I have never forgotten the thrill I felt when I read Denise Riley’s (1981) History Workshop article “The Free Mothers”: Pronatalism and Working Women in Industry at the End of the Last War in Britain. I had found the article in the process of research on women and work, a long-standing preoccupation that continued after my 1978 book with Louise Tilly, Women, Work, and Family. I was newly arrived at Brown University, then (and now) a centre for feminist theoretical work of a kind I had not before experienced. At Brown, I was being exposed to post-structuralism and psychoanalysis and grappling with the ways (at once exciting and painful) in which they were changing my understanding of what analyses of gender entailed. At the end of her very long piece, which Denise in characteristic modesty referred to as ‘a bit of writing’ (Riley, 1981: 114), I was – as they say – blown away by this:

But the trouble with the attempt to lay bare the red heart of truth beneath the discolourations and encrustations of 30-odd years on, is that it assumes a clear space out of which voices can speak. As if, that is, ascertaining ‘consciousness’ stopped at scraping off history. That is not, of course, to discredit what people say as such, or to imply that considering the expression of wants is pointless. The difficulty is that needs and wants are never pure and undetermined in such a way that they could be fully revealed by stripping away a patina of historical postscripts and rewritings, to shine out with an absolute clarity. There is the space of language and desire which this conception of reading off an original consciousness forgets (Riley, 1981: 111–112).
‘The red heart of truth’ has stayed with me for nearly forty years. I have always remembered it as the characterisation of a certain feminist desire to find emancipatory consciousness or, at least, ‘empowerment’ and its consequent ‘agency’ in the history of women. (And it somehow captures the beating of my own red heart as I read Denise’s prose.) I was already embarked on a quest to rethink what it meant to be writing women’s history, so, in a sense, I was prepared for the turn to ‘the space of language and desire’ that Denise’s article took. But I was not prepared for the stunning way in which she wrote it, nor for the model of thinking theory with history it so brilliantly provided.

Who was this woman, I wondered, and how could I continue a conversation with her? It was 1983, and we were launching the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women at Brown University. There was fellowship money to bring scholars to pursue their research with us for a year. I found an address for Denise – at Shakespeare Walk in London; it added immeasurably to her allure – and wrote to her (‘Dear Dr Riley’) inviting her to apply. She wrote back (‘Dear Professor Scott’) and proposed a project that would become ‘Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History. Denise spent 1984–1985 at the Pembroke Center and that was the beginning of an enduring friendship, for which I am forever indebted to ‘The Free Mothers’. Hence my decision to write about it for this tribute to Denise as inspirational scholar, teacher, colleague and friend.

Irony

The first thing to note about the article is its ironic stance. Although Denise makes no explicit mention of it, the very title – a quote from Graham Greene who defines ‘free mothers’ as ‘mothers of free nations’ – is a commentary on the unfreedom experienced by working mothers. Greene’s equation of free mothers with mothers of free nations subsumes women’s reproductive function to the needs of the state. And the story Denise will tell in the pages that follow – of the discursive eclipsing of working women’s needs by the putative demands of motherhood – illustrates how that happened.

The central concern of the article, as its title implies, is with the status of mothers as workers and with the attempt by a range of political commentators to articulate what their needs might be. These mothers mobilised for wartime work are anything but free; indeed, defending the free nation by entering the workforce requires accepting all manner of constraints. There is no question that working mothers’ needs – for time to shop and clean the house, for reasonable working hours, for living wages, for childcare and other social services – were a major preoccupation for those managing the war effort. But these material matters ‘were obscured by a passing rhetoric of maternal function’ (Riley, 1981: 61) (emphasis in original). In the discourse of policy-makers, the essentialised mother, the key to family stability, eclipsed the figure of the working woman with children during the war and after.
But the post-war pronatalist attention to women’s reproductive role was not new; it had its antecedents in the war effort itself. The provision of nurseries for the children of working women during the war was understood as a way to bolster ‘mothers’ whose work was temporarily required for the duration of hostilities. ‘There is a crucial difference between invoking “the mother” and speaking about the practical needs of women with children: the first is a rhetoric of function and static position; the second discusses sexual-social differences in a way which does not fix it under the appearance of eternity’ (Riley, 1981: 101).

It was the first of these that prevailed during and after the war. What Denise describes as a tension between the hailing of ‘free mothers’ working outside the home and the concern about population (‘mothers of free nations’) that drove pronatalist campaigns across the political spectrum was resolved (as it is in Greene’s definition) in the direction of pronatalism. To the post-68 feminist question ‘why was pronatalism not roundly and universally rejected as such, as inimical to the “interests” of women?’ (Riley, 1981: 103), Denise points to the fragmented nature of feminism, to the vagueness of the general demand for ‘equality’ and to the fact that there was ‘no feminist political philosophy [of that kind] historically available’ (Riley, 1981: 107). As a result, ‘working women with children became an invisible category’ (Riley, 1981: 107), replaced by an ideologically constructed representation of the mother as a temporary worker, but whose essential being had to do with her reproductive function.

Denise works the ironic resonance (the oxymoron?) to challenge those feminists who take literally the notion of ‘free mothers’ to mean that employment outside the home was by definition liberating, giving rise to trade unionism and other forms of resistance:

It could be asked whether the continuously high levels of women’s absenteeism are best analysed as a form of militancy, a form of industrial resistance less sharply visible than women’s periodic involvements in official or more often unofficial strikes. Or whether, if this kind of resistance cannot be taken as a guarantee of political consciousness (as distinct from boredom or exhaustion with two jobs, work at home and work at work), how that usefully modifies the idea of class-consciousness itself (Riley, 1981: 70).

The wartime employment of married women did not contribute to the advance of women as workers, she concludes, ‘for women were, rhetorically, both overinstalled as mothers and de-sexed as workers’ (Riley, 1981: 109).

She goes further, arguing against those who attribute the loss of an emancipatory moment to the combined efforts of psychologists and the state:

post 1968 feminism has grown up with a depiction of a mass postwar return of women to the home after 1945, engineered by a governmental deployment of maternal
deprivation theories, advanced mainly by the psychologist John Bowlby. This depiction misleads in so far as it assumes a collusion between the State and a particular psychology [...] The supposition that government and psychologist colluded to confine mothers also colours our understanding of the nature of ‘the State’ in relation to ‘the family,’ to preserve a falsely-unitary sense of both (Riley, 1981: 63). As an alternative, Denise offers a reading of this history that effectively deconstructs those ‘falsely-unitary’ oppositions.

**Critical history**

There’s a brief moment at the start of ‘The Free Mothers’ when Denise explains that her interest in the topic might be a way of trying to ‘make sense of my own history as a “single parent” relying on State provisions in the shape of nurseries and welfare benefits’ (Riley, 1981: 59). But, she continues, ‘biography apart’ (Riley, 1981: 59), her quest has to do with thinking about the contemporary demands of socialist feminism as it addresses state welfare and family policy. Looking back on that moment in a piece for *History Workshop* on ‘historic passions’ in 1997, she writes:

Mine wasn’t a passion for a written history, but an obsession with the stance of a moment of socialist feminism, with whether its questions, which were also mine, were after all helpful [...] I believed that my brief corner, the history of the wartime nurseries, really might have practical implications for how campaigns for childcare provision might best be conducted in the 1970s; a potential usefulness to justify the solitary library hours (Riley, 1997: 238).

This is an understatement of what goes on in ‘The Free Mothers’. It is not only an attempt to find useful ‘lessons in the past’, but an entire rethinking of the very questions that feminists should be asking. It uses history not to document reductive theorising about the formation of state policy, but instead to hone our ability to analyse that policy, to interrogate rather than assume its operations. The article combines critical theorising (about language, desire, subjectivity) with a historian’s attention to detail in order to illuminate the complexities and contingencies that produce what comes to be represented as the record of the past. It constantly challenges many of the feminist presumptions that were driving the emerging field of women’s history, rendering them illogical or insufficient to account for the evidence on which they appear to be based. For example, when exploring the way the Ministry of Labour insisted on the difference of sex for the training of women shipbuilders, she comments that were it not for all the raw material it provides for arguments about whether this use of language is sexist or not, the ‘sexist’ characterisation is ‘wrong because it would collapse far too much together’ (Riley, 1981: 68). Simple answers do not work for Denise (a source of some resistance on the part of those of her sisters who preferred to keep working with them).
Denise was introducing history into socialist feminist debates in order to challenge the very terms on which the debates were being fought. But also in order to challenge conventional notions of history itself. In this way, the mind of the critical historian is laid bare in these pages.

Critical history is driven by theoretical/philosophical considerations. For Denise, these are considerations of language as it structures subjectivity, desire and our categories of analysis. In ‘The Free Mothers’, seeking to understand the effect of pronatalist thought on women, she insists that ‘the ubiquity of official nervousness about the falling population can’t in itself be assumed to have affected women’s reproductive behaviour one way or the other. Rhetoric doesn’t make women have more children through the sheer power of the word’ (Riley, 1981: 60). This view does not factor in considerations of desire either at the practical level of individual decision-making or at the unconscious level of subjective identity. Still, she says, the political effects of discourses matter, but in ways that must be considered, not assumed.

Part of the consideration has to do with the material conditions the discourses do and do not address. The first part of the essay explores those conditions in great detail, dealing with the kind of wartime work available (low skill and low pay), the strains of long hours, the availability and limits of day nurseries and then the response to the end of the war. Low wages and long hours were the ‘hard-headed grounds’ for women to leave the workforce and not ‘purely sentimental conservatism about a woman’s proper place after marriage’ (Riley, 1981: 83). While the demand for women workers persisted in some industries after the war, ‘no broadly-emancipating moves in the direction of a social recognition of childcare needs accompanied the cries for female labour’ (Riley, 1981: 79). And the conception of women’s work and childcare as a ‘social need’ was replaced by ‘a rhetoric which spoke, depending on its political persuasion, of the needs of either the nation or of the community for more children’ (Riley, 1981: 79). All of this combined to discourage women from seeking work; their actions misread (by contemporaries and historians) as confirming the notion that motherhood and wage-earning were necessarily (essentially) antithetical activities.

The second section of the essay is a long analysis of the spread of pronatalist ideas across the political spectrum. Against many of her feminist colleagues, she notes the importance of the discourse of family before and during the war; the post-war period did not signal a ‘concerted drive to revive traditional values after the demoralisation of war, to rewrite the nuclear family after the closing of war nurseries and the return of women to the home’ (Riley, 1981: 98). Instead, her historical investigation leads her to this conclusion: ‘...if you look for some uniform postwar movement to “rehabilitate the family” it cannot be traced’ (Riley, 1981: 98). There are instead a series of attempts of various kinds that settle on ‘the mother’ as the cause either of family pathology or stability. These attempts follow the exhaustion
of a homogenising social-democratic emphasis on ‘the family’ which had been running through the war... In this light, I would describe that particularly intense concentration on ‘the mother’ which got going in 1945–6 as a symptom/indication of the impossibility of holding together, at the level of language, the unity of ‘the family’, once the end of the war had dissolved its rhetorical appeal (Riley, 1981: 98).

The effect of the universal stress on the Mother was to create two irreconcilable parties: the housewife-mother and the woman worker. The latter was implicitly de-sexed because after the war, discussion about childcare provision increasingly turned on the needs of the industrial productivity drive and therefore withered away as industrial needs changed. Working women with children became an invisible category, overlooked from virtually all perspectives (Riley, 1981: 107).

The article concludes with a reflection on the piece itself; a critical consideration of her own practice. The piece was meant, she says, to tease apart simple causal explanations of the kind that attributed to state action working women’s experiences or that equated women’s liberation with work for wages outside the home. One way to do this was to offer a host of evidence to refute those assumptions; she calls it a ‘seemingly “materialist” method of working (the method that the earlier descriptive sections in this paper went in for, and then later drew back from)’ (Riley, 1981: 111). The reasons for the drawing back had to do with the inadequacy of this method to address the complexities of subjectivity. The literal reading of women’s complaints or lists of preferences (the search for ‘real wishes’, for the ‘red heart of truth’) left entirely aside the question of subjectivity – always an unstable mixture of desire, social conformity and material pressure, conditioned (enunciated) by language. ‘A fully historical materialism would need to address this problem of understanding subjectivity somehow’ (Riley, 1981: 111). That ‘somehow’ I hear as a sigh, a wish, the way to mark a theoretical absence we are being called upon to address.

The other inadequacy has to do with the issue of need. How are the needs of women, of working mothers, to be understood? ‘There is no clear theory of need available to us’ (Riley, 1981: 113). And yet we cannot do without it. The article has demonstrated the conservative impact of the ‘needs of mothers’ discourse, that ‘starts out with gender at its most decisive and inescapable point—the biological capacity to bear children’ and ends up ‘making the needs of mothers into fixed properties of motherhood as a social function. I believe this is what happened in postwar Britain’ (Riley, 1981: 113). How to avoid this kind of outcome for socialist feminist politics?

I’ve said both that people’s needs can’t be revealed by a simple process of historical unveiling... while elsewhere in these notes I’ve talked about the ‘real needs’ of
mothers myself. I take it that it’s necessary both to stress the non-self-evident nature of need and the complexities of its determinants, and also to act politically as if needs could be met; or at least met half-way (Riley, 1981: 113).

This call for a strategic invocation of specific needs without attaching them to an essential identity continued to preoccupy Denise – it is at the heart of Am I That Name? (Riley, 1988). In that book she talks about ‘women’ as a political category, as a ‘massification’ produced to achieve specific ends, and warns against its essentialisation. It is not just that there are many kinds of women (the claim of intersectionality), but that ‘women’ do not always inhabit the category itself; subjective life is more complex than the categories that are said to define us. The point of the ‘Free Mothers’ was to warn against the dangers – the unfreedom – consequent on our taking those categories to represent the reality (material, social, psychic) of our lives.

One of the amazing things to me about this article is that although it was written in the context of a specific socialist feminist moment, it speaks still to the preoccupations of our politics, not only because of its substantive arguments about determining the ‘needs’ of women, but also for its brilliant theoretical interventions both for the thinking of feminists and (perhaps, in these days of the ‘new empiricism’, even more urgent) for the writing of history.

Notes
1. That this interpretation persists among some feminists is evident in Robcis (2013).
2. She developed these ideas at greater length in War and the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother (Riley, 1983).

References
Riley, Denise (1981) “The Free Mothers”: Pronatalism and Working Women in Industry at the End of the Last War in Britain. History Workshop Journal, 1(1): 59–119.
Riley, Denise (1983) War and the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother. London: Virago.
Riley, Denise (1988) ’Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History. London: Macmillan.
Riley, Denise (1997) ‘Reflections in the Archives’. History Workshop, 44(1): 238–242.
Robcis, Camille (2013) The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.