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Sylvie Gambaudo  
*University of Durham*

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**Sylvie Gambaudo**

University of Durham

## Kristeva, Ethics and Intellectual Practice

# ABSTRACT

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The aim of this article is to revisit the work of the French philosopher Julia Kristeva and ask what place we might give her conceptual framework today. I will focus on one key aspect of Kristeva's work, sexual difference, as that which ties most, if not all, aspects of Kristeva's work. I am hoping to present a concise, yet wide-ranging view on Kristeva's critical contribution to the fields of politics and ethics. My objective will be threefold. First, I will present the main lines of Kristeva's theory on sexual difference; this presentation will also outline her political critique of equality and diversity in the domains of gender and sexuality. Kristeva believes that contemporary politics invested in suppressing inequality through the promotion of diversity will in the long term not only prove unsuccessful, but also create more exclusion. Secondly, I will point out the main objections raised against her theories and show how her critics come to their conclusions. Objectors to Kristeva's sexual difference theory are mostly concerned with the manner in which she associates marginality and unintelligibility. They see little value in her theory, because, on the one hand, it relegates marginal groups to a world beyond social viability, and, on the other, because it effectively disables advancements in equality politics. Finally, I hope to provide the reader with a useful counter-critique to Kristeva's detractors that will show why their views are partly founded on a misreading of her ethical (Freudian) framework and a desire to translate her work into a more pragmatic and user-friendly tool. I will argue that Kristeva's work is best apprehended as a variant of psychoanalytic ethics and that to engage with its rhetoric is to capture the full weight of Kristeva's contribution to politics and intellectual engagement.

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**ABSTRACT**

## INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to revisit the work of the French philosopher Julia Kristeva and ask what place we might give her conceptual framework today. Kristeva's work has often left critics with ambivalent feelings towards her work. She first made her mark on the Anglo-American academic world in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the introduction of her symbolic/semiotic modalities of language. Some saw in the semiotic "disposition" of the speaking subject (*Revolution in Poetic Language*) the potential for emancipation from hegemonic (symbolic) forces. However, when Kristeva herself objected that it was not what she meant (*Tales of Love* 80–81), she also found herself the target of criticisms. The semiotic "disposition" of the subject lacked the potential for actualization and Kristeva was accused of siding with the enemy in relegating the possibility of an emancipated "semiotized" individual to the fate of unintelligibility (Doane and Hodges 76).

Indeed, the lack of intelligibility would become a recurring complaint made against Kristeva in the 1980s and 1990s. Her work was seen as unnecessarily "hard-core" intellectualism, out of the reach of the uninitiated, too abstract; in short, too removed from lived social experiences. Kristeva herself summed up her position in academic circles:

I believe that much of what has been written in the United States about my conception has been inaccurate. People have either defined and glorified the "semiotic" as if it were a female essence or else claimed that I do not grant enough autonomy to this "essence." (qtd. in Guberman 269)

The vision of Kristeva's work as neither here nor there also provoked a third type of criticism. There is both a wish and a difficulty in labelling her work and tying her to a school of thought. This is particularly obvious when critics attempt to by-pass Kristeva's allegiance to the Freudian framework. Trying to explain what Kristeva is proposing away from psychoanalysis has led many critics to volunteer other labels to describe where Kristeva's work might belong: French feminism and French theory for example are amongst the most commonly found, especially in Anglo-American feminist circles. Attempts to sever Kristeva's work from Freudian legacy raise questions about academic allegiance: on the one hand, Kristeva's own allegiance to established frameworks (I will come back to this) and on the other her critics'. The need to reposition Kristeva's work says

more about those critics' need to contain and appropriate what Kristeva represents for them than what her work actually achieves. While such appropriation opens the door to misreadings of Kristevan theory, it has also had an interesting effect on feminist debates. The Anglo-American importation and packaging of Kristeva's work under the "French feminist" banner has refreshed discussions in Anglo-American feminism regarding the place of otherness (cf. Gambaudo, "French Feminism vs. Anglo-American Feminism: A Reconstruction"). In a context (the 1970s/80s) where feminism was grappling with the very stuff that justified its existence (women's essence, their political rights, etc.), the coining of "French feminism" allowed Anglo-American feminists to regroup around more philosophical questions of inclusion, exclusion, marginality, foreignness, etc. It also enabled some to dissent against so-called "French theory" because of its insistence on the importance of "otherness." As Lechte explained, French theorists (especially those of a Freudian persuasion) are regarded as suspicious because they make central to their thesis the matter of "otherness," a term that an empirical and pragmatic Anglo-Saxon academic tradition deems too elusive to conceptualize (25). Both sides were thus asking pertinent questions to the other: on the pragmatic side, for example, what status shall we give this "other"? How do we incorporate the "other" in political (feminist) demands? On the "French" feminist side, the assimilation of otherness as "diversity" in political rhetoric was seen as a short term solution. If otherness provokes the exclusion of some individuals, motivates projective identification, triggers one's hatred of strangers and in the extreme prompts psychotic acting-outs against fellow beings, then its metamorphosis into issues of "diversity" is questionable. Worse, Kristeva suggests that it may also be what participates in "othering the other" further. This is what this paper is interested in. Before we begin unpacking the relationship between otherness and diversity, I want to make one final point of introduction to address the previously opened question of Kristeva's academic allegiance, or lack thereof.

Kristeva would be too intellectual and too Freudian. The attempts to separate her work from its Freudian roots lead to questions regarding her true academic commitment, at worse to accusations that she lacks academic purity. These critics do have a point. Pegging Kristeva's work with labels is indeed a challenge. Even within psychoanalysis, her work is indebted to many schools: Freudian, Lacanian, Kleinian and Object Relation Theory, to name just a few. Psychoanalyst, philosopher, feminist, linguist, novelist, political theorist, sociologist and critical theorist are some of the terms most commonly used to describe who Kristeva is. Indeed, her interdisciplinary approach is forcing her work into the margin of scholarly disciplines. In an interview, she said: "I'm at the interface of disciplines.

This is still perceived by the French university or media establishment as something that is, if not scandalous, at least disturbing” (qtd. in Lechte and Margaroni 156). She then added that her status as a foreigner had also been a hindrance in gaining academic validation amongst French intellectuals. While this is true in France, Kristeva’s status as a foreigner and her work on otherness has been precisely what has attracted such a huge interest, whether positive or negative, outside France, especially in the United States. But as she says, in France her work tends to be relegated into a certain margin of thought because her foreignness and her interdisciplinarity disturb the academic establishment. The fact that Kristeva links the two ideas together in Lechte’s interview is significant. While she does not explicitly come to any conclusion regarding hostility towards interdisciplinarity *and* distrust of foreignness, there is little doubt that she is talking about the same thing: hegemonic hostility towards “bastardization” of thought *and* “bastardization” of being. To be clear, in Kristeva’s work, the manner body and mind are signified points to the same issue, that of otherness, of difference, or, more precisely, *sexual difference*. And any form of marginalization, for example dismissing interdisciplinarity as a lesser form of thought, or doubting someone’s conceptual frameworks because of its (and her) foreign character, are particular formations of a wider question regarding sexual difference.

This essay will be primarily concerned with “sexual difference,” one area where Kristeva has contributed the most, possibly *the* area as other key themes like otherness, foreignness, the maternal, feminism, etc., can be traced back to her sexual difference theory. In conjunction with sexual difference, I am interested in her response to more pragmatic approaches to difference, that is the integration of difference and its morphing into issues of diversity and equal opportunity in mainstream politics. Kristeva sees such equality rhetoric as attempts to level out difference. I aim to show that Julia Kristeva’s conceptual framework is a valuable tool to evaluate and critique cultural responses to social concerns today. I will begin with an appraisal of what Kristeva has contributed in the field of difference theory and gender discrimination. In a second stage, her framework will be pitched against political achievements that have granted “oppressed” minorities equal opportunity. We will see that behind some promotions of “diversity” can hide the loss of difference in the sense that Kristeva gives it. The trivialization of difference into euphoric messages, for example like those found on diversity posters, would not promote diversity but in fact participate in its repression. To illustrate this, I will look at one significant manifestation of it: sexuality. A recurring theme in the work of Kristeva, sexuality is where she unpacks the hidden face of hegemonic (hetero-)

sexuality, with surprising conclusions critiquing the demands of marginalized sexualities (LGBT, for example) for claiming successful outcomes to activism. Her dedication to challenging hegemonic thought has motivated her to stick to her psychoanalytic “guns” rather than resort to what she sees as uncritical speedy fixes to social unrest (promoting “gay marriage,” for example). This essay will thus emphasize Kristeva’s more discreet form of subversion, one that has a crucial role to play in responding to social unrest and which is part of her ethical framework for a forward-thinking intellectual practice.

### A PLACE IN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: DIFFERENCE

149

The hinge pin of Kristeva’s framework is without question the issue of sexual difference or differentiation. In fact, Kristeva occupies an interesting place in the theory of difference. In her essay “Women’s Time” (1979/1981), she famously uses three common historical moments of the feminist struggle to explain key philosophical positions in feminism and clarify the ambiguous relationship between feminism and sexual difference: first-wave feminism also known as “liberal” feminism, second-wave or “radical,” and third-wave or “postmodern/poststructuralist” feminism. The first wave, mostly concerned with issues of suffrage and education, directed their effort at difference to decry its injustice. First-wave feminism aimed to correct inequality between the sexes by denouncing difference as the source of women’s exclusion and seeking its eradication in particular fields of social experience, politics and education mostly. The second wave, politically, sociologically and intellectually empowered by the achievement of the first one, again would locate feminist advancement in revisiting the notion of difference. But second-wave feminists saw the first-wave’s effort to eradicate difference as a selling out of “woman” to dominant politics. Feminists now denounced the effort to reach equality as an assimilation of woman to “sameness” (meaning: to man) and as the cause of women’s servitude. Consequently, second-wave feminists directed their attention at ways of rehabilitating difference as source of woman’s identity. For example, the creation of Virago Press in 1973 sought to promote female writers whose work had not yet been published or had been neglected or fallen into oblivion.

The legacy of the first and second waves of feminists is unmistakable. Today, equal opportunity policies or the right to diversity are omnipresent markers of feminist achievements. While Kristeva nods to these undeniable triumphs of feminism, she also critiques what she perceives as the shortcomings of identity politics. John Lechte summarized those shortcomings as follows:

A failure by first generation feminism (for example de Beauvoir) to recognize the risk of being incorporated into the male power structure, and, with the second generation, a blindness as to the risk of sectarianism and of becoming agents of the violence (terrorism) that the movement expressly opposes. (207)

For Kristeva, the problem with identity politics lies in the very act of speaking in the defence of “woman,” as feminism does. She has consistently warned that to posit collective identity above the singularity of individual experience is harmful. Kristeva does not mince her words and firmly believes that asserting the existence of sexual identity (the existence of men *and* women) is a form of tyranny imposed on the individual. If “woman” (for example) is that which is equal to or different from man, sameness and difference then become the terms by which “woman” is normalized. By extension these are also the terms that deny “woman” the possibility of becoming anything else. “Woman” is then this universal figure that all girls aspire to grow into regardless of their background and that is actualized in the reiteration of what is “same as” or “marginal to” dominant narratives that describe her.

With her 1979 (translated 1981) essay, Kristeva’s complaint announces the coming of age of identity politics, which flourished from the 1980s onwards and found their accomplishment in the work of scholars like Judith Butler.

[T]he premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. (Butler 6)

By this Butler echoes Kristeva’s words: “I think that the apparent coherence which the term ‘woman’ assumes in contemporary ideology . . . essentially has the negative effect of effacing the differences among the diverse functions and structures that operate underneath this word” (“Women’s Time” 18). Noëlle McAfee summarized the risks of un-deconstructed acceptance of “woman’s difference” and of the forces that regulate the representation of that difference. Whether idealized as a good wife/mother or demonized as a dangerous vixen, woman’s difference is romanticized to such a point that real women are denied individuality and specificity of identity (McAfee 100). Kristeva’s objection to identity politics is partly located here. She argues that romanticizing “woman” identifies “woman” with her perceived essence, constraining her to a pre-defined position of inferiority and marginality (qtd. in Guberman 116–17). Difference thus

becomes her and between idolization and vilification, “woman” loses her singularity in favour of other images that become particular formations of the woman spectrum: from the good woman (maternal, caring, etc.) to the bad woman (ranging from alluring to deadly).

The construction of woman as same-as-man is equally unsatisfactory for women, but here Kristeva tells us that it is not just women who face the exclusion of their singularity. I will detour briefly via Luce Irigaray whose framework so aptly shows the dangers of so-called “sexual equality” for women. I will then return to Kristeva to draw attention to a critical aspect of her framework that could be summed up as follows: the conclusion drawn by detractors of identity politics is that the attempt to establish categories founded on sameness and/or difference amongst individuals would achieve the opposite. It would not lead to establishing satisfactory coherent categories of being but instead participating in the undoing of those same categories. If identity politics amounts to the negation of individual identities in favour of coherent pre-set identity types, what is interesting in Kristeva is that she is not advocating the end of difference. On the contrary, she proposes a revisiting of difference theory (the process by which one draws differences amongst people) as the creative path towards individual singularity.

In 1974 Luce Irigaray published *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Her book became one of the key texts describing the risk of unquestioned adherence to patriarchal models for women. In her thesis, Irigaray coins the notion of “phallogocentrism,” a term with which she critiques two key traditional concepts: logocentrism and phallogocentrism. Schutte describes logocentrism as the assumption that there exists a “transcendental subject of knowledge [who] coordinates and controls the multiplicity of sensations and impressions received from sense experience, thus forming a unified field of experience” (65). The subject would moderate the transcendence of knowledge, which in turn operates as the referent of all representation. Hence, one’s linguistic experience is the site where what one says is truly what one means. With the term “phallogocentrism” a gender dimension is added. Phallogocentrism is the attitude of one who assumes that epistemic experiences are valid inasmuch as the actor of the experience is male and that *his* experience is the referent for *all* experiences. Hence, experience is “fundamentally hermetic,” operating “according to rules and conventions” that exclude women (Irigaray, *je, tu, nous* 28). Any experience that is not phallogocentric, that is any experience defined as that of woman, must be linguistically territorialized and made to comply “into the production of the same discourse” (Irigaray, *Speculum* 137). Irigaray is proposing that although dimorphic by definition, there are no two gender identities (man/woman) but one since men’s experience is the only one that counts.

Most women's experience tells them . . . that they are first and foremost asexual or neuter. . . . The difficulty they face in order to enter the between-men cultural world leads almost all of them, including those who call themselves feminists, to renounce their female identity and relationships with other women, bringing them to an individual and collective impasse, when it comes to communication. (*je, tu, nous* 21)

So what about women's role in this phallogocentric arrangement? Women's femininity becomes the object of men's subjectivity and acts as catalysts to their experience. What Irigaray means is that "woman" is not anything except that which it needs to be in order to make man's experience meaningful. She is his other, his variable: the unintelligible, the irrational, that which lacks something and is in need of his linguistic input if it is to achieve intelligibility and recognition.

"Phallogocentrism" is by and large what Kristeva is critiquing in first generation feminism and in today's policies of equal opportunities. What she sees as the levelling of difference is similar to Irigaray's idea of the neutering of women's sex. For Kristeva, the recognition of one's strangeness avoids the erasure of one's difference. Yet celebrating diversity is not necessarily the same as recognizing one's own strangeness because diversity is politically recuperated in a narrative of difference that averages out everybody's rights to a common denominator. The cultural expression of this common denominator comes down to a "doing" of diversity, to use Butlerian rhetoric, and becomes the means by which the individual signifies their difference. Kristeva's understanding of difference, however, is not about diversity awareness. Her theoretical framework is explicitly anchored in Freudian psychoanalysis and this means that difference is always mediated by the libido. So, instead of having difference as desexualized diversity awareness, on the contrary, difference is that which is libidinally invested and is manifested in the individual's pleasure and creativity. Kristeva explains that

if you level out difference, given that it's difference that's desirable and provokes sexual pleasure, you could see a kind of sexual anesthesia. . . . That's extremely troubling, first, for the individual's psychic life whose levelling off rules out desire and pleasure, and second, for the individual's creative possibilities. (qtd. in Guberman 126–27)

In a phallus-centred organization of knowledge, the marker of difference (and so of pleasure and creativity) is the female body. The female body, in

particular the phenomenological female body,<sup>1</sup> becomes that object which challenges and ultimately prevents the libidinal disinvestment of individuals of both sexes. Why prevent? Because its difference repositions it as this strange, elusive “thing” every time one attempts to appropriate it to turn into an “object.” The apprehension of the female body and of its experience is the marker of a desire for difference. This desire is manifested in practices which, although experienced as pleasurable, nevertheless always frustrate the individual by virtue of being outside phallogocentric experience. So returning to Irigaray and our critique of equality and diversity, under the guise of encouraging the singularity of individuals, political engagement in fact levels these singularities to a common state of experience: the heterogeneous nature of difference, mediated by the libido, is neutralized in favour of a single (phallogocentric) vision of knowledge. The experience of difference is lost in that process.

There is, however, a big difference between Irigaray and Kristeva. The latter does not advocate the re-writing of theories of sexual difference to allow woman her own different sexual identity. On the contrary, Kristeva is more loyal to the traditional epistemic model than Irigaray. She advocates the maintenance of a phallogocentric model for different reasons. One is an issue of stability. The overthrow of phallogocentrism would, she believes, lead society to the brink of psychosis and self-destruction. The creation of a labio-logocentric or gyno-logocentric, whatever morphological equivalent to the phallus we might use, would not lead to the rehabilitation of woman’s epistemic experience, as would be hoped, simply because Kristeva does not believe there is such a coherent unit as man or woman already there and phenomenologically ready to share its experience. As a result, we cannot say that it is only women who must fight a system that excludes their singular experience. Men also face the risk of neutering in a phallogocentric system. This has important consequences for the understanding of Kristeva’s ethics as an intellectual and I will return to it later.

If Kristeva rejects the re-writing of difference theory to accommodate women, she does, however, come close to it with her symbolic/semiotic model of language. Caught between a romanticized image of woman and one that erases her, Kristeva proposed in 1979 that we should regard the categories “man” and “woman” as metaphysical. In doing so, she was instrumental in questioning the possibility of a coherent form of feminism. Instead of a monolithic understanding of feminism’s essence and objectives, she advocates a form of feminism that promotes the philosophical questioning of identity and of its politics, and the *aesthetic* practice of her

<sup>1</sup> What Kristeva describes as “the feminine” and what I return to in the next section.

version of “the feminine.” Before we move on to the terms that define “the semiotic feminine,” I want to emphasize the importance of aesthetics in Kristeva’s understanding of feminist engagement. Indeed, one of the critiques addressed to Kristeva’s vision of a third type of feminism is at times a misreading of and at others a disagreement with the wider potential of an aesthetic feminine practice. What I am saying is that a criticism regarding Kristeva’s alleged disengagement from hands-on politics could be criticism of a wider question about the powers and limits of aesthetic practice. In short, can aesthetic production change social reality? If so, which aesthetic practices should we favour? I am not proposing to answer these questions here but I am interested in showing how Kristeva’s aesthetic critique of sexual difference, although seemingly disconnected from, even hostile to the defence of “women,” is in fact a call for more subversive practice at the service of social change. In other words, as I will illustrate below, many of Kristeva’s aesthetic practices *can* be perceived as nothing more than circular bourgeois narratives that only serve the perpetuation of hegemonic thought. But the careful consideration of her psychoanalytic framework shows that the opposite is also true.

### SEXUALITY, HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE OTHER OF OEDIPUS

A critical reading of Kristeva’s *oeuvre* permits the construction of her theory of sexuality, or maybe more accurately theories of sexuality. In what follows, I am recalling conclusions I made in an earlier article (“Julia Kristeva, ‘Woman’s Primary Homosexuality’ and Homophobia”) and using those to emphasize the importance of maintaining sexual difference in seeking subversion of hegemonic (hetero)sexual narratives. While arguing that in order to challenge hegemony one needs to maintain it sounds like a circular argument, Kristeva’s take on it should not be dismissed too quickly. For the past 20 years, her argument has been that the opposite of differential treatment of sexualities, for example seeking equal opportunity for lesbian and gay couples to marry, does not achieve the coveted acceptance of other sexualities but rather levels out these sexualities along heterosexual lines of understanding. This is not a new argument (see Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example). But a careful reading of Kristeva shows that she does something quite subtle and unusual that in my reading amounts to a form of sexuality theory that is new. This is what I want to describe now.

Kristeva has famously proposed a model of language where two modalities, symbolic and semiotic (1974/1984), cohabit within language and contribute to meaning-making. She has consistently and, in my

opinion, very successfully applied this model to many areas of experience: gender, ethnicity, race and what interests us here, sexuality. Effectively, Kristeva challenged the Freudian model with her own. Freud proposed the Oedipal model as universally applicable to all individuals. Castration engenders individuals: men become men because they are threatened with gender emasculation (the fear to lose their phallus) and women become women because they seek gender reparation (the desire to recapture the lost phallus).

Kristeva does not dispute this but slows down the Freudian model of sexual development and pauses on the part just after loss, when the phallus becomes the referent of sexuality. She suggests that while the symbolic filling of the hole may well be reparative, it is never complete. Furthermore, in the case of pregnancy, that filling may not be all it seemed to Freud. In fact, she believes pregnancy is subversive. Kristeva is particularly interested in the manner pregnancy is psychologized and fantasized, so in her work the pregnancy experience is not confined to parturient women, nor is it confined to females in general. More precisely, it is the fantasy of parthenogenesis or immaculate conception where the individual can experience desire without symbolic castration. In other words, in fantasizing conceiving immaculately, the individual imagines that s/he bypasses the problem of sexual difference and challenges the compulsion to heterosexuality. Pregnancy fantasies also portray a perfectly symbiotic relationship which, while being of the same body, is nevertheless a twosome that finds its foundations and accomplishment in a sense of kinship (mother *and* child) that ignores the father's involvement. Put differently again, Kristeva's "Madonna model" (cf. Gambaudo, "From Scopophilic Pleasure to the Jouissance of the Madonna") challenges heterosexuality and in the challenge to heterosexuality lies one of the definitions Kristeva gives of woman's homosexuality<sup>2</sup>: the doubling of bodies and the search for female kinship away from castration (*Le Génie Feminin III* 351–52). I do not have the space to unpack the individual's motivation for actually fabricating such fantasies and successfully preserving them in spite of repression. But there are three interesting points I want to highlight: first, once these fantasies are formed, they become a kind of blueprint for particular psychosexual formations, effectively cohabitating with fantasies of an Oedipal nature. So, we now have at least two psychosexual models, one symbolically motivated (Freud with castration) and one semiotically motivated (Kristeva with the Madonna model). Second, these fantasies appear in both men and

<sup>2</sup> To be accurate, she calls it woman's primary homosexuality, but for simplicity, I am using the expression "woman's homosexuality."

women.<sup>3</sup> I suggested somewhere else the possibility of Madonnic fantasies in men (“From Scopophilic Pleasure to the Jouissance of the Madonna” 18). In one example, Dick Blau’s photographs of his wife (Jane Gallop) and child (Max), Blau ordered the mother and child, then engaged in the ritual intimacy of Max’s bath time, to look at him and he captured on camera the pair’s angry looks directed at the father’s intrusion upon their symbiosis. Blau, we are told, intentionally set up the angry response in *his desire* to chronicle photographically the rejection of castration. Third, although they bypass castration, Madonnic fantasies are intelligible only retroactively, after Oedipal development. Hence, women’s homosexuality is located somewhere between the two ends of a spectrum with at one end “the delightful arena of a neutralized, filtered libido, devoid of the erotic cutting edge of masculine sexuality” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 80–81) and at the other lesbianism is made intelligible through the prism of phallic desire (for example stone butches, lipstick lesbians or Diesel dykes become the colourful phallogocentric formations of lesbian intelligibility).

Understanding Kristeva’s conceptual apprehension of woman’s homosexuality clearly matters in the context of lesbian studies and lesbian and gay rights. It also matters more widely. Talking about sexuality goes way beyond categorizing sexuality according to preference of sexual partners. Rather, the analysis of the ontological structuring of sexuality has interesting results for a challenge of hegemonic (hetero)sexuality. At the end of the analysis, Kristeva tells us two things: one that she remains on her position (dismissal) regarding the possibility of a socially coherent form of homosexual existence, in the sense she gives homosexuality. Whether hetero- or homosexual, all individuals seek intelligibility via an already established form of sexuality and do so more or less successfully. In this, we can recall Irigaray who says there is only one true form of sex and sexuality and it is phallogocentric. When Kristeva is insisting that the phallus is the referent of any form of sexuality, she is by and large saying the same thing: “To the extent that she has a loving soul, a woman is drawn into the same dialectic involving confrontation with the Phallus. . . . Whatever the organ, confrontation with power remains” (*Tales of Love* 80–81). But Kristeva also tells us that at an aesthetic level much more can and should be done. A reassessment of ontological categories is not just desirable; it is a practice showing one’s sense of good intellectual ethics. Beyond the question of sexuality, Kristeva firmly believes that an aesthetic practice of marginal forms (narratives, paintings, etc., but also their analysis) is key to resisting

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<sup>3</sup> Although I have an un-investigated suspicion that their particular formations tend to differ along gender lines (see Gambaudo, “From Scopophilic Pleasure to the Jouissance of the Madonna: The Mother’s Maternal Gaze in Three Photographic Examples”).

their disappearance when hegemony requires their transformation into coherent formations. She has often called the marginal the “feminine,” and beyond their differences, several theories converge to agree with her, whether they call it “feminine,” “queer,” “trans,” or something else:

In the end, recognizing feminine “specificity” and “creativity” associates them with the structures and identities borrowed from paternalistic and monotheistic societies. Because such societies do not recognize feminine specificity, they try to put it aside, subdue it, and make sure no one talks about it. (qtd. in Guberman 106)

157

What I am trying to say is that Kristeva is suggesting the shortcomings she highlights would be caused by a lack of philosophical reflection on the very meaning of “difference.” While equality and difference feminists achieved much at a political and sociological level, feminist achievement is more mitigated at an aesthetic level. Kristeva appears to place a certain type of intellectual practice, commonly denoted by the terms “French theory” or “continental philosophy,” higher and above other academic disciplines, like politics or sociology. But it would be a mistake to see in this the arrogant exclusion of other intellectual traditions. In fact, she puts forward an interesting dynamic between a feminism that is supposedly verifiable and more exact, and an aesthetic feminism that directly challenges it. Why should we take aesthetic seriously as a tool for subversion? Because Kristeva thinks that in a time of crisis where melancholia permeates the *socius*, aesthetic production is a (if not *the*) chance to rise above crisis and to mobilize imaginative skills precisely because the possibility of aesthetic practice seems foreclosed (Gambaudo, *Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture*; Lechte and Margaroni 3). In the Western world, crisis is partly caused by changes in the limits of authority, partly it is a side effect of the importance we give technology. Let me take each in turn.

As mentioned at the start of this essay, Kristeva has been criticized for seemingly siding with the enemy and encouraging us to protect what she terms “the father” or “the Symbolic.” Against her detractors (I am thinking of Butler’s excellent critique in *Gender Trouble*), Kristeva firmly believes in the value of maintaining a certain form of hegemony in the defence of singular experience. But if the assurance of personal creativity rests on the perpetuation of hegemony, it is not done willy-nilly and Kristeva believes two conditions need to be fulfilled: the maintenance of a fairly solid boundary between permission and interdiction *and* the suppleness of that boundary (Lechte 143–63). The failure to go beyond hegemony and show personal creativity is then a consequence of either too rigid a dominant discourse (for example totalitarianism) or of its instability (for instance corruption),

if not inexistence. So ironically, the suppression of difference, in my earlier example the introduction of “gay marriage,” leads to its assimilation to an existing model but not to the eradication of difference, here homophobia.

Second is the question of technology. Kristeva believes “an excess of technology can kill the imagination’ (qtd. in Lechte 152). There is a certain amount of nostalgia in her views, a nostalgia for the good old “pen-to-paper” days when communication was mediated by tangible *matter* like ink or a blank sheet. Kristeva’s gripe with technology also goes beyond this. She describes aspects of technology and the use we make of it that feel uncomfortably Orwellian. For example, the reaching out for ready-made answers (the “just Google it” approach to difficulties from cooking recipes to existential angst) or the use of prefabricated images as models of experience (distressed customers of the Costa Concordia reported that they *knew* what was happening because their experience was reminiscent of scenes seen in the film *Titanic*) suggest that knowledge is not so much mediated by the body from the inside out, but rather generated through our consumption of technology from the outside in. These would be the side effects (or, in the long term, the regulation) of life experiences in a technological environment. Kristeva deplors the impoverishment of the human psyche which, for lack of use, increasingly shows wastage in areas like the capacity to cope with emotions and the aptitude to be creative. The potential to unleash political control or marketing strategies upon needy but docile populations indeed makes for uncomfortable thought.

158

## CONCLUSION

There is a difficulty in abiding by a Kristevan ethics because there is ambivalence with regard to what we might ethically object to. On the one hand, she shows quite successfully that certain cultural manifestations hinder political action against the marginalization of difference. A weakening symbolic referent replaced by, for example, a more technological narrative of the human, would be both markers of what is hindered and of what obstructs the path towards change. On the other hand, Kristeva also guards us against the option of authenticating perpetrators and victims of crimes committed in the name of difference. In what appears a circular argument, Kristeva has been one of the early key figures to insist on the importance of understanding how difference (and the marginalization of difference) is manifested and the urgency in unpicking the structures that operate underneath the notion of difference. The authentication of crime would be the domain of the Law, of diversity policies and their application. But these

can only be short to medium term answers to social unrest, with mitigated social efficacy and always in need of reformulation. The latter would be the responsibility of intellectuals and artists. I suggested at the start that Kristeva's discreet form of intellectualism had a crucial role to play in solving social concerns, but this is not entirely accurate. In fact, Kristeva does not envisage a solution and this ambivalence, no doubt, put hopeful critics off. Instead, her vision has political activists and intellectuals engaged in a common venture where each represents one aspect of the same process. If Kristeva's ethics were to be defined, it would be found here, in the fight to maintain dialogue between civic realities and aesthetics, where political action tracks reflection and vice versa.

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