

# Remapping the European Cultural Memory: the Case of Julia Kristeva's *Murder in Byzantium*

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## Abstract

This article considers Julia Kristeva's novel *Murder in Byzantium* in the context of some of the most pressing ethical and political dilemmas faced by Europe today, regarding the role of religion and the inclusion of religious references in the Constitution of European Union. It traces Kristeva's remapping of the European tradition, and places feminine creativity at the core of her analysis. I argue that this remapping that revalorizes feminine creativity and sensibility envisions the question of the eternal Europe as an illusion to be endlessly reinvented.

## Résumé

Cet article considère le roman *Murder in Byzantium* par Julia Kristeva dans le contexte du dilemme éthique et politique le plus sérieux auquel l'Europe fait face aujourd'hui, en ce qui touche le rôle de la religion et l'inclusion de références religieuses dans la Constitution de l'Union européenne. Il trace le remodelage que fait Kristeva de la tradition européenne, et place la créativité féministe au cœur de son analyse. Je fais valoir que ce remodelage qui revalorise la créativité et la sensibilité féministe visualise la question de l'Europe éternelle comme une illusion qui est réinventée sans fin.

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In recent years, Julia Kristeva's work has been the focus of many feminist debates concerning the relationship between psychoanalysis and social and political praxis. Nancy Fraser's reading of Kristeva's work as a traditional psychoanalytic elaboration of subjectivity, and therefore irrelevant for understanding group formations and social relations (Fraser 1990), has since been challenged by many feminists. For instance, Maria Margaroni argues that the question is no longer whether the transposition of psychoanalytical concepts does or does not do justice to social, economic and cultural oppression, but rather how we can rethink the relevance of Kristeva's thought "for some of the most urgent ethical and political dilemmas we are facing today, caught as we are in the midst of unprecedented changes on political, economic, and cultural fronts" (Margaroni 2007, 803). Margaroni's call for shifting attention to questions of ethics that are relevant to current political dilemmas, on both local and global levels, is also echoed in the essays collected by Tina Chanter and Ewa Ziarek in *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*. Their declared aim is to address the growing criticism of Kristeva's focus "primarily on the personal or the psychic maladies of modern Western subjectivity rather than on group formations or the political structures of oppression" (Chanter and Ziarek 2005, 1). Their argument is that, without paying attention to the role of affect, negativity and play in the formation of subjectivity, as well as in the emergence of collectives and social relations, we fail to consider the "fluid in-betweenness" of the social and psychic consequences (2005, 2).

Like Margaroni, Ziarek, and Chanter, I believe that Kristeva's work lends itself well

to various attempts to rethink the relationship between subjectivity, politics and ethics from less conventional angles. While these authors have focused primarily on Kristeva's theoretical work, I propose to shift attention to Kristeva's fiction in order to elucidate the political stakes of her psychoanalytic approach. Though Kristeva has published four novels to date: *The Samurai* (1992), *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1994), *Possessions* (1998), and *Murder in Byzantium* (2006), her fiction has been conspicuously neglected, if not completely ignored.<sup>1</sup>

Although the first three novels appeared in the 1990s, when Kristeva's theoretical work was receiving a great deal of attention, most of the reviews at the time of their publication conveyed, above all else, the critics' perplexity. Rather than wondering if Kristeva's thought was entering a new stage (bringing together psychoanalysis and politics), for which fiction seemed to her as useful as theoretical discourse, there seemed to be a widespread opinion that Kristeva's novels fail in comparison with her outstanding theoretical work. As works of fiction, they disappointed the readers' expectations, offering neither coherent, straightforward stories with which the reader can easily identify, nor innovative formal experimentation. When Kristeva came back to the novel ten years later, reactions were still lukewarm at best. Most readers turn to these works with a prior interest in Kristeva's ideas, and intellectual satisfaction may be gained by searching out echoes of her various concepts in the stories she weaves. Others may be motivated by curiosity about the autobiographical elements which the author has herself indicated. Most reactions were still marked, however, by confusion and frustration, and relatively few critics have attempted to untangle the web of intertextual allusions that sustains her plots, or to pinpoint what it is she tries to achieve by writing fiction.

Even though Kristeva's novels are not as successful as her theories, they nevertheless provide an immense reservoir of theoretical, aesthetic and political insight that has yet to be fully tapped. For the purpose of

this article, I focus only on *Murder in Byzantium*<sup>2</sup> and hope to demonstrate how the novel uses psychoanalytic detection and political praxis to raise questions about the European cultural memory. Written in the genre of detective fiction, the novel offers Kristeva a framework for thinking about some of the most pressing ethical and political dilemmas faced by Europe today, regarding the role of religion and the inclusion of religious references in the Constitution of European Union. The main objective of this article is to situate Kristeva's novel as part of a complex process of critical analysis of the signification of European identity. My reading of *Murder* traces Kristeva's remapping of the European tradition, placing feminine creativity and sensibility at the very core of her analysis.

I argue that Kristeva draws on Freudian psychoanalysis to examine the roles of religious and secular orders in the European cultural memory, and discuss some of the ways in which they marginalize and repress the feminine and the maternal. Reading Kristeva's novel in intertextuality with her theoretical work allows me to demonstrate how her sustained interrogation of the relationship between the psychic and the social is also central to her fiction writing. More specifically, this model of reading traces Kristeva's engagement with Freud's theories of the social order and of female sexuality and with Hannah Arendt's notion of the political as they emerge both in her novel and her theoretical work. Let me suggest from the outset the outline of Kristeva's negotiation in the novel with these two rather diverse lines of thought. In Arendt's analysis of the political as a narrated action, Kristeva finds a model for her narratives that partakes on another kind of politics, that of an "open memory" of plural interactions (Kristeva 2001, 43). Reading Kristeva's novel in this context makes it possible, I argue, to link narratives, life and politics to psychic interiority. Through her engagement with Freud's work, on the other hand, Kristeva is able to examine the relationship between psychic and political life, by reflecting on how religious and secular orders rely on the exclusion of the feminine

and the maternal. I conclude by considering Kristeva's alternative model that contrasts with the religious and secular order, by envisioning the question of the eternal Europe as an illusion to be endlessly reinvented.

*Murder* is Kristeva's most politically overt novel. It can be read as responding to the political crisis threatening to delay the project of the first Constitution of the European Union, caught into an unprecedented dilemma of whether or not religious references should be made in the preamble of the Constitution. At the beginning of 2001, the preamble of the (then) unfinished Constitution omitted from its list of cultural forces considered to have shaped European identity any reference to Christian values or God. This omission became the basis of a heated controversy, involving politicians, the Pope, various intellectuals and writers. In 2003, the WorldNetDaily reported that the long-awaited preamble included the words "spiritual," "religious" and "humanistic" but made no reference to the deity. The article "God Kept Out of EU Constitution" reported that an intense political debate was carried out, quite literally, "in the name of God." Those opposing the inclusion of religion argued that the modern pluralist Europe had no need to reference religion in its Constitution, since it would make it difficult in the future for non-Christian countries to be integrated into an expanding Union, for example, Turkey, a predominantly Muslim country. Those opposing the inclusion of religion claimed that a reference to Christian values would amount to a "violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms."<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand, those coming from countries where religion continues to play an important role, such as Poland, Spain, Italy, and some of other Eastern European countries aspiring to join the EU, argued that it would be impossible to understand the history of Europe without acknowledging the role of religion, its impact and influence on the lives of people; in short, its contribution to the identity of Europe. Poland, largely a Roman Catholic country, decided, in 2003, to hold a referendum on whether or not to join EU. The

Polish primate declared that Poland would join EU "but only with God." Likewise, Hungary's Roman Catholic primate claimed that without clear reference to Christianity, "the heart of Europe would be missing."<sup>4</sup> In the end, the final Constitution resorted to making reference to Europe's "cultural, religious and humanist inheritance."<sup>5</sup>

*Murder* raises questions concerning the possibility of having a European Union premised solely on economic and political grounds, and whether or not religion still plays an important role in its collective and individual behaviour, or if the secular order is better suited to address the subjective and political crises of European identity. Kristeva traces the interrogation of the process of European unification back to the schism between the Occidental and Oriental Church in 1054, that eventually led to the split between Eastern and Western Europe. She considers the First Crusades, in 1094, as the first attempt at a European unification, premised on religious grounds, at a time when the geopolitical identity of Europe did not even exist. From the First Crusades to George Bush's crusades against the "Axis of Evil" in Iraq, Kristeva charts the European territory from multiple perspectives at once: religious, historical, political, philosophical and psychoanalytical. In order to better assess whether or not religion still plays an important role in influencing and shaping European tradition, Kristeva uses as the main setting the secular global village, Santa Varvara, where corruption, chaotic administration and the absence of any political direction has led to violence, arm dealers, mafia control and religious extremism. This allows Kristeva to examine the effects of secularism and capitalism in a society driven by images and consumption, and at the same time to raise questions about whether or not religious extremism might be a direct consequence of the absence of authority, laws, and values characteristic of Santa Varvara. She uses a political journalist, Stephanie Delacour, to investigate the violation of human rights abuses and a series of murders committed against some of the corrupt religious

members of the New Pantheon in Santa Varvara. As her initial search for the serial killer of the religious members does not amount to much, she begins another kind of investigation, this time into how religion, secularism and politics have shaped European tradition, as she explains: "my wanderings have taken me today to *another European era*, nine centuries before the *problematic 'Union'* of the present day that still hesitates to extend its reach from the Atlantic to the Black Sea, *with or without Turkey...*" (Kristeva 2006, 80, my emphasis). Stephanie's reflection on how the politics of Judeo-Christianity has impacted the dynamics of subjectivity and social relations in both Eastern and Western Europe emerges as the catalyst that brings together the various stories of the novel.

Interlaced with Stephanie's investigation there is the story of Sebastian Chrest-Jones, a professor of the history of world migrations, who conducts academic research on the role of the First Crusades and its similarities with the current problematic Union. According to Sebastian, "it was the troubling times of the Crusades that inaugurated this Euro-Mediterranean project..., although they didn't conceive of it in the same way at the time and simply covered the whole thing with the unique symbol of the cross" (2006, 81). Sebastian's research takes him back to Anna Comnena's historical account of the First Crusades in *The Alexiad*, whom he credits to be the most complex historical and political account of those times.<sup>6</sup> The story of Anna Comnena also inspires Sebastian to embark on a personal crusade, in search of his paternal great-great-great grandfather, whom he believes had participated in the First Crusades. Sebastian begins writing a novel, inventing a story of love between Anna Comnena and Ebrard Pagan, his imagined ancestor, a process that sets him on a journey of self-examination and self-knowledge. Thus on the one hand, we have Sebastian Chrest-Jones, a respected professor of world migrations, who reconstructs the itineraries of the First Crusades, examining various historical maps

and documents in order to better understand the circumstances of the modern times of world migrations. On the other hand, we have Sebastian's "sub-self," or C/J as he is also called, who is conducting a personal research into the "wrinkles of another time" (2006, 59). This research turns out to be in fact a search for the image of a pure ideal mother, since he profoundly dislikes his biological mother, Tracy Jones, because she conceived him out of wedlock. C/J's search for a pure ideal mother offers Kristeva the opportunity to revisit the religious imaginary and its insistence on representing the Mother as pure, virginal, asexual and immortal. She engages the religious representations of the Virgin Mary in both Orthodoxy and Catholicism in a reflection on whether or not the soulless secular global village of Santa Varvara is well suited to reconsider the role of the mother: "we've not invented anything to replace the Virgin Mary, unless it's surrogate mothers and paediatric psychiatry" (2006, 235).

By constructing Sebastian on the logic of the double, Kristeva also draws a parallel between the politics of the everyday life and the dynamics of psychic life. While Sebastian retraces the itineraries of the First Crusades, traversing the European continent from France to Bulgaria, he observes the political realities of a Europe that still feels the aftermath of the Kosovo war. At the same time, C/J, the traveller with his psychic map, suggests that what he remembers is rather repressed memories and that is not what is remembered by the history of religions or socio-cultural politics of the everyday. Kristeva suggests that both the historical and religious European memory and C/J's search are formed and driven by the exclusion of the feminine and the maternal.

Kristeva attributes to Stephanie the role of revealing the intricate logic of Sebastian's and C/J's stories, since her investigation into the serial killings and human rights abuses in Santa Varvara leads her to Sebastian's research on world migrations and his novel on Anna Comnena. It was Sebastian's sudden disappearance, the

murder of his pregnant Chinese mistress, Fa Chang, and the murder of one of his colleagues found in his office, that prompts Stephanie's investigation of Sebastian's life. The political journalist turned detective discovers that, in fact, it was Sebastian who in a fit of rage murdered Fa, as she reminded him of his promiscuous mother. At the same time, she discovers that the serial killer of Santa Varvara was the twin brother of Sebastian's mistress, Xiao Chang, who took it upon himself to clean the city of its most corrupt and religious extremist citizens. Yet the death of his twin sister threw Xiao into a deep crisis that led to the murder of Sebastian's colleague, whom he mistook for Sebastian, and prompted him to look for Sebastian in Europe. Helped by a police investigator, Northrop Rilsky, Stephanie remaps Sebastian's journey and arrives at the monastery Le Puy-en-Velay, in France, just as the Chinese serial killer shoots Sebastian, and who, in turn, is shot by Rilsky. Stephanie and Rilsky return to Santa Varvara, where Stephanie explains to her psychoanalyst friend Estelle Pankow, the entire logic of Sebastian's story, makes sense of it and integrates it into the larger religious and political context of European tradition. She argues that in both cases what is at stake is the repression and exclusion of the feminine and the maternal, and the novel ends on Stephanie's promise to continue to further investigate its logic.

In *Murder*, the encounter between religion and politics is staged through a philosophical and psychoanalytical line that engages the works of Arendt and Freud in a way that links the act of narration and politics to psychic life. Kristeva's presentation of the novel as a polyphony of voices, illustrated by the proliferation of narrative acts, of *mise-en-abyme* techniques, resonates with Arendt's emphasis on the importance of pluralization of political space and Freud's insistence on polymorphism, to which I return later. Kristeva's narrative construction is indebted to the kind of narratives she ascribes to Arendt's conceptualization of storytelling in *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*. For

Arendt, storytelling, like historical narratives, has a political function which recasts the act of narration as a form of action. Kristeva explains that Arendt's model of aesthetics and politics responds to the ways in which modern technologies and consumerism threaten to destroy human life by abolishing the very meaning of life (Kristeva 2001, 13). In contrast, Arendt recasts the concept of human life as a political action that is revealed in the language of a narration (2001, 13). For Arendt, political thought is realized through narrative and not in language in and of itself, though language is the essential vehicle of narration. As Kristeva further explains: "Narrative is the initial dimension in which man lives, the dimension of a *bios* - and not of a *zoe* - a political life and/or an action recounted to others. The initial man-life correspondence is narrative; narrative is the most immediately shared action and, in that sense, the most initially political action" (2001, 27).

In *Murder*, the Arendtian model of narration as action is best illustrated through the story of Stephanie Delacour. Kristeva attributes to Stephanie the role of making the connections between life, narratives and politics evident. As Stephanie begins her investigations of human rights abuses and serial murders in Santa Varvara while at the same time reading and interpreting Sebastian's novel on the life and times of Anna Comnena, she also starts writing a detective novel which draws on her experiences. This novel emerges as the very narrative structure of *Murder*. For Stephanie, life and writing are inseparable and their relation reversible, as she explains: "Like a detective novel, life itself needs detours and subplots to be readable, livable" (Kristeva 2006, 110-1).

Echoing Arendt's link of life, narratives and action, Stephanie regards her writing as an open-ended process of interrogation that tells the story as she lived it, "with no conclusion" (2006, 231). In that way, her writing can only provide a "road map," "something hybrid" which she fears might not be understood or even visible (2006, 228). Yet

this hybrid map has the potential to indicate an alternative way of rethinking the religious versus secular debates that mark the process of European unification, while also trying to open up ways of forming communities, without reducing them to nationalism, ethnicity, or religious markers. As Stephanie explains:

*My map of the world has been shaped by my trips, meeting and the new networks that weave an open community around them and that has nothing crazy about it.... More than the beliefs of some and the States of others, it's really just a little International of Byzantines like me, Stephanie Delacour, trying to understand and sometimes coming up with some answers. (Kristeva 2006, 79, my emphasis)*

It is this emphasis on writing as a way of modifying the map of the world that prompts Stephanie to doubt that what she is writing can even be called a "novel," as she insists: "No, I don't think it's a novel, no" (2006, 236). If it is not a novel, what is it? Stephanie responds that her writing may be seen rather as "some kind of free association" (2006, 226). In contrast to the rhetorical mode of traditional novel that obscures the importance of self-interrogation and thought, the model of free association emphasizes the importance of self-questioning that reveals the self-complicity in the construction of narratives, cultural meanings and so on. The emphasis on free association is a way of constructing a model in sharp contrast to some of the racist and xenophobic literatures of European tradition.

Free association lends itself well to Stephanie's definition of her minor genre as a road map, invoking Kristeva's metaphor of writing as a mental surface while pointing to the modification and transformation of both individual and cultural maps. For Stephanie, free association underscores the transitory movement between and across genres, the refusal to be anchored down via stories, onto

stable territories of meaning and signification. The rule of free association relies, in the novel, on what Kristeva has called the "optimistic model of language" (Kristeva 2000b, 38). In her analysis of the Freudian models of language, Kristeva argues that this optimistic model of language which justifies free association has been developed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (2000b, 38). According to Kristeva, Freud's invitation to the patient to "tell a story profoundly modified the traditional conception of language" (2000b, 38, italics in original) in so far as we understand *story* not in the sense of signs or syntax but as the capacity to associate, translate and displace the unconscious and conscious traumatic contents (2000b, 38). For this to happen, language is seen as an "interface" between the unconscious and the conscious, constituting the intermediary zone that picks out the memory trace and the unconscious libidinal charge allowing them to surface (2000b, 39). Thus, when freely associating, the patient tells a story that "reveals not his biological surface or his libidinal surface" but rather "his mental surface, from instant to instant," and this in the form of language (2000b, 39). For Kristeva this model is optimistic, because "the unconscious is articulated like a language, 'I' can decipher it, 'I' can discover its rules" and because it is situated in an intermediary position, it allows access "to the unknowable, that is, to trauma" (2000b, 40). In *Murder*, free association not only reveals the intricate connections between the various murders but also opens up an alternative way of thinking about the relationship between the psychic and the social, in which conflict, violence and the death drive are turned into sources of investigation, interrogation and thought.

Kristeva uses psychoanalysis not only to construct an optimistic model of narratives but also to question the role of Freudian psychoanalysis in obscuring the formative role of the maternal, in its representation of the feminine as a mystery or as an enigma to be deciphered. In aligning Freud with Saint Augustine, she suggests a Christocentric aspect of the Freudian formulation of the

feminine and the maternal. Kristeva critiques Freud's analysis of female sexuality, for instance, for obscuring the central role of the mother in the formation of subjectivity, by shifting the focus onto the role of the father, as she insists in the novel: "Much more than the human female, the male is a mammal that depends on his mother from start to finish....*Freud pretended to minimize this indelible passion that he was all too aware of...*Jocasta and Oedipus, remember them? *The good doctor only saw castration fear everywhere*, his sole explanation for the forward striving of the stronger sex and his rage to perform" (Kristeva 2006, 223, my emphasis).

Kristeva's critique of Freud's theory of female sexuality and maternal passion also opens up the interrogation of Freud's formulation of the social order. For Freud, the social order is a religious order, as Kristeva explains in *The Sense and Non-Sense of the Revolt*. She argues that when Freud analyzes the oedipal structure as the "major organizer of the psyche of the speaking being and the permanence of the oedipal over the generations," he begins from the premise that the social order is "fundamentally religious" (Kristeva 2000b, 12). For Freud, the "religious man is a rebellious man" because the logic of religion is premised on the dialectical logic of prohibition and transgression, thus satisfying the desire for transgression (2000b, 29). In *Murder*, the question is not to understand how the religious man is capable of revolt, of transgressing the prohibitions imposed by religion, but what happens to the social order if it is no longer a religious order.

In stark opposition to the Freudian formulation of the social order as a religious order, Kristeva presents the global village of Santa Varvara as trapped in a stage of economic and political transitions that normalizes psychic life through a "nonstop exhibition of intimacy, televising values and execution of our passions" (2006, 65). The question she asks, with Freud's social order in mind, is whether it is enough to replace the oedipal structure, and the oedipal father, with what she calls the secular imaginary Mother

of the society of the spectacle, and whether that is enough to provide the conditions for an inner life and free subjectivity. If the social order is no longer a religious order, if the oedipal father is dead, as suggested in the model of the global village, and if the secular global order embraces "the imaginary Mother of the Spectacle Society" (2006, 76), in what sense can we define a European identity?

In *Murder*, Kristeva proposes an alternate model of the social. She challenges the Freudian social and religious order by shifting attention from the dialectic of prohibition and transgression to the return or access to the maternal archaic. In that model, the emphasis lies on the re-valorization of repressed femininity. Without rejecting either Freudian thought or the secular new world order, Kristeva tries to displace them, retaining only the elements that could create a fertile space for thinking about European identity. To that end, she constructs the narrative space as a staged encounter between various traditions, trying to create the illusion of a different form of spectacle, the obverse of the spectacle of society, a spectacle that is aware of the illusion that it creates, of the fact that there is no way out of the spectacle other than by playing the game. Stephanie best sums up this idea:

There is no way out of the spectacle, Stephanie, no exit...My boss at the *Evenement* de Paris lectures me...It was precisely because I knew there was no way out that I joined the team of this little cynic. Or rather because I believed *there was in fact a way out, one that passed through the interior*, through the underside of all the cards, and through the cards themselves - in other words, *through playing the game...*" (77, my emphasis)

For Kristeva, this form of spectacle creates in fact a theatre of interiority of what Stephanie calls "the desirable, the impossible Europe," a Europe that "doesn't know the passion that is felt for – then and now she has

never even suspected how much" (2006, 173). Kristeva draws on Baroque theatre to construct the novel as a stage where Saint Augustine, Freud, Arendt, Anna Comnena, Colette, Joyce, Proust, Nabokov, Paul Ricoeur, Philippe Sollers and other major European thinkers are brought together to create an illusory space of a "European" imaginary realm made "fertile without its least knowledge or recognition" (2006, 173) .

Baroque theatre presents for Kristeva the example of a spectacle that induces the audience to dream, to desire, to hallucinate, while at the same time calling attention to the fact that the scenic illusion is only a game, not to be confused with reality. And as in a game, Kristeva reveals in the novel its logic, its actors, and the reasons behind its choices. It is Stephanie who explains clearly why the Baroque model might best accommodate the idea of the desirable yet impossible Europe: "It is not the Revolution...nor is it the libertine spirit with its daring sadism, nor the appetite of Gargantua....," Stephanie argues, but rather the "volatile, mobile, playful and vagabond inconsistency" of the Baroque man that assumes the paradox and desire of Europe (2006, 229). It is because Baroque man "practiced *liberty as a comfortable illusion, never as a birthright or absolute claim,*" knowing he was an actor "without interiority, skilful at changing masks and burning the sets of his spectacles, which were only enchanted islands, dreams, or wonderlands *never to be confused with reality*" (2006, 229, my emphasis). This triumph of the illusory gives prominence to the ability to live, aware that freedom is not a "birthright or absolute claim," and the ability to put on masks, creating a kaleidoscope of perspectives, so that one can "dare to be inessential" (2006, 229). It is nothing but an invitation to become the spectator and actor of the show, to dare have no essence, to play at continuously reinventing the show. As Stephanie explains: "When the actors of *Ile enchantee* burned the set of their show, they meant to say that *all was inessential, including their fire*, just as the fire in which Don Juan burns is inessential. *And that it's up to them, up to all of us, in fact,*

*to renew the show, to reinvent it, nothing more, nothing less*" (231, my emphasis).

Kristeva's spectacle of interiority joins Arendt's view on narrative with Freud's optimistic model of language, so as to imagine a political space where plural identities are recognized and shared, and where conflicting ideas can emerge without cancelling each other out. Why Arendt with Freud? Because if for Arendt the political is incomplete without the transformational function of narrative, for Freud narrative renders the prepolitical (i.e., the unconscious, feelings, affect) political. If Arendt argues that it is narrated action that lies at the basis of politics, Freud believes that it is narration, as long as it freely associates, that profoundly modifies the psychic map and the relationship with language, allowing the crisis of subjectivity to be addressed as a crisis of language, through language. It is Freud's opinion that Kristeva echoes when Stephanie insists that the only way out of the spectacle is by passing through the interior, by playing the game. More importantly, Arendt conceptualizes the political as a site of *inter-est*, as Kristeva explains in *Crisis of the European Subject*, meaning that the political is, for Arendt, the intermediate space in which arises the "logic of memorization as detachment from lived experience *ex post facto*" (Kristeva 2000a, 54). If the intermediary space, the *inter-est* constitutes the political for Arendt, for Freud, it is the intermediary role of language that gives access to and unfurls the crisis of subjectivity. Kristeva offers in the novel the theatre of interiority as an example of the intermediate space, where the political is seen as part of the illusion, yet aware of its illusory character, to the extent that it is able to practice "liberty as a comfortable illusion, never as a birthright or absolute claim" (2006, 229). Alongside Freud, who called religion an illusion (Kristeva 2000b, 35), Kristeva not only believes it is an illusion, but in the novel tries to expose its logic, stage its dynamics, make it aware that it is only an illusion, that can dare be inessential, in other words, that can be analyzed. Even more importantly, Kristeva seems to suggest that the economic and

political grounds of the current European Union can be rethought in terms of Arendt's formulation of the *inter-est*, as an intermediary space, where the apparent homogeneous meaning of the European identity is staged as an illusion, aware that is never a "birthright or absolute claim" (2006, 229).

But who could expose this illusory nature of either religion or of the European identity, and stage the theatre of interiority as a show that renews itself continuously, highlighting the freedom of reinvention that comes from the ability to distance oneself from one's self, seeing one's self as an other? According to Kristeva, it is women who are better placed to expose the illusory nature of the spectacle of interiority. Kristeva's theatre of interiority of "the desirable, the impossible Europe" (2006, 173) celebrates not only the politics of another narrative jouissance, but also what Freud called the "illusory" nature of women (Kristeva 2000b, 100). It is through feminine creativity and laughter that the desirable Europe is imagined, envisioned and re-created, in such a way as to expose its rigid constructed boundaries, emphasizing feminine creativity and sensibility as the major actors of change in the reconfiguration of the European cultural map. Irony is used as a modality to underscore the temporary illusory effect of freedom, bringing political contestation and anti-theological movement together, as Estelle remarks about Stephanie's use of irony: "You're *not* a believer, Estelle remaining political. [...] If atheism really existed, the ironist would be the radical atheist. Certainly, *not* a purist! Those who deflect words and genres abolish purity itself ..." (2006, 243, my emphasis).

For Kristeva, atheism is tied up with the very heterogeneous structure of the novel. It emerges not as a form of secularism, but as a critical attitude that relies on feminine sensibility for keeping open the various forms of investigation into monological practices of signification. On the political level, this form of atheism emerges as a way of displacing, questioning and analyzing the religious past that has marked European memory. Without stigmatizing that memory, it offers a critical

attitude towards the religious order of both Eastern and Western Europe. From a past memory, formulated through the political instrumentalization of religion, to a present secular one, seen as if from a distance, from the global village Santa Varvara, European identity is redefined in such a way as to become a source of interrogation, of pluralization of subjective dynamics and narratives, and of heterogeneity, rather than the immovable grounds on which economic and political unification takes place. It is women's creativity and their ability to think beyond rigidly constructed borders, questioning religious, epistemic and geopolitical frontiers, problematizing the economic and political grounds that define who counts as a European, that continuously transform and reinvent the meanings of East, West, Europe, thus keeping the definition of European identity from closing up. Such potential for transformation is best illustrated in the novel by the image of Anna Comnena's grandmother, Dessislava, whose portrait, found in the Boyana Church, in Bulgaria, combines elements from various cultures in a hybrid genre, presenting them as a narrative for interrogation, sharing and recreation: "The maturity of the East and the illuminations of the Latins intermingled and sometimes produced a graceful result such as the gothic left hand of Dessislava" (2006, 170-2, my emphasis). I see Dessislava's open hand, in a welcoming gesture of hospitality and sharing, as a metaphor for rethinking the transitory condition of subjectivity and cultural identity, as being premised on the revalorization of the feminine condition. It is on such revalorization that the very possibility of rethinking European identity rests, leaving the question of Europe to be endlessly interrogated and reinvented. Or as Stephanie suggests: "I am even inclined to think that it is precisely from the transitory beings that we are - we vulnerable Byzantines and recorders of the modern Crusades - that the question of the future, if not the future, will come" (2006, 56).

## Endnotes

1. The few exceptions include articles by Anna Smith (1998), Carol M. Bove (2006), Valerie Raoul (2001). Each addresses one or more notions of Kristeva's theoretical work, yet none discusses the interrelationship between her theory and fiction.
2. Further references to *Murder in Byzantium* will appear as *Murder*.
3. [www.europeanconstitution.ie/constitution/en/preamble\\_en.asp](http://www.europeanconstitution.ie/constitution/en/preamble_en.asp). Retrieved, June, 2009.
4. "God Kept Out of EU Constitution." Available online at: [www.wnd.com/?pageId=19030](http://www.wnd.com/?pageId=19030). Retrieved, June, 2009.
5. [europa.eu/scadplus/constitution/objectives\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/scadplus/constitution/objectives_en.htm). Retrieved, June, 2009.
6. Kristeva uses Anna Comnena's *The Alexiad* as both a historical account to reference key moments of the First Crusades and as a fictional account, that becomes the basis of Sebastian Chrest-Jones' imaginary love story between Anna Comnena and Ebrard Pagan, his great-great-grandfather.

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