

## *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva* by Alice Jardine, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2020

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Review of

## *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*

by Alice Jardine, New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2020

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### **Kristeva's Absence**

For some educational philosophers and theorists, the Bulgarian-born and French-trained public intellectual Julia Kristeva is perhaps better known for her name than her thought. Indeed, this has historically been true of my own experience. In my undergraduate studies, much space was devoted to Marx, Freire, and the critical pedagogues that followed. During my master's degree, methodologists, posthumanists, and intersectional feminists seemed to appear on every syllabus in one form or another. Before my recent preoccupation well into the third year of my PhD, I had encountered Kristeva's name only a handful of times in educational research, theory, and philosophy (e.g., Abdul-Jabbar, 2018; Ardnt, 2017). Indeed, a quick search of *Philosophical Inquiry in Education's* (PIE) online database found only three articles containing reference to Kristeva (Bach, 2008; Backer, 2017; Schwimmer, 2017), but one of which could be called substantial (Bach, 2008). Having recently immersed myself in Kristeva's writing, I expect this paucity is not a coincidence. Her language is dense. Her brand of feminism is unique and challenging to her contemporaries. Her emphasis on secular humanism pushes against the posthumanists as heiresses apparent to the postmodernist throne (e.g., Braidotti, 2019) and, above all, she doesn't write specifically about education.

Despite these justifications for her absence, I believe Julia Kristeva has much to teach us in education, particularly through her life as what she calls a "contestatory intellectual" (Jardine, 2020, p. 7). The recently published biography of Kristeva, *At the Risk of Thinking*, authored by Kristeva's former student and close friend Alice Jardine, provides the ideal opportunity to reconsider Kristeva's legacy, or lack thereof, in education. In this review, I seek to highlight *At the Risk of Thinking* for the educational philosophy and theory communities. I begin with a summary of the text's contents and then briefly touch on its strengths and weaknesses. In my subsequent discussion, I contextualize Kristeva's insight into totalitarianism and the heart of intellectual work within the current socio-political moment.

## Summary of Contents

Divided chronologically into three sections, *At the Risk of Thinking* traces the trajectory of Julia Kristeva's life and thought from her birth and early education in Bulgaria, through her formative years in the Parisian intellectual community of the 1960s and 1970s, and into her years spent as an international public intellectual from the 1980s onward through today. This third section of the book is divided again into four sub-sections, each detailing Kristeva's activity within a particular decade.

The first section is narrative in nature and comprises an accounting of Kristeva's Bulgarian upbringing. Jardine puts particular emphasis on three early intellectual influences on Kristeva: her mother, a brilliant scientist whom Jardine credits with Kristeva's later emphasis on female genius; her father, a theologian who, Jardine suggests, may have contributed to Kristeva's later respect for religion; and the socio-political climate of post-war Bulgaria. After World War Two, Bulgaria was governed by the national Communist Party and had close international ties with the USSR and other communist nations. As with other communist states, the position of post-war Bulgarian intellectuals was often precarious and marked by strict surveillance. Jardine attributes some of the linguistic density of Kristeva's later writing to coming of age intellectually under this surveillance. Because much of Kristeva's writing was critical of the Communist Party (though not communism *per se*), and being openly against the government could prove dangerous, Kristeva and other Bulgarian intellectuals often wrote in thickly coded language to make it more difficult for the government to discern their critical sentiments. Jardine points to Kristeva's early life under Communist rule as a major contributing factor to her later intellectual critiques of totalitarianism.

Jardine's second section highlights Kristeva's initial years in France from 1965 until 1980. The narrative in this section focuses around Kristeva's relationships with other renowned French intellectuals, as well as her own development as an academic in the fields of literature and semiotics. Jardine follows Kristeva's journey beginning with her arrival in France as a doctoral student through conversations with French novelists and Bulgarian expats to arrive at her first doctoral supervisor, Lucien Goldmann. Kristeva was interested in the "new" French novel and, in conversation with Goldmann (a staunch Marxist), began to trace the history of the novel more generally. At a certain point, however, the cultural ethos of 1960s Paris began to influence Kristeva more significantly than her supervisor. She attended seminars with Lacan and Barthes, took on an editorial role with the left-leaning *Tel Quel*, and began her life-long partnership with French novelist and critic Philippe Sollers. Each of these events, detailed thoroughly by Jardine, influenced Kristeva both personally and intellectually, and by the time she defended her first doctoral dissertation in the midst of the 1968 Paris protests, her relationship with Goldmann had visibly and ostentatiously deteriorated, marking Kristeva's transition away from Marxist analysis into the burgeoning field of semiotics (Barthes was also on Kristeva's doctoral committee) and later psychoanalysis. The climax of the second act of Jardine's biography is the much-criticized and publicized trip Kristeva and colleagues (e.g., Sollers, Barthes, but notably not Lacan) took to China in 1974. Shortly after the trip, Kristeva made two significant decisions that greatly shaped both her academic and personal life: she decided to become a mother, and she decided to become a psychoanalyst.

In Jardine's third section, which details the last forty years of Kristeva's career, the narrative of the text gives way to an encyclopedic account of the ideas within Kristeva's work. Beginning shortly after the birth of her son, David, a focus on maternity began to appear in Kristeva's writing. Jardine uses this maternal emphasis to distinguish Kristeva's line of thought from those of her feminist contemporaries,

some of whom name motherhood as a marker of the patriarchy (e.g., de Beauvoir). The 1980s were also defined by the emergence of a more pronounced commitment to psychoanalysis in Kristeva's writing, as well as the beginnings of her firm commitment to secular humanism. These trends continued throughout the later decades as well. In the 1990s, Kristeva began writing novels. Though perhaps more approachable than her academic work, Jardine is quick to point out that these novels are rich enactments and explorations of the philosophical ideas articulated and defended in Kristeva's academic writing. Around the turn of the millennium, Kristeva began to publish her renowned trilogy of texts exploring the lives and intellectual journeys of three female geniuses: Hannah Arendt, Mélanie Klein, and Sidonie-Gabrielle (Colette). In each of these works and women, there are echoes of major themes in Kristeva's own intellectual genius: in Arendt, a politically engaged philosophy; in Klein, the potential of psychoanalysis to explore, and defend the significance of, psychic space; and in Colette, the complexities of the "new" French novel. In the last decade, Kristeva's journey as told by Jardine has been one of considerably more notoriety than previous decades. Kristeva is particularly well regarded for the defense of secular humanism and her dialogue from that perspective with believers.

Jardine brings her account of Kristeva's life to a close through a discussion of the recent controversy surrounding documents disclosed by the Bulgarian government supposedly outing Kristeva as a spy for the Communist government of the 1960s and 1970s. In this, as in all controversies discussed throughout the text, Jardine is a staunch defender of Kristeva, in this instance showing the logical inconsistencies of those who interpret these documents as proof of Kristeva's guilt. Jardine echoes Kristeva's own position on these documents: that they prove nothing other than the fact that the Bulgarian government was spying on her and intercepting her communications for decades. Closing with this controversy should not be read as a question mark as to Kristeva's political allegiances; rather, it should be read as a metaphor for Kristeva's life as an intellectual: she has been nothing if not controversial, contesting, and committed. Kristeva, like she names her three female geniuses, has been *une battante*—a fighter—and in that, we who study education have much to learn.

## Discussion

Jardine's text succeeds in several key ways. First, it offers a biographical contextualization to all of Kristeva's major works, and while other such treatments of Kristeva's life exist, none are so comprehensive. Second, Jardine's use of language is a stark contrast to that of Kristeva's in that Jardine writes in an accessible tone. As mentioned above, the first two sections are particularly focused on the narrative of Kristeva's life, and there the text reads almost as a novel. This narrative quality takes nothing away from Jardine's engagement with Kristeva's ideas. Throughout the text, Jardine presents meaningful readings and clear articulations of Kristeva's major intellectual contributions. In all of this, Jardine makes the life and work of Julia Kristeva more accessible to an English-speaking audience. It is because of Jardine's clarity that I would recommend this text as a starting point for anyone interested in Kristeva or her ideas about semiotics, psychoanalysis, public intellectual life, feminism, and/or secular humanism.

Those looking for an alternative to reading Kristeva's texts will be disappointed with Jardine's account. Jardine does not deal with the minutiae of particular works, but rather with the macro-narratives of intellectual development and argument made over the course of Kristeva's career. In this way, Jardine's text is not sufficient as a reference text on, or an encyclopedia of, Kristeva's thought. The text must be

appreciated within its genre, intellectual biography. And there it is fairly well balanced between ideas and narrative but, as I have noted, rather lopsided toward ideas in the third section of the text. Despite this, Jardine's text is certainly mandatory reading for those wanting to develop expertise in the Kristevaian lens.

Finally, I come to the question of what Kristeva might have to say to the *PIE* community and education more broadly. When I initially wrote this essay in January 2020, the socio-political moment was much different. Then, I highlighted Kristeva as an example of an intellectual who was always willing to disagree no matter how much power or prestige her interlocker may have had. I pointed to her break with the Marxism of Lucien Goldmann, her own doctoral supervisor, as an example of her relentless willingness to be disruptive. I gestured toward this capacity to disagree—Kristeva's ability as a contestatory intellectual—as an important model for teachers, whose status as intellectuals is constantly under attack (Giroux, 1988; Pinar, 2001). I suggested that one need only look so far as the Ontario provincial government's (mis)handling of education to see examples of neoliberal propaganda against teachers, turning them into technicians rather than intellectual workers. Kristeva, I suggested, would not accept such intellectual degradation, nor should we in the teaching profession.

The importance I saw in Kristeva's work before the COVID-19 pandemic, before George Floyd was murdered, and before two Indigenous people (Chantel Moore and Rodney Levi) were shot by New Brunswick police within 8 days of each other is not the significance I see in Kristeva's work now. Indeed, my first instinct when trying to articulate Kristeva's significance to the current moment was to suggest that maybe she isn't significant at all. Perhaps it is more important in times like these to read work by historically marginalized thinkers. Recent books by Leanne Simpson (2017), Sarah Ahmed (2017), and Daniel Heath Justice (2018), or forthcoming titles by Afua Cooper (Cooper & Rausser, in press), Houda Asal (in press), and Pam Palmater (in press) all prove illustrative examples of works with immediate significance to the current moment. Each could also be read in the context of educational philosophy as readily as can Kristeva's thought, which is to say, not without considered attention. Yet, Kristeva does retain significance in the current moment through her career-long critique of totalitarianism, particularly for educators.

Some of the more aggressive responses to the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States show how quickly peaceful demonstration can lead to violent state suppression when militaristic institutions are being critiqued. Likewise, the weighing of human life against economic prosperity amid the COVID-19 pandemic in (often unilateral) decisions of when and how to re-open the economy highlights the fragility of democracy at the beginning of the third millennium. A reading of Foucault, who is cited far more often in education than Kristeva, might offer compelling discussions of the sovereign, disciplinary, and biopolitical power involved in these contemporary examples, but Kristeva offers insight into their origins within the psychological landscape of society. Here, Kristeva's (1982) work on abjection is significant, as Jardine explains:

In abjection, the boundary between subject and object is unstable, with the result that the subject (or emerging subject) is defensively drawn to clarity, purity, identity, and definition, which in turn means that it is obsessively fearful of what it experiences as unclear, impure, other, mixed, unclear, or foreign. (Jardine, 2020, p. 195)

To those on the far right, the Black Lives Matter movement, calls to defund the police, and even being asked to wear a mask in public are perhaps only the latest expression of an ongoing assault on traditional

boundaries between societal subjects and objects. In this reading of abjection, the totalitarianism of the far right is an obsessively fearful, often illogical, retreat from that which transcends the perceived boundaries between us and them, right and wrong, or self and other. I think this locating of totalitarianism within the psychological landscape of the individuals that make up society might offer teachers agency to engage with their own embodied biases as well as those of the students with whom they work. In my Indigenous Education courses with teacher candidates, for example, students often become immobilized with the magnitude of structural racism manifest in schooling; they frequently ask where to start. Here, I think Kristeva provides an answer: start with the individual. Start by confronting your own fear and that which makes you uncomfortable, and then help the students with whom you work do the same.

No doubt this is a daunting journey, but Kristeva does not leave us without inspiration. In the closing pages of her text, Jardine reiterates her argument that for Kristeva, life is writing, and further states: “Kristeva will always return to language, to the poetic at the heart of her intelligence, at the heart of her politics...at the heart of her writing” (Jardine, 2020, p. 313). Just like Kristeva, we must find the poetic at the heart of our intelligence, whether it is writing, teaching, creating, caring, or social mobilizing, and return to it again and again in order to maintain our ability to respond to the terrors within, those which threaten the integrity of our profession, and those which have been woven into the fabric of our society and must now be dismantled.

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