human transformation supported by various practices and experiences.”⁶² I personally view mysticism as comprising the *seeking* practices, including art, that strive for the union of human and spirit and for sacred truth, whatever that truth may be.

⁶² "Mysticism," Wikipedia, last modified March 20, 2019, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mysticism>.

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