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## FLUIDIZING THE MIRROR: FEMINISM AND IDENTITY THROUGH KRISTEVA'S LOOKING GLASS

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"Then she began looking about, and noticed that what could be seen from the old room was quite common and uninteresting, but that all the rest was as different as possible."

-- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

When Tweedledum and Tweedledee inform Alice that she is "only a sort of thing in [the Red King's] dream," she begins to cry. "I *am* real," Alice retorts, recovering from her emotional outburst by finding an image in the pool of her tears. She recovers her identity with the anxious assertion: "*I am*," "I am real," just in time to avoid the impending darkness of the "monstrous black crow" -- black sun, symbolic breakdown -- which frightens the twins away from the battle they had planned.<sup>1</sup> Yet after Alice returns from her journey through the looking-glass, she realizes that *she* was dreaming of the Red King dreaming of her. Her lingering puzzle over "which dreamed it" throws her previous declaration of identity into uncertainty: if "I am" in a dream, am I but a dream? This time, however, the prospect of identity as dream, as fiction does not seem so frightening.

The twins are emblematic of the logic of identity and of opposition -- twins negating each other (Contrariwise! Nohow!) and threatening battle -- and yet they also disturb (Alice's) identity. Through the looking-glass, things happen that way. The border of identity, the boundary between self and other, inside and outside, may seem impenetrable -- a mirror without depth reflecting only opposites separated by a void. But Kristeva's work, moving *through* this mirror, opens up its border to difference, to movement and life in the seeming void. Though, as Alice notes, each side of the mirror houses only the "old and uninteresting," through the looking glass Kristeva brings out heterogeneity. This difference emerges through the mirror, *within* the logic of identity and its twin opposites. Kristeva draws us into the blackness of the mirror's border, the seeming void between opposites, to bring out the heterogeneity therein.

### *Taking up Sides*

Feminism is undergoing a crisis in identity. The identities feminists may have sought to define over the years have been steadily eroding as our conjunctions make our differences more apparent. The dangers of reified, oppressive identities are clear, yet the solidarity achieved through unity has arguably been important in propelling many feminist political successes. It seems at times as if feminists are taking up sides in battles over identity, lining up along a border between unity and multiplicity -- e.g. "identity politics" and "radical difference." Yet identity is a peculiar thing over which to do battle, for it is not simply a "thing," a concept one can be either "for" or "against." While we do speak of it at times as a unity (say, a single conception of "self"), it is also, and perhaps most significantly, a border. It is a boundary that sets up both an inside and an outside, a self and an other. Thanks to Lacan, we can picture this border as a mirror whose reflected image sets up identity's first positions and negations -- both "me" and "not-me," separated by a gap that forms against the mirror's tain. Both sides, both mirror images are colonized by identity, its border separating "sides" that each function according to its logic. Theorists concerned with the oppressive potential of identity are thus left with a dilemma: how to resist a logic that has already taken over both sides of the fight? How to "oppose" the logic of opposition? If both sides are colonized, it is difficult (some may say impossible) to find a strategy that does not, directly or indirectly, support the colonizer.

It seems refusing identity is not the key to difference, since attempting to go outside of identity only achieves a reflection of the same on the opposite side. But there may be another route, found in the work of Julia Kristeva: instead of refusing identity and trying to move outside of it, Kristeva suggests a move *inside* and *through* identity's border, accepting its logic and finding difference within it. Identity is not, for Kristeva, something that needs to be avoided or begrudgingly accepted. Kristeva accepts identity's boundary rather than trying to locate heterogeneity in an impossible "outside" to it. Moving through this border, embracing identity's distinctions, Kristeva manages to open up a space for heterogeneity within. Kristeva's mirror is

not a flat surface reflecting only images, representations of the self and other; it has depth, it can be plumbed, and there is buried there difference in a seeming void.

I believe that Kristeva's work may offer some interesting alternatives for feminists wary of identity's potential oppressions and weary of its battles with difference. Yet this is not readily apparent, I think in part because her movements through identity to heterogeneity have, at times, been overlooked. Her writings are sometimes read as if she, too were taking up sides instead of investigating the border under dispute. Critics have read her into both sides of the identity/difference issue, pinning her loyalties both to a kind of poststructuralist dissolving of identity as well as to a problematic essentialism.<sup>2</sup> On one hand, Kristeva's work has been read as critical of identity in general, warning of its dangers and advocating its eventual dissolution. Toril Moi has termed Kristeva's political views as anarchist, due to Kristeva's warnings about the dangers of adhering to group identities: "The stress on negativity and disruption, rather than on questions of organization and solidarity, leads Kristeva in effect to an anarchist and subjectivist political position."<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Grosz makes a similar point, arguing that Kristeva's refusal of identity does little to support a specifically feminist political agenda aimed at the emancipation of "women" as an identifiable group:

It is by no means clear that women's struggles are compatible with her position; many feminists object to her reduction of feminist struggles to a generalised dissolution of identity, for it makes no contribution to the overthrow of women's specific oppression.<sup>4</sup>

But recently Kristeva has been read as taking a turn in the opposite direction. Instead of focusing on dissolving identity, in *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism*, Kristeva has begun to suggest a return to Enlightenment humanism as a political salve.<sup>5</sup> This apparent turnaround in her work is perplexing at the least, and has been read by Norma Claire Moruzzi as contradictory: "Kristeva's sudden reversion to the tenets of humanism is not only unhelpful, it is, coming from her, a philosophical about-face and a surprise."<sup>6</sup> Other critics have also read Kristeva's work as including totalizing, or essentialist notions of identity -- often focusing on the semiotic *chora* and Kristeva's discussions of maternity. Jacqueline Rose asserts

that “the essentialism and primacy of the semiotic . . . is one of the most problematic aspects of [Kristeva’s] work.”<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Grosz argues that Kristeva attributes “an irreducibly biological and genetic ‘nature’ to maternity,” revealing the essentialism Kristeva had tried to avoid by refusing to characterize motherhood as specifically female.<sup>8</sup>

Such tensions seem to result from a double reading of Kristeva’s semiotic order, both stemming from the notion that it is *outside* and *opposed* to the symbolic order. The semiotic appears essentialist because it is read as “primary,” as a ground or origin, or as stemming from a biological (maternal) realm opposed to the symbolic (paternal) realm. It also appears to be a site of radical difference that tends to destroy identity altogether, because it is read as a homogenous realm of difference opposed to a homogenous, symbolic realm of identity and unity. In other words, the semiotic and the symbolic in Kristeva’s work, I believe, can be and have been wrongly characterized as opposing reflections of each other, between which Kristeva’s texts oscillate back and forth. But to read her work in this way is to force her to take up sides in identity’s battles, an approach that ignores the possibility of getting inside the border under dispute. Rather than trying to go outside of the symbolic and its logic of negation and opposition to find difference, Kristeva brings heterogeneity through the inside/outside border itself -- keeping the border of opposition intact, but noting the difference that exceeds it. In what follows I consider the relation between the semiotic and the symbolic in order to show that the relation between the two is not one of opposition. I then use this discussion to explain how Kristeva’s suggestions for resolving our identity crises might be helpful for feminists, through a brief consideration of her recent work on national identity.

### ***Borderline Transgressions***

Kristeva’s writings trace borders -- both the borders of the subject as well as, more recently, national borders.<sup>9</sup> Her early work on subjectivity and language focuses on separations, abjections, the development of frontiers where the subject becomes delineated *as* subject. Most significantly, however, Kristeva focuses on the places where the symbolic frontiers of the subject are exploded from within. Rather than taking up a position either on the side of symbolic identity

or on that of semiotic instability, Kristeva points to the revolutionary potential of the transgression taking place *within* the boundary of the symbolic itself.<sup>10</sup>

Kristeva calls this boundary the “thetic,” marking the break that distinguishes the semiotic from the symbolic. According to Kristeva, the thetic “is structured as a break in the signifying process, establishing the *identification* of the subject and its object as preconditions for propositionality.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, the thetic break marks the institution of the symbolic order, along with the subject’s identification as subject. The thetic is located in part at the mirror stage, forming the boundary between symbolic identity and the child’s presymbolic relation to its mother.<sup>12</sup> It separates the realm of drives and their motility (the semiotic *chora*) from the child’s developing ability to signify, its entry into the realm of signification (the symbolic order). It does not, however, set up a radical break between semiotic and symbolic, leaving each entirely *outside* the other. The thetic is transgressed continually by the semiotic order: the semiotic breaks through the thetic border and brings drive motility and heterogeneity into symbolic language and identity. But this does not mean that the thetic is destroyed -- it is permeable, allowing for irruptions of semiotic heterogeneity that do not obliterate its boundaries.<sup>13</sup> This is not an irruption of difference as a *negation* of symbolic identity, but as a transgression of *negativity*.

Kristeva ascribes *negativity* to the Hegelian dialectic, calling it the “fourth term” that often gets lost in the comforting symmetry of the triplet. Negativity is the “mediation,” the “supersession,” the “liquefying and dissolving agent” that drives the movement of the theses.<sup>14</sup> It is not purely a destructive agent, since each movement produces a reformulation, an affirmation of a new organization. Kristeva distinguishes negativity from negation, a symbolic judgment of “polarity” or “opposition.”<sup>15</sup> Negativity works *within* negation; it “constitutes the logical impetus *beneath* the thesis of negation and that of the negation of negation, but is identical to neither since it is, instead, the logical functioning of the movement that produces the theses.”<sup>16</sup> It is a heterogeneous motility that works beneath the static terms of symbolic negation, a motility that Kristeva links to the semiotic order. She replaces the term “negativity” with “rejection,” in part to avoid confusion with “negation,” and in part to connect it with the material movement of the drives

in the semiotic *chora*. Negativity/rejection, for Kristeva, thus marks the semiotic movement that “moves through the symbolic, produces it, and continues to work on it from within.”<sup>17</sup> This movement reflects an archaic ordering of the drives, a “rudimentary combinatorial system” that provides the first separations necessary to the more rigid divisions, the negations of symbolic representations.<sup>18</sup> The ordering of the semiotic *chora* is provided by the mother’s body, her regulation of the child’s drives according to both biological and social constraints. Maternal authority maps the child’s body into “a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows . . .” through the mother’s satisfactions and frustrations of the child’s oral and anal drives.<sup>19</sup> This division of the child’s body preconditions the later, more radical separation between self and other that begins in the mirror stage.

These archaic divisions, however, occur through an ordering that is heterogeneous to the movements of negation and opposition.<sup>20</sup> The separations within the semiotic *chora* are *abjections*, archaic rejections of the not-yet-object by the not-yet-subject.<sup>21</sup> Food I loathe, filth, waste are rejected, expelled, thrust aside, helping to consolidate what will later become “me.” But since these abjects are not yet “other” for “me,” it is also myself that I am rejecting.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the border supplied by abjection is an ambiguous one that does not completely separate “me” from what I expel: “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it . . . .”<sup>23</sup> Abjection does provide an archaic border as a precondition for symbolic separations and negations -- a maternal ordering before the paternal law -- but this border functions differently: instead of following the logic of opposition, of taking up sides, this semiotic ordering provides for separations that are material (drive-related) and ambiguous.

A combination of factors appear to point to a possible essentialism here: the idea that the semiotic is *before* the symbolic as primary, that it is maternal, and that it is material -- an ordering of biological drives. Kristeva seems guilty of presenting the semiotic as a maternal, originary and natural/biological site of difference opposed to mirror images of the symbolic as paternal, secondary, and cultural/symbolic.<sup>24</sup> This is indeed how it is recognized through the logic of

negation, the symbolic logic that divides up the world into homogenous opposites, mirror images. But trying to avoid this logic, to go *outside* of it has proved to only further embed us in it. Kristeva's work, I believe, considers the possibility of going through such divisions, through the logic of the looking-glass to articulate heterogeneity. This means that through the logic of opposition and negation the semiotic *is* maternal, originary and material; but it is also, and most importantly, *more* than that.

To understand this point, it is important to note first of all that the semiotic appears only within the symbolic, as transgression of the thetic border: "Although originally a precondition of the symbolic, the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic. . . . It exists in practice only within the symbolic . . . ." <sup>25</sup> Further, it is the transgressions taking place in signifying practices *now* that allow the semiotic to be described as "primary" or a "precondition:" "Theory can 'situate' such processes and relations diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because *they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself.*" <sup>26</sup> In other words, the transgressions of the symbolic by the semiotic allow for the description of these orders as two, separate modalities of language, one "before" the other. In that sense, the semiotic is a "*theoretical supposition* justified by the need for description," a way to explain the breeches that do, now, exist in the symbolic. <sup>27</sup> It is a "precondition" only in terms of the symbolic, whose representational logic requires "origins" as part of its norms of description. But semiotic negativity/rejection continuously disrupts and reformulates the logical stability of such symbolic representations, exploding the concept of origin and in so doing, setting up the conditions of its possibility once again.

The semiotic is not therefore a kind of "site" outside and completely separate from the symbolic. Kristeva describes it as the movement of transgression itself, the exceeding of symbolic borders; <sup>28</sup> and it is only because of this exceeding, this transgression that the semiotic can be divided off as a separate realm. The semiotic, then can only be posited as a "site" on the other side of the thetic border insofar as it already bursts through this border itself. For Kristeva, this points to "the simultaneous existence of the *boundary* . . . [and the] *crossing* of that boundary." <sup>29</sup> The

border remains in place, but the semiotic is not a stable position on one side opposing the stable symbolic. Stability and positionality are symbolic terms, and if the semiotic seems to be a position, it is only by being viewed as part of the symbolic order. The semiotic comes through the symbolic, cannot exist without it; but it is a heterogeneous order because rather than dealing in symbols and representations, the semiotic involves a movement of drive *material*. Semiotic negativity, for Kristeva, is “the *very movement of heterogeneous matter*,” the separation of matter that is (as described above) “one of the preconditions of symbolicity, which generates the symbol as if through a leap -- but never merges with it or with its opposite logical homologue.”<sup>30</sup> What crosses the border is not some reflection of the symbolic, but a movement of semiotic, drive material coming to signs. Of course, this too may seem like an opposition -- the opposition of symbolic representation to semiotic material. But again, as above, the semiotic is not a position of pure materiality opposing pure symbolicity. It seems to take up this position only insofar as it crosses, ruptures, and exceeds it.

The semiotic cannot, therefore, be the stable support of a closed, essentialist identity. But neither can it be a wellspring of radical difference upsetting symbolic identity altogether. Kristeva does not advocate the dissolving of identity, since semiotic transgression of the thetic border requires that the border be in place.<sup>31</sup> Further, symbolic identity is not a homogeneous totality, since semiotic transgressions open it up to heterogeneity and ambiguity, remodeling it constantly.<sup>32</sup> In other words, it is not the case that Kristeva’s work oscillates between two separate, oppositional realms of unity and radical difference. It might be read this way if the borderline region wherein Kristeva locates semiotic motility is deemed ineffable, void, abysmal -- a mirror one cannot enter. Kristeva argues, however, that the void is only a reflection in identity’s mirror: “when negativity is considered a logical operation, it becomes reified as a void, as an absolute zero -- the zero used in logic and serving as its base . . . .”<sup>33</sup> In other words, if the heterogeneous processes of semiotic negativity are seen only through the logic of opposition, they can seem to disappear into the gap, the void between the mirror’s reflected opposites. But Kristeva’s looking glass is not a flat mirror reflecting only opposing images with a void in-



between. It is instead the pool of Narcissus, a mirror whose calm surface is continually threatened by the semiotic motility, negativity and abjection that cloud the waters below.<sup>34</sup> The border of identity formed by the mirror has depth, it is a pool whose tranquil surface covers semiotic turbulence and continual transgressions. Kristeva's looking-glass reflects "the shimmering of signs set on the instability of water."<sup>35</sup>

### *A Watery Prowler*

Narcissus, however, is in the midst of a crisis. Searching for someone to love, he finds only his own image reflected back to him in a calm, still pool. He is alone, he loves only himself; which in this case is to say he loves no one at all. Noting that the other in the pool is a reflection of himself, Narcissus realizes that it is an empty image, a "me-that-is-not-me" -- and this "not" seems to swallow him up in its void.. This image is a fake, a static identity resting upon an abyss of negation, and Narcissus is left precariously on the border between "me" and "not-me." Seeing only these two sides, Narcissus loses himself in the void in-between: "He loves nothing because he is nothing."<sup>36</sup> His image is an "arbitrary" sign supported by a gaping "bar," a function of a symbolic order resting on emptiness.<sup>37</sup> Narcissus, if he speaks, speaks only in empty words -- signs that signify, but that have no meaning for him. If he survives, he will, like the modern narcissi Kristeva insists are now everywhere among us, flit from one image to another, taking these on as empty identities, "false selves," fakes.<sup>38</sup> None of these fill the void -- all are "not-me" -- but they distract; and if he hurries hurry fast enough from one to the other he may avoid glimpsing the emptiness that drives him ever forward. If this doesn't work, however, he will die: Narcissus, engulfed by emptiness, "kills himself because he realizes that he loves a fake."<sup>39</sup> He throws himself into the abyss behind the mirror, drowning in a monstrous, total emptiness.

Narcissus is a borderline case, a being who exists on the boundary between the symbolic realm of signs and his semiotic, bodily drives. The problem is that this border is abysmal -- Narcissus cannot connect his drives to language. His speech is empty, his identity is empty, and his drives are manifested in bodily symptoms such as the anguish that can drive him to suicide. He has entered the symbolic order, has crossed the thetic threshold and achieved a language that

provides him with an identity, an image; but the thetic border is a void for him that radically separates his words from his bodily drives. His words, cut off from drive energy, are not his own -- they are artificial, coming to him from outside like the image he sees in the pool. Narcissus may not realize that this image is not flat, that it is supported not by the emptiness of negation, but by the semiotic turbulence of the maternal *chora* that now seems utterly absent. What was once maternal fusion becomes abysmal absence in a reflected opposition of absolutes circling about a void. But Narcissus need not give up on his identity because it is a fake, turning his eyes away; nor need he continue to stare longingly, "enamored of stable images" on the surface of the pool.<sup>40</sup> His salvation lies in realizing the fake is only the reflected image of a movement welling up from below, a thesis produced by semiotic negativity and constantly revised by it. In other words, Narcissus must investigate the semiotic depths below his representational identity. Pursuing the watery depths within the mirror need not lead to death by drowning; the mythical Narcissus dies in a void, engulfed in a draining emptiness. Belief in the void leads to anguish, but anguish can be soothed by the realization that beneath the image lies the heterogeneity of semiotic movements, of drives that are necessary for life.

There is, then, hope for Narcissus. Kristeva counsels him to become a "watery prowler," an *artist* who investigates the waters below the mirror, crossing the boundary between semiotic and symbolic in order to resurrect himself in a second birth.<sup>41</sup> Art transgresses the thetic boundary without destroying it, making it pliable. By becoming an artist Narcissus can create an identity for himself that is not empty, that has meaning for him because it transgressed by his own, semiotic affects and drives. This allows him a choice between the fake and the void: he can create himself as a *fiction*, setting up borders for his identity but allowing them to be transgressible, pliable, playable. Psychoanalysis can help him do this: the analyst is there to help analysands build "their own proper space," "to speak and write themselves in unstable, open undecidable spaces."<sup>42</sup> A successful analysis results in the ability to continuously create new identities as fictions, as stories one tells to oneself about oneself on the basis of one's own interpretations, affects and meanings.<sup>43</sup> One is then capable of art, of imagination, of writing -- writing *oneself* as a fiction.

No longer an empty image, a “not-me” perched over the abyss, identity-as-fiction is both less threatening and more meaningful than the fake. It is my own story, written from my own semiotic depths, from “the labyrinthian and muddy canals of an undecidable sailing, of game-playing with fleeting meanings and appearances. . . .”<sup>44</sup> Further, this fiction changes as I do, remaining always a “work in progress.”<sup>45</sup>

Narcissus’ salvation, therefore, does not come in the form of rejecting identity altogether because it is a fake. Recognizing the impermanence and the impropriety of images, of representations of the self, Narcissus the artist finds within these changing images a source for creativity. He crosses the border between semiotic and symbolic without relinquishing that border itself, making his identity pliable, subject to an artifice necessary for life -- for a self and a language filled with meaning and motility rather than with emptiness, lack and death.<sup>46</sup> Identity’s borders are not to be given up, but rather to be *played*, in the sense of being *plied*: they are permeable, transgressible, pliable, playable.<sup>47</sup> But they are not to be gotten rid of altogether. After all, one can play with borders only if one also accepts them: Alice *pretends* she can go through the looking-glass because she thinks it’s impossible.<sup>48</sup> But trust in the integrity of borders too much and the mirror becomes an abyss covered by dual, opposing images.

Readings of Kristeva which force her to take up sides in the battle over identity, then, seem to tell of a reluctance to play. Kristeva’s trip through the looking-glass can be easily lost in the rush to establish loyalties, in the fervor of taking up sides and preparing for battle. If identity’s border is seen as an empty void of negation between sides, Kristeva’s texts may seem merely to oscillate from one side to another. But Kristeva neither focuses on one side nor the other, neither on a kind of radical, semiotic difference nor on a stable, unified, symbolic identity. By going *through* the boundary between these mirror images, she can advocate the taking on of identities that are not univocal, but are transgressed by heterogeneity.

### ***A Necessary Fiction***

In this final section, I consider briefly the advantage of Kristeva’s view of identity for feminists. Specifically, though Kristeva’s notion of identity-as-fiction could clearly provide some

interesting implications for feminist notions of subjective identity, I am most interested here in possible re-formulations of feminist group identity. Can feminists as a group take on identities as fictions, continually creating multiple, changing representations of ourselves? I believe Kristeva's recent discussions of national identity may provide a interesting model here.

As mentioned above, Kristeva suggests in some of her recent work that we consider Enlightenment humanism as a possible salve for current tensions in national and political identity. Specifically, she argues that certain Enlightenment views, though they emphasize unity and identity, could be taken on as models to help alleviate the crisis of the foreigner -- the *other* ejected from a closed totality of sameness. This suggestion may sound contradictory, of course, as Enlightenment views of identity (such as the *cogito*) seem to present it as a closed totality from which difference is ejected to the outside.<sup>49</sup> But I believe it possible to read in these texts an attempt to articulate an identity that is pliable, a national and human unity that includes its own differences -- that, indeed, can only recognize and appreciate the differences within insofar as it is united into a larger whole.

In *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism* Kristeva presents a cosmopolitan version of the nation-state based in part on the writings of Montesquieu.<sup>50</sup> She proposes that Montesquieu's "esprit général," as a version of national unity, could be used to counter the closed, totalizing "Volksgeist" that she attributes to Herder and Hegel (and that she believes is too easily transformed into a fascistic nationalism). The *esprit général* of Montesquieu, according to Kristeva, is not a closed, totalizing "abstract ideality," but rather a unity infused with difference. She argues that Montesquieu reformulates the idea of a national whole as "a *historical identity* with relative steadiness. . . and an always prevailing *instability* . . . . Endowed with a *logical multiplicity* . . . ." <sup>51</sup> This "logical multiplicity" is perhaps best explained by reference to Montesquieu's hierarchy, wherein the nation is but one level in a group of identity strata: self/family/homeland/Europe/Mankind. This hierarchy presents a series of identities, each crossed by divisions of itself into smaller identities. Further, each larger unity is necessary for the differences between smaller identities to be brought out. In other words, the wider perspective

available through identification with a larger group makes possible the recognition of differences within this identity itself. According to Kristeva:

[Montesquieu] refers indeed to a series of sets that, from the individual to the family, from the country to Europe and to the world, respects the particular if, and only if, it is integrated into another particular, of greater magnitude, but that at the same time guarantees the existence of the previous one and lifts it up to respecting new differences that it might tend to censor if it were not for that logic.<sup>52</sup>

The nation, as part of that hierarchy, becomes for Montesquieu “the nation as a *series of differences*,” a unity wherein particularities are acknowledged through the larger perspective of the “general interest” (*esprit général*).<sup>53</sup> According to Kristeva’s version of Montesquieu, “national unity is a necessary and relative cohesion,” making the nation *transitional* -- “open, uninhibiting, creative.”<sup>54</sup> National unity allows for the recognition of difference within, thus making this unity more fluid, open, pliable. Kristeva maintains that the heterogeneity amongst individual members of such larger unities will continually destabilize these unities: “. . . the competition with others refines one’s singularity in spite of and beyond the tendency to step back into a universal similarity.”<sup>55</sup>

In other words, Kristeva seems to be proposing a way to conceive of political identities infused with multiplicity, with differences that can only be reached *through* these identities themselves. Larger identities allow for a wider perspective that brings out difference and singularity amongst those thus united. Individual differences, therefore, become apparent under the unity of the region or nation; and the nation too must be subjected to a higher unity: “nation-states must give way to higher political systems.”<sup>56</sup> One such higher system is a universal principle of humanity, or the “rights of man” (taken from the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* -- hereafter called simply “human rights”).<sup>57</sup> National differences, then, become apparent under the unity of “humans.” In this way each identity is seen to be heterogeneous, crossed by the multiplicity of the smaller identities subsumed within it.

Unity and identity are not to be avoided, then, because they allow a larger perspective from which to recognize difference. Further, they need not be the closed, totalizing conceptions often associated with Enlightenment humanism. Though Kristeva does emphasize the “human rights,”

she suggests that we retain the only the *principle* involved while changing its *content* to include a recognition of the estrangement, the otherness within its core. In other words, this unity must include the understanding that “humanity” as an identity is not a seamless totality, that it is broken by separation, hatred and violence as well as unification, friendship and kindness.<sup>58</sup> The problem, in other words, with traditional, humanist views of “human rights” is not the attempt to unify humans *per se*, but the attempt to find a *homogeneous* unity, a totality that doesn’t recognize its own scissions and that therefore ejects these differences outside onto foreigners.

One way to insure that unity becomes a homogeneous totality, Kristeva argues, is to refuse identity altogether. She points out that if we try to dissolve identity (if we try, for example, to get rid of the nation-state altogether) it is then that we will lose respect for differences *within* it. We will instead become withdrawn into our own, fragmented groups with our common denominators, the same within ourselves and the different, the foreign pushed to the outside. A universal principle of humanity, then, is necessary to provide “a symbolic dignity for the whole of mankind . . . as a rampart against a nationalist, regionalist, and religious fragmentation . . .”<sup>59</sup> She notes that without a larger identity under which nations and regions can be unified, these smaller identities may come to believe *themselves* to make up the identity of “humans.” In other words, if I am not concerned with uniting myself with other people, I may not have a chance to recognize the vast differences between us; if all I compare myself to are the citizens of my nation who are more or less similar to me, I may come to think that all of humanity is one, homogeneous group of people like me -- a totality of similarity. Fragmentation, the refusal of larger identities such as the nation and humanity, seems to be what leads most clearly to conceptions of identity as totality. Each smaller unit must instead be placed within a larger, polyphonic community in order to avoid its “morbid contortion:” the tendency to turn *my* identity into the norm and the *other* into the foreign.<sup>60</sup>

I believe that Kristeva’s discussion of national identity could be used as an interesting analogy through which to consider feminist struggles with group identity, with unity and solidarity. I don’t believe that trying to get rid of feminist group identity altogether is necessary,

nor even to be advised. The feminist movement is undergoing a pluralization of identity, as a variety of different “we’s” assert themselves. But these differences are especially meaningful insofar as we still consider ourselves from the larger perspective of “feminists.” In other words, our differences are most important *through* our unity, and without this unity we run the risk of splitting off into smaller totalities that are more the same than they are different -- pushing difference onto the outside, onto those foreign to our individual groups. Kristeva argues that just like the subject the nation has to go *through* its mirror in order to infuse this image with heterogeneity and learn to respect the irreconcilable, the different, the foreign.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps feminism, like the nation, must move *through* its identity in order to respect the differences within it. These differences, in turn, could become a means for continual transgression of our identity, an impetus for continually rewriting that identity as a fiction, albeit an important one. Feminist identity is perhaps a necessary fiction, pliable, playable, created ever anew.

There is still much that remains to be considered, for I have not elaborated in depth on the philosophical and political benefits and pitfalls of such trips through the looking-glass.<sup>62</sup> I have rather suggested that any such evaluation ought not to force her into a battle she is trying to avoid. To read Kristeva’s work it is necessary to imagine something inside the battle lines, to welcome rather than fear the seeming void, to move inside its darkness through artifice, fiction and dreams.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Symbolic breakdown is avoided by the reinstatement of identity and its logic through both Alice’s assertion of her identity and the twins’ preparations for battle. After Alice recovers from her shock by asserting her identity, Tweedledum and Tweedledee help solidify this logic of identity by reminding her of the distinction between inside and outside -- though it may rain outside, it won’t do so inside their umbrella. Soon after, they ask Alice to help them prepare for battle with each other, a logical battle of “contrariwise!” and “nohow!”. The battle never takes place, however; it is only ever prepared-for, threatened. Were the two sides to meet, they would do so only in a dark void, a “monstrous crow,” which frightens the twins and makes them forget their quarrel.

<sup>2</sup>I believe there are a number of critical readings of Kristeva’s work that could be placed under this sort of dual framework, only a few of which are discussed below. Kelly Oliver provides a list of feminist readings of Kristeva’s work that makes reference to this kind of oppositional structure, in “Julia Kristeva’s Feminist Revolutions,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 3, 1993: pp. 94-5.

<sup>3</sup>Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 170.

<sup>4</sup>Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists*, (St. Leonards, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 1989) p. 66. See also pp. 96-97, for a discussion of Kristeva’s emphasis on dissolving identity. There is certainly ample evidence that Kristeva is more interested in dissolving identity than in supporting political unification and solidarity. See, for example, “A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident,” and “Psychoanalysis and the Polis,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, Toril Moi ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp. 292-300, 301-320; see also Kristeva’s discussion of the dangers of group identities -- “we’s” as opposed to singularities, or “I’s” -- in *Julia Kristeva Interviews*, Ross Mitchell Guberman ed., (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1996), especially pp. 24-25, 37, 42, 44-45, 57, 117, 155-57. I suggest below, however, that some form of unity is necessary in order to bring out differences amongst individuals.

<sup>5</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Leon S. Roudiez trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); *Nations Without Nationalism*, Leon S. Roudiez trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>Norma Claire Moruzzi, "National Objects: Julia Kristeva on the Process of Political Self-Identification," in *Ethics, Politics, and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writing*, Kelly Oliver ed., (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 143.

<sup>7</sup>Jacqueline Rose, "Julia Kristeva -- Take Two," in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings*, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup>Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions*, p. 81. See also Drucilla Cornell and Adam Thurschwell, "Feminism, Negativity, Intersubjectivity," *Praxis International* 5, no. 4, January 1986: pp. 484-504, for a criticism of essentialist elements in Kristeva's view of maternity. Tina Chanter discusses and criticizes various other readings of Kristeva's work as essentialist in "Kristeva's Politics of Change: Tracking Essentialism with the Help of a Sex/Gender Map," *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Julia Kristeva's Writings*, pp. 179-95.

<sup>9</sup>See especially *Strangers to Ourselves* and *Nations Without Nationalism* for discussions of national borders and national identity that seem to parallel discussions of the subject's identity in Kristeva's earlier work.

<sup>10</sup>The "revolution in poetic language" is the transgression of the symbolic by semiotic processes. It is this movement of transgression that Kristeva links to social revolution, rather than discussing the revolutionary aspects of the semiotic alone. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Margaret Waller trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 60-63, 72-85.

<sup>11</sup>Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 43

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 46-47. According to Kristeva, we also find the thetic at the point of "discovery" of castration.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 62-3, 68-9.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109. For further discussion of Kristeva's notion of negativity, see Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp. 41-6.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 109, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 26-7, 68.

<sup>19</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Leon S. Roudiez trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), pp. 71-2.

<sup>20</sup>... what the dialectic represents as negativity . . . is precisely that which remains outside logic (as the signifier of the subject), what remains heterogeneous to logic even while producing it through a movement of separation or rejection . . .", Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 112.

<sup>21</sup>"What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous," Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 1.

<sup>22</sup>"I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself," *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup>See, e.g., Judith Butler, "The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva," in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Kristeva's Writing*, pp. 164-78. Butler presents a very interesting and complex analysis of the relation between Kristeva's semiotic and symbolic orders, but one which remains on the level of taking up sides. Butler begins from the premise that the semiotic is meant to offer "a specifically feminine locus of subversion of the paternal law within language" (164), that it is *outside* of the symbolic, rooted in the material body -- a kind of "true body" beyond the law. Butler points out quite well how starting from such a position, where the semiotic is posited as outside the symbolic, only works to support the law one means to resist. Butler argues instead that subversion must take place from within the terms of the law, when the law is seen as complex rather than homogeneous, spawning multiple possibilities of itself. Though I cannot answer Butler's criticisms fully here, I do think that this last suggestion resembles that which I think Kristeva herself suggests -- a move through the symbolic, through the law which is not, as Butler deems it to be, homogenous in Kristeva's work. The symbolic undergoes continual transformations and multiplications of meaning through the influx of semiotic heterogeneity.

<sup>25</sup>Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 68. See also p. 123: "Negativity -- rejection -- is thus only a *functioning* that is discernible through the *positions* that absorb and camouflage it . . ."

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup>"We shall have to represent the semiotic . . . as *the transgression* of [the symbolic] order," *Ibid.*, p. 69 (emphasis mine).

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 113, 117.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 69. See also p. 63: "The precondition for such a heterogeneity that alone posits and removes historical meaning is the thetic phase: we cannot overemphasize this point."



- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 62.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 112.
- <sup>34</sup>"... narcissism is never the wrinkleless image of the Greek youth in a quiet fountain. The conflicts of drives muddle its bed, cloud its water, and bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs, is abjection for it," Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 14.
- <sup>35</sup>Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, Leon S. Roudiez, trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 134.
- <sup>36</sup>Ibid., p. 376.
- <sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 42. See also Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, p. 85.
- <sup>38</sup>See the case histories included throughout *Tales of Love* and in Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, Ross Guberman trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). See also *New Maladies of the Soul*, pp. 3-44, for a discussion of empty images and false selves.
- <sup>39</sup>Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 126.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 373.
- <sup>41</sup>On Narcissus as an artist, a "watery prowler," see *Tales of Love*, p. 136. On art as a kind of second birth, see *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 70.
- <sup>42</sup>Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 380. There is much more to the story of how psychoanalysis can help modern narcissi than I have indicated here. Explaining precisely how analysis allows analysts to connect drives to language, thus crossing the border between the semiotic and symbolic and creating identities as fictions, requires a much closer exposition of *Tales of Love* than is possible here. What is important to note at this time is that Kristeva does not advocate the dissolving of identity altogether for modern narcissi. Instead, the goal is to create fleeting and unstable, yet necessary, fictional identities.
- <sup>43</sup>See Julia Kristeva, *In the Beginning Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith*, Arthur Goldhammer trans., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 19-20.
- <sup>44</sup>Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, p. 136.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 380.
- <sup>46</sup>Kristeva characterizes Lacan's subject of desire as a dead subject -- cut off from drives, affect and meaning, this subject is empty, pursuing only "lack, death and language" (*Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 132). The kind of artifice Kristeva counsels, on the other hand, appears to allow for life: "the art of living" (*In the Beginning Was Love*, p. 9).
- <sup>47</sup>Playable, according to Kristeva, in the sense that a piece of music is playable (*In the Beginning Was Love*, p. 8) -- which provides some interesting and complex implications not completely addressed above. Among these is the suggestion that while identity is symbolic, expressed in words -- the same words used by all other speakers of the language -- what makes it "my own" is the way the story is told; just as what personalizes a piece of music is the way that it is played. This includes not only the particular organization of words, but also their intonation and rhythm, their poetic deliverance. For Kristeva, semiotic elements in language are heavily auditory, and the image that Narcissus needs (in place of the visual one he fixes on in the pool) is one involving "various facilitations corresponding to the entire gamut of perceptions, especially the *sonorous* ones . . ." (*Tales of Love*, p. 40).
- <sup>48</sup>"Let's pretend there's a way of getting through into [Looking-glass House], somehow, Kitty. Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through . . ." Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* (New York: Signet, 1960), p. 129.
- <sup>49</sup>Moruzzi makes this kind of objection in "National Objects" when she interprets Kristeva's return to "the comforts of Enlightenment humanism" (140) as a failure on Kristeva's part to accept the return of the abject, the foreign element that is expelled, abjected when identity is consolidated (143-47). For the nation, the abject is the group of foreigners expelled when territorial borders are established; and its return is embodied in the increasing numbers of immigrants in France and the threats to its national identity that are brought along with them. The return of the abject threatens the borders of identity, and thus the stability of the nation-state. Moruzzi sees Kristeva heading in the direction of dissolving fixed national identity, but then retreating, resisting this disintegration and waxing nostalgic for the safety of humanist ideals. According to Moruzzi, Kristeva seems unable to accept what her own work suggests, namely that the return of abjection requires the death of the ego, and the ego of the nation-state is not yet dead in her work. Yet, as discussed below, I believe it is possible to view Kristeva's discussion of national identity as a way to go *through* identity to difference. This might help explain Kristeva's claim that abjection not only brings about the death of the ego, but also its rebirth: "Abjection is a *resurrection* that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (*Powers of Horror*, p. 15, italics mine). Identity, the ego (of both the subject and the nation) become *pliable* through the return of abjection; they are not disintegrated altogether.
- <sup>50</sup>See, especially, Kristeva, "What of Tomorrow's Nation?", *Nations Without Nationalism*, pp. 1-47; and *Strangers to Ourselves* pp. 127-95.
- <sup>51</sup>Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, p. 56.
- <sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 41.
- <sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>56</sup>Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 131.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 148. "Human rights" does not cover the specific meaning attached to the "rights of man" in French political history (discussed by Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves*, especially pp. 148-54), but as I am not going to enter into a detailed account of this meaning here I believe the gender-neutral term will do for the present purpose.

<sup>58</sup>Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* pp. 152-53.

<sup>59</sup>Kristeva, *Nations Without Nationalism*, p. 27

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>61</sup>See Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, pp. 169-92 for a discussion of the analogy between the crises of foreignness in the subject and the crises of foreigners in the nation. Through recognizing the strangeness in oneself one learns "an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable" (182), and the same seems to be true for national identity as well.

<sup>62</sup>I have purposefully left out many of Kristeva's discussions of specific political and legal remedies for national identity crises, as I wanted to focus mainly on the general structure of identity-as-fiction and as means for bringing out difference. For a discussion of some practical problems with Kristeva's humanist solutions to immigration issues (and possibly reasons why Kristeva's view of the nation might *not* be a good model to use for feminism) see Noëlle McAfee, "Abject Strangers: Toward an Ethics of Respect," in *Ethics, Politics and Difference in Kristeva's Writing*, pp. 116-134. In "National Objects," Norma Claire Moruzzi also offers some important criticisms of Kristeva's views on national identity not addressed above, which would need to be discussed within a more in-depth study of Kristeva and Enlightenment humanism than is provided here.