There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated.
—Kristeva, 1982, 1

I’ve read the first sentence of the quote above so many times it has become my mantra. Even though the words string together in magical ways, I am unsure of their meaning. I am lost and beset in the abject, object, subject, “dark revolts of being,” the horror, the violence, and the edge of abjection (Kristeva, 1). What does Kristeva, the French philosopher, mean by the abject or abjection? My Oxford pocket dictionary tells me that abject means hopeless, miserable, wretched, degraded and despicable—this does not help. A ten minute Google search of ‘abject and Kristeva’ reveals that, according to Dino Felluga and Katherine Cooklin, Kristeva’s abject is the Other that both engenders identity, and challenges the integrity of identity by confronting it with its own unstable borders. But this is their interpretation. What might mine be?

The reason I am embracing the headache of trying to “get” Kristeva (1982), as if that were possible, is on the advice of Claudia Ruitenberg, a professor of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. She informed me, in a reply to an assignment on ‘finding Self,’ that my work/words connected with the French philosopher. So here I am steeped in words that are a complete mystery to me, struggling to piece together the meaning of the title, let alone the content of the book! Why am I putting myself through such frustration? Well, I love theory, and I love the agonizing challenge of interpreting someone else’s words/thoughts and finding myself or, in this case, losing myself. Aha!

STOP. ARRÊT.

Maybe I’ve found MY way, byway in.

...Ω... >
“And the more he strays, the more he finds himself.”(Kristeva, 8)

My elementary and high school experience told me that I had to have an answer, but what I am coming to trust is that if I embrace the unknown, the risky, the uncomfortable, I can depart/arrive at a point where there is no end, only possibilities. Maybe the answer is that there is no answer: It is strange to realize that possibility and yet liberating. If I let go of the idea of ‘getting’ anywhere in particular with her words, maybe I can come to see that I am already there. There is nowhere to go. I am sitting where I need to be, but I have just not realized it yet. If I accept being lost, being where I am meant to be, perhaps I can relax into Kristeva’s words and let go of the terrible strain of striving to understand, to arrive, to accomplish, to win. I can let go of the fear of incompetence, of failure, of being recognized as what I fear I am—an academic fraud.

Instead of the self-torment and fear of (mis)interpreting Kristeva, the frustration of searching for an answer to the mystery of her words, a space opens for me to listen, to feel, to go beyond my limitations to a place where I don’t know exactly if what I am doing/knowing/being is right but I keep on doing/knowing/being, constantly changing. That is how I will break barriers. This place of not knowing, of being lost has as much to tell me as that of the knowing.

Hmmmm… so

in my state of confusion

Of not knowing…

What do I discover?

How do Kristeva’s words speak to me?

dance? me?

play in my mind?

Two sentences, that I quote below, jump out at me for different reasons and move me in ways that shakes up what I thought I previously knew.

“I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish myself.” (Kristeva, 3)

Nearing the end of my Master’s program, I am feeling more unsure than when I began. As I moved through the program, the theories—creating myself, my theories, only to then reject myself, realizing a state of unknowing, of uncomfortableness is where I am. A push and pull between wanting to arrive and not arrive—knowing that I am always becoming and that therefore the idea of ‘arriving’ is impossible. My knowledge is always “partial and murky” (Loutzenheiser, 2006) and that I will always be in a state of not knowing, yet striving still to become known.
At the same time that I accept myself, Kristeva tells me I must also expel myself. Kristeva challenges me to see the fear and suffering at the borders of my identity. Her words invoke my body and force me to confront my fragile state and the ghosts of self who stink. Kristeva urges me to listen to those times when I am lost, to “forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where “I” am—delight and loss” (12).

“As on the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture.” (Kristeva, 2)

As a queer woman I am always on the edge of nonexistence, that of the unreal, unacknowledged reality of my life, my queer identity. Months ago on the (mis)advice of my father,…,

>You should go see a hypnotist. They helped me stop smoking.<br/>But, Dad, you still smoke?<br/>Yeah, but I quit for a while.

I finally agreed to try hypnotic therapy. In our second session, as I lay vulnerable on her couch, the hypnotist stated that I do not exist, that my identity as a lover of multiple genders and sexualities is impossible, that I was ‘sitting on the fence.’ I froze, becoming the withdrawn little girl I thought I had left behind—abjection became my safeguard. If I were to acknowledge that woman’s words, then I annihilate myself—I kill everything I feel inside.

>My love d<br/>e<br/>s…

>The passion that ROARS through my Scorpio body<br/>Becomes n<br/>u<br/>m<br/>b

>To ‘norm’alcy and ‘accept’ance.

>I no longer a<br/>m.

But it is more than that, the very way I read the world, the lens that gives me a path to myterpret the surroundings is lost. So instead abjection becomes my safeguard (Kristeva, 2). I expel her—her ignorant, evil words, her words of death, of horror, so that “I” may exist. This little girl is my abject, the being that continues to exist on the border of self, disrupting my identity (Kristeva, 4). In Kristeva I have found my abject—the little girl of my past, my ghost, a reminder of a miserable, wretched existence in silence. Today I continue to try and break that silence.
Kristeva argues that the abject “is simply a frontier, a repulsive gift that the Other, having become alter ego, drops so that “I” does not disappear in it but finds, in that sublime alienation, a forfeited existence” (9). What if instead I welcome my abject self, and give her space to be, what then are the possibilities for existence? If Kristeva is right in that “the abject does not give up” (15), then I must embrace my abject as part of my subject, and “recognize [my] kin” and the “want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (Kristeva, 5).

This little girl is part of who I am today. I cannot escape her. She was/is a different part of my journey, but she was/is part of my subject and has helped bring me into being. So as I lose myself in Kristeva’s words, I (re)discover a part of myself and experience “jouissance” (Kristeva, 9).

References:


About the Author
Karen Zucchiatti holds a Master’s of Education in Society, Culture and Politics in Education from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, with a focus on ‘queer’ and social justice issues in education. “My belief is that education stretches beyond the ‘ivory towers,’ hence I have worked, lived, and learned in various parts of the world and in many different contexts. As a result, I live with many identities, none of which fit perfectly in the tin frame on the door to my room. At the moment I am living and laughing in Uganda, teaching Year 5 and discovering more about myself each day—the road stretches far and wide!