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**'Unlock a Marvell Karaoke':  
Quotation as Adoption in the  
Work of Denise Riley**

*My autobiography always arrives from somewhere outside me; my narrating I is really anybody's, promiscuously.* Denise Riley

I spent autumn, 2002, in London, and tried, whenever possible, to meet poets whose work I admire. One of these poets, Denise Riley, informed me up front that she did not talk about poetry. Curious about a poet who refused to discuss poetry, I met her for lunch, where we began a conversation on our critical projects. After I said that I wanted to write about adoption and literature, she told me that she had been adopted. Well-versed as I was in the 'literature' about adoption, written largely by social workers or adopted persons angry that they cannot get their birth records, I was surprised to hear Riley talk the way she did about adoption. No, she had not sought out her birth mother so that she could 'complete' her identity by finding her 'genealogical roots'; she had sought her out because she wanted to know her *history*. She spoke of her astonishment at the way orthodoxies about adoption had changed within her lifetime, from a demand that children *not* be curious about their origins, to a contemporary insistence that they *must*. Finally, she declared over

lunch that she did not believe in identity, and we parted ways.

I now embark on that intended essay on adoption and literature, using Denise Riley's work, both her poetry and her theoretical criticism, as my basis.<sup>1</sup> Much of what Riley said during that brief lunch has resonated for me in reading her poetry and theoretical writing. While intersections of identity and adoption are most apparent in her work, what most intrigues me here is the way in which Riley uses quotation (especially from the language of popular culture) and how quotation relates to a very private discussion of adoption in her work. Where Riley talks about adoption in her poems and theoretical writing, she discusses it from a distance. When questions of identity and adoption confront the reader as 'personally' charged moments, they tend to do so through quotations from The Platters and other early rock-n-roll groups. To quote is not, for Riley, to seek an origin for her thinking, but to postulate its history. To quote is not to create a biological or mythical genealogy for herself (as in Bloom's theory of influence, with its reliance on the ur-adoptee, Oedipus), but to 'adopt' a family of references. To quote is to acknowledge that identity can never be fixed, is always in flux, and that recognition of this fact is inevitable and crucial (especially) to a poet who was adopted. Finally, quotation —especially when it is acknowledged through visible 'marks' — distinguishes voices from

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1 Perhaps the best introduction to literary criticism through the lens of adoption can be found in Marianne Novy's edited collection, *Imagining Adoption: Essays on Literature and Culture*. Yet Novy's collection concentrates on adoption as a literary theme, not as a concept through which to write poets' relationships with language and tradition, which is my interest here and elsewhere.

each other, within the larger collection of voices that make up the work of 'Denise Riley'.

Where Riley does address issues of biology, as in the first poem of her *Selected*, "A Note on Sex and The Reclaiming of Language," she shows how easily blurred are the lines between biology and adoption by giving us the example of a test tube baby, whose mother was fertilized by 'special seed,' but who 'gets confused at school' because there is 'Biologically, a lack.' The lack, of course, is precisely not biological: there was sperm and there was an egg. The lack is of a father, a person, a 'he-husband' rather than the 'she-husband' imagined by the speaker of the poem. That lack cannot adequately be described as 'biological,' as father is a category that encompasses more than sperm, more even than 'inseminator' — we call the original father a 'birth father' in adoption, but a sperm donor is one who was not present at the conception of 'his' child. Thus, the lack is social ('social father' is sometimes used to describe the father who raises a child conceived through sperm donation), not biological. But Riley's interest, in this poem as in others, is not in how to describe the intricacies of conception and child-raising, but to get at the confusions of our language. A shift of names involves a shift in histories. In another section of the poem, the speaker says:

in St Petersburg now Leningrad we have communal kitchens  
the cooking is dreadful but we get to meet our friends  
Whether the city is called Leningrad or St Petersburg, it is a city, a  
community where people eat together. The city's names are  
historical, have been changed, represent 'identities' that are political

more than they are personal. That the names have, since the writing of the poem, switched again, only affirms Riley's idea that origins are less interesting than historical shifts and that, in the midst of those, what lasts is human contact, 'eating with friends'. We know the city now as a blurring between Leningrad and St. Petersburg, between the recent Soviet past and the new capitalist one. We cannot separate the one from the other, at least not yet.

Recent writing about adoption often emphasizes the adoptee's need to locate his or her biological roots, not simply for reasons of medical records, but also in order to be a 'whole person'.<sup>2</sup> For example, in her famous polemic in favor of opening adoption records, *Lost and Found*, Betty Jean Lifton writes:

everyone but the adopted has caught a glimpse, however fleeting, of his own ghosts. Unlike the *real* orphan who still carries his family name, the Adoptee is cut off completely from his past. And though he has "psychological" parenting in the adoptive home, he suffers a severe physical deprivation in being cut off from anyone whose body might serve as a model for both the wondrous and fearsome possibilities of his own. (5)

That identity and language are linked for Lifton is evident in her lament that adoptees no longer bear their family name, and hence are 'cut off completely from [the] past.' A page later, she offers up 'the

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2 Another thread of writing has emerged, namely writing about adoption by critics and theorists, many of whom are parents by adoption. I'm thinking of the recent *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, devoted to adoption, as well as the *South Atlantic Review's* special issue on 'transnational adoption.' Barbara Melosh has written persuasively about adoption and literature, as has Wayne Carp.

folk saying "blood is thicker than water," calling it 'profound' and wondering 'what importance is there to the blood tie?' The argument of Lifton's book is that the blood tie, even more than the linguistic one, is utterly crucial to an adoptee's sense of self. Running alongside Lifton's ideas are those of the 'primal wound' theory, which posits that adopted persons are inevitably and intimately wounded when they are transferred from one to another set of parents. There is a growing literature intended to guide adoptees in their search for self; one among these books is *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*, written by a Ph.D., an M.D. and a medical writer. They echo Lifton when they write, 'When you live with your biological family, you have guideposts to help you along. You can see bits of your own future reflected in your parents, pieces of your own personality echoed in your brothers and sisters' (13). They quote a British researcher, H.J. Sants, who coined the term 'genealogical bewilderment' to describe the plight of the adopted person, disconnected from the past. 'It is,' they write, 'a sense of confusion and alienation that seems to emerge at critical times in a person's development' (14). One of the crucial arenas of development for these writers is the early childhood stage they term that of a 'verbal sense of self' (27). 'The verbal sense of self', they write, is the one we are aware of most easily because it is represented through language and other accessible symbols. But even though it dominates, the earlier components of self (emergent, core, and subjective) continue to exist and to influence who we are (27-28).

According to these writers, then, the self-reference that reflects an

individual's identity is formed of biological mirrors. (Note that the resemblances that come up in daily conversation are almost always figured as pictures, not as sounds; 'they look alike' is more common a statement of family likeness than 'they sound alike'). We each see ourselves in another; we are not original, but partial copies of our blood relatives. The goal for the adoptee, according to this narrative, is to *locate* the self, to find it whole by joining it with biological family. The only way to become one-self, then, is to find others that resemble that self. The end result of such looking (the journey motif is strong in adoption literature) is the strong assertion of an 'I'. That bookstores are full of adoption memoirs these days indicates the strength of this paradigm: from Korean adoptees to birthmothers to adoptees who describe their 'reunions' with kin, to how-to books on making the search and re-recovery possible, myriad proof texts can be found. These books assert a strong link between language and identity by the very fact of their having been written and then published. My personal amazon.com account presents me with 'lists' of must-read books on adoption almost every time I open it.

Thus a paradox lives within the definition of identity as posited by the writers I've cited thus far. The adoptee is lost when he or she is 'alone,' without biological kinship to assure her that she *belongs* to others, within a genealogy that can be *seen*. And yet the adoptee, in seeking a 'whole' identity, is actually looking for ways in which that identity depends on other people. So that the notion of 'identity' is raised to the truth-position in the equation. The assumption is that we have identities, and that the way to find them is to locate ways in

which they are like other, similar, identities, those which are signaled usually by resemblances of form (bodies), not content (souls, sounds). Furthermore, the assumption is that our identity comes from our origin, and that our origin is biology, is nature, is 'natural'.

Denise Riley has carved out an argument that identities are not biological, but historical. At one moment late in her feminist study, *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988), she writes that 'the body is a concept' (104). In that book, Riley posits that 'woman' is a category that has shifted in meaning radically over the past several centuries. For Riley, even the biological is a construct that shifts over time, depending on whether the age lives under the star of religion or 'the social'. Where this book falls short of answering central questions about identity, we find Riley's next book providing answers to the question: even if identity is in perpetual historical flux, where does it come from? This is a question of origins, one that does not especially appeal to Riley, but it is central to her work in *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (2000).

Riley's second major book of theoretical criticism is what might be termed, in part, an intellectual autobiography. How her philosophical writings contain more self-revelation than do her poems is a question to which I will turn later on. Portions of *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* cut close to the bone, where many of her poems do not. While the ostensible subject of this book is the way in which irony can be used as a political force, its primary subject, in

my reading of it, is the relationship between adoption and identity, a question that only comes into the reader's view almost halfway through. For this book is an argument against identity, an assertion that we cannot describe ourselves (unless as the object of our own public relations), and that this *lack* of identity is a positive. Against the impersonality of this argument, as Riley engages it in philosophical language, is the 'personality' of the arguer when she introduces the situation of her own adoption, without acknowledging it as such. First she comments on the way in which 'identity' is asserted as a quality with 'the hard permanence of diamond' (131), then asks, 'Under what historical circumstances do I come to feel sure that I need to find an identity as an aura over and above the facts of my parentage' (132)?

The question of parentage proves more uncertain than it might in the hands of a different writer. Riley goes on to pose the following problem, one that she does not say was *hers*: 'to be brought up as the child of one set of parents, then much later to stumble upon the fact that these were not one's original parents at all, might well be assumed to generate "a crisis of identity" (135). The crisis is not generated, not because no such thing exists, but because it is a given. 'Yet it can do the very opposite — the previous long years of unease become immediately explicable, and the suddenly revealed genealogical lacuna ushers in an illuminating confirmation as to why things were as they were' (135). And so the possible crisis is actually a blessing: 'As is often the case, this "lack" is really a kind of plenitude—not mournful, but a positively productive lack' (135). Not only will



Riley, in the larger spirit of her argument, use this revision of 'lack' into 'plenitude' to argue against fixed notions of identity, she also uses them in the more local case to argue against the adoption 'reunion' as a necessary moment of healing, referring to 'its inevitable disappointments . . . in a culture of ordinary identity which so emphasised its curative powers to heal the torment of blackness' (135). And this torment, she asserts, comes not out of a 'refusal of identity, but in the obliteration of a history' (135).

If identities, however fluxial, are posited, where do they come from? According to Riley, they come out of language; we are its subjects, not the other way around. If there is a 'verbal self', as the earlier writers I quoted said there is, then that verbal being, according to Riley, does not emerge from the self, but uses it as something of a causeway, flowing into, rather than out, of it. The trap, as Riley sees it, is that the identities created by language are thought to be 'original', rather than 'received'. 'The very grammar of the language of self-reference seems to demand, indeed to guarantee, an authenticity closely tied to originality. Yet simultaneously it cancels this possibility', she writes (57). Because the 'I' does not exist, Riley argues, it cannot claim originality either. As for the writing of one's self: 'My autobiography always arrives from somewhere outside me; my narrating *I* is really anybody's promiscuously' (58).

Riley's autobiographies (*Words as Selves* and several of her poems) are written in the languages of philosophy and popular songs, promiscuously. A telling passage in the theoretical text moves the

reader through 'Riley's' ideas by way first of claims to the throne in England, then to Heidegger, an expected source in such a book, and on to The Platters. Here is a passage I would like to look at carefully:

That false feeling of an I-pronouncement can't be to do simply with its air of claiming to originate, despite that common sensation that one is first being spoken by language, that 'I' is a pretender to an impossible throne. In this vein Heidegger describes language as an invocation to which man, although its ostensible speaker, must resonate. Or as The Platters less gloriously had it, Oh yes, *I'm* the great pretender.<sup>3</sup>

That the movement of the mind behind, or with, these words is poetic goes almost without saying. The *I* who is a pretender resonates with British monarchical disputes, which lead her to Heidegger and his emphasis on the ways in which language speaks through people, and then to the lyrics of a pop song that contains the lyrics, 'I'm the great pretender'. This passage operates as more than a horrible deflation of the terms by which we talk about the self, however. It is a passage that moves historically, from Renaissance political conflicts to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, and finally to later 20<sup>th</sup> century music; the last passage is, of course, the most accessible to a general audience. It is also an autobiographical passage, for a scholar-poet raised in Britain, educated in the philosophical tradition, whose ear was very much on her radio in the early 1960s. It is, perhaps, most curious that the only 'quotation' actually quoted here belongs to The Platters; debates among politicians and Heidegger's assertions are both

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<sup>3</sup> You can find the lyrics to 'The Great Pretender' online at <http://lyrics.rare-lyrics.com/P/Platters/The-Great-Pretender.html>

presented as indirect discourse, not given their own 'texture'. Pop lyrics, as they are wont to do, interrupt our reveries, even as they push them forward. They are also far more susceptible to copyright law than are the words of the old philosophers; money is at stake, after all.

The 'I' lives at least a double life in this passage. Riley is not speaking of herself directly, but of the 'I' one finds in a pop song, an 'I' that merely pretends to be itself. The 'I' in the Platters song expresses a 'need' such that 'I pretend too much / I'm lonely but no one can tell.' Living in a make-believe world of happiness, the speaker senses that his pretender role has become 'too real'. He has made himself into something he is not, at least in the eyes of others. That the 'I' in most pop songs is formulaic, having less to do with the lyricist than with the form in which he or she is working, suggests that to pretend to be such an I is already to remove oneself from the 'real' I by at least three degrees. 'I-pronouncement', as Riley calls it, is the creation of the 'I' by saying it. 'I pronounce you man and wife', is at once an assertion about one's language (I am pronouncing these words) and an action (I am making you such by saying so). In Riley's version of self-hood, I am who I am because I say so, but I say so as often as not because I heard it in a song — or read it in a book of philosophy. The song's formula, its cliches, link the self to a communal space: 'a cliché is not to be despised', she writes in the Introduction to *Impersonal Passion*, 'its automatic comfort is the happy exteriority of a shared language which knows itself perfectly well to be a contentless but sociable turning outward toward the world' (4). That the singers of the song

were African Americans, the voices at least implicitly male, and that their adopter is a white female British poet and theorist, only further complicates the question of identification. And strengthens Riley's argument that language imposes identities on us, rather than the other way around.

The word 'texture' comes from Leonard Diepeveen, whose *Changing Voices: The Modern Quoting Poem*, creates some needed categories for poems that allude and poems that quote, and argues that 'appropriation of previously existing material may well be *the* aesthetic of this century' (viii). Crucial to Diepeveen's description of quotation is his emphasis on the role of *disruption* it plays in the Modernist poem. Unlike allusions, which meld into the new text, quotations have a texture, which 'implies a quotation's history, its past, "original" use and this original use's earlier appropriations by culture' (3). Quotations within poems are inevitably 'crude', and 'fight poetic unity' (95). They are at once repetitions within history, and moments of originality, as of course material quoted is never the same as it was when it first appeared. In a poem that subsumes texture, except in the footnotes that follow, Riley returns to 'the great pretender'. The first fluid sentence of the poem contains two versions of the 'I'; the first is a lyric 'I', presumably belonging to the poet, and the second comes out of a popular song that is not quoted with 'marks', but set apart so:

Navy near-black cut in with lemon, fruity bright lime green.  
I roam around around around around acidic yellows, globe  
oranges burning, slashed cream, huge scarlet flowing

anemones, barbaric pink singing, radiant weeping  
When will I be loved? (50)

What is the purpose of this quotation, 'When will I be loved?' Is it an appeal to authority, as Marjorie Garber might argue, when she writes that quotation 'instates an authority elsewhere and, at the same time, it imparts that authority, temporarily, to the speaker or the writer' (2)? Is it an 'interruption of context', as Walter Benjamin would claim? Is it an appropriation *of* authority?

In this instance the quote is but a disruptive, emotive addition, at that. Insofar as the reader can be expected to know at least some of the lyrics to the song by The Platters, the above poem, cool on its lyric surface, reveals a sound-track that is desperate, self-pitying, anxious, and pained. The poet of cool surfaces unveils the sound of a 'crybaby song'.<sup>4</sup> For the singer bemoans her state as one who is 'not loved':

When I find a new man  
that I want for mine,  
it always breaks my heart in two.  
It happens every time.  
I've been made blue. I've been lied to.

*When will I be loved?* (Everly Brothers Lyrics, italics mine)<sup>5</sup>

The next line of Riley's poem contains another barely buried quote: 'Flood, drag to papery long brushes / of deep violet, that's where it is, indigo, oh no, it's in / his kiss' (50). 'It's In His Kiss (The Shoop Shoop Song)', with lyrics by Rudy Clark, erupts into the poet's

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Deborah Meadows for telling me about this phrase.

<sup>5</sup> The lyrics to 'When Will I Be Loved?' can be found at

consciousness via the word 'it', in conjunction with the popular song motif of love, un-, or in this case, requited, proved by 'his kiss'. Riley follows this with the telegraphic sentence: 'Obsessive song'. And the poem ends with another allusion to The Platters's song:

Oh yes I'm the great pretender. Red lays a stripe of darkest  
green on dark. My need is such I pretend too much, I'm  
wearing. And you're not listening to a word I say. (50)

'The Great Pretender' is a song about pretending to do well, when one isn't. It's a song about making-believe, about hiding the hurt from a lost relationship. As such, it relates to the first quotation Riley used, which wonders — despairingly — about love. We can presume that what Riley has written is a love poem about loss, whose key is in the sound-track. Perhaps, as E.E. Kellett asserts, 'A quotation may be adopted as a subterfuge; you may shelter yourself under the authority of another author when you do not wish to face entire responsibility in your own person' (44). But certainly she acknowledges, through example, her more philosophical (and personal) point about identity: 'My *I* never does exist, except (and critically) as a momentary spasmodic site of space-time individuation, and its mocking promise of linguistic originality must be, and always is, thwarted in order for language to exist in its proper communality' (*Words* 58). What better way to show the 'communality' of language than to rely upon pop song lyrics for one's self (and other) expression? And yet, within this 'thwarting', we find the subjective underpinnings of Riley's ostensibly philosophical poem. As she writes in *Words as Selves*, 'Perhaps emotionality, too, has its own external quality. It can arrive from the

outside' (49). As in a pop song, where the emotionality is a formula, which depends on a solitary 'I' looking for community with at least one lover.

The way in which Riley uses quotations, then, especially the 'great pretender' quotation, that by now seems central to her work, says a lot about her view of identity as well:

When I write *I* and follow up the pronoun with a self-description, feelings of fraud grip me,' she writes in *Words as Selves*. The self is a fraud because it is performative rather than 'real.' Poetry, too, is performance, even when it rests upon the page: 'Poetry in its composing is an inrush of others' voices, and in this respect it is not more than a licensed intensification of the very same property in prose. So "finding one's own voice' must be an always frustrated search, fishing around in a strange fry-up or a bouillabaisse in which half-forgotten spiky or slimy things bubble up to the surface' (*Words* 65).

The writer is not an originator, but an accumulator and editor. In this case she is also a jukebox, whose buttons are pushed as background to abstract thinking, even as the impetus to thought is difficult emotion. Or does the emotionality of language force the poet to think about *it*? And what, then, is philosophical language? The prose in which the book of philosophy does not bear the same expectations as the poetry in which the lyric is composed. The lyrical I is assumed to be subjective, the philosophical I not. The philosophical I is assumed to be one among many, not originary but a commentator upon a tradition. And in that, it is much like the popular song, in its reach

back to tradition. As Perry Meisel writes, in his comparative study of Romanticism and rock and roll: 'The shared preoccupation with boundaries in both Romantic and African-American culture leads us to something else we can now see that they share: the knowledge that everything is made up, invented, usually out of tradition and authority' (10). That our pretenses come out of the authority of our traditions is something Riley also teaches us.

In her introduction to *The Words of Selves*, Riley writes: 'The strains of describing the self are also acute within those literary genres reliant on a covert self-presentation; hence it is a liar who writes, and a liar who tries lyric' (18). This comes close in tone to Laura Riding's lacerations of the lyric poem. Like the previous poet, Riley sees the lyric, with its notion of a self that can be described, as 'advertising' (*Words* 28). Like Riding, Riley turns to prose to give the lie to the lyric lie. If the liar tries lyric, then perhaps the philosopher/theorist is better suited to call it such, and then to tell the truths we recognize behind the lying 'I'. (I hear the refrain of 'Your Lying Eyes' by The Eagles as I write this.) The very artifice of the philosophical I releases Riley into a lyrical space, where she can reveal (and re-veil) her doubts about the 'I', not as a matter of personal biology, but as a way of thinking about selfhood. In this sense, Riley's work very much seems to prefigure that of another feminist theorist who was adopted, Kimberley Leighton.

In her wonderful essay, 'Being Adopted and Being a Philosopher: Exploring Identity and the "Desire to Know" Differently,' Leighton



writes:

To have an adopted identity—which is for me an identity based on the desire to know—is thus to include in that very identity the way in which it has been denied. To be adopted, then, involves including in *being* those processes of *becoming* which not only affirm who we are, which not only give us the means with which we can assume an identity, but which also make the articulation of an identity possible' (169).

For Leighton, as for Riley, the desire to know is not a desire to know *origins* but to know *articulations* of identities. Knowing comes through the unfolding of language, not through the discovery of a biological origin, even when that discovery might be part of the person's history, as it was for Riley and for Leighton.

It seems appropriate at this point to define the word 'adopt', for its origins are both in the act of raising a child who was not born to you, and also in taking on ideas that were not yours to begin with — in other words, to follow my argument, to quote them. According to the on-line Merriam-Webster dictionary, 'to adopt' means to 'take by choice into a relationship' (as in a child) and 'to take up and practice or use'. The word, they say, 'implies accepting something created by another or foreign to one's nature' (M-W). The rather more reputable Oxford English Dictionary adds, under the fifth definition: 'To take (a course, etc.) as one's own (without the idea of its having been another's), to choose for one's own practice'. What is the act of quotation but the acceptance of 'something created by another' that is *chosen* into a relationship with another text? Riley's use of quotation,

in *'Lure, 1963'* and other poems, enacts an adoptive use of texts. If her text has a 'nature', a point she would no doubt argue against, then the pop song lyric has a very different 'nature'. And yet they are related, as in an adoptive family.

Unlike many poets, including John Ashbery, with whom Riley has a poetic relation, Riley does not mock the pop song or simply incorporate its form into her own lyric.<sup>6</sup> Instead, the pop song is an integral part of the texture of her own poem, revealing naked emotions that she cannot, while being restrained within the highly controlled syntax of her own sentences, lines. The Platters are no less honored by her quotation of them than is Heidegger, and vice versa. Further, through her use of citation at the back of the book, she not only covers her copyright duties, but also makes it clear that these quotations come from particular places and moments in history. Her adoption, in the lingo of this day, is 'open', even as the frequent lack of quotation marks diminishes the differences between Riley's language and that of the pop lyricists from whom she borrows.

'A Misremembered Lyric' incorporates portions of a lyric by Cook and Greenaway, 'Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart', while using the quote to jump off into a poem about dealing with loss.

A misremembered lyric: a soft catch of its song  
whirrs in my throat. "Something's gotta hold of my heart

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<sup>6</sup> John Ashbery's poem from *April Galleons*, 'Forgotten Song,' posits what I call an adoptive poetics. Ashbery begins the poem with two lines from ballads left at his door as foundlings. The poet adopts these lines and 'raises' them via the poem.

tearing my' soul and my conscience apart, long after  
presence is clean gone and leaves unfurnished no  
shadow. (51)<sup>7</sup>

The song was about love, wondering if it is *real* or not; Riley here uses a bit of the song's language to get at a very different subject, namely loss. Like 'The Great Pretender', then, as with so many pop songs, the central question is not simply about love, but about the *reality* of it. While the artifice of the form renders the question ironic to the reader of the original lyric, the force of the lyric is different when it is adopted into Riley's poem. Here, Riley uses the 'misremembered' lyric to convey a pathos she might not permit herself otherwise. 'I don't want absence to be this beautiful', she writes, with perhaps a note of irony that she has 'lost' the full lyric. Where the lyric is misremembered, however, 'you get no consolation anyway until your memory's / dead' (51). That Riley's memory has not died is emphasized by yet another song lyric that emerges out of the rain, or the thought of 'rain', namely The Cascades 1963 song, 'Rhythm of the Rain':

Listen to the rhythm of the falling rain,  
Telling me just what a fool I've been.  
I wish that it would go and let me cry in vain,  
And let me be alone again.<sup>8</sup>

This becomes, in Riley's rendering:

There is no beauty out of loss; can't do it-

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7 The lyrics for 'Something's Gotten Hold of My Heart' can be found at:  
<http://www.risa.co.uk/sla/song.php?songid=13355>

Riley *has* misremembered it: the word is not 'tearing' but 'dragging.'

8 The lyrics to 'Rhythm of the Rain' can be found at

and once the falling rain starts on the upturned  
leaves, and I listen to the rhythm of unhappy pleasure  
what I hear is bossy death telling me which way to  
go, what I see is a pool with an eye in it. (51)

Here, Riley has not only 'adopted' a portion of the lyric, as 'rhythm of the rain' becomes 'rhythm of unhappy pleasure', but she has also adopted a mode of inquiry into the fact of loss. In the song, the girl the singer loves has gone away, hearkening to 'a brand new start!' In the poem, the exact loss is hidden, but the poet's meditation on loss ends, too, with the lines,

Looking for a brand-new start. Oh and never  
notice yourself ever. As in life you don't. (51)

The speaker's brand-new start here is less hopeful than in the song; there is no exclamation after, more a sigh of submission to the loss the speaker has suffered. And the poem ends with the ironic assertion — ironic because this poet always notices herself — that you cannot notice yourself. 'Notice' of course relates to publicity, and as we have seen, Riley thinks of sentences that begin with the pronoun 'I' as partaking more of publicity than of actual identity. More than that, however, the self cannot 'notice' itself because it comes to us out of so many fragments of quoted language, so that even during what one imagines is an intensely personal moment of grieving, the speaker is spoken through. She is 'being lived' (*Words of Selves* 50), largely by the scraps of language she sees and hears around her.

The relationship of language to self is, of course, best represented in

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[http://www.aldielyrics.com/lyrics/the\\_cascades/rhythm\\_of\\_the\\_rain.html](http://www.aldielyrics.com/lyrics/the_cascades/rhythm_of_the_rain.html)

the process of naming, being named, and changing one's name. Adoption narratives often include stories about names that were given, then taken and replaced by other names. Changing one's name back is thought by some adoptees to recover an original self, the one that was named first, by one's biological parents. But Riley will have none of this; the name, for her, is inevitably historical, and no one can evade history. The name comes to us from the outside (just as language does, and its freight of affect). 'The harsh truth', Riley writes in *Impersonal Passion*, 'is that even your original name does not belong to you; it belongs to other people and always did, and that won't change now' (325). The same is true for the old lyrics that Riley incorporates, adopts, into her own. The feelings they express, in the language of cliché, do not belong to us alone; they belong to a community of us-es.

There is irony in the way we are 'lived' by pop songs, or even Heidegger for that matter, although I hope to have shown that Riley's use of quoted language expresses the deeper ironies about self and language that are the crux of her philosophical work. One such irony is that her songs are distinctly those of her youth, the 1950s and early 1960s, and that their sexual politics and their vocabularies are hardly those of the feminist theorist Denise Riley became. These songs insist on distinctions between 'the real' and the 'pretend', between community and solitude (where community would be better, but isn't possible much of the time). These songs insist, in other words, on the very concepts that Denise Riley has come to disavow. That is, she doesn't say 'isn't it ironic?' in the sense most of us use the term to

point out one of each day's petty contradictions. She says 'it is ironic' in the sense one might say 'it is true'; that our identities are at once one thing and another expresses the way in which they are 'ironic', and can be nothing else. The 'misremembered lyric' expresses a mode of irony that Riley honors in a long poem about Echo, entitled (with quotation marks), "'Affections of the Ear'", a poem that revises the Narcissus myth away from the eye and toward the ear. If Narcissus traditionally loves himself because he resembles himself, and thus makes a perfect family for himself, then Echo works through a resemblance in sound (misremembered as it might be). That Echo's influence on mythology has been less central than Narcissus' returns us to the centrality of *image* rather than *sound*, of *nature* rather than *construction*, in the western tradition. (Riley's Narcissus loves himself, and not his clone, hence his self-torture.) But, because sound is dependent on time, and time shreds memory, Echo can only offer partial echoes: 'I am mere derivation', she proclaims, and yet her originality — like that of the poet — comes out of what she cannot remember accurately. Having fallen for Narcissus, she responds to him out of his own voice, but a voice truncated, become ironic: 'He called "I'd die before I'd give myself to you!" I shrilled "Give myself to you!" Ran nearer. / If he'd cried "I'd die before I'd fuck you", at least I could have echoed back that "Fuck you" (*Selected* 95). This rare thing, a rhyming poem by Denise Riley, ends with Echo echoing the poet, or perhaps the other way around: 'All I may say is through constraint, dictation straight from sounds doggedly at work in a strophe' (96).

If quotation represents constraint, it also — when the marks are used for emphasis rather than to denote another's sentence or fragment — points out the impossibility of category. As she writes in *'Am I That Name?' Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, 'the arrangement of people under the banners of "men" or "women" are enmeshed with the histories of other concepts too, including those of "the social" and "the body"' (7). Or, as she phrases it in the first poem of her *Selected Poems*, 'A Note on Sex and The Reclaiming of Language', again positing language against sight, the fluidity of words against the fixity of a gaze:

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. (11)

This involves a critique that gets not simply at the problem of individual identity, but also at the problem of 'identity' in language; the quoted word is assumed to have a history and, because it has a history, it is presumed to exist in flux. If human identity is in flux because it is based on language, and if language is in flux because it is historical and not fixed, then Riley's world-view is indeed one without 'end'. The apparent absurdity of this end-lessness is borne out in this poem:

She has ingested her wife

she has re-inhabited her own wrists

she is squatting in her own temples, the

fall of light on hair or any decoration

is re-possessed. "She" is I.

To assume a pronoun, as to assume a philosophical position, is according to ordinary speech, the equivalent of 'adopting' one. Riley uses the word in this sense quite frequently, more familiar than most at its valences of meaning, its relevance to issues of identity and language: "And then to adopt these public designations of being hurt may not, in fact, offer me the consolation that they purport to bring" (Words 125). And: "Near-masochistic submission may flower in the adoption of a mildly derogatory category" (127). To claim an identity, any identity, as we have seen, is to "adopt" one, according to Riley. Adoption is not, then, a special case, a concept good only when applied to certain persons, certain ideas, certain poems. Instead, it describes the dilemma that faces each individual, living out an identity within differences that is marked by Riley in her use of quotation. If family is generally considered to be a space of allusiveness, to use Leonard Diepeveen's definition toward another end, then adopted families are places where quotations are marked through overt, visible, differences between people, texts. According to Diepeveen, "alluding texts attempt to assimilate their borrowings; the poet does not present the allusion as a self-contained texture that refuses integration into the new text . . . allusions do not as violently resist their new function as do quotations. At their most extreme, allusions passively submit" (11, 13). On the other hand, "All quoting . . . exploits an alien texture" (15). Yet Riley intervenes in what might be a neatly separated category here, but suggesting that family is constructed of discontinuity, just as individual identity is, that allusiveness is less possible in contemporary life and poetry than is quotation, a quality recognized by the ear, rather than the eye/I. If, as



Edward Said suggests, “writing is a form of displacement” (22), then Denise Riley is one of the most important contemporary writers of that form. And if the lyric is written by liars, it may be the best form in which to contain (or fail to contain) such an argument about who the “I” is, or might be.

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