

## At the Risk of Thinking

### *On Writing an Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*

Alice Jardine

#### Part 1

Kristeva. I have to assume that everyone reading this shares a semiotic sense of who we are referring to, around whom we are circling at so many events and in so many publications. We circle her, follow her, read her, listen to her, teach her, value her. There is comfort in the stability of her image, even across time.

Yet even this remarkable woman whom we presume to know is the first one to admit she is quite at a loss to know who is Julia Kristeva. It was the very first thing she said during the first of my many interviews with her via teleconference and in person over the past couple of years. Here's how she began our "biography tapes":

It's very difficult. Sometimes I do not recognize myself in the demands people make of me to talk about Julia Kristeva. Because I'm not entirely sure who this woman is. There is an image, there is a received idea, there is even sometimes a cult . . .<sup>1</sup>

She asks: who is this woman Julia Kristeva? She travels around the world, accepting honors and speaking to huge audiences wherever she goes—

often to her genuine astonishment. She knows, as a practicing psychoanalyst, that autobiography is a “false genre.” And on top of that, she has been psychoanalyzed, leading to what she sees as a complete “transvaluation of the self.”

But what about biography? What about someone else taking on the role of biographer? Why should someone else care “who Kristeva is”? Why should I care? Who am I to care?

In her book *Risking Who One Is*, my friend and colleague Susan Suleiman raises the question of how to operate critically as an intellectual when the work one is interpreting has been produced by a contemporary, by a living artist, philosopher-critic, or writer with whom one feels deep affinity (1994). She unpacks, through multiple examples, how complex this question is in terms of identity, and I would add, especially in the twenty-first-century context of seriously competing identity models: for example, the model celebrating postidentity global, cosmopolitan citizenship versus models of authoritarian, often nationalistic when not proto-fascistic reactions worldwide today against all new forms of what Kristeva calls “happy cosmopolitanism.” For those of us politically and epistemologically engaged by many of the same urgent questions as the still-living subject-object of our biographical, artistic, and/or critical fascinations, in the context of world politics today and the relative silence of intellectuals confronted by those politics, the question of how to proceed with integrity can be paralyzing. And what about when one knows one’s subject-object personally? Maybe even likes the person? Perhaps even considers the person a friend?

On top of, or alongside the question of, writing about one’s contemporaries in the current global political climate, I have lately been asking myself many of the same questions Suleiman asks about “strong autobiographical reading”—reading autobiographically even when one doesn’t intend to. In the post-postepistemological, political, and artistic situation today, what does it mean to engage in strong autobiographical reading practices to sort through the chaos of how to live, think, and work? Does that kind of reading as a search for the sense of one’s own life and work amount to intellectual narcissism at a moment when intellectuals need to adopt perhaps a more historically familiar “committed” model of intellectual labor? Does the practice of “strong autobiographical reading” apply in the same way to critical and philosophical narrative that it does to fictional, poetic, or imagistic story telling? Must it most often work through identification or through rejection—or can it somehow involve both? What about writing biography through strong autobiographical reading? Would it be possible to do strong autobiographical reading through writing biography without

resorting to analogy, or allowing oneself to get in the way of the biographical project, without occupying all the space?

I am asking many of these questions because I am currently writing an intellectual biography of Julia Kristeva, asking what constitutes her originality and authority for the twenty-first century, with emphasis on her call for the urgent revival of the humanities. There is no doubt that Kristeva is one of the most important intellectuals of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, yet her work is often marginalized, critiqued, even maligned on the Right and also on the Left. I have never fully understood why—although sometimes I think I do. What I know for sure is that since I first started reading Kristeva in the mid-1970s, I have mostly remained fascinated by her loyal defense of the creative, psychic process at the heart of the literary and artistic humanities and her ability to maintain that defense across mind-numbing historical change. Do I still read Kristeva today because of that defense? Or is it because of my fascination with her status as a “migrant female intellectual”? Or is it her identity as an intellectual and writer who is also a mother? Or is it her advocacy for those who are marginalized in scary new ways in an increasingly technologically flattened-out world? Or is it my attraction to risk: to the risk of thinking, to the idea of putting at risk my sense of who I am while embracing Julia Kristeva’s call for all of us to take the risk of thinking? *Period.*

Sometimes I wonder whether the strong resistance to Kristeva’s thought, particularly on the Anglo-American Left, is an allergy to thinking—*period*. Whatever the reason, the critiques are serious, loud, and often difficult to answer:

—There is the familiar accusation of elitism, most often accompanied by an allusion to the famous difficulty of her prose, a stylistic approach associated with postwar High French poststructuralism and its emphasis on the power of language to shape reality.

—There are the accusations of Eurocentrism, the argument that her emphasis on “caring for Europe” (*soigner l’Europe*), her emphasis on and celebration of the singularities at the heart of European intellectual history, have led her to naive ethnocentric tourism (for example, in China) and, more importantly, to false theoretical generalizations about the “others” she so values. This leads to accusations that she isn’t Marxist enough, or postcolonial enough, or feminist enough.

—And then, to add fuel to the fire, there is the often virulent critique of her persistent interest in religion, especially the history of mysticism at the heart of Judeo-Christianity. She has, after all, been called one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century as she has laid out the benefits of spirituality for a secularized world.

—Or there is the often hysterical complaint about her association with and intellectual camaraderie with a small gang of—to put it mildly—controversial French postwar male writers and thinkers, particularly those not critiquing forcefully enough the hegemonic power of advanced neoliberal capitalism.

—And then there's her allegiance to psychoanalysis, with all of its nineteenth-century echoes of the heteronormative bourgeoisie. Most recently, I couldn't believe the angry hullabaloo about her psychoanalytic focus on male adolescence, and the adolescent's need to believe in ideals, and how when those ideals are shattered it can lead to nihilism, indeed to crisis, with Kristeva making reference not only to Western male adolescents, but also to young men in Middle Eastern cultures being pulled into nihilistic extremism. You would have thought she was saying there are no other reasons for terrorism than teenage angst . . .

—But by far the longest, loudest, most frequent—and snarky—complaint about Kristeva, particularly on the part of feminists, is her long, loyal, passionate, very public love affair with Philippe Sollers—from their earliest days to now:

—In Philippe Sollers's words . . .

What is a *coup de foudre*? A *coup de foudre*, it's a very common expression. It seems it actually happens from time to time . . . [Kristeva: “. . . with clouds full of electricity . . .”] There are attractions . . . But what is a *coup de foudre* that endures? That, well, that's something else. It's complex. It must have to do with very complex individuals who can eventually reignite each other from time to time . . .<sup>2</sup> (Damisch, 2011)

What is a *coup de foudre* that endures over time?

I must ask *myself* this question, of course, because I had one of those for Julia Kristeva in my youth. Of the intellectual kind at least. . . . And it has endured. I remain fascinated by Kristeva's work—in an unresolved kind of way. I made peace, for example, a long time ago with Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Wolf, Margaret Atwood. I made peace with those texts on which I had operated an obsessively "strong autobiographical reading" for decades. My fascination for Kristeva's work is different. I am writing an intellectual biography of her by engaging in a strong autobiographical reading of her, putting myself at risk in part, I must confess, in order to be able to fully engage with the abovementioned critiques of a body of work I admire and find vitally important. But I am also searching for an etiology that is not an origin, but a start to figuring out what it means to be an *intellectual* in the twenty-first century. Not an aesthete. Not an expert. But what Kristeva calls a contestatory intellectual. That's what I try to be. But it's hard. And I haven't succeeded yet.

I first met Julia Kristeva when I was twenty-four years old, a young, naive woman in my first year of graduate work at Columbia. I was work-study, and the then chair of French, Michael Riffaterre, asked me if I wanted to be Julia Kristeva's research assistant. The Kristeva I met then—only ten years my senior—was mesmerizing to me in every way. I was particularly struck by the fact that, even as a relatively young intellectual, she could be viciously attacked by Marxist graduate students and by right-wing faculty—without batting an eye! She didn't really care. She was too busy devouring Mallarmé.

But what I remember most acutely about her was her simultaneous intellectual brilliance and her devotion to her baby son, David, born in 1975. I have a vivid memory of Kristeva holding David in one arm and talking on the phone at her shoulder while sorting through the books I had just brought her from the library. In the beginning, it was the way Kristeva looked at David that fascinated me the most.

Over the years, I have stayed very attached to David, first babysitting him when he was very small, singing "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" with him over and over and over again. Over the years, it has never entered my head to ask Kristeva about David's developmental and cognitive delays and disabilities. He was—and is—gorgeous. Always just himself. Just David. And adored by both of his parents, who have done everything humanly possible to make space for his exquisite singularity.

Most recently, I spent some time on the Ile de Re with David, listening to his thirty-nine-year-old self recite LaRoche foucauld by heart. It was

also there where I conducted a series of intensive interviews with Kristeva about her life. Yes, I decided to take the risk . . . the risk of figuring out who Julia Kristeva is for me through strong autobiographical reading and the writing of her biography. I decided to take seriously one of the strongest things I have learned from Kristeva—the importance of the intimate. I am following my desire to understand better how she connects her “vie intime” with the thought processes she makes public through constant writing. That is something I want to learn to do better myself.

But I also want to engage those pesky critiques I mentioned. Recently Kristeva said in an interview with the *Huffington Post* that she is an “energetic pessimist”—which, yes, describes me exactly. And this world we are living in right now feeds my energetic pessimism so acutely that I have come to be very sure that

—This world we’re living in needs Kristeva’s strong ethical drive as a cosmopolitan and contestatory intellectual;

—It needs her insistence on thinking not about identity, but about how to achieve and value singularity;

—It needs her strong insistence on secularism and a new, renewed form of humanism, a transvaluation of classical religion, with the infinite Chain of Being coming to us through books rather than through God and religion;

—It needs her valuing of the arts and literature as unique forms of thought, as when she emphasized recently in China, agreeing with a colleague, that the only way to face up to totalitarian thought is to learn about and teach to new generations [the value of] the plurality of languages, literatures, and mentalities of the world and how to problematize and analyze them (Kristeva 2010);

—It needs her ability to embrace, indeed embody, marginalization and vulnerability. It needs her insistence on all the edges of subjectivity: mental illness, delinquency, mysticism, maternity—for example, through her recent work on disability as an opportunity, not as a lack to be fixed through charity, not as a deprivation, but as irreducible singularity. She reminds us that

Jesus was the disabled God, carrying our mortality for us, carrying our fear of our own mortality;

—The world really needs Kristeva's resistance to mediatization, to mechanization, her pushing back against an increasingly digitalized, commodified technocracy. This is especially so at a time when the complex dance between what she calls "the need to believe" and "the desire to know" is being replaced by a trudging obsession with how one might fit into the marketplace, where everything and everyone can be bought and sold—preferably in English.

Kristeva has sutured my attention to her insistence on the importance of revolt, even small, localized, "intimate revolt" in the West, a continuous revolt against allowing our inner life—whether one calls it *soul* or *psyche*—to be colonized by media spectacle, capitalist consumption, and information overload.

I want to emphasize all of those things in this intellectual biography, against her critics, and for the sake of my own intellectual narrative.

But, first, I want to insist on the fact that at the heart of Kristeva's own strong thinking over forty years, there is an intimately experiential shape that I especially want to highlight in my text. Kristeva arrived in Paris in 1965 very much the young woman educated in the Eastern bloc, an immigrant. During the 1960s and 1970s, she was at her most theoretical, developing her abstract vocabularies with breathless rapidity. While focused on gendered subjectivity, she was careful to distance herself from feminism; when she focused on nationality, she looked to the United States or to China, not to Eastern Europe; her own status as a mother was mostly hidden from public view. Any conceivable autobiographical voice there might have been at that point was buried under some very heavy prose.

Kristeva's work published in the 1980s and 1990s shifted radically, and very quickly, toward a more forthright consideration of what she saw as a serious crisis at the heart of Western civilization, a crisis brought on in large part by the assault of technology and the media on human subjectivity. Since 2000, Kristeva has continued her call begun in the 1990s for new, complex, flexible, hybrid subjectivities and for the socio-political acceptance of otherness in Europe and around the world. But she has left behind the scientifically abstract, theoretical prose of the first two decades of her work

as well as the predictive prose of the following twenty years, and returned to her own experiential beginnings. She writes more personally of foreignness, migration, and immigration; she explores more openly femininity, women, and motherhood; she questions world religions, atheism, and current relationships to the sacred; she worries about the ends and echoes of the Cold War and its effects on the formerly Communist world, particularly Eastern Europe. She also acts publically on behalf of the vulnerable.

It is the return of Kristeva's work in the early twenty-first century to her own, earlier life experiences that I want to explore most deeply in the work ahead of me, while exploring for myself the shape of that experiential/intellectual trajectory.

## Part 2

Julia Kristeva would be first in line to say that one is not, cannot be determined by one's childhood:

Many things from my childhood resonate with what I am doing today. But if I am a Freudian, it is because I believe, like Freud, that we are not determined by our childhood—contrary to what many think about Freudianism. Our childhood provides us with the seeds of our personality, but what one rediscovers in analysis is that one has reconstructed one's childhood. Something was given to us, but we have rebuilt it. Therefore one never finds the exact, current situation in the past. Lots of people who think they will be actually disappointed by analysis. They complain: "But I can't find The Memory that can explain who I am now . . . I can't find the Delicate Flower . . . The Love . . . The Enigma . . ." That's why I say that memories are not deterministic, they are invitations to travel . . .<sup>3</sup> (Damisch, 2011)

And yet . . .

Kristeva was born in Sliven, Bulgaria, on June 24, 1941—two days after World War II became a daily reality in that part of the world with the German invasion of the Soviet Union. Sliven is at the foot of the Balkan Mountains and not far from the Black Sea. She would live there until the family relocated to Sofia after the war.



Her parents could not have but felt like she was a glimpse of bright joy in the midst of the darkness of war. Kristeva was born into the chaos of war:

There was a song that we sang during my childhood—a Russian song—that goes like this [JK sings the song with clear delight] . . . So it was the 22nd of June 1941, at 8 o'clock in the evening I think . . . Kiev was bombed and we were at war . . . And so me, I was born two days after. Sometimes when I hear this song, I imagine how dramatic it must have all been for my parents. Bulgaria was entering the war and, very quickly, it was the German presence that made itself felt since Bulgaria and Germany were allies. To give birth to a child in those circumstances was no doubt a great joy, but also at the same time a huge uncertainty. What was going to happen?

Bulgaria entered World War II in 1941 as a member of the Axis powers but declined to participate in Operation Barbarossa and actually saved its Jewish population from deportation to concentration camps. It was the only Nazi-infiltrated country in Europe not to do the Nazis' bidding when it came to Jews. As the war turned against Germany, Bulgaria did not fully comply with Soviet demands to expel German forces from its territory, resulting in a declaration of war and an invasion by the Soviet Union in September 1944. The Communist-dominated Fatherland Front took power, and Bulgaria then joined the Allies until the war ended. The left-wing uprising of September 1944 led to the abolition of the monarchy, but it was not until 1946 that a single-party people's republic was established. It became a part of the Soviet sphere of influence under the leadership of Georgi Dimitrov (1946–1949), who laid the foundations for a Stalinist state that was highly repressive, executing thousands of dissidents.<sup>4</sup>

That is, from birth to the age of five, Kristeva's earliest childhood memories, earliest stories and photos, and earliest psychic echoes are infused with what she calls the great "Bulgarian Ambiguity." In this land where Greek myth, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam meet; where first there were Nazi boots on the ground, then Soviet boots; where the monarchical government aligned itself with the Nazis but adamantly refused to deport the Jews; where Russians took over but only became fully Stalinist late in the game, taking their time—this was the historical cauldron in which Julia Kristeva was formed.

One of Kristeva's earliest memories is of sneaking down to the basement with her parents to listen to Radio London. She first saw Nazi boots, then Stalinist boots marching past the windows at the top surface of the basement walls. Safety was down below, in the basement: with Europe, with family.

I only remember a few things. In this house where I was born, there was a basement. And the house was rented by teachers, who were probably Communists—resisters . . . So my parents and I went down to the basement to listen to Radio London . . . so that no one could hear . . . because there were Germans who lived there too . . . and who passed by . . . I vaguely remember seeing the soldiers in German uniform pass by . . . And I can still hear the sound . . . dun dun dun da . . . the signal of Radio London . . .

Kristeva recently reflected: "Politics, it's not for me. I prefer the micro-political, the microcosms of the Macropolitical world . . ."

When Kristeva evokes the Bulgaria of her childhood, however, as with most us, it is the intimacy of family she remembers best. She was surrounded by affection.

When I speak of and think about Bulgaria, about Sofia—both of which abound with memories—these memories, everytime I evoke them, are never fixed, determinant. What matters in my experience of memories is the voyage towards and through them . . . it's about a perpetual questioning . . .<sup>5</sup> (Damisch, 2011)

Kristeva's father lost his parents as a child—Kristeva's paternal grandfather died in the war of 1912, her paternal grandmother dying shortly thereafter. Her father was raised by a country peasant woman who also took care of Kristeva as a very young girl, passing away when Kristeva was about three years old. Kristeva called her "grandmother."

Because her father was an orphan, he had only two choices in life—à la Julien Sorel: he could join the military or he could become a priest. He decided to join the seminary, later studying at the Theology Faculty of Sofia. He was a practicing Orthodox Christian, but he had a sharp, critical, restless mind. What he was really enthusiastic about was literature—espe-

cially Russian literature: Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. He spoke many different languages—Russian was obligatory—and this was what he wanted for Kristeva too. He introduced Kristeva to literature and poetry from a very young age. The other thing he loved was music, and Kristeva remembers well his beautiful voice booming through the church—although Kristeva is quick to point out that he passed on his musical talent not to her but to her sister, born in 1945. During the early part of the war, under Nazi occupation, her father was part of the resistance to the deportation of Jews, belonging to a brave group of intellectuals who went straight to the czar with their demands that the deportations not take place. At the end of the war, with the Russians in charge and the passage to Communism, Kristeva's father left the Seminary and Kristeva took her last communion at the age of five. Her father then studied to be a doctor. That was until he found out—as would take place later in Maoist China—that he was going to have to go out into the countryside as a “barefoot doctor” to supposedly “treat” the poor (with no supplies and no help). So he quit his medical studies and worked in Sofia at the Soviet Style Ministry of Religion, interpreting Christian Orthodoxy for the young Soviet state. Kristeva describes herself as having been a true “*fille a papa*”—her father adored her: he was a father in love. The feeling was mutual: Kristeva adored him as well.

Kristeva's mother came from more of a bourgeois background, with Kristeva's maternal grandparents working in small business. What is especially interesting about them goes back two generations, into what Kristeva calls the “religious polyphony” of the Balkans. There, on her mother's side, one finds dissident Jews who became Muslims and, eventually, Christians. But in spite of this hybridized spiritual history, Kristeva's mother was not at all religious; she was completely secular. She was a scientist, had studied biology, and was a follower of Darwin.

The young Julia Kristeva was, in fact, caught—almost every night—in the middle of good-humored but passionate debates at dinner, where her religious father was “the dinosaur” and her scientific, Darwinian mother the “progenitor of monkeys”:

Life was pretty restrained. But there were certain freedoms for a time. For example, my father took us to communion in the orthodox faith until I was about 5 or 6. After that, he didn't want us to be seen taking communion because people who were religious were repressed. As for me, I very quickly adapted because of school and mama was also very secular. She never

disputed papa's ideas although one could sense that she went to church only to please him, that she herself did not believe. She had studied biology and so her ideas were the opposite of my father's. At the dinner table, once I was in school, we would tease my father. We called him a dinosaur and we would say that, as Darwin had argued, we descended from monkeys. My mother was a strong Darwinian. And papa would get furious! He would yell: "yes, of course you are both descendants of monkeys (because my sister would follow me in my teasing of him). Yes, yes, it's very easy to see! One just has to take a look at you to see that you descend from the monkeys!"

Kristeva has been recently reflecting a great deal on the struggles in the twenty-first century between science and religion, suggesting that we may have more to learn right now from the dinosaurs than from the monkeys.

Kristeva was a very independent young girl in the young Soviet state. She remembers it as a time of having everything she needed, but not what she wanted. She tells the story of seeing, when she was about five, the little girl next door being fed water one spoonful at a time. This felt like the libidinal economy of those Communist times—spoonful by spoonful, drop by drop, one got what one needed, but only that. She rebelled against that economy, preferring instead to run wild in her grandmother's garden among the flowers, or among the beautiful old Byzantine churches by the sea. These are very physical memories she has. But, of course, she was also a very good student in school.

Because Kristeva's father was not a member of the Communist Party, Kristeva couldn't go to the public school. She was disappointed not to be able to carry the flag, but she didn't cry about it. She almost never cried. Her parents enrolled her in the "French Maternal" school, where she was taught by French Catholic nuns—Dominican nuns, to be more precise. There she absorbed languages, especially French, like a sponge and was taught to memorize songs, especially French literary texts. The nuns taught her poems by La Rochefoucauld and Hugo, and, of course, she read lots of stories by Colette. Kristeva loved her Dominican nun teachers and was devastated when, in the early 1950s, they were arrested, condemned as spies, and chased out of the country.

Kristeva has obviously reflected a great deal in her writing on the beautiful fragility of the poetic imagination and in particular on the importance of the French literary imagination. This emphasis becomes less mysterious

when we realize that whatever else she was up to as a child, French literature was at the center of her young life.

Like most excellent students, Kristeva longed for symbolic recognition. And in this regard, there are two stories she really wants everyone to know about her Bulgarian childhood—and she has in fact written about both. First, as far as we know, Bulgaria is the only country in the world that celebrates the alphabet every spring, and she was an avid participant in those celebrations, receiving a “Prix D’Excellence.”

And she also wants everyone to know that Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Communist government in Bulgaria, who had once been accused by the Nazis of setting the Reichstag on fire, was instrumental in stopping the Jews from being deported from Bulgaria during the Nazi occupation. In fact, it was he who helped make it possible for Jews to actually immigrate to Israel after the war (his wife was Jewish).

She wants us to know that it isn’t her in the official picture presenting the flowers to Dimitrov. It should have been her—she was first in her class—presenting flowers to Dimitrov. But she was so nervous that she got sick and couldn’t go. She still gets sick when she is really nervous—like before meeting the pope!

Then there are two stories from Kristeva’s Bulgarian childhood that *I* really want you to know. One has to do with Kristeva’s love of books and her impatience with anything that smacked of girlish destiny. She especially didn’t like any kind of dolls, although they were continually thrust upon her. She remembers her intense disappointment at once receiving the gift of a dollhouse:

I remember that I once received the gift of a dollhouse—the representation of a house . . . where there’s a doll, a bathroom, a kitchen, a dining room, etc and then there’s the little girl who’s supposed to take care of all that! Me? I was really disappointed because I didn’t want to take care of all that! I never played with it much. It’s still pretty much all in one piece. It stayed in a cupboard. I thought it was ridiculous for little girls to push strollers. Me? I had my books. They might have been kept in a drawer, but I really used them and they ended up completely torn apart through use. So this gift of a dollhouse disappointed me a little. On the other hand, in that package of things that little girls were supposed to have—the bathroom, the kitchen, etc—there was that little dollhouse doll which could sit up in

order to be bathed because there was a hole in its buttocks . . . a hole in order to be able to sit her up on a little peg . . . I found it all so absolutely stupid. In all of that, the only thing that interested me was to see what was inside of the hole! My mother said I would be a doctor and it's true that for a long time, I wanted to be a doctor.

The other story I want to share with you about Kristeva's Bulgarian childhood is that she almost never cried. She was often disappointed—disappointed she couldn't wear the flag to parades because of her father not joining the Communist Party, disappointed that her long-awaited gift was a dollhouse, and so forth—but she didn't cry when she was disappointed. Or even when she was sick or hurt. In fact, this “stay calm and carry on” posture became integral to her character. This became clear to me during what I call the “running story”: Kristeva as a child didn't walk, she ran! She ran and ran as fast as she could until she fell down! And then when her mother—tearful and worried—caught up with her, Kristeva touched her mother's cheek and said: “Don't cry, Maman, I will take care of you.”

It's something that's just part of my character: not to cry. My mother used to tell me about it. As soon as I could walk, I wouldn't walk but would, rather, run. And I ran very, very fast! So I started running . . . and there's a park in Sofia called Le Parc des Rosiers where I would run and run until I would fall . . . and Maman would yell “But stop! Stop!” And I would fall and she would catch up with me. I would stand up, with my knees all bloody and my mother would plead with me, “please stop! your knees are all bloody!” And I would reply: “listen mama, don't be upset. Let me comfort you.” And then I would take off running . . .

Very recently, Kristeva has reflected on the fact that she “takes care of herself by taking care of others” . . . “Je me soigne en soignant les autres.” She has admitted that family for her is about complex caring, not about comfort.

For high school, Kristeva attended the Alliance Française, where she continued her linguistic and literary studies. She soon took up journalism and wrote stories constantly for the high school newspaper, getting paid enough that she was able to become even more independent. She was able

to finish her studies through a correspondence course, and she became a successful, full-time, well-paid journalist just before she left for Paris on a scholarship.

And that was the turning point—for her and, it turns out, for us and for the rest of Kristeva's readers worldwide. It was the time of Sputnik. It was time to make big decisions about her future. She was excellent at math and science and decided she would become an astrophysicist and go off to Siberia in the Soviet Union to study (and probably to work on new Cold War weapons for the Soviet state). She applied for a fellowship she clearly should have won. But, of course, her father was not a member of the Communist Party, so she wasn't be chosen. The envelope finally arrived:

So one day I saw an envelope addressed to my father in the mailbox and I understood immediately what it was (the response to my application). So I opened it, thinking to myself that maybe I had been accepted . . . but . . . no. They told my father that his daughter perhaps had all the necessary qualities for acceptance, but that they only accepted the children of those who were members of the Communist Party and that since that wasn't the case with him . . . And with that, my father completely broke down in tears. But not me. I didn't cry. I pursued my studies of the humanities [les sciences humaines].

She didn't know it yet, but the French government was about to offer a scholarship to a top Bulgarian student to go study "les sciences humaines" in Paris. And so, for us, "the rest is literature."

Kristeva has reflected at some length on the fact that she has never planned her life. She has never had a program, or strategy. She had never thought about leaving Bulgaria before she actually left. She never thought: I will go to France. She says she swims through life, traveling through herself. "Je me voyage." She swims through experiences; she doesn't add them to an itinerary. What is important to her is to move along in life and writing, pulled by pure curiosity, just seeing where it all leads . . .

Even though I think of myself as very Cartesian, rational, etc., I do not follow a program. I don't say: I will do this and I will do that, and then that. I do not follow a trajectory fixed in advance. I do things a bit as they come to me, as if I were swimming. I let myself be carried by the waves. I swim, but

there is also the movement of the waves. I never thought that I would leave Bulgaria—never! But it is true that in a way all of my studies have been escapes, a way of taking distance from my parents while staying close, distancing myself but at the same time transcending them where they were.

Yes, Kristeva has talked to me a lot about how she has always just tried to construct herself as she swims through the waves of the world and history.

And my attention to “reading for strong autobiography” really perks up here! For that is the way I have lived as well, with far less illustrious results, I’m afraid. But it’s the same lack of Plan. So what can I—at sixty-four years old—learn from my contemporary, my friend, at seventy-four years old, right now, about how to live, how to work, how to be, how to contest? One thing I already know is that, over the past few years, Kristeva and I have both come to share a deep concern about the world of our children and students, where everyone is becoming so programmed they are never present to themselves. They are becoming so rapidly commodified and mechanized—with vulnerability absolutely not allowed:

Humanity is so caught up in the rat race for a so-called “happiness”—a “well-being” made up of enjoyment, performance, brilliance—that all vulnerability is considered to be an intolerable menace, unthinkable. This is a vision of humanity that is commercialized and mechanical. (Damisch, 2011)

This kind of programming runs totally countercurrent to self-making through reliance on curiosity and ethical passion . . .

I try to construct myself through the waves of the world and history . . . and there’s a lot of chance involved, a lot of necessity too, but I do not think I have a destiny. And I’ve had a lot of deaths and resurrections in my life. When one leaves one’s language, one’s country, childhood, one loses a lot of things . . . and a lot of things are erased just as one erases writing in the sand . . . But there are always re-beginnings and it has been living through these tests, these deaths and resurrections, that I have achieved satisfactions in life that would have been unimaginable to me beforehand. . . . (Damisch, 2011)



Whoever history ultimately determines Kristeva to have been, can we embrace the fact that someone so accomplished, such a cosmopolitan and contestatory intellectual, could be living life so in the moment, so caught in the waves of curiosity? And how can her utter lack of strategy help me—her autobiographically inclined biographer—find my way forward—with integrity?

Kristeva often quotes the words on Colette's tombstone: "To be reborn has never been too much for me." Having done some strong autobiographical reading of Julia Kristeva, perhaps it's time for me—for us?—to contemplate some rebirth, or at least some re-self-invention.

Taking on the challenge of strong thinking, traveling through oneself, constructing oneself, walking the tightrope between intellect and revolt, between the intimate and the public, between work and play, with no plan, no program, no strategy or directive—that is the kind of contestatory intellectual I want to be henceforth—for whatever time I have left on this earth! And you? It's worth the risk, don't you think?

## Notes

I presented a slightly different version of this work as the Keynote Address at the March 28, 2014, Kristeva Circle at Vanderbilt University. Warm thanks to Kelly Oliver and Rebecca Tuvel for their conference-organizing genius and also for their warm reception in Nashville. I also want to thank Anna Jardine for her patient, loving help with the PowerPoint I used for my address at Vanderbilt. Special thanks to Loren Wolfe—co-interviewer and co-producer of the "biography tapes." A different version of this article will appear in the volume *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today*, edited by Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.

1. All quotations unless otherwise attributed are from my private taped interviews with Kristeva, conversations expressly focused on my biographical project.

2. Sollers made these remarks while sitting with Kristeva outside their home on the Île de Ré.

3. Kristeva makes these remarks while looking at photos of herself as a child.

4. This short paragraph of historical context is constructed from multiple sources, including Wikipedia.

5. Kristeva makes these remarks as images from her childhood and from historical Sofia scroll in the background.

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