

1997

Julia Kristeva and the Psychological Dynamics of Writing

Janet M. Ellerby

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Follow this and additional works at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), [Educational Psychology Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Instructional Media Design Commons](#), [Liberal Studies Commons](#), [Other Education Commons](#), [Special Education and Teaching Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ellerby, Janet M. (1997) "Julia Kristeva and the Psychological Dynamics of Writing," *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*: Vol. 3 , Article 6.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jaepl3t2ax>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl/vol3/iss1/6>

This article is brought to you freely and openly by Volunteer, Open-access, Library-hosted Journals (VOL Journals), published in partnership with The University of Tennessee (UT) University Libraries. This article has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning by an authorized editor. For more information, please visit <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jaepl>.

Julia Kristeva and the Psychological Dynamics of Writing

Cover Page Footnote

Janet M. Ellerby teaches critical theory and 20th century fiction and coordinates the Womens Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Julia Kristeva and the Psychological Dynamics of Writing

Janet M. Ellerby

By tapping into latent emotional dynamics, Julia Kristeva's poststructuralist psychology offers a provocative means to modify the emphasis of academic discourse on cognitive order.

Cognitive psychology has provided us with protocols and processing models that examine the diverse ways writers solve problems. Recent sociocognitive orientations continue to identify observation-based discourse patterns that writers use to construct meaning within "the broader context of a social and cultural context, of language, of discourse conventions" (Flower, 1994, p. 52). With sophisticated conceptual maps and experimental savvy, sociocognitivists adeptly investigate interacting subprocesses in constructing negotiated meaning. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) demonstrate with precision that "microlevel studies of . . . *individual processes*, can also be interpreted (from the macrolevel) as *communicative acts within a discursive network or system*" (p. ix). Moving beyond the controversy over the value of these findings, I would like to counterpose organized sociocognitive psychology with the poststructuralist psychology of Kristeva.

Most humanists believe that writers are more than serial processors. James Berlin (1988) argues persuasively for a social-epistemic rhetoric, within which language is recognized as a "social phenomenon that is a product of a particular historical moment" (p. 488). Berlin critiques the attention cognitivists have paid to mapping the heuristics of writing while regarding the mind as a straightforward "set of structures that performs in a rational manner, adjusting and reordering functions in the service of the goals of the individual" (p. 482). Berlin is right to see that "[t]here is no universal, eternal, and authentic self"; instead, "[t]he self is always a creation of a particular historical and cultural moment" (p. 489).

Clearly we create meaning through a complex synthesis of history, culture, and intellect. However, by widening our investigations to psychoanalysis, those of us who theorize about and teach composition may come to understand more fully that writing emanates not only from the intellect and ideological situatedness, but also from deep-seated emotions and fantasies. Writing theorists need to take a more comprehensive look at the ways personal casting and emotional tonality influence writing. Kristeva's reconfiguration of symbolic discourse offers us one provocative way to look beyond cognitive, sociocognitive, and social epistemic boundaries to new ways of understanding the mysteries of composing.

Janet M. Ellerby teaches critical theory and 20th century fiction and coordinates the Women's Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Kristeva critiques the concept of *language* as a monolithic structure, focusing on a *speaking subject* that is divided, decentered, heterogeneous. As a member of the *Tel Quel* group, a political circle of emerging poststructuralists in 1960s Paris and publishing in the journal *Tel Quel*, Kristeva came to an understanding "of writing (*écriture*) as *production*, not representation" (as cited in Moi, 1986, p. 4). Kristeva observes: "[W]e can adopt the term of *writing* when it concerns a text seen as production, in order to distinguish it from the concept of . . . 'speech'" (1986c, p. 86). Writing theorists recognize that writing is a complex signifying *process* rather than a monolithic *system*. However, Kristeva helps us recognize the subject who writes, who produces text, not only as a social agent and a social product, but also as a psychologically complex subject with rebellious impulses—a *writing subject* who consciously and unconsciously evades rubrics, intentionally and unintentionally disrupts and destroys them.

Before postmodernism catapulted into intellectual parlance, we believed the autonomous individual was an intentional author of his or her words. Writers, we thought, could represent their experience—could know it and express it truthfully. Then, as we assimilated Freud's and Lacan's theories of the unconscious—that unknowable site harboring our most trenchant desires, fantasies, and self-projections—we established that not only does the subject become plural, indeterminate, even illusionary, but the *writing subject* also loses autonomy and intention. Writers are no longer the captains of their souls.

Herein lies my interest, within the situated, intuitive process of the *writing subject*. To act responsibly on our professional truism that all meaning is contextual, we might take seriously Kristeva's idea of *intertextuality*, a complex interpenetration of drives, emotions, ideology, politics, and culture. According to Kristeva, a writer's consciously comprehended and intended meaning determines only a part of this complex intertextuality (Morris, 1993, p. 138). Kristeva asserts, "Writing is upheld not by the subject of understanding, but by a divided subject, even a pluralized subject, that occupies . . . permutable, multiple and even mobile places," (1980, p. 111) as the unconscious attempts continuously to disrupt the writer's attempt to control meaning. Repressed feeling is *condensed* in language, and words suddenly become uncontrollably loaded with ambiguity and emotion. What we write is rarely what we mean. Rather than relying on the social-epistemic model that locates the writer in a dialectic between time and culture, or on the sociocognitivist model that posits consistent structures of the mind and equates goal-directed writing with technical rationality, we might recognize the irrational, the unrehearsed, and the unresolved. The writer unconsciously rejects and disrupts convention, hence limiting forms of discourse—all as a normal part of writing.

This theory, then, suggests that within the writer, there is a continuous tension between repressive social control and disruptive excess. Foucault (1973), for example, has demonstrated how language functions repressively by putting us in our place within the conceptual order, but he also notes how language also contains an excess of meaning that constantly threatens to disrupt defined identities and expose the fiction of imposed truths. To explore the revolutionary potential of an excess of meaning, we might eschew academic conventions and experiment with a discourse that refuses to settle into unitary meaning, a discourse that

destabilizes its repressive foundations.

Kristeva revises Lacan's distinction between the imaginary and symbolic into a distinction between the semiotic and the symbolic. The interaction between these two processes constitutes the signifying process from which writing emanates. To explain the semiotic, Kristeva appropriates the term *chora* from Plato who refers to it as "an invisible and formless being which . . . partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible" (as cited in Moi, 1985, p. 161). Kristeva (1984) redefines the *chora* as a provisional articulation that is neither a model nor a copy, but linked to the preOedipal rhythms of heartbeat and pulse, dark and light, hot and cold, food and feces (chap. 2).

Kristeva (1984) follows Lacan in positing the "mirror phase" as the first step that "permit[s] the constitution of objects detached from the semiotic *chora*" (p. 46), and the Oedipal phase as the period in which the process of splitting is fully accomplished. Once the subject has entered into the symbolic order of language, the *chora* will be repressed and will be perceived not as language, but as "pulsional pressure" on symbolic language: as contradiction, meaninglessness, disruption, silence, and absence. The *chora*, then, constitutes the perpetually disruptive dimension of discourse (Kristeva, 1984, chap. 6; Moi, 1985, p. 162).

All language always contains within it the two dispositions—the semiotic and the symbolic. The symbolic is master and control, and it disposes us toward the fixed, the unitary, the systematic, the linear. The semiotic, with its origins in the preOedipal phase, encourages us to identify *with* rather than separate *from* the Other. Writing, then, is a dialectic: The symbolic imposes uniform meaning and structure while the semiotic continually destabilizes that urge for fixity. Furthermore, "since writing breaks the 'subject' apart into multiple doers, into possible places of retention or loss of meaning within 'discourse' and 'history,' it inscribes, not the original-paternal law, but *other* laws . . . its [writing's] legitimacy is illegal" (Kristeva, 1980, p. 113). The writing process—a pluralized, fragmented, conflicted, divergent undertaking—is epistemic, for it always includes the generative potential for synthesizing new meaning as the writer struggles for constancy and originality.

To conceptualize the semiotic is to be caught in the paradox of both retaining and subverting the ordering presence of the symbolic. Without the control of the symbolic, writing is overwhelmed by unconscious drives and becomes psychotic babble. It is the symbolic which allows us to communicate in society discursively. "There is no *other space* from which we can speak" (as cited in Moi, 1985, p. 170). Since writing is inevitably implicated in the social, political, and historical, if we are to speak seriously, it must be within the framework of the symbolic order because we are involuntarily sutured into the assumptions and values of patriarchy. But we also inhabit in discourse an unstable and threatened subjectivity continuously pressured by the illogical, drive-governed psychological negativity of the semiotic "which rends and renews the social code" (Kristeva, 1986d, p. 33). Although an ethic of subversion clearly undergirds Kristeva's theory of language, she also posits an inexorable subjectivity situated in the symbolic order. Paradoxically, without structure, subversive writing is impossible.

Likewise, the subversive writer is able to allow the *jouissance*, or plenitude

of the semiotic, to disrupt the symbolic order. *Jouissance* endangers the symbolic resources of the writer, challenging what may be structured, contesting representation as it "makes the real loom forth as a jubilant enigma" (Kristeva, 1986e, p. 230). However, as the plenitude of the semiotic *remodels* the representation, the plenitude must be tailored by restraint: "Indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine, this space [the semiotic] underlying the written is rhythmic, unfettered, irreducible to its intelligible verbal translation; it is musical, anterior to judgment, but restrained by a single guarantee: syntax" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 29). Kristeva foregrounds expulsion, disruption, *jouissance*, rather than organization and solidarity. The semiotic fosters unfettered, disruptive texts—which obscure clarity as they achieve rhythm. Such texts prefigure cultural transformations. "[P]recisely through the excess of the languages whose very multitude is the only sign of life, one can attempt to bring about multiple sublations of the unnameable, the unrepresentable, the void. This is the real cutting edge of dissidence" (Kristeva, 1986b, p. 300). Since the writer is motivated not only by the conscious desire to make meaning, but by the unconscious capacity to splinter and revitalize social codes, systematic control might not always be what we want to encourage, especially since we often find the intertextual power to expel the old and imagine the new on the threshold of indeterminacy.

Kristeva's consistent and fundamental project has been to produce a discourse that always confronts this impasse—that it is both subject to and subversive of the law. Such a discourse dares to think language against itself. And so Kristeva expects political writing, be it liberal, socialist, or feminist, to reveal itself as yet another master-discourse, since the sway of even a counterhegemony commands, given its frame in the rational/cognitive realm. Since the 1980s, Kristeva has thus distanced herself from theorists who see all discourse as political, as implicated by ruling ideology. Taking the unfashionable position that love or desire cannot be adequately understood in terms of the political, Kristeva maintains:

If we stay with only a political explanation of human phenomena we will be overwhelmed by the so-called mystical crisis, or spiritual crisis Every bourgeois family has a son or daughter who has a mystical crisis So my problem is: how . . . through . . . discourse can we try to elaborate . . . these critical points of the human experience. . . . (as cited in Moi, 1986, pp. 8–9)

Not only do our students experience such mystical or spiritual crises, we all do. How can we allow for the kind of discourse that might explore these critical points of human experience? First, we can recognize writers as neither fixed and stable nor unstable and unfettered, but as writers-in-process within the symbolic. This means not exclusively immersing student writers in highly volatile political issues where they must negotiate difference, take a stance, and follow argumentative models. Instead, there might be opportunities to explore discursively the spiritual, the personal, the emotional, opportunities to resist the political, the contentious, and the public. I am not suggesting here that traditional discourse and the semiotic be reduced to binary oppositions between which we should choose; the semiotic, identifiable by slippages, is present in all languages. Nev-

ertheless, by way of a latitude which allows impulsiveness and fantasy, we can create meaning not rigidly fixed in formulaic discourse. The composing milieu for academic writers should animate the free play of the imaginative and the imaginary. Furthermore, the imaginary should not be considered just a frivolous hiatus from *serious* composition modes, but as a profound space from which to compose.

Kristeva associates the imaginary with transference, the process whereby the analysand transfers early relationships into the analysis. The concept of transference originated with Freud and has been reinterpreted by psychoanalytic theorists in myriad ways. One method (often caricatured today) is the silent, blank-walled analyst who becomes the object of a transference brought entirely from the analysand's past experiences and relationships. The analytic technique here consists of analyzing the resistances and defenses that keep the client from acknowledging transference feelings. Such transference is entirely one way. Nancy Chodorow offers another interpretation—one that complements Kristeva's own interpretation. Chodorow characterizes transference as "a 'therapeutic' or 'working' alliance between analyst and analysand, . . . an agreement made with the analysand's ego to work on change, in tandem as it were" (1989, p. 160). The analyst's strong feelings about the analysand or about particular moments in the analysis were always an unwelcome intrusion for Freud. However, for Chodorow and Kristeva, the analyst, as an empathic Other, handles the transference lovingly, for it is the idealizing space that can yield the healing discourse. Transference love becomes the indispensable element of the cure. (This conception of love is *not* to be confused with primary love, the prototype of genital love.) The created loving space of transference helps the analysand to focus the imaginary, allowing him or her to become a subject-in-process in the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1986a, p. 248).

Can this approach, presumably remote from our discipline, be of use within the academy? Though the profession might be uncomfortable because transference love is introduced into the writing apprenticeship, I propose that it supports writers-in-process within the symbolic order while also modulating the traditional emphasis on clarity, logical analysis, and correctness.

Such a suggestion seems an intimidating step away from traditional pedagogies based on the technical predictions of cognitive psychology, the rational components of the sociocognitive process, and the "interpellations of subjects within the always already ideological" (Berlin, 1988, p. 490) of social constructionism. Nevertheless, I want to encourage a kind of enabling transference between teachers and writers-in-process. Such an alliance is risky for both. Still it is just such a connection that could allow the writer-in-process and the teacher-in-process the trusting locality in which to explore, experiment, and push beyond the boundaries of academic discourse that neutralizes resistance. If we are to follow Kristeva's notions all the way, we must furnish the writer-in-process with the imaginary space where the heterogeneous "pulsions of the semiotic" (Kristeva, 1984, chap. 6) can intrude upon and even disrupt the limiting forms of symbolic language and university discourse.

Lynn Worsham (1991) sees the dichotomy between *écriture féminine* (for Kristeva, postmodern discourse) and American university discourse as a "battle

royal" (p. 83). For Worsham, *écriture féminine* cannot be freely imported into the writing classroom to work alongside academic discourse because the predominant goal of literacy is "aligned with the ideology of the clear and distinct, the transparency of communication, the overriding need for consensus and communication" (p. 93). Worsham claims that although *écriture féminine* cannot be incorporated into composition studies and pedagogical strategies, it can contribute to "an examination of how composition conducts itself as a theoretical enterprise" (p. 98)—an enterprise that reproduces ideology as it "promises to empower students to (re)produce the 'proper' kind of discourse" (p. 100). Unlike Worsham, I believe there is and should be a place for postmodern discourse. By creating pedagogical strategies and teacher/student relationships that invite the interpenetration of the social, historical, emotional, and imaginary, that entice the semiotic to surface, we can practice modes of communication that resist and refuse homogeneity, neutrality, and phallogentrism.

The relevance of Kristeva's insights on intertextuality emerged when I recently worked with a graduate student. Tina had been greatly moved when we read Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, a novel about a mother's suicide and its long-term effects on her daughters. At the time of Tina's first reading of the novel, she was also writing an autobiographical account of her own mother's suicide for another course. The simultaneous immersion into the real and the imagined was so intense that Tina wanted to write about both the fictional and real maternal suicides for her master's thesis. It is instructive that she first approached a creative writing professor to direct her thesis, thinking this was the only way to gain the imaginative leeway that would permit her to undertake her project. However, this first relationship did not provide her with the sustaining alliance she needed to examine deeply the emotional turbulence that engulfed her. As a relatively new teacher, Tina's first advisor was not yet able to negotiate the tangled nuances of such guardianship and erred on the side of amity, offering the rapport of a friend while overlooking the professional support a teacher and mentor must preserve. For this kind of exposure, a student and teacher must establish a subtle relationship that allows for emotional intimacy while still maintaining professionalism.

Tina came to me, and I believe we achieved a kind of enabling transference such as I have described. But what can we, as teachers, offer Tina that her first advisor could not? First, as guides through students' psychological writing journeys, teachers can make a significant place for self-reflective autobiography. Personal, emotional engagement is at the heart of penetrating prose and is integral to the adventurous writing I ask students to undertake. We have all read too many vacuous student essays that demonstrate polished critical technique and clear, concise syntactical skill but have no vigor, no soul. Teachers need to be prepared to conduct students through emotions that will range from joy and wonder to despair and anger, through responses that are daring, through writing that will shake us all up.

Second, as teachers wishing to allow for the semiotic to bubble up and invade academic discourse, we can prepare for students' resistance to unruly prose. Stoically socialized into what counts as real writing, students may be hesitant to embrace the broad parameters that resist codes and rupture expectations. Many

students may ask for carefully delineated guidelines, formulas, or models, for they simply have not been allowed since grade school to exercise their imaginations and emotions in their writing tasks. They may, at first, founder in this discomfiting exploration of the heartfelt and mysterious. To elicit postmodern prose is not to say anything goes; it is to ask for thoughtfully passionate prose that students can and, I think, want to produce when many of the strictures of traditional academic discourse are relinquished.

Third, teachers need to remember that by helping students reflect on the spiritual, the emotional, and the imaginary, we are asking them to represent the psychological entanglements of their lives. We can help them describe their unique perplexities, but we are not our students' intimate friends; we are not their counselors; we are not their therapists; and we must resist all invitations to take on such roles. Indeed, it is important to remember that resolution is not our job; as teachers and learners, we have learned from the classicists to respect the enigmatic, the unknowable. It is not our place to counsel our students toward revelation and resolution, but to help them have a tolerance for the unresolved, for partiality, for the mystery that persists at the core of our most personal selves.

Tina and I agreed to work on her ideas in tandem, and as teacher and student, we built a fellowship from which Tina's work progressed. In a spirit of trust, Tina was able to write courageously about the psychological impact that *Housekeeping* had on her understanding of her mother's death. Our relationship gave Tina a position within the symbolic from which she interwove the fictional and the real by blurring the boundaries between poetry, autobiography, and critical analysis. However, like Kristeva, Tina and I grew to accept that, although her writing competently adjusted to the symbolic's demand for coherence, absences and ambiguities remained. These persisted not only in Tina's work but in Robinson's *Housekeeping*; they mark where the symbolic is inadequate to explain the fervent irrationality of a mother's suicide and a daughter's troubling memories and unresolved emotions, where the "pulsional pressure" of the semiotic refuses the neat categorizations familiar to us in academic essays.

If we hope to encourage transformative writing which imaginatively *rends and renews*, we might consider moving the emotional and the ambiguous to the center of appropriateness rather than relegating them to the margins. Have we not already taken steps in that direction by encouraging journal responses, brainstorming, and personal interaction, modifying our obsession with control and precision? Surely, there are still other strategies that responsibly can be employed to tap the potential of the semiotic.

Unlike many poststructuralists, Kristeva sees ethics as central to her work. As an analyst, she is under the ethical obligation to try to cure her clients (as cited in Moi, 1986, p. 17). We do not want to deploy such medical analogies, but we might imagine sustaining approaches that help writers-in-process see the interpenetration of the social, the cognitive, and the psychological. And in so doing, give a force and a commitment to the composing enterprise that is often missing when their writing is one dimensional. To operationalize transference means to build empathic alliances with our students, whether they be graduate students like Tina or first-year writing students. Such alliances can yield the trusting locality from which students can experiment with the historical, social,

and psychological facets of their unique writing selves. In fact, as Chodorow (1989) points out, this practical activity, the empathic involvement with others and the taking account of one another's anxieties, interests, and pursuits, exemplifies a social objective (p. 160). By providing empathic guardianship, we can better assist our students in experimenting with the imaginary as a means of resisting conformity, revealing difference, and producing provocative discourse. Within such creative relationships, we can better tap the intertextual power that can balance our symbolic urge for cognitive order with our semiotic need for emotional freedom. ☺

References

- Berlin, J. (1988). Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class. *College English*, 50, 477–494.
- Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. (1995). *Genre knowledge in disciplinary communication: Cognition/culture/power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Chodorow, N. J. (1989). *Feminism and psychoanalytic theory*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Flower, L. (1994). *The construction of negotiated meaning: A social cognitive theory of writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1973). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. New York: Vintage.
- Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in language: A semiotic approach to literature and art*. (T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Revolution in poetic language*. (M. Waller, Trans.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986a). Freud and love: Treatment and its discontents. (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 238–271). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986b). A new type of intellectual: The dissident. (S. Hand, Trans.). In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 292–300). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986c). Semiotics: A critical science and/or a critique of science. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 74–88). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986d). The system and the speaking subject. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 24–33). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kristeva, J. (1986e). The true-real. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva reader* (pp. 214–237). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Moi, T. (1985). *Sexual/textual politics: Feminist literary theory*. London: Methuen.
- Moi, T. (Ed.). (1986). Introduction. *The Kristeva reader*. (pp. 1–22). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Morris, P. (1993). *Literature and feminism*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Robinson, M. (1980). *Housekeeping*. Toronto and New York: Bantam.
- Worsham, L. (1991). Writing against writing: The predicament of *écriture féminine* in composition studies. In P. Harkin & J. Schilb (Eds.), *Contending with words: Composition and rhetoric in a postmodern age* (pp. 82–104). New York: Modern Language Association.