

ARCTIC VIRGINS
*Élekcriture and the Semiotics of Circumpolar
Icon(o)graphé*

Cynthia Haynes

One hundred sixty years ago, in 1837, Samuel Morse invented the system of signs now commonly known as Morse code. A simple translation of letters, numbers, and punctuation into long and short magnetic pulses carried over long distances via telegraph wires enabled messages to be sent in a matter of minutes. In 1848, the first recorded report of the effects of the *aurora borealis* on the telegraph's relationship between magnetism and electricity occurred during an appearance of the *aurora* on November 17. An Italian named Matteucci observed that "the soft iron armatures employed in the electric telegraph between Florence and Pisa remained attached to their electro-magnets, as if the latter were powerfully magnetized, without, however, the apparatus being in action and without the currents in the battery being set in action. This singular effect ceased with the aurora, and the telegraph, as well as the batteries, could again operate without having suffered any alteration" (Norton, np). A few years later, in the winter of 1852, all New England telegraphic operations were affected by an intense *aurora*, during which the following account was recorded:

Towards evening, a heavy blue line appeared upon the paper, which gradually increased in size for the space of half a minute, when a flame of fire succeeded to the blue line, of sufficient intensity to burn through a dozen thicknesses of the moistened paper. The current then subsided as gradually as it had come on, until it entirely ceased, and was then succeeded by a negative current (which bleaches, instead of coloring, the paper). This gradually increased, in the same manner as the positive current, until it also, in turn, produced its flame of fire, and burned through many thicknesses

of the prepared paper; it then subsided, again to be followed by the positive current. This state of things continued during the entire evening, and effectually prevented any business being done over the wires. (Norton, np)

It was as if an invisible finger reached down to write something in/delible (Latin> *in-* + *delEre* to delete), something impossible to erase, something blue. Yet the negative current, bleached-writing, produced an antiseptic white message – a blank page. Writing – blue – electric. Woman – color – *élekcriture*. Stunning semaphore, no mundane metaphor, it was a script etched in/of what I call *élekcriture*.

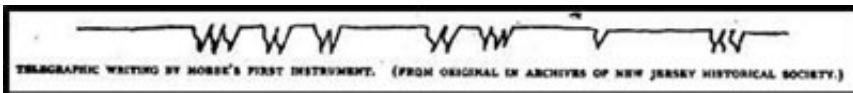


Figure 1. Telegraphic writing by Morse's first instrument. (From original in archives of New Jersey Historical Society.)

The term originated from my desire to splice together electricity (from Gr. *elektra*> the beaming sun) and what some French feminists call *l'écriture féminine*, writing that resists the masculine economy under which women have labored, suffered, and forcibly learned to be the objective counterpart to man's self-awarded subjectivity. Lynn Worsham describes the radical potential of *écriture féminine* as writing that "allows departures, breaks, partings, separations in the meaning, the effect of which is to make meaning infinite and, like desire, non-totalizable (Worsham 1991, 90). Naming *élekcriture*, as such, is not, however, intended to blithely import *l'écriture féminine* into electronic media in some superficial way. Nor is it an attempt to capture the currency afforded by the hype of virtual reality, digital art, or other post-nouveau modernist media (media that does not know they are modernist). I confess to harboring a certain intuition about *élekcriture* triggered most often when writing in the synchronous world of MOOs, the effect of which set in motion the *idea*. But I am no Platonist, so the term never became elevated to the *Idea Élekcriture*. This, then, is an attempt to sketch a force that cannot be represented in a medium that bears only the nostalgic semblance of a substance worthy of transmitting this force, namely, print. And the telling necessitates, at times, strategic employment of transliteral and transgenic narratives. For now, I let the auroral disturbances of man-made language machines claim the alibi of

élekcriture, as we begin at midpoint, *in media res* (is there ever any other vantage point?), or, as Nietzsche would have it, at high noon, “moment of the briefest shadow” (Nietzsche 1982, 486).

In *The Victorian Internet*, Thomas Standage explains that the impact of telegraphy (*far-writing*) had very similar effects as email has today. By the late 1870s, a third of the operators at the main telegraph office in New York were female. Many were between 18–30 years of age and unmarried. And not unlike today, telegraphic romances between operators began to abound. This led some companies to segregate female operators from male operators and to employ a “matron” to keep an eye on them. We could speculate that this was in order to preserve the moral conventions of the day, namely, to prevent immoral behavior among the employees. Or, we could put it in less discrete terms and suggest it was designed to preserve their virginity. Those slender wires taut with sexual tension harbored the most private (and urgent) codes – signs of sanguine (eager to shed blood) young women and men – and the most forbidden tales.

Who then, tells a finer tale than any of us? Silence does. And where does one read a deeper tale than upon the most perfectly printed page of the most precious book? Upon the blank page. When a royal and gallant pen, in the moment of its highest inspiration, has written down its tale with the rarest ink of all – where, then, may one read a still deeper, sweeter, merrier and more cruel tale than that? Upon the blank page. – Isak Dinesen

In her short story, “The Blank Page,” Dinesen tells a tale from long ago in Portugal, the telling of which I use as an allegory of *élekcriture*. It seems that high in the mountains of Portugal, there stands an “old convent for sisters of the Carmelite order” (Dinesen 1957, 100). The sisters were known for one thing: they grew the finest flax and made the most beautiful linen of Portugal. It was said that the linen of this convent drew its “true virtue from the fact that the very first linseed was brought home from the Holy Land itself by a crusader” (ibid., 102). In due time, the convent was accorded the privilege of producing the bridal sheets for all the young princesses of the royal house. It was the custom in Portugal that on the morning “after the wedding of a daughter of the house, and before the morning gift had yet been handed over, the Chamberlain or High Steward from a balcony of the palace would hang out the sheet of the night and would solemnly proclaim: *Virginem eam tennemus* – ‘we declare her to have been a virgin.’ Such a sheet was never afterwards washed or again

lain on” (ibid., 102–03). For hundreds of years, not only did the convent have the privilege of providing these linen sheets, they were also privileged to receive back that “central piece of the snow-white sheet which bore witness to the honor of a royal bride” (ibid., 103).

In the gallery of the main hall of the convent hung a long row of heavy gold frames, each of which bore an engraved gold plate with the name of a princess, and each of which contained the square piece from her wedding sheet. Royal ladies from all over the land made pilgrimages to see the gallery at the convent: princesses, queen dowagers, Archduchesses, and others proceeded from near and far. “Within the faded markings of the canvases people of some imagination and sensibility may read all the signs of the zodiac: the Scales, the Scorpion, the Lion, the Twins. Or they may there find pictures from their own world of ideas: a rose, a heart, a sword” (ibid., 103). But, the story goes, in the middle of the long row hangs a canvas different from the others. The frame is as fine, but the plate has no name inscribed, and the “linen within the frame is snow-white from corner to corner, a blank page” (ibid., 104). In its difference, the blankness affirms a negation. That is, the negative becomes the scene of affirmation, framed by the faces of those who viewed it. “It is in front of this piece of pure white linen that the old princesses of Portugal – worldly wise, dutiful, long-suffering queens, wives and mothers – and their noble old playmates, bridesmaids and maids-of-honor have most often stood still. It is in front of the blank page that old and young nuns, with the Mother Abbess herself, sink into deepest thought” (ibid., 105).

The tale ends with the image of a long procession of women who stand gazing in deep thought upon a portrait of *illegitimacy*. It is a sign of *ethos* – the *ethos* of one bride who resisted consumption by the *logos* through silence (i.e., no *logos*), an *absence* of that which consumes everything in its wake by objectification and quantification. And, it signals the absence of totalitarian regimes of legitimacy by its very inclusion among the others. By the tradition of loyalty, the proud royal parents of this princess hang it there to speak its own tale of *logos*; but, more than that, to punctuate the hall with an *ethos* disburdened of its logocentric stain. It signals, in its silence, the non-passivity of *ethos*, the movement against dissemination of a prior violation, the sign of which is a non-sign. The consummation of a marriage is deferred because it is not the consummate (perfect) integration, it defies the perfection of logic.

With these stories, permit me to bind you, my reader, to the *illogical*, to a series of auroral/feminine *pulsions/writings* I call *élekcriture*. My gen-

re of choice is also a story, yet no mere story. Mine is a *mystory*, what Greg Ulmer terms a genre “capable of organizing this picto-ideo-phonographic writing” (Ulmer 1994, xi-xii). Wrought from the sign of the *chora*, a generative space invoked by Plato, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva, Ulmer underscores one strand of my splice, quoting Derrida: “*Chora* receives everything or gives place to everything, but Plato insists that in fact it has to be a virgin place... [s]ince it is absolutely blank... [e]verything inscribed in it erases itself immediately, while remaining in it. It is thus an impossible surface – it is not even a surface, because it has no depth” (qtd in Ulmer 1994, 65). According to Ulmer, “[c]hora, then, evokes together the thought of a different kind of writing (without representation) and a different mode of value... the goal is... to explore the invention process itself by means of this problem: What would a writing be that produces understanding without representation?” (ibid., 66). Ulmer calls this means of invention *chorography*, explaining that “[i]n chorography, I do not choose among possibilities but enter them into the paradigm of the diegesis, creating a network in which to catch an invention” (ibid., 138).

Perhaps all of this is to say (all that I have said thus far) that *cybertexts* are not always (nor only) produced in the most familiar (and ubiquitous) media of today; rather, they often emerge in unrepresentable (natural) media as extra-semiotic signs read by illogical means. In addition to problematizing cybertextual media, delineating the dynamic processes by which cybertexts function, i.e., foregrounding the functional theories of media in which they are produced, should not limit us to normal definitions of functionality. Invention should catch *us* from time to time.

Kristeva reminds us, for example, that in addition to what we typically observe about art, religion, and ritual, other phenomena emerge, “*fragmentary phenomena* which have been kept in the background or rapidly integrated into more communal signifying systems but [which] point to the very process of significance. Magic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and ‘incomprehensible’ poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the *process* that exceeds the subject and [her] communicative structures” (Kristeva 1984, 16). But Kristeva cannot simply leave it at that; nor can I when confronted with the frequent disdain for theory and the inevitable privileging of practice/function. It may *seem* that fragmentary phenomena will not *do* when the question is put: what then must we *do*? Such fragmentary phenomena do not (often) share in the luxuries of theorizing, so they are twice removed from

practice.¹ And *practice* is everything. Only *practice* wins the revolution. So, Kristeva asks: “At what historical moment does social exchange tolerate or necessitate the manifestation of the signifying process in its ‘poetic’ or ‘esoteric’ form? Under what conditions does this ‘esoterism,’ in displacing the boundaries of socially established signifying practices, correspond to socioeconomic change, and ultimately, even to revolution? And under what conditions does it remain a blind alley, a harmless bonus offered by a social order which uses this ‘esotericism’ to expand, become flexible, and thrive?” (ibid., 16).

Of the countless examples of women who resisted naming the dominant regime as sole beneficiary of their esotericism, let me enter one into the ‘paradigm of my diegesis.’ A group of Norwegian female telegraph workers agitated for higher wages and equal opportunity in the late 19th century. In 1898, ninety-seven female telegraphers appealed to the *Storting* (Norway’s national assembly) having signed an application for increased wages that had been systematically rejected for six years by the firm’s director. According to the director, “women had ‘performed their work less satisfactorily when it came to operating more complicated telegraph equipment’, (qtd in Hurrell 1998, np; Hagemann 1985, 10) and this was a view strongly supported by the younger male telegraphers in the service, who published a statement claiming that women were ‘also wanting in resolution and ability to take rapid decisions’” (qtd in Hurrell 1998, np; Hagemann 1985, 11).

My grandmother worked for Western Union Telegraph Company in 1928 in Anson, Texas, a small struggling west Texas town during the years just before the Great Depression, and it is hard for me to imagine someone less ‘wanting in resolution’ than Wahnie Haynes. I often wonder about the messages she sent, the code she learned, and the people she met over the wire. I like to think that if she were alive, she would understand how I could be ‘courted by’ and marry a Norwegian man I met on the Internet. I apparently come by my predilection for communicating online honestly, although I began my technical journey at an earlier age and on a similar machine. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to possess the opportunities to work with computers, the avenues of access to research in those lived spaces, and the commitment to teach others how to do likewise, should be mindful of Gayatri Spivak’s invocation to pay attention to our own subjective investment in the narratives we produce. This next story, of virgin *élekcriture*, is my way of paying attention.



Figure 2. The author (top right) and the Monroe Monrobot School Computer [*Fort Worth Press* newspaper, 1966].

From Morse code to typewriting, I hear the clicking even now as my mother typed my father's Master's thesis in triplicate during the summer of 1966. I think it was an old Underwood. In that same summer of 1966 I was chosen to participate in a special summer program for gifted junior high students in math and science. During this program, I learned to use a machine they called a computer. Actually, it was called the Monroe Monrobot School computer. Over the next few years I excelled in math subjects, but I *really* wanted to write poetry.

Later I used our old Underwood to teach myself how to type. I couldn't take a typing course that summer after my senior year in high school. It was 1970, and I was pregnant, unmarried, and living in a home for such girls, girls who would surrender their babies for adoption. I had lots of time on my hands and desperately wanted to learn to type, so my mother brought me that typewriter. I took books of poetry from the small library in the home, and I typed poetry ... endlessly and with much enthusiasm. I drew from as much 'fragmentary phenomena' as possible to get through a very

difficult passage for a young woman of my age. I pounded those keys with passion and sorrow, knowing the act of surrender was near. But let me pause here to splice more fragments with which to conduct the currents of my *élekcriture*.

My name is Cynthia Haynes. I don't tell you that in order to inform you, for you have only to look at the author of this essay to see that. I tell you so that in speaking my name, I call myself into being. I afford myself an identity beyond the legacy of secrecy (and il/logic) that I inherit from my gender, my generation, and my generic – Haynes. It is my father's name, the same name my grandmother took when she married his father, Morris Moon Haynes. But, Wahnie Haynes was originally a Keys. That the Keys had Cherokee ancestors is well-known up in the northeastern parts of Oklahoma where she was born. I never knew what Wahnie stood for while she lived. But when she died, I wanted to know – who was she? I asked my father what Wahnie stood for, whether she had a more formal name. He said, "No, it just means Wahnie." The long answer is that she is descended from Major George Lowry (1770–1852, Rising Fawn), last Cherokee Indian chief who survived the infamous journey called the Trail of Tears, and grandfather to Lucy Lowry Keys, great-grandmother to Wahnie. But Lucy wasn't really Lucy. (Oh, this is getting complicated.) Lucy was really Wah-ne-nau-hi, a name I have only recently learned translates as 'storyteller' in English.

Wahnie had a room in her five-room flagstone ranch house that she locked one day, after which we were forbidden to go in there. The door was brown, rickety, and smelled of west Texas red dirt. If you looked through the keyhole, you could just make out the foot of the bed and the long-ago freshness of sheer lace curtains that sometimes in summer moved with the night breeze. I remember that bed, big and sinky in the middle. It was a small room, but it held her daily stored-away dreams. I guess it was a big room in that respect. All I know is that one summer it was unlocked, and the next summer it wasn't. But suppose we walk across the threshold of that locked room, into Wahnie herself, sweet and billowy once again – a young woman caught no more behind the veil of another language, a story not her own. Here, now, Wahnie speaks in more than whispers, in more than contained life, in uncontained moments of joy. What we found behind Wahnie's door, the *chora* of her life, was not a dust-to-dust existence, but a shiny series of possible futures. We found letters, hundreds of them – words that opened doors and windows on her life. We found se-

cret hobbies, unfinished projects. We found handkerchiefs, dozens of them, unused and often still in their gift boxes – as were many other items. Wahnie stored her beautiful things away rather than use them. That’s what living in the Depression did to people, and that’s what her private ethic reinforced – save them so you’ll always have them. My parents found many of the gifts they gave her over the years still in their original boxes – nightgowns, blankets, practical things. When you live on a ranch, as Wahnie did, you have to burn the trash, and she couldn’t bear to burn things, so she saved them. Little by little that room became overrun by her secretly stashed objects, and by her privately held dreams. And so, she locked it. I guess I would too if I had saved every rattler off the rattlesnakes they killed each year, neatly organized into small labeled boxes – 1941, 1942, 1943. We found old magazines and books, sweet perfumes and lilac powder in frosted jars. The mounds of photos and mementos rivaled the Christmas cards they had received over the years, names trailing at the end of each one in the unmistakable handwriting of women, the keepers of our language. Some new Christmas cards from the 40s remained unsent and unsigned in their original box, languishing there like the unsigned and unsent birth announcements for my unnamed Baby Haynes. Wahnie and I – inordinate telegraphers – let our language languish behind locked doors, no *legitimate* means of representing why, no symbolic means of understanding our lack.²

But *élekriture* is not consigned to the economy of legitimation, nor to systems of representation in which writing stains the page like every proclamation of every High Steward: *Virginem eam tennemus* – ‘we declare her to have been a virgin.’ If anything, *élekriture* functions like an immaculate conception – some auroral disturbance of man-made writing inscribed by the very finger of Elektra – revirginizing³ (though not by abstention) the hymen/hymn of writing. The problem is how to escape the ‘maternal’ aspect of suggesting such a link. In “Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini,” Kristeva’s study of the shift in representation of the Madonna from Byzantine artistry to continental humanism, she reveals a “style of representation” (Kristeva 1980, 251) that has “pushed to the limits of representability” (ibid., 269) the figuration of the maternal beyond the patriarchal Western “economy of representation” (ibid., 243) to an “integration of the image accomplished in its truthlikeness within the luminous serenity of the unrepresentable” (ibid., 243). Kristeva struggles within the system of representation she calls the ‘symbolic’, ultimately lashing

herself to the stake of a semiotic signifying process she claims is pre-linguistic, “a rhythmic but nonexpressive totality” (Kristeva 1980, 40) – the feminine unrepresentable desire in language, *jouissance*. Simply put, Kristeva posits a split subject: divided between unconscious and conscious motivations, which correspond to two signifying processes, *semiotic* and *symbolic*. Unlike the more phallo-pedestrian schools of semiotics offered by Saussure, Peirce, Eco and others, Kristeva relates the semiotic to the *chora*, a term even Plato describes as mysterious and incomprehensible. In some ways, it appears that Kristeva wants badly to elucidate, but then retain that incomprehensibility (Roudiez introduction to Kristeva 1980, 6). Toril Moi, Norwegian feminist literary theorist, characterizes Kristeva’s semiotic *chora* as what “will be more or less successfully repressed and can be perceived only as pulsional pressure on symbolic language: as contradictions, meaninglessness, disruption, silences and absences in the symbolic language. The *chora* is a rhythmic pulsion rather than a new language” (Moi 1985, 162).

Until recently, I’ve been perfectly content with Kristeva’s desire to transgress representation, to “tear the veil of representation,” to speak in “a fire of tongues...[and] exit from representation.” It was my desire as well. And though this is no either/or situation – either abandon representation or languish under the alibi of the unrepresentable ... I still feel compelled to represent *élekcriture* as more than the *aporia* it seems to be. But without the *aporia*, we would not have been able to take a reading on our bearings. We *are* bearing down on the question of the representation of *élekcriture*, and Kristeva ‘bears’ it for us with her subsidiary approach. By valorizing the ‘mere testimony of a withdrawn body’ in her countless depictions of the *chora*, or the pre-symbolic semiotic nonspace of the Virgin Mary, who (against her orthodox representations) defies all those who see her as ‘living area,’ ‘dwelling,’ ‘or union...a contact without a gap, without separation,” (Kristeva 1980, 251) Kristeva reveals the double bind of feminism: its desire to found a politics based on difference in relation to language and meaning, while being caught under the Law of the symbolic, without which *no thing* is thinkable. This is also the double bind of representing *élekcriture*, it has the effect of situating us in the space of the untenable.

The untenable is not, however, indefensible, nor does it necessarily render us paralyzed. In short, there is a tension behind the untenable that wields its own measure of power. Drucilla Cornell’s discussion of Derrida and

Levinas in *The Philosophy of the Limit* provides a useful model for a similar move on Kristeva, a passage that allows us to use her without excusing the conundrum I've been describing. Like Kristeva's notion of *jouissance*, Derrida's concept metaphors the *trace* and *différance* elude our ability to represent them adequately in language. As Cornell explains, *différance* is the "trace of what differs from representational systems and defers indefinitely the achievement of totality. When we attempt to think 'exteriority,' whether as Infinity or as 'matter,' we are always walking on a tightrope and risking the fall into another mechanism of appropriation" (Cornell 1992, 70). Cornell recognizes, also, that "we cannot escape representational schemes ... what we confront in the aporia ... is *différance*, the inevitable difference between the Saying and the said that can only indicate the beyond allegorically" (ibid., 70). But, she maintains, "to run into an aporia, to reach the *limit* of philosophy, is not necessarily to be paralyzed. We are only paralyzed if we think that to reach the limit of philosophy is to be silenced The dead end of aporia, the impasse to which it takes us, promises through its prohibition the way out it seems to deny. To promise through prohibition is the 'action' of allegory" (ibid., 70–71).

To promise through prohibition is the icon of the virgin. To represent the prohibition through the northern lights is to allegorize the "fragmentary phenomena" of Kristeva's semiotic and my *élekriture*. In the circumpolar female iconography of nordic culture, in both its literal and figurative stratospheres, they saw in the *aurora borealis* the souls of dead virgins dancing, old maids and spinsters guarding the door to heaven, reflections of the shields of the Valkyries, choosers of the slain – all figures occupying a liminal threshold between two domains of representation: the semiotic and the symbolic. Naming neither one nor the other, the lights move and morph into hues that shatter whiteness and darkness.

In the saying, however, it is necessary to qualify (briefly) my use of Nordic female iconography in deconstructing Kristeva's semiotics. And to do that I must also note my marginal status with respect to Nordic feminist theories and practices and explain a bit about them. Although Nordic is a term that generally designates the countries of Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, my primary (and very preliminary) research has been focused on Norwegian culture and landscape. And what began as a vague sense that women enjoyed better social conditions in Norway than in other parts of the world has grown into a more concrete certainty that they do. But generally speaking, according to Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen,

although Nordic women's studies and gender research began in the 50s and 60s as it did in the United States, it differs from North-American approaches in two ways. First, a parallel development of "qualitative and critical empirical sociology in Norway" called "problem-oriented empiricism" helped facilitate sex-role research and later women's studies. Second, there are general traits of the Nordic culture and society that explain the relative speed with which Norwegian feminists have achieved what they have in comparison with their North American counterparts. Nielsen explains: "In Nordic culture and political history, equality and community spirit are central values. This has been expressed in strong and varied popular movements, a close relationship between state and society, the strong position of social democracy, and the building of the welfare state. These special nordic features have furnished official and political legitimacy for the demand for gender equality. Struggles for equal rights and better social life conditions for women, as well as political and philosophical theoretical discussions of the status of women, have taken place in the nordic societies since the late 18th century" (Nielsen, np.).

However, in a recent collection of essays called *Is There a Nordic Feminism*, feminists from the five countries suggest that a geo-political focus that situates Nordic feminism in relation to the non-Nordic helps to "make visible a body of work that 'has sometimes been obscured by the writings of the French or American feminist scholars'," writes Robin Scott in a review of the book (Scott 1999, np).

It is my goal to understand in what ways Nordic feminism has been obscured, and to what degree reporting on its achievements can benefit the very French and North-American feminist scholarship that has eclipsed Nordic feminist research. Using Nordic female iconography and circumpolar "fragmentary phenomena" such as the northern lights is one way to bring both traditions into dialogue. Nordic feminist research ranges from "women's rationality of care" to "phenomenological and qualitative research methods," from "peace research and human rights" to "primary industries and economy, ecology and administration of nature resources (for example, women's participation in fisheries, forestry, and agriculture) and to areas such as biotechnology, conceptions of nature, and the world of sports." Nielsen explains that such perspectives give "Norwegian women's research a stamp of interdisciplinary and empirical orientation." The advantage of pairing feminism and state politics has resulted in unprecedented financial and political support from the Norwegian government, support that feminists all over the world envy.

Thus, Nordic feminism is instructive in both its applied theory and cooperative traditions, but equally significant are its cultural and naturalist traditions, which may defy representation by phallogocentric standards, but teach by unrepresentable means. Cornell is right, “that the un[re]presentable exceeds the determinable cannot and should not serve as an alibi for staying out of juridico-political battles,” which Nordic feminists have obviously embraced. In other words, and drawing from the productive confluence of Nordic and French feminisms, arctic virgins dancing in the aurora borealis *could* signal an allegorical unveiling and shattering of representation’s alibi as well as of Kristeva’s case against representation. In my *pentimento*⁴ on Kristeva I see something revealed beneath her portrait of representation that is conducive (and heuristic) to our hologram of *élekcriture*. In her essay, “Giotto’s Joy,” Kristeva’s analysis of Giotto’s frescos hones in on the aporia apparent in her critique of representation when she suggests: “Formative light is nothing but light shattered into colors, an opening up of colored surfaces, a flood of representations” (Kristeva 1980, 233). There. It is said – a *flood* of representations, of fragmentary phenomena, of *jouissance* not set free from representation, but set free by the liberation of representation into its phenomenal heterogeneity and proliferation.

But let me be clear – we are not defining *élekcriture* by building an anti-foundation foundation from the “ruins of representation,” rather we are funding its radicalization with such allegories and “fragmentary phenomena” as telegraphy, typewriters, rattlers, radiations, refractions, *revontuli* (Finnish for *aurora borealis*), also with *pentimenti*, circulations, circum(polarizations), and salient juxtapositions. As Geoffrey Sirc notes: “Letting the other speak (*allos + agoreuei*) is the very definition of allegory” (Sirc 2002, 193). Similarly, Kenneth Burke’s notion of “entitlements” offers us a semiotic in which the “things of the world have become material exemplars of the values which the tribal idiom has placed on them” (Burke 1966, 361). Still another useful Burkean idea is that terms sometimes “radiate” in an outward direction, sharing jurisdiction with other terms, and, I would add, by extension, with natural phenomena (*ibid.*, 369). For example, we can readily see the kinship of the ancient Greek term *chasmata*, which likened the auroral arc structure to the mouth of a celestial cave, and the scientific term isochasms, which are two geographical points which share an identical frequency of auroral occurrence. Now, imagine a porous hymen – through which we see the northern lights, and through which they see us – and the following links between language and frag-

mentary phenomenon entitle the morphology of an aporia that radiates out from the arctic aurora herself – salient juxtapositions among science, mythology, art, folklore, and Kristevan semiotics, to which we will return shortly.

A result of intense solar activity that streams to earth as electrical particles, the northern lights are technically speaking “a complicated interplay between the so-called solar wind and the earth’s magnetic field” (Hansen 1997, 11). When the lights appear to dance or shimmer, they are called “pulsating auroras” by which is meant “the repetitive intensity modulation in the auroral luminosity” (Spaceweb, np). “When oppositely moving VLF waves and energetic electrons interact, so called cyclotron resonance interaction is possible. In these interactions, VLF waves are amplified by the transition of energy from the spiraling electrons to the waves. As a result, the pitch angle of the electron is reduced and electrons scatter into the *loss cone*” (emphasis mine; Spaceweb, np). Despite the scientific data, the northern lights perpetually defy representation. Of course we may explain the phenomenon in terms of the magnetic interplay between the solar wind and earth’s magnetic field, but at the same time, the predictability of those variables cannot account for the unpredictability and inefability of the *aurora borealis*. Even scientists are dazzled by their transience, variability, and complicated variations in intensity. These showers of electric particles “tear along like impetuous squalls, creating arcs, draperies and rays,” notes Truls Hansen of the Auroral Observatory at the University of Tromsø (1997, 11). “The particle precipitation is found in a ring around the magnetic poles, and in this ring the northern lights are situated like an unbroken halo around both poles...called the auroral halo” (ibid., 11). But Asgeir Brekke reminds us, “the northern lights are more than a matter of physics, because they are a kind of ‘persona non grata’ which does not allow itself to be tied down in physical formulae or mathematical chains like the stars and planets” (Brekke 1997, 43).

In Norse mythology, the lights represented the very bridge of the gods, Bifrost, which, in a “brilliant show of colours, formed an elegant, quivering arc between heaven and earth” (Brekke 1997, 19–20). Among the earliest artistic renderings of the lights, perhaps the most beautiful (and representative) were drawn by Louis Bevalet (figure 3), an artist who accompanied the French expedition to Svalbard in 1838. In describing Bevalet’s illustration, Brekke claims it “allows a majestic aurora to fling itself in immense folds over [Norway]” (22).



Figure 3. Painting by Louis Bevalet.

In 1892, Gerhard Munthe (figure 4) titled this painting “Suitors, Daughters of the Northern Lights,” and we see polar bears (*isbjørn*) entering the daughters’ bed chamber, licking their feet in a posture of worship, remnants of earlier folklore and mythology. Among the circumpolar indigenous people of Nordic regions, some say that the auroral halos are the dancing souls of dead virgins, or old maids waving their mittens. Some believe the “mystical veils” are still-born children playing ball with their afterbirth. Icon of the threshold between life and death, arctic virgins signified liminal figures characterized in Norse mythology as the Norns, and later the Valkyries, goddesses who determined the destinies of kings, who chose the slain and escorted them into Valhalla, the hall of Odin. In Finland, when the auroras filled the sky, they said “the women in the north are hovering,” or “the old women in Pohjanmaa are hovering over Konnunuo” (the place where dead virgins lived) (Brekke 1997, 43).

To hover means, literally, to remain in an uncertain state – the site of this hovering *is* the limit of symbolic order. According to Moi, Kristeva defines woman not essentially, but as situated at the threshold of this limit... “[sharing] in the disconcerting properties of all frontiers” which has enabled male culture to locate and “vilify women as representing darkness



Figure 4. Sutors, Daughters of the Northern Lights by Gerhard Munthe.

and chaos, to view them as Lilith or the Whore of Babylon, and sometimes to elevate them as representative of a higher and purer nature, to venerate them as Virgins and Mothers of God” (Moi 1985, 167). So, the whitewash is not over. Yet Kristeva’s desire to release the unrepresentable marks but a tear in the veil of representation. Her call to abandon representation pales when juxtaposed with her all-too-brief review of color in “Giotto’s Joy.” In her analysis of Giotto’s paintings in the Arena chapel in Padua, Kristeva explains that his particular use of colors, especially a “luminous phosphorescent blue,” signifies a break with Byzantine tradition and the dogma of the church that controlled ‘representation’ itself. She suggests that color is not restricted within the “strict codes of representation and verisimilitude,” as are form and space (Kristeva 1980, 226). As such, “[c]olor translates an *oversignifying* logic in that it inscribes instinctual ‘residues’ that the understanding subject has not symbolized” (ibid., 221). “Color is the shattering of unity” (ibid., 221). It shatters the “dominion of One Meaning” (ibid., 224), in this case, the color white. It does not suppress light, but segments it with spectral multiplicity.

Backtrack to the winter of 1852, to the “heavy blue line” that etched itself onto the blank page of one telegraph machine, then bleached white by the negative current that followed the positive-ly blue. Re-coil the story of the ‘blank page,’ allegory for Wahnie, for Baby Haynes, for *mystory* of *élekcriture*. Working *heuretically* from telegraphy, circumpolar Nordic, mythic female iconography as well as from the spectre of the *aurora borealis*, my vision of the arctic virgin is not simply, nor only, circum/spection. Nor does it aim to speculate on whether *chasmata* de-pict the *chora*. Blending folklore and theory, magnetospheric studies of the *north-ern lights* with semiotic translations, this analysis holds forth the polar hymen, its pulsating auroral electrons scattering into the “loss cone” of the earth as a sign of *élekcriture* and the ‘arctic virgin’ – all surface, all luminosity, all pulsion. The arctic virgin re-emerges as no ice maiden, no snow queen, no valkyrie. She is the pulse of a polar hymen tightly quivering from the stress of a universe aching to penetrate her auroral arc.

In the end, she is an aberration of cybertextuality: consigned to wander, to err; incapable of producing an exact mirror image, destined never to represent *the rational object*, cybertext. With/in *élekcriture* she is the streaming of color and language above the ground of function; thus, she rejects ‘function’ in light of its proximity to foundations, or the ground. The arctic virgin as aberrant heuristic and semiotic aporia misfires by failing to ignite as a sign of, or a medium for, cybertext. This is not due to some miscalculation; rather, it is, finally, more a function of misgivings – of perpetual doubt about the cybertextual. There, just there, the arctic virgin glimpses *us* and shivers.

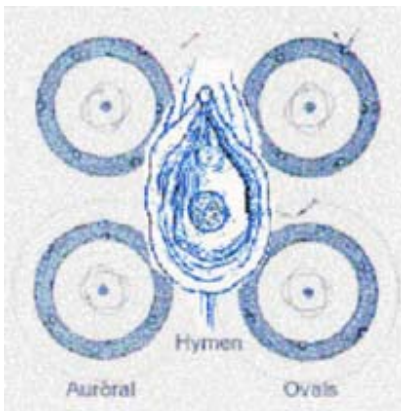


Figure 5. Auroral Ovals

NOTES

1. One obvious exception is Freud's "mystic writing pad," an analogy he used to explain how the psyche receives and records material (see "A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'", 1925, and Jacques Derrida's essay, "Freud and the Scene of Writing").
2. Portions of these narratives are drawn from my "Family and Forbidden Zones" and "... -- -- .../Women, Computers and the Language of Distress" essays.
3. The concept of revirginization stems from a recent trend in abstinence education. Sometimes called "secondary virginity," a "'born-again' virgin, is when an individual who has had premarital sex chooses to 'start again' and wait until marriage" (<http://www.geocities.com/thevirginclub/Secondary.htm>).
4. "Term (Italian for 'repentance') describing a part of a picture that has been overpainted by the artist but which has become visible again (often as a ghostly outline) because the upper layer of pigment has become more transparent through age." From <http://www.xrefer.com/entry/144991>.

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