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“Dethroning the Madonna: Greta Knutson, Julia Kristeva and the Search for a Post-Virginal
Discourse on Jouissance”

I first want to thank the conference organizers, Professor Loselle, and my colleagues on this panel. When Kate, Lauren and I came together to propose a panel on jouissance, I thought this would be the perfect forum for my work on Greta Knutson’s fiction, which I’ve been developing for several years in various ways. This paper represents the most recent elaboration of what began as a translation exercise, grew into a chapter of my master’s thesis, and remains a field of enquiry that my scholarship targets.

The idea of jouissance ties in two ways to the topic at hand; first, it figures in the writing of the Swedish-born Francophone author, Greta Knutson. Primarily a visual artist, Knutson was born in Stockholm in 1899, fell in with the Surrealists when she moved to Paris in 1920, and married the poet Tristan Tzara in 1925. Following their split in 1930, she relocated to the south of France, where the bulk of her mature writing was completed, between the 1930s and her death in 1983. Though she broke with the avant-garde early in her career, her later writing still retains traces of Surrealist thematics: concerns with mysticism and with the occult, for example, and a strong concern for “l’amour fou,” or convulsive, overpowering love. She also remained faithful to that bulwark of Surrealist thought: that previously neglected forms of association rule our waking lives, and that it is the task of poetic language to give these forms voice.

Unlike those female artists and writers associated with the Surrealist movement who have undergone revision in the past few decades, Knutson's work has never received the critical attention that it merits, based on its sophisticated treatment of themes related to female sexuality: maternity, desire, and *jouissance*. Her disappearance from the literary record is curious and warrants correction. To this is end, I use three essays by Julia Kristeva - "Stabat Mater," "Women's Time" and "Motherhood According to Bellini" - as a theoretical lens to explore Knutson's story, *La vierge noire*, or *The Black Madonna*.

This brings us to our second link with *jouissance*, through the figure of the Madonna, which has played a central role in the construction of our cultural attitudes toward feminine sexuality and motherhood. In her essays on motherhood (first published between 1975-1984), Julia Kristeva argues that the maternal subject has been left mute by Western discourse, distorted by the dueling poles of science and spirituality. Each view dismisses the maternal subject as either biological and therefore pre-social, or sacred and beyond rationality; both views fail to address the mother as a speaking, social being. Emphasizing the failure of the spiritual discourse by examining ecclesiastic and artistic manipulations of the Virgin Mary's image, Kristeva calls for a re-conceived notion of maternity that rejects the cult of the Virgin, in favor of exploring manifestations of *jouissance* within maternity itself.

For a working definition of the term *jouissance*, I refer to Jacques Lacan's seminars. In Book 20 of *Encore*, a series of lectures from 1972-73, Lacan defines *jouissance* in opposition to Freud's pleasure principle. It is transgressive enjoyment that goes beyond pleasure, to a liminal space that borders on suffering. Lacan concedes that there is a feminine *jouissance*, yet he insists that we know nothing about it. He cites Bernini's statue of St. Teresa in Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome [slide 1]. "You only need to go to Rome and see the statue to know that she's

coming,” he famously quips, adding that it is impossible to know what she’s getting off on, for no one can know anything about female jouissance, and least of all women themselves [slide 2]. Kristeva reworks this definition, arguing that there is a maternal jouissance located within maternity itself, a central place in Western culture, from whence all signs and language are begotten.

Keeping these theoretical considerations in mind, allow me to now turn to the content of Greta Knutson’s “Black Madonna.” This story, narrated by an old woman reflecting on her youth in the French countryside, presents a mother driven to insanity by her passion for a younger man; her daughter, abandoned, is raped by this man, then consigned to a Catholic boarding school, where the suggestion of her pregnancy elicits pitied whispers from the nuns. Meanwhile, a Black Madonna statue surveys the sequence, unmoved.

Written in the late 1970s, first published in 1984, this story is unique in both its dialogue with the nature of female desire and the ambiguities related to the Virgin symbol. Knutson dramatizes the consequences of the mother’s carnal passion, which conflicts with her maternal obligations, sending the sequence of events into a downward spiral. Consider Kristeva’s claim that, in Christianity, woman can accede to the symbolic, provided that she keep her virginity. Failing that, she can still gain access to the symbolic order, through an endless struggle between her body, and the symbolic prohibition against jouissance: however, guilt, mortification and masochism result. It is precisely this struggle that will drive the mother insane and result in her disappearance, leading to the conditions that result in an act of sexual violence against her daughter. This child, alone and traumatized, turns to the maternal figure par excellence, the Virgin Mary, for solace. The particular icon that she chooses, however, remains impervious to her prayers.

Despite recent studies on the phenomenon of dark-skinned Virgin icons, there is no consensus on why these representations of the Virgin are black. Catholic doctrine has remained characteristically diffident concerning the reasons for the Virgin's black skin. Sometimes it is attributed to the ill-effects of candle smoke, or the accretion of dirt over centuries of worship. Others wish to read the continuation of an ancient, powerful mother goddess into their blackness, and celebrate the icon as proof of the debt that Christianity owes to pagan, matrilineal societies. Because their shrines appear in sites where temples to Demeter, Ceres or Isis once stood, Black Virgins are assumed to carry powers of fertility, wisdom, and a humble interconnection with the earth.

Yet among these icons, there is considerable variation in the Virgin's posture and dress. Some are shown as lavishly adorned as their rich, white counterparts, mirrors for the earthly power of the church, while others adopt the Franciscan style of poverty and humility, barefoot and dressed in a simple maphorion. Though Bernard de Clairvaux, the twelfth century saint and mystic, attributed her blackness to humility, his own patroness assumes the dress, posture and paraphernalia of royalty. [Bernard's Black Madonna at Chartres, wears a finely embroidered gown of gold, with a jeweled crown and scepter to match [slide].] These symbols of earthly wealth and feudal power elaborate a materialist ideology wholly at odds with the gospel teachings that exhort Christians to charity, and insist that the poor shall inherit the earth.

It is precisely this paradox that Knutson will target. Through her ekphrastic rendering of the icon, Knutson indicates that the Black Madonna is a mirror for the earthly queen or feudal lady of the medieval court. The jewels, crowns and robes that seem like normal components of Mary's attire lose their innocence, become insidious, as they project an earthly hierarchy onto heaven. Consider Marina Warner's claim that the Virgin was systematically developed in order

to diminish, not increase, her likeness to the female condition. Her freedom from sex and painful delivery, as well as age, death and sin, in combination with her selection as the vessel for the divine, exalt her above all other women and showed them up as inferior (153).

Read alongside Julia Kristeva's 1977 essay "Stabat Mater," an analysis of the cult of the Virgin Mary and its implications for the Catholic understanding of motherhood and femininity, Knutson's story gives rise to a growing sense of dissatisfaction with the prevailing discourse on female desire. This sense of dissatisfaction arose from the decline of religion, alongside the gradual progress of women's political and social emancipation, beginning in the twentieth century. Knutson's representation of the Virgin channels the ambiguities related to female sexuality, while challenging the myths that preserve a virgin ideology as archetype for motherhood. Such ideology provides a point of fascination for the cultural imaginary, while it ignores or represses the modern woman's experience of sexuality. It denies her the subjectivity to represent her body and experience. And as the virgin's symbolic hegemony continues to fade, contemporary feminist theory struggles to bridge the gap between sexuality and subjectivity that her disappearance is making plain.

This struggle is connected to what Kristeva calls "the symbolic question," a difference in the relation of subjects to the symbolic contract, which has historically muted the "specificity of female psychology and its symbolic realizations" (194). In forging a new ethics of gender, contemporary feminism must avoid deferring to religion and mysticism to explain the needs of women, and look instead towards a symbolic structure that privileges woman in her specificity as the foundation of the social order. This structure remains undiscovered. Literature by female authors furthers the process of discovery by giving voice to the "intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by cultures in the past;" that is, by rewriting the experience of the female

body that dominant, male-centered discourse has misrepresented or failed to represent at all (Kristeva 192).

Knutson's story provides us with one such attempt to illustrate the female experience, as well as an interesting manipulation of the Virgin's image. How do we reclaim the psychological space that the Madonna once occupied, without deferring to the lure of religion and mysticism? Either as artists or writers, Kristeva insists, women must undertake an exploration of the "dynamic of signs," an exploration which relates the tendency to give language to muted corporeal experiences to "all major projects of aesthetic and religious upheaval" (194). *La Vierge Noire*, in its dialogue with religious symbolism and the prescriptive ethics of motherhood, demonstrates Knutson's attempt to give voice to this "dynamic of signs" and insert subjective experience of the female body, along with its *jouissance*, into literary history.

"The Black Madonna" is a story that addresses the need for a new discourse on the maternal subject. By emphasizing its exclusive and ascetic elements, Knutson points to the icon's failure as an archetype for motherhood. She highlights its inability to provide solutions for the concrete, social issues surrounding the experiences of women, including passionate love, sexual desire. By reexamining the archetypal feminine, Knutson effects a re-appropriation of maternal subjectivity, dethroning the Madonna in favor of exploring the mother's body: her pleasure, pain and *jouissance*.