

# Introduction

## Revolutionary Practice and the Subject-in-Process

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Julia Kristeva is our contemporary and one of the foremost intellectuals in the world today. This volume of essays by established scholars of her work celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of her magnum opus *Revolution in Poetic Language*. In the last fifty years, Kristeva has published nearly thirty volumes in semiotics, linguistics, literary theory and criticism, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory, not counting six novels and essays in film and art history. In an impressive recognition of her contributions as a public intellectual, in 2004, Kristeva became the first woman to receive the Holberg Prize, equivalent to a Nobel Prize for literature and humanities. Since then, Kristeva's stature as a public intellectual has risen astronomically. In 2021, she was inducted to the Légion de France for her lifetime achievement, following the international seminar at Cerisy on maternal reliance and revolt, just a year after the appearance of her long-awaited book on Dostoyevsky.

Capturing her astonishing rise to world-renowned philosopher and thinker, Alice Jardine, in a first intellectual biography, gives special role to the major significance of Kristeva's present practice of psychoanalysis. Kristeva's continued involvement with political thought reminds us of our duty to pay a debt the modern condition owes to the pain of psychic life under attack: "It is only through the process of what psychoanalysis calls *perlaboration*—a working-through, a reinvention, a *transfiguration*—of history and cultural memory that humanity can avoid a cataclysmic end"

(Jardine 2020, 186). There is nothing abstract or aloof in this demand that we transfigure through transforming our practices of our relations to others and that this shift is doubly dependent on beginning through transforming our relation to ourselves first. As I write these words, in August 2022, after two and half years of the COVID pandemic, the rise of autocracy in the West and its felt impact in climate, food, human trafficking, and racial violence around the world is becoming our extreme contemporary cataclysm. The unprecedented assault on women's reproductive rights rendering abortion illegal fifty years after *Roe v. Wade* (1973) in the US, this June opens up a new horrid reality leaving the rights of women in the hands of state legislatures—abortion after six weeks, including cases regardless of rape, is banned and subject to prosecution, in more than half the country. If we do not take stock of soft totalitarian practices that creep in and suffocate individual and collective lives together, we will keep repeating the mistakes of the past.

Kristeva's work since the 2000s is dominated by innovating psychoanalysis, as at the turn of the new millennium, not unrelated to the superpowers of the US and Britain bypassing the UN and unilaterally declaring a war on Iraq, she offered a diagnosis of a "society in depression." Concerned with the uncertainty in our contemporary psycho-political condition, she likened the crises of the then-globalization to ill will "that declares some humans expendable," echoing Arendt (Jardine, 186). As she restates in her 2012 address on New Humanism, in which she urges that the modern condition, its values, and new malaise of the soul has not yet finished with us, Kristeva signals the threat of inevitably slipping into genocide, and the mass "ending" of life is a constant preoccupation. She warns that, as a "humanity," we depend on the duty of revival and renewal of historical and cultural memory, to avoid the "death drive" at its "fullest and most horrific." The aim is precisely *not* to reject intellectual and cultural history, but much rather hermeneutically, it falls on remembering, re-understanding, re-inventing, redefining, reconceptualizing the past.

Over the span of fifty years, Kristeva remains a revolutionary, but she has shifted focus in order to more adequately take up the "politics of life"—through her psychoanalytically inflected term of "intimate revolt," a critique of soft totalitarianism. She has intervened with writing on myriad occasions of crisis, such as nationalism in Europe, America's war in Iraq, the Paris suburbs uprisings in 2011, and the immigrant wave in Italy in 2015. In 2011, Kristeva became the first woman to join, as nonbeliever, a

group of eleven religious delegates to the Vatican, where she gave a famous speech: “No One Owns the Truth.” Just one year prior to that, she wrote a manifesto, “Secular Humanism in 10 Theses,” calling for a “new ethical language,” “to be invented sooner,” to promote rights for LGBTQ people, for recognition of non-normative subjectivity (Jardine, 284). In this collection, we draw from the sources that Kristeva proposes as New Humanism, to address the remarkable continuity from early into recent work.

What connects revolution to revolt?—this question orients all contributions in the collection. The theoretical approach to the psychic conditions of life in “revolt” culminated in her work in the 2000s marked by the trilogy on “female genius” (Arendt, Klein, Colette). The contemporary interest in Kristeva’s enormous contribution to multiple aspects of social, cultural, and political importance could not have been possible, however, without the early work on “revolution” in “poetic language,” in that a deep logical complementarity exists between the two domains, “revolution” and “revolt.” I will slowly introduce this topic of a systematic interpretation of the terms of revolution-revolt after I first briefly introduce the ideas of the early work.

Leaving Bulgaria for France on a nine-month stipend by de Gaulle’s government in 1966, the young Kristeva distinguished herself through a stellar success. In the same year of her first doctorate, 1969, with Lucien Goldmann, she publishes her first book *Semēiotike*, and in 1973, *Polylogue*. Immediately following, Kristeva defends a 645-page *doctorat d’état* in 1974, published a year later in French (and just at 260 pages in 1984, in English), her major theoretical breakthrough, *Revolution in Poetic Language*. We celebrate the anniversary of Kristeva’s text, yet this volume is focused on the (partial) translation and not on the original French text, *La Révolution du langage poétique: L’Avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle, Lautréamont et Mallarmé*. We owe the readers, and perhaps, not unrealistically, at this time of technological progress, a translation in full. In the meantime, Kristeva’s legacy, in North America, and hence for this volume’s primary audience, stands limited to the translated part. A future project to celebrate the magnum opus would rightfully in due fashion address the nontranslated sections that deal specifically with poetic language as it is manifest in Lautréamont and Mallarmé.

The intellectual achievement that *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) represents cannot be overstated. Kristeva names the dimension of producing meaning in language—a “poetic” dimension, namely, the capacity of the sign for literally “figuring” over and above being a mimetic

faculty, in excess of the symbolic order of signification. By operating as temporally futural possibility of being yet-to-come, the poetic dimension invokes the radicalism of linguistic imagination as the sign of the subject already in “revolt.” The radical linguistic text of the avant-garde poets at the end of the nineteenth century thus becomes a signifying practice confronting the limit of signification in language so as to disrupt bourgeois codes, much like the revolutionary forces confront late capitalism, for instance, in the Russian Revolution, to overthrow it. In this way, revolutionary practice and the avant-garde art and literature come to express both a necessity and limit in the production of language, as they reach out to a reality larger than the average understanding of everyday life and are aimed at metaphysical notions of time and justice, following ideas in Hegel’s dialectic. As a linguist and innovator, Kristeva ties the semiotic text to Freud and Klein as having pointed to what lies beyond psychoanalytic processes of language acquisition, and simultaneously to Hegel’s principle of the strength and resilience of the negative—namely, the manifestation of a semiotic authority as irreducible to past linguistic and cultural rituals.

Theorizing semiotic authority in excess of signification echoes Hegel’s idea of rejecting the old while preserving it by other means, in the affirmation of the new but at the same time as a thought and judgment never reducible to an act, either linguistic or socio-political. For Kristeva, this opens to the interaction between the semiotic and symbolic levels of language as taking shape concretely through signifying practices embedded in the mother-infant semiotic matrix. This is to say that through its signifying power, language, which arches over both the symbolic order, and its semiotic, unfigurable dimension, reaches out to the bodily dimension of subjectivity that is outside of language. Indeed, the conditionality of revolution plays out as anterior to the symbolic order since it is its condition of possibility. However, this conditionality in no way pre-exists the symbolic order, although it precedes it in time, precisely because only the latter has the power to overturn it, by retrospectively revealing the effects of revolution within language.

Through her critique of language as structure, and the structure of subject formation in psychoanalysis, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva acknowledges language’s timely power. This connects her, in the spirit of her contemporaries, to Derrida and Deleuze, and more primarily to a philosophical heritage developing a salvatory or messianic account of time, examining both the legitimate and illegitimate ways into foreclosure

of temporal possibilities for modes of production of meaning in language. There is a horizon inherent in the aporetic structure of representation of language that draws from the unfolding of time and justice presupposed as metaphysically prior to symbol and rationality, which never can be outstripped by the power of language. The symbolic order of language for Kristeva, who follows Lacan and Freud, thus represents a horizon for revolutionary liberation, presuming that paternal law and patriarchal socio-historic order are opened up from the side of repressive illegitimate foreclosure, and from this Kristeva shapes her feminist theory. Not only is there an essential connection between revolution and revolt, but this collection also aims to contribute especially to theorizing Kristeva's account of time, which connects revolution and revolt, and how this can be retrieved out of the work in her magnum opus. The connection can be explained through a model of "revolutionary time," as Fanny Söderbäck recently argues (2012; 2019, 6, 9). This major idea about time as temporality and as well as explaining historical change is represented throughout the contributions in this volume.

In a bit more detail, work in recent years moving beyond feminist theory, which this volume ambitiously seeks to reposition under a broad umbrella unifying transgender, disability, and decolonial studies based on Kristeva, forges a link between revolution and revolt, and this means that the forcible linearity of paternal law and patriarchy becomes the focus of inquiry into the illegitimate foreclosure of temporal possibilities for modes of production of meaning in language. The resources for this are available in the early work but it has not always been easy to recognize them, specifically if and how this concerns reversibility and linear time.

To start with, Kristeva's explicit work on "revolt" does not begin until the 1990s trilogy (1997; 2002), which elaborates the "intimacy" of revolt—revolt as a form of the regaining of "lost" time, which includes treating time as a sign and "writing," for instance, in Proust (Kristeva 1998; see Miller 2014). As Jardine puts it, Kristeva's focus on revolt adds "time" over and above the early problematics of "history" and "subjectivity" (284). It takes Kristeva two decades to formulate the logic of this connection—namely, developing a "theory of time" through which to articulate this connection. Revolt, and that it is intimate, is not necessarily an action in the world, and so at first glance appears the opposite to revolution. The two are etymologically related, but revolt, insofar as it is essentially a retrospective examination, appears as the more conservative of the two signs. Revolt elaborates and renews meaning in psychic life, and Kristeva

defines it on a tripartite temporal schema of transgressing-consummation-renewal (2002, 5, 8; 2014, 3; see also Hansen & Tuvel 2017, 1–13). Through displacement and alteration, the renewal of meaning becomes possible, and as Kristeva puts it: “There is a necessary repetition,” “but beyond that, I emphasize its potential for making gaps, rupturing, renewing” (2002, 85).

Kristeva’s confrontation from 1974 with “revolution,” which in its ontological meaning assumes the possibility of a radical loss of significance, as I will explain below, also importantly signals the beginning of her turning away from negation and instead moving in a direction back “to” natality.

A systematic reading of Kristeva’s lifetime of work does not yet exist, but bringing out a research project such as this, as this collection aims, appears quite timely. The contributions gathered here are momentous and quite needed given the current orientation in Continental philosophy and other areas and interdisciplinary interest, particularly work from liberatory natality in Arendt as opposed to “freedom” (Nancy, Badiou, and Heidegger), social and political philosophy generally, and critical disability, gender and transgender, and critical race studies specifically.

What does this mean in the terms of revolution as practice, and the subject-on-trial? Below, I indicate the main axes of the second and third scholarly divisions of this collection. The five chapters of division two engage Kristeva’s lifetime development from the most recent and back through the 2000s of “New Humanism.” The chapters logically trace out of the 1970s in French theory, the fate of the semiotic and symbolic in Kristeva’s own path. They thoughtfully engage the task of reading Kristeva for the future, to reimagine the deepest potentiality for novelty and for transformative political agency. The authors jealously guard the heritage of Kristeva’s thought, yet they rigorously inquire as well into complicating points of dissension. Adding new voices and challenges, the chapters push the boundaries of Kristeva’s ethics, aesthetics, and psychoanalysis in a friendly encounter. These texts breathe the anguish and the cultural and historical turmoil of our current moment. Take, for example, the crisis of the present time we experience with normalizing transphobia, misogyny, racism, and extreme violence in the US, where critical race theory, critical gender and transgender studies, and Black history are targets under fire.

Five chapters in part 3 provide a lens through which we can revisit the contribution from the early work as already underway to the mid-1990s shift from “revolution” to “revolt,” considered in depth for its theo-

retical proposals. This division opens with tracing the long arc of Kristeva's focus on the revolutionary power of poetic language, beginning with the very real political situation of coming of age in Bulgaria under communism. The leitmotif is how might language be employed to subvert a repressive order? To begin with, the mid-1990s find Kristeva looking for resources of subversion, and aligning herself with the critique of late capitalism available in Debord's society of the spectacle. The chapters work in concert to show how the resources of revolt's intimacy do not usher in discontinuity, specifically Kristeva opposes an egalitarian severing of ties between public and private, while engaging unorthodox psychoanalysis remains continuous with the core of *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

### Beyond Feminism: Engaging Kristeva for Decolonial, Trans, and Disability Studies

Through her New Humanism, and on the basis of her philosophy of the subject, Kristeva is a great deal more than simply a resource in today's social and political philosophy and interdisciplinary critical studies, and most importantly, she matters for non-normative subjectivities, as well as decolonial and disability studies. We find this in the most recent developments of research on Kristeva—maternal love, care ethic, critical disability, decolonial subjects, transsubjectivity, Latinx feminisms, and more. Additionally, this makes it possible to rectify some misinterpretations connecting to the work from 1974, and especially the late 1970s, to instead show how Kristeva is quite useful beyond feminist theory. The initial unifying claim is that Kristeva outrightly refuses the rigid dichotomy between linear and cyclical time, and instead argues that, since this dualism rests on masculine-mind and feminine-body models that are not *actually* separate, we ought to also consider revolt in ontological and temporal terms.

It is important to note the contrast between second- and third-wave feminisms, and how Kristeva does not agree with either but might best fit in the fourth: affective materialisms. The activist movements of our era predominantly still rely on a notion of time of linear progress. Due to its historical period, the 1960s women's liberation was oriented by moving away from inequality and toward equality, and this is a program susceptible to appeals immanent to totalitarian regimes that render human lives disposable for the sake of securing a better future. Right-wing feminists today have presented indefensible conservative and harmful,

exclusionary claims. Instead, Kristeva's theoretical approach urges for the constant renegotiation of values, what she early on understood and theorized as a complicitous approach of meaning creation, indebted to both semiotic and symbolic interaction. Her view of the Modern predicament is that it submits the human to "cyclical time," the so-called counterpart to linear time, to repression (cf. Kristeva 1981). But as she argues, without the perlaboration of trauma, the subject only returns to the repetition of past traumas. She warns that the denial and repression of cyclical time in the feminism of the 1980s (and repression of the feminine in fear of the body's being unto death) results in its unexpected and often unnoticed resurgence in our life, and the consequence of this is that "it is indeed deprived of a future" (Söderbäck 2012, 319).

Kristeva has not been always well received. A case in point concerns her now classic critical essays ("Women's Time" and "Stabat Mater") on second-wave feminism. Discussing the reception, Jardine rightly suggests that, like Foucault, Kristeva resists identity politics—for she believes that, with the onset of the Enlightenment, the dogmatic image of "Man" is finished. Being both a psychoanalyst and a poststructuralist, Kristeva believes that "woman has never been given existential worth," and "philosophically speaking she [Woman] does not exist"—and "yet, we must account for women sociologically, empirically, historically. But then, all identity models must shift in the name of revolt if not revolution" (Jardine 2020, 153). That is, since her earliest beginning, Kristeva is not theorizing the domain of political life (freedom, human rights, the rights of women) as structure, but nor is she theorizing something merely cultural (ethnos, the anthropological idea). This situates her work intricately at the margins of the signifier, at limits of material contiguity between metaphor and metonymy. Language, by itself, Kristeva argues, runs the risk of disconnecting from the very experience it sets out to articulate and reveals itself as unstable and dubious with regards to its revolutionary signifier. Hence, language rather accomplishes its revolutionary aim through the *mode* of retrieval of lost time by language, and not in the *content* of the language itself. Kristeva instead focuses on the proximity between the poetic and the decentered subject—and adding, since the early 2000s, the disabled subject (Jardine 2020, 166). On this radicalized social basis, she builds her model of a democracy of proximity, an ethic of care, rooted in the asymmetry of the alterity of the other, and not based in the mandate of obligation to care. She then anchors on this a "new humanism" (cf. Oli-



ver 2009, 2020; McAfee 2005, 2020; Ziarek 2020; Hansen 2020; Sjöholm 2020).

The 1970s and the fate of the semiotic and the symbolic—the question as to where precisely Kristeva enters the debate—could not be more crucial to clearing misunderstandings of the early work. There is nothing apolitical or ahistorical in the early work, and a wide audience of interdisciplinary readers as well as the established community of Kristeva scholars have put significant labor into locating the classic work of *Revolution in Poetic Language* for its major primary findings, the difference between semiotic and symbolic, through the interests of intellectual and philosophical debates in the 1970s. It is significant, as Jardine points out, that by 1978, “the basic infrastructure of [Kristeva’s] thought familiar to English-language readers was more or less in place” (179).

Kristeva’s important interventions in the 1970s are her contributions to the theory of the materiality of the linguistic signifier, through the principle of the interaction of the semiotic and the symbolic. Some thirty years later, in her address to the Holberg Prize, appearing in a major collection of essays from 2005, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, Kristeva puts the distinction between the semiotic and symbolic this way: it “has no political or feminist connotation. It is simply an attempt to think of ‘meaning’ not only as a ‘structure’ but also as a ‘process’ or ‘trial’ . . . by looking at the same time at syntax, logic, and what transgresses them, or the trans-verbal” (2010, 11). The omission of feminism from Kristeva’s definition of her work as French theory frequently baffles readers. How can we help not reading into Kristeva’s theorizing of the materiality of the signifier a feminist connotation—in what way does this shed light on the early work? A quick response: She means narrowly that poststructuralist theories of language at the foundation of heated debates on interpellation and feminism of the 1990s remain tied to either pure “objectivity” (empiricism) or pure “subjectivity” (intellectualism) as targets of critique, while in reality much of the debate could benefit from arguments stemming from the unorthodox psychoanalytic theory she practices.

The easy answer is that since 1974, Kristeva differentiates herself from Lacan, who posits the symbolic as a metalanguage—akin to the word as an empty envelope, “genuine denomination of authentic speech,” drawing from an inner operation of the mind, as in Cartesian introspection. Both thinkers help to break the tendency of theorizing to posit “that reassuring image that every society offers itself when it understands

everything” (Kristeva 1984, 31)—a tendency of fetishizing Culture in all its colonizing and alienating forms, toward totalization and finality that is a product of the theoretical use of language. Both appeal in support of tearing down to the foundation, to Hegel’s theory of desire and negativity as an antidote. Against Lacan, however, Kristeva posits that the semiotic, in that it evades the hold of the pure linguistic signifier—in excess over signification (her term is *signifiance*), just *is* this metalanguage; namely, there exists a gap between time and justice, the word in language and its history, such that no metaphysics can outstrip linguistic signifiers. Thus, the implication—there is no pure void of the signified, just as there is no pure linguistic signifier. All signifying practices and their institutions are, therefore, modalities of the materialization of bodies, the result of material bodily processes. As Kelly Oliver recognized, this point crucially engages Freud’s theory of the drives differently, aiming to “bring the speaking body back into discourse” (1991, 6). The logic of language is already operating at the material level of bodily processes, and bodily drives continually, relentlessly reconstitute, make their way into language anew. Furthermore, on Kristeva’s view, the speaking body’s enunciating position may only be fully assumed through metaphorical and unstable processes—laying emphasis on the semiotic authority transgressing signification, and withdrawing to a futural promise of the past, to a messianic or heterogeneous, hidden objects, closed “text” dimension.

As Ziarek (2005; 2020), Sjöholm (2005), Söderbäck (2019), and Miller (2014) demonstrate, the early Kristeva’s novel account of subjectivity, history, and time centers bodily intimacy and its folds: what sort of perspectives or standpoints place it beyond being, beyond abyss, for example, inscription of alterity at bodily borders, including semiotic meaning inscribing maternal abjection. In the 1970s, Kristeva introduces the semiotic as a perspective activating a double-bind view, which includes the possibility of the ethical relation to the Other, as the Other is beyond language, and so, beyond representation: the unfolding of time may only be accounted for in linguistic terms. However, alternatively, as it is a conduit of meaning created through signifying, language as it is available to the decentered poetic subject finds its essential aim through the accomplishment, ontologically, of a “temporal” revolution. In other words, over the span of fifty years, Kristeva maintains, there is something revolutionary, an important ambiguity at the root of normative egalitarian laws, attaching to the deferred, delayed action of dual retrieval of meaning as foundation, as both affect/structure and subject/outside structure

at the origins of subject formation—and this definitely exceeds the logic of inauthentic being, binary gender, and we must add, colonization. In order to understand the interaction of both these dimensions, we must first understand the structures of subject formation, which *Revolution in Poetic Language* outlines. Indeed, in order for the semiotic to make its way to the symbolic, the subject must accept and assume its position as a fundamental lack, following the symbolic order, in Lacan (cf. Lacan 1977). However, as Kristeva differentiates her standpoint from Lacan, this position may only be fully assumed through metaphorical and metonymic unstable processes—laying emphasis on the semiotic authority transgressing signification “for the purposes of renewal” (1984, 29).

To restate: the symbolic in Lacan and Kristeva represents the structured aspect of language and subjectivity—the linear language of consciousness. But against Lacan, Kristeva maintains, the semiotic is that which evades such representative structures—that which “underpins language and, under the control of language, it articulates other aspects of ‘meaning’ which are more than mere ‘significations,’ such as rhythmical and melodic inflections” (Kristeva 2010, 11). The semiotic and symbolic are so utterly interdependent, such that the attempt to distinguish them easily runs into problems. In other words, the claim of the symbolic to any sort of logic or any sort of readability is hence definitionally unstable. For Kristeva, the symbolic itself inaugurates unavoidable violence; but in that, the symbolic is lawlike or inscription, a first founding violence, as it is at the same time procurement of the readability that makes the unfounded possible, that is, the semiotic as a second force, a law-enforcing violence, unreadability, the subject-on-trial necessary and unsurpassable. The symbolic, much like justice, amounts to an aporia that may not be surpassed, however, the thetic phase, Kristeva’s third term (cf. Roudiez, 1984, “language leads to exteriority”), may not be negated without a remainder, even though it may be foreclosed, and surely it may not be a strictly symbolic apparatus (unlike the mirror stage might be for Lacan). More accurately restated, it is Derrida’s *arche*-trace that bears close comparison to the subject-on-trial in Kristeva (Kristeva 2010, 11).

That is, diverging from Lacan, Kristeva consistently claims since 1974, the thetic phase logically precedes (but does not pre-exist) meaning production, in that it draws on both symbolic and semiotic dimensions of language. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva defends that the inauguration of the symbolic order of language can only be carried out through a necessary separation between the subject and its primary bodily

drives, what she calls the “thetic phase” (43–46). The thetic phase is hence the necessary separation in order for a “subject” and an “object” to appear as such and consequently, for an enunciation and an identification of the subject with these objects to be possible. The thetic phase implies both a rupturing of the preverbal subject and its drives, and is what allows the subject to build and produce a self-identification through its enunciation and relations. Enunciations may only refer to or represent their objects through specific meaning production, namely, through material contiguity, metaphors or metonymies—the chain of the network of signifiers is not closed, and the constant revision of the meaning of the word is part of the creativity of language as a sign system itself. However, diverging from Lacan’s “trap” of linguistic science, for Kristeva, the thetic phase itself precedes logically and chronologically as the virtual fact of attribution of meaning to objects by the subject (49).

In Kristeva, as Sara Beardsworth helpfully suggests, this non-overlap or tension between meaning as actually present, and as virtual (e.g., affect subtending language), can be understood as a “tendential severance” (2004, 14). That is, separatedness yet connectedness (to the maternal body) is a formula to capture the self-production of subjectivity as a constant oscillation between semiotic and symbolic meaning. Moreover, these dimensions “need to be connected” in spite of severance “if self-relation, the other, and world-relation are to be possible” (2004, 14). Explaining along similar lines the theory from *Revolution in Poetic Language*, more recently Jardine clarifies that this oscillation, or “this symbolic/semiotic dance does not exist in the abstract, does not take place in a void, or only within an individual—but rather is grounded in an intensely interdisciplinary set of historical and material constraints” (Jardine 2020, 139). Thus, the *sujet-en-process* denotes a process of signifying meaning “between,” “within,” and “among” two irreconcilable yet interwoven and interdependent modes of meaning. There can never be purely symbolic or purely semiotic language: the subject is always necessarily both, for the subject is constituted by the dialectic between the two and is “marked by an indebtedness to both” (Kristeva 1984, 24). To generalize, Kristeva then offers a philosophy of the subject in the 1970s, in a new key, in that she offers a philosophy of history through engagement with Freudo-Marxism reopening psychoanalysis and poststructuralism through Freud, Klein, and Lacan (Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida) and at the same time, radicalizing social-critical ontology in Heidegger (Husserl, Sartre).

As stated above, in *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity*, Beardsworth shows that from the outset Kristeva is centered on the

modern problem of nihilism and her “*oeuvre* is best characterized as a philosophy of culture rooted in the psychoanalytic view of subjectivity” (2004, 2). This limiting to “philosophy of culture,” though, is not the full scope of approaches to Kristeva. John Lechte, Kelly Oliver, Ewa Ziarek, Tina Chanter, Noëlle McAfee, Cecilia Sjöholm, William Watkin, Miglena Nikolchina, and others motivate recent engagement with Kristeva, by further examining the context of the 1970s, and situating her in epistemic-ontological and deconstructive, and affective materialisms’ approaches to the subject.

The merit of Beardsworth’s approach lies in demonstrating that Kristeva is not limited to a philosophy of culture. Its major contribution is that it explains Kristeva’s method by situating her in the 1970s context of confrontation with modern nihilism as the “collapse of meaning, value, and authority—in the structures of the psyche” (Beardsworth 2004, 12). Kristeva is concerned that the prevailing institutions and discourses in Western society fail to symbolize the semiotic, which then deprives people of the ability to articulate love, loss, and separatedness. In order to experience values and meaning, there are pre-symbolic psychic structures developed in early infancy, which need to take on and be given symbolic form (this is why she often refers to the semiotic as rooted in “that unconscious ‘language’ found in children’s echolalia before the appearance of signs and syntax” [2010, 81]).

### The Evolving Meaning of Ontological Loss: From Revolution to Revolt

In order to evaluate two of the most salient proposals of *Revolution in Poetic Language*, it is important to place the extraordinary ideas of the early work within the context of the fifty years spanning the divide between us and the major advancements of Kristeva’s genius, as it came to fruition in the doctoral dissertation. This collection aims to reconceive of the mainstay of impact of the early work through the prism of revolution-revolt. The meaning of ontological revolution is to usher in change, to reject the old and affirm the new. These iterations of change are, in addition, liberatory insofar as they depend on promise of return, what I call liberatory natality.

The main proposal at the heart of the account of time, then, treats liberatory natality as opposed to freedom and, as well, posits that *Revolution in Poetic Language* inaugurates Kristeva’s thought on revolution, but

also constitutes in the same breath a departure from it. It is well known that shortly after 1974, Kristeva begins a shift that will develop into a systematic withdrawal from the thesis on revolution and as early as 1980 recommence as a thesis more akin to revolt. I use William Watkin's fresh reading of Kristeva's major turn in 1974 as springboard for my introduction, specifically in that it contains, in implicit form, the tripartite temporal schema of revolt, and the bridge of transition to it. It is of interest to briefly reconstruct this reading to establish our starting point. This is because in the first place it provides one of the strongest claims to how there is a logical complementarity between revolution and revolt already in 1974. In the second place, it is of interest, since it ties to what Watkin calls Kristeva's lifelong commitment outright to "feminist revolutions" (Watkin 2003, 98; Lechte 1990, 34–35).

Current contexts in French philosophy, discussions of the material ontology of the coming-to-presence of being in Jean-Luc Nancy (or, the indifference of difference in Alain Badiou); and problematics on revolution in Hannah Arendt (egalitarian modernity and the invisible life of the mind)—constitute a two-party debate that distinguishes between freedom, for Nancy, and revolutionary liberation, for Arendt. Kristeva nurtures affinities with both, and is closer to Arendt. Kristeva, through Freud and Klein, turns up interestingly as mediator between the two conceptions.

In more detail, Watkin argues that around 1987, Kristeva clearly shifts from the original notion of "revolution" from 1974. She is willing to put to work the "potential of natality for undermining subjective certainty," that is, for emancipatory purposes, but like Arendt she is "afraid of living the life of natality/liberation, seeing birth rather as a limited event, a [mere] wiping the slate clean, an opportunity to begin rebuilding the subject once more" (Watkin, 95). In other words, in a world of severed ties between public and private domains, of repressive paternal symbolic law and patriarchal values for Arendt, and for Kristeva, "natality become[s] the precondition for foundation," "foundation as text." Birth serves to build foundation as precondition for it, "in the same way that the [semiotic] mark is the precondition for text," so far as it attacks, divests of subjective certainty, of the egoism of the isolated individual. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva is still quite close to the orientation of the main ideas from 1974, an ontological revolution. The "dead speech" of the melancholic disposition treats rejection analogically to the semiotic mark. "In *Black Sun* dead speech, the more similar it becomes to the revolutionary textual procedures [Kristeva] admires so much in the work of avant-garde

writers like Mallarmé and Isidore Ducasse. . . . It is what happens to text when difference is renounced. Melancholic writing; to refuse differentiation” (92).

The question is: what was she shifting away from? Watkin puts it well in two lengthy passages, which I cite in full: “Yet Kristeva, having touched on the truth of the radical loss of significance as an ontological revolution in her early work, then systematically withdraws from it through a redefinition of terms and a re-consideration of the role of heterogeneous materiality. This means that when she returns once more to the issue of revolt in *The Sense and Non-sense of Revolt*, these issues are considered in a very different light” (Watkin, 92). “Freedom, for Nancy, is the foundational truth of the non-founded, that which can never be reduced to simple, basic foundational concepts, and that which will always exceed what has been founded. For Arendt, freedom is the return to a western myth of common origins, for Nancy it is the endless coming into being of events, subjectivity and community, that disallows such a single, common story totally to dominate. With this sophistication of approach to the basic idea of revolution leading to freedom, we can say that Kristeva’s first interests were indeed in revolution not what she later calls ‘revolt’” (94).

Watkin proposes that the turning point in Kristeva verges on her having arrived at the realization as to “the basic idea of revolution leading to freedom” (94). Contradicting Nancy’s radical natality for Kristeva, what matters is that natality, pure and simple, is too weak to sustain opposition granted the unconditionality of freedom. Kristeva is contradicting a full-blown Kantian antinomian idea of groundless ground, a nonfounding concept, “the non-founded,” as that which “can never be reduced to simple, basic foundational concepts, and that which will always exceed what has been founded.” Like Arendt, Kristeva argues for an “extended thinking,” also borrowing from Kant, but in his later period, the third *Critique*, “freedom is the return to a western myth of common origins.” For Watkin, in *Revolution in Poetic Language* for Kristeva, text is generated always through the “sudden irruption of materiality into the sign whether from inside or outside the speaking subject” (91). The entire process of text production on this dialectical pattern of irruptive materiality overlaps with the process of putting the subject-on-trial. The semiotically divested subject, divested of its primary narcissistic subjectivity, is so put on trial. In 1974, fully fleshing out this view, Kristeva is forced to confront what it would be to experience revolution as near ontological loss of meaning.

“To deny difference both in what that means for the conservative and the radical, the right and the left, is to deny the condition of life itself. However impossible this might be in reality, this is, surely, the only condition which achieves a state anything like the total liberation from subjectivity that revolutionary and avantgarde practice strives for” (92).

While I need not discuss the Nancy and Arendt debate and the relation to Kristeva any further, for the purposes of this introduction I limit myself to a note. In the conception of 1974, Kristeva touches on the radical loss of significance as an ontological revolution. Suffice it to say, it is around this problematic of ontological revolution but tied to loss, mourning, and recovery in subject formation that Söderbäck’s reevaluation, through “temporal revolutions” (2012, 319) invites new approaches in recent work—the new productivity of Kristeva’s “feminist revolutions.”

In more detail, Kristeva’s 1967 interview with Derrida in *Positions* (Derrida 1974) is worth revisiting with these ideas in mind. Temporal revolutions, in Söderbäck’s interpretation of Kristeva, do not give in on the importance of the symbolic order for revolution. The renewal of meaning in its effectivity may only be revealed in the future, in retrospect. In this sense, the later Kristeva perhaps even more strictly aligns with Derrida’s aim in his 1985 “Force of Law” (1992) to reimagine the locus of the unfolding of justice. Justice in its totality, for that matter, is played out on the grounds of the very laws on which foundations are violent (as only law-founding violence is revolutionary in definition), without referring to justice as an outside and exterior concept. Likewise, Kristeva’s use of psychoanalysis as “counterdepressant” in 1987 and onward (shifting to subjective revolt), is restricted to necessary repetition, without referring to time as an outside and exterior concept, and retrospectively recollecting, and reconceptualizing the past.

By the 1980s, the benefits of good mental health are too useful for reconceptualizing natality by Kristeva as a practicing psychoanalyst to dismiss. Her interventions for feminist revolutions and regaining “lost” time in the 1980s and 1990s are predominately work from her psychoanalytic practice. Freud’s ill-formed fable of *Totem and Taboo*, founding the “cultural/mythical/subjective on the original crime of patricide,” as Watkin notes, in Kristeva’s much revised unorthodox and feminist direction, is simply an opportunity “too useful to dismiss,” “the two acts of murder and consumption of the body” “match the dialectic of the semiotic and the symbolic” (Watkin, 96). These transformations, then, tie Kristeva’s systematic withdrawal from the term *revolution* instead to favor a psy-



choanalytic discourse of revolt, and in concert her withdrawal from a monolithic notion of the semiotic, instead to favor plurality (cf. Chanter & Ziarek 2005; Oliver & Keltner 2009; Hansen & Tuvel 2017).

It is appropriate at this point to briefly introduce the notion of the speaking subject as a site of the consolidation of loss, negativity, and mourning through the model of the Kristevan foundation of “motherhood,” which represents object-less love. These only deepen with the theory of a subjectivity in revolt in Kristeva’s later development, and this makes fuller sense of the turning point after *Revolution in Poetic Language*. I next outline three argumentation points, accordingly: mimesis; significance [*signifiante*] as historic-social effects since “language only leads to exteriority” (cf. Kristeva 2002, 57); and what this has to do with object-less love—all three help explain the construction of the speaking subject in Kristeva.

Kristeva’s argument through mimesis in *Revolution in Poetic Language* is similar to Derrida’s work on structural contamination between the metaphysical value of the address of justice as such, on the one hand, and its always singular addressee, non-metaphysical and empirical application, on the other hand. The double bind of *signifiante* in Kristeva’s semiotic dimension of language with regard to justice is analogical to contamination, that is, it plays out as mimetic in so far as it is a repetition. As a generality, the law structures as foundation its future possibility as an installment, as a singularity (Derrida 1967; 1974; 1992). The presence of justice, like the presence of other metaphysical entities (such as, e.g., deconstruction or democracy), may only make its way into manifesting within laws by the messianic structure of time, by “withholding” total releasement. Accordingly, *signifiante* for Kristeva reveals that the semiotic dimension of language may only make its way into the symbolic order as the releasing, by the subject, of temporally discontinuous and maternal pre-Oedipal drives. Hence, revolution, the retrieval of “lost” time by *signifiante*—is never fully completed and always to-come (cf. Miller 2014). This temporal openness is retained in the Kristevan revolt.

The second argument concerns the exposure of the sign in language to a “transcendental” dimension of signification in the thetic phase as a fundamentally figurable and transcendental dimension of language—without which we lose the very possibility of language to signify. Söderbäck rightly insists that, unlike an ahistorical orientation in deconstruction, Kristeva’s archaeological approach acknowledges a distinction between the *mode* of retrieval, that is, archaeology, and the *object* of retrieval, the *arché*

being paradigmatically inscriptive (Söderbäck 2012). Indeed, according to Kristeva, the reintroduction of the previously repressed maternal drives is a break from the previous syntax and inaugurates a new symbolic order.<sup>1</sup>

Only through language and the analysis of its signifiers is Kristeva's archaeological work possible, since lack always reveals itself as such or as such, that is, metaphorically. Representation, for Kristeva, is a second nature within which the psyche lives. The rule of representation holds throughout, since *signifiance* must have a socio-historical function in order to be revolutionary. The socio-historical function of significance may only arise as a break or a breaching within the narcissistic fixations of the psyche, and narcissism is a condition of possibility of *signifiance* itself. Kristeva works with the mother-infant dyad and genesis of narcissism at the boundaries and at margins, since *signifiance* only arises from there. Kristeva strongly defends the necessity of the split, that is, two aspect view, and argues that "only a subject, for whom the thetic is not a repression of the semiotic *chōra* but instead a position either taken on or undergone, can call into question the thetic so that a new disposition may be articulated" (1984, 51). On this point, Söderbäck writes, "what is at stake here is renewal, not absolute destruction. Later in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, she reminds us that while the thetic is 'absolutely necessary,' it is nevertheless 'not exclusive: the semiotic [. . .] constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice" (Söderbäck 2011, 86f18).

The third argumentation point is implied by the preceding exposition on breaching representation and narcissism, namely, the two components of the divide or split: the speaking subject is founded on negativity; this implies the role of liberatory natality in later Kristeva, and the centrality of feminist revolutions. She posits via Klein that in the early state of infancy, the child directs all their desires onto the mother's body, experiencing both pleasure and suffering. Yet, the child, in this state, does not distinguish between self and mother—there is no identity yet. Only when the child experiences the mother directing desire elsewhere do they identify with the "object." Mother's erotic desire points to an elsewhere, a third term (the Freudian imaginary Father of individual pre-history, see *Tales of Love*) that inaugurates the entrance into language, which is a positing of position or identity. Thus, primary narcissism is a drama that relies on a third term to establish an identity that allows one to construct a productive relationship with otherness. As adults, object-less love is always with a bit of a distance, a little nostalgic, a little sad; it inaugurates that

we cannot access the pre-Oedipal space to negotiate this structure or feel the states, so we must return to it, reimagine it, and reconstruct so as to produce something like those states in adulthood.

### Division into Chapters

The volume is comprised of three parts, in which the contributors engage with the legacy of Kristeva's ideas from the doctoral dissertation and onward, but the center of each essay organizes its starting point from out of *Revolution in Poetic Language*. What further distinguishes this collection is that the first part offers two texts from Kristeva, here first published in English.

The first text in division one is Kristeva's article from 1988, "*L'impossibilité de perdre*," translated by Elisabeth Paquette. This concentrated text, presented at a conference, comes with a ten-page lengthy question-and-answer period following the talk, in which the reader will find a wealth of technical terminology made accessible. Importantly, this brief talk given just a year following her main publication on melancholia and the depressive position from *Black Sun*, underlines Kristeva's affinity with and transformation of Freud's psychoanalysis; her divergence from Lacan (especially on sublimation); and her agreement, and as well disagreement, with Klein (in theorizing separation and the earliest mother-infant dynamics of psychic life). Since this collection aims at situating the contribution from the early work in Kristeva's overall intellectual trajectory, and more specifically, attends to her shift to the intimacy of a subjectivity in revolt around the 1990s, this text from 1988 is crucial as it represents a watershed point.

Kristeva's second text, "Of What Use Are Poets in Times of Distress?," is an address from 2016, co-translated by Elisabeth Paquette and Alice Jardine. The title of this address is the question to which Kristeva, along with other invited philosophers, filmmakers, historians, and writers responds, as part of the colloquium on November 7, 2016, at the Colline National Theater, as part of the movement "*Fraternité générale!*" [Fraternity for All!]. The colloquium was organized by the French Ministry of Culture and Communications, commemorating the first anniversary of the arrival of the Syrian immigrant wave in 2015. Both these newly translated texts are discussed in more detail, outlining their significance, in the editor's introduction to part 1.

The second part offers a perspective on the work from 1974 by a fresh engagement emphasizing the proximity of de-centered subjects: the poetic subject aligns with maternal ethics, disability, decolonial subjects, including nonbinary and transgender subjectivity. Kristeva's *polis*, in the most recent development of a more complex New Humanism, translates the political dimension of revolution into a politics of intimate revolt. Today's geopolitical crisis puts pressure on recalibrating the psychoanalytic aspect and whether its semiotic process is delimited within the individual psyche, or even nation's psyche, or Europe, and evidently new vantage points take on some critical and unresolved problematics, as well.

Kelly Oliver's essay offers an energetic and passionate involvement with Kristeva. She traces Kristeva's evolving discussion of the maternal in relation to ethics, and breaks new ground by showing how an ethics of tenderness in Kristeva grows out of her engagement with disability and her exchange with Jean Vanier, founder of *L'Arche*. From Kristeva's early suggestions of an *herethics* of love and into more recent discussions of democracy of proximity, as Oliver argues, the maternal ethics of tenderness revolves around complex affective connections, which are always ambivalent and requiring critical interpretation. By emphasizing Kristeva's call for attending to ambivalence-ambiguity, Oliver proposes that Kristeva posits this critical love as the basis of an ethics of tenderness, which goes beyond care or ethics of care, and goes to what Oliver describes, is an ethics of *being with*.

Sid Hansen corrects two popular 1990s misunderstandings, by Judith Butler (who situated Kristeva along with a similar misunderstanding of Foucault's *Barbin*), and then by Nancy Fraser—both of which isolate a blank slate concept of sex as opposed to gender as the social construction discursively performative of it. It is a misunderstanding to treat Kristeva's interaction between semiotic and symbolic developed in the *Revolution in Poetic Language* (and similarly Foucault), as leaving out the body as signifiable, as if it were situated outside of the socio-historic and therefore bearing no implications for the political. In emphasizing the socio-historic embeddedness of the signifiable body, Hansen appreciates Kristeva's theory of abjection as a useful resource in transgender studies. However, Hansen wishes to know if Kristeva might be open to repositioning trans studies from out of an intersectional perspective. The socio-historic and symbolic context of the oppression of trans youth and trans bodies does not exist in a vacuum but is the development of a bio-necropolitical capitalism, as we blatantly witness in the United States. Disturbed by