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In Red Ink: From abjection to the menstrual imaginary

Abstract:

In this paper I present a close reading of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, as set out in *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (1982), with particular reference to her theorisation of an imaginary border of consciousness that originates with the maternal body. I pursue Kristeva's particular interest in the poet's confrontation with abjection. However, as it is predominantly a male poet that Kristeva considers in relation to abjection, I consider the female poet's journey to encounter the abyss. I argue that the female poet is less distanced from the maternal Other because of her animal procreative functions, particularly her menstrual cycle, and she may therefore choose to face the abject periodically, and contribute to what I have termed a *menstrual imaginary*. Moreover, I argue that this maternal reminiscence is potentially *abreacted* by the female poet on a periodic basis in the form of poetic catharsis, and is a possible source of self-renewal. Furthermore, I contend that the female poet potentially contributes to an extensive menstrual imaginary that already exists in Western culture.

Biographical Note:

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Keywords: abjection, menstruation, the menstrual imaginary, poetic writing, periodicity, periodic writing, Julia Kristeva

Introduction

In this paper, I will present a close reading of Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, as set out in *Powers of Horror; An Essay on Abjection* (1982), with particular reference to her theorisation of an imaginary border of consciousness that originates with the maternal body. I will also explore her claim for the semiotic, or pre-linguistic influence of the maternal figure on the subject, as well as her emphasis on the poet's encounter with the abject. However, as it is predominantly a male poet that Kristeva considers in relation to abjection, I will consider the female poet's journey into the abyss. I will argue that the female poet has a different relationship to the abject because of her procreative functions. Moreover, I will argue that menstrual blood, which is a heightened symbol of femininity, is a jettisoned object that stems from the mother, and *periodically* calls forth a metaphorical language deriving from the mother, bringing about the poetic articulation of *the menstrual imaginary*, as written by the female poet. Furthermore, I will argue that the female poet's periodic encounter with the abject represents a journey into her self as a means of celebrating her procreative functions and rediscovering her animalism. It is because the female poet has procreative functions herself that she is not distanced from the maternal Other, unlike the male poet, whose separation from the abject maternal figure allows him to 'remove' himself from the scene of menstruation.

As I am writing about menstruation, my approach to the writer/reader relationship is particularly relevant. Of course, the writer/reader relationship is often rhythmic, subtle and even subliminal. Meaning is never immediately transparent or obvious. In 'Writing Degree Zero', Barthes explores the difference between writing and speech. He states:

Writing, on the contrary, is always rooted in something beyond language. It develops like a seed not like a line, it manifests an essence and holds the threat of a secret, it is an anti-communication, it is intimidating (1968:20).

Although I am exploring menstruation initially in the language of theory, I am aware that creative writing is in a sense beyond conventional speech. Writing about menstruation, as I will discuss later, is 'beyond language', does grow 'like a seed' and offers the 'threat of a secret'. In fact, a writing of menstruation requires the reader to

take a textual leap into an abyss, not a terrifying abyss, rather an abyss that builds readership of Otherness.

An Archaic Border Signified

In the world in which the Other has collapsed, the aesthetic task—a descent into the foundations of the symbolic construct—amounts to retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless ‘primacy’ constituted by primal repression. Through that experience, which is nevertheless managed by the Other, ‘subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse, and start again – inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: *abject*. (Kristeva, 1982:18)

In her essay *Powers of Horror* Kristeva lays down the foundations of the workings of the imagination in relation to abjection. She theorises abjection as an imaginary border that operates at the very limits of consciousness, as ‘a dark revolt against being,’ which threatens the living subject. The *abject* fascinates desire, even whilst it haunts the subject who encounters it.

What is *abject* is not my correlative, which providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The *abject* has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homogenous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses (Kristeva, 1982: 1-2).

The *abject* then seems to straddle the unconscious at its outermost limit. The *abject* is a ‘detachment’, an ‘autonomous’ imaginary of ‘thoughts’ and ‘affects’, where meaning collapses. In fact, the subject who encounters the *abject* is de-stabilised by its very

existence, and yet is dually compelled to encounter its full-bodied violations, presumably as a means of seeking to understand the self. Even whilst the abject has an atmosphere of the uncanny about it, which bears down on the subject, and threatens to annihilate him/her, the abject is necessary to the survival of the self (Kristeva, 1982:2).

According to Kristeva the corpse is the utmost of abjection, the decaying body without science or God, 'death infecting life', because it reveals what must be pushed aside in order to live, even as it touches on the boundaries of a living being, it represents a real threat, which 'disturbs identity, system, order' (Kristeva, 1982:4). Other improper or unclean artefacts, like menstrual blood that is expelled from the human body, is a marker of abjection, stemming as it does from the maternal body.

Kristeva elaborates on Freud's theory of the unconscious through her concept of abjection (Kristeva, 1982:8). The one for whom the abject exists is beyond the system of unconscious effects, is a 'deject', is 'separated', 'strays' from culture, and its safety valve of discursive effects, and is likened by Kristeva to the poet. (Kristeva, 1982:8). The poet situates him/herself at the very limits of the Freudian body of repression, which threatens to return to culture in poetic writing. The poet is therefore saved by drawing on his/her *jouissance* from this 'land of oblivion', or sphere of the abyss, and articulating in poetic writing his/her confrontation with the maternal Other.

In my view, Kristeva seems to be problematically focusing on a maternal abjection that only a male poet/subject approaches, and draws on libidinally in the forging of his imaginary. It is therefore an essentialist position that Kristeva holds in relation to both accessing and writing a maternal abjection. She writes:

Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother, a daze that has cut off his impulses from their objects, that is, from their representations, out of such a daze he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up – fear (Kristeva, 1982:6).

Has *he* looked at a Medusa who has petrified him, sent him into a daze? A loathsome animal maternal Other that he both desires and fears because she has the power to castrate him! It is in this sense that Kristeva's theory of abjection seems to have phallogocentric underpinnings, figures more strongly as an imaginary of a male desiring

subject, who breaches the border of the animal maternal Other. An act of reminiscence, yet paved with such darkness, such wordless fear. A maternal abyss closed over at birth, revisited by the subject, through poetic writing, overlaid with violence, such as *Dante's Inferno*, which offers a very masculine view of hell. This does not necessarily account for a woman's approach to the abject, as I will argue later in this paper. Moreover, Kristeva constantly refers to a male gendered subject in her text and she reads only male writers who encounter the abject in their texts, such as Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline, and Joyce.

A Maternal Abyss

Importantly, Kristeva envisages abjection as first forming in relation to the pre-objectal relationship encapsulated in the 'violent' separation of the infant's body from the mother's body, in order to 'be', and in which a gulf opens up. This constitutes an erotic gulf as Georges Bataille had suggested, which has pre-linguistic, or semiotic strength. This is the 'deject' or 'stray' of culture; the poet who re-births through this pre-objectal sphere of the maternal Other. This is not an Other that is incorporated into the self, but rather exists as a sphere of animalism, which cannot be assimilated because it is at a limit of 'primal repression'.

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*. Thus, by way of abjection, primitive societies have marked out a precise area of their culture in order to remove it from the threatening world of animals or animalism, which were imagined as representations of sex and murder (Kristeva, 1982:12-13).

To this end, abjection operates as a body of language expressed through symptom, a symptom sublimated, kept under control because it is monstrous, a tumour, an alien.

Kristeva therefore finds that we confront the abject both through our 'personal archaeology', as well as through our encounters with the territories of the animal, as a means of releasing the hold of the maternal entity, and by way of mourning after the loss of it (Kristeva, 1982:13).

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hand of *maternal* entity even before exist-ing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling. The difficulty a mother has in acknowledging (or being acknowledged by) the symbolic realm—in other words, the problem she has with the phallus that her father or her husband stands for—is not such as to help the future subject leave the natural mansion (Kristeva, 1982:12-13).

This encounter with and releasing of the maternal entity is marked by anguish because we both desire its influence, and its release, in the subsequent forging of our own identities through a poetic writing practice. It is extremely important that Kristeva assigns the child's first influence to the mother, which has an impact on our ongoing development as human beings in culture.

The child can serve its mother as a token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn. In such close combat, the symbolic light that a third party, eventually the father, can contribute helps the future subject, the more so if it happens to be endowed with a robust supply of drive energy, in pursuing a reluctant struggle against what, having been the mother, will turn into an abject. Re-pelling, rejecting; repelling itself, rejecting itself. Ab-jecting (Kristeva, 1982:12-13).

Interestingly, Kristeva argues that the moment of birth, when the infant exits the vagina, crosses over into the sphere of being, is characterised by an 'immemorial violence' both physical and psychic (Kristeva, 1982, 10). In fact, this crossing over, as at birth, the muscular pulsing from the stretched lips of the vagina into the world, is not necessarily physically violent at all, unless the birth is difficult, even dangerous¹. However, in my experience birthing is an animal act in which the child breaks away from the maternal body, as by muscular expulsion, a continual rhythmic opening, a concentrated effort

towards a magnificent releasing of life, which is beautiful, raw, and basic. In these terms, the imaginary maternal border of meaning might be approached again by the poet/subject in poetic language less violently. Rather, it is an experience of differentiation of the self from the maternal, breaking away to forge one's own identity, so that what is preserved in the subject and the affect that is carried out is less traumatic, possibly beautiful, and perhaps even unique. I will take up this line of argument in relation to a female poet's approach to the abject later in this paper. It is important to consider that Kristeva is also, of course, asserting the symbolic violence of birthing, the separation of the child from its maternal home, and its constitution as an act clouded by abjection.

Kristeva advises that this struggle to break away from the maternal influence 'fashions the human being' and is thereafter drawn upon through *jouissance*, when repression is relaxed. As Freud argues what is repressed returns and gains power, is articulated through language, has an influence on the subject (Kristeva, 1982:13). According to Kristeva, repression reminds us of the pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and child, which is the 'semiotic chora'.

Let us enter, for a moment, into that Freudian aporia called primal repression. Curious primacy, where what is repressed cannot really be held down, and where what represses always already borrows its strength and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language. Let us therefore not speak of primacy but of the instability of the symbolic function in its most significant aspect – the prohibition placed on the maternal body (as a defense against autoeroticism and incest taboo). Here, drives hold sway and constitute a strange space that I shall name, after Plato (*Timeus*, 48-53), a *chora*, a receptacle (Kristeva, 1982:13-14).

Kristeva's semiotic is one of the most important contributions she makes to the field of critical analysis and relates to Freud, and Melanie Klein's infantile pre-Oedipal stage, as well as Lacan's pre-mirror stage. In this 'strange place' of the 'semiotic chora' the drives of the 'not yet' ego hold sway, and are related to the maternal body, which has a pre-linguistic influence on the subject, and brings about a confrontation with abjection.

Kristeva considers the semiotic to be of the drives and instincts, related to the maternal body, brought into signification by the subject/poet who writes the abject. The semiotic is therefore aligned with rhythms, cadences, and movements of the body signified, closely related to the prosody of language, and are indeed poetic formulations of language. Moreover, the female subject's maternal influence will necessarily differ from that of a male's, that is, mothers tend to physically respond to their children with at least some reference to their gender difference.

It is a 'narcissistic crisis' that the subject encounters through the abject, a weakening of the super ego. Moreover, it is the writer or poet's task to imagine the logic of the abject.

The writer, fascinated by the abject, imagines its logic, projects himself into it, introjects it, and as a consequence perverts language – style and content. But on the other hand, as the sense of abjection is both the abject's judge and accomplice, this is also true of the literature that confronts it. One might thus say that with such a literature there takes place a crossing over of the dichotomous categories of Pure and Impure, Prohibition and Sin, Morality and Immorality (Kristeva, 1982:16).

The poet then imagines the abject as a means of transgressing the limits of culture, coming under the sway of the maternal Other, temporarily, through encountering his/her own personal archaeology, and the realm of the animal, before returning to convey the abject in symbolic terms. It is extremely significant then to understand that the signification process is devised of two aspects: the semiotic and the symbolic. It is in these terms that Kristeva's 'semiotic chora' may be periodically abreacted in poetic writing, when repression is relaxed, or undone.

The Artist's Role is to Confront the Abject

Kristeva argues that abjection appears as a rite of defilement and pollution, taking the form of exclusion of a substance, such as menstrual blood, which has historically been considered the very essence of femininity.

The various means of purifying the abject—the various catharsis—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. Seen from that standpoint, the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject it utters and by the same token purifies, appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions (Kristeva, 1982:17).

In Christianity, menstruation has historically been constructed as the curse of Eve, a dialectical elaboration of a threatening Otherness, encapsulated in the feminine sex, which must be sanctioned, and purified, in order to safeguard patriarchal society. In post-Christian society, it seems possible then that the abject might be voiced by the female poet as a means of re-articulating the maternal body in relation to the social sphere, and dually as potentially a means of personal, and cultural catharsis from phallogocentric discourses, such as those established in Christianity, and other religious doctrines.

Kristeva points out that ‘outside of the sacred, the abject is written’ as by the poet/writer, whose ‘aesthetic task’ is to trace the limits of the symbolic, of the speaking being, to its lowest mark, its ‘primacy’, or ‘primal repression’, which is ‘managed’ by the Other, the maternal aspect that is confronted and repelled at the boundary of meaning (Kristeva, 1982:17-18). Kristeva reads the abject in literature, finding that it unfolds in the writings of Dostoyevsky, Lautréamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Céline, and Joyce. She investigates various literary texts written by these *male* authors in order to account for ‘different psychic structures’ of abjection (Kristeva, 1982:26). Kristeva finds that it is ‘poetic catharsis’ that offers the means of exploring the abject, gives control over our defilements, bringing about a rebirth, and renewal of the self. The abject is therefore to be found in poetic mimesis, extended through speech. It arises through our jouissance, to do with the fascination of the image, of ‘phantasmatic articulations’ for the purpose of rebirth against abjection, explored through a poetic writing practice (Kristeva, 1982:31).

However, Kristeva fails to theorise the journey of a female poet, which would potentially engender an encounter with her procreative self that stems from the maternal

body. It is in this sense that for a female poet a journey to confront the abject could constitute a journey of self-discovery. We might interpret this as referring to the continual writing of re-birth from a bloodied wound, out of which membranes erupt, reminiscent of a menstrual surge, which can be revisited in language by the female poet, laced with the maternal as it is, though from which she is ultimately separated from in order to reassert her own identity. For a female poet the abject is potentially much closer, since she lives in a close relationship to the maternal and animalistic abject.

Kristeva goes on to discuss how the abject is to be written by the poet as a means of poetic catharsis. For Plato, poetic catharsis is related to philosophy. 'It is the mind alone, as harmonious wisdom, that insures purity: catharsis has been transformed, where transcendental idealism is concerned, into philosophy' (Kristeva, 1982:28). By contrast, Aristotelian catharsis is aligned with 'sacred incantation' (Kristeva, 1982:28).

Through the mimesis of passions—ranging from enthusiasm to suffering—in 'language with pleasurable accessories,' the most important of which being *rhythm* and *song* (see the *Poetics*), the soul reaches *orgy* and *purity* at the same time. What is involved is a purification of body and soul by means of a heterogeneous and complex circuit, going from 'bile' to 'fire,' from 'manly warmth' to the 'enthusiasm' of the 'mind.' Rhythm and song hence arouse the impure, the other of mind, the passionate – corporeal – sexual – virile, but they harmonize it, arrange it differently than the wise man's knowledge does (Kristeva, 1982:28).

Aristotle believed that there is a 'discourse of sex' that has nothing to do with knowledge per se, which is the only possible catharsis. In my view this could be the animal self that has its part in the development of human subjectivity, perhaps informing our negotiation of the social realm. Insofar as women are primal beings who have raw basic functions like menstrual cycles as well as other procreative functions, which need to be expressed, not in an exclusively philosophical sense, but rather in line with their feeling beings, or even as a means of navigating the space between. The aspect of human beings that comes under catharsis periodically, ensures their overall wellbeing as a developing species, as well as brings about a more harmonious

integration into culture and society. In these terms, the abject can be written by the poet as a means of subverting negative patriarchal discourses such as the doctrine of Christianity, which has sought to shape woman as 'Other'.

Sex, coupling, pregnancy, menstruation, birth, and lactation are acts that remind us consciously or otherwise of our status as human animals. All of these procreative functions are property of the animalistic female body that can be articulated at the level of culture in poetic writing. These procreative functions are related to those of many animals such as the mammal who gives birth to its young, nurses its young with milk from special glands, and in some cases even has a placenta which feeds its offspring during pregnancy. Of particular interest are primates to which the human species belongs. Women should not be deterred from aligning themselves with the procreative animal body for fear of being denigrated in their role as reproducer of the species, rather women need to take charge of the discourse that is produced in relation to their procreative being, as it relates to the realm of abjection.

A Metaphorical Language of the Mother

Abjection is the discursive border of negotiating inside and outside, nature and culture, prohibition and sin, order and disorder, morality and immorality, self and Other, within the poet. The poet therefore demonstrates in his/her writing a metaphorical law of the mother that exerts its influence pre-linguistically, and is enunciated through the symbolic function in Western culture. Kristeva's project is to chart the poet's journey in society through gaining symbolic competence to confront the feminine, the Other maternal power, as through abjection.

What we designate as 'feminine,' far from being a primeval essence, will be seen as an 'other' without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity ...a coming face to face with an unnameable otherness – the solid rock of jouissance and writing as well (Kristeva, 1982:59).

Kristeva therefore ascribes a pre-linguistic power to the mother, calling it a metaphorical rite of the mother, or a maternal influence that predates the subject's entrance into the symbolic, which the poet draws on, and which is extremely important to women or to female experience. This is the 'semiotic chora' relating to bodily drives, to the rhythms, cadences, and movements stemming from the maternal body, brought into signification periodically. Moreover, which is further related to the prosody of language and poetic articulation.

Kristeva therefore seeks to account for the need human beings experience verbally to represent the external world from *within*, that is, in light of the internal world, and the continuous crossing over of an archaic border of meaning within the self, presided over by the unnameable Other, an animal maternal aspect that designates our pre-verbal semiotic beginning. In these terms the poet is privileged journeyer who conveys himself through endlessly negotiating his subjective experience of pleasure and pain, bridging taboo, and establishing a preverbal maternal influence in poetic language. It is therefore the logic of taboo, or prohibition by which the poet relates the abject, and conveys the existence of a maternal influence.

According to Kristeva polluting bodily substances stem from the maternal and become the markers of taboo. These polluting stuffs that are associated with the maternal body pre-date the father's symbolic influence on the subject, and continue to have an affect on the subject through encounters with the abject. Historically, it is the 'demoniacal' influence of the maternal that threatens the 'clean and proper self', and so religious rituals of defilement were instituted in order to ward off the danger of the maternal power, based on the 'feeling' of abjection (Kristeva, 1982:64-65). The exclusion of filth, the taboo on it, then is a means of separating from the maternal aspect based on the 'feeling' of abjection that a subject experiences. That is:

Matter issuing from them [the orifices of the body] is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. [...] The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins (Kristeva sites Mary Douglas, 1982:69).

Kristeva examines the dangers incurred by the speaking subject if they infringe on these borders of filth, or defilement, because it puts the symbolic order at risk. Filth is traced to the maternal body and becomes a source of discrimination against all women, and hence the need for the institution of prohibitions carried out through ritual practice, like menstrual prohibitions, which have been damaging to the status of women socially and culturally.

The overall prohibition on the maternal body through the practice of ritual defilement has the effect of silencing the archaic pre-linguistic authority of the maternal Other. Kristeva points out that 'polluting objects' fall into two categories: excremental and menstrual (Kristeva, 1982:71). Interestingly, 'Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to the borders of the body, have any polluting value' (Kristeva, 1982:71). Excremental stuffs are related to 'the danger to identity that comes from without', whilst menstrual blood stuffs are related to 'the danger issuing from within the identity', which 'threatens the relationship between the sexes' and is a prototype substance of femininity (Kristeva, 1982:71). So, what of this danger within, this menstrual substance that threatens male power over the symbolic because it stems from the maternal body, and as such signifies sexual difference? Given these two defilements, the excremental and the menstrual, stem from the maternal, it is the elaboration of the animalistic procreative female body in poetic writing, which therefore brings about an encounter with abjection for a female poet. Moreover, it is through encountering one's own 'personal archaeology' that a female poet comes face to face with the abject, the pre-linguistic, or semiotic power of the maternal body, and its many processes, such as menstruation. Furthermore, these procreative functions need to be accounted for cyclically in order to remind Western culture of what it has cleansed and over purified.

Kristeva claims that the semiotic or pre-linguistic influence of the mother on the infant subject is extremely significant. She theorises a maternal authority in the form of a pre-linguistic bodily language taught to the infant, prior to their coming to language, for example through toilet training. The mother maps the child's clean and ordered body, teaching him/her how to eradicate abject stuffs like piss, shit, vomit, and so on, ahead of his/her entrance into phallic law, established through the symbolic.

It is as if, while having been forever immersed in the symbolics of language, the human being experienced, in addition, an *authority* that was a—chronologically and logically immediate—repetition of the *laws* of language. Through frustrations and prohibitions, this authority shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation between proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is a ‘binary logic,’ a primary mapping of the body that I call semiotic to say that, while being the precondition of language, it is dependant upon meaning, but in a way that is not that of *linguistic* signs nor of the *symbolic* order they found. Maternal authority is the trustee of that mapping of the self’s clean and proper body; it is distinguished from paternal laws within which, with the phallic phase and acquisition of language, the destiny of man will take shape (Kristeva, 1982:71-72).

So, culturally there is a pre-linguistic or semiotic authority assigned to the maternal, a mapping of the infant’s body, as a pre-condition of language, on which a poet necessarily draws. And yet, Kristeva doesn’t really explore how the female poet experiences the abject, as differentiated from the male poet, particularly given that females have procreative functions. In my view, a female poet’s approach to the abject and semiotic is more about a journey into her self, because unlike a male she is not distanced from her own so-called abject menstrual self. That is, she menstruates, ovulates, gives birth, lactates, and discharges other fluids cyclically. She might feel ambivalent because, on the one hand, approaching the abject on this cyclical basis takes her back to those early beginnings when she was beholden to the mother. And yet, on the other hand, she might simultaneously desire to break away from the maternal influence, to celebrate her own fertility, and forge her own identity in society.

If, as Kristeva argues, it is the maternal authority that shapes the semiotic or pre-linguistic mapping of the body as an ordered clean self, making a territory of pre-discursive power ahead of the subject’s entrance into paternal law, then this seems a potentially highly interesting sphere of women’s writing. The potential task then is for the female poet to map the procreative female body, a continuous crossing of borders

within herself, as a means of trespassing on a semiotic maternal authority, voicing her own personal journey and bringing about an encounter with the abject in poetic language. In my view this mapping of the procreative body can best be undertaken in relation to a women's cyclical being and undoubtedly charts her periodic self. It is now my intention to reveal how the female poet can go about charting the abject in relation to her menstrual cycle is she should choose to do so.

A Journey for the Female Poet

Kristeva's chief concern is to chart the abject as *abreacted* by the male poet, as a poetic catharsis that purifies the abject, and so protects the poet from obliteration in *his* dealings with that primal repression to do with the maternal body. If a man is confronting the maternal abject there is a sense that he is distanced from her, but if a woman is confronting the abject she is already on the border with abjection because of her animalistic procreative functions, that is, through the animal-ness of her mothering, ovulating, menstruating, lactating, birthing, and passing of fluids. It is therefore more of a journey into her *self* that Kristeva does not account for or explore. Kristeva's work does not therefore attempt to chart the abject as abreacted by the woman poet, which can be considered to be a cyclical phenomenon, in accordance with a woman's menstrual cycle, in the production of a menstrual imaginary.

In my view, a female poet potentially confronts the abject as a means of poetic catharsis to/from the Other maternal entity broken away from, as at birth, which demands to be known, traced, revealed, but which she must ultimately be separated from in order to re-establish her own boundaries of selfhood. The menstrual cycle in these terms gives rise to a periodic poetic catharsis to do with the maternal aspect and abjection, to be written by the female poet. Moreover, it is also a means of cultural catharsis from negative Western accounts of the reproductive female body, that Other maternal body that has been constructed in accordance with a masculine imaginary, such as Freud's in relation to the horrific Medusa figure in Western history.

A key aspect of Kristeva's theory of abjection is that it is an outermost limit of the unconscious, which is correlative of repression. So then, abjection does not operate on the same terms as the unconscious; rather the abject is a hinge of the unconscious. In fact, the abject is a correlative of *abreaction* according to Kristeva, a technique Freud

applied in relation to hysteria. So, the abject, presupposes the abreaction of its contents periodically, accessed by consciousness, as having an effect on the subject, that is, needing to be expressed in language. In this sense the abject 'borrows strength' from language and abreacts periodically when repression is relaxed. It therefore still works in relation to/or with the unconscious and the concept of repressed contents.

A menstrual imaginary can be abreacted *periodically*, that is, in accordance with the menstrual cycle, by the female poet, who approaches her abjection through writing, and records a maternal imaginary. It is this maternal imaginary about which she reminisces, engages, desires and explores. However, she is able to cut away from this, in order to re-establish the borders of her own corporeal country.

A deviser of territories, languages, works, the *deject* never stops demarcating his universe whose fluid confines—for they are constituted of a non-object, the abject—constantly question his solidity and impel him to start afresh. A tireless builder, the deject is in short a *stray* (Kristeva, 1982:8).

The female poet periodically negotiates a fluid border of selfhood through her poetic writing practice. Before she menstruates she is a stray, on the outermost limit of her culture, at the very cusp of the symbolic, aligned with a defilement, which has the power to unsettle her. Until she menstruates and is released again back into culture, comes to know herself intimately as periodically separate from the maternal Other, though eternally indebted to her, having been birthed by her. The female poet writes her way toward/from formlessness, negotiates those seamless borders of self, never oversteps the mark, dangles her foot at the edge pondering an abyss, a 'good abyss'.

In my view it is woman's unique relationship to abreaction that gives birth to the menstrual imaginary, which is founded in abjection, and speaks through poetry and the artistic imagination. The process of abreacting that brings about the articulation of a menstrual imaginary, is undertaken in direct relation to the menstrual cycle, as well as all animalistic procreative functions. In their study of hysteria, Freud and Breuer explain that through hypnosis a repressed memory is abreacted in the patient, or hysteric, acting like a 'foreign body', which is brought up (Freud and Breuer, 1936:3).

Even though it is reminiscence, the body of memory brought up in the hysteric acts like a thing of the present, which needs to be released in order to relieve the hysterical patient. 'For it was really shown that these memories correspond to traumas which were not sufficiently 'ab-reacted'' (Freud and Breuer, 1936:6). Breuer and Freud give two reasons as to why the trauma might become blocked. The first reason is that social circumstances made a reaction impossible, or the trauma was repressed by the subject because he/she wanted to forget the incident altogether. The second reason is that the trauma became mixed up with other insignificant psychic states in the subject. In these cases, Freud and Breuer applied hypnosis to the hysteric in order to resolve the trauma. Speech therefore became the means of recalling the emotion attached to the foreign body of meaning, which had been repressed. Freud found that apparently unrelated reminiscences from the hysterics past built up in them as a stream of consciousness, revealing a psychic agency in the hysteric to be accessed through a 'free association' technique. Moreover, Freud detected that a patient's avoidance of certain unpleasant ideas showed an active repression in the hysteric. Hysteria was therefore thought to be a blockage of memory that needed to be unblocked by a physician like Freud or Breuer, encouraging the hysteric to actually narrate this aspect of his/her past. Abreaction then is strongly linked with hysteria.

What if Freud and Breuer's idea of abreacting a 'foreign body' from within, were a maternal body of meaning, as a *non-pathological* phenomenon? Rather, this could be seen as a 'poetic catharsis' periodically articulated by the female poet, as a means of portioning the abject, and expressing it through her 'jouissance', in order to develop female subjectivity. The abject as maternal body broken away from at birth, the Other, which must be rejected, becomes an imaginary border, an outermost limit of the subject that periodically abreacts its contents, drawing on language and the symbolic function, in order to have its effect on the subject. It is possible that this is the experience of many women writers, poets and artists at pre-menstrual, pre-ovulation and menstrual times, and requires articulation for the ongoing positive development of female subjectivity. Even Freud recognised the connection between hysteria and the witch, or the sorceress, whereby the hysteric's symptoms are considered pathological, and the witches are brought under control by the church. But, when this maternal reminiscence is abreacted by the female poet through poetic catharsis, as a confrontation with the abject, one could

argue she is also writing a menstrual imaginary, toward the creative development of female subjectivity, and which can potentially be rewarding, and/or self-renewing.

Periodically Crossing a Threshold in the Self

I believe that a menstrual imaginary can engender a periodic writing of the abject by the female poet as a means of poetic catharsis, an exploration of woman's animalistic procreative functions, as a journey into the self, engendering personal renewal for women, and a celebration of sexual difference, whilst dually offering cultural catharsis from the maternal aspect that has been discursively depicted as contagious, monstrous, disorderly, and even horrific in Western culture. The historical maternal prohibitions that institute symbolism in Western culture are related to *that* patriarchal construct of the maternal figure, which does not serve women. The female poet therefore may choose periodically to bring about poetic catharsis from philosophical doctrines that have historically oppressed her. Women may choose to articulate their primal flow, and/or jouissance through poetic mimesis, periodically, in order to speak their corporeal selves, transgress ordered meaning, and approach a border of human species, going toward an Other identity of woman. A vandal of former maternal prohibitions that have historically been constructed by men in patriarchal culture, *she* can write the abject too, but from a different place.

It is important to point out that Kristeva has been criticised for being essentialist mostly on the basis that she supposedly offers a biological explanation, such as maternity, for a psychological state like abjection. Feminist critics have expressed concern over Kristeva's concept of the pre-linguistic maternal influence on the child, viewing it as a powerless positioning in the face of a male symbolic structure, already firmly set in place, and seemingly impenetrable.

During the 1980s and 1990s, leading feminist critics in the English-speaking world, such as Nancy Fraser, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, and Toril Moi.. took issue with her conceptions of the *chora*, maternity, and the semiotic, arguing that, in invoking these, Kristeva is positing some female essence. Critics linked her idea of the *chora* with a maternal receptacle, which they linked with her semiotic aspect of signification and

with woman. They made claims about Kristeva's supposed 'compulsory maternity,' about her quietude in the face of an 'implacable symbolic structure'. The concern among many feminists has been that, in Kristeva's philosophy, woman is linked necessarily with the maternal and that she is powerless to change a male-driven symbolic order (Noëlle McAfee, 2004:77).

However, for Kristeva the semiotic is not an inherently biological sphere. Kristeva is a theorist of poetic language as well as estrangement and the border of exile, of abjection, which she views as encapsulated in the maternal body. It is the maternal subject who potentially affects a profound subversion of the nature/culture division through her procreative functions, most notably through pregnancy and birthing, but also through menstruation, ovulation and lactation, repeatedly bringing to life a language born of the Other within, as a profound act of love. She argues in her essay *Héretique de l'amour* (1977), titled *Stabat Mater* in English, that the maternal figure is bound by a profound love of the other within, as well as dually bound to raise the child in accordance to the law, and fulfil her obligation to the species. In these terms the mother's position is subversive because she exists on a threshold of nature/culture, both 'guarantor of the community and *other*' (Noëlle McAfee sites Alison Ainley, 2004:86).

Conclusion

My focus in reading Kristeva's writing on the abject in this paper has been to explore her psychoanalytic framework for theorising an imaginary border of human meaning, which originates with the maternal body, shown to be an influence on human subjectivity. It has been my intention to reveal how Kristeva theorises the abject primarily in relation to the male poet. Nevertheless, she claims a semiotic, or pre-linguistic influence for the mother in relation to human subjectivity that is extremely significant for women, particularly in terms of the female poet's ability to give voice to her self in poetic writing. To this end, I have sought to demonstrate that men and women have a different relationship to the abject. I have argued that it is potentially the task of the female poet to encounter the abject in conjunction with her menstrual cycle, through abreacting a metaphorical language of the mother, which shapes her subjectivity on an

ongoing basis, and in fact has the potential to bring about catharsis both on a personal level, as well as from a now partially historicised negative Western patriarchal discourse on her sexual difference. Moreover, the female poet who potentially confronts the abject periodically enters a journey of self-exploration in relation to her animalistic procreative functions, repeatedly, as a means of both connecting with, as well as separating from the maternal influence. Through menstruation women can get in touch with themselves as a species, as a human animal, although in civilised societies we don't necessarily want to see ourselves this way. But, this is precisely what a confrontation with the abject brings about for a woman on her journey into the menstrual imaginary. Finally, writing the menstrual imaginary is not just an exploration of woman writing her cyclical being, but also an exploration of woman writing her cyclical being in relation to the cycles of nature in the world.

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Endnote:

1. That is, unless vaginal tearing, or other medical intervention occurs for a woman.