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Denise Riley's Socialized Biology

This chapter surveys the work of Denise Riley from roughly 1975 to 1985, analyzing 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 force of her critical writings in the context of 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. 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.¹ Here, I undertake a reading of the early poetry with the early critical writings, integrating each part of the *oeuvre* in a fashion that work on Riley in feminist and literary studies has generally avoided. Read together, I argue, her early prose and poetry trace what she herself calls a "socialized biology" at the heart of poetic and political language. Riley's development of a socialized biology cuts directly against lyric pedagogy by rejecting the assumption that poetry's sociality can be reduced to an ethics of intersubjective encounters.

I situate this reading of Riley's work within the framework I have developed in about the social stakes of lyric pedagogy and the latter's limitations for anti-capitalist and feminist politics. Riley's work provides strategies for interrupting the lyric pedagogical understanding of poetry as prepolitical 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 work refuses lyric pedagogy's baseline insistence that intersubjectivity is previous to politics. This work gives an implicit account of the relationship between poetry and social reproduction that jettisons the lyric pedagogical tradition, taking its lead from a critical politics *and poetics* of social reproductive justice.

'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 from her own experiences as a single mother with 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 reentrenching 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" (*War in the Nursery* 196). But what gets her to this point is a rather tremendous heap of historical and theoretical material, all compiled 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" (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:

There 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. (8-9)

The subsequent chapters of her 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 in my chapter.

While *War in the Nursery*, the book version of her PhD thesis in Philosophy from the University of Sussex, is an 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 "conservatising" 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 *conservatising* effect of being a single mother now. I sense this conservatising on all fronts at once; housing, geography, time, work, medicine, sexuality, love. ('The Force of Circumstance' 26)²

Continuous from this early piece through her later work is an insistence on the affective dimensions of lived material and ideological circumstances, on the 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 motherhood 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. (26; emphases in original)

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. Riley also implies that unmet emotional needs intertwine with unmet material needs in awkward ways: "emotional demands from people in a landlord position which couldn't be met."

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.

("Marxism" 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 is simultaneously folded 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: "In our own shade / we embrace each other gravely &/ look out tenderly upon the world."³ 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 verses 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

(6)

The "I" who 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 that 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 some of the poetry produced in the Women's Liberation Movement, however, Riley's "I" does not break through its former silence as a victorious, self-realized entity.⁴ 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 nonhuman 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 feeds into 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, poetry seems like a curious place to turn in order to explore 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 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 the *Theses on Feuerbach* and the *Grundrisse*, breaks

from an understanding of the social as a sum of preexisting 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" (n.p.). This is where, in breaking with a particular libertarian feminist aesthetics and ethics, Riley's poetry also breaks away from lyric pedagogy's framing, still palpable today, of poetry as a prefigurative training ground for social and political being: the affects and addresses of poetry are always 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.⁵ 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 'ideology'."⁶ Riley lived in Cambridge during much of this time while raising her young children as mother in a one-parent household (she also lived in a squat in Lewes for some of this time); childcare was never merely an academic question for her. In her 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 organizations making coordinated and concrete demands upon the state in the hopes of transforming society. Riley's primary locus for political action in the 1970s was in work on specific campaigns pertaining to reproductive justice and nursery provisions within the Women's Liberation Movement, particularly the Cambridge Women's Liberation Group.⁷

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. In all of these contributions, including those that are co-authored, Riley's characteristic dialectical style is clear. Her prose provides the index of a profoundly self-critical mind and ear at work, catching itself in false generalities but never paralyzed by the necessity of being wrong sometimes. In a short piece written for the Socialist Women's Regional Workshop in 1976, Riley argued along with two co-authors that a "positive politics of the family" was necessary for women and for the working class in general:

Nineteenth and early twentieth-century socialists and feminists who did campaign for the dissemination of information about birth control were plunged into a set of contradictions—the Malthusian implications of contraception for the workers as an alternative to any true political and social reform; eugenistic elements and 'social hygiene' currents tangled up with genuine attempts at progressive reform . . . From our vantage point, it's not hard to detect the eugenically reactionary elements in earlier population control attempts. But what's more interesting, from a feminist perspective, is to try to establish how far anyway women's fertility is susceptible to State intervention at all, and how. ('Fertility, Abortion, "Choice" 2)⁸

The task of this work was to understand how socialist-feminist politics might take up the vexed problem of "the family" without either simply deriding

"bourgeois familialism" or upholding the telos of a genuinely "socialist family." As elsewhere, part of the aim was also to attempt to disaggregate the aims of ruling class strategy from their effects: state efforts at control are not, Riley insists, transparently successful affairs (these aspects of her approach draw from Foucault's histories of discourse).

No work on Riley has engaged with these early political writings. The closest is a chapter of *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry*, in which Andrew Duncan speculates, 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 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. While Duncan does a better scholarly job than many critics of Riley's poetry in tracking down her sources, his 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 *rather than Marxist* 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.⁹ In particular, Duncan ignores Riley's outright dismay at some libertarian rejections of institutions like "the state" or "the family."¹⁰

Duncan is right, though, that Riley finds fault in aspects of 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 history and projectable 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 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 a 1982 article taking on various "Left Communist" views of "the Family" Riley 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" (79). 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, 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 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 more direct 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 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" (n.p.). On the one hand, Riley is quick to demonstrate her distance from some libertarian and radical feminist versions of self-help that might "conservatively substitute 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 antiauthoritarian 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. ('Notes Toward' n.p.)

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 1987 essay, "The Serious Burdens of Love," in which Riley revisits the question of how feminists and socialists might address childcare 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. (188)

The socialist-feminist desire to articulate and ultimately meet the needs of working mothers through serious social provisions such as childcare requires a socialist-feminist theory of what needs *are* (184), but this theory will inevitably run up against its own constitutive embeddedness in discourses that exceed and even oppose it.¹¹ 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 heteronomous.¹² 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. 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. (193-94)

Riley is also 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 generalising 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 criticise an essentially defensive slogan, so heavily marked by its necessary strategical locations, on the grounds of its incompleteness. ('Feminist Thought and Reproductive Control' 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. In this, she both follows and departs from Althusser's notion of the "overdetermination" of the superstructure and base.

War in the Nursery is precisely such an effort to base Marxist-feminist strategy on an understanding of how economic and political power can shape—and fail to shape—social needs.¹³ The crux of this matter is, as I will elaborate, Riley's insistence on the distinction between "socialization" and "human development" through intersubjective relations. The chapter on "Developmental psychology; biology and Marxism" takes on various tangles in the domain of theories of socialization.¹⁴ 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": "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" ("Developmental" 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."¹⁵

Riley next surveys existing models of accounting for the movement of the "infant" from the category of biological animal to social human. Along the way, she reopens 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. Her interest in the infant lies in its odd transitional status in the chain of "socialization" and "human development," two nonidentical 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' ('Developmental' 75-76).

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 subsequent chapters of *War in the Nursery*, this slippage 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.¹⁶

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. ('Developmental' 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 nonideological 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'. ('Developmental' 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 chapter that it takes partial form in the poetry that Riley was concurrently writing.¹⁷

A note on sex

I 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" (*Wigan Pier* 135–36). 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. (Cambridge Poetry Festival Collection n.p.)

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 pronatalist writings from the 1940s that Riley quotes at length in *War in the Nursery*.¹⁸ Riley's title also harbors reservations about the political purchase of her own relatively "academic" socialist-feminist poetry, given its limited and somewhat rarefied circulation.¹⁹ Finally, the title riffs on Orwell's suggestion that a socialist would demand some sort of swap 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 slippages 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 insisting 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

(*'Marxism' 1*)

These lines have been read by critics as a relatively straightforward polemical allegory for the misrecognitions of categorical identifications and interpellations. Unlike much 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."²⁰ 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.²¹ 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. 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 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" (Robinson 85).

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 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 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" (Presley n.p.). 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 241)

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

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've 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 artefact. 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 based on the short, self-contained lyric poem.²² 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 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, however spuriously, to the successfully autonomous lyric poem (by, e.g., Richards's *Practical Criticism*). 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 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" (Watts 160). I would extend Watts's 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 no effort at writing can possibly contain the problem in a single, self-contained 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 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 *War in the Nursery* 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 the first and second person. That is, the "biology" that Riley seeks to understand is only accessible through a writing of life that cannot readily be described in the third person. This means that there can only be an aporetic relationship between "socialized biology" as a *theoretical* or discursive category and its enactment as a biographical praxis. This tension will accompany all of my readings of the poems: each time that I attempt to read them theoretically 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 Postwar Britain" (1996) but neither does any "Marxism" get transmitted to any "Infants" through some sort of "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

(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 gain dominance, with "i" remaining in the mix by the underscoring of "in" such that "the material determinants" close 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 hiccup 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), 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 *toward 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 account of phantom-limbs (Merleau-Ponty 87-102) 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)

(*'Marxism'* 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. 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, apostrophe has "a special temporality which is the set of all moments at which writing can say 'now'" (Culler 149), 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. (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, and this staging is not as readily universalizable as Culler's framework might suggest.

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." 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 antiabortion 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 asks, "who, in the final analysis, exists by addressing whom?" (Johnson 192) 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 conventions of the love poem are 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 and neither can the reading of poetry.

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.

(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 parceled out as objects, primarily hand and mouth. These are the agencies of speech as the body attempts to form and shape a language that in fact gives it form: "The voice repeating a word which the mouth shapes./ The mouth and hand together encircling the words." Finally, "This impulse renewed over and over again," an impulse to speak coming from outside the hands but within the world of the woman's head, in which language gives contour to the hand and mouth within the total field of the "woman's head" that it simultaneously constitutes. There is no mention, in this poem, of "you," but the conditions for any address are shaped by this constitutive exteriority and iterability of "the voice."²³

A few pages earlier, the fourteenth poem brings "you" into this dynamic, narrating the affective intensity that both "you" and "I" have felt. The poem is breathless, briefly cathecting on different objects of promise as it passes between each "particular/ whatever . . . / that shone to the eye immediately," including "your" own face in the mirror:

you've met I've met people in rooms before
we've gone into rooms burning with our own

rightness for now

& alight with eagerness and almost touch
& stay the night here and yes! the blazing
ever-realised vividness of that particular
whatever—stone postcard slow scarlet of
a paperback's creased edge sharp corner
of soap & at the mirror your face outdated
since you are already gone on ahead of it
to this on which you are embarked & goodbye
to your opened face as you turn
back to the lit room seriously – anyway
that shone to the eye immediately

before
touch

(14)

The first words of the poem assert a continuity between "you" and "I" ("you've met I've met people in rooms before"), the vagueness of the verb and predicate forcing a recognition that indeed "you" and "I" have both had this same experience. The distinction between you and I is then dissolved in the next line into we: "we've gone into rooms burning with our own/ rightness for now," which might have been a bit harder to get "you" to ascertain had the stage not already been set for "our" conflation. 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 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 impetus 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 verse, 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

(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: "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" (Hughes 32). Not only are the opening words of each poem the same, but each first line shares an end rhyme (die/eyes) and stress pattern. 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's injunction to dream within the context of US antiblackness 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's 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," and so on? 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" (an infant?), must also somehow survive and be survived. The final stanza speeds up again into that rapturous, breathless stream that we saw in the fourteenth poem, lacking punctuation and replete with enjambment and suggestions of regular meter (the trochee and the 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 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 quality of much 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 close this chapter 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.

(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, poetic 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 in the relations of production. "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 writing that simultaneously decries the myth of a prepolitical, 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.

Forms of Reproduction in the Early Work of Wendy Mulford

In February 1979, Wendy Mulford's Street Editions released a 200-copy second edition of *No Fee: A Line or Two for Free*, a chapbook of poems co-authored by Mulford and Denise Riley. *No Fee* had first been issued in 1978 for an art opening at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London; the second edition was released to coincide with the inaugural "Women's Week" in Cambridge. Women's Week included film screenings, talks, panels, workshops, an art exhibition and a "women-only" performance of music and poetry, with readings by Mulford, Riley, Judy Carey, Julia Dale and Angela Carter "or bring your own."¹

The thread connecting the headlining writers was their involvement in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM); they were not necessarily otherwise bound by common literary strategies. Angela Carter, who had recently published her novel *The Passion of New Eve*, engaged, like Riley and Mulford, the problem of women's oppression. Unlike either of them, she made a steady income from writing prose as a journalist and novelist. Judy Carey was a fellow member of the Cambridge Women's Liberation Group (CWLG), and her poems, brief and whimsical pieces of confessional free verse, were unlike the compositions of Riley and Mulford. Indeed, Riley and Mulford never had poems published in the *Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter (CWLN)*, despite being actively engaged in the CWLG and its 'small group' focusing on women and writing. In the April 1979 issue of the *CWLN*, Carey herself appraised the reading and art exhibition at the

understanding. This is true not only of “ordinary language,” but also of poetry, which for Empson does not (as Richards and others had claimed) by-pass questions of truthfulness with its own forms of “pseudo-statement.” On the contrary, poetic language in Empson’s view simply extends the resources of sense-making characteristic of language use more generally (though Empson works through his own complex qualifications to this position in relation to the meanings of the word “sense” in Wordsworth, and “all” in Milton)” (Durant and MacCabe 173).

2 Denise Riley’s Socialized Biology

- 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.
- 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 *Licking the Bed Clean*, *Cutlasses and Earrings* and *One Foot on the Mountain*.
- 5 See “Waiting” for a chillingly elliptical account of Riley’s early family life and schooling.
- 6 Email correspondence, 22 September 2010.
- 7 The group was not University based, although many of its members were affiliated in one way or another.
- 8 This essay, “Fertility, Abortion, “Choice” — Towards a Positive Politics of the Family” was co-authored by “Denise [Riley], Jo [Bradley] and Val [?]” and appeared as a position paper for the Socialist Women’s Regional Workshop in 1976. Portions of this essay are reproduced in Riley’s own “Feminist Thought and Reproductive Control.”
- 9 That is, Riley was not one to demand the immediate dissolution of the state. Left-libertarian socialist feminism certainly did exist, but Riley was not obviously one of its proponents. See Lynne Segal’s contribution to *Beyond the Fragments* (Rowbotham et al. 1979) for a now canonical expression of left-libertarian feminism.
- 10 I read Duncan’s seemingly idiosyncratic gloss of Riley’s politics as a symptom of a more widespread lack of knowledge regarding the history of the women’s liberation movement and particularly of its relationship to socialism and Marxism. Many on the literary “left” seem 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.
- 11 For example, the imbrication of contraceptive provisions with eugenic discourses or more generally of the welfare state with biopolitical forms of discipline and control.

- 12 In this, her work is a far cry from her contemporaries’ attempts to create “unified” theories of capitalist patriarchy. See Eisenstein (1979) and Vogel (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.
- 13 I discuss *War in the Nursery* at length in part because this material has not been adequately treated in other readings of Riley as a poet and has been eclipsed by many other materialist-feminist accounts of social reproduction.
- 14 The chapter was revised from its original 1975 version (which was part of her postgraduate work) for publication in the journal *Ideology & Consciousness* in 1978; it was rewritten again as chapter 2 of *War in the Nursery*.
- 15 Riley’s 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). 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. See my “*Lespace de la lecture*” for an analysis of Althusser’s ambivalent treatment of spatial metaphors.
- 16 According to Riley, the common socialist-feminist account of Bowlyism 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.
- 17 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” (*War* 151–52). 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.
- 18 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" (*Wigan* 49–50; quoted in *War* 156).
 - 19 Thomas Butler argues this last point at more length in *Writing at the Edge of the Person* (2005).
 - 20 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 co-optation within "A Note on Sex" verges uncomfortably on a repetition of the colonization process" (Buck 95–96). 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.
 - 21 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."
 - 22 Watts is an exception to this general tendency.
 - 23 Riley consistently explores this thinking of lyric address and subjectivity through the work of Merleau-Ponty. Another poem directly quotes five lines of *Phenomenology of Perception* (97) and then adds on two additional lines ("Marxism" 11).

3 Forms of Reproduction in the Early Work of Wendy Mulford

- 1 *Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter*, January 1979.
- 2 See Dowson and Entwistle, and Kinnahan, for an elaboration of this distinction.

- 3 Neither Riley nor Mulford made much "explicit use of poststructuralist theory" in their poetry from the 1970s, even if, in prose from those years, Mulford did reference Cixous and Lacan and Riley wrote on Foucault.
- 4 Mulford also wrote two books of prose during the 1980s and 1990s: a biography of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland (*This Narrow Place* 1988) and a co-authored study of women saints (*Virtuous Magic*, with Sara Maitland, 1998).
- 5 As a 1978 Workers' Action pamphlet titled *British Road to Nowhere* put it, "In short: the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat is inconceivable without the working class throwing up the potential organs of its undivided power in the period of the struggle against capitalist domination and carrying these over, enlarging and perfecting them, as the form of the new workers' state" (5).
- 6 Unlike Rowbotham, who left the Trotskyist organizations with which she had been aligned, Mulford remained a member of the Communist Party through the 1970s, not thereby rejecting the political party as a basis for revolutionary organizing.
- 7 As Michèle Barrett asks in *Women's Oppression Today*, what if the various fragments really do have fundamentally conflicting interests: "Important though questions of organization are, I would not see the potential benefits of some kind of alliance as consisting in what each movement could learn from the other in these respects. The more urgent question to be asked is whether there are political objectives in common that might constitute a basis for a relationship" (257).
- 8 In this sense, Mulford's tack is more in line with Balibar and Macherey's later essay "On Literature as an Ideological Form." Mulford, however, is less concerned with literary education as a relatively autonomous ideological form and more with literary production as continuous with other social movements, broadly defined to include "ideological" and more directly political-economic struggles.
- 9 The latter is concerned to challenge both "bourgeois" and avowedly Marxist readings of nineteenth-century literature with an emphasis on the tensions between sex and class belonging: "Bourgeois criticism should be read symptomatically: most of its so-called 'evaluation' is a reinforcement of ideological barriers. Wollstonecraft's, and later Brontë's, ambivalent relation to Romanticism, usually described as clumsy Gothicism, is bound up with their feminism" (Marxist-Feminist Literature Collective 31).
- 10 This was part of Street Editions turn toward issuing chapbooks by women: one year earlier, Mulford had published Alice Notley's *For Frank O'Hara's Birthday* and Veronica Forrest-Thomson's posthumous *On the Periphery*, and 1977 also saw her release of Riley's *Marxism for Infants*. *Bravo to Girls & Heroes* features numerous drawings by Julia Ball: these printed collaborations should form the basis for a separate study.
- 11 The phrase "reclaim the language," even in scare quotes, indicates a discussion bot