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Anti-Social, Inside-Out

by Samuel Solomon

[An extract from Chapter 4 of Samuel Solomon (2019), *Lyric Pedagogy and Marxist-Feminism: Social Reproduction and the Institutions of Poetry*, published in the series Bloomsbury Studies in Critical Poetics (ed. Daniel Katz). Reprinted with permission from Bloomsbury.]

In her second book of critical prose, *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988), Denise Riley tracks the historical oscillations, in feminist and proto-feminist movements, between claims for and disavowals of the name 'women'. The book asks how 'women' – as a name and as language – has interacted and will continue to interact with feminist political formations as both an irritant and a necessity. The book's argument is that such shifts and mutations are not aberrant but rather endemic to feminism's multifaceted relationship to the category 'women' in the first place. Riley's goal is not simply to insist on the real heterogeneity of women, as if the category 'women' contained an empirical mass, however variable, but rather to show that the *category* itself amasses and gathers forces that sometimes do violence to those who call themselves or find themselves called 'women'; so, as she writes,

The risky elements to the processes of alignment in sexed ranks are never far away, and the very collectivity which distinguishes you may also be wielded, even unintentionally, against you. Not just against you as an individual, that is, but against you as a social being with needs and attributions. (1988: 17)

There is a clear continuity between this kind of claim and those found in Riley's first book of prose, *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother* (1983). In the earlier text, Riley showed how invocations of 'mothers' often elide the actual needs of those who find themselves called 'mothers'. Similarly, Riley in 1988 argues that feminists must navigate the twin threats of responding and not responding to a misinterpellation: to refuse, to say 'no, we are not women' risks being utterly unintelligible and being swept up along with the attribution that was presupposed in the first place, whereas even canny affirmations of 'women' can be appropriated to underwrite rather than transform the troubling operations of the category (1988: 112). The tactic that Riley proposes, in light of this oscillating threat, is a politics of irony as a working from within that may or may not be audible, even to its speakers, who will never control the historicity of the classifications that they repeat or refuse.

Many readers of Riley's poetry and prose have taken up this emphasis on irony as political tactic and attempted to decide whether irony is a political good (as Riley herself sometimes claims) or is instead an excuse for quietism. Bypassing this pro-or-con approach, I aim to show that Riley's writings more interestingly set to work the dialectics of the social and the antisocial, and that they do this by elaborating states of *singleness* and *loneliness*. This is the case across her poetry and her prose. Riley rejects an approach to poetry that assumes the framework of an intersubjective relation between two persons, and she provides in its place a rich writing of the inherent sociality of apparently solitary states. Her poetry and prose work to explain the reproduction of forms of experience that fall on the far side of what

counts as 'social'. For Riley, it is precisely the reproduction of the division between the social and the non-social, and the jettisoning of all questions of human need to the 'social' side, that elides the crucial question of *how needs* are produced and met. What is of concern for Riley, and for me, in much of her work is the problem of how to articulate and share needs that are not reducible to those attributed to people on the basis of sociological categories.

To this end, *Am I That Name?* amends some of her earlier arguments from *War in the Nursery*. The most significant challenge comes in the book's third chapter, on "'The Social', 'Women', and Sociological Feminism'. Here, Riley tracks the development of 'the social' across the long nineteenth century in the United Kingdom, considering how 'the social' came to designate a specifically feminized sphere of human life. While *War in the Nursery* had insisted on rethinking the 'social' through an account of 'socialized biology', Riley now argues that the very delineation of the social must be understood as an historical event with particular logical consequences that cannot go unchallenged. She writes,

Once the seemingly neutral and vacant backdrop of 'the social' presents itself for scrutiny, it appears as a strange phenomenon in its own right . . . [O]nce the authenticity of 'the social' is called into question in itself, it cannot function as a neutral site upon which progress or reaction may win the day. (1988: 49)

That is, 'the social' has, as a *category*, been an agent of historical change. The frequent usage of 'the social' to name a neutral field upon which to compose feminist politics ignores this history, and along with it the historical and political force imposed by the delineation of 'the social' itself.

Most significantly for Riley, 'the social' emerges as a *doubly feminized* sphere by virtue of its proximity to domestic life and by its subsequent openness to the virtuous interventions or deleterious failings of individual women, for better and for worse in the eyes of those who would seek to manage it (often themselves women). Riley writes,

One of the peculiarities of 'women' in its proximity to 'the social' is a doubled feminisation. In so far as the concerns of the social *are* familial standards – health, education, hygiene, fertility, demography, chastity and fecundity – and the heart of the family is inexorably the woman, then the woman is also solidly inside of that which has to some degree already been feminised . . . One striking effect of the conceptualising of this 'social' is its dislocation of the political. (50–51)

That is, the contents of the 'social' are already feminized in advance of their ascription to women's activities, and this ascription enacts a redoubling of femininity. But it also means, Riley insists, that the invention of 'the social' was part of a 'dislocation of the political' away from the sphere of women's participation and influence. This is part of a project of divorcing political thought and practice from the conditions and concerns of exploited and oppressed people, and particularly from the lives of women as waged and unwaged workers:

The question of poverty, for instance, becomes divorced from politics and assigned . . . to the social sphere. The associations of 'women' with this sphere accompany a displacement and a permanent erosion of older distinctions between the 'public' and the 'private', at the same time as the constriction of the 'political' is refined. 'Women' are overwhelmingly sociological and therefore, given these new definitions, not political entities . . . The social is in this sense constructed, rather than being the universal agent which bathes everything else. (1988: 51)

There were, then, significant obstacles to attempts by women to use 'the social' as a launching pad into political life. Indeed, as Riley writes, 'How "women" might become

candidates for translation from the social to the political sphere depended not only on how “women” were conceived, but on how the understandings of those spheres themselves were altered’ (1988: 55). In this sense, *Am I That Name?* supplements Riley’s thinking of ‘socialized biology’ (developed in *War in the Nursery*) by unpacking further the contradictions that are historically embedded in ‘the social’, such as the tenuous divorcing of women from the political by way of the supposedly non-political nature of the social.

All of this amounts to a project to *transform* ‘the social’ by thinking about how and when refusals to assent to sociological categories might have some cumulative effect upon the constitution of the division between the social, where marked identities would be placed, and the political. I am arguing that Riley works at this desired reconfiguration of the ‘social’ by elaborating seemingly asocial or antisocial experiences and relations. In her poetry and prose from the late 1980s to the present day, Riley elaborates loneliness and singleness as *political* wedges against the enforcement of feminized sociality. Her writing approaches tenuously social forms of loneliness and non-belonging dialectically, in order to counter the reproduction of the division between the social and the antisocial, a distinction that tends to sever questions of social reproduction from the activity of politics.

I’ll illustrate this with a glance at one of Riley’s more surprising poems, ‘Curmudgeonly’. The poem’s long lines extend across the wide pages of Riley’s 2000 *Selected Poems*, forming a ragged margin at the right edge of the page. In spite of this unusual lineation, ‘Curmudgeonly’ is basically a mini-prose-essay decrying the use of the term ‘partner’ in

reference to the couple form. It is an alternately wry and impassioned critique of ‘partner’. But the poem’s title also undercuts the seriousness of its own critique by announcing itself as ‘curmudgeonly’ – as holding a grudge and emitting a grumble – and, in any event, as coming from someone who finds themselves behind or just outside of the times. In this sense, not only the *content* but also the *species* of the critique – the characterization of itself as ‘curmudgeonly’ – is flamboyantly and recalcitrantly antisocial. The poem grouses about ‘partner’s’ lexical trendiness:

This maybe is my soured reaction; but I only mean
If you’ve a private contract to describe a person as your partner, junking all the shackles
Of the state, plunged in a glow of free association – that is fine, but don’t you then set up
An unintentional excluding coldness to the millions who through bad luck, mismanagement,
death or desertion, find themselves un-partnered?

(Riley 2000a: 92)

The seemingly anodyne use of ‘partner’, on this account, flattens out the lived material histories that leave people partnered or un-partnered. The effect of this flattening is that singleness is rendered a distasteful failure to participate in a liberal democratic institution.

The poem doesn’t provide a satisfying alternative designation, however:

Of course just what to call them makes you slither (like ‘the father of my youngest child’, ‘a person
I once lived with’?) – but I can’t warm to this vogue for ‘partner’, since not to possess something
So sober yet so mildly venturesome, so virtuously unlicensed by the state, sounds worse
Than not being trusted in business, not being picked for even the weakest school netball team

Things get better – or, anyway, more curmudgeonly – for the remainder of the poem, which climaxes with millenarian premonitions of a further flattening of social life:

Better a cheerful privacy than this partitioning pseudo-public speech
Of two followed by two, neat and wooden as Noah’s Ark. I hear a bloodless future come
In which we’ll sidle as usual through attachments whose truthful varieties are beaten flat
Under one leaden word.

The particular *content* of the antisociality of this poem’s argument lies in its rejection of a social democratic rhetoric of intimacy. Indeed, the poem opens, ‘A partner is a social-

democratic thing to have.’ Jokey denigrations of social democracy were always a feature of Riley’s writings: her work tends to understand social democracy as an approach to politics that is profoundly inattentive to the material foundations of the social. On her account, social democracy atomizes individuals on the basis of abstract categories and casts the state in the role of meeting the aggregate needs of individuals who have been sociologically subcategorized.¹ Social democracy here names a political ideology that grounds its approach to human needs in abstracted categories and assumes the stability of crudely sociological designations of individual types. For Riley, this assumption of the stability of sociological definitions inevitably *reproduces the elision of the needs* of people – such needs, she maintains, are not readily encompassed by ascriptive practices. ‘Curmudgeonly’ is a performance in the face of such forms of categorization, and it places itself firmly on the outside of the social democratic arithmetic of partnership wherein individuals freely elect to add themselves together.

Riley’s essay ‘The Right to Be Lonely’ revisits this same problem in an attempt to query the rise of ‘alternative’ forms of kinship that progressively pass for legitimate variations on ‘the family’; such an expansion of the family just pushes those outside of its grasp further to the margins. The essay’s considerations of ‘loneliness’ spring into an elaborate description of an ‘emotive topography’ of sociality: ‘There is an emotive topography in that spatial conceptualization of inclusion and exclusion; it is this linguistic emotionality which suffuses all political philosophies of who is in and who is left out’ (2005: 50–51).

¹ This approach also explains the ironic phrase ‘the social democracy of loneliness’ that shows up in her long poem, ‘A Shortened Set’ (2000a: 41)

According to this argument, the unavoidable fact of spatial rhetoric produces and reproduces a structurally necessary affect of loneliness among those falling both inside and outside of new definitions of the family.

In contrast to the pervasive figuration of loneliness as cut off from or outside of the social, Riley challenges her reader to imagine loneliness not as a non-social state but rather as the social form adhering to those who refuse or who are refused the call of socially legitimate affiliation that finds its form in the word 'family'. Riley writes,

But there's a stronger solitude which refuses to be understood as merely presocial and which rejects the benevolent will to make everything, and it too, familial. This solitude has no time for any plangency about its own 'exclusion.' Indeed, it groans at the prospect of being tenderly ushered into the domain of the new social . . . How might such singleness neither be considered pathological nor be swept up, in an ostentatious depathologizing, into a compulsive sociability? (2005: 58)

This loneliness refuses to endorse the language of inside and outside, and with it the affect attendant to all talk of inclusion and exclusion that a 'social democratic' understanding of loneliness might entail. Such singleness rejects 'compulsive sociability' but is not for that reason *asocial*; the refusal is part of a dialectical relationship that is within, so to speak, the social, insofar as the social *is* the institution of a division between the social and the non-social.²

² In this sense, Riley's interest in loneliness might have an analogue in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's poetics of the 'undercommons', wherein they explain that the 'professionalism' of the academy declares itself at war with the *asocial*, working to root out and forcibly socialize 'the undercommons'. They reject professionalism's declaration of war: 'it is professionalization itself that is devoted to the *asocial*, the university itself that reproduces the knowledge of how to neglect sociality in its very concern for what it calls *asociality*.' Against this, the opposite of professionalization is the 'fugitive impulse': 'not

Here Riley insists on the *political* need for a singleness that places itself neither outside nor inside of the social. The essay closes,

Might a properly recognized state of singleness (to wrench the notion of ‘recognition’ away from its usual oppressively gregarious tone) recast that desolate and resentment-prone metaphoricity of social exclusion – and might it also somewhat allay the burden, or at least the embarrassed self-reproach, of those who may find themselves effectively living in solitude at the very same time as they live inside the family? (2005: 58)

‘The Right to Be Lonely’ picks up the contradictions that animated Riley’s earlier writings on the social and on motherhood and the category of ‘women’, but it focuses its investigation of such contradictions on the spatialization of language and on metaphor. This spatiality is a complex reflection of social contradiction. As Riley writes, ‘I’m not inside anything. I’m not outside it, either. Yet the public/private distinction, which has such solid realities in its effects, tends in its topographical conceptualization to underwrite the affective metaphoricity of inner and outer. This cuts many ways’ (2005: 54).

This is one of many passages from Riley’s prose that reuses lines from her own poems, in this case from a poem that likewise worries at the barrier between inside and outside.

‘Knowing in the Real World’, a poem first published in 1993, includes the following line: ‘I’m not outside anything: I’m not inside it either’ (2000a: 53). Here, the problem seems to be one of lyric *expression*: what is being rejected is the idea that poetic expression involves a unidirectional movement from the private inside to the public outside. The poem, constructed in couplets with regular line-length, has, up to this point, described a day’s

asocial but against the social . . . this is what disturbs and at the same time forms the undercommons against the university’ (Harney and Moten 2013: 40).

changing colours and textures as if looking out a window. The day also moves in and out upon itself: 'One afternoon hour burns away until a rust-/coloured light sinks in towards evening.' The poem then, itself, turns quickly 'inward':

or any time at all when I fall straight through
myself to thud as onto the streaked floor of

a swimming pool drained out for winter, no
greeny depths but lined in blackened leaves.

The assertion that 'I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either', which comes next, torques this dirty pastoral interior, and a demonstratively social language irrupts into the poem's withdrawn reflections:

I'm not outside anything: I'm not inside it either.
There's no democracy in beauty, I'm following

human looks. Though people spin away, don't
be thrown by their puzzling lives, later the lives

secrete their meaning. *The red sun's on the rain.*
Where do I put myself, if public life's destroyed.

The question of where to place 'myself' among shape-shifting social relations responds to the faulty division between 'inside' and 'outside'. The essay on loneliness repeats this aphorism ('I'm not outside anything; I'm not inside it either') in inverted form. In both cases, Riley queries the relationship between the 'single' self and 'the real world' where 'public life's destroyed'. The fact that public life's destroyed might, perhaps, be a good thing from the perspective of a socialist-feminist critique of the public/private divide. The challenge for poetics, anyway, is 'to put myself' somewhere without reproducing and reinstituting the division between the social and the antisocial. But in order to work, any rhetorical displacement of the border between inside and outside would have to be part of

a strategy for social change. Such social change would have to work at abolishing the 'social' as a cordoned off – and cordoning off – field so that 'I' might not suffer the effects of the social's emotive spatiality of inside and outside. Riley's rewriting of her own words amounts to a performance of antisocial experience. If this writing seems antisocial, and it sometimes does, that is because it retraces the reproduction of the antisocial *by way of* the spatiality of the social.

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