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Denise Riley's Socialized Biology: Navigating the Boundaries Between Social and Biological Realms

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ABSTRACT

Denise Riley, born in 1948, is a renowned poet and prose writer known for her work influenced by political and personal contexts. Her work often combines feminist and libertarian perspectives, addressing issues such as the moral condemnation of dependent mothers, restricted nursery services, inadequate housing regulations, and the isolation imposed by bourgeois familialism. Riley's work also features autobiographical introspection, such as her 1977 poem "Marxism for Infants," which explores the challenges of living alone with children and the philosophical question of whether anyone truly has a family. Riley's political ideas in the 1970s were influenced by Marxist-Leninist theory, the Women's Liberation Movement, left libertarianism, and direct action campaigns like the Unsupported Mother's Group. She questioned the Marxist legacy for treating "the family" as a unitary concept and argued that Riley's feminism sees housing and the family as fundamentally political concepts intertwined with property relations. Riley's feminist socialized biology asserts that every reproductive experience should be analyzed alongside specific social and political discourses, laws, and campaigns. Her poetry collection, Marxism for Infants, emphasizes conservative viewpoints in efforts to "retrain" awareness through moral and cultural instruction.

Introduction:

Born in 1948, Denise Riley lived roughly from 1975 to 1985. Samuel Solomon's research (2014) examines Riley's poetry and prose from this period, focusing on her stylistic textures and the political and personal contexts that influenced her work. Both feminist and literary critiques have often overlooked the political aspects of her writing, emphasizing her poetic status instead to justify deviations in her prose. Riley's work resists simple classification as "poetic" due to its discursive nature, bordering on lyrical, and its use of aphorisms and slogans alongside personal pronouns. Despite varying linguistic and literary approaches, her poetry and prose stem from a shared set of ideas. Solomon's research juxtaposes Riley's lyrical and critical works, revealing aspects that past scholarship has frequently missed. By reading her early poetry and prose together, one can discern the "socialized biology" that Solomon identifies as foundational to both her political and poetic language. First, Samuel Solomon aims to provide a thorough justification for the connections between Riley's political activism, poetry, and prose—an aspect he feels has not been adequately addressed so far. Second, Solomon seeks to contextualize this perspective within the social impacts of feminist, anti-capitalist, and literary pedagogies and policies. Riley's writings offer methods for challenging the conventional view of poetry as pre-political moral instruction. Her works from this period are so intertwined that they effectively dismantle the typical notion that literary "morality"

connects culture to politics (Solomon, 2014).

The Influence of External Factors

Riley studied developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, state social policies, wartime economy, employers' production demands, and feminist and socialist movements in her 1983 book *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother's,* exploring the rise and fall of municipal nurseries in post-World War II Britain. Her personal experiences as a socialist-minded single mother, actively involved in the women's movement throughout the 1970s and 1980s, heavily influenced this study. Riley addresses a fundamental question: how to meet the needs of single working mothers under late capitalism without perpetuating the idea of motherhood as a fixed role distinct from the gender-neutral concepts of "worker" or "citizen." Her final conclusion might seem straightforward: "My view is that... there can be no version of 'motherhood' as such which can be utilized to construct a radical politics" (Riley, 1983: 196). However, reaching this conclusion required extensive historical and theoretical inquiry. Riley aims to understand how various discourses, ideas, and material realities of the era shaped a definition of "mother" that often obscured the needs of working women with children (Riley, 1983: 7). Emphasizing the need for socialist-feminist practice to critically analyze both biological and social categories, Riley begins her research with a chapter on "Biology, Psychology and Gender in Socialist and Feminist Thought" (Solomon, 2014).

> [T]here is a need, in the often painful gap between the body politic and the individual body, for an idea of a socialised biology. This would speak to problems adumbrated in slogans like 'the right to choose', 'the right to sexual self-determination' 'control of one's own body' — the language of campaigns concerning abortion and contraception, welfare and population policies, or asserting sexual categories. The idea of a socialised biology would also join broader questions about human capacities and wants, growth, illness, ageing; and, instead of holding these at the margins of socialism, would set them at the centre of its ethical nerve. At the same time, I want to illustrate ways in which the history of psychology has in fact worked against this kind of development, sometimes by acting as an inadequate representation of socialised biology. (Riley, 1983: 8-9)

Riley's book continues this analysis in its later chapters by examining literature on developmental psychology that portrays the infant's development from biological animality to social "humanity" (Chapter 2). It investigates child psychology's insights into the fundamental needs of infants, focusing on Kleinian theories of infantile aggression and Bowlby's theory of "maternal deprivation" (Chapter 4). The book also discusses how these concepts were popularized through Bowlby's work and examines how these psychological theories influenced wartime nursery policies, along with other ideas and material factors (Chapter 5). Finally, Chapters 6 address the rise of postwar pronatalism and its connections to various state sectors, business needs, socialist and feminist politics, and the increasing focus on the single figure of "the mother." I will review some of these topics in more detail later (Solomon, 2014).

Riley also wrote several short prose pieces for feminist and socialist newsletters and journals that complemented this research and highlighted how these issues intersected with her personal experiences. In contrast, *War in the Nursery* is a detached academic work based on her PhD thesis in Philosophy from the University of Sussex. Published in the socialist-feminist periodical *Red Rag* in 1975, Riley's piece "The Force of Circumstance" explored the "conservatising" effects of single motherhood on her, even within the context of a leftist feminist organization (Solomon, 2014).

> 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. (Riley, 1975: 26)[2]

Riley highlights in both her early and later works a continual focus on the emotional aspects of daily material and ideological conditions, emphasizing that these emotions are not always alleviated by examining their ideological or historical origins. Consider, for example, "the housing question" (Solomon, 2014).

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

Riley's "knowledge" that her "conservative" desire for private home-ownership and family security is rooted in a need for socialized material resources that could be fought for or otherwise made accessible does not trivialize her desire in any way. Riley recognizes the appeal of libertarian-socialist communitarian ideals as prefigurative but argues that they fall short because they do not address the concrete conditions necessary for them to become genuinely democratic possibilities. We might "know the utter brutal irrationality of living alone," yet, if there are no viable alternatives, we may still need or even desire it (Solomon, 2014).

Riley's poetry also features this kind of autobiographical introspection, though it is not merely a confessional or unvarnished statement of personal knowledge. For instance, consider this poetry from Riley's 1977 *Marxism for Infants* (Solomon, 2014).

> You have a family ? It is impermissible.
> There is only myself complete and arched
> like a rainbow or an old tree
> with gracious arms descending
> over the rest of me who is the young
> children in my shelter who grow
> up under my leaves and rain
> In our own shade
> we embrace each other gravely &
> look out tenderly upon the world
> seeking only contemporaries
> and speech and light, no father. (Riley, 1977a: 15)

Riley explores the challenges of "living alone with children" in her work, including in another poem. She examines the single mother's situation from various perspectives: family is inaccessible as family rhetoric neither acknowledges nor validates her. This discourse evolves into a broader philosophical question about whether anyone truly has a family or if it is merely "just me." This inward humility then shifts to more traditional self-

portraits—"complete and arched"—and imagery of motherhood "like a rainbow or an ancient tree / with gentle arms falling." Another transformation occurs when the "complete" self intersects with the collective, encompassing others: "who are the young / children in my shelter who grow / up under my leaves and rain?" This leads to a first-person plural perspective, not in a universal sense, but reflecting the notion of a "haven in a heartless world" that some feminists critique: "In our own shade / we embrace each other gravely & / look out tenderly upon the world." The poem underscores how family connections should respond to external events. It also offers hope for alternative forms of kinship based on mutual respect and care, as seen in the "tender" gaze "out... upon the world / seeking only contemporaries / and speech and light, no father." This poem can be seen as a testing ground for the themes explored in *War in the Nursery* and "The Force of Circumstance." Beyond political theory and personal experience, *Marxism for Infants* provides a series of lyrical poems addressing the difficulty of expressing wants, feelings, or aspirations within a societal framework that is both individualizing and alienating (Solomon, 2014).

> postcard; ' I live in silence here
> a wet winter the baby's well
> I give her bear's names Ursula
> Mischa Pola Living alone makes anyone crazy, especially with children'
> I live in silence here
> x is the condition of my silence
> s/he
> the tongue as a swan's neck
> full and heavy in the mouth
> speech as a sexed thing
> the speaking limb is stilled (Riley, 1977a: 6)

Not only in the broad sense that any 'I' is both personal and universal, but more significantly because the mother's voice inherently reflects her children; she embodies both more and less than a single entity. The 'I' that forms the 'postcard' is fragmented and distinct. The apparent contradiction of "living alone... with children" underscores the separation of the "mother" from liberal and social-democratic notions of citizenship, where the assumed equality of each "I" conceals the relationships of dependence and exploitation that underlie the "freedom" of some at the expense of others (in this case, those confined to and excluded from the symbolic role of "mother") (Solomon, 2014).

Unlike most feminist poetry from the Women's Liberation Movement, Riley's "I" does not present a triumphant, self-actualized individual. Instead, silence is depicted not as an external tool of repression but as a fundamental element of language production: "I dwell in quiet here/x is the condition of my silence." Non-human prostheses illustrate the gendered silence the "I" navigates: "the tongue as a swan's neck/full and heavy in the mouth/speech as a sexed thing." However, this phenomenological approach contradicts socialist-feminist objectives because, without Riley's "socialised biology," such clearly gendered embodiment can obscure the social dimensions of speech, reducing it to a matter of personal hygiene or self-care, and placing the entire burden—despite the "self" being inherently relational—on the individual. The poem shows how this tendency to individualize social connection through imitative speech might help explain the isolation experienced by a mother living with children within the celebrated intersubjectivity of motherhood. It reveals the limitations of an intersubjective ethics of social and sexual diversity or personal relationships. The mother is portrayed as a solitary figure, compelled to advocate for herself while serving as a conduit for an intersubjectivity that provides her only means of social interaction: preparing the child for social life. The poem critiques how sovereign expressions of feeling in confessional or consciousness-raising forms might only communicate demands already linked to the symbolic image of "the mother." Thus, lyric poetry becomes a compelling means to explore the pressures faced by a single mother, as this collection intends. While it reflects personal relationships and emotions, these political issues transcend any "I" or "you" interactions (Solomon, 2014).

Riley's approach diverges from Marx's view of the "social individual" as outlined in his *Theses on Feuerbach* and *Grundrisse*, which treats the social not merely as a collection of real intersubjective interactions but as reflections of more complex social processes. As Marx notes in his sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, "Feuerbach lowers the religious essence to the human essence," but the human essence is not an innate abstraction; rather, social relations encompass all aspects of life. Riley's work contrasts with some libertarian feminist aesthetics and ethics, as well as the Arnoldian perspective that poetry is merely a platform for social and political engagement. For Riley, poetry is not a training ground for liberal humanistic qualities like articulating one's demands or responding to others; instead, it is inherently rich with social and political themes. Riley argues that understanding the voice assigned to the social individual requires what she terms a "socialised biology of speech." Solomon (2014) will examine Riley's early critical works on socialised biology in the subsequent discussion and then address *Marxism for Infants*.

The Challenges of Intense Emotional Investment

Through her experiences in the 1970s and 1980s, Denise Riley highlighted issues such as the moral condemnation of dependent mothers, restricted nursery services, inadequate housing regulations, and the isolation imposed by bourgeois familialism. These concerns reflected not only social policy issues but also Riley's personal circumstances. Riley initially studied English at Oxford before transferring to Cambridge to study philosophy, eventually graduating with a fine art degree. Born in Carlyle in 1948 and raised Protestant by adopted parents despite attending Catholic school, Riley completed her MA and DPhil in Philosophy at the University of Sussex, where her thesis developed into *War in the Nursery*. This work, emphasizing ideology, is an intellectual history of European and American child psychology and psychoanalysis. While living in Cambridge and raising her children alone, Riley faced childcare as a personal and practical issue. By integrating feminist and libertarian perspectives with political economics and socialist strategies, her critical work maintains emotional depth and reveals the social and material dimensions of personal politics (Solomon, 2014).

Marxist-Leninist theory, the small group strategy of the Women's Liberation Movement, left libertarianism, and direct action campaigns such as the Unsupported Mother's Group significantly influenced Riley's political ideas in the 1970s. Riley preferred making explicit demands on the welfare state to drive social change, aligning more with Marxism than with libertarianism, even though she did not fully align with any particular socialist-feminist school or vanguard party. Her political activity, primarily within the Cambridge Women's Liberation Group, focused on campaigning for reproductive rights and improvements in nursery policies (Solomon, 2014).

Riley addressed topics such as women's self-help therapy groups and "A Woman's Right to Choose" in several pieces for the Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter during the mid to late 1970s. However, her early political writings have not been thoroughly examined in recent literature. Andrew Duncan's chapter in *Centre and Periphery in Modern British Poetry* provides the closest relevant analysis. Duncan suggests that Riley's background in natural sciences influenced her to reject Marxism and Freudian theory as authoritarian and flawed. He proposes that she turned towards libertarian-anarchism, viewing her as abandoning academic theories for practical political realities. This perspective, however, misrepresents Riley's actual political involvement, which included working within state institutions and supporting social welfare, and contrasts with Duncan's portrayal of her as solely libertarian (Solomon, 2014)

Riley questions the Marxist legacy, from Engels to Lenin and partially Kollontai and Trotsky, for treating "the family" as a unitary concept projected into a socialist or communist future, as noted by Duncan. Engels, for instance, viewed the family as a moral advancement under capitalism—specifically, a heterosexual monogamous ideal—that he believed would persist after the revolution. In her paper "Left Critiques of the Family," Riley argues that Engels's perspective, which links women's freedom to their participation in industry and suggests a base-superstructure relationship between love and economics, failed to challenge the family's central role in society. Riley's critique highlights the limitations of Engels's approach but does not align with Duncan's interpretation of Riley's focus on family. Duncan's view of the family as a barrier between natural attachment and the rational

world of property misunderstands Riley's feminism, which sees housing and the family as fundamentally political concepts intertwined with property relations (Solomon, 2014).

Riley was interested in early radical feminist and left libertarian strategies but did not view them as substitutes for actual class struggle. She voiced concerns about replacing politics with psychology and advocated for practical solutions in the October 1976 Cambridge Women's Liberation Newsletter, where she cautiously proposed starting a Women's Self-Help therapy group. Riley criticized how political organizations sometimes suppress personal emotions, reducing individual fears to abstract concepts like politics or history, and expecting immediate political action to resolve them. Approaching self-help groups with pragmatism and openness, she balanced between uncritical support and harsh rejection. Riley's perspective on integrating personal politics into socialist and feminist movements highlights her practical and sensible approach amidst the debates of her time (Solomon, 2014).

> 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 unhappines [sic] need not lead to any increase in your capacity to act effectively; - years of communism and feminism haven't stopped me from literally shaking in a roomful of people. It is not that the sources of this are mysterious to me; amateur self-psychoanalysis may inform - but not *change*, which is why I'd like there to be a practical group of some sort, if others would too. (Riley, 1976)

Under the proposed scenario, a self-help therapy group would neither replace nor merely prepare individuals for real political action. Riley acknowledges, however, that personal anxieties do impact broader issues such as racism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy, as well as the organizing needed to combat them. Her essay "The Serious Burdens of Love" vividly illustrates this pragmatic approach, examining how feminists and socialists can address child care as both a necessity and a right (Solomon, 2014).

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

Social policies such as child care support working women by employing a socialist-feminist theory of needs (Riley, 1987: 184). However, due to its intersection with competing or broader discourses, this theory faces challenges. Riley argues that no political theory, whether socialist or feminist, can encompass all human relations without integrating elements of other systems and frameworks that maintain some degree of autonomy. She suggests leveraging the inherent limitations of political theory as a valuable means to advance significant research (Solomon, 2014).

The article "Developmental Psychology, Biology, and Marxism" addresses issues in socializing theory. Like many of Riley's works, it is self-reflective and closely examines concepts such as "biology," "the social," and "the individual." Riley initially states her intention to explore the conceptual challenges in the "relationship of biological and social factors," particularly through the lens of child developmental psychology (Riley, 1978: 73).

However, Riley soon points out that her use of scare quotes highlights the inherent limitations of the language used to discuss these issues (Solomon, 2014).

Riley questions the assumptions that "biological" and "social" are clear-cut categories, while acknowledging their abstract impact, as she examines models depicting how babies transition from biological animals to social beings. She explores the distinct yet often overlapping mechanisms of socializing and human development. Riley critiques developmental psychology for equating "social" with "interpersonal" and for overlooking broader factors such as housing and income. She argues that many theories fail to consider how wider societal conditions affect mother-child relationships. With a focus on how these theories address both the infant and the mother, Riley examines how Kleinian theories of infant aggression and Bowlby's concepts of "maternal deprivation" reflect these issues in *War in the Nursery* (Solomon, 2014).

Riley contends that socialist feminism would struggle to grasp the complexity of reproductive experiences and the interplay of biological, psychological, and political ideas without a robust understanding of socialised biology. This necessity fuels her interest in reintegrating biology into socialist feminist theory (Solomon, 2014).

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

Riley states that "biology is simultaneously biography," which suggests viewing "biography" as more than mere empirical experience or emotional narrative and understanding biology as more than just a collection of non-ideological facts (Solomon, 2014).

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

Riley's feminist socialised biology asserts that "every reproductive experience" should be analyzed alongside specific social and political discourses, laws, and campaigns. However, the precise nature of this socialised biology remains somewhat elusive. This article argues that Riley's poetry, written concurrently, reflects this concept to some extent (Solomon, 2014).

Reflections on Gender Identity

Samuel Solomon (2014) will now concentrate on Riley's poetry produced alongside the documents leading to *War in the Nursery*. Her debut poetry collection, *Marxism for Infants*, was published in 1977 by Street Editions, a small, paperback volume edited by Wendy Mulford. The collection's title, inspired by George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*, highlights class conflicts by referencing a fictional book by a bourgeois socialist. Riley noted during her first public reading in 1977 that Orwell's title influenced her only unconsciously.

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

Samuel Solomon (2014) notes that Riley's choice of title emphasizes the persistent conservative viewpoints in efforts to "retrain" awareness through moral and cultural instruction. Given Orwell's pro-natalist ideas, which Riley addresses in *War in the Nursery*, the title carries an ironic undertone. Riley's doubts about the influence of her scholarly socialist-feminist poetry are also evident, considering her small audience. Additionally, the title challenges Orwell's assertion that Marxism and child-rearing are incompatible or that the working class should sacrifice children for Marxism. Riley completely disagrees with this notion.

Samuel Solomon (2014) notes that although Riley's nineteen-poem series is labelled as a handbook, it is far from instructional; instead, it conveys confusion and doubt. The series employs fragmented thoughts, sound patterns, unusual page layouts, and shifts between "she," "I," and "you" to reflect modern feminist and Marxist issues. Emphasizing the need for grammatical personality amid frequent disruptions, the first poem, "A Note on Sex and the Reclaiming of Language," questions the concept of a true lyrical voice. Often regarded as fundamental to Riley's early work, this poem anticipates the political philosophy of language that Riley later explores in *Am I That Name: Feminism and the Category of 'Women's' in History* (1988).

A Note on Sex and the Reclaiming of Language
The Savage is flying back home from the New Country.
in native-style dress with a baggage of sensibility
to gaze on the ancestral plains with the myths thought up
and dreamed in her kitchens as guides
She will be discovered
As meaning is flocking densely around the words seeking a way
any way in between the gaps, like a fertilisation
The work is
e.g. to write 'she' and for that to be a statement
of fact only and not a strong image
of everything which is not-you, which sees you

The new land is colonised, though its prospects are empty The Savage weeps as landing at the airport
she is asked to buy wood carvings, which represent herself (Riley, 1977a: 1)

Samuel Solomon (2014) observes that "A Note on Sex" has been interpreted by some as a critique of errors in interpellations and category identifications. Unlike other works in *Marxism for Infants*, this poem focuses on a specific issue and critiques radical feminist calls for women to "reclaim the language" using the concept of the "Savage." Riley is skeptical of this notion, arguing that language often serves competing interests, as demonstrated by the commercialization of the "Savage's" quest to return "home." Some contemporaries missed this irony; for instance, Peter Robinson's 1977 review in *Perfect Bound* criticized the volume for not including the male pronoun, arguing that without addressing the male perspective, the language reclamation was incomplete.

Samuel Solomon (2014) notes that although Riley's feminist readers sometimes interpret this poem as an attempt to "reclaim the language," they also recognize it as a sardonic take on such efforts. For instance, Linda Kinnahan views the poem as a means of expressing the feminine "I" outside of accepted wisdom.

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

Samuel Solomon (2014) observes that while hopeful that truth may emerge from the "gaps" between overly defined discourses, Kinnahan views the poem and Riley's broader work as part of a negative process of rejection. Frances Presley (1999) finds Riley's work more effective at identifying what a woman is not than in asserting what she is. Romana Huk notes that the poem's sarcastic use of naturalizing language concerning sexuality serves as a critique of radical feminist claims about the "feminine."

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

Samuel Solomon (2014) notes that Riley's early poetry often makes it easier to identify what is being rejected rather than what is being affirmed, a point also observed by Carol Watts (2000: 159).

These readings address aspects of "A Note on Sex," but focusing solely on this poem and its connection to Riley's 1988 book, *Am I That Name? Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, may overshadow the broader context of *Marxism for Infants* and its relation to Riley's concurrent political and historical studies. For instance, Presley argues that poetry emphasizing feminist rather than Marxist themes contradicts the label *Marxism for Infants*. Riley's work investigates the intersection of Marxism and feminism, particularly through the lens of "socialized biology" and the "mother's voice in her poetry," which somewhat narrows this perspective.

Samuel Solomon (2014) explains that while "A Note on Sex" anticipates Riley's later feminist philosophy of language, it does not encompass the full range of issues and forms explored in *Marxism for Infants*. This collection features various disciplines and formal styles, with many of its poems functioning best in a continuous sequence rather than as standalone pieces. This characteristic partly accounts for Riley's limited inclusion of her later work in the 2000 *Selected Poems*. Although some poems from *Marxism for Infants* reappear with titles in the 1985 book *Dry Air*, most lack titles. This distinction between standalone poems and verse sequences is crucial for understanding the book's structure and challenges conventional interpretations of short, self-contained poems. Despite its production over several years, Riley herself described *Marxism for Infants* as a single, lengthy poem when she first presented it at the Cambridge Poetry Festival.

Solomon (2014) explains that *Marxism for Infants*' serialized form underscores its relevance to Riley's socialized biology. The poems are interconnected, reflecting and refracting political and personal dialogue, rather than being straightforward, self-contained lyric pieces. Like Emily Dickinson's work, the domestic imagery in Riley's poems—similar to the self—reveals gendered connotations of domesticity and confinement, as noted by Carol Watts. However, in *Marxism for Infants*, this domestic image is also permeable. Each poem interacts with the others, contributing to a greater totality, and cannot fully address the issues on its own.

The Struggle for Authenticity in Modern Society

In what Samuel Solomon refers to as the "second kind" of poetry, there are two main themes: (1) the disturbance of voice and bodily awareness, which questions how the biological and social aspects of life are expressed through lyric form, sound patterns, and echoing; and (2) the address to an unidentified "you," perceived through these disruptions. These ideas present a different perspective on lyric poetry compared to practical criticism. The poems explore connections among love, money, and various personal and societal spheres such as demand, rights, and identity (Solomon, S., 2014).

Using these ideas, Samuel Solomon will examine the remainder of *Marxism for Infants* and explore how Riley's poetry interacts with her concept of "socialised biology," which remains somewhat abstract in *War in the Nursery*. Riley's notion of socialised biology is understood through the personal and vocative elements of lyric poetry as a form of socialised autobiography. This creates a tension between theoretical concepts and their poetic representation, yet Riley's poetry and theory together contribute to depicting the lived experience of biology (Solomon, S., 2014).

Like "A Note on Sex," the remainder of *Marxism for Infants* deviates from the epistemological assertions of consciousness-raising, as Claire Buck points out in her 1996 article "Poetry and the Women's Movement in Post-war Britain." It does not present "Marxism" to "Infants" through Leninist political education or parental authority. Instead, the political and personal elements are conveyed through prosody, where the interaction of personal and political addresses expresses subjectivity. The fourth verse says (Solomon, S., 2014).

According to Jonathan Culler, every lyric poetry—not merely a specific case—has apostrophe addressing an inanimate or absent entity as if present (Culler, 1981). He believes that rather than only reflecting outside events, lyric poetry employs vocative forms to produce textual happenings. According to Culler (1981: 149), apostrophe represents a special temporality wherein writing may declare "now," and this instantaneous aspect is fundamental for lyric poetry (Solomon, S., 2014).

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

Given Culler's perspective on the fictitious power of apostrophe, the "I" and "you" in lyric address shouldn't be taken as simple empirical conversation. Rather, the "I" is an inanimate linguistic entity depending on a "you" that it animates to get its own movement. This dynamic of address generates the textual event Culler notes as connected with apostrophes. Riley's poem uses a deconstructive quality of apostrophe, but reading it just from Culler's perspective ignores the particular social setting of lyric address in Riley's work (Solomon, S., 2014).

Applying Culler's theory to sociopolitical discussions on abortion, Barbara Johnson's article "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion" demonstrates how apostrophe's poetic force could influence actual events (Johnson, 1987). Johnson shows how apostrophe could animate another, such as an unborn child in pro-life argumentation, thereby strengthening the speaker's power. She argues that apostrophe represents social conflicts going beyond a simple abstract "I" and "you". Riley's work clearly illustrates this social component of lyric, as seen in the reference to "social" in the text and the combined effect of the poems, which reveal how the need to hear or be heard transcends individual utterances (Solomon, S., 2014).

Apostrophe's performative power destabilizes the empirical temporality of the speaking subject and infuses it with the social dynamics of the mother/child relationship. As Johnson (1987: 192) questions, "who exists by addressing whom?" This dynamic, reflected in the chiasmus of "the speaking, the desire to hear/the hearing, the desire to be spoken," shifts the focus from self-presence to the other who animates the self. In this poem, "my" voice originates from "your" mouth, with you representing not just anyone but a phantom presence, a diffuse and massy extension. Riley's depiction of voice is intertwined with her social inscription of motherhood from other poems. The interplay between "I" and "you" surpasses simple self-other relations, as they are deeply embedded in the socialized biology of lived speech. Riley's work as a whole emphasizes that socialization extends beyond mere intersubjectivity (Solomon, S., 2014).

This poem uses the third person to illustrate the objectifying nature of theorizing the body impersonally, thereby exploring the concept of "voice" as a recurring phenomenon (Solomon, S., 2014). It employs a feminine impersonality, shifting between definite and possessive articles such as "A woman's head" and "her head," along with "the voice," "the mouth," and "the hand." By beginning with the idea of a woman's head encompassing all subjectivity and then deconstructing it into speech-enacting components like the hand and mouth, the poem transitions from subjective experience to objective presence. These elements shape and produce language, thus creating a cycle of repetition: "The voice repeating a word which the mouth shapes./ The mouth and hand together encircling the words." Ultimately, the poem demonstrates how language molds the body by portraying the desire

to speak as originating externally yet residing within the mind of the woman. Although "you" is absent, the external and repetitive nature of "the voice" sets the stage for address within the poem.

The fourteenth poem earlier in the book introduces "you" into this dynamic, thereby articulating the intense emotions exchanged between "you" and "I" upon encountering others (Solomon, S., 2014). For instance, in lines like "people in rooms... burning... & alight with eagerness and almost touch / and stay the night here and yes!" the poem depicts a scene brimming with anticipation and fleeting connections. Breathless and momentarily focused on various promises, the poem transitions through multiple sensations, including "your" own reflection 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 (Riley, 1977: 14)

Opening the poem with a connection between "you" and "I," as in "you've met I've met people in rooms before," suggests shared experiences (Solomon, S., 2014). The poem then explicitly merges "you" and "I" into "we," with lines such as "we've gone into rooms burning with our own/rightness for now." The subsequent lines, featuring ampersands and internal rhymes, accelerate the rhythm, resulting in "& stay the night here and yes!" This momentum slows with "the blazing/ever-realized vividness of that particular/whatever," where "whatever" diminishes the vividness. The use of enjambment to describe items like "stone postcard slow scarlet of/a paperback's creased edge" increases the poem's tempo and addresses "you" as impersonal and interchangeable with "I." Phrases like "since you are already gone on ahead of it," followed by uneven meter and a farewell to "your opened face as you turn/back to the lit room seriously," further quicken the pace. "Anyway," reflecting on earlier events before "touch," contemplates a partly negated intensity of these words, signifying both a climax and an ongoing presence in the poem. This interplay of conversational and ecstatic tones recurs in the second half of the sixteenth poem, following three distinct stanzas—one mystical, one fractured, and one contrasting coldness with emotion

Though their structures and tones differ, the stanzas of the poem have unmistakable links (Solomon, S., 2014). Riley's imagery of "white birds" and "frozen hand" resonates with Langston Hughes's "barren field" and "broken-winged bird," and the opening lines echo Hughes's "dreams," sharing rhyme and meter. Riley's conclusion of "an indifference" neutralizes the prior oppositions (fire vs. ice, mineral vs. animal), while Hughes's plea to "hold fast to dreams" contrasts sharply. Particularly in the second line of the first stanza, where it is unclear what "whom" or "constant and receptive as a capital city" refer to, Riley's grammar appears dubious. The second stanza intensifies this uncertainty with vague objects and transformations.

The poem's demand that the elusive "otherness" endure and be survived results in a fast, frenzied final stanza reminiscent of the fourteenth poem (Solomon, S., 2014). Addressing an impersonal "you," who may equally be an "I," it employs enjambment and near-regular meter. Outside the capital city, this otherness represents a vanished

entity. Presented as a challenge due to the uncertainty surrounding whose "wrong body" is being altered, the poem grapples with the complexities of knowing and empathizing with others. Riley's works delve into the difficulty of understanding other people's lives and the transition from apathetic to passionate, sympathetic poetic intensity.

Samuel Solomon will now conclude by discussing the eleventh poem from *Marxism for Infants*, which presents a less bleak dreamscape yet remains "looking impossible" (Solomon, S., 2014). This poem stands out among most of the collection for its grammatical clarity (though with somewhat erratic punctuation) and a consistent idea with a clear narrative. It chronicles a swift journey from an unlikely household environment shaped by circumstance to a desired and deliberate choice.

> I lived with my children in a warm bright and
> harmonious room which formed the crest of a high
> timber scaffolding - a room on stilts. Outside
> it was a black night, an old railway yard,
> abandoned tracks, a high wind. Our room
> although too small for our needs was glowing and
> secure despite the fact that it had no roof,
> that its walls led straight upwards to the
> black clear sky.
>
> I left there briefly and encountered x
> who pointed upwards to show where we should both
> go. A smooth platform hung in the sky, its
> only access a long swaying cord joined to its
> midpoint, the end of which drifted against my
> face. It looked impossible but I was not
> disheartened. (Riley, 1977: 10)

Samuel Solomon will describe how the opening verse presents a fantastical depiction of a squat: the surroundings are "old" and "abandoned," with a "black night" and "high wind" reflecting the family's grim situation. The space is described as being "on stilts" and lacking a roof, oscillating between its shabby state and its unexpectedly suitable nature. It symbolizes the family's aspiration for abundance despite living in and being surrounded by an indifferent external environment. Although the area is "too small" and "roofless," it appears "glowing and safe," merging harmony and security into a magical reality that spans the "black clear sky" (Solomon, S., 2014).

Samuel Solomon will discuss how the poem transitions to its second act, where the speaker briefly exits the squat and encounters an enigmatic authority figure, "x," who provides guidance on where they should go. The subsequent "impossible" architecture leaves the poem open-ended. The speaker's lack of demoralization, despite the seeming impossibility, raises questions: is it due to a desire to stay in the roofless house or to optimism and faith in eventual success? The poem does not clarify whether the speaker is simply recounting a dream without understanding its origins or deliberately concealing her reasoning. This ambiguity prompts readers to reflect on the emotional dimensions of existence and the complex needs of single mothers within the context of the mother as an intersubjective figure (Solomon, S., 2014).

According to Samuel Solomon, like most of *Marxism for Infants*, this poem reveals various emotions and experiences without prompting readers to merely emulate or critique the lyrical theme. Instead, it demonstrates how embodied contexts influence speech. Although it appears to engage morally with otherness, the lyric address is interwoven with the institutional discourses of the capitalist state. The poems illustrate how, even following a revolution, desires and needs remain continually shaped within this system and articulated through the socialized body. Repeated, incomplete attempts to interact with "you" aid in uncovering actual needs and wants. Riley's poem, which challenges the notion of a pure, pre-political ethical realm, underscores the importance of addressing these needs within the framework of socialized biology. It becomes clear that neither as it stands nor while these

concepts are confined to ethical or idealized views of intersubjectivity will they be sufficient (Solomon, S., 2014).References:

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