Julia Kristeva (1941–) is a philosopher, semiotician, psychoanalyst, novelist, and professor whose work has profoundly influenced post-WWII interdisciplinary thought. Born in communist Bulgaria to a mother dedicated to Darwin and a father devoted to Orthodox Christianity, she began her education in a French Catholic primary school. Her state education was supplemented with afternoons at the Alliance Française, which is where her voracious appetite for (French) literature first took hold. At university, she joined a small circle of talented dissident writers in Sofia, making a name for herself in print by the age of 24. In 1965, she was awarded a French government scholarship to study in Paris. Working with Lucien Goldmann and Roland Barthes, she discovered the journal *Tel Quel*, where she met her future husband, Philippe Sollers. Kristeva became known in the 1960s and 1970s for her work on how the unconscious impacts the production of desire and language, and in the 1980s and 1990s addressed multiple forms of marginal subjectivity as well as the question of how to revolt. Her six novels, published from 1990 to 2015, explore many of the same themes as her theoretical work, but while "traveling through herself." Her books on "women's genius" in the 2000s and on religion in the 2010s have changed the international conversation about how to (re)think the 21st century in an increasingly hyperconnected, violent world.

Alice Jardine is a professor at Harvard University, where she teaches 20th- and 21st-century French/Francophone literature, poststructuralist and feminist theory, and Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality. Her *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (1985), co-translation of Kristeva's *Desire in Language* (1980), and several co-edited volumes (e.g. *The Future of Difference*, *Men in Feminism*, *Shifting Scenes*, *Living Attention*) reflect her deep investment in understanding how issues of women, gender, and sexuality are integral to the analysis of politics, culture, and society.

Mari Ruti (PhD, Harvard University) is Distinguished Professor of Critical Theory and of Gender and Sexuality Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. She is the author of thirteen books, including *Between Levinas and Lacan: Self, Other, Ethics* (Bloomsbury Press, 2015) and *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (Bloomsbury Press, 2018).

Contents

Acknowledgments

There are a handful of people without whom this book simply would not exist. First and foremost, of course, I am deeply grateful to Julia Kristeva for her generous attention and time, as well as for her patience with my endless questions. I also want to thank Nancy K. Miller who first suggested that I undertake this project and who has remained available whenever I needed good advice. I am forever grateful to Mari Ruti, who—beyond her normal responsibilities as one of the coeditors of Bloomsbury Academic's Psychoanalytic Horizons Series—put her life and work on hold for several weeks at the end of this project in order to undertake a detailed editing of this entire volume. A world-class editor, Mari was my graduate student decades ago and, in a strange bit of role reversal, has turned out to be my most important writing mentor as I have returned to my writing desk after years of institutional activism.

I do not know how to thank enough my two talented and generous research and editorial assistants, David Francis and Emma Zitzow-Childs, who brought their acute intelligence and diligent editorial acumen to this manuscript. I also want to thank Philip Sayers for his meticulous attention to detail at the final stages of this project. Thanks also to Amy Martin and Leela Ulaganathan for their graceful responses to my countless queries during the production process. A special thanks to Loren Wolfe—co-interviewer and co-producer of the "biography tapes"—and a totally unflappable *compagnon de route*, whether driving remote Île de Ré roads or trying to read menus in Cyrillic.

I also want to thank very sincerely Haaris Naqvi, Editorial Director of Bloomsbury Academic in New York. I had forgotten what it is like to have a great publisher in one's corner. I also owe much gratitude to the Ruth Landes Memorial Research Fund and to Mr. David Latham, Programs Director of the Reed Foundation, for believing in this project from the very beginning and for funding the sabbatical which allowed me to begin it. I am

also indebted to many other sources of support both near and far: in Cambridge, MA—especially Dean Robin Kelsey and the Faculty Publication Fund, the Chairs and staff of Romance Languages and Literatures and of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality—and in Sofia, Bulgaria—especially the dedicated research librarians at the National Library. I have been immensely helped by Kristeva's assistant in Paris, Guillaume Leplâtre, and the wonderful photographers/videographers in France: Georgi Galabov, Sophie Zhang, and Alain Monclin.

I also want to thank the many friends and colleagues who have in one way or another supported this project from its inception: warm thanks to Miglena Nikolchina and Iskra Angelova who generously guided me not only through the streets of Sofia but also through the mysteries of communist and post-communist Bulgarian history and culture. I want to thank Kelly Oliver, Rebecca Tuvel, and the Kristeva Circle for their welcoming reception at Vanderbilt where I first presented some of this book's material. Thanks are due as well to Patsy Baudoin who translated several of Kristeva's journalistic responses on short notice in the midst of the media frenzy around the Sabina dossier in 2018 and to Susan Suleiman who helped me understand better the Eastern European contextual complexities of the dossier. I also owe a debt of gratitude to two excellent translators/transliterators from Bulgarian to English: Margarita Teneva, a young intellectual in Sofia with a Master's Degree from the English and American Studies Department, University of Sofia, and Maria Vassileva, translator and doctoral candidate in the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University.

Finally, I want to thank my family and friends everywhere for their patience and support during this extended writing project. Gratitude is especially due to my close Boston circle of friends who never lost faith in me and listened 24/7 to my complaints: among many, special thanks to Janet Beizer, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Kathy Richman, Nancy Salzer, and Hope Steele. Last, but far from least, I want to thank my daughter, Anna, for everything from her expertise in photography and digital magic to her willingness to take scary moonlit walks over the salt marshes of the Île de Ré. Thank you, Anna, for your unwavering belief in me.

Author's Note

For the convenience of English-speaking readers, the titles of Kristeva's books, articles, and talks are provided in English in the text. However, because the chronological sequence of publications and public appearances is important in an intellectual biography such as this one, the date that accompanies each title refers to the original French date of publication or presentation. Complete French references, along with complete references to English translations, are provided in the endnotes. Where no official English translation exists, the translation is mine, and in such cases, given that no English publication information exists, only the French reference is provided in the notes.

In order to avoid unnecessary repetition in the endnotes, in most instances complete references to Kristeva's books are given when these books are examined in detail rather than at the first (allusive) mention. The Table of Contents—which lists Kristeva's books—guides readers to sections of the text where complete citations are provided. For the sake of specialist readers, Appendix 2 contains a chronological list of Kristeva's books in French.

All quotations not otherwise attributed are from my private taped interviews with Kristeva. Likewise, all translations of quotations not otherwise attributed are mine.

Portions of the Introduction and Part I have been published in *New Forms of Revolt: Essays on Kristeva's Intimate Politics*, ed. Sarah K. Hansen and Rebecca Tuvel (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017) and *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today*, ed. Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016). Images not attributed are in the public domain or are posted on Julia Kristeva's website: http://www.kristeva.fr. I have captured some of them as screen shots from the documentary, *Histoires d'amour et de passerelles* (2011), written and directed by Teri Wehn-Damisch. The complete documentary is available on Kristeva's website.

To listen to the unconscious means that one is at once in the story/in history . . . because people come with stories . . . they tell stories . . . and at the same time, you are surveying . . . you enter the depths of this verticality . . . it is a very specific temporality.

The question is unavoidable: if we are not on the side of those whom society wastes in order to reproduce itself, where are we?

Julia Kristeva

Introduction: At the Risk of Thinking

Julia Kristeva is the first to admit that she is quite at a loss to know who Julia Kristeva is. It was the very first thing she said during the first of my many interviews with her: "It's very difficult. Sometimes I do not recognize myself in the demands people make of me to talk about Julia Kristeva. Because I am not entirely sure who this woman is. There is an image, there is a received idea, there is even sometimes a cult."

Kristeva asks: Who is this woman, Julia Kristeva? She travels around the world, accepting honors and speaking to huge audiences wherever she goes —often to her genuine astonishment. She knows, as a practicing psychoanalyst, that autobiography is a "false genre." On top of that, she has been psychoanalyzed, which is a process that, in her opinion, leads to a complete "transvaluation of the self." As she puts it: "Julia Kristeva, that's a lot of people: psychoanalyst, linguist, teacher, writer, mother, wife."

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

The Question of the Intellectual—Again

I care in large part because in our still early part of the twenty-first century, there is in my opinion no more urgent matter than developing through dialogue, debate, and practice a new model of the intellectual. I imagine this new model as flexible, contingent, but powerful, yet hopefully beyond the careerist and/or media models that I see in the American university. And one thing is clear: Julia Kristeva has never stopped thinking not only about what it means to be an intellectual but also, more precisely, about how to live a thinking life.

In the epistemological, political, and artistic situation today, what does it

mean for me to engage in what might be called a "strong autobiographical reading" of Kristeva's work in order to help sort through the chaos of how to live, think, and work as an intellectual in the twenty-first century?[1] Does this kind of reading as a search for how to work as an intellectual amount to narcissism at a moment when intellectuals might need to adopt perhaps a more historically familiar "committed" model of labor? Is it possible to engage in strong auto-bio-graphical reading without allowing oneself to get in the way of the biographical project, without occupying all the space?

I open with these questions because although this book is technically an "intellectual biography," it does not follow the genre in a loyal way. Rather, I offer an "essay" in the French tradition, a reading of Kristeva's life and work as part of my own search for a new model of the intellectual. My founding question for this book has been quite simply: What constitutes Kristeva's originality and authority for the twenty-first century? Through her emphasis on the need for an urgent revival of the humanities, does a new model of the intellectual emerge that is viable for the twenty-first century as we are living it? I think it does. Is it a compelling model? I think it is. *The contestatory intellectual*: that is what Kristeva calls it.

In the Face of Resistance

There is no doubt that Kristeva is one of the most important writers of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. She is the author of some fifty well-known books, written across several disciplinary fields including philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology, linguistics, semiotics, and theology, and translated across the entire world. As her international reputation as an influential intellectual has expanded, she has received many high honors: she was the first Laureate of the international Holberg Prize created in 2004 by the Norwegian government; she was awarded the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought in 2006; she was named Commander in the Legion of Honor in 2015; and she received the prestigious Prix Saint-Simon in 2017. She taught for many years at the University of Paris 7, where she founded a well-respected Humanities Institute, as well as at several North American universities, including Columbia University and the University of Toronto. She has also been celebrated for her creation of the international Simone de Beauvoir Prize, awarded to extraordinary women intellectuals, writers, artists, and activists.

In spite of all this accomplishment and acclaim, Kristeva's work is also attacked, marginalized, and even ridiculed both in the media and in certain parts of the academy, particularly in the United States, on the right as well

as the left. Some have said that this is because she is a woman, because she is following in the footsteps of the very few major women intellectuals of the twentieth century, especially Simone de Beauvoir.[2] Indeed, it is impossible not to see how similar the negative reactions have been to their very different work, undertaken at very different historical moments. To the extent that mine is an explicitly feminist biographical project, I do attempt to show what is unique about Kristeva as a woman intellectual, a "female genius," including what is revealing in that regard about the attacks on her work.[3] But truthfully, I have never fully understood the resistance she encounters—although sometimes I think I do.

What I know for sure is that since I first started reading Kristeva in the mid-1970s, I have remained fascinated by her loyal defense of the creative, psychic process at the heart of the literary and artistic humanities as well as by her ability to maintain this defense across mind-numbing historical change. Do I still read Kristeva today because of this defense? Or is it because of my fascination with her status as a "migrant female intellectual"? Or is it because of her identity as an intellectual and writer who is also a mother? Or is it because of her advocacy for those who are marginalized in frightening new ways in an increasingly technologically flattened-out world? Or is it because of my attraction to risk: to the risk of thinking, to the idea of putting at risk my sense of who I am while embracing Julia Kristeva's call for all of us to take the risk of thinking. *Period.*

The title of my volume, *At the Risk of Thinking*, is a play on Kristeva's 2001 *At the Risk of Thought* [4] —a collection of her interviews with the journalist Marie-Christine Navarro—in part because this book was the first time that Julia Kristeva exercised her formidable powers of thinking while also making herself personally vulnerable in public. My choice to echo the title of her 2001 book—to entitle my own volume just slightly differently with a gerund as noun—is not only due to the fact that *thinking* is the active core of Kristeva's life/work. It also refle cts my belief that it has been through her increasing willingness to reveal her own vulnerabilities *while still thinking* that Kristeva has more rapidly connected with millions of readers worldwide.

Sometimes I wonder whether the strong resistance to Kristeva's thought, particularly on the American left, is an allergy to thinking—*period*. Kristeva thinks all the time. For her, like for Hannah Arendt, thinking is living. Life is thinking. Moreover, like Arendt, she believes that the incapacity to think—especially when thinking is uncomfortable, challenging, or even dangerous

—inevitably leads to totalitarianism, to monologism, of one sort or another. The resistance to re-thinking, to remembering—the loss of historical memory—is what leads to the banality of evil. Even today. Perhaps most especially today.

Whatever the reasons for the resistance to Kristeva's work, the critiques are serious, loud, and often difficult to answer. There is the familiar accusation of elitism, most often accompanied by an allusion to the difficulty of her prose; there are the accusations of Eurocentrism;[5] there is the often virulent critique of her persistent interest in religion; and there are, of course, the complaints about her allegiance to psychoanalysis with all of its nineteenth-century echoes of the heteronormative bourgeoisie and its twentieth-century emphases on the individual psyche as opposed to social and political forces.[6] For example, I could not believe the angry hullabaloo in the 2000s about her psychoanalytic focus on male adolescence, on the adolescent's need to believe in ideals, and on how the shattering of these ideals can lead to nihilism, indeed to crisis, in the context of which Kristeva made reference not only to Western male adolescents but also to young men of Middle Eastern and North African descent being pulled into nihilistic extremism. Her critics seemed to believe that she was saying that there are no other reasons for terrorism besides teenage angst—which is far from being the case.[7]

Although I do not directly engage with Kristeva's most fervent critics in what follows, I do try to highlight what in Kristeva's thought both invites and repels these critiques. Implicitly at least, and in some cases even somewhat forcefully, I address dismissals of Kristeva's work that seem to be based on her "person" and a series of received ideas—almost mythologies—about Kristeva that need dispelling, or at least nuancing. That is, as with most celebrated intellectuals in France, there is an aura of notoriety that surrounds Kristeva, but in a way that is different from what happens to male celebrity intellectuals, given that most often hers is a notoriety that has little to do with her published work. There are, for example, accusations that she is rich (she is not); that she is elitist (no, not in any simple way); that she is relentlessly ambitious (not at all). I can hear the objections: "She wears designer clothes and lives in the 6th arrondissement of Paris and has property on a beautiful French island. Besides, she lets her husband be awful to her . . ." I hope that what follows relieves the popular pressure of these mythologies and reveals them to be profoundly gendered if not misogynist.

By far the longest, loudest, most frequent—and snarkiest—complaint

about Kristeva, particularly on the part of feminists, is her long, loyal, passionate, and very public love affair with Philippe Sollers—from their earliest days to now:

Figure 1.1 Kristeva and Sollers as a young couple. The Julia Kristeva Archive.

Figure 1.2 Kristeva and Sollers as an older couple. Photo by Sophie Zhang.

In Sollers's words: "What is a *coup de foudre*? A *coup de foudre* is a very common expression. It seems that it actually happens from time to time . . . There are attractions . . . But what is a *coup de foudre* that endures? That, well, that's something else. It's complex. It necessarily has to do with the very complex individuals who can eventually reignite each other from time to time."[8]

My *Coup de Foudre*

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

I must ask *myself* this question, since I had one of those for Julia Kristeva in my youth, at least on the intellectual level. And it has endured in the sense that I remain fascinated by Kristeva's work in an unresolved way. I confess that I am, in part at least, writing an intellectual biography of her in order to help my readers to fully engage with the above-mentioned critiques of a body of work that I myself continue to admire and find vitally important. However, I am also searching for an etiology that is not an origin, but rather a start to figuring out what it means to be an *intellectual* in the twenty-first century. Not an aesthete. Not an expert. Not a politician. Not even a scholar. Rather, what Kristeva calls a contestatory intellectual. That is what I try to be, but it is hard. I have not succeeded yet as I write these words.

I first met Julia Kristeva in 1976 when I was twenty-five years old, a naïve woman in my second year of graduate work at Columbia. I was on work-study, and the then chair of the Department of French, Michael Riffaterre, asked me if I wanted to be Kristeva's research assistant. The Kristeva I met then—only ten years my senior—was mesmerizing to me in every way. I was particularly struck by the fact that even as a relatively young intellectual, she could, without batting an eye, withstand being viciously attacked by Marxist graduate students and right-wing faculty alike! She did not care. She was too busy devouring Mallarmé.

What I remember most acutely about Kristeva from that time was the impressive amalgamation of her intellectual brilliance and her devotion to her baby son, David, born in 1975. Over the years, I have stayed attached to David, first babysitting him when he was small, singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" with him over and over and over again.

In part, it was the way Kristeva looked at David that most fascinated me.

Over the years, it has never entered my mind to ask Kristeva about

David's developmental and cognitive delays and disabilities. He was—and is—gorgeous. He is always just himself—just David. And he is adored by both of his parents who have done everything humanly possible to make space for his exquisite singularity.

Figure 1.3 David with his parents, Île de Ré, 1990. The Julia Kristeva Archive.

One of the most mysterious things for Kristeva about "Julia Kristeva" is how detached the image of the academic celebrity is from the everyday struggles of a mother of a handicapped child, a loving wife, an overworked professor, a practicing psychoanalyst, and, of course, someone who thinks, reads, and writes in every spare minute she has. David shares her bafflement at the circulation of the idealized image of "Julia Kristeva" that has very little to do with their daily lives. "I do not know Julia Kristeva," he says with an ironic smile.

Figure 1.4 Summer home on Île de Ré. *Histoires d'amour et de passerelles* (2011), dir. Teri Wehn-Damisch @Cinétévé]

In the summer of 2012, I spent some time on the Île de Ré with David, listening to him recite La Rochefoucauld by heart. The island, located off the western coast of France near La Rochelle and known for its salt marshes, is usually overrun with tourists in the summer. But that summer, it was relatively quiet and I was able to stay long enough to conduct a series of intensive interviews with Kristeva about her life. Yes, I decided to take the risk of figuring out who Julia Kristeva is for me today. I decided to take seriously one of the most significant things I have learned from Kristeva: the importance of the intimate. I am following my desire to better understand how she connects her *vie intime* with the thought processes that she makes public through her constant writing. That is something I want to learn to do better myself.

But I also want to implicitly engage the pesky critiques I have mentioned. Kristeva has described herself as an "energetic pessimist"—which also describes me exactly. Indeed, the world that we are living in right now feeds my energetic pessimism so acutely that I have come to be certain that while I do not always agree with my subject-object, I deeply admire Kristeva's personal and intellectual courage.

Why Now? The Contestatory Intellectual

As Simone de Beauvoir states in the preface to the second volume of her autobiography, *The Prime of Life*, "I must warn [my readers] that I have no intention of telling them everything."[9] That is, there is a specific shape to what follows. While in no way is this book a hagiography (Kristeva is no

saint), I am nevertheless not neutral here and want to be clear about where I am coming from. I believe that

*The world we are living in needs Kristeva's strong ethical drive as a cosmopolitan and contestatory intellectual;
*It needs her insistence on thinking not about identity, but about how to achieve and value what she calls universal singularity;
*It needs her strong insistence on secularism and a new, renewed form of humanism, a transvaluation of classical religion, with the infinite Chain of Being coming to us through books rather than through God and religion;
*It needs her valuing of the arts and literature as unique forms of thought, as when she emphasized recently in China, agreeing with a colleague, that "the only way to confront totalitarian thought is to learn and to ensure that new generations are taught the plurality of languages, literatures, and mentalities of the world, and how to problematize and analyze them";[10]
*It needs her ability to embrace, indeed embody, marginalization and vulnerability. It needs her insistence on all the edges of subjectivity: mental illness, delinquency, mysticism, maternity. And it needs her ideas on disability as not a lack to be fixed through charity but rather an opportunity, not a deprivation but rather an irreducible singularity;
*It needs Kristeva's reflection on "new forms of revolt," given that revolt seems to be the order of the day on a global scale.

Regarding revolt, Kristeva asks: "Is it in the process of waking up digital humanity from its hyperconnected dream? Or is it rather just another ruse of the culture of spectacle that requires more and more ruses in order to endure?"[11] Kristeva argues first and foremost that to truly be alive, one must have a living psychic space and that in the contemporary world, one has to make a strong effort to keep it alive, for example through psychoanalysis, through an artistic practice of some kind, or through the rediscovery of past religious experience—even if one is an atheist. She calls for a new "discourse on life" because the need to believe—to have an immovable certitude about something—is in crisis today, in large part because of the suffocation of psychic space. According to Kristeva, this state of affairs leads to "new maladies of the soul"—to violence, addiction, criminality, nihilism, and somatic suffering.

Kristeva's work toward understanding what Arendt called "extreme evil" has led her to emphasize the necessity of revolt against new forms and

practices of biopolitics, including new global strategies for managing subjectivity through technologies such as social media. For Kristeva, psychic death is about the death of the imaginary—a death from which only a culture of revolt can save us. But how can we revolt in our hypermodern world? How can we revolt when there are obstacles to our psychic life wherever we turn? And how can we revolt against what is perceived as a power vacuum that lacks the kind of central figure—such as a king—that older models of revolution opposed? Kristeva has issued strong warnings about new forms of fascism for our time, warnings increasingly echoed from many other corners as I write these words.

In short, Kristeva u rges resistance to mediatization and mechanization, pushing back against an increasingly digitalized, commodified, and neoliberal technocracy that is taking over human psychic space. For this reason, we need her reflections on biopolitics in late capitalism, particularly as an "update" to Foucauldian ideas of disciplinary regimes.[12] This is especially so at a time in history when the complex dance between what she calls "the need to believe" and "the desire to know" is being replaced by a trudging obsession with how one might fit into the marketplace, where everything and everyone can be bought and sold—preferably in English.

I emphasize all of these things in this intellectual biography, in dialogue with the difficulties of the times in which we are living, and for the sake of my own intellectual narrative. But equally importantly, I insist upon, and therefore highlight in my text, the fact that at the heart of Kristeva's strong thinking over the last fifty years, there is an intimately experiential shape.

Born in Sliven, Bulgaria in 1941, Kristeva arrived in Paris in 1965 very much a young woman educated in the Eastern European communist bloc, a foreigner, an immigrant, a bit traumatized by such a radical change, and searching for a way to be part of all the exciting intellectual and artistic innovation of that time. She found that life-changing experience in Paris. She also found friendship and camaraderie through the group *Tel Quel* and eventually love (and citizenship) with her husband, Philippe Sollers. Soon thereafter she discovered what can only be described as *jouissance*, pure joy/bliss, through becoming mother to her son. During those years, Kristeva remained intensely loyal to the prevailing poststructuralist currents being developed by the pretty much exclusively male intelligentsia in Paris. During the 1960s and 1970s, she was at her most theoretical, developing her abstract vocabularies with breathless rapidity. The major insights of her first publications, such as her 1969 *Semiotike*, 1974 *Revolution in Poetic Language*, and 1977 *Polylogue*, were buried in scientifically driven narrative prose. In retrospect, it is easy to see that this vulnerable yet tough young

woman's intense desire for her work to be taken seriously is inscribed on every page.

What is most striking to me about the texts of these years is their lack of autobiographical inscription.[13] The Kristeva of the 1960s and 1970s was faithful mostly to the very abstract. She was also primarily focused on male subjectivity. While her status as a woman occasionally breaks through (as it does, for example, in the 1974 *About Chinese Women*), she was careful to distance herself from—when she was not outright critiquing—feminism. When she focused on nationality, she looked to the United States or China rather than Eastern Europe. Her status as a mother was mostly hidden from public view. Any conceivable autobiographical voice that there might have been at that point was buried under some very heavy prose, perhaps out of caution given how women's writing has for centuries been dismissed as "only autobiographical."

Kristeva's work in the 1980s and 1990s shifted radically toward a more forthright consideration of what she saw as a serious crisis at the heart of Western civilization, a crisis brought on in large part by the assault of technology and the media on human subjectivity. Her books of this time period insist upon our state of "permanent crisis": her 1980 *Powers of Horror* analyzes the horror of the abject at the heart of Judeo-Christianity; her 1983 *Tales of Love* focuses on the breakdown of love; her 1987 *Black Sun* examines the prevalence and dangers of melancholia and depression; her 1988 *Strangers to Ourselves* discusses the dilemmas of strangeness and foreignness; and her 1993 *New Maladies of the Soul* emphasizes the importance of psychoanalytic theory for thinking about the social. After this important series of theoretical books, Kristeva finally arrived at fiction. It was almost as if Kristeva got to a point where trying to communicate the "deep logics" of Western civilization and their consequences today in theoretical language became too frustrating; it was as if only the language of fiction could capture what she was getting at. Kristeva thus became a novelist, publishing *The Samurai* in 1990, *The Old Man and the Wolves* in 1991, and *Possessions* in 1996.

Kristeva also began to speak out in the 1990s on the pressing issues that she saw as haunting the West, issues seemingly unable to attract the attention of the Western world's increasingly conservative intellectual class —most centrally, the issues of migration/immigration and of religious belief systems (and their demise). She returned with foreboding to the question of the body in the human sciences as well as to the crises of human subjectivity leading to a retreat into religious extremism and violence against those who are different from oneself. This is when she began to

write about the importance of revolt, even small, localized, "intimate" revolt in the West, about a continuous revolt against allowing one's inner life—whether one calls it soul or psyche—to be colonized by the technocratic world of media spectacle, capitalist consumption, and information overload. She also turned explicitly to the question of women and genius with the first volume of her trilogy of intellectual biographies, the 1999 *Hannah Arendt*.

Since 2000, Kristeva has continued the call she began in the 1990s for new, complex, flexible, and hybrid subjectivities, as well as for the sociopolitical acceptance of otherness in Europe and around the world. However, she has left behind the scientifically abstract, theoretical prose of the first two decades of her work as well as the crisis-driven, predictive prose of the following twenty years, and returned explicitly to her own experiential beginnings. She writes more personally for a larger public about the body politic, particularly "foreignness," including her worries about the shocks and echoes of the end of the Cold War and their effects on the formerly communist world, especially Eastern Europe: *Crisis of the European Subject* (2000); *Micropolitics* (2001); *Chronicles of a Sensitive Time* (2003); *Hatred and Forgiveness* (2005); and *Passions of Our Time* (2013). She explores more openly female genius, femininity, women, and motherhood: *Melanie Klein* (2000); *Colette* (2002); *Alone, a Woman* (2007); *Beauvoir Presents/In the Present* (2016). And she questions world religions, atheism, and current relationships to the sacred: *This Incredible Need to Believe* (2007) and *Teresa, My Love* (2008).

Kristeva moreover acts publicly on behalf of the vulnerable: for example, she has created the National Council for the Handicapped, largely because of her personal experience of raising a handicapped child, chronicled in the 2011 *Their Look Pierces Our Shadows*. She has likewise worked to focus public consciousness on the plight of the ill and elderly in France and across Europe, largely because of the way she experienced the tragic—indeed criminal—death of her father in a Bulgarian hospital. Her fourth novel, *Murder in Byzantium* (2004), explores all of these topics via a female detective who—as Kristeva puts it—"travels through herself." Kristeva also explicitly defends and celebrates her long marriage to Philippe Sollers in their 2015 *Marriage as a Fine Art*, and has begun to expose her private life to her vast public readership through an autobiographical collection of interviews with Samuel Dock: *Traveling Through Myself* (2016).

It is the determined movement forward of Kristeva's work through the postwar twentieth century as well as her thoughtful return in the early twenty-first century to her earlier life experiences that I examine most

deeply in what follows. I explore for myself and for my reader the shape of Kristeva's experiential, intellectual, and political trajectory with the goal of illuminating new possibilities for the cosmopolitan and contestatory intellectual in the twenty-first century. I try to elucidate Kristeva's status as an outsider who defends the interpretive and creative process at the heart of global interdisciplinarity, making a special effort to render visible how she does this through an increasingly brave, explicit, and strong insistence on the value of her life experience.

Kristeva has reflected at some length on the fact that she has never planned her life. She has never had a program or a strategy. She never thought about leaving Bulgaria before she actually left. She never thought: "I will go to France." She explains that she swims through life, traveling through herself, living for the most part in a "vertical present tense" close to the logic of the unconscious: "Je me voyage." For her, what is important is to move along in life and writing, pulled by pure curiosity, just seeing where it all leads:

> Even though I think of myself as very Cartesian, rational, etc., I don't follow a program. I don't say: I will do this and I will do that, and then that. I don't follow a trajectory fixed in advance. I do things a bit as they come to me, as if I were swimming. I let myself be carried by the waves. I swim, but there is also the movement of the waves. I never thought I would leave Bulgaria—never! But it's true that in a way all of my studies have been escapes, a way of taking distance from my parents while staying close, distancing myself but at the same time transcending where they were.

Kristeva has talked to me a lot about how she has always just tried to construct herself as she swims through the waves of the world and history, hovering in vertical time. My attention really perks up here, for that is the way I have lived as well, with way less illustrious results I am afraid. But the same lack of a plan characterizes my life as well. So what can I learn from my slightly senior contemporary, my friend, right now, about how to live, how to work, how to be, how to contest? One thing I know is that over the past few years, Kristeva and I have come to share a deep concern about the world of our children and students, a world where there is no room for vulnerability, a world where everyone is becoming so commodified, mechanized, and programmed that they are never present to themselves. As Kristeva puts it, "Humanity is so caught up in a frantic race for a so-called 'happiness'—a well-being made up of enjoyment, performance, brilliance—that all vulnerability is considered to be an intolerable, unthinkable menace. This is a vision of humanity that is commercialized and mechanical."[14]

Kristeva believes that this kind of programming runs entirely counter-current to the kind of self-making that relies on curiosity and ethical passion:

> I try to construct myself through the waves of the world and history . . . There's a lot of chance involved, a lot of necessity too, but I do not think that I have a destiny. And I've had a lot of deaths and resurrections in my life. When one leaves one's language, one's country, one's childhood, one loses a lot of things . . . and a lot of things are erased just as one erases writing in the sand . . . but there are always re-beginnings and it has been living through these tests, these deaths and resurrections, that I have achieved satisfactions in life that would have been unimaginable to me beforehand.[15]

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

Figure 1.5 Kristeva walking on wall on Île de Ré. *Histoires d'amour et de passerelles* (2011), dir. Teri Wehn-Damisch @Cinétévé.

In speaking of her life, Kristeva often quotes Colette: "To be reborn has never been too much for me."[16] Indeed, these are the words that Kristeva would like inscribed on her tombstone. Perhaps it is time for me—for us?—to contemplate some re-birth, or at least some re-self-invention: perhaps it is time to nurture the capacity to begin again.

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

Notes on the Biography

There are three relationships that I want to address with regard to the writing of this intellectual biography.

First, there is the question of *my* relationship to the biography, a question of the kind of distance and tone I have adopted. Yes, I am a great admirer of Julia Kristeva's work and I consider her to be an important personal friend. But—as I have already said—this is not a hagiography. This is not an adoring book. What follows is not the product of the kind of starry-eyed reverence that characterizes many texts written about Kristeva, a reverence almost always fixated on her beauty, her charm, or her intelligence—all three of which she has in abundance. Both men and women seem to indulge in this reverence. Most recently, Dock opens *Traveling Through Myself* by evoking Kristeva's large smile, and two erudite female professors who interviewed Kristeva in 2009 begin their interview by describing her warmth.[17] These kinds of descriptions are undoubtedly accurate. But in what follows, I attempt only to provide the ground, the background, and the glue holding together this beautiful and brilliant—and imposing—personal and textual presence.

Second, there is the question of *Julia Kristeva's* relationship to this biography. Kristeva is still, thankfully, very much alive. This biography is in some ways premature. It is hybrid, tentative, and only a first attempt at sharing publicly the details of this remarkable woman's life. *Traveling Through Myself* was also a tentative effort by Kristeva herself to begin to consolidate and protect her legacy—and it has been an important source for my work here. But both of these efforts are just the beginning.

Kristeva still has a lot of living to do. She is likely to write many more books—she is currently writing one on Dostoevsky—and many more books will be written about her. After her death, archives will be opened, her papers and letters will be published, and so on. Michel de Certeau, a masterful historian, once made a distinction between "reconstitution" and "reminiscence."[18] The hybridity of what follows is largely due to my reconstitution of Kristeva's reminiscences as, for example, they were shared with me through long, very alive and lively interview sessions. These interviews are not by any means the only sources for what follows, but they are important sources.

The hybridity of my text is also due to the fact that Kristeva does not live in linear, biographical—chronological—time. Given Kristeva's aforementioned tendency to live in "vertical time," the reconstitution of her story has at times been a genuine challenge. Kristeva floats through time. She swims and catches each wave a bit *par hasard*. Her memories are

gathered into complex rhythms that most often have very little to do with linear experience. As a result, it has been hard to reconstitute what-happened-when in Kristeva's life. Indeed, often her memories and my memories surge together to the surface somewhat willy-nilly. I have nevertheless tried to reconstitute her reminiscences as best I can, while carefully respecting the fact that she is still alive and hopefully will be so for a considerable time to come. I have, for instance, limited my sources to scholars, students, friends, and family members who are eager to speak on the record now, during Kristeva's lifetime. I have not pursued intimate sources. That is, I have protected most of Kristeva's closest intimacies—an unusual procedure for a genre that cries out in our time for "tell-all" transparency. I decided upon starting this project that someone else will have to reveal the content of Kristeva's intimate correspondence and the names of her lovers "after her death," as Kristeva prefers. The tone of this biography is personal but not completely intimate, with my own unconscious, perhaps transferential connections to Kristeva and her writing surfacing more often than is usual for the genre.

Third, there is the question of *the reader's* relationship to what follows. From my perspective, that is the clearest of the three relationships. I have written for the interested, non-specialist reader who might be intrigued by Kristeva's life and work. For me, such a reader might or might not have read Kristeva's work directly. Those who have read at least some of Kristeva might have done so with passionate and informed interest and comprehension. Or they might have found her texts too demanding. Either way is fine. This book is written for the sophisticated, the uninformed, and everyone in between. That is, I have assumed my readers' interest in Kristeva and her work but not necessarily their expertise. I in fact hope that my book will help readers tackle Kristeva's books. At the very least, I hope that what follows will make them *want* to try to tackle them, if they have not already.

Finally, I want to say something about the time of the writing of this intellectual biography.

Over the past decade of my intense engagement with Kristeva's life and work, much has changed in the world, often in ways that have shaken me to my core. My own "energetic pessimism" has increased tenfold since I started this project. I have been shocked by the spiraling crisis in the viability of democratic philosophy, the dangerous expansion of an often surreal atmosphere of post-factuality, the enthusiastic embrace by millions of populist ideologies that frequently include appeals to violent extremism, the escalation of authoritarian nationalism and identity paranoia with its

attendant racism, sexism, and homophobia, and the truly head-spinning election of Donald Trump—not to mention the global emergency, and delusional denial, of ecological collapse and climate chaos. Closer to home, as someone who has labored at the heart of the academy for decades, I have been appalled by attacks from multiple special interest perspectives on progressive intellectuals, on the arts and humanities and, indeed, on all ethical pursuits of knowledge that are not immediately marketable. My concurrent loss of faith in the capacity of progressive academics to change the university from within has brought me face to face with my now truly outlived idealism. How indeed is it possible to be a contestatory intellectual in the twenty-first century?

In the middle of all this, in early 2018 Kristeva was suddenly accused of having been an agent of the murderous Secret Services of the proto-Stalinist government of Bulgaria in the early 1970s (see Part III). This out-of-nowhere assault on one of the most respected, progressive, and ethical intellectuals in the world was mind-boggling to me. Indeed, in the context of grappling with this assault, as I came to understand better the history and lived experience of Eastern Europeans from the Second World War until now, many of the more recent historical shocks listed above have been amplified for me as if from within an uncanny echo chamber. I want my reader to know that I believe Kristeva when she says that she has never been an agent for anyone, least of all for the totalitarian state she ran away from in 1965. And I want my reader to know that given everything that I have come to understand about Kristeva, as well as about the particularities of the totalitarianism from which she escaped, I have made an active decision to continue telling her story in the way that she has lived it. What follows i s the story of Julia Kristeva's life as I believe it has been lived.

Part I

Bulgaria, My Suffering (1941–1965)

Julia Kristeva would be the first to say that one is not—cannot be—determined by one's childhood. Nor does she see her country of birth as constituting her identity or origin, identity for her being a constant state of questioning. In fact, she sees exile as her permanent condition and goes so far as to say that each person's truth resides not in their belonging to an origin but in their capacity to exile themselves, to take some distance from their origins:[1]

> Many things from my childhood resonate with what I am doing today. But if I am Freudian, it is because I believe, like Freud, that we are not explained, we are not determined by our childhood—contrary to what many people think about Freudianism. Our childhood provides us with the seeds of personality, but what one rediscovers in analysis is that one has reconstructed one's childhood. Something is given to us, but we have rebuilt it. Therefore, one never finds the exact, current situation in the past. Lots of people who entertain this idea are disappointed by analysis. They complain: But I can never find the memory that explains who I am now . . . I can't find the delicate flower . . . the love . . . the enigma . . . That's why I say that memories are not deterministic; they are invitations to travel.[2]

And yet . . .

A Production of History

Kristeva was born at home in Sliven, Bulgaria, at 8 a.m. on June 24, 1941, two days after World War II became a daily reality in that part of the world with the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the bombing of Kiev on June 22, 1941. Her mother, a brilliant scientist who gave up her career to dedicate herself to her family, was especially delighted to have a daughter, although she was distressed that she could not nurse her because of an infection. Her father, a brilliant theologian and writer, and Yordana, her

caretaker, fed her sheep's milk from a bottle (initiating a life-long intolerance for any kind of milk). Both of her parents as well as Yordana doted on her continually, setting in play a life-long loving loyalty to family and friends no matter what.

Figure 2.1 Map of Bulgaria. University of Texas Libraries.

Sliven is an industrial town in east-central Bulgaria. It lies in the southern foothills of the eastern Balkan Mountains at the confluence of the Novoselska and Asenovska rivers close to the Black Sea. Kristeva frequently evokes, especially in her novels, young childhood memories of running free in her maternal grandmother's flower gardens, flowers in her hair, when her family visited her mother's native city of Yambol not far from Sliven. Sometimes she even links her relationship to time itself to her observations of plants and flowers in her grandmother's gardens, echoing the rhapsodic love of nature of Rousseau and Colette. She also has fond memories of playing in the sand by the sea during childhood trips to the Black Sea. Two towns in particular stand out in her memory: Sozopol and Nessebar, located near the two larger Black Sea cities of Varna and Burgas. Nessebar—originally a Thracian settlement, a Greek colony beginning in the sixth century BC, then part of the Byzantine Empire, captured by the Turks until the nineteenth century, and a sleepy village of Greek fishermen in the early twentieth century—is described vividly in *Murder in Byzantium*.

The historical layers of Nessebar deeply impressed the young Kristeva. She vividly remembers the town as a magnificent place that had not yet been spoiled by the postwar tourist industry. In particular, she recalls the hundreds of beautiful and historic church ruins from the ninth to the

twelfth centuries. Whether built during the Byzantine, Ottoman, or Bulgarian rule of the city, the churches of Nessebar represent the rich architectural heritage of the Eastern Orthodox world and provided many of Kristeva's earliest sensorial pleasures. In *At the Risk of Thought*, Kristeva also evokes with affection the larger Bulgarian countryside, especially the gorgeous "valley of roses": "Bulgaria is the country of roses, for between two mountains, a valley is planted with roses from east to west and reputable refineries extract a magnificent essence. A scented country then, but also a country with an extraordinary cultural memory."[3]

Kristeva lived in Sliven until the family relocated to Sofia after the war in 1946, first to 4 Saint Sophia Street and then to 31 A. Kanchev Street. Her only sibling, a sister named Ivanka, was born in January 1945, just before the family moved.

Figure 2.2 Map of Sofia.

Figure 2.3 The Saint Nedelya Church. Photo by Alice Jardine.

Figure 2.4 Kristeva ringing the bell at 4 Saint Sophia Street, 2014. Photo by Alice Jardine.

Today these streets are small, winding reminders of the charm of this part of the city, not far from the Saint Nedelya Church, and relatively quiet compared to the rest of the city. During a trip to Sofia in 2014 when I accompanied Kristeva to her childhood haunts, I was struck by how central her family's apartments were, how close they were to the church where her father sang in his free time. I was also struck by how well Kristeva remembered her way around the streets, as if she had been walking in these neighborhoods her entire life.

Kristeva's parents could not but have felt that she was a glimpse of bright joy in the midst of the darkness of war and, indeed, they smothered their baby girl with love.

Kristeva has described herself as a "royal baby," born into the chaos of war. She recalls:

> There was a song that we sang during my childhood—a Russian song—that goes like this [Kristeva sings the song with clear delight]:
>
> Dvadtsat' vtorogo iyunya,

Rovno v chetyre chasa,
Kiev bombili, nam ob''yavili,
Chto nachalasya voyna.

The 22nd of June,
At 4 o'clock precisely,
They bombed Kiev and announced,
The war has started.

It was the 22nd of June 1941 . . . Kiev was bombed and we were at war . . . I was born two days after. Sometimes when I hear this song, I imagine how dramatic it must have all been for my parents. Bulgaria was entering the war and, very quickly, it was the German presence that made itself felt since Bulgaria and Germany were allies. To give birth to a child in those circumstances was no doubt a great joy, but also at the same time a huge uncertainty. What was going to happen?

The stories dominating Kristeva's earliest memories of her childhood were shaped by the two devastating totalitarian invasions—the first undertaken by the Nazis and the second by the Soviets—that Bulgaria experienced during the twentieth century. At the beginning of the Second World War, in 1939–41, Bulgaria remained neutral. It entered the war in March 1941 as a member of the Axis Powers. However, it quickly took its distance from the Nazis. Operating as a constitutional monarchy during most of the war (Boris III was Tsar 1918–43), the government managed to fend off the Nazis' strongest demands. For example, Bulgaria declined to participate in Operation Barbarossa, the Nazi plan to enslave Slavs beginning with the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union; it did not declare war on the Soviets; and it actively saved its Jewish population from deportation to concentration camps.

Antisemitism was not rampant in Bulgaria at the time and there was a highly assimilated Jewish minority of about 50,000 people living in the country at the beginning of the war. What distinguishes Bulgaria from many of its European neighbors is the ferocity with which it resisted the Nazis' orders: it was one of the few Nazi-occupied countries in Europe not to do the Nazis' bidding when it came to Jews; the Bulgarian government stood mostly firm on its policy of not deporting Jews, even as members of the communist resistance, especially the Fatherland Front, accused the government of collaboration.[4]

As the war turned against Germany, Bulgaria also did not fully comply with Soviet demands to expel German forces from its territory. By the summer of 1944, the Soviet army was approaching Bulgaria through

Romania (which had already left the Axis powers and declared war on Germany). Bulgaria tried to claim neutrality, but on September 5, the Soviet Union declared war on Bulgaria and the Red Army invaded three days later (the communists entered Sofia the night of September 8–9, 1944). Bulgaria was forced to give up its neutrality. The communist-dominated Fatherland Front took power, and Bulgaria formally joined the Allies until the war ended. The left-wing uprisings of September 1944 (called a coup by some) led to the abolition of the monarchy, but it was not until 1946 that a single-party people's republic was established. The Tsar went into exile and Bulgaria became part of the Soviet sphere of influence under the leadership of Georgi Dimitrov (1946–49) who, in spite of his protection of Bulgarian Jews, laid the foundations for a repressive Stalinist state that executed thousands of dissidents during its long postwar rule.[5]

This complicated history means that from her birth to the age of five or six, Kristeva's earliest childhood memories, earliest stories and photos, earliest psychic inscriptions and echoes, are infused with what she calls the great "Bulgarian Ambiguity." This land where Greek myth, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam meet; where first there were Nazi boots on the ground, then Soviet boots; where the monarchical government aligned itself with the Nazis but adamantly refused to deport Jews; where Russians took over but where Stalinism arrived slowly and relatively late in the game—this was the historical cauldron in which Julia Kristeva was formed. It is the foundation of what she sees as the overdetermined formation of her psycho-social identity by history. Calling herself a product of history, and citing Bulgaria as an important crossroads of history, Kristeva literally sees herself as a *production* of history:

> My Hegelian-Marxist education, which subordinates the individual to the collective, leads me to say that I am a product of history: the Second World War, the Yalta Conference, the partition of our continent into two Europes—a Europe of the East and of the West; the dream of General de Gaulle, who already saw Europe as stretching from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains and so gave doctoral fellowships to young students from the East who spoke French; then May of 1968; the fall of the Berlin Wall; Perestroika; Glasnost; the awakening of China and other emerging powers; structuralism; poststructuralism; Freudianism; the clash of religions; hyperconnectivity; the financial-economic-political-social-metaphysical-existential crisis . . . and many more.[6]

One of Kristeva's earliest memories is of sneaking down with her parents to the basement of their home in Sliven to listen to Radio London. This was done with extreme caution because the building Kristeva's family lived in

had both communist teachers—resisters—and Germans. Kristeva has described with emotion how her family watched, through the slim line of windows at the very top of the basement wall, first Nazi boots but then Stalinist boots marching in unison along the sidewalk outside her building. Safety was inside, down below, in the basement, with Europe, with family: "My parents and I went down to the basement to listen to Radio London . . . so that no one could hear . . . I vaguely remember seeing soldiers in German uniform pass by . . . And I can still hear the sound . . . dun dun dun da . . . the signal of Radio London."

However, when Kristeva evokes the Bulgaria of her childhood, it is the intimacy of family she remembers best. She was surrounded by affection and her earliest memories swim in the love that her parents showered upon her as a small child. It is perhaps because of this constant affection that her memories of the period are fluid, filled with sensations of curiosity and discovery: "When I speak of and think about Bulgaria, or about Sofia—both of which abound with memories—these memories, every time I evoke them, there is nothing fixed or determinant about them. What matters in my experience of memory is the voyage toward and through it . . . it's a perpetual questioning."[7]

Stoyan Kristev

Kristeva's father, Stoyan Kristev (Kristev: literally "of the cross"), lost his parents as a child. He did not know his father, who was an officer in the Bulgarian Army and died at the front during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. His mother, Mithra, died shortly thereafter in childbirth. He was raised by a peasant woman named Yordana who also took care of Kristeva as a very young girl, passing away when Kristeva was three years old. Yordana did not legally adopt Stoyan but raised him as her own child in the countryside and then doted, along with Kristeva's parents, on the "royal baby" born in the midst of the war. Kristeva called her "grandmother" and was told that her own first name, Julia, was a modern version of "Yordana," a name whose etymology in turn harkens back to the Biblical Jordan River.

Kristeva describes herself as having been a true *fille à papa* (daddy's girl): she looked like her father; her father adored her; he was a father in love. The feeling was mutual, for Kristeva adored him as well. She has often spoken of how being held by such a loving father psychically imprinted her. In fact, to this day she attributes her inability to be jealous of anyone to the intensity of her father's love, noting that she "can never seem to envy anyone." She explains that even when there has been conflict in her life, the

legacy of having been certain of her father's love as a child is that she has never wavered in her sense that she is right and that the other person is wrong. Kristeva recognizes that her mother and father's "parental madness"—their idealization of their first daughter in the midst of a world war—could have led her to develop a classically insolent egotism. Instead, she believes that it gave her an energetic self-confidence that she values to this day.

Figure 2.5 Kristeva with her father and sister, c. 1948. The Julia Kristeva Archive.

Because Kristeva's father was an orphan, he had only two choices in life: he could join the military or he could become a priest. He decided to join

the seminary, later studying at the Theology Faculty of Sofia. He was a practicing Orthodox Christian, but he had a sharp, critical, and restless mind. He took young Julia constantly to concerts, the theater, the opera, etc. He was also an athlete and pushed Julia toward sports, especially basketball and gymnastics. She became a swimmer.[8] Her parents saw all this activity-in-pleasure as a form of lightness, of resistance to the heavy conformity of communist era social norms. For this reason, they were for their time and place an unusually open and complex couple.

Kristeva's father was especially enthusiastic about languages and literature, particularly Russian literature: Dostoevsky, Gogol, and Tolstoy. He spoke many different languages—Russian was obligatory—and this was what he wanted for his daughters too. He repeatedly told his daughters that he wanted two things for them: to learn languages and to be financially independent. He introduced Kristeva to literature and poetry from a very young age. The other thing he loved was music, and Kristeva remembers well his beautiful voice booming through the Saint Nedelya Church.[9] But she is always quick to point out that he passed on his musical talent to her sister Ivanka rather than to her.

Figure 2.6 Kristeva's sister, Ivanka, in a recent photo. Music Without Limits.

According to Kristeva, it was unquestionably Ivanka who was musically talented, Kristeva never having been able to carry a tune. Music was at the

heart of their family universe and Ivanka took center stage in this regard from an early age. She was a talented child musician with a "perfect ear." She played the piano and the violin, giving concerts to family and friends, and she attended the prestigious Music High School in Sofia.[10] She carried the name of the girls' maternal grandfather (Ivan) and was also much loved and supported by her parents. But like many younger siblings, Ivanka vied for her parents' attention and got angry with Julia when Julia captured academic praise. The sisters often ended up fighting. It seems that Kristeva was frequently the more (sometimes literally) injured of the two, but her father always found her to be the guilty one, guilty of causing the fray or at least of not stopping it, which he said she should have been able to do because she was the eldest. Kristeva describes her childhood relationship with her sister as close—Ivanka having taught her "to admire the talents of another woman"—but their father was often exasperated with their sibling rivalry as he struggled in the public realm with some of the urgent political problems of their time and place.

During the early part of the war, under Nazi occupation, Kristeva's father was part of the resistance to the deportation of Jews (much like the one in Holland), belonging to a brave group of intellectuals who went straight to the Tsar with their demand that the deportations not take place. (Kristeva has often praised the "fraternity" of intellectuals and religious leaders who fought the deportations.) At the end of the war, with the Russians in charge and the passage to communism, Kristeva's father left the seminary (Kristeva took her last communion at the age of seven). Although her father was very religious and had a degree in theology, he decided to study medicine because of the communist regime's intense crackdown on religion in Bulgaria.[11] He told some that he left the seminary because he wanted to marry, but Kristeva has said that this is unlikely given that priests were able to marry at that time. It is more likely that he thought that his future in communist Bulgaria was going to be more viable as a doctor. However, this changed when he found out that—as was the law after September 9, 1944, the official date of the liberation of Bulgaria from fascism (and as would later be the case in Maoist China)—he was going to have to go to the countryside as a "barefoot doctor" to treat the poor with no help or supplies.

Because Stoyan Kristev wanted, above all else, for his daughters to have a good education in Sofia, he ended up deciding against medicine and never practiced as a doctor. Instead, in order to stay in Sofia with his family, he became a bureaucrat in the Orthodox Church while at the same time

detaching himself from a (potentially dangerous) visible-to-the-government religious practice of his own. In considering this seemingly contra dictory situation, one must keep in mind the complex status of Orthodox Christianity in communist Bulgaria: on the one hand, religion was restrained by the communist regime but, on the other, the Orthodox Church continued to function due to the need to appease the population. The church never regained the influence it had held under the monarchy and most of the high roles within it were assumed by communist functionaries. Kristeva's father, though not a communist, joined such functionaries at the Holy Synod, which in the Orthodox Church is the permanent council at the top of the religious hierarchy. At what was, in the end, a Soviet-style Ministry of Religion, he patiently administrated and interpreted while keeping himself sane by writing fascinating stories and essays, both under his own name and as a ghost writer, on Christian Orthodoxy for Christians trying to carry on with their lives in the young communist state—for example, essays on the place of the Virgin in Orthodox Christianity or on such and such a Bulgarian saint who had struggled against the Turkish occupation.[12]

All My Childhood Was Bathed in This

It was not until I accompanied Kristeva to Sofia in 2014 that I began to truly understand her complicated relationship to Orthodox Christianity, which has a great deal to do with her father's passionate experience with it, right down to his insistence that his name, Kristev, had originated during the Crusades.

Figure 2.7 Kristeva with the Patriarch Neophyte of Bulgaria, head of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and associates, 2014. Photo by Alice Jardine.

During our visit with the Christian Orthodox Patriarch in Sofia and our visit to the Rila Monastery close to Sofia, I watched Kristeva speak urgently and at great length with senior members of the clergy about the problems facing Eastern Europe and indeed the world. She seemed as at ease in the private suites of the Patriarch as in her Parisian classrooms.

Figure 2.8 Outside Rila Monastery, 2014. Photo by Alice Jardine.

Figure 2.9 Fresco of angels and devils, Rila Monastery, 2014. Photo by Alice Jardine.

The frescos and murals surrounding us on the walls of the monastery made me realize that these images must have haunted Kristeva's childhood imagination alongside the realist views of the communist state. It is, then, no wonder that the blues of the Madonnas, the cruel frenzy embedded in images of Biblical hell, and other religious allusions can be found in her writing decades later. Looking back, one can also see that her notorious fascination with the preverbal is something that she associates with the liturgy of the Orthodox Church. As she states in relation to this liturgy, "All my childhood was bathed in this."[13]

Kristeva has often stated that she experienced the Orthodox faith of her father as dissident—as secretive and associated with the unknown—and that it was this experience that kept her from completely identifying with the Bulgarian communist identity of the time. She has spoken of a force of resistance sleeping within Orthodox faith, absorbed by her along with the incense and flowers of the church where her father sang. This spiritual climate had something of the forbidden about it: the importance of the story about how, when they were very young, Stoyan Kristev took Kristeva and her sister to communion only in the earliest and darkest morning hours so as to avoid being seen cannot be overestimated when thinking about the overall shape of Kristeva's work and about the centrality of religion to this work.

Kristeva's worries about Eastern Orthodoxy falling into historical irrelevance are already visible in her 1995 article, "Bulgaria, My Suffering."[14] But she sums up her concerns most concisely in *At the Risk of Thought*, where she compares Orthodox Christianity to Western theology. Whereas the latter, in her view, has combined its faith with reason since the Greeks, she sees the former as having sacrificed thinking for praying, for having opted for mysticism rather than comprehension, dependence on the raptures of the spirit rather than the independence of the mind. Her worries overall about post-communist Bulgaria are very much rooted in what she sees as the failures of the Orthodox Church: "Today I have the feeling—and that's why I suffer for Bulgaria—that people hesitate between nihilistic resignation (people are overwhelmed by what is happening to them, by marketplace liberalism, by banks, by productivism, and they are unhappy, depressed, they cry, they blame the West, etc.) and the brutality of the mafias. It seems to me that one has perhaps not sufficiently interrogated the weight of faith and religious tradition in the current context."[15] Witnessing her father's strong faith, his devotion to the church and its music, while also seeing how he and the entire family suffered in

communist Bulgaria because of that faith, could not help but leave a deep impression on the young Julia and perhaps leave behind for the adult Kristeva a certain nostalgia for the magic of the Orthodox faith as presented to her by her adored and respected father. In *The Old Man and the Wolves*, where we see one of Kristeva's first *cris du cœur* in response to her father's cruel death in a Bulgarian hospital in 1989, she also indulges in thinly veiled descriptions of the Bulgarian people of today as lost, hardened, and deeply challenged in their quest to belong to Europe. Nonetheless, she is always quick to recognize with pride the unique history of Bulgaria where Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have managed to co-exist for such a long time.

Kristina Kristeva

Kristeva's mother, Kristina Kristeva (maiden name: Paskova) came from a more bourgeois background than her father: Kristeva's maternal grandfather was a shopkeeper. Kristeva has some ancestors from Spain on the maternal side of her family. Her mother's family also goes back two generations into what Kristeva calls the "religious polyphony" of the Balkans. There one finds her grandmother Nevena (maiden name Zhekova, a version of Jacob) genealogically traced to dissident Jews who are in turn linked to the celebrated seventeenth-century Balkan Jewish mystic, Sabbatai Zevi. Zevi is famous for having converted to Islam and founded a sect awaiting the Second Coming—with Zevi as the Messiah. This sect still has followers today, especially in Turkey.[16] Kristeva's family, however, turned toward Orthodox Christianity in the eighteenth century.

Kristeva has written—for example in *Murder in Byzantium* (where Byzantium is in part a metaphor for today's Bulgaria)—about the links between Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in Eastern Europe, Greece, and Turkey as well as about the schism between Rome and Byzantium. The Schism of 1054 is called either "The Grand Oriental Schism" or "The Orthodox Schism" (from a Western point of view) or "The Schism of Rome" or "The Latin Schism" or "The Catholic Schism" (from the Eastern Orthodox point of view). It was the outcome of numerous decades of conflicts and reconciliations between the two churches. Whatever one calls it, because of this schism, the mystic descendants of Bulgarian Christian Orthodoxy—whose multilingual, panspiritual history extends to Kristeva's family's religious history—remain largely invisible to the Western world. In speaking of this mystical heritage, Kristeva is quick to point out that there is no direct correspondence between her life and her work, emphasizing that her mother was *both* the result of the religious polyphony of the

Balkans *and* an atheist. Yet she hastens to add that, as with everyone, the stories she inherited are what matter for her life's work. Her father's stories based on his love of languages, of Russian literature, and her mother's stories about the religious polyphony of the Balkans—as they were shared with the young, impressionable Kristeva—provide a rich bio-psychographical background to her later published work.

In spite of her hybridized spiritual history, Kristeva's mother was not at all religious. She was completely secular, she and her brother having been raised in a humanist and secular atmosphere. She was a scientist, excellent at math, had studied biology, and was a follower of Darwin. But she was also an artist, and in particular was very good at drawing. For Kristeva, drawing is where there is no distance between thought and hand; it is thinking in action. She attributes her fascination with drawing to her mother: "A face, a countryside, an animal, a flower, an object—they all unexpectedly lived again at the tip of her pencil, with a precision all the more surprising because it came so naturally to her: without forcing it, without thinking about it, as if it were nothing, my mother drew as others breathe or embroider."[17]

In *The Severed Head*, Kristeva writes of a drawing by her mother that influenced her greatly. During an intense, snowy Balkan winter, warming herself by the coal stove, young Kristeva was listening to a children's radio show announce a contest: whoever could answer—and draw the answer—to a question could win a prize. The question was, "What is the fastest mode of transport in the world?" Kristeva's younger sister yelled, "An airplane!" Kristeva corrected her, "Sputnik!" Their mother answered last: "I think, rather, that it's thought." Kristeva retorted, not without insolence, "Maybe, but one can't draw a thought. It's invisible." Her mother responded, "You'll see!" Kristeva remarks that she can still see the postcard her mother then drew, under Kristeva's name. It was a drawing that won the radio contest for her. On the card, her mother had drawn a large snowman, melting and tipping to his left, his head falling off as if cut off by the invisible guillotine that was a ray of the sun. To the right of the snowman was the earth (and Sputnik in all of its orbital glory) that the snowman was imagining, even as it was perishing. The young Kristeva was deeply impressed by this vision of mortality, by this vision of how ideas survive after death. The body dies, but Sputnik continues. One cannot help but wonder whether this maternal inspiration might not be in part behind Kristeva's non-stop production of ideas for over fifty years!

The young Julia Kristeva was caught—almost every night—in the middle of good-humored but passionate debates at dinner, where her religious

father was "the dinosaur" and her scientific, Darwinian mother the "progenitor of monkeys":

> My mother never disputed papa's ideas, but one could sense that she went to church only to please him, that she herself did not believe. She had studied biology and so her ideas were the opposite of my father's. At the dinner table, we would tease my father. We called him a dinosaur and we would say that, as Darwin had argued, we descended from monkeys. My mother was a strong Darwinian. And papa would get furious! He would yell, "Yes, of course you are both descendants of monkeys" (because my sister would follow me in my teasing of him). "Yes, yes, it's very easy to see! One just has to take a look at you to see that you descend from the monkeys!"

In speaking of her mother, Kristeva often evokes her clear maternal role and the ways in which her mother came to represent for her one pole of a strict choice for women of that time. On the one hand, there was her mother, a brilliant woman who sacrificed her career and devoted all of herself to her children.[18] On the other hand, there was someone like the Bulgarian poetess, Blaga Dimitrova—whom Kristeva has called her "symbolic mother"—who only late in life, after many trips to Vietnam as a journalist during the Vietnam War, adopted a little Vietnamese girl in 1967 and became the vice president of Bulgaria in 1992. Kristeva often criticized her mother to her face for her lack of ambition—"you are letting yourself be crushed!"—but at the same time, Kristeva deeply admired her and freely admits that she owes a lot of her early academic success to her because her mother was very hands-on about tutoring her in math and science.

Kristeva's father more or less fulfilled the normative expectations of paternity at the time. He was Kristeva's explicit intellectual guiding star, full of love and affection, but also very strict. He was always telling her to stand up straight (in the name of rightness and justice) and, unlike her mother, he was a severe disciplinarian. Kristeva tells stories about how he would, perhaps because of his religious fervor, punish her by making her kneel with a very straight back in a corner for hours (maybe this is where she got her backbone from). Because young Kristeva was spirited, strong-minded, and at times insolent, her father insisted that she needed to learn humility. She spent so much time in the corner that she came to feel that everything was always her fault. There is no doubt in my mind that this experience helped set up Kristeva's life-long passion for justice (or at least for psychoanalysis).

Kristeva admits that she believes that her mother was, in some ways, more intelligent than her father. His intelligence was literary, imaginative. Her mother was more rational, reasonable, and pragmatic. But she had

learned to be silent, to never put herself out front—to the point where some thought that she was depressed. It was her father who put himself in the lead, a bit hysterically, especially given his strong temper. However, Kristeva acknowledges that it was her mother who secretly approved of Kristeva's outspoken resistance to her father and later openly approved of Kristeva's choice to live as "a free woman" in Paris.

It is clear that Kristeva was deeply imprinted by the complexity of her parents, especially with regard to the tension in the parental couple surrounding religion and science. This is a tension that has persevered in Kristeva's work to this day. Kristeva spent her childhood resisting her father's religiosity. She was much closer to her mother's scientific mind, becoming the family spokesperson for Darwin. She says that it took her a long time to take religion seriously and that she has only recently come to embrace its foundational importance for understanding human behavior. Kristeva has in fact been reflecting a great deal on the struggles in the twenty-first century between religion and science, suggesting that we may have as much to learn from what the dinosaurs have had to say historically as from what the monkeys are saying today.

One Spoonful at a Time

Kristeva was a very independent young girl in the young communist state. She remembers it as a time of having everything she needed but not what she wanted. She emphasizes that she did not suffer under communism. However, although she did not experience directly the brutality of communist rule, the fear-inducing stories of terrible things associated with this rule did pervade her young consciousness. She overheard visitors to the house speak of hangings and tortures. She was especially haunted by stories of drownings in bathtubs filled with waste. One night, she was scared when loudspeakers in the streets of her maternal grandmother's town warned of impending executions and she and her mother ran all the way home, pushing the baby carriage with her sister in it frantically before them, with the baby even falling out at one point.

Living under communist rule meant for Kristeva and her family that life was constrained. You had to eat whatever was put on the table. There were long lines. The apartment in Sofia was considerably smaller than the one she had been used to in Sliven. But it was not without its charm. During my visit with Kristeva to Sofia in 2014, I was struck by how Kristeva's world as a small child was closely bordered by the family apartment, the Saint Nedelya Church, and her school.

As a kind of parable for life under communist rule, Kristeva tells the story of being forced to leave her house in Sliven when her sister was being born. She talks about going next door and seeing Anne, who lived there, being fed water one spoonful at a time.[19] This felt like the libidinal economy of those communist times—spoonful by spoonful, drop by drop, one got what one needed but only that. For Kristeva, this was an imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence: the pervasive sensation of parsimony, of surveillance. She admits that this memory might have more to do with what is normally experienced by children as an increase in discipline because of the arrival of a new sibling than with any Soviet psycho-economics. In any case, she rebelled against that economy, preferring instead to run wild in her grandmother's garden among the flowers, or among the beautiful old Byzantine churches by the sea. These are very physical memories for her. But, of course, she was also always a very good student.

There was a widely accepted saying in communist Bulgaria at the time, namely that the Bulgarian people were caught "in the intestines of hell." Kristeva's father felt that the only way out—the only ticket out of hell—was through gaining cultural capital: music for Ivanka and foreign languages and literatures for Julia. However, both Kristeva's formal and informal education—her choices of schools to attend, her eligibility for scholarships and honors—were deeply impacted because her father was not a member of the Communist Party; many options were denied to children whose parents were not members of the Party. Although Kristeva was always "the best student," she was consistently disappointed by not being able to carry the school flag.

At first—when Kristeva was six or seven—her parents enrolled her in the French "maternal school" where she was taught by French Catholic—Dominican—nuns.[20] For a couple of years, she absorbed languages, especially French, like a sponge and was taught to memorize songs and French literary texts, with the nuns teaching her fables by La Fontaine, poems by Hugo, and stories by Colette.[21] She remembers plays in French with lots of bright costumes. She learned "La Marseillaise" before she learned the Bulgarian National Anthem, recited the fables of La Fontaine before she learned to recite the poems of the nineteenth-century Bulgarian National Poet, Hristo Botev.[22] She even prayed in French. Kristeva loved her Dominican Nun teachers and was devastated when they were arrested, condemned as spies, and chased out of the country, to be replaced in her life by the Alliance Française. She was incredibly lucky to have such an opportunity: the Sofia office of the Alliance Française, founded in 1904, was

able to continue its basic activities throughout World War II and was considered a space of open dialogue and calm in the midst of violence and political turmoil. Kristeva has reflected a great deal on the beautiful fragility of the poetic imagination, particularly on the importance of the French poetic tradition. This emphasis becomes less mysterious when we realize that whatever else she was up to as a child, French literature was at the center of her young life.

Figure 2.10 Kristeva in traditional costume, 1944. The Julia Kristeva Archive.

Like most excellent students, Kristeva longed for symbolic recognition. In relation to this longing, there are two stories that she wants everyone to

know about her Bulgarian childhood. She has in fact written about both many times. First, Bulgaria holds a Festival of the Alphabet every spring, and from the age of seven she was an avid participant in the festival, often receiving a Prix d'Excellence.

Figure 2.11. Kristeva at the Festival of the Alphabet. The Julia Kristeva Archive.

Kristeva has evoked this unique, annual May 24 celebration so many times, both in writing and in interviews, that anyone familiar with her work has to notice that she never tires of explaining the ritual's intellectual significance:

> Bulgaria gave birth to two inventors of the Slavic alphabet, the brothers Cyril and Methodius. In the 9th century, these monks created the alphabet that not only permitted the progression of Christianity into Slavic territories, but also allowed the foundation of a State that would be very significant in the Middle Ages . . . Bulgaria is the only country in the world celebrating a national festival of culture, moreover, a festival of the alphabet, honoring its two learned saints. This commemoration consists of a procession in the squares of towns and villages (I lived in the capital, Sofia), processions in which school children participated (I wore my top student ribbon and also a letter to personify this alphabet), but also those who work in the domain of culture: artists, journalists, professors, writers, etc. On this occasion, the entire population celebrates the verbal and the written. This moment is of capital symbolic importance, because it shows how deeply culture is rooted in the Bulgarian people. Throughout its entire history, this cultural rooting, at once very physical and very spiritual, has been lived as a major form of resistance against various forms of occupation, notably that of the Turks, which lasted five centuries.[23]

Whenever Kristeva evokes this celebration of language, culture, and the unique contribution of her native country to world culture, her pride and admiration shine through. And it is easy to see how this festival influenced the young intellectual whose strong belief in the power of the imaginary and the symbolic to shape what we call reality through language has never faltered. In her 2012 article, "My Alphabet; or, How I Am a Letter,"[24] Kristeva is explicit about her relationship to the Festival of the Alphabet, to her native Bulgarian, and to her fully internalized French. She explains how definitional her relationship to language is, how her existence as a foreigner in France and her life as a writer are intrinsically bound together through her love of language—and how it all started in Bulgaria. In reference to her multilingualism, she goes so far as to say that "to speak another language is quite simply the first and minimal condition necessary for being alive."[25]

Second, Kristeva wants everyone to know that Georgi Dimitrov, the leader of the Communist Party in Bulgaria who had once been accused by the Nazis of setting the Reichstag on fire, and who some claim helped stop Bulgarian Jews from being deported during the Nazi occupation, was brilliant—and persuasive—in the delivery of his anti-Nazi speeches. Following Moscow's lead, Dimitrov helped make it possible for many Jews to emigrate to Israel after the war (Dimitrov's wife was Jewish, and to this day Kristeva has cousins in Israel). Kristeva wants us to know that it is not her in any of the official pictures presenting bouquets of flowers to Dimitrov. It should have been her—first in her class—doing so. But she was so nervous that she got sick and could not go. She still gets sick when she gets very

Figure 2.12 Kristeva's public elementary school in Sofia, 2014. Photo by Alice Jardine.

Kristeva attended High School #33, but most important in her memory about her years in public school is her "extra time" at the Alliance Française. There, two to three afternoons a week, she continued her linguistic and literary studies begun at the French maternal school. She strengthened her command of French and eventually learned Russian and English. Kristeva has consistently spoken of French as her language of freedom, a language that has allowed her to ask questions and to develop a singular voice. She has spoken of "traveling through herself," most often in French, as a way (unconsciously) to transcend her childhood situation.

Literature was Kristeva's other avenue of escape. She devoured "the classics": Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Chekhov, Gorky, but also Molière and Hugo, through Proust and Sartre, to Ionesco and Beckett. She credits a professor of French at the Alliance Française, Kiril Bogoyavlenski, with forming her taste in literature as well as her desire for everything French. She has spoken often of her admiration for the French literary imagination, which often allows for a fruitful encounter between reason (especially science) and

Radevski painted an optimistic picture of socialist reality and the development of the communist revolution. He was best known for his poetic development of the motifs derived from socialist reality that appear in his works written after 1951. He al so translated classic Russian poetry.

However, not all the writers that Kristeva chose to write about were predictable. For example, she also wrote about her "symbolic mother," Blaga Dimitrova, who was also very much admired by Kristeva's father and eventually became a close friend.[28] This is especially fascinating since Dimitrova, outside of her name appearing as an author of poetry, only appears once in the English language to this day: as a character named Vera Glavanakova in John Updike's famous story, "The Bulgarian Poetess."[29] As is the case in most of Updike's stories, the woman only exists as a mysterious object of fascination for Updike's alter-ego writer hero, Bech, who moves from one woman to another during his tour of Eastern Europe: "But I have nothing to say to [Glavanakova]. I'm just curious about such an intense conjunction of good looks and brains. I mean, what does a soul do with it all?"[30] This Updike trope echoes strangely the kinds of things I have heard many men say about Kristeva over the years.

When Kristeva was twenty-one, she became widely known for an article she published in *Septemvri*, the journal of a small group of forward-looking and fairly open-minded young elite intellectuals, the Union of Writers. *Septemvri* brandished a certain liberty of tone and insisted upon allowing conversation and debate even though each "open" article was accompanied by an article loyal to the communist party line that categorically refuted its argument.

A Bulgarian communist—but increasingly dissident—journalist named Albert Koen (no relationship to the fiction writer) had published a collection of essays on the Soviet Thaw: the period of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries during the Khrushchev era. In 1956, Khrushchev had proclaimed the doctrine of "peaceful coexistence" with the West and Stalin as a Soviet hero was becoming less visible by the early 1960s even as the Berlin Wall (1961) and the rest of the Soviet Cold-War ideology was at full tilt. Koen's 1962 book, *Roads and Stops*, which was essentially a travelogue of his time spent in Western Europe, was written in the spirit of this so-called *perestroika*. No one at *Septemvri*—or anyone else in the communist bloc media—was willing to review Koen's book. The brave (or perhaps naïve) Kristeva was the notable exception.

Kristeva appreciated Koen's book. In her short review, "Western Europe Through the Eyes of a Journalist,"[31] she carefully utilized codes of

"openness" to praise Koen's ways of observing Western cities while simultaneously adding a heavy vocabulary of communist cliché to judge what he saw there. Her review is an accomplished exercise in "doublespeak," in the kind of palimpsestic (multilayered, often purposefully opaque) prose used by dissident intellectuals on the communist side of the Iron Curtain.[32] In Part II of this book, I will discuss in greater detail the significance of this type of writing for Kristeva's intellectual formation. Here it suffices to note that, in her review of Koen's collection of essays, Kristeva walked a fine line between adhering to the communist party line and pushing the boundaries of that line, writing, "Koen's articles are marked by well-grounded analysis, broad perspective, communist passion, and a vivid journalistic style." She went on to admire his "keen sense for colors, shapes, and volume," which, "with a luscious brush, lays before our eyes a rich range of colors: from the bright and lively hues of the Swiss lakes and mountains to the grey patina of the homes in Paris and the dried mud on the Spanish village huts." But the astute young reviewer specified that Koen did not get carried away, for he also wanted to "show the back of the coin":

> Then it turns out that in Paris the pre-Christmas fuss conceals the false philanthropy of the rich and the careful frugality of the poor: will the money suffice?; that the myths of the "new" are simply a mask of conformism and of the cult of various "stars"; that there is nothing romantic in returning after a vacation because it means an increase in prices. Thus the class divisions, the casts, the political maneuvers are revealed . . . [The book] juxtaposes our reality with the capitalist one . . . His voice is not the voice of someone who criticizes with *partis pris*, who has come with a definite goal—to see and reject. Koen contemplates patiently, he tries to understand and only then, soberly and civilly, without any loud-mouthedness and journalistic straining, puts everyone in his place, depicts the capitalist world in its shameful nakedness, and reasons as a communist-publicist.

While this may seem like dated, fairly innocuous prose to an American reader today, Kristeva's words set off loud alarms in communist Bulgaria. The day after the review was published, there appeared on the front page of the communist newspaper, *Rabotnichesko Delo*, a violent article denouncing Kristeva as a cosmopolitan agent of the capitalist hyena. She was called a spy, a Zionist. Her father was deeply worried, hiding the newspaper headlines so as not to alarm Kristeva's mother and sister. He took Kristeva out of the city to a café near a monastery in the mountains where he asked repeatedly, clearly distraught, what they were going to do. He feared that they would be thrown into one of the labor camps that were said to exist on

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

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First published in the United States of America 2020

Cover design by Alice Marwick
Cover photographs from top: Recent portrait © Sophie Zhang; © Julia Kristeva; © Julia Kristeva

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Jardine, Alice, author. | Ruti, Mari, editor.
Title: At the risk of thinking: an intellectual biography of Julia Kristeva / Alice Jardine; edited by Mari Ruti.
Description: New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. | Series: Psychoanalytic horizons | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The first biography of Julia Kristeva-one of the most important intellectuals of the last 100 years. It connects her personal journey with the history of her ideas, clarifies her legacy within the context of postwar European thought, and demonstrates her crucial importance for the future of interdisciplinary thought"– Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019028646 (print) | LCCN 2019028647 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501341342 (hb) | ISBN 9781501341335 (pb) | ISBN 9781501341359 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501341366 (epdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Kristeva, Julia, 1941–
Classification: LCC B2430.K7544 J37 2020 (print) | LCC B2430.K7544 (ebook) | DDC 194 [B]–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019028646
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019028647
Series: Psychoanalytic Horizons