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Feminist Styles of Immanent Critique: Judith Butler and Denise Riley

Abstract: Taking up the question of style, I argue that this term provides a generative framework for reassessing the historical challenges of feminist writing and politics. To develop my argument, I read Judith Butler’s philosophy alongside Denise Riley’s poems, historical criticism, and philosophical prose, proposing that both writers are inventive participants in the tradition of immanent critique. I demonstrate how feminist questioning of linguistic conventions and social norms is enfolded in Butler’s paratextual reflections on philosophical grammar and in Riley’s poetic and theoretical efforts to acknowledge her uneasy relationship to lyric. Any dialogue between philosophy and poetry returns us to the longstanding debate about the value of these respective disciplines. I conclude by proposing that Riley and Butler encourage us to consider that each demands the other as a supplement – a necessity that emerges from the need to account for the collective life in which language is embedded.

Key words
Judith Butler; Denise Riley; poetry and poetics; lyric; philosophy; style; feminism

Bio
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On February 16, 1995, the philosopher Judith Butler drafted a short letter to their friend Denise Riley, the British poet, philosopher, and historian. “My Dearest Denise,” Butler writes, “I am, we are, devastated that you won’t be here, and profoundly apologetic for what appears to be a rabid resurgence of anti-immigration politics on the part of our dear country.” Following this critique of America’s xenophobic immigration policies, which appear to have prevented Riley from traveling to Irvine to participate in an academic event sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Institute, Butler’s letter changes in tone and register, although its subject matter remains the same. “Last night,” they continue, “driving back here, from San Diego, the sky over the highway was filled with loud and ugly helicopters searching in a full paranoid flourish for illegal immigrants in the fields between the highway and the ocean.”

Reading these lines at the Cambridge University Library on a freezing winter day in 2019, approximately 24 years after they were composed, it occurred to me that, in directing their words towards a particular addressee, Butler was also, in some sense, tuning their language in the direction of the poetic. This is especially evident in their metaphorical use of the noun “flourish,” a word more readily associated with the signing of legal documents than helicopter movements, but which also has notable camp and ornamental associations (flourish can be traced to the Latin florere, meaning to bloom, blossom, flower; the word’s associations with literary or rhetorical embellishment, as well as penmanship, emerge in the early 17th century). Taken in conjunction with their personification of the “loud and ugly helicopters” as intentional agents, Butler’s phrase “paranoid flourish” would appear to be calling attention, more particularly, to the performativity of state power in way that also subtly ironizes it. Through its figural language, this passage seems to be condensing a number of meanings: straightforward observations on the inequity of the
immigration system and the oppressive nature of the state are layered with more intricate and incipient reflections on the coded relationship between power and social signification.

Perhaps, in constructing this elaboration, Butler was recalling how Riley’s lyrics self-consciously deploy rhetorical figures such as metaphor and apostrophe. “O great cadences of English poetry / We blush to hear thee lie,” Riley writes in a poem included in her 1993 collection *Mop Mop Georgette* – lines both characteristically combative in their attitude towards the canon and also unusually direct in their ironic appropriation of the trope of apostrophic address (albeit an irony tempered with seriousness, given that the “blush” at the “lie” implies a genuine attachment to poetry as a form of truth).4 At the same time, Butler would likely have been preoccupied by their own work as they cast their thoughts across the ocean. In the winter of 1995, they were beginning to evolve their ground-breaking, and much debated, idea of gender performativity in the direction of a reassessment of speech acts – a project explicitly centered on countering hate speech – so they certainly would have found the idea of state-sanctioned aerial activity as a kind of performative skywriting both troubling and provocative.5

It is possible that my interpretation of Butler’s note might be objected to as an act of overreading, a willful interpolation of poetic language into their occasional prose. Yet I have not been able to shake my initial sense, reading this letter, that its language provides us with a suggestive point of entry for thinking the contributions of Butler and Riley together.6 More particularly, I offer Butler’s letter as a touchstone, a means of orienting us towards this article’s primary objectives: first, attending to the significance of *style* as way of clarifying the stakes of Butler and Riley’s allied projects; and, secondly, working to account for the significance of those formal and conceptual divergences that mark these theorists’ particular interventions in second
wave feminist discourse – interventions that continue to be both influential and contested within the contemporary field of feminist debate.\(^7\)

My argument is that, in contrast to some second wave feminists who sought out a conceptual “purity of position,”\(^8\) uncontaminated by patriarchal logic, from which to advance their politics, Riley and Butler share a determination to participate in the philosophical tradition of immanent critique: each works on and through the language of their chosen conceptual fields to generate recognition of contradiction or nonclosure within established conceptuality. Butler is committed to a theoretical practice of critique, albeit a difficult one, which certain philosophers have criticized for perpetuating a “symbolic”\(^9\) feminism. Yet Butler’s difficult style is the opposite of symbolic, I suggest, because it enables them to acknowledge their ambivalent relation to philosophical grammar: how it restricts, but also enables, a questioning of gender norms. (In what follows, we will repeatedly see this type of acknowledgment in the context of Butler’s critiques of philosophical and feminist conventions.) Riley, as I have already noted, works in different styles, including a poetic style through which she enacts but also distances herself from established tropes of lyric poetry. These are conventions, her writings intimate, that have been enabled historically by their own forms of masculine bias. In this essay, I therefore theorize Butler and Riley’s practices of immanent critique as materialized through different feminist styles. Style provides the framework for examining how these authors draw implicitly and explicitly on the resources of the poetic. It also facilitates a consideration of how their writings deepen our understanding of the recent history of feminism and contribute to current debates in feminist politics.
Thinking Style

This article proceeds in two parts. First, I address formal and conceptual correspondences between the early feminist writings of Butler and Riley, with a particular focus on parenthetic and paratextual moments in Butler’s philosophical prose. I then turn to Riley’s lyrics, drawing out the feminist significance of poetic style.

The term style emerges early on in Butler’s feminist philosophy. Their exploration of the concept is indebted to both their doctoral research on Sartre and their turn to Foucault in advance of the publication of their first book Subjects of Desire in 1987.10 The idea of “corporeal styles,” in particular, which Butler invokes in their first published attempts to theorize gender, including in their 1985 article “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault” and their 1986 article “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s Second Sex,” prefigures the emergence of performativity as a central concept in their philosophy.11 In the final pages of Gender Trouble, it is clear that the idea of style enables Butler to account for the central paradox of gender performativity as they are theorizing it: namely, that gender is a consequence of our deliberate efforts to “self-style,” but also of forces beyond our control; “styles have a history,” they remind us, “and those histories condition and limit the possibilities [of self-styling]” (GT 190). Yet these limits also provide us with a starting point for challenging gender norms, Butler suggests when they invoke drag as a performance that “implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender—as well as its contingency” (GT 187). If styles have a history, this history’s coercive force is what style is nevertheless capable of challenging. Style is a potentially powerful concept for feminist critique, then, because of its ability both to denaturalize the apparent givenness of a sexual essence (or “true” gender) and question the presumed transparency of those discourses, including
philosophy, that have historically bracketed out the messiness of embodied subjectivity (of the “I” who lives and writes).

Butler’s inventive recourse to style in the 1980s reflects their desire to theorize gender in a way that could constructively account for queer and non-binary perspectives. Yet feminist theorists have often sidestepped an overt engagement with aesthetics. Feminist trepidation about the aesthetic, understood as a category associated with style since the eighteenth century, can be linked most directly to fears that it could distract from feminism’s urgent practical responsibility to maintain itself as a coherent political enterprise. In her 1999 article “The Professor of Parody,” Martha Nussbaum assumes such a position, characterizing Butler’s writing as “fancy words on paper” and speculating whether it “belongs to the philosophical tradition at all, rather than to the closely related but adversarial traditions of sophistry and rhetoric.” However, numerous recent writings indicate a countercurrent of contemporary feminist theorists who engage constructively with questions of aesthetics and, indeed, style. As Isobel Armstrong has argued, “to have lost confidence in the aesthetic as a category, together with the possibility of generating new ideas about it, leaves one without resources of analysis in contemporary culture.” We will see both Butler and Riley refuse the binary formulation offered by Nussbaum, who resists a genuine thinking through of style in order to posit philosophy as preoccupied with forms of truth that operate within or behind the surface of language (whereas “sophistry and rhetoric” are concerned only with appearances).

Such a refusal on the part of Butler and Riley is closely tied to the manner in which they question the language of self-description and challenge prevalent styles through which self-understanding has historically been conditioned. They are especially wary of the capacity of identity politics to elicit reductive formulations of selfhood (produced both by ourselves and by
others), and this wariness complicates how they relate to feminism, as evidenced by the fact that
interrogations of the subject of feminism take center stage in their early writings. The sustained
contiguity of Butler and Riley’s thinking on this difficult topic of self-description is perhaps most
clearly revealed by the fact that Butler includes a quotation from Riley’s 2000 book *The Words of*
*Selves* as the epigraph to the second chapter of their 2005 book *Giving an Account of Oneself*:

> “While I can’t believe in a selfhood which is any other than generated by language
over time, I can still lack conviction if I speak of myself in the necessarily settled
language of a sociologised subject. This self-describing “I” produces an unease
which can’t be mollified by any theory of its constructed nature…. What purports
to be “I” speaks back to me, and I can’t quite believe what I hear it say.”

Riley’s point, as I take it, is that any attempt at self-description produces a kind of alienation that
we can’t simply conceptualize away. This “unease” that the subject experiences in relation to the
first-person “I” is something that persists, shaping and restricting any attempt at self-accounting,
which is what Butler is seeking to address in this chapter. As Butler acknowledges, echoing Riley:
> “The recognition that one is, at every turn, not quite the same as how one presents oneself in the
available discourse might imply, in turn, a certain patience with others that would suspend the
demand that they be self-same at every moment.”

In other words, recognition – of both oneself and others – is structured by profound epistemic limits, requires considerable patience, and may even necessitate the suspension of judgment: an acknowledgment whose origins can be traced to
Riley’s slim 1988 volume *“Am I That Name?”: Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History*, which Butler cites in the opening pages of *Gender Trouble*.

> The stated premise of *“Am I That Name?”* is to “break open the daily naturalism of what
surrounds us.” In this historical materialist analysis, Riley theorizes “women” as a profoundly
mediated category “enmeshed with the histories of other concepts,” including “the social” and “the
body” (*AITN* 7). Consequently, a central claim of “Am I That Name?” is the idea that “women,” as a category, always operates “in advance” of our conscious intentions. Building on Simone de Beauvoir’s assertion that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” Riley proposes: “it seems to me that even the apparently simplest, most innocent ways in which one becomes temporarily a woman *are not* darting returns to a category in a natural and harmless state, but are something else: adoptions of, or precipitations into, a designation there in advance, a characterisation of ‘woman’” (*AITN* 97).

In response to the idea that feminists ought to minimize their use of “women” in light of the fact that it exists “prior to both its revolutionary and conservative deployments” (*AITN* 97-8), she therefore cautions: “The intimacies between consenting to be a subject and undergoing subjection are so great that even to make demands as an oppositional subject may well extend the trap, wrap it furiously around oneself” (*AITN* 113).

Here, the reader would be forgiven, if, in encountering a decontextualized version of the sentence just quoted, they mistook it as a line from Judith Butler. Butler has productively mined the chiasmic relation between subjectivity and subjection, and one need only consider their engagement with Foucault’s concept of *assujettissement* for this to be apparent.²¹ Anticipating the thought of Butler, Riley proposes a chiasmic relation between consent and subjection, implying our inability to be fully intentional about how we engage with a category like *women*. That is, even if we claim to reject such a category, it by no means follows that we can successfully escape it – that it is willing to let us go. Moreover, while Riley seems to be addressing a primarily linguistic problem, she is at pains to underscore that this problem has real social and economic effects – that we are not dealing with purely conceptual concerns here. We might, for instance, consider how the designation *women* facilitates our institutionalization as a particular subcategory of the human: a distinction that has contributed to historical definitions of productive versus reproductive labor,
the division between public and domestic spheres, and, thus, served to reinforce income and other disparities between persons who are and are not determined to be part of this category, irrespective of their personal preferences or nonconforming senses of self.

As well as its clear overlaps with Butler’s concerns, the crucial sentence from “Am I That Name?” discussed above is notable for its figural language – not dissimilar to what we initially saw in Butler’s use of the term “flourish” in their 1995 letter to Riley. In particular, the second half of this sentence, in which Riley asserts “that even to make demands as an oppositional subject may well extend the trap, wrap it furiously around oneself” (AITN 113), might be pointed to as the locus of an eruption of the poetic as a feminist style of immanent critique – a moment when the critical is productively contaminated by the creative – insofar as we are faced with a linguistic situation in which her writing performatively flags the limits of a certain kind of philosophical transparency through recourse to the figure of metaphor. By portraying the category of women as a “trap” that physically ensnares (“wrap”) the female subject even as she attempts to discard it, Riley figures the conceptual impasse that arises when we seek to reject women as an outmoded term. It is through this mixed and overdetermined metaphor – which is invoked not as a turn away from sense, but rather in an effort to point towards the hidden complexities of subjectification – that Riley illustrates why the failure to reject a designation like women cannot be rectified simply by adopting a more self-aware feminist practice. Her ambivalent recourse to the metaphors of “wrapping,” invoking ideas of clothing, entanglement, and protective concealment, underscores the material issue of self-presentation – and, hence, style – as a constant dilemma of women’s social existence, necessarily bound up with the question of what it means to be an “oppositional subject.” Indeed, the figure of metaphor itself can be understood as performing the ambivalent relation between a hidden, or opaque, truth (which cannot be approached directly, hence the recourse to figural
language) and the oblique forms of its appearance (around which Riley’s sentence turns), in a linguistic act that simultaneously affirms and pressurizes Riley’s theoretical efforts to think women as a category.

*Gender Trouble* might seem like a questionable text to invoke at this juncture, too familiar to provide new insights for feminist analysis. However, when reconsidered in conjunction with Riley’s lesser known *“Am I That Name?”*, this book provides us with an opportunity to elaborate the feminist significance of the kind of metaphorics that I just traced in *“Am I That Name?”*. In particular, I want to think about why *Gender Trouble* includes various situations in which Butler troubles philosophical norms of language presentation – a fact that has been repeatedly acknowledged by both their critics and defenders, though not specifically in relation to poetics. While Butler had not yet linked gender performativity to a performative theory of political speech acts, which they would go on to do in their 1997 book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, they are nevertheless explicit in *Gender Trouble* that something they call “corporeal style” (*GT* 190), which makes strategic use of the more familiar aesthetic and literary connotations of style, cannot be taken for granted. Rejecting feminist perspectives that viewed gender as expressive of, or caused by, an authentic female essence (and therefore sought literary styles adequate to the materialization of such an essence), *Gender Trouble* claims gendered identity as a non-natural construct developed through repetition over time. “The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self,” Butler asserts, is “performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” (*GT* 33-4). They particularly emphasize the centrality of “stylization” in the sedimentation of this “gendered self,” arguing that gender “ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition
"of acts" (GT 191). Even the culturally sanctioned “heterosexual original” is a “copy” (GT 43), they argue, which fails to fully embody a gendered ideal set up by culture.

Yet this lack of ontological basis is also what enables us to disrupt and resignify gender norms so that their coercive function is potentially mitigated. If the “stylized repetition of acts” is what consolidates gender into an “identity,” this type of repetition is also, Butler argues, what troubles regulatory practices of identity by opening gender norms up “to intervention and resignification” (GT 45). “The possibilities of gender transformation,” they conclude, “are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such acts [of stylized repetition], in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction” (GT 192). Repetition is necessarily imperfect, open to disruption and subversion. It can even be unexpectedly transformative: an idea that has stylistic implications not only for Gender Trouble, understood as a philosophical interrogation of second wave feminist theory, but also for Riley’s lyric poetry, a point I’ll return to when I discuss her use of the elegiac figure of echo.

In their revealing 1999 preface to the second edition of Gender Trouble, Butler reflects on Gender Trouble in ways that shed light on the difficulties they faced in writing this book, as well as on their complex relationship to feminism, which they experienced in the late 1980s as profoundly compromised by heteronormative bias. “As I wrote [Gender Trouble],” they explain,

I understood myself to be in an embattled and oppositional relation to certain forms of feminism, even as I understood the text to be part of feminism itself. I was writing in the tradition of immanent critique that seeks to provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs. (GT vii)

By framing their project as participating “in” the philosophical “tradition of immanent critique,” Butler seems to accept the need to adhere to certain discursive, conceptual, and stylistic norms of
feminist theory, even though they explicitly conceived of the book as a challenge to this field. Yet it is also evident from these lines that the composition of Gender Trouble provoked difficult questions for Butler as a writing subject. What textual strategies should they employ to produce a critique of feminist theory that would still remain legible as feminist theory? And if their own philosophical style inevitably exceeded their intentions, just like the “styles of the flesh” that never can be fully “self-styled,” then how might they nevertheless take this style to task in an effort to resignify feminist theory in a more inclusive way?

In their second preface to Gender Trouble, Butler goes on to propose that style is not just an effect of one’s “inculcation into normalized language,” but is, rather, the very prerequisite of human communicability and, hence, of the ability to enact a meaningful critique:

I think that style is a complicated terrain, and not one that we unilaterally choose or control with the purposes we consciously intend. Frederic Jameson made this clear in his early book on Sartre. Certainly, one can practice styles, but the styles that become available to you are not entirely a matter of choice…. Learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself. (GT xix)

Here, Butler implies that exposing biases inherent in a discourse that one cannot escape without the “loss of intelligibility itself” is a potentially insurmountable task. Are we, then, coming up against the limits of Gender Trouble as a work of immanent critique? It is significant that this acknowledgment occurs in a paratext, which is itself doubly ancillary to what is editorially styled as the self-enclosed textual body of Gender Trouble. Only in this second preface, which provides a new opportunity for bracketed retrospective reflection and for the insertion of a more personal writing subject (“I”) on the occasion of the book’s republication, does Butler confront style, not simply as a metaphor for the way in which we are formed as gendered subjects, but as a genuine problem for feminist philosophy.
It might be expected, then, that, within the original text of *Gender Trouble*, a parenthetical aside is where we find the clearest example of Butler seeking to address this issue of how to write as a feminist subject and critic:

I have argued (‘I’ deploy the grammar that governs the genre of the philosophical conclusion, but note that it is the grammar itself that deploys and enables this ‘I,’ even as the ‘I’ that insists itself here repeats, redeploy, and—as the critics will determine—contests the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted) that…. (*GT* 199)

In this passage, the authorial “I” tells us that they have adhered to the grammatical norms that govern the “genre of the philosophical conclusion” in an attempt to make *Gender Trouble* legible to a community of “critics” whose existence they nevertheless seem to accept as inevitable, as evidenced by the future tense phrase “will determine.” In asserting that the “I” who “deploy[s] the grammar that governs the genre of the philosophical conclusion” is “deploy[ed] and enable[ed]” by said conventions, Butler implies that their affiliation with such a “genre” is not entirely within their control. This idea is underscored by the parenthetical statement’s final clause (“contests the philosophical grammar by which it is both enabled and restricted”). Butler’s recourse to the passive construction “enabled” attests to their sense that *Gender Trouble* is only possible because they have made a choice to adhere to certain stylistic norms. Yet the qualification “restricted” suggests an awareness that *Gender Trouble* cannot escape certain conventions that might limit its ability to both challenge and advance feminist theory.

What conclusions can we draw from this eruption of a paratextual self-questioning within the textual body of *Gender Trouble*? Despite their formal act of bracketing the reflective self – which seems calculated to maintain the separation of the “I” constituted by the conventions of philosophical argument from the “I” who feels and thinks these conventions as a problem –
Butler’s parenthetical aside reveals an ethical dilemma central to the book itself: how to find a style adequate to the way in which the “philosophical” is always enfolded in lived experience. As an acknowledgment of the insufficiencies of “philosophical grammar,” is Butler’s strategy of parenthetical qualification enough, or does it contain within itself an implicit demand for some other style of expression? Are we to conclude that they should have written *Gender Trouble* as a poem? To be clear, I’m not trying to argue that disrupting the rules of syntax and grammar would make *Gender Trouble* more authentically “subversive,” to deploy a classic Butlerian turn of phrase. Rather than proposing that poetry supersedes the need for philosophical and theoretical discourse, I want to consider seriously the possibility that each demands the other – a demand that emerges from the ambivalences of the subject’s lived existence in language. Although we tend to perceive ourselves, often quite acutely, as beyond names and categories, or “beyond the reach of mere words,” as the philosopher Amia Srinivasan has written, we are also, in a profoundly everyday sense, given in and through language: language – style – emerges as a crucial site of feminist practice.25

Performing Lyric Styles

If Butler’s parenthetical aside in the concluding pages of *Gender Trouble* raises questions about the insufficiencies of the philosophical style to which they have found it both necessary and useful to adhere, then such questions only intensify when their aside is considered against the backdrop of Riley’s lyric poetry. My argument is that Riley’s complex commitment to lyric – a commitment, she recognizes, that is also not fully hers to make – enables her to perform lyric styles, poetically enacting the subversive repetition and resignification of gender norms that Butler proposes in *Gender Trouble*, as well as the performative theory of resignifying hate speech that Butler later
develops in *Excitable Speech*. As Riley explains in a 1995 interview with Romana Huk: “I don’t have the choice to ‘abandon’ it [lyric]. You get formed in a certain way. You get formed with attachments to, for instance, Blake – the prime example of somebody who uses the lyric form to carry a savagely distressed content.” The issue, then, is how one deals with those “attachments” that cannot be altogether transcended, much like the category of women that Riley analyzes in “*Am I That Name?*”.

The poet and critic Andrea Brady has persuasively argued that Riley’s conflicted relationship to lyric is on display throughout her poetry, in the form of what she characterizes as a “lyric swaying.” Through this evocative phrase, Brady calls our attention to the way in which the first-person speaker that so often structures Riley’s poems “oscillate[s] dramatically between assertion and retraction,” as well as “between disclosure and rebuff, invitation and rejection, certainty and hesitation.” Brady goes on to argue that, for Riley, lyric “is both the announcement of singularity and the call that ideally could lead to a response; but if that response is not forthcoming, lyric must become its own echo,” an idea to which I will return. This lack of response, or “unmet need,” is a potential danger, then, both to the poem and to the existence of the lyric subject, because it may reveal “the indelibility of personal affect and the impossibility of a recuperative or ironized repetition of the deepest harms.” While the final section of this article will explore how certain forms of repetition counter lyric and social norms, I, too, am conscious of the limits of lyric as a “recuperative” force – of how the poetic strategy of echoic repetition can sometimes reinforce an affective and sociological sense of entrapment. Nevertheless, the agonistic resistance to narratives of consolation and recuperation that marks both Riley and Butler’s projects seems to me to constitute an important rejoinder to more idealistic feminist discourses and the temptation to revive transcendental modes of argumentation.
Riley herself offers a negative assessment of “today’s lyric form” in *The Words of Selves*, describing it as “frequently a vehicle for innocuous display and confessionals, at odds with its remoter history.” As indicated by this critique, Riley is wary of the “possible egotism” of the “lyric ‘I,’” and, in a later passage that echoes the wrapping metaphor of “Am I That Name?”, she worries about “espousing self-presentation within the conventional categories, about tying herself up or winding up her story of her own case, subjecting herself to subjectification and loudly inhabiting her potential identities.” But rather than abandoning the “unattractive flowery hat of poet” altogether, she wants to know: “What might transpire if this discontinuous legacy in self-telling became the topic of a poem itself”? In these lines, Riley apparently enlists the figure of a “flowery hat” – blatantly characterized as an “unattractive” style – to allude to a disparaged type of sentimental lyric often associated with women poets. Yet despite this ironic act of distancing, Riley’s refusal to discard the stereotypical feminine accessory suggests her commitment to a subversive working through of conventional poetic style. In her 2004 book *The Force of Language*, a collaboration with the philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle, Riley similarly refuses the idea of perfect authorial self-styling that would transcend established norms and clichés, rejecting the idea that “writerly style is what carries the stamp of authorial authenticity.” Instead, she offers a counter-characterization that her own poetry will be seen to affirm: “my style is, in effect, both a response to and a compendium of all the voices I have met in my life.”

Riley’s self-conscious performance of lyric is especially apparent in a five-stanza poem simply titled “Lyric,” included in *Mop Mop Georgette*, which opens:

Stammering it fights to get held and to never get held as whatever motors it swells
to hammer itself out on me (MMG 36)

In these lines, which register an unresolved “swaying” between conflicting desires (“to get / held and to never get held”), the speaker seems to acknowledge that she cannot simply extricate herself from the lyric condition in which she finds herself. Here we might, once more, recall the “trap” that Riley figures in “Am I That Name?”, which is unknowingly perpetuated by the oppositional feminist subject who fails to recognize the constitutive force of her subjection in language. Like the designation of women, which exists “in advance” of both its conservative and radical deployments, the titular subject of “lyric” outpaces the poet. But here, it is lyric, animated as a combative “it” who “fights” for contradictory aims, that “hammer[s] itself out” on the speaker: a poetic enactment of assujettissement that returns us to Butler’s argument in Gender Trouble that we cannot fully “self-style,” because “styles have a history” that conditions our ability to self-innovate.

Yet as “Lyric” continues, the poem’s speaker also portrays her investment in lyric as instrumental and canny, guided by a subversive ethics of appropriation:

I take on its rage at the cost of 
sleep. If I love it I sink 
attracting its hatred. If I 
don’t love it I steal its music. (MMG 36)

Despite her imperfect, even unhealthy, relation to lyric (“I take on its rage at the cost of sleep”), it is also through the oppositional pull of lyric’s affective force that this “I” is able to account for herself as a writing subject. Even if Riley’s relationship to lyric remains non-absorptive (“I don’t love it”), lyric still provides her with the “music” that she will “steal” and remake as her own poetry, through a poetic resignificatory process. Dramatically thematizing the theft of lyric
authority as the ground of her feminist poetic practice while nevertheless figuring this theft as itself a consequence of her inability to escape the full force of convention, “Lyric” may be interpreted as both a conceptualization and an enactment of Riley’s ars poetica.

We see a continued investment in the conventions of lyric – specifically, elegiac lyric – in Riley’s 2012 poetic sequence “A Part Song,” first published in the London Review of Books. In this poem, composed following the death of her son, Riley’s previously articulated engagements with the limits of self-description and linguistic impersonality are reshaped by an acute experience of personal grief. “A Part Song” consists of twenty numbered sections, characterized by repeated shifts in tone, form, and register. While some parts self-consciously cite lyric figures and adhere to traditional verse forms, other portions pointedly abjure lyric prosody. There are also unusually abrupt shifts in tone and perspective within individual sections, almost as if the poem were incapable of choosing a single style. That is, it would seem that the poem is bound to persist indefinitely in its search for a form of expression adequate to the poet’s experience, even as Riley herself recognizes that language is fundamentally insufficient as a medium for this expression.

What does it mean to give an account of oneself for another who is no longer present, other than as an interlocutor within the fictive space of lyric? And why might the linguistic representation of a mother’s grief be a feminist issue? Writing in The White Review, Helen Charman argues that “Riley’s constant recourse to the ‘work’ of grief and the ‘work’ of motherhood in her recent publications is connected — by a fine, steely wire — to her earlier conceptions of the domestic, the personal and the social.” Cautioning against reading “A Part Song” as an apolitical meditation on grief, a concern in light of Riley’s increasing mainstream visibility, Charman suggests that we should understand this poem as intimately connected to Riley’s Marxist-feminist engagements with “maintenance work” and the “emotional labour” of
motherhood in 1970s and 80s. In both her 1977 poetry collection *Marxism for Infants* and her 1983 book *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother*, for example, we see Riley committed to furthering a key Marxist-feminist objective: challenging the historical devaluation of social-reproductive labor (work that creates, maintains, and restores labor power – from housework to childcare) in favor of productive labor (work that produces surplus value in a capitalist system and also enables the reproduction of the system as a whole).

As a way of clarifying the feminist intervention of “A Part Song,” then, it is useful to consider how this poem complicates traditional norms of elegiac mourning that emphasize the mastery of the productive masculine mourner, who turns away from a state of narcissistic melancholia and towards the world once more. Peter Sacks characterizes the successful elegiac poem as a consolatory artifact, a form of “figurative or aesthetic compensation” (5) that symbolizes the outcome of *worked through* grief and desire. According to Sacks, the Ovidian myth in which Apollo fashions a laurel wreath out of branches of the transformed nymph Daphne can be interpreted as an originary figure for elegy as a poetic genre. He reads the “unnatural severing of the tree and an artificial entwining of its cut leaves” not only as “a move from organic nature to an item of an unnatural, societal code,” but also as “a consoling sign that carries in itself the reminder of the loss on which it has been founded.” For this reason, he claims that “Daphne’s ‘turning’ into a tree matches Apollo’s ‘turning’ from the object of his love to a sign of her. It is this substitutive turn or act of troping that any mourner must perform.” Sacks belatedly admits that the “figures … of compensatory but figurative sexual power” that he invokes “appear to be exclusively masculine.” However, he justifies his interpretation through recourse to Jacqueline Rose’s warning that the phallus stands for “that moment when prohibition must function” and cannot therefore be taken to represent an unproblematic assertion of male privilege: a reference
that seems calculated to bracket the problem of gender, in order to affirm more persuasively a “substantial overlap in men’s and women’s mourning.”\textsuperscript{44} The idea that mourning exceeds gender certainly appears to be an egalitarian and even feminist notion, productively unsettling the hierarchical question of who has the right to mourn. (Traditionally, the right to mourn was tied to the right to inherit.) Yet Riley will be seen to reject this equal opportunity reading in “A Part Song,” demonstrating rather how the articulation of grief continues to be shaped by the expectations of patriarchal and heteronormative society.

Since I don’t have space for an extended reading of the different sections of “A Part Song” here, I’d like to focus on section fifteen, in which Riley challenges elegiac convention through structural recourse to the figure of echo (a figure that she suggestively theorizes in \textit{The Words of Selves} as “my transformative figure of reiteration,”\textsuperscript{45} a formulation that itself conspicuously echoes the idea of “subversive repetition” that Butler posits in \textit{Gender Trouble}): 

\begin{quote}
\begin{verbatim}
The flaws in suicide are clear
Apart from causing bother
To those alive who hold us dear
We could miss one another
We might be trapped eternally
Oblivious to each other
One crying \textit{Where are you, my child}
The other calling \textit{Mother}\.\textsuperscript{46}
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

This richly allusive section, composed of a single stanza of eight lines, opens with an instance of linguistic understatement, in which the speaker makes light of the effects of a potential decision to take her own life by describing it as “causing bother” for “those alive who hold us dear”: rhetoric that reads as especially ironic given that it emerges within the context of a poetic effort to confront, if not resolve, the lineaments of her own unstinting grief. Although a Dantesque purgatorial fantasy of eternal entrapment follows swiftly on the heels of this performance, the conditional phase “could
miss one another” sustains the speaker’s strangely mild tone, in this way counteracting the mythic drama. This phrase registers the affective and spatial reality that Riley faces as a grieving mother—a feeling of profound sorrow, coupled with a physical experience of dislocation that stems from the disappearance of the other and the ongoing failure to meet. Yet such a failure is nevertheless minimized by the poem’s characterization of it as a kind of scheduling mix up. In this way, the speaker defers the possibility that an acknowledged disappearance could entail the absolute loss of a linguistic relation—that if “One” is “crying Where are you, my child,” “The other” is not “calling Mother,” however separated they may be.

These thematic resonances are further deepened by the section’s prosody. Riley proceeds according to common meter (iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter) that follows an ABABCBB rhyme scheme, in a manner that enables her to engage suggestively with the elegiac figure of echo, understood, most simply, as “any recurrence of the same sound or combination of sounds at intervals near enough to be perceptible to the ear.” While echo may be used either internally or terminally, and its repetitions can be achieved through a range of prosodic strategies, including assonance, consonance, near-rhyme, rhyme, repetend, and refrain, the interplay of refrain and rhyme is most notable in this section. The word refrain, John Hollander has observed, is itself etymologically associated with echo, “being cognate with refract (but from Old French refraindre, with a sense of breaking back or again).… The rhetorical relation between strophe and refrain is one of affirmation and perhaps implementation.” In Riley’s lines, a changing call (AACD) alternates with the affirmative return—or, I would argue, refrain—of the B rhyme scheme, rendering echo central to the structure of section fifteen. Moreover, the B rhyme does not simply repeat, but also revises: “bother” transforms into “another”; “another” is reduced to “other”; and “other” is augmented, finally, to “Mother,” a word spoken in the voice of the absent other.
Significantly, however, the section’s primary subject – the “child” to which the mother calls in this fictive scenario – remains outside the echoic structure. Riley’s rhyme scheme thus both admits and enacts the absence of the loved one, formally unsettling the elegiac function of echo as a consolatory mechanism.

This section additionally invokes Echo as a haunting allegory. In Ovid’s telling of the myth, Echo begins as a thoughtless chatterbox, distracting Juno’s attention while her nymphs run off to Jupiter. As punishment, Juno casts a spell on Echo so that she is no longer able to originate discourse, but only repeat it. So when she falls in love with the beautiful youth Narcissus, she is only able to speak his own words back to him, thereby confirming his autoleptic love. Echo’s body finally withers away, and she is reduced to a voice that emerges out of woodland caves. Obliviousness, in short, distinguishes Narcissus’s relation to Echo. In “A Part Song,” we can identify a correspondingly oblivious relation to the other. Yet this failure is no longer the result of excessive self-regard. Instead, it is a structural consequence of the situation in which mother and child are equally “trapped.” In the most basic sense, this statement evokes an experience of reaching out to the “other” with no hope of reciprocity. At the same time, insofar as the section conjures the possibility of a (failed) encounter, it arguably embeds a future wish that recalls Echo’s own refusal to relinquish desire despite her own disembodiment.

Finally, section fifteen registers a more intertextual – and, in this sense, potentially inadvertent or involuntary – sense of echoic repetition, which recalls a central tenet of Butler’s theory of gender performativity: their idea that the “possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in … the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity,” which “exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity” (GT 192). We see this especially in the fifth line of Riley’s section fifteen (“We might be trapped e-ter-nal-ly”), which echoes the dactylic rhyme scheme of
Thomas Hardy’s famous elegy “The Voice,” written for his wife Emma ("Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me / call to me"). In both poems, emphasis is placed on an unanswered call. In each verse, however, the absent “other” is not unresponsive, but is rather figured through echo. In Hardy’s “The Voice,” she who avowedly “was all” to the speaker continues to “call to me, call to me,” a fact underscored by the reiteration of a simple phrase. Similarly, in Riley’s section fifteen, the final B rhyme, “Mother,” which imperfectly echoes the prior rhyme “other,” stages the longed-for call that the speaker had previously dismissed as impossible, and thus returns us to the critical question as far as elegiac convention is concerned: is such a conclusion a consolatory fiction, or something different?

In light of Riley’s structural resistance to an elegiac discourse of aesthetic mastery and productive labor, the answer would seem to be the latter.49 “The echo,” Sacks argues, “makes the voicing of loss seem to come from beyond the self, from the objective world of fact. Also, the echo would seem to work as a kind of trial, in which the mourner brings his loss into language, testing how it feels to speak and hear of it in words.”50 Yet “A Part Song” troubles this interpretive schema, not because it seeks to deflate or directly counter the figural function of echo, but rather because it enlists the trope of echo in the service of a broader effort to reconceptualize elegy – to resignify it as a form of maternal work that remains politically and affectively tied to other forms of social-reproductive labor. In this way, echo contributes to the poem’s implicit critique of the compensatory ideal of the successful masculine mourner, who reenters the world – the public sphere – only through the productive sublimation of his personal loss.

Coda: Lyric Indwelling
In her essay “Malediction,” Riley describes how “affective words,” including both bad speech (“vindictive words,” “imperious accusation”) and “beautiful speech” (“lyric, gorgeous fragments, psalms and hymns”), come to “indwell” in us, so that we experience them almost as a physical presence in our bodies. Yet in her own poetry, we have seen how Riley turns the metaphorical tables on lyric, recoding iconic conventions like apostrophe and echo through what we might describe as a kind of performative lyric indwelling. This indwelling would not be possible without Riley’s deep knowledge of poetic history and her creative dialogue with lyric convention. At the same time, she reminds us that it is the ambivalent consequence of a recognized inability to relinquish lyric “attachments.” It is by staging an uneasy negotiation between poetic disavowal and acknowledgment, then, that Riley’s practice of performative indwelling generates a feminist style of immanent critique – a style distinct from Butler’s philosophical prose and, indeed, from Riley’s own critical writings.

I am not advocating for a usurpation of the theoretical by the poetic. To offer Riley’s lyrics as a kind of sublimated theory would be just as reductive as suggesting that Gender Trouble should have been written as a poem. Rather, this essay has proposed a conceptual and practical framework – style – for questioning the disciplinary conventions, linguistic grammars, and gender norms with which feminism today remains entangled. If, as Sara Ahmed has proposed, “A norm is something that can be inhabited … rather like a room or a dwelling,” then Riley’s lyric indwelling, understood as a political endeavor, reveals how poetics can productively disorient both patriarchal and feminist conventions. By working across conceptual fields and styles – and by accommodating a contamination of the critical by the creative, and vice versa – my hope, finally, is that we can begin to account more fully for the contribution of poetics to contemporary feminism. As Riley’s lyrics reveal, the living of a life impinges on poetic language, creating generative stylistic and
conceptual tensions, and forcing us to reevaluate feminist poetics as a creative practice capable of both pressurizing and expanding the philosophical tradition of immanent critique.

Endnotes

I would like to thank Peter Nicholls and Oliver Southall for their careful readings and insightful suggestions, which have significantly improved the final version of this article. I am grateful to Judith Butler for permission to quote from their personal correspondence with Denise Riley. I am also grateful to John Wells, senior archivist in the Department of Archives and Modern Manuscripts at the Cambridge University Library, who aided my research on the Denise Riley Papers.

1 Given the nature of my argument and the limitations of word length, I am especially concerned with Riley’s poetic practice in this essay, although I also discuss her historical and philosophical writings. At the outset, I would therefore underscore that Riley is a philosopher and historian as well as a poet, with an MA in European Philosophy; Social and Political Theory and a PhD in Political Philosophy from the University of Sussex. She has also written several philosophical books on the languages of the self, including *The Words of Selves* (2000), *The Force of Language* (2004) (a collaboration with philosopher Jean-Jacques Lecercle), and *Impersonal Passion* (2005). Her poetry and philosophy must therefore be understood as tied together in complex ways. I direct the reader to Andrea Brady’s essay “Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley” for a lucid analysis of the relationship between Riley’s poetry and theory. Brady reads Riley’s poetry “against the claims of her theory, to argue that Riley’s thesis that language is ‘impersonal’ is challenged by the lyric dialogues she stages” (138). I am
working to explore these poetic-philosophical relationships further in my current book project *Held by Form: Feminism, Poetics, Critical Practice*.

2 February 16, 1995 letter from Judith Butler to Denise Riley, Denise Riley Papers, Cambridge University Library, MS Add. 10087/6/9. I am grateful to Judith Butler and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library for permission to publish this extract.


4 Riley, *Mop Mop Georgette*, 39 (hereafter cited as MMG). These lines are from the final stanza of her poem “When it’s time to go.”

5 This project would eventually take the form of Butler’s 1997 book *Excitable Speech*.

6 I would note here that numerous textual citations, acknowledgments, dedications, and public conversations, in addition to personal correspondence, indicate that Riley and Butler have influenced each other’s work in ways that have not yet been accounted for by critics of either author. In the opening pages of *Gender Trouble*, Butler’s citation of a passage from Riley’s 1988 book “*Am I That Name?*” provides us with the earliest evidence of an underlying conceptual affiliation between the two theorists. See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 4 (hereafter cited at GT). In the writings of Riley and Butler, we can also identify a similar ethical turn in the later 1990s and early 2000s that exceeds their early feminist preoccupations, but also extends from those engagements. Broadly, we see this in Riley’s *The Words of Selves* and *Impersonal Passion*, as well as in Butler’s *Giving an Account of Oneself*.

7 This is especially true of Butler, whose work has been extremely influential in the fields of feminist and queer theory, even as it has also been critiqued in recent years by Lynne Huffer,


9 Martha Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody.”

10 In their 1998 preface to the paperback edition of *Subjects of Desire*, Butler discusses their turn to Foucault, whose work they did not study while in the philosophy department at Yale. They first encountered Foucault in the context of a women’s studies faculty seminar at Yale, but it was only as a visiting faculty member and postdoctoral fellow at Wesleyan University, between 1983 and 1986, that they began to engage seriously with French theory. See Butler, *Subjects of Desire*, xiii-xiv. These influences are further clarified in Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.” I also direct the reader to Huffer’s *Mad for Foucault* for an extensive discussion and critique of Butler’s engagement with Foucault in *Gender Trouble, The Psychic Life of Power*, and elsewhere. Huffer argues that Butler “limits her antihumanism [in *The Psychic Life of Power*] to a critique of identity which, from a certain perspective, positions her within the humanist tradition Foucault spent his life challenging” (168).

11 See Butler, “Variations on Sex and Gender,” 508, 510; and Butler, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*,” 40, 45.

12 Here, I would clarify that I am not seeking to propose a certain feminist aesthetic, or a unifying aesthetic theory, which would entail ideological reductionism and sameness, but only trying to think the implications of feminism and aesthetics together. For an earlier book that intervened decisively in this territory, see Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. However, her focus is on realist autobiographical narratives.
13 Nussbaum, “The Professor of Parody.”

14 See, for example, Isobel Armstrong, The Radial Aesthetic; Lauren Berlant, Cruel Optimism; Anne-Lise François, Open Secrets; Saidiya Hartman, Wayward Lives; Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories; Adriana Cavarero, Inclinations. This list is by no means exhaustive.

15 Armstrong, The Radical Aesthetic, 2.

16 Riley qtd. in Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, 41.

17 Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself, 42.

18 In the opening pages of Gender Trouble, Butler asserts that “there is a political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity” (4). As evidence of this, they note that “women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety” (4). In the following sentence, they elaborate: “As Denise Riley’s title suggests Am I That Name? is a question produced by the very possibility of the name’s multiple significations. If one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is” (4). Butler’s point is that woman is not a cohesive identity, because gender intersects with other “discursively constituted identities.”

19 Riley, “Am I That Name?”, 2 (hereafter cited as AITN).

20 Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 273.

21 See especially Butler, The Psychic Life of Power. Their engagement with assujetissement (subjection) is also evident throughout their writing.

In both *Gender Trouble* and “Variations on Sex and Gender,” Butler’s interactions with, and critiques of, the radical lesbian writings of Monique Wittig, which challenge the heterosexual biases of *écriture féminine*, clarify their perspective in this regard.

It would be interesting to consider how this idea of “gender coherence” is connected to the type of philosophical coherence or clarity that grounds Nussbaum’s critique of Butler’s style as obscure and, indeed, illegible.

Srinivasan, “He, She, One, They, Ho, Hus, Hum, Ita.”

Huk, “In Conversation with Denise Riley.”

Brady, “Echo, Irony, and Repetition in the Writings of Denise Riley,” 141.

Brady, 141.

Brady, 145.

Brady, 154.


Riley, 94, 103.

Riley, 76, 94.


Riley and Lecercle, 26.

Charman, “Where Do I Put Myself, If Public Life’s Destroyed.”

“A Part Song” won the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem following its publication in the *LRB*. Picador published Riley’s poetry collection *Say Something Back* in 2016, which was shortlisted for Best Collection. In 2019, Picador published an updated *Selected Poems* by Riley. All this has contributed to the increased visibility of Riley’s work, particularly in the United Kingdom.
There is an extensive tradition of literature on mourning and elegy that I do not have the space to engage with in this article. For a classic second wave feminist account of elegy, see Celeste Schenck, “Feminism and Deconstruction.” “Refusal of consolation,” Schenck writes, “is perhaps the female elegist’s most characteristic subversion of the masculine elegiac” (24). For a psychoanalytic account of trauma that refuses the consolatory discourse of elegy, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*. For more recent work on elegy that challenges Sacks’s claims, see, for example, Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*; Max Cavitch, *American Elegy*; and Diana Fuss, *Dying Modern*.


Sacks, 5.

Sacks, 5.

Sacks, 12.


Riley, *Say Something Back*, 12 (hereafter cited as *SSB*).


Hollander, *The Figure of Echo*, 34.

My thinking here has much in common with Jahan Ramazani’s important argument in his 1994 book *The Poetry of Mourning* that twentieth century elegy exhibits a “fierce resistance to solace” (4). Drawing on the writings of Freud, Ramazani proposes that modern elegy is melancholic in its resistance to consolation.

Feminist theory has historically struggled to account for the political and conceptual contributions of feminist poetics. However, this failure is not categorical. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminist theorists sought to explore the potential of poetics, often under the influence of French écriture féminine. See Nancy Miller, ed. The Poetics of Gender. Recent scholarship in poetics has also begun to reengage with these ideas. See, for example, Sam Solomon, Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist Feminism.
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