



Article

Writing: The Question as Revolt in Kristeva and Boochani

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Abstract: Writing offers a privileged access to the culture of revolt, a kind of radical questioning that has the potential to unsettle illegitimate forms of authority and sense. Writing bequeaths a future and a society capable of creative thought, and this is all important in societies where questioning and critical thought is increasingly under threat. This work explores the importance of writing in relation to questioning and revolt in two markedly different contexts: in Julia Kristeva's celebration of the European tradition of revolt and dissent, and in Behrouz Boochani's literary revolt against the illegitimate incarceration of refugees in Manus Prison. If Kristeva is correct and European culture is, in part, a culture of the question and of revolt, then what does this mean for the non-European world? Boochani's writing offers a powerful contemporary response to this question, a response that positions the suffering body as a locus of protest and resistance.

Keywords: philosophy; ethics; literature; writing; Kristeva; Sartre; Boochani

1. The Question of Writing

"Rather than falling asleep in the new normalizing order, let us try to rekindle the flame (easily extinguishable) of the culture of revolt". (Julia Kristeva, *SNRS*: 9)

"O my body, make of me always a man who questions!". (Frantz Fanon, *BSWM*: 181)

Writing offers a privileged access to the culture of revolt, a kind of radical questioning that has the potential to unsettle illegitimate forms of authority and sense. Writing bequeaths a future and a society capable of creative thought, and this is all important in societies where questioning and critical thought is increasingly under threat. In this work I explore the importance of writing in relation to questioning and revolt in two markedly different contexts: in Julia Kristeva's celebration of the European tradition of revolt and dissent, and in Behrouz Boochani's literary revolt against the illegitimate incarceration of refugees in Manus Prison.

If Kristeva is correct and European culture is, in part, a culture of the question and of intimate revolt, then what does this mean for the non-European world? Boochani's writing offers, I think, a powerful contemporary response to this question, a response that in part challenges what may at first appear as Kristeva's arguably privileged account of intimate revolt as a *self*-questioning. Against this, Boochani's work leads us toward a revolt that questions more directly the system that illegitimately detains him. In Boochani's writing, the internal focus on the suffering body is ultimately directed externally, to the world. In writing, his suffering body becomes the locus of protest and resistance to an unjust world. In reading Boochani's work alongside Kristeva's, we are, I think, better able to glimpse aspects of the legacy of colonialism and the limits it places on a specifically European framing of questioning and revolt. We are, perhaps, better able to situate intimate revolt in its very worldly context.

While Boochani's writing offers a powerful reminder of the social context of our intimate revolts, there is an important sense in which Kristeva's account helps us to better understand the links between intimacy and world. Indeed, her claims that revolt is an index of the imaginary, and that radical questioning rests on our ability to remember, i.e.,



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to a renewed relation with the past, establishes a resurrectional process that ultimately bequeaths a culture capable of creative thought. In so doing, Kristeva's work on revolt bridges the intimate with the collective.

2. Writing and/as Revolt: Kristeva Reads Sartre

In 1996, Kristeva published *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (Kristeva 2000), and a year later *Intimate Revolt* (Kristeva 2002a). These are, I think, important books—if not for any other reason than that they code (or encode) a certain (local) history of what Kristeva herself refers to as revolt.¹ In these works, Kristeva spends considerable time (one of eight chapters in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* and three of fifteen chapters in *Intimate Revolt*) rereading Jean-Paul Sartre and building a case for both returning to his body of thought² and for rereading or reframing his work as an emblematic instance of revolt.³ It would not be unfair, I think, to say that Kristeva bases her claim to reclaim or salvage Sartre's work precisely by presenting his writing, his thought, and his political actions as questions. For Kristeva, Sartre's work expresses a persistent questioning. Given this, it is not surprising to find that her reading or rereading of Sartre effects a persistent return to what we might refer to as the ethics of the question.⁴ With this in mind, let us now turn to a brief discussion of Kristeva's work on revolt, and the prominent place she accords Sartre within it. While this is an interesting discussion in its own right, I hope to link this with more general questions concerning the Sartre that emerges from her particular framing, and the implications of this Sartre—if any—for the questions we have regarding refugees and writing.

At first glance, for those who know her extensive work in the domain of psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva's focus on Sartre's writing may seem somewhat odd. Given Sartre's at best troubled relation to the unconscious (or at least the psychoanalytic theory of it), it may seem strange that at a time when Kristeva is defending psychoanalysis from attack and denigration,⁵ she characterises Sartre as one of the twentieth century's most radical practitioners of what she refers to as "intimate revolt". This incongruity is, I think, more apparent than real, and I shall return to it at a later point. For the moment we need only consider that, for Kristeva, Sartre's questioning positions him on terrain that is more than familiar to those of a psychoanalytic persuasion. However, what are we to make of Kristeva's focus on revolt? What fuels her interest in the question, and what are the implications for contemporary social and political theory? In order to understand this, we need to explore her analysis of contemporary society and her argument concerning the malaise that European culture currently suffers.⁶

Following on from and adapting Freud's observations at the level of the psyche, Kristeva believes that for a society to be healthy and free it must continually question itself; it must habitually undergo a retrospective questioning that amounts, in effect, to revolt. This regenerative revolt—or perpetual self-questioning—involves a return to, reconstruction of, and displacement of the past.⁷ It allows a restoration of memory and as such is a resurrectional process of consciousness—a consciousness, or society, whose mode of being is to question itself. By perpetually re-engaging with the past, the individual or society is able to refigure it. This leads, she says, to a creative re-thinking that serves and nourishes "the life of the mind"⁸ and the individual's attempt "to find meaning". The benefits for society are, for Kristeva, clear. Such a creative engagement with or questioning of the past means that we are better able to avoid the dangers of simply *opposing* the past or (even more significantly) *forgetting* it.⁹ Likewise, we are better placed to avoid the dangerous situations of failing to engage with what the past means, or might still yet mean, or *even* might have meant. Significantly, Kristeva positions Sartre as one of the most important (if somewhat currently disavowed) instances of such a critical engagement in the twentieth century. Accordingly, he serves as the *place* of Kristeva's own return and creative re-engagement. Returning to Sartre (her Sartre) is, if you like, part of the meaning of Kristeva's revolt. A revolt, we should underline, that takes a particularly European form.¹⁰

If the health of a person and a people is tied to the intricacies of revolt, then it is perhaps true to say that an unhealthy society is one that, for whatever reason or reasons, bars the ability to question. Radical evil is, Kristeva says, “the halting of representation and questioning” (IR: 10). For Kristeva, what justifies our return to the question of revolt today is precisely the danger that *our* society (she is at times vague about this term, though the eurocentrism of her analysis is made clear) is headed toward a situation in which the creative re-engagement of a questioning culture is lost. She speaks of the normalizing and pervertible order of post-industrial and post-Communist democracies in the west, where the “society of the spectacle” or “society of the image”¹¹ threatens to displace culture and art (SNSR: 4, 8)¹², or at least the culture and art of revolt.¹³

Kristeva characterises this new order in the following terms. Firstly, she contends that its normalizing nature is tied to a power vacuum, an absence of plans, a disorder and anarchy that makes it almost impossible to determine who governs. What this suggests, in Kristeva’s terms, is a symbolic system in crisis—a law, power and authority that is no longer clearly centralized and stable, a pseudo-symbolic system. In the legal sphere, this power vacuum can be seen in the falling away of culpability (in favour of public menace), the decline of fault (in favour of damage) and the rise of liability in the place of responsibility. She writes: “Though we are not punished, we are, in effect, normalized” (SNSR: 5). And the effect of this normalizing order? *We* are threatened, she says, with the loss of memory and our subsequent inability to question (SNSR: 16).

The second characteristic of this creeping normalization can be linked with what Kristeva refers to as the Patrimonial Individual. (Patrimony as property inherited from one’s father or ancestors; one’s heritage). Here she questions the status of the individual, or, more specifically, the fate of the individual in a normalized and pervertible economic order. For example, she enquires into the status of the person in relation to new biological technologies, arguing that we must “protest the primacy of the market economy over the body before it is too late” (SNSR: 6). If not, we are in danger of witnessing the disappearance of the human subject as a person with rights, so that what remains is merely a patrimonial individual who possesses organs “convertible into cash” (SNRS: 6).¹⁴

Now what ties the arguably disparate threads of Kristeva’s analysis of the normalizing order is her firm conviction that the ills of modern (Western) societies can only (perhaps paradoxically) be countered by revolt or permanent contestation.¹⁵ The effect of this order is the stifling, or eradication, of revolt. Without the means to question and creatively resist, we become a culture of docile bodies ordered by an ever increasing move toward a normalized world: “the very notion of culture as revolt and of art as revolt is in peril, submerged as we are in the culture of entertainment, the culture of performance, the culture of the show” (SNRS: 6).¹⁶ For Kristeva, art, writing, and a certain critical thought thus serve as antidotes to an order that has already, in rather chilling ways, taken its toll. Thus, the need to return to the question of revolt.¹⁷

“There is an urgent need to develop the culture of revolt starting with our aesthetic heritage and to find new variants of it. Heidegger thought only religion could save us; faced with the religious and political impasses of our time, an experience of revolt may be the only thing that can save us from the automation of humanity that is threatening us”. (SNRS: 7)

“... I see no other role for literary criticism and theory than to illuminate the experiences of formal and philosophical revolt that might keep our inner lives alive, this psychological space we call a soul and that is no doubt the hidden side, the invisible and indispensable source of what is Beautiful” (SNRS: 7–8)

In a careful discussion of the etymology of the term¹⁸ Kristeva traces the myriad paths that lead us, around the time of the French Revolution, to our contemporary European understanding of revolt. To the meaning that we most readily assign to revolt—a protest against established norms, values and powers—she appends a discussion that would have us think of it in terms of a “questioning of one’s own being”, a return that is simultaneously

“recollection, interrogation and thought” (IR: 5–6).¹⁹ Kristeva is quick to distinguish this understanding of revolt from what she refers to as rejection and reactionary opposition:

“What has been taken for revolt . . . for two centuries, particularly in politics and its attendant ideologies, has more often been this abandonment of retrospective questioning in favour of a rejection, pure and simple, of the old, destined to be replaced by new dogmas . . . Generally, when the media employ the word ‘revolt’, we understand nothing other than this nihilistic suspension of questioning in favour of so-called new values, which as values, precisely, have forgotten to question themselves and have thereby fundamentally betrayed the meaning of revolt that I am trying to emphasize here” (IR: 6)

Revolt thus refigured—or more correctly for Kristeva, revisited—enacts a return, a displacement, a creative engagement and transformation of the past. It is both a “questioning and displacement of the past” that ensures for us a future (IR: 6). Kristeva’s aim, in these works, is thus to look for “experiences in which this work of revolt, which opens psychical life to infinite re-creation, continues and recurs, even at the price of errors and impasses” (IR: 6).²⁰

While Kristeva has elsewhere devoted significant intellectual energy to an analysis of the ways in which revolt is inscribed in psychoanalytic interpretation²¹, she turns her attention, in these two books, to a discussion of the revolt that structures the very possibility of thought and writing in, amongst other things, Sartre’s *œuvre*. In the process she draws delicate lines between his questioning and the Copernican revolution that Freud’s discovery of the unconscious effects within both the philosophical and psychological domains. To say this, though, is not to suggest that she reduces his work to Freud’s. Kristeva is keen (at least consciously) to preserve the unique negativity²² she sees at work in Sartre’s thought.²³ Whether she is ultimately successful, though, in avoiding this reduction remains an open question.²⁴

So, why Sartre? What is it about his work that captures Kristeva’s interest in revolt as a form of permanent contestation? Why Sartre, rather than say Camus or Fanon?²⁵ Kristeva offers an initial response to these questions by characterising his work as belonging to the “monumental history” of Nietzsche’s challenge (SNSR: 218, n.14). In effect, for Kristeva, Sartre’s monumental work on freedom places the radical violence of the question at the heart of our understanding of all identity, faith, and law (IR: 9). Following, (yet separate from), Hegel and Heidegger, Sartre charts “the moment when the knowing subject’s questioning of himself and his truth . . . leads him to nothing less than a familiarity with [what Kristeva calls] psychosis”, when he comes up against “a psychical reality that endangers consciousness”, exposing itself “to the pulse of being” (IR: 8–9).²⁶ For Kristeva, Sartre’s thought and writing are henceforth devoted to a certain revolt, one that confronts the unity of law, being, and self, and one that searches continually for a language and style equal to the task of countering any barrier that would result in “the halting of representation and questioning” (IR:10). In this it contributes to—perhaps even leads—a culture of revolt dedicated to keeping the question alive.

Sartre’s magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1996), is a work that is, for Kristeva, central in any understanding of Sartre’s enactment of revolt.²⁷ Here Sartre depicts consciousness as “essentially nihilating and interrogating, a process, in conflict and in flux” (IR: 124). This emphasis on nothingness (the negativity of consciousness) is what makes it possible for him to resist, for example, the logical calculations of cognitivism (IR: 124). What emerges from this confrontation is a consciousness that Kristeva describes as resurrectional: “consciousness is not alive unless it allows itself to be questioned—even at the risk of annihilation—by intimacy in revolt” (IR: 125).²⁸ And this is the meaning of freedom for Sartre. Freedom as questioning.

Thus, by formulating freedom in terms of the question Sartre comes to occupy the terrain of what Kristeva repeatedly refers to as revolt:

“ . . . as soon as man posits himself in the world and the relationship between them is possible, the fundamental conduct of man is that of ‘questioning’: ‘At

the very moment when I ask, 'Is there any conduct which can reveal to me the relation of man with the world?' I pose a question . . . In every question we stand before a being which we are questioning. Every question presupposes a being who questions and a being which is questioned' (BN: 4)". (IR: 142)

The revolt in question here is precisely the revolt in or of being. *Man's* questioning conduct is internal to consciousness (IR: 143) and is inseparable from the negativity of *his* freedom: "if man is able to question, it is because he is able to put himself outside of being" to pose himself as question and to question himself (IR: 144). This, for Kristeva, is the meaning of Sartre's statement that "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom" (BN: 25).²⁹

To this point, Kristeva draws the various threads of Sartre's literary and philosophical works together in order to make a case for writing and aesthetic experience as marking a privileged domain of revolt.³⁰ Sartre's various aesthetic experiments (whether "literary" or "theoretical")³¹ serve as a model of radical questioning, always at the limit of sense and non-sense. In this, (for Kristeva) he shows us the way, providing us with a map of revolt and radical interrogation. And yet, Sartre—perhaps true to form—refuses to remain here. At a certain critical point, Sartre returns to the aesthetic domain only to bid it a fond adieu. Kristeva marks *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre 1976) and *The Words* (Sartre 1981) as critical moments in his retreat from literature.³² Here Sartre famously renounces the imaginary in favour of action and his search for an agent of history. Negativity, for Sartre, no longer resides in the imaginary of the literary domain, but, rather, in the committed actions of social praxis and politically engaged writing. In *What Is Literature?* (Sartre 1998), Sartre is already on his way to this renunciation by privileging "the collectivity" over and above the negativity of the individual and his or her imaginative world (IR:185). "In this last period of his life, cured of his 'madness,' his 'neurosis,' and his 'belief,' including his religious worship of Literature" (IR: 135), Sartre "bids a magnificent farewell to literature" (IR: 159), if even in literary and imaginary form³³ And Kristeva laments this passing in the following terms:

"Henceforth Sartre will relentlessly disparage the imaginary in favour of action, particularly political action . . . This flagellation quickly turns into an auto-da-fé, however, because the political activities in which Sartre continued to engage, despite their incisive impact in a France settling into consumerism and the spectacle, seemed to lack the density and polyphony that once accompanied the splendours of the master of Saint-Germain. Deprived of the imaginary, political engagement is fleshless, cut off from its emotional and unconscious substratum, castrated, in a way, of its fateful connotation". (SNRS: 183)

Sartre's renunciation of negativity as "a force at work in the imaginary"³⁴ (SNRS: 183)—whether in his novels, plays or the famous images and metaphors of *Being and Nothingness*—accompanies a simultaneous stabilisation or sedimentation of his thought. In effect he leaves behind the "imaginary 'madness' that opened an infinite abyss in each (necessarily erroneous) position he took, thereby saving it" (SNRS: 183). What Kristeva suggests is that Sartre's revolt is, perhaps ironically, an essentially "unintended outcome of a writing practice" that exists "where it would be least expected"—his literary works—and "does not exist where one might [logically] expect it" to be—his explicitly engaged political writing and action.³⁵ For Kristeva, revolt is an index of the imaginary. A revolt-culture, if we can speak of such a thing, is one in which the inner life of the individual is given free reign for its own intimate revolt, its own self-questioning. And this intimate revolt exists most clearly and unambiguously for Kristeva in Sartre's earliest works. For here, Sartre creatively questions in such a way as to keep the psychic space of the self open to perpetual interrogation and revolt.

What emerges in Kristeva's reframing of Sartre is arguably a picture of his writing as something akin to Freud's *unheimlich*; work that stands in for a history, past, and memory that can only be forgotten or overlooked at *our* peril. In this spirit of revolt Kristeva is

literally compelled to return to and engage with Sartre's writing.³⁶ In her own terms, we might say that her retrospective questioning of Sartre generates a regenerative revolt, one that leads to a renewed relation with the past and the other. This restoration of memory (has France "forgotten" Sartre?) serves to revitalise the negativity of the question, of all questions and all questioning. It is—once again to use her words—a resurrectional process of consciousness that bequeaths a future, a society, and a culture capable of creative thought.

While there are arguably problems with what some have characterised as the euro-centric and "intimate"³⁷ orientation of Kristeva's analysis, i.e., with the focus on questioning as a *self*-questioning, her understanding that radical questioning and revolt rests upon the ability to remember, to recall, to create a renewed relation with the past is helpful in thinking through and making links with the writing of contemporary refugee-seekers. This is, in part, due to the sense in which Kristeva's understanding of intimacy undoes any neat opposition between the personal and the collective. In what sense (or senses), then, might a resurrectional process of consciousness or remembering help us to better understand the complex relations between writing, questioning and revolt in representations of refugee experience today? In what sense might Kristeva's focus be illuminative of contemporary refugee writing?

3. Behrouz Boochani: Writing as Horrific Surrealism

It is helpful to think of the writing of the Kurdish-Iranian refugee Behrouz Boochani in terms of questioning and revolt. Imprisoned on Manus Island³⁸ by the Australian government, "without charge, without conviction, and without sentence" (Boochani 2018, x), Boochani's revolt takes the form of an uncompromising account of his six years spent in detention between 2013 and 2019. To be sure, Boochani's questions and his revolt emerge from different worlds and different concerns than those Kristeva identifies. And yet, questioning and revolt are central to Boochani's significant literary and political accomplishments. In *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (Boochani 2018), Boochani's literary and philosophical experimentation culminate in what the Australian writer Richard Flanagan has described as "a strange and terrible book" (Boochani 2018, xi).

In his Foreword to the book, Flanagan suggests that Boochani's work "can rightly take its place on the shelf of world prison literature" (Boochani 2018, ix).³⁹ This is an important point as it brings to mind a deeper question concerning the role of writing and the imaginary in response to representations of captivity and trauma. Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (written between 1929–1935) mark a notable instance of the negativity and force released in writing under conditions of incarceration. Like Boochani's work, Gramsci's *Notebooks* were smuggled out of prison only later to see the light of day. However, the force of this literary relation between captivity and trauma predates Gramsci's impressive legacy. In her provocative account of the literary achievements of Miguel de Cervantes, Maria Antonia Garcés argues that the writer was imprisoned for five years (1575–1580) in Algiers and that this experience of captivity, and the trauma it induced, lies at the heart of his work, thus grounding modern literature as an imaginary expression of, or flight from, incarceration.⁴⁰ Given this, Boochani's turn to literature and the imaginary is arguably an attempt to represent the unrepresentable, an attempt to make sense of the senseless; in this case, the senseless suffering of the incarcerated refugee. While, as we have seen, Kristeva maintains that Sartre moved away from the imaginary toward praxis in his later work, Boochani's writing is a forceful reminder that praxis (the ability to act) is precisely what the incarcerated refugee has taken from him or her. What remains is writing and the imaginary, and yet access to this form of revolt is by no means a given.

"Behrouz Boochani's revolt took a different form", writes Flanagan, a literary form different from the physical acts of revolt carried out by others in detention:

"And so over the course of his imprisonment Behrouz Boochani began one of the more remarkable careers in Australian journalism: reporting about what was happening on Manus Island in the form of tweets, texts, phone videos, calls, and emails. In so doing he defied the Australian government which went to

extreme lengths to prevent refugees' stories being told, constantly seeking to deny journalists access to Manus Island and Nauru; going so far, for a time, as to legislate the draconian section 42 of the *Australian Border Force Act*, which allowed for the jailing for two years of any doctors or social workers who bore public witness to children beaten or sexually abused, to acts of rape or cruelty". (x)

Boochani's extraordinary book was painstakingly written as a series of texts and tweets on illegal mobile phones, smuggled out of Manus Prison. This, too, is significant, as it demonstrates a remarkable reframing of the text and tweet as an ephemeral and ultimately superficial form of communication. Boochani appropriates the only form of communication available to him—the instant thought, the superficial remark—to construct a complex and reflective text that demands critical reflection and attention. In short, he achieves the near impossible—to go against the instant and distracted form of the internet where information is sampled in an infinite series of meaningless bits—by creating a work of focused attention that demands an enormous effort from its reader.⁴¹ Over and against the speed and superficiality of internet skimming, Boochani's revolt is to call forth a concentrated and contemplative response to a "normalized" world (to use Kristeva's term), largely oblivious to the refugee's plight. In this, Boochani remakes the technology in his own image. A remarkable achievement indeed.

In remaking technology, Boochani's literary revolt simultaneously pushes the very limits of journalism. His genius here is to undo the restrictions and limitations of the "embedded journalist" who, since the war in Vietnam, has more often than not been employed to report an official narrative.⁴² Boochani's writing effects a very different form of "embedded journalism", one able to subvert the official narrative which, in the case of Australian immigration policy, is effectively one of silence. Boochani's revolt is precisely to give voice to his "embedded" and very "embodied" experience of incarceration and trauma. In this, his writing is a form of protest literature written, in part, to inform the Australian people of the workings of a detention system established in their (our) name.

Boochani's translator, Omid Tofighian, refers to Boochani's writing (both the book and subsequent works) as an embodied mix of "literary language and journalism to depict the strategic use of starvation, thirst, insomnia, disease and emotional and psychological pressure as tools of torture" (xix). Boochani's revolt takes the form of questions the government would prefer not to be posed, questions articulated in a language consonant with the horrors he invokes. Moones Mansoubi, another translator contributing to the book⁴³, writes: "Behrouz's use of words and phrases in this book is so complex and unique—the context in which he's using language is deep and challenging, and often bizarre in a remarkably creative way" (xxiv). For Tofighian and Mansoubi, to fully understand the force of Boochani's writing, one needs to understand the complex links between colonialism, imperialism, and economic exploitation, and in particular the intimate associations between colonialism and forced migration. Such understanding marks the book as a decolonial work. Mansoubi writes:

"... many of Behrouz's narratives illustrate the connection between [*estemar*-colonialism/imperialism and *estesmar*—economic exploitation]; he emphasises how domination and control are related to aggressive extraction and manipulation of natural resources, the destruction of the ecosystem, and exploitation of human bodies". (xxvii)

The decolonial effects of Boochani's writing depends to a significant degree on a strategic fusion (or confusion) of genres, mixing literature with political commentary and a myriad of unexpected discourses. For Tofighian, this strategic play results ultimately in the production of an anti-genre:

"... Behrouz's literary techniques and forms of expression have connections with horror realism and culturally—or ethically—situated forms of surrealism. Identifying these factors facilitated the translation: it made expressing Behrouz's voice, choosing the words, developing the tone and style, and creating intertextual

figures more compelling and consistent. I interpret his genre (or anti-genre) as ‘horrific surrealism’’. (xxxix)

Literary experimentation is central to the revolt that Boochani is able to achieve in his work, an experimentation complicated by work that is written in Farsi (the language of Boochani’s colonial oppressors) and translated into English (the language of his contemporary goalers).⁴⁴ In this sense, experimentation works to question the authority and sense of the language of his oppressors, confronting it with a kind of excessive non-sense or meaning—literally a horrific surrealism that echoes in certain respects Freud’s *unheimlich*.⁴⁵ Boochani’s horrific surrealism, depicted by Magdalena Zolkos as a kind of poetics of detention,⁴⁶ works to undo the carceral aim of eliminating the possibility of revolt and freedom, of imagination, hope and resistance: “resistance against oppression consists of carving out narrow spaces of political action and reclaiming not only voice but precisely the subject’s capacity to imagine and to dream” (Zolkos 2019, 79). This literary revolt challenges what he refers to throughout the book as the “The Kyriarchal System” or the “kyriarchy”, “a term that signifies intersecting social systems that reinforce and multiply with the aim of punishing, subjugating and suppressing” (Boochani 2018, xxix).⁴⁷ This is the ideological apparatus that governs the prison within what Boochani refers to as Australia’s “ubiquitous border-industrial complex” (xxix). Additionally, writes Tofighian, “the notion kyriarchy amplifies the extent and omnipresence of the torture and control in the prison” (xxix). By renaming what the Australian government refers to as Manus Island Regional Processing Centre as Manus Prison, Boochani challenges the ideology of the border-industrial complex, laying bare the violence that structures and supports every aspect of daily lived experience for those incarcerated there. For Tofighian:

“Naming has special aesthetic, interpretive and political functions in the book. For Behrouz, renaming things is a way to affirm his personhood and establish a sense of authority; naming is a way of reclaiming authority from the prison, disempowering the system and redirecting sovereignty back to the land. Naming is also part of a creative endeavour, and it works as an analytical tool for examination of the political and material circumstances”. (xxviii)

In short, Boochani’s horrific surrealism signifies an embodied revolt that questions and ultimately refuses the legitimacy of the Australian government’s refugee policies. As such, it questions the government’s right to detain and incarcerate refugees in indefinite detention. Given this, Boochani is not so much concerned with questioning himself (Kristeva’s intimate revolt?) as he is with questioning the system that illegitimately detains him, stripping him of freedom, dignity, and personhood.⁴⁸ Boochani’s embodied revolt is directed not inwardly, but externally, to the colonial and carceral institution within which he finds himself imprisoned. For example, he rails against the ubiquitous gaze of the prison, and the larger culture that it supports, writing: “All the pockets and corners in far-off sections of the prison are dominated by their gaze—eyes tracking us down and committed to pursuit . . . There, in every section of the prison, they keep watch like hostile animals. Their gaze ploughs through and it seems that there is no chance of avoiding its pervasive scope” (Boochani 2018, 142). Such writing is, for certain, a different form of revolt, one that returns the gaze of the legacy of European colonisation which (paradoxically?) supports the revolt-culture Kristeva champions. In this, Boochani’s work arguably echoes—and provides a very local intonation to—the words of Fanon that open this essay: “O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (Fanon 2008, 181).

Boochani’s revolt and Boochani’s questions are in part directed toward exposing the near impossibility of revolt, the near impossibility of posing or formulating questions within the colonial context of incarceration. He writes: “The Kyriarchal System presents the prisoner with the blueprint”, a blueprint that constructs a reality that cannot be questioned. “Don’t come up with any questions . . . You can’t understand the system. Even the officers are ignorant. You shouldn’t rebel. Just submit to the power of the rules and regulations” (Boochani 2018, 210). The prison’s kyriarchal system is designed to punish, subjugate,

and suppress to the point where questions and revolt evaporate. In the place of questions: humiliation, desolation, despair. From wounds, anguish, and affliction, however, a new writing of raw humanity emerges, a writing of pure rebellion. A writing that revolts against the degradation of daily existence simply by naming it, witnessing it: “There is nothing left of that pretend pride—my head has dropped down low. A crushed person. Someone extremely degraded. Someone worthless . . . I have been degraded in no uncertain terms. The mood infused with sorrow . . . is weighing down on me. I take a few deep breaths, trying to breathe some dignity back into my spirit” (Boochani 2018, 98, 99). Time and again, Boochani’s writing bears witness to and exposes the structural humiliation built into the system: “The prison dictates that the prisoners accept, to some degree, that they are wretched and contemptible—this is an aspect of the system designed particularly for them. An objective of the Kyriarchal System: no-one has the right to express the very human feeling of munificence” (184). In outlawing munificence, the system outlaws humanity, humanness.

Bereft of humanity, the prisoners of Manus sink into a deep and perilous well, a loneliness that robs the impulse toward hope: “These forced conditions of loneliness make everyone endure scenes of an internal odyssey that would ruin any man. The odyssey summons dark angels and secrets relegated to the unconscious; like a magical curse it positions before every prisoner’s eyes the most long-standing issues and bad blood tied up in the soul . . . The prisoner is a piece of meat with a mind that is always moving between the darkest, dumbest and most worn-out scenes” (131). Without hope, anguish: “The cubicles are places for screaming out. Or they are marked as chambers of devastation, the devastation of youth who have lost their innocence, a devastation constituted by absolute hopelessness. A location of the clash between terror, hopelessness and outbursts of deep anguish” (171). An anguish expressed in the non-language of weeping, wailing, moaning:

“Moaning that doesn’t involve words or meaning/
Moaning, perhaps wailing as well/
And perhaps also weeping/
And perhaps all of them together/
Crying out. Moaning. Wailing. Crying” (279).

Kristeva’s revolt, as we have seen, is a revolt directed against the new order, characterised by a creeping normalization capable of stifling or eradicating dissent. It is a Sartrean revolt that ultimately reawakens our ability to resist by literally placing the self in question. However, bereft of the means to question and to resist, we are in danger of losing the very ability to moan, to weep, to wail. Boochani’s non-language, his weeping, wailing, and moaning, his embodied and horrific surrealism, demonstrates how his writing can return the gaze of a colonial incarceration that wills him nothing, non-being, leaves him with no place, no home to return to, no self to question. In this, his rebellion—his revolt—is a writerly revolt, a torrent of embodied words and images that construct a new place, a different home. A strange and terrible book indeed.

And yet, while Kristeva’s focus on the intimate revolt of *self*-questioning may seem at first distant from Boochani’s obviously political concerns, there is an important sense in which the two meet. For all their differences, Kristeva and Boochani share, I think, an understanding of resistance in and through memory. As we have seen, Kristeva calls for a regenerative revolt that leads to a renewed relation with the past, a restoration of memory which serves to rekindle or revitalize the negativity of the question. By resurrecting his own past in writing, Boochani resurrects, at the same time, his own traumatic experiences of war and displacement, and creates from this the foundation of a regenerative revolt, a restoration of memory that serves to revitalize the negativity of the question, of all questioning.

In *No Friend But The Mountains*, the contemporary narrative depicting Boochani’s unliveable life in Manus Prison is interspersed with passages resurrecting the trauma of his childhood during the Iraq-Iran war in the 1980s. This is best captured in the recurring motif of the mountains in his dispossessed Kurdish homeland. Both source of refuge and

place of desolation, Boochani's memory of the mountains draws the horror of childhood experience into the current crisis of his incarceration, forging transformative associations that permit him to question and to resist:

"Where have I come from?

From the land of rivers, the land of waterfalls, the land of ancient chants, the land of mountains . . . " (258).

"Truth be told, I am a child of war. Yes, I was born during the war. Under the thunder of warplanes. Alongside tanks. In the face of bombs. Breathing gunpowder. Among dead bodies. Inside silent cemeteries. These were the days when war was a part of our everyday lives and ran like blood through our identity . . . A war that devastated our families and sizzled and incinerated all of our vivid, green and bounteous homeland" (257).

In the poetic play of Boochani's writing, the mother and mountains merge in search of a remembering that does justice to both. This is anything but a sentimentalized remembering.⁴⁹ It is, rather a poetic resistance that draws strength and insight from the past. Boochani writes: "Horrorified mothers . . . mothers wrapped their children within the instincts of motherhood and escaped to the mountains" (259). Both mothers and mountains are sites of refuge, protection, shelter and solidarity, though never in any unambiguous sense. In Boochani's memory, mothers and mountains are simultaneously wounded, destroyed; they are far from immune to the violence and devastation that surrounds them.⁵⁰ And yet, in conjuring images of these ambiguous sites, Boochani confronts a history that allows him to reframe his contemporary experience, in effect, to resist it.

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Notes

¹ See also: (Kristeva 2002b).

² Kristeva argues that we need to analyse what appeared at the time to be the (French) rejection of Sartre's work in the later part of the twentieth century: " . . . it seems important to underscore right away the common impetus that incites and characterizes the specific resistance toward . . . [his] works. The innovation of . . . [his] texts, which has yet to be fully appreciated, resides in the revolt against identity . . . " (SNSR: 18).

³ While Kristeva focuses on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon and Roland Barthes in these two works, I shall restrict my discussion here to Sartre (cf. SNSR: 1, 17 and IR: 3). What is worth noting, though, is that Kristeva's choice of these three somewhat disavowed, or at least unfashionable authors, is strategic. It is part of her project of revolt as a return to and creative engagement with the history/past/memory that she claims "we" are currently in danger of forgetting.

⁴ For a discussion of the ethics of the question, see chapter three of (Boulous Walker 2017).

⁵ Kristeva writes: "You are no doubt familiar with the attack, denigration, and marginalization that psychoanalysis has undergone recently . . . Psychical curiosity yields before the exigencies of so-called efficiency; the unquestionable advances of the neurosciences are then ideologically valorized and advocated as antidotes to psychical maladies. Gradually, these maladies are denied as such and reduced to their biological substrata, a neurological deficiency" (*Intimate Revolt*: 11).

⁶ Kristeva's focus is undoubtedly on Europe; she describes revolt as an essential historical component of European culture: "a culture fascinated by doubt and critique" which is currently in danger of "losing its moral and aesthetic impact" (IR: 4). And further: "an essential aspect of the European culture of revolt and art is in peril . . . the very notion of culture as revolt and of art as revolt is in peril . . . " (6). In regard to the contemporary relation between "east" and "west" it is interesting to note that in 1996, five years before September 11, Kristeva writes: "Why does one sacrifice? Why does one enter into a religious pact and embrace fundamentalism, of whatever sort? Because, Freud tells us, the benefits we extract from the social contract threaten to disappear 'as a result of the changing conditions of life': unemployment, exclusion, lack of money, failure in work, dissatisfactions of every kind. From then on, assimilation to the social link disintegrates; the profit 'I' find in my integration in the *socius* collapses. What

does this profit consist of? It is nothing other than the ‘appropriation of paternal attributes.’ In other words, ‘I’ felt flattered to be promoted to the level of someone who could, if not be the father, at least acquire his qualities, identify with his power; ‘I’ was associated with this power; ‘I’ was not excluded; ‘I’ was one of those who obeyed him and were satisfied with that. But sometimes this identification with power no longer works, ‘I’ feel excluded; ‘I’ can no longer locate power, which has become normalizing and falsifiable. What happens then?” (SNSR: 14).

Kristeva writes that this regenerative revolt “expresses a fundamental version of freedom: not freedom to change or to succeed, but freedom to revolt, to call things into question” (Kristeva 2002b, 12).

There are numerous references to Hannah Arendt throughout the two works, (e.g., IR: 6).

Kristeva draws a clear distinction between what she sees as reactionary opposition (forgetting or opposing) and creative revolt (engaging the past).

Indeed, if Kristeva were to engage Fanon on these questions, a different (arguably non-European) orientation toward revolt might emerge.

Kristeva borrows this term from Guy Debord’s analysis in *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1994). The culture of the image can be understood in terms of its seduction, swiftness, brutality and frivolity, and Kristeva opposes it to the “culture of words” or revolt-writing that “preserves the life of the mind and of the species” (IR: 5). Further to this, Kristeva writes that “technological development has favoured the knowledge of stable values to the detriment of thought . . . ” (IR: 6).

She suggests that this modern order threatens the art and culture of revolt, not the art or culture of “the show” or of “consensual information favoured by the media” (SNSR: 8).

Kristeva notes a tension here: “ . . . ‘this society of the image’ justifies the attempt to rethink the notion of revolt, but seems simultaneously to exclude the possibility of doing so” (SNSR: 4).

She writes: “‘I’ am not a transcendental subject . . . as classical philosophy would have it. Instead, ‘I’ am, quite simply, the owner of my genetic or organo-physiological patrimony; ‘I’ possess my organs, and that only in the best-case scenario, for there are countries where organs are stolen in order to be sold” (SNRS: 6)

Kristeva’s analysis of the political events of May’68 in Paris characterize revolt as permanent contestation: “One word on everyone’s lips in May ’68 was ‘contestation’. It expresses a fundamental version of freedom: not freedom to change or to succeed, but freedom to revolt, to call things into question. [Now] . . . we’re so used to identifying freedom merely with free enterprise, that this other version doesn’t seem to exist; it’s got to a point where the very notion of liberty is fading in people’s minds and absent from their actions. Remember, liberty-as-revolt isn’t just an available option, it’s fundamental. Without it, neither the life of the mind nor life in society is possible. I mean ‘life’ here, and not just maintenance, repletion, management . . . It’s precisely by putting things into question that ‘values’ stop being frozen dividends and acquire a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life” (Kristeva 2002b, 12).

Kristeva’s analysis here builds upon Adorno and Horkheimer’s critique of the culture industry. See “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” in (Adorno and Horkheimer 2016, 80–108).

Indeed, the following questions bear testimony to Kristeva’s insistent and self-reflexive return to this question: Can we recapture the spirit of revolt and extricate it from the impasses of rebellious ideologies and the surge of consumer culture? (7); What is the necessity of this culture of revolt, and why should we resuscitate cultural forms whose antecedents lie in Cartesian doubt? (7) Can a revolt-culture emerge/exist/be sustained given the structure of the normalized society? (8) Who can revolt, and against what? (8).

See SNRS: Chapter one, esp. 1–4 and IR: Chapter one, esp. 3–4.

For an insightful analysis of the move in Kristeva’s thought over time from “revolution” (transgression of the law) to “revolt” (a restructuring of psychic space), see: de Nooy 1997. Here, De Nooy argues that Kristeva’s work in the nineties on revolt (in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*) offers a less oppositional form of contestation than her earlier work in the seventies (in *Revolution of Poetic Language*). See also the “Introduction” to (Lechte and Journazi 1998).

This is partially what Kristeva intends in her title *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, i.e., those instances where revolt “works”, and those where it does not. See also IR: 171.

See *Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva 1984), *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982), etc. In SNSR Kristeva identifies two occurrences of revolt in psychoanalytic theory: Freud’s exploration of Oedipal revolt and the return of the archaic (SNRS: 11f), and in IR she characterizes psychoanalysis’s revolt as being “an invitation to anamnesis in the goal of a rebirth, that is, a psychical restructuring” (IR: 8) In general, Kristeva links much of Freud’s understanding of revolt with his discussion and analysis of the sacred.

Kristeva links this negativity with nothingness and interrogation, see: IR: 140.

See IR: 136f, 124, and 144.

See IR: 175, 177 and 130. See also SNRS: 180.

In an interview with Philippe Petit, Kristeva acknowledges Camus’s contribution to the history of revolt, by rewriting his statement “I revolt, therefore we are!” as “I revolt, therefore we are . . . still to come” (Kristeva 2002b, 44). In this work, Kristeva also acknowledges the role of women writers (Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, and Colette) in the history of revolt (Kristeva 2002b, 95).

- Kristeva adds that Freud's work "belongs to this interrogation into Nothingness and negativity" carried out—in different ways—by Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre (IR: 9). See Freud's work "Negation" (Freud 1925).
- Kristeva argues, rightly I think, that we can only understand *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 1996) by reading it simultaneously with *Nausea* (Sartre 1964): "*Being and Nothingness* can only be understood in light of this novelistic, imaginary experience . . ." (SNRS: 171). Certainly, doing so has led to some interesting feminist readings. See: (Le Dœuff 1980, 1991; Collins and Pierce 1976).
- Prior to *Being and Nothingness* in 1943, Sartre pursues this nihilism and questioning of consciousness in *L'Imaginaire* [*The Psychology of Imagination*] 1940 (Sartre 2010). In *Transcendence of the Ego*, 1936–37 (Sartre 2004) Sartre explores the negativity that becomes so central in *Being and Nothingness*.
- Kristeva goes on in this chapter ("Sartre: Freedom As Questioning") to depict psychoanalytic interpretation as a questioning; in so doing she returns—if somewhat obliquely—to the question of Sartre's proximity to psychoanalytic interpretation.
- De Nooy writes: "The truth of aesthetic experience marks the limits of revolt—and of play" (De Nooy 1997, 157). However, de Nooy goes on to wonder aloud whether the ironic distance of women in relation to a patriarchal symbolic shouldn't also be seen in terms of a subtle revolt, as a form of play and contestation: I even wonder whether not only the mimicking of revolt but the mimicking of law itself may not already constitute an invisible form of rebellion. Women, for example, might indulge while affirming phallic law . . ." (157).
- See Kristeva's extensive discussion of Sartre's literary works in IR and SNRS.
- The Words* marks both "the apogee and the end" of imaginary experience (SNRS: 185).
- Kristeva asks: "by dismissing the arduous task of demystification through writing, doesn't social praxis, far from avoiding the madness that sustains literature, run the risk of coming up against new dead ends, falling into the old errors of Promethean optimism?" (SNRS: 185).
- Kristeva suggests that Sartre's work on the imaginary prefigures critiques of the society of the spectacle in significant and yet largely unthought-out ways: "it seems quite simply impossible to pretend to venture into this world—where an increasingly virtual imaginary reigns, which we call the society of the spectacle—without revisiting the old Sartre, who again emerges as a precursor" (IR: 123).
- See: (Lechte and Zournazi 1998, 13).
- In SNRS Kristeva writes: "To examine revolt in the contemporary world, in contemporary literature, Sartre's experience cannot be ignored. I am all the more delighted to present his work here because a sort of weak consensus has reigned for some time that disparages Sartre, unfairly, in my opinion" (SNRS: 149).
- In their "Introduction" Chanter and Ziarek comment on the manner in which Kristeva's work unsettles a too neat distinction between public and private, thus problematising a sharp distinction between "intimate" and "collective" forms of revolt: "Kristeva's work has been often criticized for focusing primarily on the personal or the psychic maladies of modern Western subjectivity rather than on group formations or the political structures of oppression. Presupposing a rather stable private/public distinction, this criticism has failed to address, however, how Kristeva's work . . . not only challenges this distinction but also elucidates the process of constitution of the traversable private/public boundaries" (Chanter and Ziarek 2005, 1).
- Referred to by the government as Australia's Manus Island Regional Offshore Processing Centre.
- Magdalena Zolkos suggests that Boochani's work is, additionally, "part political philosophic dissection of the confluence of Australian coloniality, oppression, and racism . . . as well as a more general critique of the institution of border-industrial complex and liberal states' border politics" (Zolkos 2019, 70).
- See: (Garcés 2002, 1–14).
- For a helpful discussion of the fragmenting tendencies of internet technologies, see: (Carr 2010).
- For an account of the complexities of "embedded journalism" see (Buchanan 2011). Buchanan explores historical responses to initial attempts to "frame the narrative" (115).
- Mansoubi began translating Boochani's journalistic work in 2015, and she assisted Tofighian as a consultant in the translation of *No Friend But The Mountains*. Tofighian includes extracts from his discussions with Mansoubi in his translator's introduction: "A Translator's Tale: A Window to the Mountains" (in Boochani 2018, xiii–xxxvi). See also: (Tofighian 2018).
- "Boochani situates his book within the broader Persian tradition of writing that traverses the prosaic and lyrical forms, and is unafraid of bold dramatizations and lurid descriptions" (Zolkos 2019, 70).
- Boochani's English translator, Omid Tofighian, writes: "To evoke the atmosphere and features of the text in English we needed to experiment with different techniques. Therefore, the translation arranges and presents the stories in unorthodox ways and purposely fragments and disrupts sentence and passage, appropriating and blending genre and style" (Boochani 2018, xxxiv).
- Zolkos writes: "Boochani's poetics of detention is circumscribed by the goals of political analysis of the carceral state and border-politics, but it is not identical with, or reducible to, the political. Rather . . . [his book] establishes a deeper connection between, first, the emotive, lyrical voice of the poet; second, the question of insurgence and political action in oppressive conditions; and, third, a conjuring gesture, understood not only as a way of intertwining the realistic narrative with magical and

fantastic elements (as Boochani's undoubtedly does) but also as sudden appearance of what is nonexistent" (Zolkos 2019, 73). For a discussion of Boochani's work in terms of a kind of political poetics or a poetic manifesto, see: (Surma 2018).

- 47 Boochani borrows the term from Schüssler Fiorenza's analysis of "'interconnected, interacting and self-extending' forms of structural domination and submission" (Fiorenza cited in Zolkos 2019, 71). Zolkos adds: "It encompasses techniques of surveillance and the carceral organization of place, architecture, and of the detainees' daily routines, as well as the violent 'theatre' of degradation and control. For the system to remain in operation, it also requires the cooperation and complicity of broad social groups—not just the guards, but also medical professionals, translators, journalists, lawyers, and the Australian public at large" (Zolkos 2019, 71).
- 48 Although, early in the book Boochani attempts to lay himself bare: "The odyssey across the ocean on a rotting boat had created the space for a colossal encounter—where the essence of my being could manifest—where I could interrogate my soul—so that I could lay myself bare: *Is this human being who he thinks he is?/Does this human being reflect the same theories that he holds?/Does this human being embody courage?* (Boochani 2018, 70).
- 49 Boochani creates poetic and "non-sentimental figurations of homeland and the mother, as sites of refuge, subversion, and solidarity from which resistance against . . . [his carceral] oppression arises" (Zolkos 2019, 80).
- 50 Zolkos writes: "just as with the figure of the mountains, the mother herself is wounded, and the shelter she provides is not immune to violence, but permeated by it" (Zolkos 2019, 78).

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