

Susan Moore

Kristeva, Ecocriticism, and the Cult of the Virgin

I am looking for something indescribable, so light it can be
crushed by a heavy thought, so tender even our enthusiasm
can wilt it, as mysterious as tears.

—Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*

Now she's quite close. I can see the glimmer of her
face, the dark scarf or hood around her head, or is it hair?
She holds out her arms to me and I feel a surge of
happiness. Inside her half-open cloak there's a glimpse of
red. It's her heart, I think. It must be her heart, on the
outside of her body, glowing like neon, like a coal.

Then I can't see her any more. But I feel her around
me, not like arms but like a small wind of warmer air. She's
telling me something.

*You can go home now, she says. It will be all right.
Go home.*

I don't hear the words out loud, but this is what she
says.

—Margaret Atwood, *Cat's Eye*

Introduction

This paper originally appeared as a chapter in my dissertation entitled *Women, Nature and Hermeneutic Inquiry* (Moore 2006), which inquired into the meaning of four women's experiences of nature. Specifically, I was interested in the connection between maternity and subjectivity and how this related to women's experiences and understanding of nature—and their own natures. An initial concern that guided this inquiry was my suspicion of the current trend in environmental movements and education towards what Cate Sandilands refers to in *The Good-Natured Feminist* (1999) as 'Motherhood Environmentalism.' The logic of this discourse is that women's experiences and concern for the environment derive from a protective instinct toward

home and family (Sandilands 1999). For instance, the trend toward schoolyard naturalization (Moore 2000), implemented primarily by female elementary schoolteachers and mothers, equates the nurturing of children with the stewardship of nature. Nature viewed in this light positions women in a particular way—as nurturing, child-bearers and child-rearers, caretakers willing to self-sacrifice for future generations. While on the surface this may appear desirable, empowering, even heroic, it comes at a cost—women’s environmental experiences remain in the private sphere of the home or classroom and largely apolitical. Moreover, this narrative does not take into account aesthetic experience or sensual experience of the body in nature. According to Sandilands, while the ‘maternal’ is only one of the many ways women relate to nature and the environment, it is becoming distressingly common (Sandilands xiii).

This theme has been taken up extensively by Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of the Land* (1975), where she argues that the discourse of the land as nurturing or Virgin Mother has been the most dominant metaphor in the North American imagination for three hundred years (4). In this view, desire for nature is a longing for return to the warmth of the maternal embrace. In Kristevan psychoanalytical theory, such a view attempts to restore the lost primordial connection with the mother. However, for Kristeva, the “lost” object cannot be restored. Instead, what is lost and *loss* itself is controlled by the discourse of the Virgin. Through hermeneutic conversation with my participant, Amy, and Kristevan analysis, this paper shows how the Marian discourse covers up loss, confining women’s experience of nature in fantasy. The conversation with Amy that follows, as with Kristevan “herethics”, attempts to bring out and give voice to forgotten body relationships. Indeed, as Kristeva reminds us in the concluding lines of her essay “Stabat Mater”:

If ethics amounts to not avoiding the embarrassing and inevitable problematics of the law but giving it flesh, language, and jouissance—in that case its reformulation demands the contributions of women... (“Tales” 262)

AMY

February 11, 2004

I am sitting in Amy's kitchen, surrounded by crisp white cupboards set against soft lime green walls. I have been presented with a plate of cheese, crackers, apple slices, and tea. The faint scent of recently burnt incense fills the room. Everything is immaculate, yet soothing and serene.

Olivia, Amy's 18-month-old, reaches her hand up on the table for a cracker, and then she disappears again, dancing little pirouettes out of the room. She has settled down at a wooden dollhouse in the living room. I gaze up above her and notice a collection of framed pictures of fairies hanging on the wall.

It is a dark February afternoon, and I peer out the window and notice how barren and desolate the schoolyard looks without leaves on the trees. We have been talking for a few minutes about Amy's depression and how that relates to her experience and understanding of nature.

Amy and I worked together as volunteer coordinators for Arbor Day at the school our children attend. I do not remember much from our conversations from that time except that I got an overwhelming sense of how devoted she is to her family, her community, and the environment.

I asked her to participate in the project because I was interested in her closeness to the experience of maternity. We had talked about this previously because we had shared experiences about midwifery and our home births. I didn't actually know anything about her personal history when I asked her to participate in the study, so when she told me that she was in the healing arts and was a 'rebalancer' I did not know what that was. Even after she told me what it was, the practice of manipulating the body's energies, and how she had gone to Nelson to study this for six months before she had her eldest daughter, and how she had fallen in love with the people and landscape of Nelson, so much so that her husband had to go and 'bring her back,' and how she has longed ever since to return, more than ten years, I still did not know what this was. But one day, the following September, several of us from the group took up Renee's invitation to her family's cabin in Jasper. Renee, Amy, Julie, and I spent the weekend there. While we were there, Amy offered to conduct a rebalancing session and I willingly participated. I am still not sure

what this is, but when she began to move her hands across my body, I felt very odd. It was a little like massage, but different. First I got a few tears and then I began to giggle, whatever it was she did to me, it was strange and wonderful. She said that I was very ‘open.’

We are talking about nature and her spirituality now. She was brought up Roman Catholic, but as an adult she has investigated eastern philosophies as well, as part of her practice. But she has not really named her beliefs. She has just referred to the ‘Earth Mother’ in our conversation, so I ask her if she can tell me what she means.

SUSAN: Let’s return to the spirituality question. You were talking about how you believe in the Earth Mother. Can you tell me what it is you believe in?

AMY: I am just going to go into it here a little bit because I don’t have any picture of it. I know that. And hm? (Long pause).

SUSAN: If it’s a feeling that’s okay too. Or if it is some kind of experience?

AMY: It’s almost like a *knowing* and I know that somehow that comes out when I’ve had an experience of nature and I’ve had (sigh). It’s like little messengers or spiritual experiences. For an example. This is my favorite one. Out on Savory Island¹, there is this beautiful Arbutus tree. And you know that whole area is just glorious, but this arbutus tree you look at her and you just see the mother in her. In fact, I have pictures of her. There is this huge ass. You know on the other side of the tree is this cave and she is just humungus and she just gets you so connected to your sexuality, sensuality. And I prayed to her because I wanted to have a baby so badly with Brad. It was seven years and I just thought I was infertile, and after the tree blessings...we just felt so light and happy like children. You know we held hands. There were seven of us holding hands around this tree, that’s how huge it was. My husband was there, my brother, nieces, and nephews. That night I am lying in bed and I get this conversation going on with the stars, like actually saying the spirit is coming in and she, you know, you’ve been sort of blessed by, I guess, a child. You know that your wish has been granted. Somehow it was hard to believe or to relate back to other people because who would believe that you are talking to a star, right!

¹ Savory Island is off the Sunshine Coast, British Columbia.

SUSAN: And what did it feel like? I know that this is a hard question. I know you are describing when you had this, was it a feeling or were you actually hearing words?

AMY: Yeah. It's a feeling

SUSAN: That's what I am wondering. Can you tell me what you were feeling? You were feeling something, you were not actually talking.

AMY: No, it felt like a conversation, but it was more of just this knowing again. It was like somehow I was relating back to the presence coming into me. I could feel myself getting very giddy and then the other part of me is going "but how can really, how could this be that I could be getting this information from you" and it's just. It felt like a real opening up and trust. Uh, how can I describe it as being? You're right it's hard.

Yeah. I'll give you another example because I actually just wrote about this last night. And it was just kind of weird because I don't know how to describe that, to tell you the truth. I remember I was thirteen, fourteen. I don't know somewhere around my early teens. I don't know whether I was in a depression or just really at an uncertain stage. And for some reason I was home alone. I chose not to go on a road trip with my family and I was out for a walk and it was late night February probably, I don't know. There's snow. I don't know if it was my dream or imagination or wherever this image came from, but it was like Mary standing right in front of me, almost white as snow, but blue. Blue light and golden from the heart and the connection to my heart was like I just wanted to get down pray and kneel and be holy too. I wanted to be blessed. But I was so frightened. I was so overwhelmed with the experience. I didn't know how to take it in. I didn't know what to do with it. And I actually remember going to the store and buying a pack of smokes, smoking. I'd never bought smokes before. I bought Black Cat cigarettes and I went home and I smoked and I masturbated. I did everything I could to shut that down. Shut that down! You know, and I think it was a very sexual experience. I think I just was inside out or something. I guess like raw in some ways.

SUSAN: So you tie this to spirituality, can you explain that? When you say spirituality, is this coming from some outside force or is it coming from within you? Do you mean some sort of supernatural or metaphysical force?

AMY: I think it would have to be outside myself because with all the religious upbringing that I have had and all the taboos around sex and all the, you know, how would I ever make a connection between the spiritual and the sexual. Like I don't think I, unless I am just a naturally sexual being and that's all I can relate to, but I don't think that's the truth. Like when it comes to spirituality, I do think I feel it on a very physical realm and I think that it's energy coming from...I think it's just that we are moved and filled with a certain vibrational energy and whether it's the tree or the water we are walking in, there is just a real connection to it. And how that relates to spirituality?

I ask Amy again where she thinks that energy originates from and suggest that what she has experienced is almost like a vision.

AMY: Yeah, it was a vision, probably not so much as, but it did, again it still felt like it was the magic of the snow and the light of the moon and the whole presence. I don't think it was like 'Oh there is Mary there.' It was just the energy felt true enough to have been Mary.

SUSAN: So that was how you represented that energy to yourself?

AMY: Yeah. I didn't think it was Mary necessarily you know. It was just like that something pure, that pure, that loving, that absolute. You know it could have been all the force that was surrounding us that was all of a sudden a vortex of energy there that I related to as Mary. I do feel like it is a relationship between some part of my soul or self or spirit and probably something very much greater than me. Like it just doesn't feel like it, I only put a name on it or contain it to my, however I could describe it to you. It feels like it's all part of this big big bigness and then again it's all a matter of how I relate to it. I totally don't think that makes sense, but (she breaks into tears).

As Amy continues she relates this early encounter with the 'mother' to another vision in her twenties in Nelson, British Columbia. Here she describes the experience of receiving a 'gift' from this feminine presence and being initiated into the practice of the healing arts.

AMY: I don't fully understand it but what came out of that for me was being initiated into a place that I could see the mother. Or I think it was anyway. And what had appeared to me in this vision was just an incredibly very very large feminine. You could tell it was very feminine in that it felt like mother energy. It was a bit like a tapestry and very very woven together, very intricate design of um kind of patterns and colours—you know like more intense than any colours I have ever seen. Like it was just incredibly hard to appreciate the bigness of it, so then I would just be able to focus on a small area of this and I don't know how to describe that even, other than...

SUSAN: So these are things you see or feel?

AMY: I see it in patterns in the body, especially in the body like when I was doing body work it almost became like reading a map on this person. It was just like seeing the design of the fabric and seeing here is the channel of light going through it. It's just like reading a map basically. When I looked at this goddess, I guess she gave me a gift and what the gift was, just an incredible light through my body, just like almost getting blasted with tons and tons of light, electricity, like I just felt it like zooming through my body.

SUSAN: Okay.

AMY: So powerful that I didn't want it, felt too much for me alone. I just wanted to kind of keep spreading it out and put it through something else. And it was like healing energy. I knew somehow it had a vibration of healing quality to it. I felt like that was my gift in terms of why I am here. Something I could offer in terms of if I could ever get that connected again to the mother. So that's been my search all my life.

Further on in the same interview, I ask Amy how she felt about her encounter with this 'feminine energy'.

SUSAN: So when you had this moment, afterwards then, how did you feel?

AMY: It was a mixture of incredible sadness because I wanted to stay there....And I couldn't even believe that that happened to me because first of all I didn't feel like I was, you know, I just didn't feel deserving of any kind of experience like that. Not feeling like I was particularly a good girl, you know, like I only thought good girls got

to have spiritual experiences or things like that. Like the mystic women, you know like the women in the gospels and stuff like that.

SUSAN: What do you mean not being a good girl?

AMY: Well (laughter) you know it's just if I put the lens of my parents on again, you know I was probably a slut or something close to it.

SUSAN: To your parents.

AMY: Yeah.

SUSAN: Not to you though.

AMY: I don't know. To me I had a very difficult time differentiating between the actual emotional physical experience of it (she points to her pelvic region) and maybe what the catholic girl you know the good girl up here (points to her heart) kind of thought of the whole experience because definitely that was how I played out my good and dark side. It was very mixed up in there you know.

The Mary Metaphor

One of the things I cannot help noticing as I read my conversation with Amy in its narrative entirety, is that it not only includes her story of the Virgin Mary, but also the story of her fertility ritual and her daughter's conception. In the middle ages the Mary metaphor meant "life and superabundant life" and, indeed, the analogous theme of Mary, nature, and fertility has proven irresistible to poets through the ages. Take, for instance, this small excerpt from Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem, "Mary Magnificent." As Andrew Greely, author of *The Catholic Imagination* (2000) notes "when it links the fertility of nature and the fertility of a woman with the fertility of God, the Catholic imagination risks being profoundly offensive. In effect it seems to be regressing to the fertility cults which tempted ancient Israel" (94):

Ask of her, the mighty mother
Her reply puts this other
Question: What is Spring
Growth in every thing—

Flesh and fleece, fur and feather,
Grass and greenworld all together;
Star-eyed strawberry-breasted

Throsle above her nested

Cluster of bugle blue eggs thins
Forms and warms the life within;
And bird and blossom swell
In sod or sheath or shell.

All things rising, all things sizing
Mary sees, sympathisizing
With that world of good,
Nature's motherhood.

Their magnifying of each its kind
With delights calls to mind
How she did in her stored
Magnify the Lord.

Thus, what I find curious is why then, later in our conversation, Amy wonders at the “connection between the spiritual and the sexual.” However, in reading Greely, I learn that the contradistinction between human sexuality and spiritual enlightenment arises directly out of the counter reformation. As Greely explains, erotic desire was often depicted in renaissance art where “human arousal is a hint of divine arousal” (70). For example, Greely explains that the renaissance humanists depicted the crucifixion of Christ with his genitals showing: “In this way, the artists stressed that Jesus really died. Sexuality means mortality; a being without sex can only appear to die” (71). Greely describes how the Catholic puritans painted loincloths over Michelangelo's nudes resulting in distortions of great works (e.g., “The striking Michelangelo of the risen Jesus has lost his penis, as though he shouldn't have had one in the first place”) (72). On this point Greely remarks:

Oddly enough, by no stretch of the imagination can any of the work of the Renaissance humanists be described as even mildly suggestive. The point then (and now) with the prudes is not that art was an “occasion of sin” but rather that it was disgusting. If human nature and human reproduction are disgusting—and a lot of Christians have thought so down the ages—then one understands why they

want to deny the humanity of Jesus: it too must be disgusting, unless it is stripped of its sexuality. (72)

It, therefore, does not take much of a leap in thought to see how such puritanical reasoning also applied to Mary, who is essentially depicted as sexless. Moreover, if the Marian image then becomes the only consecrated representation of ‘femininity’ available to women in western civilization, as suggested by Kristeva, imagine the profound impact this has had on female sexuality and identity.² I will return to this point a little further on, but first I would like to highlight Greeley’s findings in his interviews in North America on the topic of Mary. First of all, he notes that Mary “is the most important culture symbol in two thousand years of Western History” and that “mother love never loses its appeal” (101). He notes that seventy-five percent of the young adults he interviewed were “extremely likely” to think of Mary as “warm,” “patient,” “comforting,” or “gentle.” As Greeley concludes “Mary is not only still fashionable but also, it seems still ‘relevant’.” He then tells us to consider “the annual impact of the Nativity scene or the attractiveness of a young mother holding a baby in her arms in an airport boarding lounge” and continues,

The motherhood experience is one of the most powerful sacraments in our lives. It can be an overwhelming experience of grace, representing the persistence of life and, indeed, of life treated with tenderness and care. (102)

Indeed, Greeley paints a pretty picture of Mary and mother love, but I might suggest that maybe he has spent too much time in museums examining the great works and reading poetry instead of spending time with actual mothers and their children in the home. If he had, he would soon realize that women’s identification with their mothers, motherhood, mother-love, and the holy mother is tad more complex than this! As Kelly Oliver writes, The “cult of the Virgin” has been used by western patriarchy to “cover up the unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship” (50). And in Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, “The image of the Mother of Sorrows was a

² Kristeva forms this view from her reading of Horkheimer and Adorno’s “Mater Dolorosa” in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For discussion see Sara Beardsworth’s (2004) introduction in *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*.

concession to patriarchal residues. Yet the church used the very image that was supposed to redeem women from her inferiority to sanction it” (qtd. in Beardsworth 220).

On the topic of the Virgin, Elizabeth Grosz writes,

she is the receptacle of those socially necessary attributes—humility, self-abnegation, modesty—which are marks of compliance ensuring acceptance of the status quo amongst the oppressed and downtrodden. On the other hand she also evokes an archaic, primal shelter, the protective maternal harbour. The representation of maternity through the cult of the Virgin in the discourses of Christian theology is an attempt to smooth out and cover the contradictory status and position of maternity in the symbolic, a maternity both ‘respected’ and unrecognized, both sexless and fully eroticised. (83)

Kristeva and The Cult of the Virgin

The main point of Greely’s argument is that Mary represents the “mother love” of God: “It is the story that God loves us like a mother as well as a father...that is at the core of the appeal of the Mary metaphor” (Greely 92). Kristeva wishes to contest this claim, and argue that the image of the Virgin can no longer explain or give meaning to motherhood.

Kristeva’s analysis in “Stabat Mater” (Mother of Sorrows) highlights the way in which the Virgin image accommodates the feminine and then controls it. Oliver explains in her reading of “Stabat Mater” that “In the biblical stories, the Virgin is impregnated by the Word, the Name of the Father, God. This, argues Kristeva, is a way of insuring paternity and fighting off the remnants of matrilineal society” (50). Oliver continues,

The mother is a threat to the Symbolic order in two immediate ways. Her *jouissance* threatens to make her a subject rather than the Other against which man becomes a subject. In addition, she not only represents but *is* a strange fold between culture and nature that cannot be fully

incorporated by the Symbolic...The symbolic order, however, attempts a complete incorporation of the mother with her strange fold and her outlaw jouissance through the cult of the Virgin. First the Virgin birth does away with the “primal scene” and the mother’s jouissance that might accompany it. (50)

This is even more striking because Kristeva claims that “virgin” is a mistranslation of “the Semitic term that indicates the socio-legal status of a young unmarried woman” (51). On this point Oliver expresses that

The jouissance of the young unmarried woman is a jouissance that is not confined within the social sanctions of marriage. It is outlaw jouissance that does not come under paternal control...The jouissance of this young unmarried woman and her “bastard” child present a threat to the paternal function of the Symbolic Order. The image of the Virgin, however, controls this threat. The Virgin has no jouissance; and her body is marked with the Name of the Father. (51)

Thus, in this way, the mother’s body is brought under control. The significance of this from a psychoanalytical perspective, is that primary narcissism, that process of separation, abjection, and identification, for both child *and* mother, are concealed. But as Kristeva emphasizes, the symbolic controls the mother’s body, but is not able to contain it. The “return of the repressed” semiotic is represented by the ear (of understanding), milk, and tears. In “Stabat Mater” Kristeva writes,

Milk and tears became privileged signs of the Mater Dolorosa who invaded the West beginning with the eleventh century, reaching the peak of its influx in the fourteenth. But it never ceased to fill the Marian visions of those, men or women (often children), who were racked by

the anguish of a maternal frustration. Even though orality—threshold of infantile regression—is displayed in the area of the breast, while the spasm at the slipping away of eroticism is translated into tears, this should not conceal what milk and tears have in common: they are the metaphors of nonspeech, of a “semiotics” that linguistic communication does not account for. (“Tales” 221)

Oliver argues that identifying with the virgin is the one way that women can identify with the mother in the Symbolic form, but Kristeva’s point is that this is “masochistic” because it sacrifices an identification with the maternal body (Oliver 52). Kristeva’s entire project in *Tales of Love* is to investigate how the maternal semiotic takes on, or fails to take on, symbolic form. Clearly, we can see, from Amy’s description, how these two dimensions, semiotic body and symbolic form, can come into conflict around the image of the Virgin.

Significantly, one of Kristeva’s main points in her analysis, is that the virgin myth covers up the ‘object’ maternal body. This is especially interesting when we consider that Amy’s experience of encountering the virgin while walking in the snow, is immediately followed by an episode of smoking and masturbation. In our interview, she told me that she wanted to “shut down” that experience—and later that she “didn’t feel deserving of any kind of experience like that.” Moreover, she makes a sharp distinction between being a “good girl” and spiritual by pointing to her heart, and a bad girl, sexual, by pointing to her pelvic region and tells me how it was “very mixed up in there.” Of course, the good girl/bad girl narrative is one of the oldest in the book, and certainly one that has been projected onto women and their bodies, since time immemorial. So, it is hardly a surprise, then, that Amy would interpret her own experience in this way.

At the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) Conference in Oregon, June 2005, keynote speaker, Ana Castillo, poet, novelist, and activist for Mexican-Amerindian women, spoke passionately on this very theme. In her collection of essays *Massacre of the Dreamers* (1995), she expresses that in “modern man’s schema woman must choose between one of two polarized poles, that of mother as portrayed by the Virgin Mary vs. that of whore/traitor as Eve” (116). Interestingly

though, she also relates the story of Lilith, as it corresponds to the Mexican mythical figure, La Llorona. Castillo argues that the subordination of women's sexuality was crucial for the survival of patriarchal religious practices (107). Castillo cites the Hebrew myth of Lilith as example:

Female sexuality was viewed as perverse. A Hebrew myth illustrates this point as it attempted, perhaps, to explain the ambiguity of the creation of two women in the book of Genesis. It refers to a woman by the name of Lilith who was created before Eve and who became Adam's first wife. Having been created at the same time as her husband she was not prepared to be subordinate to him, especially in the realm of their sexual activity. She fled to the Red Sea where she fulfilled her sexual desire with demons (It seems Lilith desired oral sex)...What is evident in the Lilith account, however is the obvious repulsion the early patriarchs showed for the female body. According to the story, her regret over her behavior prevented her from returning to Adam. As she was not present in the Garden of Eden during the Fall, she did not die. Instead she "lives forever as a demonic, highly erotic night spirit who snatches newborn children (particularly males) and assaults the bodies and senses of men who sleep alone (presumably an explanation for erotic dreams)" Lilith was portrayed as a winged serpent. As late as medieval Europe, the serpent in paradise is pictured with a woman's head and breasts. Lilith portrayed as a snake, as in various pre-Christian sources, represents goddess worship. In patriarchy, the snake goddess begins to connote death and destruction rather than the regeneration of life. (107-108)

By refusing to submit to a man/god, the way Lilith/Eve did, woman, according to myth, is to be punished forever (117). Castillo's point, a point well illustrated in my conversation with Amy, is that modern woman never completely escapes a combination of these archetypes.³

However, if one interprets Amy's action of smoking and masturbation as a form of abjection and defilement (the symbolization of abjection), this sheds quite a different light on her story. Abjection is a kind of narcissistic crisis ("Powers" 14). To summarize again, it is something that attracts and repels, disgusts and fascinates; it represents a borderline position; defilement or pollution that requires exclusion or even taboo; "transgression of the law, and moral infractions can be abject, a threatening otherness that Christianity calls 'sin'" (Oliver 56). It is "not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" ("Powers" 4). Kristeva says that abjection shows up when the subject is in the process of becoming. This paper opens with an excerpt from Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*. In this scene, where the young protagonist has a vision of Mary, the abject shows up as the bones of dead bodies. As the water from the icy creek fills her boots, she thinks

The water of the creek is cold and peaceful, it comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves of their bones. It's made from the dead people, dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it. If I don't move soon I will be frozen in the creek. I will be a dead person, peaceful and clear, like them. (Atwood 252)

³ Moreover, in the same way that nature has been projected onto women, these two archetypes have, in turn, been projected back onto Nature. See Carolyn Merchant's fine analysis of female nature metaphors in "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative" *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). Merchant argues that nature takes three forms in the Edenic recovery story:

As original Eve, nature is virgin, pure, and light—land that is pristine or barren, but that has potential for development. As fallen Eve, nature is chaotic; a wilderness, wasteland, or desert requiring improvement; dark and witchlike, the victim and mouthpiece of Satan and serpent. As mother Eve, nature is an improved garden, a nurturing earth bearing fruit, a ripened ovary, maturity. Original Adam is the image of God as creator, initial agent, activity. Fallen Adam appears as the agent of earthly transformation, the hero who redeems the fallen land (137).

Abjection is the struggle to separate from the maternal body. This body, “having been a mother, will turn into an abject. Repelling, rejecting: repelling itself, rejecting itself. Abjecting” (“Powers” 13). This is important because, first of all, the action in Amy’s narrative takes place during her adolescence, but perhaps more significantly, she is relating this story to me for her first time, at the time her eldest daughter is entering adolescence, and while she is struggling with maternal differentiation with her youngest daughter. Kristeva explains that the abject is a pre-subject position. “It is undecidable between subject and object, the unruly border, birth” (Oliver 57). As Oliver explains, quoting Kristeva:

This not-yet-subject/not-yet-object is associated with the archaic mother: “defilement is the translinguistic spoor of the most archaic boundaries of the self’s clean and proper body. In that sense, it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother. (57)

The point is the ‘jettisoned object’ is no longer under the control of the maternal and has not yet found representation in the Symbolic. We have already heard from Amy about her struggle to separate from the ‘role’ of her mother, and her attempts to find selfhood in her role as mother. And here, in this narrative, we have both elements, jouissance and defilement, which mark the process of separation and abjection. This story becomes even more poignant when a couple days later Amy hands me a journal which recounts her Virgin narrative in an entry she wrote the night before our first interview. I am given some key new information in this entry, such as Amy was blind in one eye during her childhood and adolescence. What is particularly illuminating to me is how these two processes, abjection and jouissance, become linked by Amy’s usage of the adjective ‘milky blue’ to describe her eye and to describe the virgin.

Amy’s Journal Entry: February 10, 2004

I need to write...of journeys that have sparked my soul. Roadmaps or tapestries like the cover of this beautiful journal. A gift from my beloved to help me along my way. Remember! This image of beautiful threads woven so intricately reminding me of my vision of the Goddess—so large—so delicate. I could only feel like a very small child

when I looked at her. My eyes could only focus on one very small piece for it was too immense. I was given a gift of the most golden healing, loving life/light. I just needed to share it. I want everyone to feel this—know this...

Many incredible teachers have guided my path. It is hard to start somewhere in time, I was given a gift—many gifts. If I was to start a healing session I would ask Who are your family people? I was born 3rd of five children, in the middle of two brothers and two sisters. My parents both from poor families but very middle class. My mother stayed home most of the time unless my baba would come and stay. She would then work in the restaurant. I loved when she worked—we would have breakfast after church—a time that I fondly remember because Dad took us. I adore my father—a quiet, industrious man, very loyal and harmless. My mother was quite opposite in many ways. Mostly beautiful and Queen of our home. We apparently were perfect children. I rarely remember my parents arguing or having to discipline us. We were scolded often enough but there was always respect. My parents love each other and have demonstrated this for 50 years. My most difficult years were early teens and I think these years shaped my life. I had eye surgery at 16—my eye was always part of my identity. It was very milky blue and blind. Almost any strange place we would go, someone would ask what happened to it? I was given a new one—tough on a young woman lost in her looks. This was a time of passage. I became sexual—very much needing what I thought was love. I no longer wanted to be Daddy's girl, or my mother telling me what I could do—I had waited for this. I had a vision one winter night as I walked in the snow—I thought I saw Mary, milky blue in the snow with a heart of gleaming gold. I was so awed and shaken I went to the store and bought my first pack of smokes—they were called Black Cat. No one was home and I laid on the bed and began to masturbate—What kind of Holy vision is that! I'm sure I wasn't ready for it because my religious life was going to church on Sat. night then getting laid somewhere near the convent. I remember growing up I thought I was going to be a nun and I still have a lot of respect for them. (My sister and I would sit and drink coke on Sat. aft. with our sisters—also our teachers in a small Catholic school in Port Hawkesbury. I met Michael Mitchell there. He was my first boyfriend and my last before I left Nova Scotia. In the past few years he has come into my dreams as my lover regularly.

Kristeva tells us that the subject must be able to abject the maternal body so it can make what she calls the ‘maternal thing’ into an object that it can love. Kristeva defines this Thing “as the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated” (qtd. in Oliver 63). Oliver explains that

Somehow the Thing must become an Object and the child’s erotic relation to the Thing must become desire.

“Matricide” is successful only if the child can eroticize the loss either by taking a mother substitute as love object or eroticizing the *other* and finding substitutes. (63)

As one can see, the entire drama is enacted out in Amy’s journal entry, complete with lover substitute, represented by her first boyfriend who has returned to her in her dreams. Kristeva discusses how it is immensely difficult for a woman to make this kind of separation because it is difficult for her to kill the maternal body without killing herself (63). As a result she carries “the maternal thing with her locked like a corpse in the crypt of her psyche” (qtd. in Oliver 63). I recall, here, remarks made by Amy in a previous interview “So it was just about letting her go and have her own life...But I was doing things for my mother all my life. It was like she was right here watching me.”

For Amy, the Marian image is the only narrative available to her to describe her experience. But there is a moment in our conversation when we both realize that this narrative is insufficient to describe her experience. Language breaks down and the maternal semiotic surfaces in the form of tears, as we enter the realm of the unspeakable. We both recognize through a shared moment of silent understanding that what we are looking for is indescribable—call it mother love or perhaps Kristeva’s imaginary father—loss—want—but this ‘thing’ does not have a name. As Amy suggests, it is more like a ‘knowing.’ In a Kristevan view, this level of female experience is deprived of discourse. This is the problem with Kristeva’s vision, as Sara Beardsworth has noted, as long as the maternal body is associated with the unspoken, female experience and women remain confined *with nature* in fantasy (224). And the problem with this is that fantasy is a mode which “reveals and recovers *loss* in a form that distorts both what is lost and loss” (Beardsworth 223). As Beardsworth explains, Kristeva’s

investigation of fantasy that contains the maternal feminine represents a sustained effort to bring out, name, and articulate an authority other than paternal law... This is not to lose sight of the problem of women's confinement in fantasy. The thought is that 'lost nature' reasserts itself in fantasy, but phantasms distorts what is lost—for example, in the fantasy of original fulfillment in unity with nature [e.g., Amy's vision of Mary]—and so distorts this loss. (224)

Thus, Kristeva works to name this semiotic authority in “Stabat Mater;” where the recovery of the feminine is the recovery *of loss*. Kristeva develops an imaginary construct (her imaginary father) to give form to the love and loss. This would appear to be important and relevant; because as Amy has expressed it, “That’s been my search all my life.”

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Susan Moore graduated with a PhD from the Graduate Division of Educational Research at the University of Calgary in June 2006. Currently, she is the Postdoctoral Fellow in Literature, Sustainability, and Culture in the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, Toronto, where she teaches courses in Literature and Environmental Ethics and Environmental Writing. Her postdoctoral research investigates philosophical, psychoanalytical, and ethical understandings of self and other through an exploration into literature on the environment. Her essay, "Mourning, Melancholia, and Death Drive Pedagogy: Atwood, Klein, Woolf." appears in *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies: Special Issue*, Alberta (March 2005).