

Introduction

Kristeva's Fiction is a response to the fact that the doors of the so-called literary temple appear to be opening for Julia Kristeva after the publication of her latest detective novel, *Murder in Byzantium*, in 2004—doors that had been closed for many years (Kristeva 2010, 283). It is a collection of ten original and previously unpublished essays by scholars of Kristeva's work at a time when the critical commentary on Kristeva's novels appears to be increasing. And it is an attempt to fill a gap in the bibliography about her work. Out of thirteen books published in English over the past thirty-four years on the subject of Kristeva's work, only one is dedicated to her fiction (Chen). Of seven anthologies on Kristeva's theoretical work published since 1990, not one has been dedicated to her fiction (see Fletcher and Benjamin; Oliver [1993]; Lechte and Zournazi [1998, 2003]; Crownfield; Oliver and Keltner; and Ziarek and Chanter).

This relative dearth doesn't mean that Kristeva's novels have received no attention at all. In fact, much of Kristeva's fiction has received a negative reception in the popular press; and yet despite this reception, a surprising number of critical articles are dedicated to her fiction. Many of these essays have focused on particular novels, and recently some have evaluated Kristeva's fiction as a whole. *Kristeva's Fiction* attends to this ongoing interest in Kristeva's novels, and to this difference in the reception of her turn to fiction. One might go so far as to say that this collection of essays on Kristeva's fiction is written in the spirit of the strange and paradoxical act of forgiveness that has been the focus of Kristeva's work in recent years: it is an act of encouragement for Kristeva to press on despite the negative judgment of the literary world.

Kristeva's Turn to Fiction

Twenty-two years ago, Julia Kristeva, a renowned linguist and psychoanalyst, published her first novel, *The Samurai*, in 1990. The publication of the novel marked a second important turn in Kristeva's work, this time toward fiction writing. She was initially known for her work in the field of linguistics, particularly after the publication of her thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language* in

1974, where she first developed the influential idea of a “semiotic mode of signification.”¹ After undergoing psychoanalytic training between 1974 and 1979, Kristeva changed her theoretical focus and published a series of works including the influential *Powers of Horror* in 1982.² Kristeva’s turn away from the discipline of linguistics, and toward psychoanalysis, resulted in her development of the concept of “the abject,” which also helped her work to cross over into the disciplines of literature and philosophy.³ Arguably, the concepts of “the semiotic” and “the abject” remain to this day Kristeva’s most important contributions to the humanities, and to the social sciences.

Kristeva was a late bloomer to fiction. She published her first novel twenty-one years, and nine books, after her first book: *Séméiotiké: Research Toward a Semanalysis* (1969).⁴ Kristeva, the novelist, was forty-nine years old, and characteristically prolific. One year after her first novel appeared, she published *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1991), and five years later she published *Possessions* (1996). And in what seems like an uncharacteristic hiatus in her otherwise constant writing career, Kristeva’s next novel appeared eight years later: *Murder in Byzantium* was published in 2004. Although Kristeva has promised another detective novel, as of the writing of this volume, she has not published it yet.

Chronologically (and perhaps conceptually as well), Kristeva’s decision to write novels in the 1990s followed from her focus on melancholia in the ’80s. In 1985, Ina Lipkowitz and Andrea Loselle ask Kristeva, “are you thinking of writing a novel?” and Kristeva answers, “Maybe someday. For the moment, though, I do not see it happening. I am currently doing research on melancholia . . .” (Kristeva 1996, 34). Notably, after her first novel comes out, many of her interviewers repeatedly ask her, “why a novel?” During an interview with Josyane Savigneau published in the French daily *Le Monde* in 1990, Kristeva gives two answers to that question. Her first answer seems perfunctory. She says she writes her novel in response to a request for an essay on her intellectual generation. But after a rather mechanical explanation justifying her decision to write a novel rather than an essay, Kristeva adds a more personal reason, almost as an afterthought: “And, to write fiction is a more genuine integration to the French language than any theoretical writing,” she says (Savigneau, 19; all translations are my own, unless otherwise specified). At the end of the interview, Kristeva is quoted again as saying that by writing a novel she has accomplished “a long attempt to become French where integration and ‘estrangement’ coexist” (Savigneau, 20).

Over the years, Kristeva has given many interviews, where she has been asked the same question, “why a novel?” Curiously, Kristeva has not returned to her first answers to this question, focusing instead on the relation between her fiction and her psychoanalytic practice and theory. These later answers can be summarized into three related groups that eventually take us back to her initial

response. The first group of answers brings Kristeva's novels back to her work with melancholy patients rather than to her research on melancholia. Kristeva answers that her fiction is a response to the psychoanalytic session. More specifically, fiction acts for her as an antidote to the depressing effect of encountering the disillusioned knowledge of her patients. It gives her the energy, renewal, and revitalization necessary to continue her psychoanalytic work as an analyst: "When I wrote *The Samurai* I believed that working on the novel would allow me to continue listening to my patients in a way that was attentive, inventive, and receptive to them and to their symptoms," she says in a 1990 interview with Elisabeth B elorgey (Kristeva 1996g, 251). The second group of answers to the question "why a novel?" suggests that writing fiction is an advanced, progressive, and perhaps speedier way into the unconscious, for Kristeva: "In comparison, the ability of theoretical discourse to take on *m etaphore* and intrigue seemed to be far behind the form of the novel," she says in a 1992 interview with Bernard Sich ere, suggesting that by giving form and enacting the essence of the unconscious, fiction takes her further in her thinking than theory (Kristeva 1996c, 164).

But it is only in a later interview with Pierre-Louis Fort, conducted in 2005, and only in an oblique way, that Kristeva returns to her first answer to the question "why a novel?" In that interview, Kristeva again suggests that her fiction is an effect of the psychoanalytic session; but rather than an antidote against the depressive effects of therapy on the analyst, or a more progressive way to the unconscious, Kristeva instead suggests that fiction is a "propitious place" generated by the transference and countertransference with her patients (2010, 297). In keeping with her latest work on forgiveness, Kristeva describes her fiction as an oneiric and safe place that is not judgmental, and that is a necessary complement both to her own ambivalent relationship to her origins and to her violation of a certain trust.⁵ Suggesting that her "integration" to both France and to the European Union, as well as the fact that she rarely speaks Bulgarian (a language that she no longer knows how to write) is a "betrayal," Kristeva describes her fiction as a liberation from the daily discipline that ensures her assimilation.⁶ She says, "I am made of this Orthodox sensibility, and if I discipline it in the daytime, I am submerged in it at night: my unconscious is an Orthodox land enveloped by a French atmosphere" (2010, 301).

In this sense, Kristeva's decision to write novels becomes the obverse of the so-called betrayal of her Orthodox past and opens a space for the paradoxical return of a mother tongue that she no longer writes. Describing the language of Stephanie Delacour (the narrator of her novels and her alter ego), Kristeva says, "she does not inhabit the phonemes and syntax of the French language . . . but she writes the melody of the sensory that flows beneath her sentences" (2010, 301). Fiction writing then becomes for Kristeva a complement to the "integration to the French language" that she had sought fifteen years earlier. In other

words, Kristeva's decision to write fiction becomes an act that neither fights, nor submits to, her "betrayal," that is, to her integration and assimilation into another culture. From this perspective, Kristeva's decision to write novels is an act of psychoanalytic forgiveness, or what Kristeva calls a pardon (*par*, through; *don*, a gift), that interprets, or elaborates in writing, her "betrayal," an unconscious hate that makes Kristeva betray her origins.

It is reasonable to say that Kristeva's turn to fiction has not been well received, particularly when it is compared to the reception of her turn to psychoanalysis. When Fort points out in 2005 that after three novels, "the doors to the literary temple . . . opened for *Murder in Byzantium*," Kristeva answers, "The 'literary world' disgusts me, and I hear the bluntness of that remark, but why retract it? I will never be part of that world, and it doesn't want me either" (2010, 283). Kristeva's rejection of the "literary world" makes it clear that she is sensitive to the way her novels have been read despite her claim in an interview from 1992 that she is not concerned with whether her novels attract readers, and in spite of her remark that "it is enough [for her] that the novel is disturbing" (Kristeva 1996c, 166). Given Kristeva's description of her fiction as a forgiving response to her choice to make a life in the culture and language of France, it is perhaps understandable that she replies with anger to her exclusion from the "literary world" of that country.

But Kristeva's response also contains a number of interesting refusals that take her comments beyond the expression of a defensive anger. First of all, Kristeva refuses to accept Fort's characterization of her reception by the "literary world." She is aware that she has not been well received, and she is prepared to face this fact. Kristeva also refuses to heed the judgment of the "literary world" about her novels. Indeed, it is a credit to Kristeva that she has continued to write novels despite the sometimes virulent nature of the reaction of the popular press to her fiction, and to *The Samurai* in particular (more on this later). And Kristeva also aims the refusal at herself. She says that she will not stop herself from expressing her "disgust" for the "literary world" despite her contradictory feelings about her own words. "I hear the bluntness of that remark, but why retract it?" she asks herself. Hatred, like forgiveness, should also have its say, she seems to say. And the anger she now aims at herself further suggests that Kristeva might be referring here not only to the French "literary world," but also to the world of her words, to the world of her fiction, and perhaps even to the ambivalence she clearly feels toward the mother tongue at the origin of her fiction writing. From this perspective, one wonders whether Kristeva's refusal to silence an anger that is aimed both at the judgment by the other, and at her own words, also requires an act of forgiveness: to forgive a disturbance, a hatred, and a feeling of disgust, all of which seems to give rise to her singular voice.

Kristeva's Novels

Kristeva publishes her first two novels *The Samurai*, in 1990, and *The Old Man and the Wolves*, in 1991. *The Samurai* narrates the interconnected lives, adventures, and transformations of three women (Olga Morena, Carole Benedetti, and Joëlle Cabarus) living in Paris, over a period of twenty years, from the student revolts of 1968 to the beginning of the AIDS epidemic at the end of the eighties. It describes their active participation in the intellectual debates, social and cultural turmoil of the times, and traces some of the implications of the latter for their lives and loves with changing partners, which comprise a varied roster of men including a novelist, a professor, a painter, and a psychiatrist, among others. Most importantly, it follows the development of two of these women into writers: Joëlle, a psychoanalyst, and Olga, a graduate student in linguistics and literature.

The Samurai engages with contemporary political events and finds their origins in “an unknown force that causes us to act” (Kristeva 1992, 43). Published in 1990, three years after the end of a period of “Cohabitation” (1986–1988) between the Socialist president François Mitterand and the right-wing prime minister Jacques Chirac, the novel reinscribes the events of 1968 into the political landscape of France at a time when (Kristeva tells us) political leaders “didn’t want people to link the disruption of France in 1968 and the socialist victory of 1981” (2002c, 14). From this angle, the novel also reads as a reevaluation of the legacy of 1968 for the steady move of the country to the political center, together with the marginalization of the Communist Party, implicitly arguing against the opinion that “attributes to ’68 the economic crisis and unemployment which ravaged families, especially the least well-off ones” (2002c, 28). It is a personal and a critical account, written as a *roman à clef*, of events that contain for Kristeva the complex message of 1968 that “We aren’t done with deciphering” (2002c, 28).⁷ In fact, the anamnestic exercise results in a meditation about writing as a means to access a force, an energy, and a rhythm that is described as a “seizure” in the novel and that seems to drive both the private struggles and the public duels of French intellectuals like Olga Morena, and perhaps Julia Kristeva. But the novel can be also read as a summary of the past, a settling of accounts in an effort to prepare for what is to come. From this perspective, the pessimistic tone and abrupt ending of the novel is also an expression of skepticism regarding the ability of sublime forms of utopian and masterful forms of engagement with this force (perhaps exemplified by the events of 1968), as well as an implicit call to write, act, and analyze in a different way.⁸

Kristeva changes the direction of her writing in *The Old Man and the Wolves*, away from the *roman à clef* and toward the genre of detective fiction. Juliana de Nooy emphasizes the search for truth in Freudian psychoanalysis and

detective fiction as developed first by Edgar Allan Poe: “Both psychoanalysis and detective fiction promote an interpretative practice that is attentive to clues, to the uncanny, and to the pathological. Both seek truth through the rehearsal of past events” (1998, 47–48). But Stephanie’s theory of crime is slightly different from this practice. She says it is “something like ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’” (1994, 177). And indeed, Kristeva through Stephanie will criticize a disembodied view of language and truth, and the mode of analysis leading to it. Stephanie’s reference to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” signals Kristeva’s account of language and truth as embodied still, as still troubled by contradictory passions and disturbing sensations, as well as Kristeva’s own development of a mode of analysis (or detection) informed and sustained by the passions and sensations of the body.⁹

Similar to *The Samurai*, *The Old Man* has implications for historical events. Published in 1991 after the death of her father in a Bulgarian hospital shortly before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, *The Old Man* picks up where her first novel (published only a year earlier) leaves off. As allegory, the novel can be interpreted to demystify a turning point in the history of the Cold War, and to bear witness to an increase in violence that paradoxically results from the historical fall of the wall (see Bové, 123). *The Old Man* represents the reach of the unleashed violence, which kills the symbolic father, the master analyst of Freudian psychoanalysis represented by Septicius Clarus, and makes it necessary to think again about the sources and origins of the violence, as well as about the best way to approach it. The novel also dramatizes the birth of a phoenix from these ashes, the emergence of the first-person narrative voice and character of Stephanie, a different kind of investigator and analyst who does not shy away from crime, evil, and violence, but rather finds her own origins as a detective in Dupin’s animal thinking, and in the Ourang-Outang’s sadomasochistic repetition of an earlier scene with his master. Moreover, Stephanie becomes a detective who is prepared to talk about a mother tongue that she traces back to the sadomasochistic embrace and flagellation at the center of Poe’s story.

As the title of Kristeva’s next detective novel suggests, *Possessions* (1996) continues the investigation of the widespread “killer instinct” that drives the dueling characters of *The Samurai*, and the haunting passion at the center of *The Old Man*. This second installment of the adventures of the journalist-cum-detective, Stephanie, transforms the earlier instinct and sordid passion into a “spirit” or “demon” that possesses the inhabitants of the fictional Santa Varvara and drives them first to murder, and then to decapitate, Stephanie’s friend, Gloria Harrison (not unlike the Ourang-Outang disposes of the mother in Poe’s story, Madame L’Espanaye). In later works, Kristeva suggests that this spirit is also an image of decapitation that possesses her as well as her mother. She states that she wrote the novel after being possessed by a decapitated woman (1998d, 45),

that she is the headless woman in the novel (2002c, 70), and that the fantasy goes back to a drawing by her mother that she often remembers (1998d, 13). Kristeva goes on to suggest that the novel works through this possession by coming closer to its disturbing image, by becoming more familiar with it, by studying and analyzing it like a detective in a *roman noir*.¹⁰

Similar to the two previous novels, *Possessions* is also inflected by contemporary history and politics, even as the novel interrogates the sources of both. Kristeva writes the novel during a decade of consolidation by the extreme right in France. It is published in 1996, one year after the National Front, presided by Jean-Marie Le Pen, “sets a new record for the far right in a French national election,” rising to prominence on a wave of anti-immigration sentiment by garnering 15 percent of the vote in the first round of the 1995 presidential election (Shields, 251). Significantly, the political platform of the National Front included reinstating capital punishment after its abolition in 1981, and it influenced the focus of the eventual winner, conservative Jacques Chirac, who turned his attention to “immigration, crime, and national identity” (Shields, 252, 258). Stephanie’s investigation of the decapitation of her foreigner friend Gloria can be interpreted as an investigation not only of this growing anti-immigration sentiment, but most importantly of the widespread turn “to crime,” and of the wish to return to capital punishment by French society. In an essay on the visual representations of the guillotine during the French Revolution, Kristeva states that the death penalty is synonymous with decapitation in France, and that both “sinister events” are examples of what she calls “works in *noir*”: prehistoric acting-out rituals that include the totemic feast (1998d, 102). For Kristeva, the erasure of the guillotine from the national consciousness has paradoxically prepared its return in full force, and a novel like *Possessions* reads partly as an attempt to analyze the origin and the fantasies of a “killer instinct” that leads a majority of the population in 1972, and then again in 1993, to express support for the death penalty (1998d, 107).¹¹ From this perspective, the novel is an investigation into the way to control or cope with this insistent desire, not by disavowing it, but by representing it, by learning to speak its sinister language. Such investigations into what Stephanie calls the language of the mother’s womb, can (paradoxically) set the conditions of possibility for a different social, cultural, and political beginning, one unlike the rudimentary and impoverished state that follows orgies of violence such as the guillotine or the death penalty. This beginning would be based instead on both Stephanie’s linguistic analysis, and on the representation of a dark possession that leads to the matricide and decapitation of an innocent foreigner.

More so than in her earlier novels, narrators and readers alike of *Murder in Byzantium* (2004) repeatedly find themselves asking the question “Where am I?” (2006b, 234). Maria Margaroni answers by claiming that we are in melancholy

contemplation of death in the form of widespread crime, which paradoxically succeeds in animating redemptive hope in us (2009, 117).¹² But if the novel places us at a crossing that produces hope, this hope depends on something other than crime or death. There is something alive (if strangely so) at this crossroads for Kristeva. There is a trace of life, a miasma-like remainder, the *ignis fatuus* from a dead sensation, the revolting material of the lost mother tongue, that Stephanie's "gruesome" (2006b, 118) form of detection reveals as a "feu follet" (a will-o-the-wisp) (2005c, 129). In *Murder* Kristeva tells the reader of the growing need to spin out fantasies from this seemingly intractable and expanding darkness. And analysis in the novel is both a police investigation, and a form that this fantasy can take: a turbulent (rhythmic) voyage or journey through the landscape of the psyche in an effort to rewrite meaning back into it. From this perspective, both Santa Varvara and Byzantium become versions of Freud's Eternal City (1989, 726), and inversions of his infamous "dark continent" (Kristeva 2004b, 27). (Indeed, Kristeva's "mother tongue" can be interpreted as an inversion of Freud's unintelligible "Minoan-Mycenaean," an inversion that turns on the signifying point of darkness.) In short, *Murder* shows the way in which the unconscious processes screened by the obscure spaces of *noir* detective fiction can return meaning to the depleted life of Santa Varvara's inhabitants.

Murder (2004) is published three years after the attacks by Al Qaeda in 2001, which destroyed the World Trade Center in New York City, and one year after the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States and a "coalition of the willing," which caused much damage to that Middle Eastern country and fractured the former alliance between the United States and the European community. As such, *Murder* broadens Kristeva's analysis in *Possessions* of what she calls the "national depression" and its "manic manifestation in [French] nationalism" (2004b, 22) to include an analysis of the symptoms of what she calls "our dark times," and in particular of the underlying causes of the so-called "clash of religions" (2006c, 16) or the "clash between fundamentalisms" represented by these geopolitical events (2004b, 32). Again, Kristeva's literary work takes us back to the meaning of the "killer instinct," the "dark passions," or the "demons" in the earlier novels. Here it is imagined as a question of place, the question of the point of negativity, instability, and reversibility that I study in chapter 6 of this collection and that is at the origins of characters like Sebastian Chrest-Jones and Xiao Chang (a bastard and a foreigner, respectively).

The Book Reviews

All of Kristeva's novels have been translated into English within a short period of their publication in French, and they have all received a fair amount of atten-

tion in the popular press, both in French and in English.¹³ Most of the attention by the international media has been extended (so far) on Kristeva's first novel, with reviews and interviews in Paris's *Le Monde*, London's *Times Literary Supplement* and *The Independent*, as well as New York's *The Village Voice* (see Savigneau; Showalter; Hughes-Hallet; and Gehr). Notably, her later novels have not received the same kind, or the same amount, of attention. Perhaps this relative lack of interest in her later novels is explained by the fact that the reception that the international media gave Kristeva's first novel was not positive. Indeed, it would be generous to characterize it as mixed, abounding as it was in left-handed compliments like Lucy Hughes-Hallet's remark, "Philip Roth (who has a walk-on part in *The Samurai*) has called Sollers 'an intellectual clown,' and Kristeva too, combines a formidable brain with a certain playfulness" (26). More characteristic of the scathing tone of the majority of the reviews of Kristeva's novels is the opening sentence of Richard Gehr's review of novels by Kristeva and Sollers: "What a couple of remarkable sellouts" (S31). In fact, much of the negativity directed at Kristeva's first novel seemed to be the result of her association with Philippe Sollers (her husband) and with the intellectual group that she portrayed in that first book, as suggested by Elaine Showalter's ironic description of Kristeva as "one of the most versatile stars of the international post-structuralist circuit" (1038).¹⁴

There have been fewer reviews of Kristeva's later novels, but they have been somewhat less critical than those of *The Samurai*. In fact, both *Possessions* and *Murder in Byzantium* have received some positive reviews (Irvine 1998; Hooper; Gleize; and Thorne). And as we have seen, Fort has even suggested that "the doors to the literary temple" opened for Kristeva's latest novel, referring to its reception in *Le Monde*, *La Vie*, *La Croix*, *Le Point*, and *Metropolis*. However, a broader look at the reviews of Kristeva's novels still reveals a mixed reception at best, and one that tends to describe them as reactionary, difficult to read, and boring.

Politically, many reviewers consider Kristeva's novels to be conservative on several counts. These include a suspicion of the autobiographical nature of much of her fiction, which is interpreted as a turn away from social and political concerns (see Judt; Steinberg). Both Hughes-Hallet and Gehr consider Kristeva to have sold out to Western European bourgeois values and implicitly appear to criticize her turn away from her Eastern European upbringing under Communism. Others, more "feminist" in their approach, find a nostalgic, if not reactionary, return to the family, motherhood, and the patriarchy in her novels (see Donadey; Hite). From a stylistic point of view, some reviewers complain that her novels do not satisfy the reader's desire for succinct and direct prose, referring to Kristeva's forays into history or philosophy as boring digressions that one reviewer describes as "breathless blather" (Zipp). Others describe her novels

as poorly crafted, either because they breach the strict conventions of a literary genre, or because they do not meet the reviewers' expectations of verisimilitude. Declaring herself to be a lover "of realist novels like Balzac's, Stendhal's and Flaubert's," Kaylie Jones of the *Los Angeles Times* lets out a "yawn of boredom" after reading *The Samurai* (Jones; see also Irvine 1994; Enjolras; and Rubin).

Perhaps the negative reception by the popular press of Kristeva's novels can be explained, in part, as the shortcomings of a book market driven by economic forces that put a premium on so-called liberal ideas, simple pleasures, and clarity, the latter understood as a transparency achieved by staying close to familiar conventions. But the truth is that Kristeva's *theory* is also often criticized by feminist and post-feminist critics of being politically conservative, and it is also the target of a broader cultural impatience with the substance and style of so-called high theory in general, and of psychoanalysis in particular—including, by the way, the theoretical approach of those who criticize Kristeva's theoretical work.¹⁵ In his book review, Michael Wood points out the "tragic sense of life" that runs through Kristeva's *Old Man and the Wolves* as well as through two books by her on Marcel Proust. Wood calls their harshness both "cozy" and "unadventurous" and states that "Lukács spoke of modern philosophers as living comfortably in the Grand Hotel of the abyss; the Freudian story can look like setting up house in a rat-trap" (18).

It might be accurate to say that Kristeva's poor reception by the popular media is a reaction to the theoretical and psychoanalytic content of Kristeva's novels. Most reviewers don't see, or comment on, the connection between the novels and the theory, but nevertheless it seems to influence their descriptions of her novels as obscure, ponderous, and boring. Many reviewers have instead focused on putting Kristeva's novels in a literary context. Despite some minor disagreement, they place the first novel within the genre of the *roman à clef* and the rest within detective fiction. Characteristically, most reviewers have negatively compared Kristeva's novels to two successful examples of both genres: Simone de Beauvoir's award-winning *The Mandarins*, 1954, and Umberto Eco's bestseller *The Name of the Rose*, 1984.¹⁶

Despite the generally unfavorable reception by the popular press of Kristeva's novels, it seems to have had a generally positive effect on the academic community, which has rushed in to fill the gap opened by the reviews and has responded by sometimes elaborating and sometimes defending the novels from the objections raised by the reviewers. As we will see further on, much critical commentary on Kristeva's fiction has focused on establishing the connections between her theory and her fiction. Often the critics have sought to explain the so-called reactionary turn inward, her interest in the psychology of patriarchy, and her turn away from direct political commentary by reading her fiction from the perspective of her psychoanalytic theory. They have also elaborated on the

literary context of Kristeva's novels, sometimes placing the novels in surprising literary fields. In short, one could argue that the overall negative reception of Kristeva's fiction in the popular press might have had the unlikely effect of stimulating a different and perhaps more thoughtful engagement by the academic community.

The Academic Critics

Twenty years after Kristeva published *The Samurai*, academic critics are beginning to take stock of the reception of her fiction, and their assessment is twofold. They claim that critics have neglected Kristeva's fiction for the most part and that those that have paid attention are confused by it (see Chen, 19; Greaney, 294). Some, like Bianca Rus, have gone so far as to make the more extreme claim that Kristeva's "fiction has been conspicuously neglected, if not completely ignored" (2010a, 16). Noting the "perplexity" of the few critics who read her novels, Rus also describes their reactions as marked by "confusion and frustration" (16). My study of more than twenty-five book reviews could be said to contradict both claims, since Kristeva's fiction has received substantial attention from the media and from the international press, and rather than express confusion or frustration, the attention has been straightforwardly negative for the most part. What is to be made, however, of the reception by the academic community? Is the assessment of neglect and confusion an accurate description of how critics in academic journals have read Kristeva's fiction?

On the subject of strict quantity, the more than twenty academic articles I examined in preparation for this introduction appear to contradict the assessment of the critics. There is some truth to their claim, however, if by "confusion" the critics mean that the reviewers in the popular press mostly give a negative assessment of the novels (some going so far as to caricaturize them), while the studies by the critics in the academic journals tend toward a more serious, sustained, and forgiving approach to the novels, one that suggests a more positive reception. Contrary to the way Kristeva's novels have been read in the popular press, most of the readings of Kristeva's novels from academic journals insist on their link with her theory in general, and with her psychoanalytic theory in particular. One could even describe some of these academic readings of Kristeva's novels as oblique apologias of her theory, defending Kristeva against the accusation (both in the popular press and in academic journals) that her theory is amoral and even reactionary, an accusation perhaps best represented by Wood, who writes in the *London Review of Books* "Stephanie Delacour . . . believes that . . . We need not good and evil but the difference between them. This isn't 'essentially amoral,' it's just alarmingly reactionary" (18).

Much of the critical commentary about Kristeva's novels is more informed about (and more sympathetic to) her overall psychoanalytic project than the reviews. And much of it also appears to be written in answer to the similar critiques of Kristeva's theory that appeared in academic journals between 1989 and 1990, by Judith Butler, Teresa de Lauretis, and Nancy Fraser, all of them written before the publication of Kristeva's first novel (see Brooksbank, 2; Kolocotroni, 149; Kirkby, 109; and Rus 2010a, 15–16). For these academic readers familiar with Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory, the practice of writing fiction is therapeutic at a personal level, but more significantly, it is also loaded (some might say fraught) with social and political implications.¹⁷ Thus, Colin Davis suggests that Kristeva's fiction is a "gift of meaning" that helps us to confront, displace, and forgive our individual and social criminal desires, and her novels represent Kristeva's encouragement of individuals to heal their communities one story at a time. Davis also interprets the novels as a call for a broader social commitment to encourage and support the act of storytelling: "The profusion of narratives and the effects of transference whereby each story becomes the story of another correspond to the analyst's gift of meaning. Through this gift, something like the understanding of the other can be achieved," Davis concludes (2002, 304).

From this perspective the writing of fiction in general, and of Kristeva's analytical or psychoanalytic mode of fiction writing in particular, can be a gift, a cure, a return to the act of imagination, fantasy, and representation, though, for some it can also be a *pharmakon* delivering us to our self-destructive drives and to an illusion of clarity and revelation. But for the most part, academic critics see a certain antidote in Kristeva's writing. They see Kristeva's novels as a mode of treatment for an individual (and for a collectivity) that suffers from a psychosocial melancholy, which stems in part from a depressive economy at the foundation of subjectivity (itself imbued with what Freud called the death instinct), but also in part from the pulverizing catastrophes of the twentieth century (e.g., Hiroshima, Auschwitz, the Gulag, and 9/11). Following Kristevan psychoanalysis, most of these critics believe that these traumatic and catastrophic experiences have carbonized the imaginary. That is, they have shut down our ability to imagine, to elaborate our constitutive traumatic experiences, threatening instead to destroy the antidote necessary to overcome the trauma of being in general, but also the particular nature of the trauma that the speaking subject suffers due to sexual difference, and thanks to the effect of this difference on our relations to the maternal body.¹⁸ Both for Kristeva, and for these academic critics, the act of writing and reading (and of writing and reading what Kristeva calls "poetical detective novels") becomes the origin of (and the necessary condition for) all other ethical and political acts (Kristeva 2004, 119). By putting us in contact with an other (who is also in ourselves), the act of writing and reading offers the promise of renewal, and psychoanalytic forgiveness, necessary to

overcome the trauma of our death instinct and the catastrophes of the twentieth century.¹⁹ As Davis suggests, Kristeva's novels are proof of the fact that "the desire to kill is not the last word," at least not yet (304).

For many of these critics, Kristeva's novels are laboratories for personal therapy where the writer gets in touch (so to speak) with her death drive, or at least keeps open the border to the bodily drives (Kolocotroni; Tidmarsh; de Nooy; and Greaney). They are critiques of, and antidotes for, the society of the spectacle, critiques and antidotes based on self-analysis (Brooksbank). From their perspective, Kristeva's novels can restore to health the social "paternal function"²⁰ by insisting on a retelling of our myths (Margaroni 2008); they can change the view of Europe by generating new allegorical illusions (Kirkby; Margaroni 2009); they can remap our cultural memory by displacing and translating the unconscious (Rus 2010a); they can restructure and repair our relationship with our fundamental separations, breaks, and splits, including those from the mother tongue (de Nooy; Raoul); they can be acts of forgiveness beyond the death instinct—and beyond the violence that is at the origins of our selves and of our social bonds according to psychoanalysis (Davis), and as such they can move us toward an ethics based on compassion, or a humanism based on forgiveness, an ethics and a humanism that accommodates the exiled nature of the human experience (Smith 1997).

While this overall positive assessment puts the academic critics at odds with the reviewers of Kristeva's fiction, there are important points of agreement between them as well. Not surprisingly, and given the psychoanalytic approach of many of these critics, they agree with the reviewers that the nature of Kristeva's novels is profoundly autobiographical. But the critical commentary has also developed an aspect of Kristeva's autobiographical fiction that is absent from the reviews. These critics focus on the references in Kristeva's novels to her vexed identity, to her separation from her country of origin, and to her disturbing mother tongue, calling attention to the political problems of assimilation and exile that these references suggest (de Nooy; Agoston-Nikolova; and Raoul). Some of these critics put Kristeva's fiction in the literary context of exile novels by Nancy Huston and Ilija Trojanow (Raoul; Agoston-Nikolova). Others apply Kristeva's theoretical notion of the semiotic to the linguistic experience of bilingual code-switching in the United States (Kraver). Not surprisingly, this critical assessment of Kristeva's fiction appears after border studies and bilingualism became legitimate fields of study in the United States, and after the publication of *Possessions* in 1996, a novel about the beheading of a translator.²¹

Similarly, Juliana de Nooy writes about Kristeva's novels in the context of Kristeva's theory of translation of bodily drives, comparing the vexed experience of moving from one language to another to the similarly disturbing movement between semiotic and symbolic modes of signification. E. Agoston-Nikolova

interprets Kristeva's novel in the context of a nomadic experience caused by political and economic upheavals like the rise and fall of Communism under the Soviet Union. She points to the healing power of the novels that dramatize the suffering of the émigré, as well as the construction of an identity based on something other than the mother tongue. Also Valerie Raoul similarly puts Kristeva's novel in the context of bilingualism, and suggests that there might be a relation of identity between Kristeva's concept of matricide and her acquisition of another language.

All of these academic critics echo Kristeva's own account of her novels in her interviews, as well as Kristeva's account of writing in the detective mode, as an investigation of the genesis of writing (Kristeva 2004, 119). From Kristeva's perspective, the writer is a melancholy analyst who investigates the genesis of her own writing, which is nothing short of an investigation into the origins of our selves, and of our social bonds. Like Freud in the story of the primal horde in *Totem and Taboo*, Kristeva finds a crime at the center of her stories of investigation. However, Kristeva also suggests in her interviews that the crime might not be so much the murder of the Father as the betrayal of the mother tongue, and that the writer forgives this betrayal even as she repeats it in her fiction. In this way, fiction writing for Kristeva has the potential of turning betrayal into renewal in a foreign language. Kristeva has referred to this process as a necessary translation but also as a graft and a transfusion of the remains of the mother tongue onto the foreign language: "It is this double of language . . . that I have tried to translate . . . through the detective story," she says (Kristeva 2010, 301).

The critical commentary on Kristeva's novels also reveals some persistent gaps in the commentary about her fiction. Perhaps one of the most intriguing of these *lacunae* concerns the theme of matricide in Kristeva's practice of fiction writing, and particularly in relation to her first novel. While *The Samurai* has elicited the most (and the most negative) responses from the international and popular press, it has received little critical attention in academic journals.²² Most of the critical commentary has focused instead on Kristeva's later detective fiction, and while the assessment of these novels has been favorable for the most part, the criticism surrounding *The Samurai* is not only sparse, but it is also negative. In fact, the negative assessment of Kristeva's first novel is one of the few points in which there is agreement between the reviewers in the popular press and the critics in the academic journals.

In her essay, Davis refers to her preference for Kristeva's detective novels. She explains her relative lack of interest in *The Samurai* by pointing to the nature of the *roman à clef* as a genre based on facts (2002, 299). She suggests that as a critic interested in psychoanalysis she is less interested in facts than in the fantasies that we weave around the facts, and also in our ability to continue to produce such fantasies. But this explanation of her preference fails to con-

vince mainly because it is based on a strict difference between the factual and the fantastic elaboration of those facts in literature that should be suspect to a psychoanalytic critic. Indeed, from the perspective of the psychoanalytic critic, a meaningful gray area separates fact from fiction, and the *roman à clef* should be just as interesting to her as the detective novel, if not more so, given the conventional disavowal of the porosity of this border by the autobiographical genre.

Perhaps a more convincing explanation of Davis's preference (and of the similar preference of many academic critics) might be that *The Samurai* resists the reading that academic critics rehearse and repeat. In other words, *The Samurai* is not as willing an object of what Kelly Oliver has called a psychoanalytic social theory as her later detective novels seem to be (see 2003, *passim*). That is, Kristeva's first novel appears to be resistant to a psychoanalytic social theory that defines fiction writing as an act that has a political effect on both the individual and society; or as a laboratory of writing, where the writer puts herself at risk; or as a journey to the dark continent of the unconscious as Kristeva might put it, where the antidote to our maladies might be found. Instead, *The Samurai* might read more like an example of a novel rigorously orchestrated to defend the self from such inquiries into the unconscious. It is, after all, a novel that looks back to a lost time, with more nostalgia than irony, with more regret and bitterness than self-awareness and self-criticism.

More to the point, *The Samurai* can be interpreted as a novel that performs a foundational matricide that the scanty criticism about it has seen, and described, but whose function has yet to be fully understood. Like the reviews before them, much of the criticism about the novel centers on the fact that *The Samurai* is Kristeva's reply to de Beauvoir's novel *The Mandarins*. And much of the criticism has argued that Kristeva's novel (sometimes described as if it were a copy) falls short of the accomplishments of the "original." But from the perspective of Kristeva's theory of matricide, and from her comments about the poetical detective novel, *The Samurai* should also be fertile ground for a study of the novel that searches for a symbolic matricide within it, that is necessary for the beginning of Kristeva's writing. From this perspective, *The Samurai* could be the novel that not only hides the "true crime" behind the mask of the *roman à clef*, but it also would be the foundational act that the subsequent detective novels both hide and reveal. That is, the first novel might best represent the matricide that the later novels elaborate, filled as they are with repeating references to symbolic parricides and castrations. Moreover, if *The Samurai* were understood as a foundational symbolic matricide giving birth to Kristeva's fiction writing, it also could be interpreted as the similarly abject pretext to Kristeva's writing in a social-psychoanalytic mode. Perhaps this symbolic matricide at the center of *The Samurai*, Kristeva's betrayal of the original novel by de Beauvoir, but also her matricide in writing of her predecessor as an author, makes the

novel universally unpalatable, mocked as it is, by the reviewers, and ignored as it is, by most of the academic critics. Kristevan psychoanalysis suggests that it is difficult if not impossible to face the matricide at the center of our speaking subjectivity, and that we resort to all kinds of perversions to work through it. And it is a credit to Kristeva's focus, self-determination, and understanding of the vexed nature of our matricidal selves that she continues to write fiction even after the universally negative reaction to her first novel.

There are other points of agreement between the book reviews and the academic criticism, including a general consensus regarding the literary genres to which Kristeva's novels belong (i.e., the *roman à clef* and the detective novel), although the criticism has developed subtle differences within the genres. Regarding the *roman à clef*, for example, the most compelling critical readings place the novel within the more specific and limited frame of the French intellectual novel, which includes not only *The Mandarins*, but also *The Uprooted* by Maurice Barrès, *The Order* by Marcel Arland, *The Conspiracy* by Paul Nizan, and *The Side of the Angels* by Jean Louis Curtis (see Renard; Atack). Regarding the detective genre, Davis places the novels in the context of modernist and postmodern writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Patrick Modiano, Daniel Pennac, and Marguerite Duras, all of whom were similarly attracted to the genre of detective fiction but only to confound its promise of meaning-making. Nilsson's comparison of Kristeva's novels to similar Byzantine murder mysteries, including Umberto Eco's *Baudolino* (2001) and Panagiotis Agapitos's *The Ebony Lute* (2003), is both compelling and convincing. Finally, there is a group of critics that places Kristeva's novels in altogether different genres and traditions including the allegorical novel and the patristic tradition (see Kirkby; O'Grady; Margaroni 2009; and West).

Should we conclude, then, that Kristeva's fiction has been neglected or ignored, as some academic critics have noted? The fact is that Kristeva's fiction has received some attention by academic critics, though not as much as the attention it has received from reviewers in the popular press, and less attention by far than the academic critics have devoted to Kristeva's *theory*.²³ Still, the respectable quantity of academic criticism devoted to her novels (one book and more than twenty essays over nineteen years), and the sophisticated nature of the analysis, would seem to suggest that academic critics have neither neglected nor ignored Kristeva's novels. The so-called confusion might be the result of mixing together the readings of two very different audiences publishing in two different venues: the popular press and the academic journal. Indeed, it seems that while most book reviewers are frustrated by the presence of theory in Kristeva's novels, many academic critics are instead frustrated by novels that are not "Kristevan enough." For example, Levenson asks, "where is the shock to father's law?" (22).²⁴ Because of a resistance to theory in general and to psychoanalytic theory in particular,

book reviewers have tended to read Kristeva's fiction as narcissistic and self-celebratory, as apolitical at best and reactionary at worst. Academic critics, who are more receptive to both, have tended to see an attempt to explore and critique the self in Kristeva's fiction. And following the implications for our civilization and its discontents, psychoanalytic critics insist that Kristeva's fiction has political implications for the larger society because it helps us to confront the vexed desires at the origins of our social bonds, and because it helps us to tend to their potentially deadly effects, both on the individual and on the social collective.

Most book reviews have pointed to the autobiographical nature of the novels as evidence of Kristeva's ideological shortcomings, whether she is described as apolitical, antifeminist, or bourgeois. Most academic critics, on the other hand, have offered a more positive interpretation of Kristeva's novels, interpretations that also address the characterization of her theory as both apolitical and antifeminist. Many have focused on their autobiographical character in order to argue that the novels are relevant to debates ranging from immigration to exile and nationalism, as well as to the related issues of assimilation, integration, and transculturation and their often ambiguous effects.

Academic critics have expanded on the literary context of Kristeva's novels, making useful distinctions and establishing helpful differences between the genres. However, they have not offered a comprehensive account of her fiction writing, one that transcends the generic differences that seem to split Kristeva's works into two moments, the moment of the *roman à clef* exemplified by *The Samurai* and the moment of detective fiction that seems to extend through the rest of her novels. But the work of the academic critics has gone some distance in echoing Kristeva's account of detective novels as an investigation of the genesis of writing—though more work can be done in this direction, particularly on the affects of betrayal and forgiveness that seem to accompany these troubled origins and their relevance to the society at large. The essays in *Kristeva's Fiction* follow the lead set by these academic critics, even as they fill in some of the gaps left by the existing scholarship on Kristeva's novels.

Among the academic studies of Kristeva's fiction, Szu-Chin Hestia Chen's *French Feminist Theory Exemplified Through the Novels of Julia Kristeva* (2008) deserves special mention as the only book so far dedicated to Kristeva's fiction, and as a predecessor of this collection. Chen gives a chronological account of Kristeva's thoughts on the novel, from her earliest writings influenced by formalist linguistics to her later writings influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis. In her account, she also suggests that the object of analysis of Kristeva's theory and fiction remains the same, although Kristeva gives different names to this object: to wit the semiotic mode of signification and poetic language.²⁵ Chen claims that the distinction between theory and fiction proves problematic for Kristeva, and she states that her novels may "simply be a different form of her

theoretical work" (17). Drawing from Kristeva's early writings, Chen points to the Bakhtinian nature of the complex interaction of theory and fiction in Kristeva's work. She rightly states that they are in a "dialogical" relationship; and it is the precise nature of this dialogue that the writers in our collection try to describe.

"Yes, but is Kristeva any good as a novelist?"

So far, I have tried to make the argument that there are two relatively discrete readerships for Kristeva's fiction, and that each group has a different opinion as to the worth of Kristeva's fiction depending on whether they assign value to her psychoanalytic theory or not. The book reviews eschew theory in general, and psychoanalysis in particular, and are negative by and large. The academic critics, on the other hand, are open to theory and positive for the most part. But it is also true that the question of the value of Kristeva's fiction (closely followed by the related question, "Would we read these books if they weren't by Kristeva?") is also asked by a wide array of readers who straddle these two groups: readers who are both theoretically informed and are interested in literature, whatever the criteria used to assign literary value to it. For these readers, it is not enough to answer these questions by simply bracketing-out aesthetic value, based on universal categories such as beauty and perfect form. They also ask whether Kristeva's novels are more than "scholarship," more than "theoretical indirection or exploration." For example, if her novels are indeed a form of embodied detective fiction (as I suggest here), then does the corporeal supplement of her novels satisfy as fiction? Simply put, does Kristeva's fiction "deserve a read"?

These repeating questions, and others like them ("Is it really any good as fiction?"; "Is it great literature?") are symptoms of what Kristeva and the writers of the collection are in fact trying to address, which is the reason why the writers of this volume, instead of answering these questions of literary quality, urge Kristeva's readers to go beyond them and to experience writing that puts ideas at the same level as character, pacing, plot, suspense, form, and style. What is at stake for Kristeva, and for the writers of this volume, is precisely the ability first to read, and then to enjoy, such work. It is indeed a question of reading and enjoyment, and, more specifically, it is a question for Kristeva of the inability of the modern reader to enjoy the kind of experimental fiction that escapes easy definition and classification and that has a reputation for being difficult to read. This fiction includes the so-called French intellectual novel, the *nouveau roman*, but also novels of contemporary writers like the Chilean Roberto Bolaño, whose works, for example, Michael Schaub describes as "flawless, majestic" but also as "hard to read." What makes such novels so hard to read?

In her book *New Maladies of the Soul* (1993), Kristeva goes some distance in answering this question, which I believe applies to her own novels. In that book, Kristeva describes the effects of contemporary events like the Shoah, the deployment of the atom bomb, but also the collapse of Communism and the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) on our internal defenses, or on what she calls the psyche or the soul. I believe that Kristeva refers obliquely to Europeans victims of the Cold War in that book, by referring to the analysis of a patient whose dreams and speech are like an “iceberg.” Didier’s dreams are monumental, cold, and they lie hidden just below the surface. His speech is visible but reduced, shrunk, hard and brittle, like the top of an iceberg. Didier’s artwork is a set of monstrous collages, and each one represents a similarly frozen object that stands for his sense of self, his soul, or his psyche. Indeed, Didier is a figure for European man after the Cold War. He is unable to feel and transform something that is both inside and outside of him, something that is familiar but that is nevertheless so disturbing that it freezes him, something as catastrophic as the mythical severed head of the Medusa. Paradoxically, the sudden loss of his defenses, like the sudden loss of the Berlin Wall, threatens to compound the catastrophe. The fall of the Berlin Wall is both a liberation and also a threat to this man, who abruptly loses a reduced space, or a wall, that both separated and also connected (albeit thinly) the two sides of his split self, and his feelings from his language.

Although *New Maladies* is essentially a commentary on the effects of the Cold War on Europeans, it has broader implications that also affect readers outside the European community. Didier also could be a figure for Kristeva herself and for the contemporary reader in more general terms, insofar as they all uncomfortably and imperfectly straddle binaries that are at odds with each other: binaries such as feeling and language, theory and fiction, Eastern and Western civilizations. The Berlin Wall could similarly be a figure for Kristeva’s novels and for contemporary writing, insofar as they are similar defenses that both separate and connect the different sides of a split subject: a person split between Bulgaria and France, or a novel split between ideas and plot, for example. Could modern readers of Kristeva’s novels be cold to them because these novels mirror their frozen and split selves? Is this the reason why they are unable to interpret, transform, and then enjoy her novels, and why these novels are so hard to read? This seems to me to be the case. Sadly, the fact is that when these novels are simply dismissed as imperfect and boring, the defenses they enact and represent don’t disappear, instead they go underground and hide from our view; like the bottom half of an iceberg they can become more treacherous.

From this perspective, modern readers suffer from a malady that makes them ask the same questions over and again; questions that presuppose the failure of such novels for not being literary enough, for being too philosophical and boring. These questions remind us that Kristeva is not an ideal author

devoted to the craft of writing novels, and they are a symptom of our devotion to this ideal. In other words, these questions express our need and our desire to imagine ourselves in relation to an ideal object and to remain stuck, frozen, in front of that freezing object. Kristeva, instead, asks us to move beyond this paralyzing ideal, and to do it for our own good.

Kristeva's novels urge us to stop idealizing and to start finding pleasure and enjoyment in objects that are represented in a different way, in a way that is more enabling, more forgiving. They suggest that we model our reading after a different, docile, object. What is at stake for Kristeva is not to forgive a novelist for writing imperfectly, but to forgive the reader for being a perfectionist. Better yet, what is at stake is to continue to read imperfectly, with full knowledge of the fact that the reader cannot see something in himself: the very imperfection that the reader denies through what Kristeva calls idealization, the other side of abjection. By continuing to ask, "Is Kristeva any good as a novelist?" we continue to tell ourselves that it is not possible that there is no ideal object. By describing her novels as boring, hard to read "blather," we display the pleasure we feel when we protect the existence of an ideal object. Instead, we should try to ask different questions, such as whether Kristeva's novels liberate us from our tendency to idealize. How does Kristeva's blend of fiction and theory free us from our ideals? Does it allow us to overcome this punishing need? The authors in this collection help us to ask such questions by moving through and beyond the question of literary value.

Our Collection

Kristeva's Fiction is a collection that includes essays by academic critics who have dedicated much of their attention to the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, scholars who now turn their focus to her novels. It includes an essay by John Lechte, whose *Julia Kristeva* (published in 1990) was one of the first monographs dedicated to the work of Kristeva, as well as an essay by Stacy Keltner, whose *Kristeva: Thresholds* (published in 2011) is one of the latest books published on the subject. It also incorporates essays by other academic critics who have similarly published books on Kristeva, including Carol Bové, the author of *Language and Politics in Julia Kristeva* (2006), and Martha Reineke, the author of *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence* (1997), as well as essays by scholars who have published numerous essays on the subject. The collection is also unique in the international composition of its contributors and in the eclectic character of their disciplines, which range from philosophy to literature, from sociology to women's and religious studies.

The collection is representative of the general trend in the academic criticism discussed in this introduction insofar as all of the essays can be said to be