

# Kristeva, Psychic Space, and Utopia: Toward a Sketch of Abject Utopianism

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Julia Kristeva, a contemporary French psychoanalyst, literary/cultural critic, and author, is one of the paradigmatic figures of what is known in North America as contemporary French feminism. Kristeva's work includes novels, theoretical essays in the fields of semiotics and linguistics, and autobiographical prose related to the phenomenon of borderline subjectivity or liminal states of consciousness. Her 1980 book *Pouvoirs de l'horreur (Powers of Horror)* revolutionized psychoanalytic theory and practice through her introduction of the concept of *l'abjection* (abjection) and its relationship to the constitution of modern subjectivity. In this article I argue that Kristeva's work in the fields of psychoanalysis and cultural criticism, especially pertaining to what she calls "the new maladies of the soul," speaks to a utopian philosophy that becomes manifest through the reconstitution of what Kristeva calls Psychic Space. According to Kristeva, a healthy living psychic space is made possible only through a historically specific psychological process of subjectification that is characterized by great pain and suffering, but also by joy and pleasure. The suffering is proper to what Kristeva calls *l'abjection*; the pleasure is proper to what Kristeva calls *jouissance*. Together, these terms sketch out a particular range of Kristeva's work that can be used to complement extant critical theory informing utopian studies today.

For Kristeva, as is consistent with traditional psychoanalytic theory, the individual subject is a split subject.<sup>1</sup> The individual is split into a conscious and unconscious aspect. This constitutive splitting of the subject perpetually alienates the subject from himself or herself. Alienation is not a bad thing, absolutely; it is what

keeps the subject in motion. The forces of alienation acting on the subject—within and without—are the forces of *négativité* (negativity). The latter is a Hegelian concept that, when borrowed by psychoanalysis, refers to the everlasting subversion of a static or stable identity. *Négativité* operates unconsciously at the level of bodily *pulsions* (drives); however, these forces can be brought to the subject's conscious awareness through such contemplative practices as the arts, but especially via psychoanalysis.

Kristeva is part of a psychoanalytic tradition in France that is indebted to the work of Jacques Lacan. Like the way in which Alexandre Kojève introduced France to the work of Hegel, Lacan reintroduced the work of Freud to France intermingled with the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure. Kristeva is important to the development of psychoanalytic theory and practice because she diverged, quite radically, from the teachings of Lacan, her one time analyst.<sup>2</sup> Like Lacan, Kristeva understands the individual subject to be constituted through language, which is to say via the symbolic. However, unlike Lacan, who thought that the subject was constituted by means of the symbolic and *only* the symbolic, Kristeva argues that the subject is equally constituted by the 'other side' of the symbolic: *le sémiotique*. The *sémiotique* is the non-signifying "baby-talk" proper to the *infans* (i.e., pre-linguistic infant): babbles, crying, tones, silences, and rhythms. It is that aspect of subjectivity that Lacan thought to be meaningless because it cannot be codified or pinned down by the Law of the dominant symbolic. This should not lead one to think that the *sémiotique* and *symbolique* are mutually antagonistic or antithetical. They do, in fact, work together: the *sémiotique* imbues the *symbolique* with force and movement such that without the former, all that remains is a dead archive of the *symbolique*. On the other hand, the *symbolique* provides the grammatical structures through which the *sémiotique* can operate.

This relationship is not always harmonious; when the *sémiotique* fails to connect with a strong symbolic structure (or vice versa), the results can prove wildly anarchic, as there is nothing to channel the drives. This usually occurs in moments of great historical upheaval, whether in science, politics, or art. For example, Kristeva is very interested in the "great upheaval" of the avant-garde movement in art during the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but one could just as well consider paradigm shifts in science (à la Thomas Kuhn) and/or mass protests such as May '68 or the Arab Spring. Since scientists, activists, and artists are implicated in expressions of the *sémiotique*, it should be apparent that the *sémiotique* is not restricted to pre-linguistic phase of

development but is present throughout the entirety of the subject's life. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1988) articulates 'semiotic subjectivity' when she writes:

*Self as a semiotic [le sémiotique] principle constitutes the subject; self as experience in which both agent and receiver act and are acted upon; and self finally as constituted by the Other, which is the field of the political. Together they form not layers of a self like the flesh of an onion easily peeled apart but rather types of chemicals whose different properties bind to produce for each individual a unique process, reaction, and alchemical substance. (see Smith and Watson, 444)*

The "void" for Kristeva, which Lacan posited beneath language, is *full* with non-signifying meaning. This point of difference between the two thinkers is important, for it radically sets apart two very different interpretations of the individual subject—analytic practice and ethics—and their respective worldviews.

With regard to Lacan's view of the individual subject's inauguration into language or the symbolic, such a move is made—indeed forced—by the split in subjectivity affected through the separation from the pre-Oedipal Mother. This is, in short, castration. For Lacan, castration is total, complete, and psychically traumatizing, leaving the subject with a constantly plaguing sense of lack: a part of me is missing/lacking and I can never return to, or find, it (i.e., the pre-Oedipal Mother); nor would one want to, Lacan would say, as the death-bearing capacities of the Phallic Mother signify the abolition of my existence. To go beyond the pleasure principle would be to completely give oneself over to *Thanatos* and the veritable enactment of the death drive. The description above draws a picture for the reader of what constitutes the absolute, impossible, and endlessly painful nature of what Lacan calls *jouissance*. Kristeva develops a radically different understanding of *jouissance* and it too has to do with the *infans's* inauguration into language or the symbolic. For Kristeva, the subject's inauguration into language is not caused solely by a painful and traumatizing castration but also by affects of love and pleasure.

According to Kristeva, the pre-Oedipal Mother of the *infans* lovingly and carefully works *with* the non-signifying *sémiotique* speech, gradually bringing it into accord with the symbolic (i.e., making it into language). This process is pleasing and enjoyable for the *infans* as the pre-Oedipal Mother infuses the *infans* with creative potentiality via a loving and caring "apprenticeship of language": "[T]he progenitor inhabits the mouth, the lungs, the digestive tube of her offspring and, in accompanying the echolalia, guides them toward signs, phrases, tales: *infans* becomes infant, a speaking subject" (Kristeva 2006, 43-4). Kristeva, too, acknowledges that

entrance into the symbolic is painfully enacted through the loss of the pre-Oedipal Mother; she simply claims that this is not exclusively that which accounts for the constitution of subjectivity. In contrast to Lacan, Kristeva does not view the splitting of the subject from the pre-Oedipal Mother as total and complete. By virtue of *le sémiotique* operating at the borders of the self (i.e., between psyche and soma), the law-before-the-law (maternal law) is never truly severed as such; rather, it is conveyed in speech-acts not consecrated by the dominant symbolic (e.g., babble, cries, bellows, nonsense). As such, one is always already in contact with the pre-Oedipal Mother and thus capable of participating in the ecstasy of *jouissance*. For Kristeva, *jouissance* is not impossible but rather a possible space of the unknown (a “yet-to-come”). Leon S. Roudiez articulates the meaning of this ecstasy that is ‘beyond’ meaning typically understood by breaking down the French word *jouissance* into parts: *j’ouïs sens* = I heard meaning (Roudiez in Kristeva 1969/1977, 16). For Kristeva, *jouissance* is the intuitive perception of that which is beyond conventional symbolic codification and which ‘speaks’ of a meaning that is yet to come. This notion of the ‘yet-to-come’ *qua jouissance* is where I see the germs of Kristeva’s greater utopian philosophy.

The sensation of this ‘meaning’ that is yet to come is, for Kristeva, experienced during times when the individual and the social are not in accord. These times are identified as what Sara Beardsworth (2006) calls “tendential severances”:

*[...] where modern institutions and discourses have failed to provide everyday social and symbolic sites or practices for the adequate connection of the semiotic and symbolic [...] When the semiotic and symbolic are inadequately connected, the linguistic universe, symbolic bonds with others (communication), and social bonds are felt to be meaningless and without value. (14)*

The feeling of meaninglessness and nihilism conjures within the individual subject—who has, for security purposes, turned inward into himself/herself (i.e., primary narcissism)—sensations of disgust and revulsion. Without readily available cultural resources by means of which to express these sensations of unrest (for the *sémiotique* is always moving), the latter will invariably erupt in wildly anarchic and destructive ways. These outbursts can take the form of vulgar street level anarchy as might be witnessed through acts of vandalism and graffiti, or on a mass scale approximating social uprisings. These actions are not guided by positive visions (in the sense of definite plans or courses of action), but rather are simply base expressions of rejection of the status quo. In short, this phenomenon is akin to, if not emblematic of,

abjection.<sup>3</sup> Abjection, although unpleasant in every sense of the term, is a necessary process to undergo in order for (a new) subjectivity to become manifest; which is to say, for the “tendential severance” to become reconciled.

The problem Kristeva diagnoses, according to Sara Beardsworth (2004), is that the late-modern individual subject is called upon to perform the impossible; that is, to perform the function of a social institution that can knit together *sémiotique* and *symbolique*. This is an impossible task since by definition the individual is not the social; faced with such overwhelming responsibility, the individual regresses into nihilism and despair, which manifests in the form of crippling psychological ills. In place of the dearth of cultural resources necessary to help bring forth such uniting social discourses, Kristeva suggests that the arts and psychoanalysis can be utilized toward this end; for without such resources, individuals wander about aimlessly, with little or no social meaning to which to connect their own ‘bodily meaning.’ An example of this is the student riots in London in Summer 2011. Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures of the discipline of cultural studies, quoted in *The Guardian*, describes the 2011 student London riots which speak to Kristeva’s point:

*Some kids at the bottom of the ladder are deeply alienated, they’ve taken the message of Thatcherism and Blairism and the coalition [...] nobody’s going to help you. And they’ve got no organised political voice, no organised black voice and no sympathetic voice on the left. That kind of anger, coupled with no political expression, leads to riots. It always has. (see Williams 2012)*

This state of being—whereby a disconnect lingers between social meaning(s) and bodily or sensual meaning(s)—Sara Beardsworth calls “unacknowledged suffering” (Beardsworth 13-17) The rebellious actions of the protesters/rioters are received merely as senseless violence; and this is good for news media and right-wing propaganda. However, on a much deeper psychological level, Beardsworth, following Kristeva’s critique, would suggest that the violent outbursts witnessed are in fact symptoms of the disconnect between body and social, a disconnect that the individual is unable to adequately amend on their own. When there is no strong social symbolic to meet these private desires, the individual turns into a symptom of social pathology; or, as Kristeva articulates the same point: “Private suffering absorbs political horror into the subject’s psychic microcosm” (1987, 234)

The declining status of the capital-O Other, in this case the State/Politics, is but one symptom that today we live in “a new suffering world” (Kristeva, 1987, 235). These moments of violent outburst are not to be coded in merely negative language,

which is to say they are not just “outrageous and monstrous”; by way of the outburst’s abject nature these moments are also productive in terms of what they allow the individual subject to achieve. Kristeva states, for instance, “The modern political domain is massively, in totalitarian fashion, social, leveling, exhausting. Hence madness is a space of asocial, apolitical, and *paradoxically free individuation*” (1987, 235; my emphasis). Riots and violent protests are abject attempts to bring forth—give birth?—to a new individual subjectivity from within an undifferentiated collective event. Kristeva articulates the imperfect, messy, and arduous process of this abject individuation when she relates her experience of being forced to drink handed to her by her parents: “I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish *myself*. [...] ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (Kristeva 1980, 3). The disgust conjured as a result of being forced to drink the milk is symptomatic of the overbearing and/or oppressive symbolic figures that her parents represented. Although the reaction in question is reactionary at best, it is pregnant with elusive and subversive tendencies that give birth to new and unexpected subjectivities.

One of the burdens placed upon the subject under late modernity is the responsibility to establish new connections that could possibly lead to a new social symbolic, while knowing that society has ‘advanced’ to the point where such a symbolic is virtually impossible. Keeping in mind that *le sémiotique* is always pulsating at the edges of subjectivity (i.e., operating at the borders of the individual and society), disrupting the possibility of a stable symbolic, such efforts are perpetually thwarted. “[I]t is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so - whence the element of crisis which the notion of abjection carries with it” (Kristeva qtd. in Oliver 2002, 374). This is not to say that the establishment of such symbolic codes is impossible and therefore hopelessly utopian; rather, the sensations of disgust and revulsion unsettle complacent subjectivity such that the subject is forced into action of some kind. Because abjection does not point to an object as such, but instead pushes away from an existing object, such an experience requires one to remain open to radical possibility as it presents itself en route to ‘nowhere.’ What is offered to the individual subject is a *chance* to establish a more harmonious balance between *le sémiotique* and *symbolique* such that a healthy psychic space can be discovered and sustained for open and fluid dialogue and exchange to take place.

For Kristeva the reconstitution of psychic space amounts to the reconstitution of a better world, and I will be bold and claim such a world to be utopian. Kelly Oliver (2004), philosopher, clarifies the point that “psychic space is not just an inner drama or psychological interior [...] Constant and free-flowing negotiations, transference, and translations between the bodily drives and cultural language are necessary to sustain robust psychic space” (217n4); which is another way of saying, as Kristeva does in *Tales of Love*, “The psyche is one open system connected to another, and only under those conditions is it renewable. If it lives, your psyche is in love. If it is not in love, it is dead” (1983, 15). The psyche is not the mind or the soul, contained within the strictly narrow confines of the skull and brain of the individual, but is rather an open and fluid exchange of drive-energy *between* an individual and his or her social milieu. If these open and fluid conditions are not readily available (as Kristeva believes to be the case today, with her diagnosis of the “new maladies of the soul”), psychic space becomes reduced to or reified in terms of *drive* or *culture* (i.e., the individual’s body *qua* somatic symptom or external to the body in culture, namely, the ‘entertainment industry’). By this, Kristeva is claiming that during times of “tendential severance” (see Beardsworth), the ‘closed’ and unhealthy psyche seeks security by turning inward and indulging in the self-gratifying private fantasies of the body, or by cocooning itself in the substitute oceanic feeling provided by culture, namely the entertainment industry. Both of these options are security measures that the psyche enacts in order to protect it from having to take the risk of erecting a new symbolic.<sup>4</sup> Such reclusion can also dull the subject to the potential joy and pleasures to be gained through wagering such a risk.

The refounding of an open, healthy, and living psychic space begins with and works through abjection. The *jouissance* to be gained from having worked through this hardship is akin to “an ‘oceanic feeling,’ as a jubilant osmosis of the subject in the common flesh of a ‘not-yet oneself’ swallowed up in a ‘not-yet world’” (Kristeva 2006, 8). Just like the process of pregnancy/birth there are no guarantees. The life awaiting the pre-natal being *ex utero* necessitates a risk, a risk of which the pre-natal being is unaware. If it were the case that the pre-natal beings could be made aware of the risks of their birth, it is unlikely that such beings would opt to wager such a risk. However, that is exactly the wager or risk that is forced upon the subject confronted by abjection.

One particular historical event that is very important to Kristeva—and that knits together abjection, psychic space, and utopia—is May ’68. “[F]undamentally, I

think, May '68's radicalism bears witness to an indefinite sense of mutation in the essence of man, the search for other forms of the sacred" (Kristeva 2002, 37). Earlier in the same text: "I am going to use a vocabulary that may shock people [...] Infinite jouissance for each person at the intersection of happiness for all... is it anything else but the sacred" (Kristeva 2002 34). Kristeva's notion of a "not-yet-world," precipitated by the radical wager of *jouissance* for each person, echoes Ernst Bloch's notion of the not-yet-conscious developed in the latter's *Principle of Hope*. Similarly, Kristeva's statement that "significance [*signifiance*] is indeed inherent in the human body" (Kristeva 1982, 10) seems to reiterate Bloch's idea that hope functions at the core of what constitutes the human being, much the same way Freud proclaimed the human being to be constituted by the pleasure principle (see Bloch 1954-59). However, in contrast to Bloch, who viewed psychoanalysis as a negation of futurity, Kristeva sees psychoanalysis as one of the few surviving methods available to preserve any possibility of futurity.

May '68 was a historical event that witnessed the utopian potential (both constructive and destructive) of confronting/embracing the pure negativity of that which is in excess of the symbolic order. The potential good to emerge from such a radical wager is complicated by the potential harm it can inflict upon both individuals as well as groups. Like the tired-out desire of Kristeva's melancholy woman who knows no bounds, the analysand—once brought to his/her psychic limits—"wants everything, to the end, until death" (Kristeva 1987, 86). This desire for everything until death should not be misunderstood as the exanguination of the powers of agency in the empirical act of dying; rather, Kristeva is using the term "death" metaphorically for purposes of illustrating the level of risk that the individual subject is willing to test in order for the pleasures harboured deep within their suffering to become manifest. Is this not the kind of intensity that we lack today? How does one, today, wager utopia?

Unfortunately, but perhaps not unexpectedly, Kristeva does not offer her reader any ready-made answers. The closest she does come to proffering any recommendation is through her defense of psychoanalysis as a method by means of which the individual subject can return to deeply ingrained psychic traces of abjection and thus work through their own unfulfilled potentialities. Other possible sites for hope include literature and the arts (e.g., painting, sculpture, music). By means of these cultural resources, Kristeva encourages the individual subject to expand the imaginary limitations/horizons of their psyche-soma and by extension increase the

sensitivity of his/her affective capacities with regard to his/her own body, others, and the world at large. “I think we all need an experience, by which I mean something unknown, surprise, pain, or delight, and then comprehension of this impact. Is it still possible? Perhaps not [...] I prefer to welcome these experiences: I keep my curiosity on call, expectant” (Kristeva 1996, 11). Kristeva’s cultural theory may appear pretentious, but this would be to miss the intention behind her method. Through her particular recourse to the humanities, her almost religious observations seek to bring the otherwise wildly anarchic *sémiotique* under control through sublimated practices such that psychic space will remain less volatile, and thus less likely to become reified as either *drive* or *culture*. “Theologies and literatures, beyond sin and fiendish characters, invite us to carve out ourselves in a sublime Other—metaphor or metonymy of the sovereign *Good*” (Kristeva 1983, 7). Literature provides a symbolically rich signifying practice by means of which the psyche can rearticulate its topography in a controlled imaginary environment, which is to say, reconstitute its capacities by means of charting unknown psychic lands.

Kristeva argues, “[L]iterature as such, represents the ultimate coding of our crises” (1980, 208). Literature *qua* ‘semiotization of the symbolic’ (or, vice versa) is a practice through which *jouissance* infiltrates that symbolic order. “In cracking the socio-symbolic order, splitting it open, changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them the drives born by vocalic or kinetic differences, *jouissance* works its way into the social and symbolic” (Kristeva 1974, 79-80). The particular examples that Kristeva uses to illustrate her point, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, are the French poets Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore-Lucien Ducasse 1846-1870) and Stéphane Mallarmé (Étienne Mallarmé 1842-1898). Their poetic works, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, constitute a veritable rupture of the dominant symbolic of their time, by most clearly representing the modern form of desire in language. In *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Kristeva engages with More’s *Utopia* directly—if for only a few paragraphs—where she lists the various artifacts in More’s work which she calls so much “negative rhetoric”: the Achoriens are a people *without* a territory; Adamus is a prince *without* a people, and the chief city, Amauratum, is a mirage. Kristeva’s point is to affirm that, “surely ...we are dealing with a *work of the imagination*, not a piece of reporting” (117; my emphasis). Kristeva means to draw her reader’s attention to the psychic meaning of utopia, that utopia is *primarily* an experience of the imaginary, and more precisely that of the individual. “When one dreams of a happy, harmonious, utopian society, one imagines it built upon love, since love exalts me at the same time as it exceeds or overtaxes me” (Kristeva 1983, 4).

The liminal or frontier zones of the psyche are precarious and sometimes threatening or even dangerous, but given the dire status of the psyche today, it is, as she says, a chance one must take.

Kristeva's refined engagement with various signifying practices invites others to do the same (i.e., read, write, act, paint, etc.) with the expectation that, through such personal and private engagement, the individual subject will become conscious of something that will affectively increase the psychic range within which they might explore the wonders of the universe. This is, I believe, what Kristeva is hinting at in the quotation borrowed from Reé (1997): "It [Kristeva's work] was an archeology [...] An archeology in search of utopia" (267), and is what Reé meant by titling his paper "Revolutionary Archeology: Julia Kristeva and the Utopia of the Text." This form of literary/cultural engagement might, contrary to expanding the range of one's psychic space, also narrow it through an encounter with something that is traumatizing and that one is not ready to face. Yet Kristeva writes, "However distressing, unbearable, deadly, or exhilarating it may be, this psychic life ... allows you access to your body and to other people. [...] Whether it harms you or saves you, you are its subject. Our purpose here is to analyze psychic life, that is, to break it down and start over" (1993, 6). This suggests that regardless of the risks—i.e., excessively expanding or reducing psychic space—one must devote oneself to this imperative if one is to have a hope of any sort in today's late-capitalist cultural climate.

These abject psychic spaces manifest as "abject" relative to their status quo but are nonetheless utopian in their own right. These psychic spaces are utopian in the way that Susan McManus (2003) proclaims utopia as "resolutely disruptive, inherently transgressive, profoundly performative, and fundamentally creative" (14). Although I argue that these psychic spaces and relationships are utopian, they do manifest as abject within the context of the culture at large and from which they emerge. Subjectivity is never achievable as such since, as Kristeva asserts, "abjection is above all ambiguity" (1980, 9). The abject utopian is neither subject nor object but rather a pre-egoistic fledgling, teetering on the cusp of undifferentiated psychic/somatic development, and characterized by "the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded" (Kristeva, 1980, 5). To this end, abjection is a *productive* concept to work with, despite its abhorrent qualities, and indeed I claim it is couched within a decidedly utopian context. Kristeva says that abjection is experienced when the subject "weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside," (the result of a weak or declining social-symbolic), "finds the

impossible within” (5). The “impossible within” is terrifying and is equally as flawed as a failed external identification in the symbolic.

The abject utopian projects radically alternative—abject—ways of living compared to the standardized commodity form of late capitalism. Insofar as this is the case, the abject utopian mimics Kristeva’s reinterpretation of Albert Camus’s dictum “I rebel, therefore we are.” For Kristeva, Camus’s reformulation of the *cogito* with regard to the challenges of modern living becomes: “I revolt, therefore we are still to come” (Kristeva 2002, 42). The horribly distorted desires and anticipations of such a utopian anticipate a future world—i.e., a utopian world—made possible by means of a reconstituted psychic space that has its origins in the decrepit, sometimes violent and horrifying, conditions of their contemporary life-world. Indeed, I agree that this is an unorthodox approach to imagining a path toward utopia, but Kristeva’s is a theory that imagines the *necessary preconditions* in order to maximize any utopian potential (i.e., meaning, language, desire, etc.). In other words, it is only by confronting one’s own “abominable limits” that abjection becomes “*an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new signifiante*” (Kristeva 1980, 15; my italics).

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## Notes

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1 Kristeva is best understood in terms of her linguistic theory and its implications for subjectivity. Her body of work can be ‘split’ into two parts: the early, more Marxian, writings of the late-1960s through mid-1970s (best represented in the book version of her doctoral dissertation *La révolution du langage poétique* (Revolution in Poetic Language, 1974) and the later, more properly psychoanalytic, writings that Sara Beardsworth (2006) calls “the trilogy of the 1980s”: *Pouvoirs de l’horreur* (Powers of Horror, 1980), *Histoires d’amour* (Tales of Love, 1983), and *Soleil Noir* (Black Sun, 1987a). Respectively, these three latter works address and examine abjection, love, and loss. Compared to Revolution in Poetic Language’s Marxian emphasis on *procès* (process) by way of *dialectique* (dialectics)—i.e., between the grammar of *le symbolique* (symbolic) and the drives of *le sémiotique* (semiotic)—her work in the 80s shifts focus onto a constitutive moment proper to subjectivity, an incomplete *clivé* (split), around which love, loss, and abjection circulate.

2 As with the work of Kristeva, I will not attempt an encyclopedia-like recounting of the work and theory of Lacan. Such work already exists and is very thorough; see Ragland-Sullivan and Bracher (1991), Fink (1995), and Apollon, Bergeron, and Cantin (2002).

3 In one of its manifestations, abjection is the pure repulsion and pushing away from something that one violently distastes, which is to say abjection is reactionary and not affirmative at its core in Kristeva. The subjectivity of her subject-in-process is therefore a subject that is constituted on the basis of pure negation. Phenomenologically the subject-in-process may experience the world in ways that can be described as affirmative and productive but, under the 'surface' of the ego, negative—or, negating—forces fueled by distaste and repugnance drive the subject. This does not, in any sense, imply that the subject-in-process is morally corrupt or motivated by dodgy forces; rather, it merely sheds light on the intersubjective context within which conflicts and desires arise. For Kristeva, the hope would be that once the subject becomes aware of the fact that his/her desire is negative and motivated by the psychological forces of abjection then s/he will be better situated to make sense of his/her life experiences and projects. In terms of understanding how this knowledge of abjection informs the political nature of the social uprisings mentioned in the main body of the text, Kristeva's theory suggests the following: It is therapeutic to abandon thinking of the future in purely positive and constructive way such that we can get what we want. The subject of late modernity, according to Kristeva, is not a subject who wants; rather, s/he is a subject who detests and rejects. Typically thinking in terms of the latter is considered pessimistic and thus dismissed and degraded, which is to say devalued. But the alternative of thinking positively and being optimistic are not yielding the kind of world that we want. As such, the challenge is to embrace the abject aspect of our subjectivity and learn to think and act with it productively. This would effectively amount to thinking and acting in ways that are considered inappropriate and/or obscene at times; however, I hold that these are the only remnants of utopianism in today's late modern capitalist society.

4 See above, the example of the London rioters—individually together—attempting to achieve such a symbolic.