A number of years ago I was traveling in Spain. Having read about the significance of Montserrat to Catalan nationalism, I decided to visit the Monastery of Montserrat, which is 50 kilometers from Barcelona in the massif of Serra del Montserrat. Perched precariously high on the mountains, the monastery is an amazing sight. In the monastery is a Black Madonna which has been revered by the Catalan people for centuries. On this visit, I met a Catalan woman who was married to an American. She spoke to me about her devotion to this Madonna and her regular visits from New York where she lived at the time. About ten years later, I went to Provence and observed the gypsy festival honoring Saint Sarah, a black statue, which they carry to the nearby Mediterranean and bathe during this annual event. Some years after this, I happened to visit Chartres Cathedral on the 1st of May, a day that honors Mary, mother of Christ. There is a Black Madonna on a pillar in a side altar and I watched while people prayed to the madonna, went up to kiss the pillar and left offerings of flowers. Later I discovered Ean Begg’s book, *The Cult of the Black Virgin* and began visiting more Black Madonnas sites, when I knew there was one near places I was visiting.

**Landscape as sacred**

The places where these Madonna or goddess shrines were placed usually had some special quality or presence. Often they were situated near underground waters, springs or well. They might be on rocks or in caves or grottos. Le Puy is a volcanic region with many black volcanic spires. Rocamadour is on a very steep cliff surrounded by a valley. Montserrat is also located on dramatically steep mountains. Chartres has a sacred well in the crypt. Saintes Maries de la Mer is on the delta where the Rhone enters the sea. Read Lash.

**Pilgrimage routes.** Pilgrimage to holy places, especially Jerusalem, Rome and places with relics of saints was important in the Middle Ages as punishment for crimes, as penance, to fulfill a vow, request a cure or simply to gain spiritual blessings. There are many Black Madonna sites along the route to Compestela, including Le Puy as starting point and Rocamadour. In the 9th century according to legend a mysterious star revealed the remains of Saint James thus the cathedral and town is named Santiago de Compostela, a field of stars. The route from Le Puy is 1000 miles and takes 2 ½ months to walk but pilgrims only need to walk the final 63 miles to Compostela to earn the certificate of completion. During the 11th and 12th century, pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago were as many as ½ million a year.

People may make pilgrimages in hopes of having a child as does the character in *Strong as Death*. Jennifer Lash went on her journey partly as a skeptic but hoping to recover from cancer and to recover faith or belief is something spiritual.

**Precursors and pre-Christian cults**

The Black Madonna figures were often superimposed on earlier pre-Christian goddess cults in these formerly Roman regions, especially the cult of Isis. Early churches were often built on sites of Roman temples and in fact some early Madonna figures were later
replaced after it was discovered that they were actually statues of Isis and Horus. The Egyptian deities, Isis and Osiris, were responsible for bringing agriculture and viniculture to the people. As a prototype of Christ, Osiris is referred to as the good shepherd who leads the deceased to green pastures and gives protection in the valley of the shadow of death. After Osiris was killed and dismembered, Isis restores him to life and conceives a child, Horus, with him. Thus she was a goddess of the living and the dead, a fertility and mother goddess. Her statue nursing Horus is one of the earliest artistic representations of a mother and infant. The goddess figures that were worshiped in the pre-Christian era were associated with fertility, motherhood and nature and the earliest figures were earth mother sculptures. The black Madonnas could similarly signify an association with earth and nature, which made them accessible to the ordinary people who invoked their intercession. Cybele was a Phrygian earth mother goddess that became a Greek cult and then a Graeco-Roman cult which spread through the Roman Empire including Gaul which is now France. Among the cults spread through the Greco Romans or Gallo Romans were Demeter, Cybele, Isis and Artemis or Diana of Ephesus often associate with grain, fertility or the agricultural cycle. However there was also a celtic goddess, Black Annis, Ana, Anu and now become Saint Anne in Brittany. In Stes. Maries, she is Sara the Kali, Black/Egyptian servant of the Maries from the Holy Land Cybele and Isis cult maps and image of 1400 B.C. figure

In many sites, the original statues were replaced by later ones if found to have pagan origins, or if they were destroyed by Huguenots or by anti-clerical extremists during the French revolution. The site of the Cathedral in Le Puy was built on the ruins of a temple dedicated to a local god, Adido, near a sacred spring and initially contained the dolmen on which the vision of the Madonna appeared in the 5th century. The cathedral of Ste Germain de Pres in Paris was built on an Isis site and, a statue of Isis was venerated as the virgin until destroyed by Abbot Briconnet in 1514.

Another scholar notes that some of these Madonnas appear in early Druid sites, where a primordial virgin, from a Latin root meaning powerful, was worshiped as the mother of all, which would explain the location of some sites on dolmens or near Druid era wells. Even the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico appeared to a Mexican peasant on the site where there was a shrine to an Aztec mother goddess, Tonantzin. Read Rodriguez

In *Black Madonnas: feminism, religion and politics in Italy*, Birnbaum describes these Black Madonnas as multicultural because they represent a synthesis of mother goddesses from Asian, Africa, the Middle East and Europe.

Why did these icons multiply during the 11 and 12th centuries? Jean Hani believes that during the early Christian era they were forbidden and thus hidden, which would explain their apparently miraculous discovery in the ground or a cave under the guise of representing the Virgin Mary.

Blackness
There are several explanations for the blackness of these Madonnas. In a few cases, such as the Virgin of Guadelupe in Mexico, or Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles in Costa Rica, their color could be explained as representing the skin color of the local people. However this does not explain the blackness of the Madonnas in Europe and some think even the blackness of these Latin American Madonnas is more complex. Scheer and Moss think the dark color of the oldest figures is unrelated to ethnicity or race, which was not a significant category until developed by scientific discourse much later than the first appearance of these images. In fact color was more relevant as a symbolic category in early Christianity. In this symbolic sense, blackness is interpreted as a metaphor of grief but is can also signify that Mary is the crucible through which the Christ assumed a material form.

It has been suggested that the blackness of these Madonnas was the result of the figures being made from woods of ebony or cedar to represent their antiquity and origins in the Holy Land, and thus their authenticity. Some were claimed to have been made by Saint Luke, like the Madonna of Montserrat, but it seems that this probably referred to an artist named Luke, not the apostle Luke. It was during the Middle Ages, especially before and during the 12th century that most of these statues were apparently brought back by Crusaders possibly as Madonna-like Isis images.

Blackness as what is hidden
It is within the darkness of the earth that seeds germinate and make renewal possible. Blackness is also associated with fertility since soil is black. Black is also connected to wisdom, and esoteric knowledge. In Catholic countries, Black Madonnas are particularly seen to possess hermetic knowledge and powers of wonder working.

In her book, *Dark mother: African origins and godmothers*, Birnbaum mentions that these Madonnas have become associated with social justice movements. Peggy Barham, the author of an article on Black Madonnas, also mentions that these Madonnas are associated with justice and resistance partly because the legends about these statues often involved their refusal to be moved from the place where they were found. It is this quality that has made them such an important icon in resistance movements. Our Lady of Czestochowa was a symbol for the Solidarity movement of Poland in its struggle for freedom and the Virgin of Guadalupe was a symbol for the farm workers union.

In the origin stories of the black madonnas, it is very difficult to separate history from legend.

Our Lady of Rocamadour Referred to as our lady in the cleft of the rock, she is made of walnut and attributed to St. Luke but of course was made much later, probably in the 9th century. By the 12th century Rocamadour was already a major pilgrimage site as reported in *Le livre des miracles de Rocamadour* written in 1172. In 1166, it was claimed that Amadour’s (lover) remains were found there and that he brought the statue there from the Holy Land. There are many dolmens and menhirs in the region. To the troubadours she was the goddess of love and Rocamadour means Rock of the lover.
Sulivia (Gallic goddess) was worshipped there in pre-Christian times. Her eyes were all knowing and suile is the celtic word for eyes.

In the 12th century, Le Puy was one of the most important departure points on the road to Santiago de Compostela. Joan of Arc sent her mother and brothers to the 1429 Jubilee when she couldn’t attend.

Black Virgin at Le Puy. Legend claims that in the 5th c. a widow was cured of a fever when she saw the virgin in a vision and was told to lie on top of a black stone from a dolmen. A stag ran out of the woods and traced a plan of the cathedral in a July snow storm. The first church was built here between 415 and 430. Eventually the dolmen was destroyed as pagan but the stone remains embedded in the cathedral's floor. There is no sketch of the statue that was venerated until the end of the 10th century. That virgin was replaced by one that was destroyed in 1794. According to Faujas de Saint Fond it was an old statue of Isis converted into a Virgin. Another theory says that it was Ethiopian but it could have been carved in Le Puy by an Arab craftsman. An ancient sacred spring fed the fountain in the courtyard of the church. Godescale, a bishop of Le Puy was the first person to make the pilgrimage from Le Puy to Compostela in 950.

The cathedral of Le Puy was built during the 11th and 12th centuries with later expansions and shows Moorish influence.

The first chapel of Saint-Michel d’Aiguilhe was built in 962 with some additions in the 12th century. The chapel, a union of Islamic and Romanesque architecture, was built on the remains of a dolmen on a volcanic pinnacle, which was a site for the worship of Mercury. The chapel is 269 feet high with 268 steps to the top.

Black Sara, Saintes Maries de la Mer. There is a legend in Provence that Mary Magdalene, Mary Jacobe, Mary Salome and their Egyptian servant Sara came by boat with Joseph of Arimathea and the Holy Grail. Sara is known as Sara la Kali, a Hindu deity, and is venerated by the gypsies of France. Before its current name, this city was known as the ancient city of Ra or Ratis where Isis, Artemis and Cybele were all worshiped in the 4th century B.C.

Notre Dame de Confession, in Saint Victor de Marseille church, is claimed to have been venerated there since the end of the second century. The patroness of Marseilles at its founding in 600 B.C. was the black Artemis of Ephesus that the Phocaenans brought with them from Asia Minor. This best known statue of Artemis at Ephesus shows her with black face, hands and feet and multiple breasts. In 472 in Marseilles, the Christian feast of Candlemas replaced the torchlight procession of Persephone. Navettes are pastries sold in a bakery near Saint Victor. The pastry is believed to represent the boat used by the Mary Magdalene and the other Marys when they came to Provence from the Holy Land.
Notre Dame aux Nieges, Aurillac. Original statue was destroyed. Present statue of 1581 is a copy of the BV of Le Puy. Her statue allegedly helped defeat the Huguenots in 1581 by miraculously advancing the hour of dawn and producing a snowfall.

La Moreneta, Our Lady of Montserrat, Spain. Legend relates that this miraculous image was carved in Jerusalem. Another account claims that the image was moved to Montserrat in 718 to protect it from the Saracens. Evidently some shepherds saw lights and heard singing, which led them to the statue in a cave. Some believe that this was a lost statue of Isis, which was assumed to be the Madonna and Child. The devotion to this Madonna persisted during the Franco era as a symbol of Catalan identity and independence. Couples like to marry at this church to ensure a happy marriage.

Notre Dame du Pilier, Chartres, France. In the crypt of Chartres is a Druidic well built on a former Neolithic burial mound. Known to the Celts as Carnutes, this was a central meeting place for the Druids of Gaul. The ND du Pilier is 16\textsuperscript{th} c. that replaced a 13\textsuperscript{th} c. statue. There is a ND de Sous-terre that was destroyed in the revolution and replaced in 1856 by a wooden statue.

Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles, Cartago Costa Rica
According to folklore in Costa Rica, La Negrita appeared to a young native girl in 1635. The basilica has a statue of the Black Madonna known as La Negrita, who supposedly has healing powers. The rock where she appeared is kept in the basilica and revered as a sacred relic. The image is small and people line up to pass and touch it. There is a sacred spring adjacent to the basilica and people bring their bottles to collect the water.

Our Lady of Einsiedeln, Our Lady of the Hermits, Einsiedeln, Switzerland
The original hermit was a monk, St. Meinrad. While living in the forest near a fountain dedicated to our lady, he was clubbed to deaths. Two ravens whom he had befriended pursued the murderer and brought him to justice. His head rests at the feet of the Madonna whose statue he brought there. In 948 the bishop was there to consecrate the chapel and a light appeared with a voice saying “cease brother the chapel has already been divinely consecrated.”

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Barham article

Black is political in the way it relates to race, gender and the environment. This is personified in Black Madonnas as continuing aspects of ancient earth goddesses. They are resilient and active in processes of personal and political struggles for change.326

It is after all within the darkness of the earth that seeds germinate and make renewal possible 328
Black is also connected to wisdom, and esoteric knowledge. In Catholic countries, Black Madonnas are particularly seen to possess hermetic knowledge and powers of wonder working. Referring to Marina Warner 329

Refusal to be moved makes them icons of resistance movements Czestochowa and Solidarity, Guadalupe and farm workers movement

Black because she enters lives on fire and takes their suffering. Quoting Galland 331 Scheer article

Connections to sites formerly temples to Cybele or Ephesian Diana

Emphasis was not per se on color but rather on the miraculous finding of the image in a tree, bush, well, spring or underground place; and the refusal of an image to leave a certain spot

Blackness referred to value of antiquity or age of the icon i.e. ebony was found in the Eastern Med therefore brought back by crusaders

Blackness comes from Mary’s grief

Blackness was not ethnological i.e. reference to skin color which wasn’t categorized until later centuries

Jean Hani

These sites strike the visitor with their special indefinable character, a strong “presence.” These are sacred sites. Hani believes that in these sites matter is penetrated by a certain energy of the Spirit, places on earth where the Spirit breathes. For example Chartres has a primitive well in the crypt, Mont Saint Michel on a mysterious rocky fortress surrounded by water according to the tides. Le Puy is a volcanic site with volcanic needles pointing to the sky. Rocamadour perched on a high cliff 20-21

The icons are “found through supernatural signs” underground or in a tree in a spring or well etc. 23

In the pre Christian cults there was a great mother or earth mother goddess who has become translated into the Mother of god from the mother of gods. Among the cults spread through the Greco Romans or Gallo Romans were Demeter, Cybele, Isis and Artemis or Diana of Ephesus often associate with grain, fertility or the agricultural cycle. However there was also a celtic goddess, Black Annis, Ana, Anu and now become Saint Anne in Brittany. In Stes. Maries, she is Sara the Kali, Black/Egyptian servant of the Maries from the Holy Land 25-38
During initiation rites, such as those performed at Eleusis, the person dies and is reborn to a spiritual life or a life transcending ego. The mother goddess is the appropriate vehicle for spiritual birth as well as physical birth. 35

She is connected with the earth as well as the spirit, thus mediator between the worlds.

Why did these icons multiply during the 11th and 12th centuries? He believes that during the early Christian era they were forbidden and thus hidden but later returned under the guise of representing the Virgin Mary. 40

The pilgrimage of Rocamadour was created by the Benedictines. Hani believes that the intellectual elite among the monks possessed metaphysical knowledge and knowledge of the sciences such as astrology, astronomy, alchemy etc. They would have understood the spiritual significance of this symbolism of the Black Madonna 41-42

Virgo potens = vierge puissante

Begg

During the 12th c. there was a quantum leap in consciousness, an understanding of the symbolic significance of the relationship between the sexes, as more than marriage and family. The idea of courtly love was about tragic love and transcendent love, the troubadours Amadour from the Latin or French root for love trobar is Occitan for trouver or find.

Birnbaum

Cybele was an Anatolian mother goddess venerated by citizens of the Roman empire. Her priestesses, or sibyls, used bee honey in rituals. They brought her sacred black stone from Carthage to Rome. 160 (black stone at Le Puy)

She is multicultural because she is a fusion of the goddesses of old Europe (Ana, Celtic) with goddesses of the Middle East (Cybele), Africa (Isis) and Asia (Kali).

Cybele spread from Asia Minor to Greece then to Rome

Isis: Through contact with Egypt, Romans spread her cult

Changing attitudes toward nature and earth as a living organism.

Galland on nigredo and alchemy also womb, earth and death are associated with dark 151-3

Rodriguez in Castillo p.130
“Known as Tonantzin….,”
Lash p. 173 re: the host ground, the presence
Gnostic=direct experience of the divine

QUESTIONS

Why go on pilgrimage?
Refer to Jennifer Lash

Why would there be so many explanations for her color? Antiquity, middle east wood, power, earth, fertility, death.

Explanation about being hidden until the 12th century and then rediscovered. Why then? Troubadours? Trouver=find

Special features of sites on steep cliffs, near wells or groves

Isis signifies death and rebirth.

Website for map

BOOKS ABOUT PRE-CHRISTIAN CULTS AND GODDESS SITES

Gimbutas, Marija. The Language of the Goddess. HarperSanFrancisco, 1989. Mentions that "caves, crevices, and caverns of the earth are natural manifestations of the primordial womb of the Mother." Other landscape features relating to the Earth Mother include hills, streams, springs and wells.


**FICTION ABOUT BLACK MADONNAS AND PILGRIMAGE**


Set in 1964 South Carolina, *The Secret Life of Bees* tells the story of Lily Owens, whose life has been affected by her mother’s death and her father’s abuse. She runs away and is taken in by three black beekeeping sisters, who teach her about the Black Madonna and help her to heal her past. Interview with the author *Secret Life of Bees*


A mystery story set in 12th Century France and Spain. Catherine Le Vendeur and her husband Edgar go on the pilgrimage to from Le Puy to Compostela to pray that they will be able to have a child. Catherine solves the mysterious murders, recovers a stolen Black Madonna and becomes pregnant.