

# **Motherhood: A Site of Repression or Liberation? Kristeva and Butler on the Maternal Body<sup>1</sup>**

**Fanny Söderbäck**

The state of the maternal has been disputed among feminists for quite some time. Julia Kristeva – whose work will be my focus of attention here – has been criticised for her emphasis on the maternal, particularly with regards to her alleged equation of maternity with femininity. Critics have suggested that such equation risks reducing woman to the biological function of motherhood. Judith Butler, to give an example to which I will return at length, speaks of a ‘compulsory obligation on women’s bodies to reproduce’.<sup>2</sup> Kristeva herself has noted that ‘it seems [...] difficult to speak today of maternity without being accused of normativism, read: of regression’.<sup>3</sup>

Kristeva’s earliest thematisation of the maternal appears in her doctoral dissertation, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). It is here that she first articulates her notion of the *semiotic chora*, associating it with the maternal body and early heterogeneous drives. She borrows the Greek term *chora* from Plato’s *Timaeus* (2001) – a dialogue that more than anything deals with the question of beginnings, as it narrates the story of how the cosmos and its living creatures were created. In much of her early work, Kristeva distinguishes between semiotic drives and the symbolic order (although as we shall see this distinction is by no means an oppositional one).<sup>4</sup> Put most simply, *chora*, for Kristeva, is the articulation of primary processes and drives. We may say that it is the material from which language emerges, and yet, as I hope to show, to characterise it merely as ‘material’ is both problematic and inaccurate. Kristeva explains that all discourse ‘moves with and against the *chora* in the sense that it simultaneously depends upon and refuses it’.<sup>5</sup> It is a ‘preverbal functional state that governs the connections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects, and the protagonists of family structure’ (*RPL*, p. 27). Kristeva underlines that the subject involved in such a process is no mere subject of understanding, but one inhabited by pre-symbolic drives and, importantly, one connected to and oriented towards the mother (not yet differentiated from her). Both Kristeva and Plato characterise *chora* in

maternal terms: Timaeus, in Plato's dialogue, famously likens it with a 'mother' [*meter*] and a 'wet-nurse', drawing on female connotations distinct from the paternal demiurge and creator present from the outset of his story.<sup>6</sup> For Kristeva, the maternal body is 'the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*' (*RPL*, p. 27).

One could object that such an account problematically seems to divide a pre-symbolic, drive-ridden, natural, passive, maternal mold or receptacle from a symbolic-logic, cultural, active, paternal force of creation, with the consequence that we, again, essentialise such categories along gendered lines. This is precisely what many feminist thinkers have done. They have taken issue with the very association of the semiotic *chora* with the maternal body since they view it as ascribing to woman the role of mother and, moreover, as inscribing this position in an essential realm beyond culture and signification. Tina Chanter explains that, '[t]o the extent that Kristeva seeks to focus upon the maternal experience as a dimension whose significance patriarchal society has tended to overlook, and to the extent that the semiotic is associated with maternity, it is inferred that in embracing the semiotic, Kristeva endorses essentialism'.<sup>7</sup> Jacqueline Rose describes 'that essentialism and primacy of the semiotic' as 'one of the most problematic aspects' of Kristeva's work.<sup>8</sup> Gerardine Meaney speaks of a 'quasi-mystical realm' that 'looks suspiciously like the eternal feminine'.<sup>9</sup> Jennifer Stone dismisses the semiotic *chora* as a regression to a-historical perceptions of femininity.<sup>10</sup> And Gayatri Spivak admits to being 'repelled by Kristeva's politics', accusing her of a 'long-standing implicit sort of positivism: naturalising of the *chora*, naturalising of the pre-semiotic'.<sup>11</sup> It is these charges of essentialism that I would like to address here, in an attempt to show that the semiotic *chora* (and its associations with maternity) by no means can be described in pre-cultural or essential terms, but rather as always already integral to the symbolic order or symbolisation.<sup>12</sup> More specifically, I will turn to Judith Butler's critique of Kristeva in her essay 'The Body Politic of Kristeva' – published in *Gender Trouble* (1990) – in order to shed light on these issues.

I will argue that Kristeva by no means reduces woman to the function of motherhood but that, rather, she returns to the maternal body in part to free women from this very reduction. By bringing the mother out of the shadows she provides women with a past (a genealogy of their own, a community of women, a history hitherto repressed) and,

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simultaneously, with a future (in the sense of liberating them from pre-defined roles and positions – from motherhood as the only form of subjectivity available to them). It is exactly the future that is at stake when Kristeva speaks of the maternal, and more specifically it is the possibility of *temporal change* that depends on it. The maternal body to which she urges us to return must, as I see it, be understood *qua temporalisation*: that to which we return is temporal, moving, displacing, renewing. The return is neither nostalgic nor aimed at preserving some essential notion of motherhood; it makes possible new beginnings, allowing for a future pregnant with change and transformation.

Butler ends her critique of Kristeva with the following remark – one that is meant to describe what would happen if we stopped focusing on the mother the way Kristeva has done hitherto: ‘The culturally constructed body will then be liberated, neither to its “natural” past, nor to its original pleasures, but to an open future of cultural possibilities’ (*GT*, p. 119). I will attempt to show that these words in fact capture Kristeva’s own project, that such ‘open future’ is exactly what she is aiming at through her continuous return to the maternal.

## I

In ‘Stabat Mater’ – arguably her most important essay on maternity – Kristeva addresses the feminist view that she has reduced woman to the function of motherhood while simultaneously excluding the mother from the symbolic pact altogether. She also clarifies what her own attempt to revisit the maternal amounts to:

[W]e are caught in a paradox. First, we live in a civilization where the *consecrated* (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood. If, however, one looks at it more closely, this motherhood is the *fantasy* that is nurtured by the adult, man or woman, of a lost territory, what is more, it involves less an idealized archaic mother than the idealization of the *relationship* that binds us to her, one that cannot be localized – an idealization of primary narcissism. Now, when feminism demands a new representation of femininity, it seems to identify motherhood with that idealized misconception and, because it rejects the image and its misuse, feminism circumvents the real experience that fantasy overshadows. The result? – a negation or rejection of motherhood by some avant-garde feminist groups. Or else an acceptance – conscious or not – of its traditional representations by the great mass of people, women and men.<sup>13</sup>

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This passage, placed at the very beginning of her essay, needs some careful unpacking. I will do so by way of following the trajectory of the essay as a whole, one that in its very structure incorporates the two polar aspects of motherhood in our society: on the one hand, the most idealised and fantasmatic of them all – the figure of Virgin Mary – and on the other hand, what Kristeva herself refers to as ‘the real experience that fantasy overshadows’ – a poetic account of pregnancy and birth-giving grounded in Kristeva’s own personal experience thereof. Kristeva, who neither wants to reject motherhood altogether (like the avant-garde feminists), nor accept its traditional representation (like the great mass of people), addresses the problematic reduction of femininity to what she calls *maternity*, and suggests that it represents a ‘masculine appropriation of the Maternal’ integral to ‘masculine sublimation’ (*SM*, p. 236). The male subject would, as it were, try to tame maternal power through an act of appropriation – one maybe most clearly exemplified by a Socratic philosophy of midwifery.<sup>14</sup> ‘Phallic power’, Kristeva writes elsewhere in *Tales of Love*, ‘would in short begin with an appropriation of archaic maternal power’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Stabat Mater’ is her most explicit attempt to delve beyond the fantasmatic idealisation of primary narcissism and instead articulate – from a woman’s point of view – the very real experience of motherhood (to the extent that it can be experienced and articulated in a ‘real’ way within our socio-symbolic context).

What, we must ask, is motherhood for Kristeva? How is this dark continent experienced and articulated? Kristeva opens the poetic-experiential part of her essay with one capitalised word – FLASH – followed by a qualification: ‘instant of time or of dream without time’ (*SM*, p. 234). At the very outset, the experience of motherhood is in other words articulated, first and foremost, in temporal terms. And two notions of temporality surface: the instant (many of which, if collected together, would form a rhythmic movement) and the timeless (the dreamlike state of being ‘outside’ of time or ‘without’ time which, we know from Augustine, is equivalent to eternity). We should be able to recognise these two types of temporality from another of Kristeva’s essays, ‘Women’s Time’, in which she proposes that cyclical and monumental time be associated with female subjectivity ‘when female subjectivity is considered to be innately maternal’.<sup>16</sup> In the opening chapter of *Powers of Horror* (1980) Kristeva, again, uses the image of the flash:

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[...] forgotten time crops up suddenly and condenses into a flash of lightning an operation that, if it were thought out, would involve bringing together the two opposite terms but, on account of that flash, is discharged like thunder. The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.<sup>17</sup>

The two types of time thus recur – monumental infinity and cyclical rhythm – both illustrated by the flash. This passage, moreover, brings forth another important aspect of maternal temporality; it is capable of avoiding the teleological movement of (Hegelian) synthesis ('bringing together the two opposite terms') and, instead, sustains difference and heterogeneity within the double time of abjection. Returning to 'Stabat Mater', we find the articulation of this thought in the only other capitalised passage, this time consisting of two nouns – WORD FLESH – kept together or separated by no other term, no middle third that would allow them to merge. WORD FLESH; the paradigmatic opposites of a (paternal) cultural domain. Maternal time – integral to the very experience of motherhood – is one that respects and sustains difference and heterogeneity, challenging the linearity of (Hegelian) synthesis.<sup>18</sup>

Kristeva describes the maternal as an 'ambivalent principle' (*SM*, pp. 234-5) or a 'see-saw' (*SM*, p. 258), and notes that Christianity – 'the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity [...] is focused on *Maternity*' (*SM*, p. 234) – has attempted 'to freeze that see-saw', to 'stop it, tear women away from its rhythm, settle them permanently in the spirit' (*SM*, p. 259). She sees the very figure of Mary as an example of how motherhood has been cemented in a frozen image – pure (untouched) and infinite (immortal) – freed from the heterogeneity of human embodiment and the oscillating rhythms of maternal temporality, the latter capable of sustaining difference and female singularity. Patrilinearity is installed through a word detached from flesh, and woman is left with no other identities accessible to her than Maternity in its idealised form.<sup>19</sup> The maternal to which we return is thus not, in my mind, an essential or solidified figure. It is a temporal principle that refuses the separation of word and flesh – the locus of temporality thought of as non-separable from corporeality. Let me develop this thought as I respond to some criticisms raised by Butler in the final chapter of *Gender Trouble*.

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## II

In her reading of Kristeva, Butler raises what I see as two major concerns: first, she is skeptical of the subversive potential and emancipatory status of the semiotic as articulated by Kristeva; and second, she worries that Kristeva's alleged attempts to delimit 'maternity as an essentially precultural reality' will lead to a reification of motherhood that precludes 'an analysis of its cultural construction and variability' (*GT*, p. 103). Butler argues that by positing an 'outside' of culture, Kristeva fails to see that it may well be the effect or product of the very law or order from which it is said to be excluded. Put differently, 'repression may be understood to produce the object that it comes to deny' (*GT*, p. 119).

While I think Butler's worries are important ones – she in fact articulates some of the most central and difficult challenges for feminist thought today – she misses the target due to some fundamental misconceptions of Kristeva's thought that run through her argument. The most important one is the bundling together of Kristeva and Lacan as thinkers who speak of an unspeakable outside that is *prior to* and *opposed to* culture and the symbolic order. Kristeva's whole project is, in my mind, precisely a sustained attempt to *avoid* such oppositional and exclusive structures, which is why she consistently describes the semiotic and the symbolic as co-dependant, co-existing, intertwined.<sup>20</sup> Kristeva herself explains that the alleged exclusivity between the two realms is 'relative, precisely because of the necessary dialectic between the two modalities of the signifying process, which is constitutive of the subject. Because the subject is always *both* semiotic *and* symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by an indebtedness to both' (*RPL*, p. 24).

When Butler speaks of the semiotic as 'distinct' from, or in 'opposition' to the symbolic (*GT*, pp. 104, 114) – descriptions that will come to inform the central claims of her own argument – she thus misconstrues a central aspect of Kristeva's work, namely that which marks her as different from Lacan. The semiotic, Kristeva insists, is a condition for *and* a product of the symbolic:

Although originally a precondition of the symbolic, the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic. Therefore the semiotic that 'precedes' symbolization is only a *theoretical supposition* justified by the need for description. It exists in

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practice only within the symbolic and requires the symbolic break to obtain the complex articulation we associate with it in musical and poetic practices. (*RPL*, p. 68)

She goes on to say that the semiotic ‘is always already social and therefore historical’ (*RPL*, p. 68), and that the semiotic *chora* ‘is always already inevitably and inseparably symbolic’ (*RPL*, p. 96). There is thus nothing biologically ‘pure’ about it, as Butler would have it.

From the outset of her essay, Butler brings our attention to what she sees as a subversive failure in Kristeva: ‘By relegating the source of subversion to a site outside of culture itself, Kristeva appears to foreclose the possibility of subversion as an effective or realisable cultural practice’ (*GT*, p. 112). She argues that Kristeva reinforces the hegemony of the paternal law, and suggests that, following Kristeva, ‘a full-scale refusal of the Symbolic’ would be impossible, and that ‘a discourse of “emancipation”’ would be ‘out of the question’ (*GT*, p. 109). First of all, I am not sure what a ‘full-scale refusal of the Symbolic’ would mean, whether it is possible on Butler’s own account, and whether it is even desirable. For Kristeva, poetic language is ‘the ultimate means of its [the symbolic order’s] *transformation* and *subversion*, the precondition for its *survival* and *revolution*’ (*RPL*, p. 81, emphasis mine). Subversion, for Kristeva, means *transformation*, not complete breakdown or erasure. And the aim of poetic language, as I read her, is not merely to *destroy* the symbolic order, but rather to allow it to *survive* – a term which I suggest that we must understand quite literally as the sustainability and injection of *life* and *aliveness* into discourse, as opposed to a kind of mechanical and dead discourse that would reproduce itself eternally and exclude alterity and alteration altogether.<sup>21</sup> In fact, Kristeva warns us of the potential danger inherent in the transgressive element of artistic creation, and calls for a ‘structurally necessary protection, one that serves to check negativity, confine it within the stases, and prevent it from sweeping away the symbolic position’ (*RPL*, pp. 69-70).

I moreover take it that Kristeva’s acknowledgment of the impossibility of a ‘full-scale refusal of the Symbolic’ has to do exactly with the fact that the semiotic, for her, in fact does *not* lie outside or beyond the symbolic in the sense Butler would like us to think it does. It is exactly because it is always already *part of* and *produced by* the symbolic order that the semiotic is bound to in some sense ‘fail’; that it cannot fully undermine it. And similarly, it is because of this interdependence that the symbolic, in turn, can never fully rid itself of the

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semiotic; why semiotic drives and rhythms are bound to re-surface and re-emerge in language no matter how much we try to repress and silence them.

If we take seriously Kristeva's attempt to think of the semiotic and symbolic as standing together we will begin to see not only the emancipatory potential of her work, but also how it cannot be said to assume a self-identical or essential 'outside' that governs yet somehow escapes language. Kristeva does not, as Butler suggests, call for a fully finalised 'liberation [...] from the shackles of paternal law' – such liberation would, as Butler herself has carefully pointed out, be the equivalent of psychosis for Kristeva (*GT*, p. 119).<sup>22</sup> There is no possibility of '[n]egating or denying the symbolic' for Kristeva, since without it the speaking subject 'would be incapable of doing anything' (*RPL*, p. 63). This, of course, is completely in line with Butler's own Foucauldian analysis of the power of discourse. As she herself states in the opening pages of *Gender Trouble*: 'Obviously the political task is not to refuse representational politics – as if we could. The juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power; hence, there is no position outside this field, but only a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices' (*GT*, p. 8). What Kristeva does call for, however, is a more integrated and balanced relationship between the two modalities of language: maternal *and* paternal, semiotic *and* symbolic. The interdependence between the two is, for her, a fact. The question remains whether we are willing and able to acknowledge and embrace this interdependence and give voice to both, or whether one (paternal-symbolic) is allowed to thrive at the expense of the other (maternal-semiotic).

A helpful way of problematising the relationship between semiotic and symbolic, and one that I think clarifies my critique of Butler, appears in Tina Chanter's essay 'Kristeva's Politics of Change'. Chanter interestingly suggests that the two realms can be compared to the distinction between sex and gender, a division that has been scrutinised and questioned by Butler herself in books such as *Bodies That Matter* (1993). If traditionally feminists have viewed sex as static and 'natural' while gender has been understood as 'cultural' and subject to change, Butler is among those who have begun to question this distinction, pointing instead to the fact that sex, too, in some sense is constructed and, therefore, subject to change. Chanter asserts that 'it is no longer so clear where sex stops and culture starts, since our very definition of sex is always already bound up in cultural assumptions – just as semiotic

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expression is always already bound up with the symbolic order' (*KPC*, p. 186). Chanter is thus suggesting that 'Kristeva's semiotic/symbolic distinction acknowledges the need not only to unsettle the sex/gender distinction' – which would be perfectly in line with Butler's own project – 'but also to bring into question received ideas about the difference between nature and culture that often underlie mistaken notions about the ease with which gender can be siphoned off from sex' (*KPC*, p. 189).

We must, however, address two points raised by Butler: Why choose the figure of motherhood to speak of repressed aspects of discourse; and is it the case that this maternal figure can be assumed to be repressed – or is it not rather a 'compulsory cultural construction', one that assumes 'the female body *as* a maternal body' (*GT*, p. 115)? At this point we must return to 'Stabat Mater' and the way in which I proposed that we read this essay as an account of maternity articulated in terms of temporality.

### III

Butler asks: 'What grounds, then, does Kristeva have for imputing a maternal teleology to the female body prior to its emergence into culture' (*GT*, p. 115)? Kristeva does indeed make what looks like a distinction between the archaic mother of the semiotic *chora*, on the one hand, and the idealised and fantasmatic mother that emerges out of the symbolic order as mere image or icon, on the other. While both depend on the symbolic order, it does seem like the former is somehow more 'authentic' or 'originary' than the latter. As we saw, Kristeva did not want to reject motherhood altogether (like Butler?) but she also did not want to accept its traditional representation (like the great mass of people). It seems as if she wants to say that the maternal body is *both repressed and compulsory*, depending on what we mean when we speak of it.

Let me begin by addressing the latter of these two; the 'traditional representation' of motherhood – I think Kristeva would argue in agreement with Butler – is compulsory in ways that delimit women and ascribe to them a pre-defined set of expectations upon which their subjectivity depends. This narrow (yet universalised) notion of maternity is thus something that Kristeva is as critical of as Butler. As I see it, however, it is not the case, as Butler

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suggests, that Kristeva assumes ‘a true body beyond the law’ (*GT*, p. 119). In fact Kristeva, in line with Butler, describes embodiment as a process of signification. The human body, she asserts, cannot ‘function biologically and physiologically, unless it is included within a practice that encompasses the signifying process. Without such a practice, the body in process/on trial is disarticulated; its drives tear it up into stymied, motionless sectors and it constitutes a weighty mass. Outside the process, its only identity is inorganic, paralyzed, dead’ (*RPL*, p. 101). The alleged ‘true body beyond the law’ would be nothing but a piece of dead meat. Matter, to use a Butlerian expression, in this case would not matter.<sup>23</sup>

But at the same time it should be clear by now that the maternal body, for Kristeva, is also in fact repressed. Insofar as we speak of maternity as a certain kind of corporeal-temporal experience – manifested in the rhythms and oscillations that emerge through the semiotic modality of language – it is, on Kristeva’s account, to a large extent made invisible to the point of erasure in our culture. It is when speaking of *this* kind of maternity that we must ask (with Butler) why we should hold on to the image of the mother, instead of just speaking of a different kind of language or temporal experience, if that is what ultimately is at stake.

The point, as I see it, is not that all women are or should be mothers, but rather that all human beings (at least as of yet) have and are born from mothers. Our refusal to acknowledge our dual origins is exactly what installs the patrilinear conception of time that has come to dominate Western discourse. At stake, then, is our own acknowledgement of being born, of having been generated, of springing forth from a dual origin, maternal *and* paternal.<sup>24</sup> Through the figure of the mother, we are able to rethink the relationship between temporality and corporeality – not, as one might think, through a reductive equation of the maternal with corporeality and the paternal with time – but exactly thanks to the way in which the maternal body *qua* generative brings our attention to the continuity between time and matter. That time is embodied and that bodies are temporal. This, in my view, is what Kristeva is seeking to express in her work, which is why she returns to the notion of *chora* and then further elaborates her concerns with language, embodiment, and time, using the maternal body as her point of departure. As she herself suggests in one of her early essays: ‘Rhythm, a sequence of linked instants, is immanent to the *chora* prior to any signified spaciousness: henceforth, *chora* and rhythm, space and time, coexist’.<sup>25</sup>

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Addressing this question from yet another angle, we can also say, following Louise Burchill, that ‘it is precisely to the extent that the “images” conveyed by the tradition show a singular association of women [and even more so, mothers] with space (or, conversely, with space as a “feminine principle”) that these images constitute such a propitious source for the philosophers seeking to formulate another “association” of what is named “time”’.<sup>26</sup> On this account, the very attempt to re-articulate spatio-temporality in ways that challenge the millennia-long tradition of separating time and space (associating the former with the self-conscious mind, while ascribing embodiment to the latter), inevitably forces us to return to the very place where this division has been inscribed and assumed; to, as it were, reclaim that place in corporeal-temporal terms. What we get, by turning to the maternal body, is what we might call a three-dimensional account of time not simply reduced to a uni-directional line. The two parallel columns of ‘Stabat Mater’ – one depicting the lived and embodied (three-dimensional) experience of motherhood, the other unraveling and deconstructing an idealised (two-dimensional) image of Maternity – could be seen to represent these two versions of time: the rhythmic volume and the progressive line. The former, Kristeva explains, is bound to crop up ‘to remind one of what is at work beneath repression: the cost at which repression (duration – or history, to put it briefly) achieves its goal as the fulfillment of a sociocultural contract’.<sup>27</sup>

Such eruption, while incapable of destroying the social contract altogether and once and for all, in my mind has significant emancipatory and transformational potential. It moreover challenges and reformulates what we thought of as maternal in the first place – allowing us to rethink not only our relationship to our mothers, but also to time and space as intrinsically inseparable. What comes to bind *word* and *flesh* is the *flash* that is time and space at once. Three capitalised terms structuring the experience of motherhood according to Kristeva: WORD. FLESH. FLASH.

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<sup>1</sup> A longer version of this essay will be published as ‘Motherhood According to Kristeva: On Time and Matter in Kristeva and Plato’, *philoSOPHIA Journal for Continental Feminist Philosophy*, 1:1 (forthcoming 2010), and in French translation as ‘La maternité, le maternel: les féministes américaines pour et contre Julia Kristeva’, trans. by Jonathan Chalier, *l’Infini* (forthcoming 2010).

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<sup>2</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 10th anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 115. Henceforth, all references to this text will be given parenthetically in the main body of the text, using the abbreviation *GT*.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Meaning of Parity', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by John Lechte and Mary Zournazi, trans. by John Lechte (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), pp. 202-9 (p. 207).

<sup>4</sup> In her psychoanalytic account of subject development, Kristeva associates the semiotic with the early symbiotic relation between mother and child. The distinction is here yet to be made between subject and object (Kristeva speaks, instead, of an *abject*). The acquisition of (paternal) language allows the ego proper to develop and to enter into the realm of symbolisation (the symbolic order). This transition is marked by ambivalent oscillation (abjection) and it is never fully finalised insofar as semiotic traces and affects continue to flow through symbolisation. Kristeva further develops what we might call a linguistic-aesthetic theory, where poetic language is viewed as intimately bound to the semiotic (understood as that which offers musicality and rhythm to language). Through poetic language we are able to gain access to archaic maternal traces in language – traces that more rigidly symbolic language is prone to repress. The semiotic is thus crucially different from the Lacanian real, insofar as it can be articulated and symbolised in literary form.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 26. Henceforth, all references to this text will be given parenthetically in the main body of the text, using the abbreviation *RPL*.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. by Peter Kalkavage (Newburyport: Focus Publishing, 2001), 49B, 50D.

<sup>7</sup> Tina Chanter, 'Kristeva's Politics of Change: Tracking Essentialism with the Help of a Sex/Gender Map', in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 179-95 (p. 183). Henceforth, all references to this text will be given parenthetically in the main body of the text, using the abbreviation *KPC*.

<sup>8</sup> Jacqueline Rose, 'Julia Kristeva – Take Two', in *ibid.*, pp. 41-61 (p. 53).

<sup>9</sup> Gerardine Meaney, *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Stone, 'The Horrors of Power: A Critique of Kristeva', in *The Politics of Theory*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diana Loxley (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1983), pp. 38-48 (p. 42).

<sup>11</sup> Gayatri Spivak, 'In a Word', interview conducted by Ellen Rooney, *Differences*, 1:2 (1989), 124-56 (145).

<sup>12</sup> Much feminist discourse that expresses scepticism about Kristeva's use of *chora* does so on the basis of a common-held assumption that *chora* is characterised as a passive and receptive concept already in the *Timaeus*. I will not be able to examine the notion of *chora* as it appears in Plato here, but elsewhere I have argued that this assumption is false, and that *chora* is neither passive nor merely receptive on Plato's account. See Fanny Söderbäck, 'Motherhood According to Kristeva: On Time and Matter in Kristeva and Plato', and 'La maternité, le maternel: les féministes américaines pour et contre Julia Kristeva'.

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<sup>13</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Stabat Mater', in *Tales of Love*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 234-63 (p. 234). Henceforth, all references to this text will be given parenthetically in the main body of the text, using the abbreviation *SM*.

<sup>14</sup> For another example of this view, see Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. by Aine O'Healy (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 108. Cavarero here speaks of a masculine mimesis of maternity. Page duBois has, similarly, noted that '[p]hilosophical reproduction is ascribed exclusively to men who will inseminate each other with ideas in a sexual act in which women are excluded'. See Page duBois, 'The Platonic Appropriation of Reproduction', in *Feminist Interpretations of Plato*, ed. by Nancy Tuana (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 139-56 (p. 152).

<sup>15</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Manic Eros, Sublime Eros: On Male Sexuality', in *Tales of Love*, pp. 59-82 (p. 75).

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Women's Time', in *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. by Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 201-24 (p. 205).

<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> This is of course too simplistic a reading of Hegel, and one that would need qualification, but it is basically the critique implied in Kristeva's argument at this juncture. The focus of my attention is, in any event, not Hegel here, but rather the way in which Kristeva characterises maternal time.

<sup>19</sup> While the column that treats the figure of Mary in part does so in order to show how Christianity actually has carved out a space for the maternal in religious terms (Christ is, after all, *engendered*, he is a god with a mother), it is also meant to illustrate how the very introduction of a maternal figure within religious discourse immediately raises temporal concerns which have to be solved in order to save Christianity from sin and the corporeal aspects of life. If temporal life is engendered and finite (Kristeva describes it as 'the intertwining of sex and death' [*SM*, p. 239]) and if Jesus as a divine being is to escape finitude (insofar as he is resurrected), the Fathers of the Church had to solve the problem of Mary, his mother, by turning her into a figure of eternal virginity. It is these 'problematics of *time*, similar to that of *cause*' that interest Kristeva the most as she reports the development of a Christian cult of the Mother (*SM*, p. 240). Mary stands out as a complex and paradoxical figure; she at once introduces semiotic heterogeneity into culture and at the same time comes to represent an 'ideal totality that no individual woman could possibly embody' (*SM*, p. 246). Her own immortality is a strange one indeed; her life follows the very cyclicity of maternity – through transposition she is born and re-born, offering continuity to the species and making possible new beginnings. Mothers *do* provide us with a sense of immortality (as long as regeneration takes place we will live on in our children and grandchildren and so on; mothers provide 'stability [...] so that our speaking species, which knows it is mortal, might withstand death' [*SM*, pp. 262-3]) but at the same time they function as reminders that we are engendered and hence *will die*, whether we want it or not (Kristeva notes that Freud, who in her view 'offers only a massive *nothing*' regarding the experience of motherhood, nevertheless, in facing his own mother, is reminded 'that his own body is anything but immortal and will crumble away like dough [*SM*, p. 255]). We begin to see the contours of how

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important a locus the maternal body is for thinking through the question of time, and for helping us orient ourselves within our own existence as finite beings who wish to overcome our finitude.

<sup>20</sup> Sara Beardsworth illustrates this point by way of comparing Kristeva with Kant: ‘Not only are intuitions without concepts blind – in Kristeva, semiotic content without symbolic form is mute, invisible, and deprived of a history. But concepts without intuitions are empty – in Kristeva, a linguistic, symbolic universe deprived of connections with the infrasyntactic representations of exposure to otherness, separateness, loss, and death, is one without meaning or values’. See Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), p. 110. Chanter has also emphasised the interdependence between the two realms in Kristeva: ‘What has not been sufficiently appreciated is the extent to which the semiotic is a realm that only acquires meaning – or indeed existence – within the realm of the symbolic. The semiotic/symbolic distinction is not offered as a mutually exclusive one. Semiotic meaning can only emerge retroactively, and can only be expressed within the terms of the symbolic (*KPC*, p. 184). It is interesting to note that Chanter, who is one of few interlocutors to take seriously this interdependence between the two realms and the implications thereof, does so with a reference to Kristeva’s understanding of *time*: ‘The way in which Kristeva thematizes the problem of time suggests the need not only to continually rethink and revise feminist strategies, but also to reconceptualize the idea of history to which we unthinkingly appeal when we dub a certain thinker ahistorical’ (*KPC*, p. 183). The judgment of Kristeva as an essentialist thinker may well be the result of a failure to see the role that time plays in her thought.

<sup>21</sup> Kristeva asserts that, ‘only the subject, for whom the thetic is not a repression of the semiotic *chora* but instead a position either taken on or undergone, can call into question the thetic so that a new disposition may be articulated’ (*RPL*, p. 51). What is at stake here is *renewal*, not absolute destruction. Later in *Revolution in Poetic Language* she reminds us that while the thetic is ‘absolutely necessary’, it is nevertheless ‘not exclusive: the semiotic [...] constantly tears it open, and this transgression brings about all the various transformations of the signifying practice that are called “creation.” [...] what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic’ (*RPL*, p. 62).

<sup>22</sup> In *About Chinese Women*, Kristeva articulates what can be read as a response to Butler written fifteen years prior to the publication of *Gender Trouble*. If the subversion of the symbolic order is a parodic or ironic affair for Butler, Kristeva points to its dangers, especially for women: ‘A woman has nothing to laugh about when the paternal order falls. She can take pleasure in it if, by identifying with the mother, the vaginal body, she imagines herself to be the repressed and sublimated content of the culture rising through its cracks. If, on the other hand, she has failed to identify with the mother, and – as victim or militant – found her one superficial, backward, and easily severed hold on life in the symbolic paternal order, its dissolution can be her death’. See Julia Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, trans. by Anita Barrows (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1977), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> See Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> This is obviously a statement that could be challenged in light of recent technological developments. When transsexual men like Matt Rice, Thomas Beatie and Scott Moore birth babies, and when they do so *as men*, we

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must ask what it means to be of woman born (to borrow a classic expression from Adrienne Rich). More than making an essentialist claim about the female body as the one and only generative body, what I want to stress here is the duality of our beginnings. In its attempts to establish a stable and single origin, the Western metaphysical tradition repeatedly erases the maternal function in favour of a paternal principle (God the Father, the Platonic idea, the Cartesian Cogito, and so on). Kristeva herself very often speaks of a maternal *function* (one that can be inhabited by women and men alike), and more than anything she stresses the need to establish *dual* origins so as to avoid repetition of the same. The point—as I am trying to establish in this essay—is to acknowledge the interdependence between semiotic and symbolic, maternal and paternal, instead of granting privilege to one over the other. That said, it is nevertheless clear that the recent transformation of the institution of motherhood (from reproductive technologies to gay parents to transsexual fathers) forces us to rethink the very function of motherhood in ways that have yet to be explored.

<sup>25</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Place Names', in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 271-94 (p. 286).

<sup>26</sup> Louise Burchill, 'Re-situating the *Feminine*', in *Belief, Bodies, and Being: Feminist Reflections on Embodiment*, ed. by Deborah Orr, Linda López McAllister, Eileen Kahl and Kathleen Earle (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), pp. 81-102 (p. 87).

<sup>27</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'The Novel as Polylogue', in *Desire in Language*, pp. 159-209 (p. 205).

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