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## Denise Riley's Socialized Biology

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### ABSTRACT

This article surveys the work of Denise Riley (b. 1948) from roughly 1975–1985, reading her prose and poetry alongside each other. The aim is twofold: first, to provide an adequate account of the interconnections between Riley's prose, poetry, and political work, which has not been done adequately to date; second, to situate this portrait in terms of the social stakes of literary, anti-capitalist, and feminist politics and pedagogies. Read together, her early prose and poetry trace what she calls a 'socialized biology' at the heart of poetic and political language. Riley's work provides strategies for interrupting the traditional view of poetry as pre-political moral training.

### KEYWORDS

feminism • lyric • Marxism • motherhood • socialist • reproduction

This article surveys the work of Denise Riley (b. 1948) from roughly 1975–1985, paying close attention to the formal textures of her prose and poetry alongside the political and personal contexts that occasioned these writings and the ways in which Riley intervened in them. Work on Denise Riley as a poet, even a 'feminist' poet, has tended to miss the actual texture of her critical writings in their political moorings, and work on Riley as a feminist theorist has tended simply to note her status as a 'poet' to explain away the peculiarities of her prose. But her prose is not generically 'poetic' – it is tirelessly discursive in a manner that crosses with lyric, well beyond any vague notion of what 'poetic language' might sound like, in its investigation and deployment of aphorisms and slogans and in its serious play with personal pronouns. The poetry and prose seem to stem from the same set of questions and concerns, even as they each take different kinds of responsibilities and linguistic approaches to them.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I undertake a reading of the lyric work with the critical work, opening up each part of the oeuvre to a depth that work

on Riley in feminist and literary studies has generally neglected. Read together, I argue, her early prose and poetry trace what she calls a 'socialized biology' at the heart of poetic and political language.

My aim is twofold: first, I want to provide an adequate account of the interconnections between Riley's prose, poetry, and political work, which I do not believe has been done adequately to date. Second, I seek to situate this portrait in terms of the social stakes of literary, anti-capitalist, and feminist politics and pedagogies. Riley's work provides strategies for interrupting the traditional view of poetry as pre-political moral training. The result, I argue, is the effective disruption of the prevalent idea that some literary 'morality' connects culture to politics – precisely because Riley's two modes of writing from this period are, once brought together, so difficult to separate.

### 'The Force of Circumstance'

In her 1983 *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother*, Riley sought to understand how developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, state social policies, wartime economics, employers' production needs, and feminist and socialist organizing intersected around the rapid rise and fall of municipal nurseries in and after the Second World War in Britain. Riley's interest in this question sprang, in large part, from her own experiences as a single mother with broadly socialist commitments active in the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The problem that animated Riley's work can be stated in a relatively straightforward way even as its implications open into a web of conceptual and affective tangles: how to articulate the needs of single working mothers under late capitalism, without re-entrenching the ideology of motherhood as a fixed role separate from the gender-neutral 'worker' or 'citizen.' Riley's concluding remarks may sound somewhat simple: 'My conviction is that ... there can be no version of "motherhood" *as such* which can be deployed to construct a radical politics' (Riley, 1983: 196). But what gets her to this point is a rather tremendous heap of historical and theoretical material, all in order to understand how various discourses, ideologies, and material circumstances intertwined, in the period in question, to produce the figure of a 'mother' that 'effectively rendered invisible the needs of those working women with children' (Riley, 1983: 7). Riley begins with a chapter on 'Biology, Psychology and Gender in Socialist and Feminist Thinking' in which she points to the need in socialist-feminist praxis to interrogate the categories of the biological and the social:

[T]here is a need, in the often painful gap between the body politic and the individual body, for an idea of a socialised biology. This would speak to problems adumbrated in slogans like 'the right to choose', 'the right to

sexual self-determination' 'control of one's own body' — the language of campaigns concerning abortion and contraception, welfare and population policies, or asserting sexual categories. The idea of a socialised biology would also join broader questions about human capacities and wants, growth, illness, ageing; and, instead of holding these at the margins of socialism, would set them at the centre of its ethical nerve. At the same time, I want to illustrate ways in which the history of psychology has in fact worked against this kind of development, sometimes by acting as an inadequate representation of 'socialised biology.' (Riley, 1983: 8-9)

The following chapters of Riley's book do just that, moving through the literature on developmental psychology that depicts the infant as progressing from biological animality to social 'humanity' (Chapter 2), understandings in child psychology of the basic needs of infants (particularly Kleinian theories of infantile aggression — Chapter 3), the 'popularization' of these ideas in Bowlby's theory of 'maternal deprivation' (Chapter 4), how these psychological theories figured in policies on wartime nurseries alongside other ideologies and material factors (Chapter 5), and finally, in Chapter 6, the rise of postwar pronatalism and its relation to various sectors of the state, employers' demands, socialist and feminist politics, and the continually mounting address to an isolated figure of 'the mother.' I will return to some of these points in more detail later.

While *War in the Nursery*, the book version of her PhD thesis in Philosophy from the University of Sussex, is an impersonal academic study, Riley concurrently wrote a number of short prose pieces for feminist and socialist newsletters and journals that supplemented this work and brought into focus the ways in which these questions crossed with her own life. In 'The Force of Circumstance,' published in the socialist-feminist newsletter *Red Rag* in 1975, Riley reflected on the 'conservativizing' effects that being a single mother had on her, even within the context of a leftist feminist movement:

It's struck me that the single mother is effectively voiceless inside the Women's Movement as a whole; that while some good practical work is being done by various one-parent-family pressure groups tangential to the movement, and was done some years back by women in the claimants' unions — cf *The Unsupported Mothers' Handbook* — at the present we aren't talking *as* single mothers on any broad basis. At the moment we fit in around the cracks in everyone's theorising like so much polyfilla. I'm beginning to feel what I can only describe as the profoundly *conservativising* effect of being a single mother now. I sense this conservativising on all fronts at once; housing, geography, time, work, medicine, sexuality, love. (Riley, 1975: 26)<sup>2</sup>

Continuous from this early piece through her later work is her stubborn insistence on the affective dimensions of lived material and ideo-

logical circumstances, feelings that are not necessarily mitigated by a recognition of their ideological or historical embeddedness. Take ‘the housing question,’ for instance:

*Everything turns on the housing question as the most visible uniter* (‘home’) of structures of money and class. It’s in respect of housing that my single motherness pushes me back hard into the most overtly conservative position. I’d hoped to live more or less communally with people I cared for and could work with (without pushing the commune ideology too far; mutual support/convenience not necessarily entailing good politics). But I never found/co-made such a group. Lacking one, I couldn’t wait; and so I filled in such gaps as turned up in peoples’ flats on a need-a-roof-over-my-and-child’s-head basis, (which many of us do). In the event we have moved seven or eight times in his [her child’s] life-time; most of those moves I didn’t want, but were forced on us as a result of overcrowding, emotional demands from people in a landlord position which couldn’t be met, leases expiring, and so forth. The obvious solution to having a child alone is to live with people; but there are always a majority who can’t or so far haven’t had the massive good fortune of making it work, who cannot be consoled by the diminishing prospect of true communism. Though we know the utter brutal irrationality of living alone. (Riley, 1975: 26)

In this case, the ‘knowledge’ that her newfound, ‘conservative’ desire for private home-ownership and family security is, in part, the result of a lack of socialized material resources that might otherwise be available – or, indeed, fought for – does not lead to any straightforward transformation of this desire. Riley recognizes the appeal of prefigurative, libertarian-socialist communitarian ideals while feeling their inadequacy in the absence of the material circumstances that would make them truly democratic possibilities. We may ‘know the utter brutal irrationality of living alone,’ but we may still need and even desire it in the absence of other practicable options.

This kind of autobiographical reflection also shows up in Riley’s poetry, albeit in a form that is hardly confessional or expressive in the crude sense of transcribing raw lived ‘experience.’ Consider the following poem, from Riley’s 1977 *Marxism for Infants*:

You have a family? It is impermissible.

There is only myself complete and arched  
like a rainbow or an old tree  
with gracious arms descending  
over the rest of me who is the young  
children in my shelter who grow  
up under my leaves and rain  
In our own shade  
we embrace each other gravely &

look out tenderly upon the world

seeking only contemporaries  
and speech and light, no father.

(Riley, 1977a: 15)

Here the exigencies of 'living alone with children,' as another poem calls it, are worked through in various modes: having a family is impermissible for the single mother, who is not accounted for or celebrated by familialist rhetoric. This rhetoric quickly folds into a more general, if metaphysical question, namely, whether or not anyone ever *has* a family, or whether, rather, 'there is only myself.' But this solipsistic humility and caution, whether socially enforced or individually elected, immediately warps into a set of stock attributes of the individual, 'complete and arched' and then of motherhood 'like a rainbow or an old tree/with gracious arms descending.' And then, in another reversal, the 'complete' I folds over itself, 'over the rest of me' which is, in fact, composed of others: 'who is the young/children in my shelter who grow/up under my leaves and rain.' And so a first-person plural emerges, but not in the form of a celebrated universality; rather, it is the moment of a conservatizing familial-individualism, the notion of a 'haven in a heartless world' that many feminists rightly decried:<sup>3</sup> 'In our own shade/we embrace each other gravely &/look out tenderly upon the world.' This grave embrace speaks to conservatizing forms of familialist attachment in the face of the force of circumstance. Yet the hope for other forms of kinship, based on mutual care and respect, remains in the 'tender' gaze 'out ... upon the world/seeking only contemporaries/and speech and light, no father.' I have read this poem as a sort of laboratory or playground for the concerns brought up by 'The Force of Circumstance' and *War in the Nursery*. But *Marxism for Infants* also opens well beyond the generic borders of political theory and personal narrative, into a series of lyric poems that navigate the difficulty of voicing needs, feelings, or desires through a social language and body that are both individuating and alienating:

postcard; 'I live in silence here  
a wet winter the baby's well  
I give her bear's names Ursula  
Mischa Pola Living alone makes anyone crazy, especially with children'

I live in silence here  
x is the condition of my silence  
s/he

the tongue as a swan's neck  
full and heavy in the mouth  
  
speech as a sexed thing

the speaking limb is stilled

(Riley, 1977a: 6)

The 'I' that writes the 'postcard' is effectively split and doubled, not only in the sense that any 'I' is already both mine and anyone's, but, more specifically, in the sense in which the voice of the 'mother' already speaks for her children; she is already more and less than one. The apparent paradox of 'living alone... with children' rehearses the splitting off of the 'mother' from liberal and social-democratic understandings of citizenship, in which the putative equality of every 'I' effectively erases the relationships of dependence and exploitation that produce the 'freedom' of some at the expense of others (in this case, all those both relegated to *and* excluded from the figural status of 'mother').

Unlike much of the feminist poetry that surrounded her in the Women's Liberation Movement, however, Riley's 'I' does not break through its former silence as some victorious, self-realized entity.<sup>4</sup> Silence is not experienced as an external force of repression but rather as a constitutive factor in the production of language itself: 'I live in silence here/x is the condition of my silence.' The sexed silence in which the 'I' comes to speak is somatized in the form of non-human prosthetics: 'the tongue as a swan's neck/full and heavy in the mouth/speech as a sexed thing.' But this kind of phenomenological investigation is also in tension with socialist-feminist aims, insofar as such conspicuously sexed somatization can, in the absence of Riley's 'socialized biology,' also elide the sociality of speech, making speech appear as a matter of personal hygiene or self-care, as solely one's own responsibility, however constitutively exterior the 'self' may be. The poem shows how this embedded practice of individualizing sociality, by somatizing speech, can help to account for the loneliness of living with children in the celebrated intersubjectivity of motherhood. This poem, then, effectively illustrates the insufficiency of an intersubjective ethics of social-sexual differentiation or of personal relationships more generally. The mother is at once a single entity asked to speak for herself *and* the container for an intersubjectivity that is her only allowable sociality: the *preparation* of the infant for social life. The poem protests that sovereign expressions of feeling in the confessional or consciousness-raising mode may only articulate needs that are already recognizable as the province of the imaginary figure of 'the mother.' In which case, lyric poetry seems like a curious place to turn in order to ex-

plore what one single mother's needs might sound like (if this is, as I believe, one of the things that the volume seeks to do). These are, after all, political problems generated well beyond the boundaries of any 'I'/you' relationship, even as they are, significantly, experienced only through interpersonal relationships and personal feelings.

Riley's work, then, in the tradition of Marx's telegraphic theory of the 'social individual' as developed in his *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *Grundrisse* (Marx, 1845/2002, 1939/1973), breaks from an understanding of the social as a sum of pre-existing intersubjective relations. Marx instead urges us to read those relations as expressions, at least in part, of more complex social formations. Marx's Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach reads: 'Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' This is where, in breaking with a particular libertarian feminist aesthetics and ethics, Riley's poetry also breaks away from the Arnoldian ideology, still palpable today, of poetry as a prefigurative training ground for social and political being: the affects and addresses of poetry are saturated with social and political content, and so it makes no sense to see them as *preparatory* for these arenas. Poetry does not, for Riley, cultivate that primary agency of liberal humanist social democracy, the ability to voice one's needs and respond to the exigent demands of others, since the voice attributed to the *social* individual would only be readable through what she tantalizingly calls a 'socialized biology' of speech. In what follows, I trace the idea of a socialized biology through Riley's early critical work before undertaking a reading of *Marxism for Infants*.

### 'The Serious Burdens of Love'

The circumstances of Denise Riley's life in the 1970s and 1980s led her to remark on inadequate housing policies, the loneliness of bourgeois familialism (whether inside or out of 'the family'), dwindling nursery provisions, and the moral invigilation imposed on 'unsupported mothers.' These were never simply problems of social policy; they were the material conditions of Riley's life. Born in 1948 in Carlyle, Riley was raised as a Protestant by her adoptive parents, who sent her to Catholic school.<sup>5</sup> Riley enrolled at Oxford to study English, but found herself dissatisfied and transferred to Cambridge, where she studied philosophy and graduated with a degree in Fine Art. She subsequently did an MA and DPhil, both in Philosophy at the University of Sussex. Her doctoral thesis, which turned into *War in the Nursery*, was on the 'history of theories in European and American child psychology and psychoanalysis ... so roughly, in the area of intellectual history, querying the category of "ide-



ology.”<sup>6</sup> Riley lived in Cambridge during much of this time while raising her young children as mother in a one-parent household; childcare was never merely an academic question for her. In her remarkable critical prose, Riley brings the personal politics of feminist and libertarian work into contact with questions of political economy and socialist strategy, illuminating the social and material components behind personal politics without eclipsing the affective intensity that attends them.

Riley’s political outlook in the 1970s developed in conversation with the traditions of Marxist-Leninist organizing and theory, the small group approach of the Women’s Liberation Movement, various forms of left libertarianism, and the direct action tactics of particular campaigns such as the Unsupported Mother’s Group. Riley does not fit neatly into any of the categories or schools of socialist-feminist thought that surrounded her, insofar as she was not a member of any vanguard party but, all the same, did believe in the necessity of making concrete demands upon the welfare state in the hopes of transforming society and was, in this way, rather more in line with Marxism than libertarianism. Riley’s primary locus for political action was her work on specific campaigns pertaining to reproductive rights and nursery provisions within the Women’s Liberation Movement, particularly the Cambridge Women’s Liberation Group.<sup>7</sup>

From the mid- to late-1970s Riley contributed a number of articles to the Cambridge Women’s Liberation Newsletter, ranging from discussions of ‘A Woman’s Right to Choose’ to the possibility of a women’s self-help therapy group. No work on Riley has engaged with these early political writings at all. The closest I have found is an odd chapter of *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry*, in which Andrew Duncan has speculated, in an oblique argument against ‘theoretical poetry,’ that Riley’s early education in the natural sciences left a mark on her work: ‘this early phase of very close observation of nature (birds and plants) left a mark: she has ever since detested generalisations and confusion and admired precise recording of phenomena’ (Duncan, 2005: 94). As a result, he argues, Riley ‘never fell for Marx and Freud, but spotted them on first reading as authoritarians whose paranoid love of system-building had led them away from the sober rules of evidence ... I don’t think she was ever a Marxist ... she was at the libertarian-anarchist end of things.’ Duncan sees in this a salutary rejection of authority, of political lines that proceed purely from theoretical doctrine and from misrepresentations of consciousness that occlude the truths of politics as it is lived and felt. Duncan’s analysis departs from the poetic work and, more disconcertingly, from Riley’s stated positions, to construct a speculative politics that has little relation to the actual history of Riley’s political involvement. To call Riley’s political work libertarian is fundamentally

incorrect, insofar as it elides Riley's investments in state institutions and forms of social control and welfare, in their widely variable relations of antagonism and collusion with feminist and socialist aims and campaigns.<sup>8</sup> In particular, Duncan ignores Riley's outright dismay at anarchist rejections of institutions like 'the state' or 'the family.'<sup>9</sup>

Duncan is right, though, insofar as Riley does find fault with the Marxist tradition from Engels through Lenin and, to a certain extent Kollontai and Trotsky, in its assumption that 'the family' is a coherent entity traceable across its historicization and projected into its future as a 'socialist' or 'communist' family. The socialist family was usually imagined in the utopian or dystopian terms of heterosexual monogamy (or 'individual sex love') that Engels (1884/1985) championed as one of the moral advances of women under capitalism, one that would be fully realized and extended to men after the revolution. In an article taking on 'Left Critiques of the Family,' Riley (1982b: 79) maintains that 'when one adds Engels' famous pronouncement on women's liberation [i.e. that it could only follow from the participation of women in public, large-scale industry] to his supposition that love and economics stand in a roughly superstructure-to-base relationship, then the limits and strengths of his position are clear'. Riley goes on to explain that 'the historical specificity of family forms, on which Engels usefully insists ... is nevertheless an argument which may serve to retain orthodox conceptions of 'the family.' In itself it does not contain any challenge to the idea of the family as a directly cellular unit of the body politic, a microcosm of society.' This dialectical critique of the Marxist treatment of the family is trenchant indeed, but it is a far cry from Duncan's understanding of Riley's focus on the family, in which 'the house is the exact boundary where the natural and affective association of the family comes up against the rational and alienated world of property' (Duncan, 2005: 93). This reading of Riley's feminism is, like many understandings of women's liberation, unable to understand the extent to which housing and the family are already political concepts in various dialectical relationships with the 'world of property.'

There is evidence that Riley was interested in organizational tactics drawn from early radical feminist and left libertarian organizing, but she never takes these on as adequate substitutes for active engagement in class struggle. In the October 1976 issue of the Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter, she contributed to a discussion about the possibility of forming a Women's Self Help therapy group. Riley (1976) writes, rather sheepishly: 'I am taking a deep breath to say that I'd like there to be some sort of women's self-help, political/feminist, hmm, therapy group'. Riley is quick to demonstrate her distance from the libertarian and radical feminist version of self help that might 'conservatively sub-

stitute Psychology for politics' and 'promise instant Joy.' On the other hand, Riley feels that much political organizing represses feelings in the name of a politics that tends to 'moralistically and repressively reduce all individual anxieties to Politics with a monolithic P (or to History, or to Alienation) and to expect immediate resolution of private conflicts in political action.' Riley is characteristically pragmatic and undogmatic in her approach to the possibility of a self-help group, rare qualities amidst the bitter debates blustering around her between Marxist-Leninists and left libertarians over the appropriate tactics for organizing. She makes no blankly anti-authoritarian or messianic claims for collective self-help, but neither does she condemn it as a distraction from the 'real' work of party building. In the passage that follows, Riley explains how personal politics might be addressed at the level of socialist and feminist organizing:

The personal may 'be' the political alright, but the relationship's fine and complex and not one-to-one, e.g. for myself I can account for continuing feelings of isolation, depression etc, in terms of 'it's all because you live with just one person who's out to work, and you have young children and no job which takes you outside the house' and can analyse that ad infinitum in terms of sex roles, nursery provisions, ideology, capitalism etc. But while this is fine as far as it goes, the most detailed understanding of the sources of unhappiness [sic] need not lead to any increase in your capacity to act effectively; - years of communism and feminism haven't stopped me from literally shaking in a roomful of people. It is not that the sources of this are mysterious to me; amateur self-psychoanalysis may inform - but not *change*, which is why I'd like there to be a practical group of some sort, if others would too. (Riley, 1976)

In the proposed scenario, a self-help therapy group would be neither a replacement nor a preparation for 'real' political work; but neither are her own personal anxieties unrelated to racism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy or to the organizing required to fight them. This kind of pragmatic approach to organizing is reflected throughout her remarkable essay, 'The Serious Burdens of Love,' in which Riley revisits the question of how feminists and socialists might address child-care as a right and need:

There *will* be a kind of eclecticism about formulations on child-care. Political thought always, in a way, comes from somewhere else; there's a necessary stitched-togetherness at work, even though the dream of a pure and unique place of ideals is not to be forgotten in the name of a modest practicable daylight. For, however much history can demonstrate our lack of originality, the recognition of that need not entail a resentful surrender to 'common sense' ... You can derive consolation, for instance, from the free-floating nature of the attachments of socialisms and feminisms to psycho-analysis and psychology. The consolations lie in the release from having to suppose that there is something necessarily congruent between them which has at all costs to be 'worked out'; and also in taking this very supposition of congruence to have a considerable history and political interest in its own right. (Riley, 1987: 188)

The socialist-feminist desire to articulate and ultimately meet the needs of working mothers through serious social provisions such as child-care require a socialist-feminist theory of what needs *are* (Riley, 1987: 184), but this theory will inevitably run up against its own constitutive embeddedness in discourses that exceed and even oppose it.<sup>10</sup> No political theory (i.e. neither feminism nor socialism) can, Riley insists, cover the total field of human relations without borrowing from other practices and frameworks that remain at least somewhat autonomous.<sup>11</sup> No amount of theoretical maneuvering can get around this, and Riley insists that it is best to acknowledge the necessary impurity of political theory in order to get on with it critically.<sup>12</sup>

'Developmental psychology; biology and marxism' takes on such problems in the domain of theories of socialization.<sup>13</sup> Like many of Riley's essays, this is a self-reflexive piece that provides rigorous, dialectical accounts of concepts such as 'biology,' 'the social,' and 'the individual.' The essay opens with a statement of purpose: 'I want to try to describe some conceptual problems concerning the 'relationship of biological and social factors', using one particular area, the developmental psychology of children, as a touchstone' (Riley, 1978: 73). But Riley immediately follows this assertion with a rejoinder: 'my opening sentence has used scare-quotes, a pointer to the awkward necessity of using a terminology to discuss its own restrictions.'<sup>14</sup>

Riley surveys existing models of accounting for the movement of the 'infant' from the category of biological animal to social human. Along the way, she seeks to open up the question of the relations between 'the biological' and 'the social,' calling out the presupposition that each of these terms refers to a definite or unified terrain while simultaneously recognizing their effective power as abstractions in the world. Riley's interest in the infant here is as an odd transitional status in the chain of 'socialization' and 'human development,' two non-identical yet often conflated processes. As Riley insists, socialization and the development of intersubjective relations are actually distinct conceptual categories. Socialization, or the entry into a totality of relations, has yet to be explained by theories of child development, especially those that look at mother-child relations in a vacuum. Riley laments that, within developmental psychology, the "social" is generally understood as synonymous with the "interpersonal", and that within a severely restricted field of persons anyway ... That these activities [those of the mother-child couple] are read as uninterrupted by the exigencies of housing, class, etc. is to say that "social factors", anything beyond mere intersubjectivity, are unthinkable. Development happens on a terrain of pure (inter)individuality' (Riley, 1978: 75-6). The infant is of such importance to Riley precisely because, while theories of developmental psychology locate in

the vague terrain of ‘infancy’ or ‘childhood’ the emergence of human sociality, these discourses supposedly about the child always also address ‘the mother.’ In the chapters of *War in the Nursery* that follow, this is traced through the ‘popularization’ of Kleinian-derived theories of infant psychology, beginning with Melanie Klein’s emphasis on innate and pre-Oedipal infantile aggression more or less regardless of the mother’s behavior, to John Bowlby’s theories of ‘maternal deprivation’ that argued for the almost total dependence of infantile well-being on the attentive presence of the mother.<sup>15</sup>

Without a working conception of socialized biology, Riley argues, socialist feminism will fail to understand the complexities of reproductive experience and the ways in which biological, psychological, political, and other ideologies work both with and against each other. Riley’s interest in recuperating the category of the biological for socialist feminist thought lies, then, in what she sees as a need for

any historical materialist account of the individual and society [to] include a sense of the highly specific forms in which ‘biology’ is lived; and ... the category of ‘biologism’ can serve to close off examination of areas that actually crucially need marxist and feminist critical attention. These include, for example, reproduction, fertility control, sexuality, child development, illness, ageing. (Riley, 1978: 74)

Riley’s claim is that ‘biology is simultaneously biography,’ and that this demands a thinking of ‘biography’ that goes beyond the empirical description of experience or the narration of feelings and of biology as other than a set of non-ideological facts:

to overlook the particular forms in which biology is lived out is to overlook the fact that biology *is* simultaneously biography. For women in particular it is evident that an extremely significant proportion of ‘social’ experience *is* socialised biology handled in highly specific forms – all reproductive experience, for instance – and these forms have at the same time a clear *political* dimension, most obviously for the question of the conditions for a real control of fertility and for the possible real content of slogans like ‘sexual self-determination’. (Riley, 1978: 89)

In Riley’s feminist socialized biology, ‘all reproductive experience’ must be read in conjunction with specific social and political rhetorics, policies, and campaigns. It remains, however, somewhat unclear exactly what the writing of this socialized biology looks like: it is my contention in this essay that it takes partial form in the poetry that Riley was concurrently writing.<sup>16</sup>

a note on sex

I will turn here to a consideration of the poetry that Riley was writing alongside the papers that led to *War in the Nursery*. Riley’s first volume

of poetry, in which the poems quoted above were published, was *Marxism for Infants*, published in 1977 by Wendy Mulford's press, Street Editions, as a small-release staple-bound volume. The collection begins, of course, with its title, framed explicitly in relation to the questions of the reproduction of relations of production that animated much Marxist-feminist political thought. The title is taken from George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, in which a fictional 'Comrade X,' a bourgeois socialist, authors a volume called *Marxism for Infants* all the while remaining marked by the 'training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class' (Orwell, 1958: 135–6). At her first ever public reading of poetry (a joint reading with Wendy Mulford at the 1977 Cambridge Poetry Festival), Riley explained that the title was in fact only unconsciously drawn from Orwell:

I'd thought of the title for myself, but Wendy pointed it out that I hadn't, and it's a submerged memory of what Orwell says in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and I'll read the way Orwell uses the title, I suppose because it's so much ... he sells it short in a way; it's such a lovely phrase and he uses it very undialectically ... I wanted to retrieve that and use it, I suppose to say that if Marxism does not have to do with infants and vice versa then there's not much hope for either infants or for Marxism.' (Riley, 1977b)

Riley's version of the title also points to the persistence of conservative feeling in the very effort to 'retrain' consciousness via a moral and cultural indoctrination in early education. The adoption of this title is at least doubly ironic in light of Orwell's own pro-natalist writings from the 1940s that Riley quotes at length in *War in the Nursery*.<sup>17</sup> Riley's title also harbors reservations about the political purchase of her own relatively 'academic' socialist-feminist poetry, given its limited and rarefied circulation.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the title riffs on Orwell's suggestion that a socialist would demand some sort of swamp be made between Marxism and infants – in other words, bourgeois intellectuals might exchange their Marxism for rearing children, or perhaps, according to a eugenicist logic, the working classes should give up on having children and embrace Marxism instead. Riley, for her part, will have none of this.

Calling itself a sort of handbook, then, Riley's sequence of nineteen poems is nonetheless hardly didactic; it is accented, rather, by moments of doubt and uncertainty. The lexicon flickers with the concerns of the time, as the discursive materials drawn from feminist and Marxist political praxis are disorganized and reorganized, echoing each other through sound patterning, an unconventional use of the page, and complex slip-pages between the third-person pronoun 'she,' the first-person 'I,' and an impersonal, generalized 'you.' From the opening poem, 'A Note on Sex and the Reclaiming of Language,' *Marxism for Infants* calls into question lyric and feminist reclamations of an authentic voice, all the while insist-

ing on the necessity of grammatical personhood developed alongside a constant disruption of lyric address with more impersonal elements. 'A Note on "Sex"' has generally been read as a key to Riley's early work, and it does indeed prefigure the political philosophy of language that she developed later in *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988):

a note on sex and the reclaiming of language

The Savage is flying back home from the New Country  
in native-style dress with a baggage of sensibility  
to gaze on the ancestral plains with the myths thought up  
and dreamed in her kitchens as guides

She will be discovered  
as meaning is flocking densely around the words seeking a way  
any way in between the gaps, like a fertilisation

The work is  
e.g. to write 'she' and for that to be a statement  
of fact only and not a strong image  
of everything which is not-you, which sees you

The new land is colonised, though its prospects are empty

The Savage weeps as landing at the airport  
she is asked to buy wood carvings, which represent herself

(Riley, 1977a: 1)

This poem has been read by critics as a relatively straightforward polemical allegory for the misrecognitions of categorical identifications and interpellations. Unlike most of *Marxism for Infants*, 'A Note on Sex' works within a restricted thematic, lexical and syntactic range and sustains an extended conceit of the 'Savage' as a critique of radical feminist injunctions for women to 'reclaim the language.'<sup>19</sup> Riley is obviously skeptical of this possibility; in all of her work, language *has us* as much as we can ever dream of having it.<sup>20</sup> Self-descriptions are always, for Riley, appropriable to ends against one's needs and wishes ('mother' being her early test case), not because we name ourselves incorrectly but because language is radically privative. Hence the attempts of the 'Savage' to escape colonization by returning 'home,' in 'native-style dress,' are readily commodified and sold back to her for a profit. Some of Riley's contemporaries seem to have altogether missed this irony, reading the volume as attempting to 'reclaim the language.' In a 1977 review published in *Perfect Bound*, Peter Robinson (1977: 85) insists that the volume earnestly believes this to be a desirable goal, and finds fault with the volume for its absence of the 'male pronoun.' 'Until the man can be reintroduced upon terms that are more evenly distributed the reclaiming of language

remains a formulation defined in the terms of 'a now absent male orientation from which the language has been reclaimed'.

Riley's more avowedly feminist readers have also tended to read this poem as an attempt to 'reclaim the language,' but they have also more readily recognized the poem as an allegorical ironization of 'any such effort. Linda Kinnahan reads in the poem an attempt to voice 'the female 'I' outside of dominant norms':

Just as public myths enter the domestic kitchen 'as guides,' the private woman is neither separate from nor immune to the systematic othering of the 'feminine' within private, public, historical, and literary spheres ... The language of the poem, in evoking various narratives, seeks an alternative for the 'she' to the cultural representations available to her and suggests that the meaning 'flocking densely around the words seeking a way/ any way in between the gaps' occurs not through mimetic means but through the 'gaps' made apparent when seemingly disparate narratives (travel, domestic, imperial) are brought together and their interconnections foregrounded. (Kinnahan, 2004: 211-12)

Kinnahan sees the poem, and Riley's work more generally, as enacting a primarily negative movement of refusal while retaining the hope that the truth may come through the 'gaps' between different discourses, each of which is in itself too overdetermined. Frances Presley (1999) reads the poem, and *Marxism for Infants* more generally, along similar lines: 'in Riley's feminism and her language it is easier to say what a woman is not, and it is much more dangerous to start saying what she is'. Romana Huk has read the poem's ironic manipulation of a naturalizing language of sexuality as evidence of Riley's critique of radical feminist affirmations of the 'feminine':

'Sex' as gendered essence is thus *de*-naturalised by the poem's parodic naturalisation of the relentless and inevitable process of linguistic construction of selfhood - all of which issued, when the poem appeared twenty years ago, a potent early critique of romanticised projects in the female construction of identity. (Huk, 1997: 241)

Carol Watts (2000: 159) has also argued of Riley's early poetry more generally that 'it is easier ... to see what is being broken from than broken towards'.

Each of these readings helps to explain what is happening in 'A Note on Sex.' But too exclusive a focus on this poem and on its relationship to a more or less schematized version of her 1988 book *'Am I That Name': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* has tended to obscure what is happening in the remainder of *Marxism for Infants* and the volume's relationship to the political and historical writings that Riley was concurrently working on. For example, Presley is able to argue that the title of *Marxism for Infants* 'is undercut by the poems which follow in



which the infants are her own, and what she has to teach them has far more to do with feminism and feminist linguistics, than with Marxism.' This is a somewhat unhelpful distinction, not only insofar as Riley's political milieu was working through the connections between Marxism and feminism, but also because the poetry itself works in and at this connection through its concentration on the 'socialized biology' of 'the mother's' voice.

In other words, 'A Note on Sex' does prefigure Riley's later turn to a feminist philosophy of language, but it does not exhaust the range of affects and relations to language, space, voice, and body that are explored throughout the remainder of *Marxism for Infants*. This is not only because other poems broach different subject matter; they are also formally quite different. The other poems I have read above represent another tendency among the poems of *Marxism for Infants*: the first type of poem, exemplified by 'A Note on Sex,' is a relatively self-contained lyric artifact. Few of the poems that follow it really stand on their own in the same way, which may explain their relatively minimal presence in Riley's 2000 *Selected Poems*, published by Reality Street, which focuses much more on the poems from the 1993 collection *mop mop georgette*. The majority of the poems in *Marxism for Infants* do not lend themselves to being read as individual poems; they are more numbers in a series best read in quick succession. Indeed, almost all of these poems are untitled in *Marxism for Infants*, but a number of these are provided with titles when they reappear in the 1985 collection *Dry Air*. Although the distinction I am drawing between stand-alone lyric and verse sequence is contestable, I think it can help to illuminate part of what is happening in the collection and to provide a corrective to the reception of this work, which has for the most part been read according to a model better suited to the short, self-contained lyric poem.<sup>21</sup> In the *Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter* of July 1976, Ruth Craft in reporting on a meeting of the 'Women and Writing Group' noted that 'Denise would like to attempt a sustained work but, for example, finds conventional third-person narrative an impossibility' I would argue that *Marxism for Infants* is such a work, even though the poems that comprise it were written over a number of years. Indeed, when Riley read the work at the Cambridge Poetry Festival, she introduced it as a single poem: 'I want to read a poem of mine that goes on for fifteen minutes. It's called *Marxism for Infants*.' I will refer to the sections of the poem as individual poems themselves, but they operate both alone on the page and as part of a single serialized piece.

The serialized quality of this work is relevant to the argument I am making about Riley's socialized biology. To the extent that *Marxism for Infants* is a 'sustained work,' its shape is not reducible to the bounded, formal management of feeling and perception that is often attributed, how-

ever spuriously, to the successfully autonomous lyric poem. In this way, the poems are not miniaturized encapsulations of the political theory discursively elaborated in the prose; they are, rather, leaky echo chambers in which political and personal discourse are bounced across and through each other. Carol Watts (2000: 160) usefully argues that, in the poems of *Marxism for Infants* that suggestively figure language in domestic terms, 'the lyric form is unravelled as topography ... If the house is synonymous with the self, as in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, it cannot escape its gendered coding: domesticity, hearth, shelter, prison, tomb'. I would extend Watts' comments by arguing that, in *Marxism for Infants*, the walls of that great house of lyric autonomy are also porous; each poem reflects an essayistic writing of the social individual captured and recaptured in the contradictions and complicities of political and personal language, each attempt echoing pieces of the others such that none can possibly contain the problem in the wholeness of a single lyric.

'is it enough like this as I am'

I would draw two main themes and formal operations from what I'm calling the 'second kind' of poem: (1) the dislocation of voice and of bodily proprioception, amounting to a querying of how one lives the biological and social *as biography* – as the writing of life – through lyric address and versification, sound patterning, echoing; and (2) the address to another, you, who is perceived only through the above series of dislocating maneuvers. The way in which these two strands are formally linked and dispersed shows a very different management of lyric from that proposed by or analyzed by the Practical Criticism; the poems work cumulatively by extending 'the fine steely wires that run' not only 'between love and economics' (as a poem from *No Fee* has it) but also through and around want, need, rights, speech, sex, voice, biology, and individuation. In what follows, I read the remainder of *Marxism for Infants* in light of the materials I've covered so far, considering how Riley's poetic text works on the analytics of socialized biology toward which her critical work insistently gestures. As I've suggested, Riley's notion of a 'socialized biology' remains primarily gestural in *War in the Nursery*. I believe that this reflects the necessity, for Riley, of thinking this notion through the language of first and second-person lyrical subjectivity. That is, the biology that Riley seeks to understand is only accessible through the personal and vocative registers of lyric poetry as a socialized biography or writing of life. This means that there can only be an aporetic relationship between 'socialized biology' as a *theoretical* or discursive category and its enacting in lyric as a biographical praxis. This tension will accompany all of my readings of the poems: each time that I attempt to read them theoretical-

ly as expressions or developments of ‘socialized biology,’ I risk appearing as though I don’t notice the ineradicable difference between these poems and the discourses of biology or sociology. But this seems to be an unavoidable foolishness preferable to not noticing the ways in which Riley’s poetic and theoretical works actively supplement one another to write the sociality of biology ‘as it is lived.’

Like ‘A Note on Sex,’ the remainder of *Marxism for Infants* does not adhere to the epistemological claims of consciousness raising, as Claire Buck notes in her essay on ‘Poetry and the Women’s Movement in Post-war Britain’ (1996) but neither does any ‘Marxism’ get transmitted to any ‘Infants’ through some sort of Leninist ‘training-’ or ‘instruction-’ based political education (or, for that matter, through the authority of a mother or father who knows best). Rather, the political and personal materials are circulated through prosody, and subjectivity is voiced in the echoes of intimate and political addresses. The fourth poem reads:

says I’m into cooking now  
says I’m into taoism

absorbed by a shifting of bright globes serially

You have a family, then?                      No.

mothers      hospitals  
sex      class      housing  
anchored      flying  
is it enough like this as I am  
is the human visible through above &  
completely in the material determinants

up

I cannot understand the function of the  
living body  
except by enacting it myself  
and except in so far as I am a body  
which rises towards the world

(Riley, 1977a: 4)

The sound patterning of the middle section of this poem (beginning with ‘mothers’ and ending with ‘up’) shifts from an emphasis on ‘o’ and ‘s’ (mothers hospitals sex class housing) to ‘s’ and ‘i’ in ‘is it enough like this as I am.’ The effect is such that while ‘Anchored’/‘flying’ would be a simple opposition without the work of sound patterning that leads up to it, the -ing that links ‘housing’ to flying calls into question the ‘anchored’ status of the former.

Finally the ‘n’ and ‘m’ phonemes gains dominance, with ‘i’ remaining in the mix by the underscoring of ‘in’ such that ‘the material determinants’ closes this image-complex without any sonic or orthographic surprises,

subtly echoing the question about how 'I am.' But then 'up' oddly irrupts in a hiccupped syllable with the 'p' phoneme which has not appeared at all in the densely alliterative poem thus far. A British hiccough might better echo the 'enough,' but this is precisely *not* what happens, we are not 'off' but 'up,' in a moment that signals a decisive turn in a poem that already seems quite vertiginous enough. This 'up' also points 'above' the material determinants sonically and semantically rather than 'in' or 'through' them, to the above of the superstructure of 'culture.' But this performative 'up' also points back to the beginning of the poem on the page and back to the names of those material determinants themselves. And it is also perhaps 'up' as in 'time's up.'

The question remains, however: 'is it enough like this as I am' – it, this, and I linked in a question, this is as I am, but is *it* enough *like this*. It and I are crossed like anchored and flying, and what I am is woven into the elements that precede and 'house' it. The first moments of this poem are, let's recall, a sort of anonymous reported speech: 'says I'm into cooking now/says I'm into Taoism' seem to have introduced the 'I' into the poem as a quotation from a third person, echoing the impersonality of all strategies for meeting externally defined personal needs. But is this, is it, am I, enough? Is this impersonality of the subjective 'I,' is its sociality enough, even if the 'I' is socialized and therefore never a self-contained sovereign agency?

The effect of the crossing of it, I, and this is such that when we return to the 'I' in the final stanza, what 'I am' (a body) is an 'it' *I enact*, suggesting that the speaking and enacting 'I,' the subject of enunciation, is itself something that is enacted. This final stanza consists of a sentence taken directly from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2002), a philosophical work that greatly impressed Riley. The sentence narrates the paradoxical experience of the body simultaneously as object and subject of perception. Each of these frameworks, the objective and the subjective, elides the other, but it is only in and as this shifting back and forth that any understanding must take its place. This is what *cannot* be understood of or by the living (socialized) body, namely, its needs and desires, at least not when society and biology, subject and object, are understood as discrete regions of experience, however mutually 'interacting' they may be. But this theoretical statement cannot explain the poem that includes it; it is also affected by the jolt of the poem's spacing ('up') and the lines that precede it. The only possibility for knowledge is a rising of the (biological) body not *above* the (social) world but *towards it*. In this way the 'up' transforms and is transformed by the end of the poem, as are all of the 'material determinants' and the theories that would seek to name them.

The poem on the next page traces another topography of the body in speech, recalling Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2002: 87–102) account of phantom-limbs in its efforts to understand the I/you relationship in terms not reducible to an interior/exterior dichotomy:

the speaking, the desire to be heard  
the hearing, the desire to be told

tongues piece the joints of scattered limbs  
click lubricants of social grace  
'articulacy' articulates

a flow, a dazzling mass

the speaking, the desire to hear  
the hearing, the desire to be spoken

is thus sweet massy a diffused  
glowing extension

to you (shaking)  
to you (absence)

(Riley, 1977: 5)

This poem moves between two interconnected experiences of direct address: speaking so as to be heard and hearing to be told are followed by speaking as 'the desire to hear' and hearing so as 'to be spoken.' The first, in which 'tongues piece the joints of scattered limbs/click lubricants of social grace' works, through such clicking articulation (and one can hear in the hard consonants of 'click lubricants' the socially graceful clucking of tongues) to articulate 'a flow, a dazzling mass' that quickly turns into a less venerated tradition of speech. 'The desire to be spoken/is thus sweet massy a diffused/glowing extension /to you': here the glow of desire is diffused and extended like a phantom limb that neither excludes nor wholly encompasses 'you.'

Jonathan Culler has argued that apostrophe, the figure of speech in which some inanimate or absent person or thing is addressed as if present and capable of responding, is a feature of all lyric rather than a special case (Culler, 1981). This is so, according to Culler, insofar as lyric works in vocative modes to produce textual events rather than merely to represent events extrinsic to the action of the poem. For Culler (1981: 149),

apostrophe has 'a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say "now"', and this temporality is foundational to lyric as a genre or mode of discourse; the vocative call to another is the very stuff of lyric poetry. Culler further suggests that

one distinguish two forces in poetry, the narrative and the apostrophic ... Nothing need happen in an apostrophic poem ... because the poem itself is to be the happening ... Apostrophes remov[e] the opposition between presence and absence from empirical time and locat[e] it in a discursive time. The temporal movement from A to B, internalized by apostrophe, becomes a reversible alternation between A' and B': a play of presence and absence governed not by time but by poetic power. (Culler, 1981: 149–50)

Taking into account the hyperbolic, fictional power of apostrophe as outlined by Culler, the 'I' and 'you' of lyric address cannot be reduced to empirical intersubjective discourse. 'I' remains, rather, an inanimate linguistic personhood that has no authority except in relation to a 'you' that it animates in order to be animated by it. It is this discursive time of address that conditions the lyric power to produce a textual event, as Culler suggests all apostrophe does. On its own, Riley's poem reads as an enactment of this deconstructive movement of apostrophe. But here I would protest that reading this poem as an application of Culler's writings misses the particular *social* staging of lyric address in Riley's work.

Barbara Johnson's essay on 'Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion' brings Culler's theory of apostrophe into an encounter with sociopolitical debates about abortion, showing how the 'poetic power' of apostrophe can have analogous effects in the (real) 'world of difference' (Johnson, 1987). For Johnson, apostrophe can function to animate another who will, in turn, animate the first speaker (as in the case of the unborn 'child' whose imagined ability to be addressed and to respond lends the pro-life apostropher a considerable degree of authority). Johnson has exposed the extent to which apostrophe, as figure, carries with it social contradictions far beyond the scope of an abstracted 'I' and 'you.' This sociality of lyric is signaled, in Riley's work, not merely by the appearance of the word 'social' in the text but, as the poems work together to show, and as no single poem can quite demonstrate on its own, this sociality is constitutively built into the body and voice, as 'the desire to hear' or 'be heard' obviously comes before and stays beyond the hearing of any individual utterance.

Apostrophe's performative power works in this way against itself, effectively destabilizing any empirical temporality of the speaking subject and infecting it with the sociality latent in the mother/child dyad; as Johnson (1987: 192) asks: 'who, in the final analysis, exists by addressing whom?' Indeed, the chiasmus of 'the speaking, the desire to hear/the hearing, the desire to be spoken' inverts the primacy of presence to self

via a speaking to the other who is to animate the self's own mouth. 'My' voice in this poem comes from 'your' mouth, but you are not just anyone; voice is experienced as a phantom limb, a diffused and massy 'extension/ to you' who are an absent and shaking linguistic person. The love poem is thus inflected by Riley's social inscription of motherhood from the other poems. The tripping movement across imagined and real borders between 'I' and 'you' is not reducible to the stance of a 'self' in relation to some 'other,' as in the ethics of intersubjectivity; they are already soaked in the socialized biology of speech as they are lived. Once again, Riley's work considered as a whole insists that socialization cannot be reduced to intersubjectivity.

This model of speech is more fully elaborated in the antepenultimate poem in the volume, in which speech is narrated in the third person, the objective experience of the body as a set of objects:

A woman's head occupying the whole depth; a white ground.

Her head turning and the voice and the voice beginning.

The hand reaching, brushing slowly across the mouth and  
withdrawing, thus describing an arc.

The voice repeating a phrase which the mouth shapes.

The mouth and the hand together encircling the words.

This impulse renewed over and over again.

(Riley, 1977a: 17)

This poem traces the emergence of 'voice' as a phenomenological category terminating and originating in repetition ('renewed over and over again'). The poem's third person narration allegorizes the exteriorizing and objectifying nature of theorizing the body in impersonal terms. The body in question is marked as a feminine impersonality, alternating between the definite and feminine possessive articles ('A woman's head' and 'her head' interspersed with 'the voice,' 'the mouth and the hand'). The poem traces a movement from subjective experience to objective appearance, beginning with the attempt to perceive a total immersion in subjectivity: 'A woman's head occupying the whole depth,' and then the parts of the body that enact speech are parcelled out as objects, primarily hand and mouth. These are the agencies of speech as the body attempts to





The next few lines speed up with the casualness of opening ampersands echoed in the ‘ands’ that follow later in each line, the internal rhyme of ‘rightness’/‘alight’/‘night,’ and the consonance of ‘s’ and ‘t’ repeating (‘eagerness and almost touch/ & stay’). The opening affirmation culminates with ‘& stay the night here and yes!’ after which the poem is slowed down by ‘the blazing/ ever-realised vividness of that particular/ whatever—’ ‘whatever’ dulling the ‘vividness’ that the poem subsequently attempts to articulate. The next lines’ relative lack of punctuation and abundant enjambment make them read quickly, if not exactly ‘vividly:’ ‘stone postcard slow scarlet of/ a paperback’s creased edge sharp corner/ of soap & at the mirror....’ And right here, between these vivid objects and the room ‘alight’ with promise is ‘your face outdated.’ Once again ‘you’ is the impersonal you, directed to anyone listening and more or less interchangeable with ‘I’: ‘& at the mirror your face outdated/ since you are already gone on ahead of it/to this on which you are embarked....’ Here the lyric subject is, like the reader, burdened by its own necessary retroactivity, as ‘you’ are/‘I’ am already past as we turn toward another person or object, and you experience this redoubling of self-presence by reading the poem’s addresses. At this point the poem gathers speed: ‘since you are already gone on ahead of it’ might almost be a sequence of dactylic tetrameter, depending on whether or not the ‘you’ is impersonal and unstressed or apostrophic and stressed. This is followed by the metrically irregular and overly grammatical ‘to this on which you are embarked ...’ and then a departure from this encounter with your anachronistic face and from the regular meter that led away from it: ‘goodbye/ to your opened face as you turn/ back to the lit room seriously.’ The high-speed intensity of these lines is rhetorically disregarded or dismissed by an ‘anyway:’ ‘anyway / that [i.e. ‘that particular whatever’] shone to the eye immediately ...’. All of this has taken place ‘before/ touch,’ and so the ‘touch’ of a prospective lover emerges both as animus and endpoint to the ‘vividness’ of each ‘particular whatever,’ much as it haunts the face in the mirror throughout. The touch of sex is thoroughly interspersed with the self-regard that it both faces and follows after (in the double sense of ‘before’). This interplay of conversational and ecstatic tones reappears in the second-half of the sixteenth poem, after three shorter stanzas, the first composed in vocative and almost mystical lyric, the second listing fragmented figurations of some undefined entity, and the third a single line further juxtaposing coolness with emotion:

hold fast in arms before astonished eyes  
 whom you must grasp throughout great changes  
 constant and receptive as a capital city

|               |                   |
|---------------|-------------------|
| is now a fire | now a frozen hand |
| a rainstorm   | white birds       |

a rotting log                      a young boy  
 a savaged sheep                  an indifference

a kind of seriousness,    a kind of rage

and through each transforming  
 yourself to be not here whose  
 body shapes a hundred lights a  
 glowing strip of absence night's  
 noisy and particular who  
 vanishes with that flawless sense  
 of occasion I guess you'd have if  
 only I knew you at first light  
 leaving 'the wrong body', old, known

(Riley, 1977: 16)

The stanzas diverge in structure and tone, but there are some clear continuities between them. Beginning with the first line, there are unmistakable, if rather unexpected, echoes of 'Dreams,' an early poem by Langston Hughes (1994: 32): 'Hold fast to dreams/ For if dreams die/ Life is a broken-winged bird/ That cannot fly// Hold fast to dreams/ For when dreams go /Life is a barren field/ Frozen with snow'. Not only are the opening words of each poem the same, but each first line shares an end rhyme (die/eyes), and meter (iambic tetrameter). Moreover, the 'white birds' and 'frozen hand' in Riley's second stanza take on a new significance in light of this intertext, echoing as they do the barren fields of Hughes's dreamless dreamland. Hughes' injunction to dream within the context of U.S. racial oppression and economic exploitation positioned the sovereignty of imagination ambivalently between escapist fantasy and revolutionary force. Riley's second stanza ends with 'an indifference,' terminating the 'great changes' in Hughes' bleak, affectless landscape that threatens to neutralize the charge of the antitheses that precede it (fire or frozen, mineral or animal, rotting or young). But the grammar of Riley's first stanza is ambiguous: in the second line, does 'whom' correspond to the 'eyes' or to whatever one must 'hold fast in arms' (perhaps a dream?) *before* the eyes? What is being modified by 'constant and receptive as a capital city?' Is it paradoxically the 'great changes' from the previous line? There is no punctuation to help us here, and the second stanza only produces more ambiguity: what exactly *is* 'now a fire,' etc.? On what object are these figural transformations enacted? The challenge of the poem lies in its demand that this otherness without place, this thing that must be held or must hold 'fast in arms,' must also somehow survive and be survived. The final stanza speeds up again into that rapturous, breathless lyric stream that we saw in the fourteenth poem, lacking punctuation and replete with enjambment and suggestions of regular meter (the almost trochaic tetrameter and rhymes of 'whose /BODY SHAPES

a HUNDred LIGHTS a/GLOWing STRIP of ABsence NIGHT'S...'). Again the poem is primarily addressed to an impersonal you who could also be an 'I' or a 'one': 'and through each transforming/ yourself to be not here.' This otherness can only be elsewhere, somewhere other than this lonely anonymous capital cityscape 'whose/ body shapes a hundred lights,' and 'you' are one who, like the capital city, 'vanishes.' Still, the location of this otherness in transformation is unclear – indeed, the very occasion of its/your transformation is unknowable since we don't know whose or what entity's 'wrong body' is being transformed or left behind in the first place: 'with that flawless sense /of occasion I guess you'd have if /only I knew you at first light/leaving "the wrong body...."' This 'old, known' body, however, was never known or even dreamed by the speaker. Here Riley takes on the problem of knowing the affective struggles of anyone else. 'The forces of circumstance' that guide anyone else seem to be 'a frozen hand... an indifference' to me. This attempt to know and to feel anyone else's life will be the standard to which so much of Riley's later poetry will hold itself. For my purposes, it is worth noting the movement from the assertion of indifference to the rapturous lyric of the final stanza. Although the poem ends by recognizing the inability to know from what interpellation another person has struggled to break away, the lines that immediately precede it bespeak a passionate and compassionate movement that burns with more 'rightness' than the doubt that surrounds it.

I will close by reading the tenth poem from *Marxism for Infants*, in which Riley narrates a less bleak dreamscape, albeit one that all the same 'looks impossible.' This poem is quite distinct from the rest of the collection in that it reads as perfectly grammatical (if imperfectly punctuated) prose. It is one of few poems in the volume other than 'A Note on Sex' to feature a sustained conceit and to provide a seemingly straightforward narrative account. This very short story recounts an attempt to move from one unlikely domestic setting, presumably brought on by the force of circumstance, to something willed and genuinely chosen:

I lived with my children in a warm bright and  
harmonious room which formed the crest of a high  
timber scaffolding - a room on stilts. Outside  
it was a black night, an old railway yard,  
abandoned tracks, a high wind. Our room  
although too small for our needs was glowing and  
secure despite the fact that it had no roof,  
that its walls led straight upwards to the  
black clear sky.

I left there briefly and encountered x  
who pointed upwards to show where we should both  
go. A smooth platform hung in the sky, its

only access a long swaying cord joined to its  
midpoint, the end of which drifted against my  
face. It looked impossible but I was not  
disheartened.

(Riley, 1977: 10)

The first stanza provides a surreal portrait of a sort of squat: the surroundings are 'old' and 'abandoned,' and the atmosphere, following the pathetic fallacy that is perhaps all that can be seen from within the 'grave embrace' of the family, is a 'black night' with 'high wind.' The room is both removed from and a part of this world: it is 'a room on stilts' yet has 'no roof.' This housing report vacillates between pointing out the shabbiness of the squat and emphasizing its miraculous sufficiency: this is the dream of the family always being enough even as it is wide open to and propped up by 'the outside' that simultaneously abandons it to itself. Thus the room, 'although too small for our needs' and 'despite the fact that it had no roof' appears 'glowing and secure,' 'warm, bright, and harmonious.' The poem does not simply demystify the bourgeois comforts of security and harmony; they are presented as part of the same fantasmatic reality that extends 'upwards to the/ black clear sky.'

At this point the poem shifts to its second act, in which the speaker recounts having 'left there briefly.' What transpires is an encounter with 'x,' an ambiguously authoritative figure who suggests 'where we should both/ go.' The 'impossible' architecture that follows ends the poem ambivalently. If 'it looked impossible,' then why is the speaker not disheartened? Is it because she is plucky and believes that with effort she will succeed? Or, alternately, because she does not want to leave with x at all but would prefer to remain in the roofless house? Should we read the speaker as intentionally withholding the reason for her perseverance? Or, reporting a dream, is she merely recounting an affective state without any understanding of its cause? The poem leaves these questions suspended, and in this way invites the reader to speculate on the affective dimensions of housing and the as-yet-inscrutable nature of the needs of single mothers within a regime of the figure of the mother as vessel of intersubjectivity.

Like much of *Marxism for Infants*, then, this poem lays bare a range of affects and experiences for the reader's attention. This is not, however, because these poems invite the reader to imitate the lyric subject or to find moral integrity by censuring her. Rather, *Marxism for Infants* traces the production of speech through the matrix of its embodied inscriptions. Lyric address, as the purportedly ethical management of otherness, is shown to be coeval with and implicated in the institutional (linguistic, ideological, and repressive) discourses of the capitalist nation-state. But what these poems bring to the surface is the way in which wants and

needs are, all the same, constantly produced within and through this matrix, written onto and out of the socialized body: and they will continue to be so even after any revolution. 'Real' needs and wants are recuperable for struggle only through their rehearsed expression, only through repeated, partial attempts to share them with 'you.' This is the socialized biology of Riley's lyric, which cannot be produced in expository discourse but only in the vocative registers of a lyric that simultaneously decries the myth of a pre-political, ethical realm of pure intersubjectivity. So no, it is *not* enough like this as I am, but it will even more certainly never be enough as long as all that passes before touch is consigned to the realm of the ethical, of pure intersubjectivity, of some mother's good sense to develop herself into the psychology of a fantasmatic child.

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### Notes

- 1 Riley suggested as much in a private conversation with me in August, 2010.
- 2 By the time of *Am I That Name*, Riley had come to question the gesture of repairing voicelessness through speaking 'as' any particular identity or sociological category (Riley, 1988).
- 3 Cf. Barrett and McIntosh (1982) for a trenchant critique of Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977).
- 4 Cf. Collections of British feminist poetry such as Fell et al. (1978), Mohin (1979) and Roberts and Wandor (1977).
- 5 See 'Waiting' (Riley, 1993b) for a chillingly elliptical account of Riley's early family life and schooling.
- 6 Email correspondence, 9/22/2010.
- 7 The group was not University based, although many of its members were affiliated in one way or another.
- 8 That is, Riley was not one to demand the immediate dissolution of the state. Left-libertarian socialist feminism certainly did exist, but Riley was hardly one of its proponents. See Lynne Segal's contribution to *Beyond the Fragments* (Rowbotham et al., 1979) for a canonical expression of left-libertarian feminism.
- 9 I read Duncan's seemingly idiosyncratic gloss of Riley's politics as a symptom of a more widespread ignorance of the history of the women's liberation movement and particularly of its relationship to socialism. The

literary left seems particularly unaware of the fact that the women's liberation movement argued for decades over the nature of the capitalist state and whether and how to integrate feminist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist demands into contemporary tactics of class struggle.

- 10 For example, the imbrication of contraceptive provisions with eugenic discourses or more generally of the welfare state with biopolitical forms of discipline and control.
- 11 In this her work is a far cry from her contemporaries' attempts to create 'unified' theories of capitalist patriarchy. See Eisenstein (1979) and Voge, (1983) for such attempts, and Barrett for a trenchant critique of both 'unified' and 'dual systems' approaches to understanding the relations between capitalism and women's oppression.
- 12 As she writes in *War in the Nursery*: 'I take it that it's necessary both to stress the non-self-evident nature of need and the intricacies of its determinants, and also to act politically as if needs could be met, or at least met half-way. The benign if traditionally unimaginative face of 'socialist planning', is, at the least, preferable to its known alternatives, however much its objects will always tend to be in excess of it and slip away' (Riley, 1983: 193–4). Likewise, Riley is always scrupulous in indexing her understanding of the necessity for single-issue defensive slogans and reform campaigns (such as 'a woman's right to choose') even as she recognizes the practical limits and metaphysical impossibilities of this liberal language of choice: 'The right to choose' must imply the right to choose to have (not merely not to have) children; and this right is a very metaphysical assertion in a situation where provisions for the myriad needs for bringing up those children in a humane way are thin on the ground. And, of course, conspicuously thinner for some than for others. To follow through the 'positive' aspect of the right to choose would entail a many-faceted campaign, a generalizing of the issue, which linked it to a wider context of agitation for the reforms necessary to give more plausibility to the notion of choice. Nevertheless, it seems to me to be wrong to criticize an essentially defensive slogan, so heavily marked by its necessary strategical locations, on the grounds of its incompleteness' (Riley, 1982a: 191). Riley here refuses to stop short of opening to analysis the connections between these different questions of social policy, highlighting the affective tangles from which they are inextricable, and understanding the movements of these discourses and ideologies both with and against their explanation in a simple economic base.
- 13 The essay was revised from its original 1975 version for publication in the journal *Ideology & Consciousness* and was rewritten again as chapter two of *War in the Nursery*.
- 14 Her anxiety and shrewdness regarding the limitations of criticizing theoretical presuppositions while using their own terms is reminiscent of Louis Althusser's early writings on Marx (Althusser, 1965/2005). Riley's essay is littered with such skeptical gestures, most notably (and most notably following Althusser) in her querying of 'spatial metaphors' such as those of

'base' and 'superstructure' in Marxist philosophy and historical materialist methodology.

- 15 According to Riley, the common socialist-feminist account of Bowlbyism at the time of her writing saw it as instrumental in reconfiguring policies on childcare after the war. Riley herself contests this received wisdom, demonstrating that the timing didn't work out in quite this way, and that 'the state' never worked as a single entity in concert with psychoanalysis. Rather, this particular narrative is, she argues, a back-formation of the 1950s, and the closure of wartime nurseries also had to do with many other ideological formations, most notably those surrounding the 'mother' as a separate entity from the woman worker (though these could be collapsed for the sake of expediency to correspond with the necessity for temporary women's work in munitions). These ideological formations, she argues, predated and extended far beyond the reach of developmental psychology, and they were often to be found in avowedly socialist and feminist discourses.
- 16 The above passage also indicates Riley's ongoing interest in slogans as effective agents in the world worthy of analysis not only on the level of signification but also of distribution and effects. For Riley, rhetoric is perhaps the central stumbling block for political analysis; neither ideological struggle nor materialist correctives are sufficiently able to understand the workings of rhetoric. The explicit lesson from *War in the Nursery*, then, is that the gaps between intention, speech act, and effect need to be respected and held apart even as they bleed into each other. On the power of pronatalist rhetoric: 'Rhetoric doesn't make women have more children through the sheer power of the word – the word narrowly conceived. Its presence matters, though, to put it mildly, and has to be assessed, irrespective of whether it 'works' in the most detectable sense' (Riley, 1983: 151-2). The way in which the 'presence' of rhetoric and language 'matters' and 'works' is a source of continual curiosity for Riley, in her prose and in her poetry.
- 17 Orwell writes: 'the birth rate ... is not likely to rise to the replacement level until those in power, as well as the ordinary people in the street, come to feel that children matter more than money' (1971: 49–50; cited in Riley, 1983: 156).
- 18 Thomas Butler argues this last point at more length in *Writing at the Edge of the Person* (2005).
- 19 Most readers have taken the title as a directive to read 'savage' only as a metaphor for 'women.' At least one reader has questioned the racist and imperialist overtones of this figuration, insofar as it is *used* for the deconstruction of gendered rather than racialized discourse: 'The co-optation of the metaphors to a feminist project, which does not yet specifically engage race, is problematic because the conflation of gender and race denies the specificity of the colonial experience. But because this language does not reappear elsewhere in Riley's work, its use in her poem is arguably part of her critique. Nonetheless, Riley never makes this criticism explicit through the theoretical discourse of the poem in the way that she does with gender, so that the enactment of the gesture of cooptation within 'a note on sex' verges un-

- comfortably on a repetition of the colonization process.' (Buck, 1996: 95–6)  
 I would argue that the poem actively engages the intersection of gender and colonial race, insofar as inverts the troping of land/Savage as woman.
- 20 In this way Riley's work echoes that of one of her favorite poets, W. S. Graham. Riley's poems are particularly reminiscent of Graham's *Implements in Their Places*, which was published in 1977, the same year as *Marxism for Infants*, although this influence is much more pronounced in the later poems from *mop mop georgette* and in the philosophical works *The Words of Selves and Impersonal Passion*. Two of Graham's titles from *Implements* will schematically serve to indicate these resonances for now: 'What is the Language Using us for?' and 'Language Ah Now You Have Me.'
- 21 Watts being an exception to this general tendency.
- 22 Riley consistently explores this thinking of lyric address and subjectivity through the work of Merleau-Ponty. Another poem directly quotes *Phenomenology of Perception* (Ponty, 1945/2002: 97) and then tacks on two additional lines (Riley, 1977: 11).

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