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HOLY BODY/MONSTROUS BODY:
THE LIFE AND PRACTICES OF SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

by

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BFA in Dance, Belhaven University
2010

Presented in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance

Hollins University
Roanoke, Virginia
July 2024

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

eternal thanks to nathan miller for your unwavering support and belief.

from the bottom of my heart.

thank you:

ivy and marcus for teaching me everything i know about love and goodness

maurya kerr for your generosity, wisdom, and encouragement to embrace risk

jeffery bullock for building a place where we can try

jim and angela beise & dave and rachel pfanstiel for having my back every summer (and always)

&

special thanks to ruthann williams for teaching me to believe

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Corpus Mirabilis

“Love After Love”

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.
Give wine. Give bread, Give back your heart
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored
for another, who knows you by heart.
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf

the photographs, the desperate notes,
peel your own image from the mirror.
Sit. Feast on your life.¹

¹ Derek Walcott, “Love After Love,” in *Derek Walcott: Collected Poems, 1948-1984* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 38.

My introduction to Catherine Benincasa began with a novel by Emma Donahue. *The Wonder* is a work of fiction based on the true stories of “the fasting girls,”² a group of girls and women who practiced extreme fasting, all while claiming to not need food either because they were being fed from heaven or sustained by the eucharist alone. They were not known to each other and were spread across Western countries in the early 1800s. Some were found to be fraudulent – sneaking food by various means – but others soon died of their self-imposed starvation. In my curiosity about this group of girls and women, I continually came across mention of Saint Catherine of Siena. She was often named as a likely influence or inspiration behind their behavior.³ As I turned my attention to this saint and the more I learned about her life and extreme body practices, the more I felt a deep sting of recognition. Having been raised and spent most of my adult life immersed in high-control Western Christianity myself, being a woman who was once a girl very preoccupied with being exceptionally good, and as a person who has experienced self-harm, suicidal ideation, and violence, I saw in Catherine’s remarkable story a place to hide my own. Catherine’s story is also the story of most of the women and girls I know and have known. It is a story that I have never had the words with which to tell truthfully; a sequence of events that cries out for disruption but somehow horrifically unfolds itself again and again.

Virginia Woolf described the pressures of the binary roles women play in the world in her speech, “Professions of a Woman,” given at The Women’s Service League in 1931:

You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her – you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was

² Kristin Hunt, “The Fasting Girls of the Victorian Era: The Story Behind ‘The Wonder’” Mental Floss, March 22, 2023 <https://www.mentalfloss.com/posts/the-fasting-girls-victorian-era-real-story-behind-the-wonder>.

³ Alendra Schwartz, “Emma Donoghue’s Art of Starvation” New Yorker, September 12, 2016 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/09/19/emma-donoghues-art-of-starvation>.

chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it – in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure....These were two of the adventures of my professional life. The first – killing the Angel in the House – I think I solved. She died. But the second, telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet.⁴

Woolf is describing one half of the trap inherent in the binary ways in which female images are presented: Angel in the House or Medusa's monster, Madonna or whore. But of course in the end no woman escapes; we are all handed the same monstrous inheritance.

This is a story about the violence of a culture and paradigm built on misogyny and the violence women and girls direct towards their own bodies. I set out in this research to understand *why* Catherine Benincasa behaved as she did so that I could perhaps better understand why I experienced my body as I have. I come away unsatisfied and without one clear answer. Instead of a prescribed explanation, this research has prompted my imagination. I have been building a secret world for every remarkable woman and little girl I know or have known (they are *all* remarkable) – where we can be safe and wild, strange and funny, play our games, take our naps, experience pleasure, grow our gardens, eat our elaborate feasts, and dance our stomping feet - loud and heavy. I have not yet puzzled out how to make that world visible for anyone else and have been satisfied instead with an attempt at truth-telling. I *do not know* how to tell the truth about my experience in my own body. But through this research and the creative manifestation that grew from it, I have been able to see its shape come into focus and can offer this opaque, abject experience belonging.

That monstrous self/body comes to dance with us, too.

⁴ Virginia Woolf "Professions for Women (1931)" Literature Cambridge, accessed September 14, 2023 <https://www.literaturecambridge.co.uk/news/professions-women>.



1. *Santa Caterina da Siena con Gesù Bambino* by Sassoferato (1650)

Dear Catherine,

I want to tell you a story. Not a true story. But it must be told truthfully.

I was little and had long curly hair and watched them play outside. I was little and had small hands pressed against the glass. I was little and I was too small to play their game. I was little and I was crying. I was little and full of rage.

I have known myself as an object. Built to be pasted onto a violent and ancient family tree; forever at the mercy of someone else. I am a blank slate. I am a mirror. I am a good girl. I am grotesque. I am every horrible thing a man has ever said to me. I elicit. I provoke. Though I have tried being deathly still, covering my face, walking with no sound, eating no food, breathing no air, swallowing my beak, folding myself neatly in the drawer. I am a powder keg. A danger to myself; trapped and utterly visible. The air around me has reeked with fear. I am every horrible thing a man has ever done to me.

If I looked how I really am...expanding. A giant, twisted and gnarly like the trunk of an oak. Strange and opaque – a creature in the darkest part of the ocean holding my own dingy light.

Or a terrifying, severe bird hopping with heavy thud from rock to rock. If only I wasn't...small nose, dark hair, slight shoulders, polite smile...if I were granular and teeming with life, laid down like the dirt underfoot, sprouting something ripe and green, living and dying in my own time. Would I be safer? Would I belong to the earth, cradled in its density, instead of stretching away from the ground like a beckoning lighthouse? *Come to me I am whatever you think I am whatever you want me to be whatever you make me to be.*

I don't match my frame. If I did I would sway in the wind with my eyes closed and fingers deep in wet black soil humming my new name. If I did, all the air around me would swell and fall like waves on sand.

I am telling you the truth; though it comes out as fantasy. Can you hear it in my voice? Can you understand me?

My body clutches pain-memory of every woman before me. Their laughter catches in my throat, their sing-song voices surround the sound of mine. All the gardens they ever planted, the fire escapes they sat on, the cigarettes they smoked, all the babies they ever nursed. I hold a fragmented imagination of every creature they were which I will never see...my mother with her blue eyes and startling rabbit ears bending against the ceiling, my grandmother: her beautiful hands and her long crooked beak resting on my shoulder, my great great aunt's soft tail trailing behind her, muted against the ancient carpet, disappearing around every corner. My ancestors and their weeping hair, falling around me in strands of shocking black and silver.

I cannot tell it another way, do you see? The details deceive; the facts obscure. The future has happened before and the past sits here with me now. How can I explain it to you? It is exactly like this. It felt exactly like this.

I dream and wake up feeling the flames on my feet. I wake up with the weight on my chest. I wake up with a silver sun in my hand. I wake up and press my back against the heater. I wake up aching and remember my body, their bodies, distended and split open, spilling water and blood. My body is not me. It belongs to them; they reach for me, push through me, pull at me, examine me, love me. Kissing my hand three times before they slip away into the sky which is already crowded with noise and light (the stars being birthed with dizzying speed, my breath visible like smoke, the honking geese), leaving me behind. The oxygen machine clicks pointlessly in the bedroom.

Here – I have come to the finish already which is the same as the beginning (handed to my daughter as it slips from me). I know no other way to tell it. My story comes out sideways and full of colors I do not recognize.

Do you understand?

I don't know which pain is mine and which is hers and which is yours.

I don't know the end to this kind of grief.

Yours,

Melissa

In Greek mythology, it is said that brothers Romulus and Remus were born of a human mother and the god of war, Mars. Abandoned on the Tiber River, the infant brothers were found by a she-wolf who cared for them until they were discovered and adopted. Romulus would go on to found the city of Rome, where the first images of the she-wolf nursing two very young boys are found. Before the founding of Rome, however, Remus was murdered by his brother following a heated argument. Remus' two sons, fearing their uncle, fled north, and there, nestled in the Tuscan countryside, they founded the city of Siena. Statues of the she-wolf with Romulus and Remus dot the ancient city today, venerating this mythical origin story.⁵

Siena is a city of brick and stone, in warm orange, browns, and occasional stark whites, surrounded by lush, green Tuscan hills. Located roughly forty miles from Florence in central Italy, Siena is built of crooked winding paths of cobblestone, some so narrow only two people can walk through at a time. These meandering stone paths connect to a series of open city squares, the largest of which is the Piazza del Campo. The bricks of this plaza spread out from the city hall in a large semi-circular shell shape. Lacking any tree cover or vegetation, the bricks of the plaza stay warm from the sun until late in the evening. The looming tower of the city hall was built to meet the height of the tower of the Basilica of San Domenico, a rust-colored brick and stone cathedral built in the 13th century which sits a short ten-minute walk north of the plaza. The matching height of these towers was meaningful: designed to reflect Siena's dual status as a seat of great influential religious and political power in Italy.

The Basilica of San Domenico is less ornate than most cathedrals in Italy; the vast interior space is without frescos or much in the way of ornamentation aside from several giant paintings hanging on its stone walls and the row of altars along the perimeter. Instead of displays

⁵ Michele Busillo, "Why is the She-Wolf Featured in Siena?" *Camminaire in Toscana*, accessed February 20, 2024 <https://guidaturistica-michelebusillo.com/why-is-the-roman-she-wolf-featured-in-siena/>.

of ornamentation, this cathedral is famous for its holy relics. The crowning attraction is the severed, mummified, and displayed head of Catherine Benincasa.

Born in 1347 to a very large middle-class Sienese family, Catherine spent most of her life in Siena. She was canonized by the Catholic church in 1460, becoming forever thereafter: Saint Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church. She died at the age of 33 after decades of slow, self-imposed starvation. Her death, often considered a succumbing to a pious fast, or posthumously referred to as an example of *anorexia mirabilis* (translated from Latin to mean “wonderful anorexia”),⁶ was actually an excruciatingly slow suicide by starvation, performed by a woman who had longed for death since she was a very young child.

Catherine’s father, Jacopo Benincasa, was a wool dyer by trade, and his wife, Lapi di Puccio di Pagente, had given birth to twenty-two children already when she delivered twin girls on March 25, 1347, christened Catherine and Giovanna. Lapi chose to nurse Catherine herself but gave Giovanna to a wet nurse. Giovanna would die in infancy, as did roughly half of Lapi’s children, but Catherine would grow strong and remain the youngest child of her very large family.⁷

According to Sigrid Undset in her biography, *Catherine of Siena*, the saint would report to her confessor, Raymond of Capua, that at the tender age of six she became fascinated with the legend of Saint Euphrosyne and was even nicknamed Euphrosyne by her family and neighbors. Euphrosyne of Alexandria was a 5th-century saint said to have run away from home as a teenager in response to an unwanted marriage arrangement, disguising herself as a boy, to join a monastery. She lived as a monk, undetected, for the rest of her life.⁸

⁶ Fernando Espi Forcen, “Anorexia Mirabilis: The Practice of Fasting by Saint Catherine of Siena in the Late Middle Ages” Psychiatry Online, April 1, 2013, <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/10.1176/appi.ajp.2012.12111457>.

⁷ Sigrid Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, (1954; reis., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 6.

⁸ The Orthodox Church in America, “Venerable Euphrosyne of Alexandria” Accessed June 9, 2024 <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2022/09/25/102726-venerable-euphrosyne-of-alexandria>.

Catherine also expressed to her confessor that around this time she began a fascination with the ways of St. Dominic and the Desert Fathers, known for their dedication to Christian aestheticism, including harsh treatment of the body, solitude, and poverty. Undset writes that it was at the age of six that Catherine began her practice of mortification of the flesh by whipping her bare shoulders with a thin branch. Her practices of self-harm would grow through the years: she would wear a hair shirt (an undergarment made of very rough goat's wool that would scratch and cut the wearer as they moved throughout the day)⁹ and later exchange it for a thin iron chain fastened tightly around her body, she scalded herself in boiling springs, limited sleep, and eventually severely restricted her own food and water intake.¹⁰ In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, medieval scholar and historian Caroline Walker Bynum traces Catherine's fragmented relationship with food:

From about age sixteen, she subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables. From about twenty-three she gave up bread, surviving on the eucharist, cold water, and bits of food (mostly bitter herbs) that she sucked and then spit out or swallowed and vomited up. In January 1380, when she was about 33 years old, she gave up water for an entire month, offering her suffering as expiation for the crisis of the church in Italy. Although she ended her total fast in February, she died on April 29, 1380, emaciated and wracked by stomach pains....Moreover, she developed a complex casuistry about her self starvation, arguing to her first confessor and later to Raymond that, since eating caused her torture, it was the sin of suicide for her to eat – a far worse homicide of the self than starving oneself, because it was homicide by greed.¹¹

Undset goes on to offer perhaps the clearest distillation of the tragedy surrounding the person of Catherine Benincasa in her biography of the saint:

Catherine had come a long way since the time when she was a little girl in her father's house in Fontebranda and played her games before God, in the serious and preoccupied manner of children when they play. But the pale and emaciated woman whose body was

⁹ Christina Garton, "The History of the Hairshirt" Handwoven Magazine, March 27, 2019 <https://handwovenmagazine.com/history-hairshirts/>.

¹⁰ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 30.

¹¹ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London: University of California Press, Ltd, 1987), 169.

almost annihilated by supernatural experience and supernatural problems, must sometimes have shown a glimpse of the same small girl who played before God, smiling delightedly at her own strange ideas and inventions.¹²

Undset, unlike Bynum, was herself Catholic, so may have come to the beloved saint's life and practices with a very specific point of view and agenda. But from my own vantage point I cannot help but see the cruelty and diminishment enacted on this sacred body (as all bodies are) as a calamity, not a victory.

It is clear from Catherine's own words, as recorded by her confessor Raymond of Capua, that her theology included a belief that her self-inflicted, willing suffering was a way in which she could both cleanse herself from that which she considered her sin, but also as a service which could save others from damnation. In *The Dialogues of Saint Catherine*, she writes in the voice of God:

If thou actest thus, I will satisfy for thy sins, and for those of My other servants, inasmuch as the pains which thou wilt endure will be sufficient, through the virtue of love, for satisfaction and reward, both in thee and in others. In thyself thou wilt receive the fruit of life, when the stains of thy ignorance are effaced, and I shall not remember that thou ever didst offend Me.¹³

Undset echoes this sentiment when she describes the saint's self-inflicted suffering this way:

In order to imitate her spiritual father, St. Dominic, Catherine gave herself the discipline – scourged herself with an iron chain – three times a day: once for her own sins, once for the sins of all living souls, and once for the souls in purgatory. The blood often ran down her shoulders – as Raimondo says, she gave her Saviour “blood for blood.”¹⁴

Catherine Benincasa's motivations for her extreme behavior towards her body are certainly opaque, complex, and perhaps even unknowable from the vantage point of so many hundreds of years later. But an element that cannot be discounted is the established theology of the Western

¹² Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 286.

¹³ Saint Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of St Catherine of Siena: A Conversation With God on Living Your Spiritual Life to the Fullest*, Translated by Algar Thorold (North Carolina: TAN Books, 2010), 6.

¹⁴ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 32.

Catholic Church which understands the human body and mind to be irrevocably evil and the prescribed practice of continual penance via physical suffering and extreme discipline as being necessary for salvation. This viewpoint is distilled again by Undset when she is discussing a letter Catherine wrote in 1372 to Cardinal Legate:

But in order to love God with the whole of one's heart one must tear all self-love out of the heart, and with it, all submission to one's ego and the world. For these two kinds of love are opposites, so that self-love divorces us from God and our neighbour....Self love makes the heart shrink so that it cannot even contain its own ego; and certainly not its neighbor.¹⁵

The belief that the root of all evil is self-love will naturally breed self-contempt and mistrust of one's own body. It was under this theological dissemination of the body and of God that Catherine lived for her entire life. Stoicism in the face of harsh treatment of one's own body is often seen as a virtue in Western Catholic and Christian life. It should be no surprise, then, that Catherine and her contemporaries embraced extreme self-harm as a spiritual practice.

¹⁵ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 154.



2. *St. Catherine of Siena* by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1746)

Dear Catherine,

Our legs were still so short – swinging from the pew – when we were meditating on his mutilated body. Do you remember? I found it hard to focus, the room hot, dull, and serious. Bones and blood and weeping eyes. All the dour-faced adults surrounded us. Where does the violence go? Where does it live in the body decades later? Pain, daily blood, long fasts and inanition, pops on the wrist, deep cuts, and longing for death must be normal responses. We were told that our most beautiful ideas and collected treasures were like menstruation rags (the most

disgusting thing they could imagine). How were we meant to treat ourselves, then? How they tossed our perfect stones and tiny shells aside. There is no good in you (nor in me, dear friend).

He enacts horrific violence onto Himself...on your behalf...but the violence will belong to you, and to me, always. It should always have been ours. We must hold onto it and must never, ever put it down. We can never put it down.

We were primed to ask for nothing, to lower our heads and be silent. Truthfully, I was not very good at this. Guilty of talking back, being stubborn, anxious, sneaky, and willful. Full of will. I had my own ideas and I kept my own secrets. I think you did, too.

And didn't we diminish?

It was the birth of Ivy which changed my mind. My dark-haired daughter - born small, wet, and screaming. It was a profound absurdity to me that her tiny body could deserve punishment. A lie. If she felt pain I wanted her to cry out and never to swallow it or lower her eyes. I knew that she deserved to make her loud booming sound in the world – to feast on her life.

Have you thought of this already? Perhaps it is the wrong question. Tell me: why were you carefully created to be so crudely mutilated? Why is the air so much easier to breathe now? Saint Catherine, tell me: does He watch? Does He still want me destroyed?

Yours,

Melissa

There are many different ways to understand the body practices of Catherine, as well as the host of other female saints and mystics who shared her predilection for self-harm and extreme behaviors. The contemporary view, looking back on these women's lives from so many centuries later, is that their lives are an example of internalized misogyny – a picture of the violent destruction left in the wake of a psyche that has embraced its ideology. Namely, a woman who has embraced a contempt for women, and therefore for herself. But there are other compelling ideas that, when we put these women in their proper contexts, seem perhaps just as likely. In *Feminism is for Everybody*, bell hooks gives us a clue as to another motivation. She asserts:

Despite the sexism of male-dominated religions, females have found in spiritual practice a place of solace and sanctuary. Throughout the history of the church in Western life women have turned to monastic traditions to find a place for themselves where they can be with god without the intervention of men, where they can serve the divine without male domination.¹⁶

In Catherine's case, an important moment came when she was a young girl and took a pair of scissors to her hair in a very pointed act of rebellion: her older sister had just died in childbirth and Catherine had been promised to her brother-in-law as a replacement. In an act of dramatic mutiny, she cut off her hair and continued from then until the end of her life an extreme practice of self-mutilation and deep piety which would diminish her bodily functions and needs.¹⁷

Life for women in the 14th century was a bleak affair. Death by childbirth was extremely common, infant deaths were equally so, as was abuse in marriage, with middle-aged men often taking prepubescent girls as their brides. Motherhood and wifedom often meant a short life of violent drudgery. Catherine escaped this fate through her extreme behaviors and dedication to the Catholic church. She diverted the plans her family made for her by making herself entirely

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 105.

¹⁷ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 23.

unmarriageable. She entered the order of St. Dominic as a tertiary, took vows of poverty and chastity, received an education, served the very ill and poor, befriended the marginalized in her city, and eventually ascended into a place of great influence and power. Catherine Benincasa had the ear of the Pope and the respect and admiration of many powerful men both within the Catholic church and without, an unusual amount of influence for a woman in the church let alone in the 14th century. She is to this day an icon of devotion and piety, as well as unusually effective female leadership.

Catherine's treatment of her own body, though in the end fatal, would save her from a life lived wholly at the mercy of others. It would place her body, her sexuality, and in many ways her future, into her own hands. The argument was made by Bynum that perhaps these extreme behaviors, adopted by *female* mystics and saints much more than by their male counterparts, were not, in the end, expressions of self-hatred but of self-preservation in a place and time when being a woman often meant a short, brutal, and uneducated life. In *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* Bynum considers the relationship of women to food in the Middle Ages. In considering the question of female and male saints' differing relationship with mortification of the flesh and of fasting she says:

When we look more closely at the cases of fasting, however, several interesting facts emerge. The longest fasts are those of women. (One lasted thirty years, another three, whereas the longest male fast was seventy-eight weeks). Women provide both of the cases of fasting until death. Furthermore, of the twenty-six stories about individuals, only nineteen are actually about fasting. (The others are about failure to fast.) Since all the female cases are about fasting, women account for 26 percent (five out of nineteen) of the stories of people who fast.¹⁸

¹⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 79.

Bynum goes on to strongly argue for the theory that the proclivity of female saints and mystics to engage in extreme forms of mortification of the flesh was due less to internalized misogyny and more likely due to their dire societal circumstances:

In the lives of many women, particularly those, like (Saint) Lutgard, who had experienced physical (especially sexual) brutality, the touch of Christ's body came as a healing experience to replace all other touching, which was abhorrent....Many holy women were profoundly afraid of the sensations of their bodies – especially hunger and thirst. Mary of Oignies, for example, was so afraid of taking pleasure in food that Christ had to make her unable to taste....Such women felt desperately vulnerable before bodily needs and used asceticism to destroy them.¹⁹

This theory behind the extreme behavior of female saints does not diminish the role of misogyny in the church of the 14th century (nor in our own) but instead offers a new perspective when considering these women's responses to the misogyny and sexism of their time. It suggests their behavior was not merely a succumbing to or embracing of the gender-based biases of the time but rather that these behaviors were escape routes forged by their own suffering and blood into a better future. Catherine Benincasa suffered to save the world and she suffered to save herself.

¹⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 213



3. *Saint Catherine of Siena Receiving the Stigmata* by Giovanni di Paolo (1447-1465)

Dear Catherine,

I am still on my slow return...a tedious and painful process. I am often full of grief, which I can hardly understand. And I wonder sometimes how your flesh has suffered. How you never flinch. Perhaps it is better to do it this way...I wonder is it the complete mastery, in the moment, of our own bodies? Of our own pain? The power? The short, sharp shock. A brief justice.

Or maybe it's a kind of revenge. They want us suffering and hungry but not too much as would mar the picture. Woman. So pretty. So still, bloodless, hairless, and quiet. They want all their violence folded and put away inside of us. But it's best to make it as messy as possible. It is best to give birth loudly and naked. Spill your water on the floor. It is best to die emaciated and covered in scars. Bones and blood and weeping eyes.

But then - who will care? They worship our withering bodies, which they despise, and step over the blood and water, cleverly averting their eyes. And then what of the little girl with

legs swinging from the chair, terrified? *I* will not be sacrificed on the altar of their neat violence.
I will not drop my chin or walk on my knees in repentance. *I* will not mortify my soft flesh. *I* will
never atone.

Do not die quietly.

It is best to go screaming: “Blood! Blood!”

Yours,

Melissa

Catherine Benincasa died on April 29, 1380, surrounded by many of her followers and her mother. A lifetime of abusing and denying her body culminated in a weeks-long decline described by Undset this way:

With secret horror her family had seen how her body sometimes looked as though it had been beaten by invisible hands. The sick woman told them that these pains were physical, but not natural: “God allows demons to torture me in this way.”²⁰

Catherine became entirely unable to eat, drink, or move on her own during this time. Her death had many witnesses and has been much mythologized in its retelling so that it is hard to discern what her passing must have been like; most accounts mention her angelic, youthful face even as her body was wasted away. In a letter from Ser Barduccio di Piero Canigiani to Sister Catherine Petriboni, which included a report of the death of the saint and was included in Catherine’s dialogue by translator Algar Thorold, she is described:

In this way her body continued to consume itself until the Sunday before the Ascension; but by that time it was reduced to such a state that it seemed like a corpse in a picture, though I speak not of the face, which remained ever angelical and breathed forth devotion, but of the bosom and limbs, in which nothing could be seen but bones, covered by the thinnest skin, and so feeble was she from the waist downwards that she could not move herself, even a little, from one side to another.²¹

According to the two accounts of her death that I have read, that of Ser Barduccio di Piero Canigiani and Sigrid Undset, Catherine’s final moments were spent in prayer. Both of these accounts agree that Catherine Bennincasa’s final words were to loudly cry out, “Blood! Blood!” And then finally bowing her head and praying, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” Undset continues: “Her face had become as beautiful as an angel’s, radiant with tenderness and happiness.”²²

²⁰ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 313.

²¹ Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena*, 209.

²² Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 320.

Corpus Immanis



4. *Untitled from Silueta Series in Mexico* by Ana Mendieta (1976)

Although the role of violence and the threat of violence in the lives of women was not my initial focus, it became, slowly and forcefully (as is its way) an integral part of how I have come to understand my thesis research and resulting manifestation. Violence is woven into the experience of being a woman. I know this from my own experience in a female-presenting body and it is also made clear when I consider the women whose work and lives I have studied for this project. We live or die, and are done or undone, by the men in our environments.

It was my intention, in my initial imagination of this project, to unfold a vision of female agency, playfulness, and joy. I wanted to recreate the ‘real’ I had known as a young child when I knew only my subjectivity. But this desire shifted dramatically. I felt overrun, in this research, by

my own experience of brutal misogyny which colored that same childhood and found myself occupied with exorcizing this violence instead of imagining what may lie beyond.

This shift happened early in my research and began to synthesize after researching a particular visual artist. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was a Korean-American author, artist, and inspiring feminist voice. Her seminal work, *DICTEE*, published in 1982, is a visually stunning novel that plays with language and image to engage with ideas of authority, meaning, and failure. Using photography and text as a visual art form, fragmented and distorted, Cha tracks “the embodied experience of speech.”²³ Cha’s work is a complex investigation of the power dynamics inherent in language and an expression of embodied displacement and violent colonization. Although her work at the time received only moderately positive reviews, in the decades since the novel’s publication her work has become an important feminist voice in the art world.

In researching Cha’s impactful work it was perhaps inevitable that I would eventually be confronted with her sudden death. In 1982, only months after her celebrated novel was published, Cha was raped and murdered by a security guard in New York City – her body was discovered, partially clothed and abandoned, in a parking garage.²⁴ She was 31 years old. This sudden disruption into this inspiring woman’s life was deeply disturbing, unexpected, and landed like a blow. Similarly, in researching the revolutionary work of Ana Mendieta, I eventually encountered her untimely murder at the hands (it is widely believed) of her husband at the age of 36.²⁵

In researching Catherine Benincasa’s motivations for the use of self-inflicted suffering, I am confronted with the theory of her behavior being most likely an attempt to avoid the violence

²³ Laura Elkin, *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2023), 56.

²⁴ Dan Saltzstein, “Overlooked No More: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Artist and Author Who Explored Identity,” *The New York Times*, January 7, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/07/obituaries/theresa-hak-kyung-cha-overlooked.html>.

²⁵ Kate Dwyer, “When An Artist Dies, Who Owns Her Story?” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2024 <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/02/style/ana-mendieta-family-estate.html>.

of domestic life. In coming up, again and again, against the role of violence in women's lives, spanning centuries, I am reminded of the urgency of these conversations. Though they must always be housed in such smooth, unemotional, and scholarly language. Patriarchy, misogyny, and contempt for the female body is killing women, and yet how calm I have to be to discuss it with you. How logical. Do you understand now? The absolute havoc wreaked on these bodies. This experience is shared not only by female-presenting bodies but indeed by any *body* which does not comply with the white, able-bodied, male prototype – therefore becoming objects of objectification, cruelty, fetish, and dominance.

What was done to Cha, to Mendieta, and to Catherine (though hers was a self-inflicted violence whose origins came from the same deadly misogyny) continues on as a shadow in my own experience of violence. We do not escape. It is our monstrous inheritance. Instead, we are left to endlessly read and write and talk and think and make about it, holding the experience of the women before us in our minds. We must continue to speak so calmly. *And we cannot put it down.*



5. *She Isn't Here* by Melissa Miller (2024)

In light of all this shifting and discovery, the creative manifestation of this research became, as time wore on, an exercise in subtraction. I knew that dance as I have practiced and created in the past would not reflect the research the way I wanted. I was drawn away from my initial desire for an embodiment of rest and pleasure and instead set out to find the most succinct and streamlined expression of the story I was telling. Which, in the end, is the story of a woman's body – one caught in the crosshairs of oppressive religious dogma, western Christian theology of the body, violent misogyny, a particularly difficult historical context, and mental anguish. It is about Catherine's female body and it is about mine and I found I was continually removing the excess which my dancerly mind kept wanting to put on the work.

The work became finding my way into absolute presence, creating an opportunity for a transformation in real-time with real witnesses, and a hope to end differently (physically or otherwise) than how I began. It was something that could not be rehearsed in the ways I was accustomed to because it must be happening for the first time. This was an entirely new practice for me. In this paradigm performance became a laboratory, an experiment in radical presence and risk-taking. I became especially interested in exploring durational performance as well as task-based body transformation. My research of performing artists Coco Fusco, Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramovic, and Kira O'Reilly, helped shape these ideas.

Coco Fusco is a Cuban-American writer, activist, and artist whose performance piece, *Votos*, has obvious overlaps with my research, as in the work she is directly addressing the masochism of medieval mystic women. In her essay on the creation of the work, she described her performance this way: "I wanted a moment in which I could shape and be shaped by others. I wrote phrases on the wall around my audience and they carved their presence onto my person by cutting my hair off."²⁶ In her research for the project, Fusco seemed to draw very similar conclusions to my own in terms of motivations. She says:

The lucid cultural analysts of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) pointed out those mystics had succeeded in subverting the imperatives of the Church by turning devotion back on itself. By pushing their religious duties to the limit with their extreme repression of the body and absolute embrace of abjection, they freed their actions from the institutions they supposedly upheld.²⁷

She describes herself as engaging in "powerlessness," "failed agency," and "drained will," themes echoed in my research on the life of Catherine.²⁸ In *Votos*, Fusco makes use of durational performance, uses her own body as the medium, engages in task, transformation, and audience

²⁶ Coco Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours* (London: Routledge, 2001), 80.

²⁷ Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, 79.

²⁸ Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours*, 78.

participation, and embraces the abject female body. These modalities of creation are suitable areas of exploration when the goal is to resist male dominance and the dire aftershocks of oppressive systems of patriarchy. Ignoring, resisting, erasing, and indulging in non-compliance shrouded in liberated imaginations spoke to me as a generative approach to performance. I took special inspiration from Fusco's work and saw echoes of my questions and points of entry.

Ana Mendieta was a Cuban-American artist who worked in performance, land art, sculpture, painting, photography, and video. In her *Silueta* series, Mendieta superimposed her body onto the elements around her, especially incorporating earth, fire, and oftentimes blood. Laura Elkin, a writer and art historian who wrote *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art*, describes Mendieta's *Silueta* series this way: "She traced the outline of her body in the ground, burning or carving and kneading the earth until it made the form she wanted."²⁹ Much of her work brings to mind the chalk outlines left after a murder with only the vague suggestion of her body being left in the scorched earth. She used the presence, and the absence, of her body to communicate meaning. Elkin elaborates:

"(Mendieta) gets closer than any artist I can think of to confronting the abject body, and instead of jettisoning it, taking it in her arms, lying down with it.... That was its meaning for her: the ever-present threat of violence against women, of domestic violence, and onlooker's reaction, or non-reaction. Smoke emanates from the grass and brush all around."³⁰

This and other works of Mendieta recenter the female body by refusing to allow the lived experience of her own body to be absorbed in silence and instead allowing it to have a literal impact on the earth around her.

Mendieta's expression was to make the private, public; to bring blood to the pristine, white gallery walls (as she did in her work *Blood Sign #2/Body Tracks* in 1974). Her work

²⁹ Elkin, *Art Monsters*, 224.

³⁰ Elkin, *Art Monsters*, 226.

centered on the female body and its sensations as the primary subject, bringing the female body into conversation with the earth itself and offering visceral imagery for a lived experience of violence. What effect does the earth have on the body or the body on the earth? Can a woman's experience or expression of violence reshape the earth around her? Mendieta brought the abject female form to the fore, unflinchingly giving form to the objectifying and violent misogyny present in women's lives.



6. *Kitchen V: Carrying the Milk* by Marina Abramovic (2009)

Both the work by Kira O'Reilly's *Stair Falling* and Marina Abramovic's *The Kitchen V: Carrying the Milk* are durational, task-based performances that speak to what the female body in performance can connote when put into extreme situations. These two works informed the research around my manifestation in my use of duration and abjection, as well as the commitment to transforming my body in real-time. In O'Reilly's *Stair Falling*, the artist falls, naked, down an ornate spiral staircase in extreme slow motion. One iteration of this work, with

the artist performing a slow-motion backward tumble, lasted four hours. Abramovic's *The Kitchen V: Carrying the Milk* was performed in an abandoned industrial kitchen of an orphanage in Spain. The artist was inspired by her own experience of religion and by the life of Saint Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century saint and mystic from Spain. In the performance, Abramovic wears a long black gown, standing in the middle of the kitchen holding a bowl filled to the brim with milk. The piece consists of her crossing the length of the kitchen trying, and failing, to move without spilling the milk from the bowl. The performance lasted fifteen minutes. In both these performances, the experience of a female body is centered, and the circumstances built around these bodies create opportunities for failure and abjection. These works were important touchstones for me as I moved towards a manifestation and sought to synthesize the many complex themes inherent in this research into one simple task. They were also important examples for me of durational work which facilitates radical presence, builds atmosphere, and directly engages with time as a force that can influence and affect performance.



7. *Womb* by Melissa Miller (2024)

In my manifestation, I focused on four elements: space, durational stillness, iconography, and task. As I was set to perform inside The Eleanor D. Wilson Museum on the Hollins University campus, my manifestation involved the construction of an exhibit that would remain in the gallery space until the end of June. As I considered what sort of space would best support the performance and manifestation of this research, I returned again and again to the religious spaces in which I have spent so much time in, as well as those spaces that Catherine would have known very well. Therefore I set out to create my version of a sacred space within the museum, not dissimilar to a cathedral or chapel; it would be a womb-like environment meant to encourage reverence, quiet, contemplation, and meditation, as well as to connote the manic ritual of religious practice. This space and its elements would be the backdrop for my performance. I used two art objects that I had created during my research to construct an altar, which would be the

centerpiece of the room. With white fabric cascading from the ceiling and onto the floor, reaching halfway across the large gallery space, the altar was covered in tea lights and meaningful items from my life which I will catalog here:

Photos – taken by me, on a Polaroid camera. The shots are of my body parts, never a whole picture of my person, they are fleshy and angular, somewhat pained. My body offered up on the altar, my body fragmented, my body dissected, my body devoured.

Candles – to denote prayer, faithfulness, magic, and hope that someone is listening.

Cassette tape – recording from Christmas 1998. I was 11.

Metro tickets – From France where I was born and spent most of my childhood. My foreignness in every place, my unmooring, my life's movement, and my never quite belonging.

Money – French and American coins. Religion as a consolidation of power. Domination. I am for sale. Salvation is expensive.

Iconography – The beauty of religious practice, the devotion of generations before me, and the stories I was told.

Necklaces – My grandmother's: one a prayer medallion, worn almost smooth from her thumb, the other a chain of amber beads that resemble a rosary.

Communion – The wine and cracker placed in disposable, mass-produced cups collected from several services at an evangelical church. The commodification of faith. The consuming of the body. The fetishizing of violence and sacrifice.

Infant Bracelet – A gift for my newborn daughter on the occasion of her dedication service. Small with a silver cross dangling from the side and a small heart engraved on it. My lineage. My questions. My not knowing.

A lock of hair – Under a bell jar. My hair, my body. The first piece that I cut with the performance scissors.

Large silver medallion – Of Saint Benedict. It was given to my husband at his graduation from seminary. What we have lost in stepping away from our faith tradition. Community. Recognition. Career. Certainty.

Crystal cruets – My grandmother's. For oil. Ritual, care, superstition, heritage, ancestry.

Small white shells – A gift from my mother. A love for small, beautiful things.

Railroad Spike – From a Tennessee railroad. Deep south America.

Broken mirror – “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.”³¹

³¹ The Bible Gateway “1 Corinthians 13:12 ESV” Accessed June 25, 2024
<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2013%3A12&version=ESV>.



8. *Altar* by Melissa Miller (2024)

In my manifestation of this project, I have been looking away from traditional performance and instead trading gender hierarchy for human connection; seriousness and elitism for accessibility; performance for transformation; entertainment for communal experience; explaining for showing; and rehearsed pretending for failure. In Elkin's *Art Monsters*, she says:

To be in a body is to live with failure, to acknowledge eventual decay; to tell the truth of one's experiences within that body has to involve making room for failure, and decay, in one's practice. Like (Virginia) Woolf's, (Eva) Hesse's work was a question of throwing in her luck with materiality and its uncertain futures. Life is matter; matter has limits; form has consequences.³²

The use of durational stillness stood out to me as an effective way of expressing the austerity, deprivation, and diminishment that was inherent in the research around the lived experience of Catherine Beninicasa. This came to me early on in my research as a generative image and

³² Elkin, *Art Monsters*, 223.

posture when considering the research, and I began a practice of absolute stillness, beginning with one minute on the first day, and finally growing the practice to standing still for twenty minutes at a time. However, I dismissed this expression as a possible one for performance early on. Standing still did not fit the paradigm I held for a successful dance performance. Which is partly why, in the end, I knew it was perfect. Durational stillness opened and closed the performance of my manifestation, with eight minutes of stillness opening the work, and three at the close. An exercise in radical presence, passive resistance, and generative failure, this portion of the work holds the most tenderness for me.



9. Performance photo by Rachael Appold (2024)

The third element of my manifestation, embodying iconography, began as an exercise early in the movement research process. I had gathered many images of Saint Catherine of Siena as helpful clues as to her significance in the Catholic tradition, and in rehearsal would practice

embodying the images. Studying each image in its most minute detail became a meditative practice for me. I would seek to understand the shoulder placement, eyeline, and points of tension in the body. And though these were not images painted to reflect her likeness but rather to communicate meaning and mythology, I found embodying them connected my body to my mental construction of her. Performing this iconography was also a signaling to those of us who grew up around such images that I was operating within a religious context and it also served to make visible the idea of a holy, pristine, female body, or the Madonna vs whore binary. Embodying these ideals of female beauty, meekness, stoic sacrifice, and appropriateness was a prelude to the final act of the performance.

Catherine took scissors to her hair in resistance to a life she did not choose, abjecting herself but ultimately gaining agency over her body. Coco Fusco encouraged audience members to cut her hair as part of her *Votos* work, to reflect the stoicism of female medieval mystics. And I would also learn via the podcast *The Turning: The Sisters Who Left* by Erika Lantz, that as part of their life vows, the nuns of the Missionaries of Charity cut their hair to the scalp, and burned the strands.³³ It is perhaps not surprising that the task I chose to include in my performance was to cut my hair. A ritual of self-abandonment as well as a reclamation of agency, a painless expression of self-harm, and a rejection of Western standards of female beauty, cutting my hair was my chance to transform in real time and to express the abject female body in religious space and ritual. The scissors and the hair would be left in the gallery space as part of the ongoing exhibit.

³³ Erika Lantz, Produced by Rococo Punch, *The Turning: The Sisters Who Left*, May 2021, Podcast, MP3, audio <https://open.spotify.com/show/3n778ASBS3ScYwluOhN7x2>.



10. Performance photo by Rachael Appold (2024)

Through my research into both the life of Catherine Benincasa and in the work of performance artists, I found some surprising overlapping imagery. Catherine's radical body practices throughout her life, strangely, intersect with some of these performance artists' practices. The use of the grotesque or the abject in particular. Feminist visual artists took their bodies, the site of violence and conflict, and expressed agency by employing the grotesque, monstrous, and abject. In much a similar way, Catherine foresaw the violent wearing down of her body and took the task upon herself. She was praised, venerated, given education and agency, and made safer (in the short term at least) for it. I think of the theatrical cutting of her hair on the long staircase of her childhood home when she was a young girl, with her parents watching

helplessly below, as described by Undset,³⁴ or of how she immersed herself in scalding water while with her family.³⁵ Her suffering was done out loud. It was real but it was also staged. She never cried out or lamented, as far as we know, but there was often an audience to her stoicism. Though it would never be seen this way in her century, looking on from so many hundreds of years later, Catherine Benincasa's life could be discussed as a durational performance of deprivation and austerity. A performance of silent suffering, focus, and *absolute* control.

³⁴ Undset, *Catherine of Siena*, 23.

³⁵ Jennifer Egan, "Power Women: The Lives of the Mystic Saints Offer a Cruel Lesson in Success - and it Still Works Today" New York Times Magazine, accessed on December 20th, 2023
<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/magazine/millennium/m2/egan.html>.

Conclusion

Dear Catherine,

We must

Collect every wonderful thing we have seen

Keep them safe

Pile them on the soft carpet of your bedroom

Sort them into glass jars place them on the cracked paint of the windowsill

Bright red buttons golden brass beads smooth rocks fragile shells dark blue marbles

The mother bird gathering supplies

Swinging high

Dust floating in the light from the window

The child with her gentle father

The woman, alone, in the small sailboat

Collect every wonderful thing you have seen

Evidence

Against our damnation

Let us make the case together

We,

Drawing a warm bath bringing coffee brushing the hand

Your favorite song

Remember walking beneath a canopy of trees in bloom? The overwhelming scent?

Remember the softness of your belly, recently vacated of baby, blood, water?

Remember the view from the treehouse

Remember touching the twisted tree and breathing together

We are good

We are good

We are good

We have no penance to pay

Yours,

Melissa



11. *Dear Catherine* by Melissa Miller (2024)

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