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THE POSITION OF A WOMAN: A POETICS OF GRACE
PALEY'S POLITICAL STORYTELLING

by

JAMIE ZABINSKY

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The Position of a Woman: A Poetics of Grace Paley's Political Storytelling

by

Jamie Zabinsky

Advisor: Nancy K. Miller

While literary critics have long shown modest interest in writer-activist Grace Paley's short fiction, no scholarship has yet focused on her extensive record of nonfiction writing. This thesis concentrates on *Just As I Thought*, an anthology of Paley's essays, articles and speeches organized by Paley herself in lieu of any memoir or autobiography. Hannah Arendt's theorizations of time, thought and standpoint serve as frameworks to establish the essay collection, arranged according to Paley's political life along a timeline of feminist history, as a political storytelling project. Political storytelling, in the Arendtian sense and in context of this thesis, aims to establish a polis or political realm in which freedom and equality rely on a public memory maintained only when subjects are able to grasp the existence of standpoints including and apart from their own. Arendt, a political theorist who eschews collective philosophical systems and movements such as feminism, does not find a natural descendant in Paley, a women's rights, anti-war and environmental activist dedicated to feminist movement. To bridge the ideological gap between Arendt and Paley, this thesis turns to Adrienne Rich's prose on standpoint feminist theory and accountability. This thesis ultimately evaluates how Paley, who writes from her own perspective as a woman, employs rhetorical strategies such as irony, humor, dialogue, metaphor and tactical proximity to illuminate the standpoints of others and present a feminist history through stories in her collected nonfiction.

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Grace Paley (1922 – 2007) was a short story author, poet, beloved teacher and lifelong political activist for socialist, feminist, antiwar, and environmental causes. Though she was not a prolific fiction writer—Paley produced three major story collections, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974) and *Later the Same Day* (1985). She was elected to the National Academy of Arts and Letters in 1980, became the first New York State Writer in 1989 and was the Vermont State Poet Laureate from 2003 to 2007. Her *Collected Stories* (1994), which contains her three short fiction volumes, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Scholarship on Paley has primarily focused on the activist themes and narrative strategies used in her short stories, in which she paints portraits of the politics of everyday life through dialogue-heavy exchanges devoid of allegory but full of wit. Many of her stories begin with little context and end with the possibility for change still intact, her characters left to “the open destiny of life” that reflected her belief in the fight for a better future (CS 232).

Given Paley’s literary legacy, her very public, activist persona and the varied though not abundant existing scholarship on her fiction writing, it is surprising that little to no individual attention has been paid to her collection, *Just As I Thought* (1998), a compilation of essays, articles, reports, prefaces and recorded talks chosen and organized by Paley herself. The collection is ordered chronologically by subject matter, with emphases on fragmented moments or events in history, according to Paley’s political life along a timeline of feminist history. In her introduction to the book, Paley writes, “This is not an autobiographical collection, but it is about my life. Many of the pieces are political even when they take on literary subjects – a reaction not unnatural to me or deliberate” (JT *xiii*). Paley produced no autobiography or memoir in any traditional sense – nor did she leave behind the journals, diaries or marginalia typical of more

quantitatively “productive” writers. In “Some Notes on Teaching: Probably Spoken,” she addresses this tendency in a directive to her students: “No personal journals, please, for about a year. Why? Boring to me. When you find only yourself interesting, you’re boring. When I find only myself interesting, I’m a conceited bore. When I’m interested in you, I’m interesting” (JT 191). Paley herself understood that she wrote fiction using her own knowledge—in the feminist sense that experience is knowledge—of family life, motherhood, feminism, love, sex, marriage, socialism, war and pacifism, the space and community of the urban neighborhood, environmentalism and more. Paley resists the label of autobiography, but *Just As I Thought* chronicles the *experiences* that shaped and reflected her political position as well as her ability to understand and convey the positions of others. As a collection, *Just As I Thought* serves to trace the deep interest Paley had not in herself—though on one level it is about her life—but in life in general and the world’s most vulnerable in particular. She was greatly invested in the lives of those whom she felt most need attention, protection and a better future: children, women without full bodily autonomy under patriarchal control, persons of the third world who bear the brunt of racism and imperialism, men drafted to be cannon fodder, and the victims of war, genocide and ecological destruction.

In the essay collection Paley provides a roadmap to the politics of her writing, which I will argue, is a kind of political storytelling informed by the imperatives of standpoint feminism. This thesis will analyze the formal strategies Paley uses in *Just As I Thought* to make her points, as an activist, about the interconnected issues of women’s rights, war (she covers Vietnam, the Gulf War and American military intervention in Central and South America), and environmentalism. My close reading of Paley’s stylistic choices and rhetorical strategies—how she uses metaphor, irony and dialogue, how she plays with genre, the various tones she assigns

to different situations and subjects—will serve to illuminate a poetics of Paley’s political storytelling.

If we are to establish a poetics of Grace Paley’s nonfiction writing as a set of political storytelling techniques, it is important to first define what we mean by “political storytelling.” The popular understanding of political storytelling is the use of storytelling by politicians or other political actors to engage an audience, whether to establish their own personas through narrative or to evoke emotional responses through anecdotal life stories woven into speeches. It is essential to note that this type of political storytelling in the contemporary American sense relies on a linear notion of plot *and* time. For example, when politicians use stories to advocate for progress and/or tradition, the time along which their individual or historical narratives coalesce is ordinarily conceived of as straight and unceasing. But as it applies to prose, the concept of political storytelling originates from analyses of the linguistic techniques and theoretical frameworks of Hannah Arendt (1906-1975), a German Jewish woman who remains one of the most influential political theorists of the twentieth century. Annabel Herzog in particular “focuses on the political ‘effect’ that Arendt wished to achieve with her ‘old-fashioned storytelling’” and later uses the phrase “political storytelling” to refer to Arendt’s writing in her article, “Illuminating inheritance: Benjamin's influence on Arendt's political storytelling,” in which Herzog links Arendt’s storytelling to Benjamin (1). Ronald Schleifer chapter on Paley from *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* (1985), “Chaste Compactness,” is titled with a phrase from Benjamin’s “The Storyteller.” Schleifer argues that Paley’s short stories articulate “the *position* of a woman,” which is, I will argue, Paley’s narrative standpoint that allows for “the recognition of others,” Benjamin’s criterion for effective storytelling (33, 41). Herzog describes Arendt’s style of writing as “political storytelling” in the

sense that Arendt aims to illuminate histories through the recollection of fragmented life stories to serve not just as anecdotes but as *exemplars* of the very actions (or lack thereof) she wishes to make visible. Arendt's cast of characters includes but is not limited to Socrates, Rahel Varnhagen and Adolf Eichmann, whose actions and perspectives give life and meaning to her arguments on thinking, time, Jewish identity, marginality, thoughtlessness, language and totalitarianism, among other philosophical yet historically grounded issues. Arendtian motivations for political storytelling are quite different, then, from those of modern politicians. At the root of Arendt's political storytelling lie her theorization of a fragmentary past, standpoint, thought and thinking time.

In the *Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt's mammoth, posthumously published work comprised of *Thinking* (Volume One) and *Willing* (Volume Two), Arendt argues that the linear time of everyday life—which she also calls historical or biographical time—differs completely from thinking time. Thinking time (a concept Arendt attributes to her readings of Kafka) or the spatial quality of time when one thinks is “broken,” which means the thinking ego's standpoint is a gap between the past and the future. Rather than at a “fixed point” along daily life's unceasing, temporal continuum, “according to which the present is today, the past begins with yesterday, and the future begins tomorrow,” thought-events, reflections or recollections both create and occur within a break in the continuous (though not unchanging, in fact *always* changing) motions of day-to-day activities (Portable 205). From within the gap between what *came* and what *might come* to pass—a space-moment only the mind has the capacity to produce and occupy—the thinking ego is in the position to witness the act of “looking back or looking forward” that Arendt ascribes to the sequential nature of ordinary time (Portable 205-206). I say *might* come to pass in order to avoid any implication that to think is to know what will come in the future; to

think, in Arendt's terms which I am adopting, is to see that many possibilities lie outside, around and ahead of oneself. When the thinker directs her attention towards events or actions made somewhere along the discernable though fractured line from a *then* to a *now*, she is a spectator and is therefore in the unique position to shape her memories of such events into coherent narratives that bear repeating.

Julia Kristeva describes the role the thinker-spectator plays as story maker in contribution to the creation of a polis in "Hannah Arendt, or Life is a Narrative," when she clarifies the link Arendt makes between thought, story and collective memory:

We note that the *actor* himself, the actor alone, no matter how heroic his exploit, does not constitute the marvelous action. Action is marvelous only if it becomes memorable. Where is memory to be found? It is the *spectators* who bring the story/history to completion, and they do so by virtue of the *thought* that comes after the *act*, and this is accomplished via *recollection*, without which there is, quite simply, nothing to be told. It is not the actors but the spectators, if they are capable of thought and recollection, who make the polis a creative organization of memory and/or of history, histories, stories. (54)

As thinker and spectator, Arendt makes stories as lives appear through recollection, or what Kristeva explains is the payment of thought (in thinking time) to an act after its occurrence (in ordinary time, with the act already in the near or distant past). Of the particular impact stories have on a collective understanding of actions, Herzog writes, "Stories allow Arendt to seize the gap in time created by the lives of individuals, and tales and parables allow her to reveal the meaning of events occurring in history in the form of these lives" (8-9). Arendt aims to reveal the crystalline recollection of the broken bits and pieces of a life-story's once "rectilinear movement" in order to unfurl historical phenomena (*Portable* 207). As storyteller, Arendt

prompts a system of thought and spectating that becomes recursive when she makes individuals' perspectives of actions throughout history visible for new thinkers now aware of standpoints apart from their own and, thus, empowered to maintain and contribute to the memory of the collective.

This kind of storytelling is political (rather than simply historiographical), for Arendt, because of “the essential role that public memory plays in the establishment and maintenance of the political arena and its space of appearance” (McMullin 91). By virtue of making individual lives both appear and give meaning to actions and events in history, stories embody the ideal experience of the Greek *polis*, that ancient political realm of the public into which citizens enter as free equals. Arendt qualifies said freedom and equality in “The Public and the Private Realm” from *The Human Condition* when she writes:

The *polis* was distinguished from the household in that it knew only “equals,” whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled. Thus within the realm of the household, freedom did not exist, for the household head, its ruler, was considered to be free only in so far as he had the power to leave the household and enter the political realm, where all were equals. To be sure, this equality of the political realm has very little in common with our concept of equality: it meant to live among and to have to deal only with one's peers, and it presupposed the existence of “unequals” who, as a matter of fact, were always the majority of the population in a city-state. Equality, therefore, far from being connected with justice, as in modern times, was the very essence of freedom: to be free meant to be free from the

inequality present in rulership and to move in a sphere where neither rule nor being ruled existed. (Portable 187-188).

Arendt's primary theoretical interest is the modern disappearance of such a public realm, one cut off from but constituted by the inherently unequal structures of private life. As a writer who aims to revive the imaginary capacity of the polis, Arendt displays a proclivity for storytelling, Herzog explains, because "the purpose of Arendt's storytelling is to show individuals' crystallized lives, and, thereby, to give them a public 'stage' on which to appear" (9). Based on this understanding of Arendt's mission as a political theorist and writer, prose classifies as "political storytelling" when lived experiences or *standpoints* otherwise invisible to the public are given a platform, through stories, in order to give meaning to actions or events in history. Herzog clarifies, "...the purpose of this writing was not to commemorate the defeated and the dead, but *to write from their standpoint* and, hence, to display their absence, their invisibility" (3). In other words, to make standpoints known through storytelling reveals their exclusion from dominant historical narratives and, as a result, interrogates the myopic thoughtlessness with which history is otherwise at risk of being constructed—devoid of all lived experience and meaning. Additionally, political storytelling aims to establish a political realm in which freedom and equality hinge, at minimum, on a public memory—formed by appearance through speech, and recognition through thought—maintained by spectator-thinkers able to grasp the existence of standpoints apart from their own perspectives.

How does the notion of standpoint function as a point of contact and differentiation between political storytellers Hannah Arendt and Grace Paley? Standpoint is a crucial concept for Arendt, for whom thinking and perspective are inextricably linked and, moreover, according to whom "thoughtlessness" lies at the root of modernity's most outstanding political issues. To

be thoughtless, or to never occupy the break in time within which reflection is made possible, is characterized by Arendt as an inability to see outside one's own perspective, from the standpoint of another, and thus a failure to grasp the very existence of experiential perspective or standpoint in general. Arendt expounds upon the relationship between standpoint and thoughtlessness in her critique of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* when she analyzes the language with which Eichmann speaks in evidentiary witness testimonies and, similarly, as he himself testifies to his role as a Nazi SS-*Obersturmbannführer* (senior assault unit leader) in the orchestration of the Holocaust. Of Eichmann's tendency to inflate his part in the organization of Jewish genocide, Arendt writes:

Bragging was the vice that was Eichmann's undoing. It was sheer rodomontade when he told his men during the last days of the war: "I will jump into my grave laughing, because the face that I have the death of five million Jews [or "enemies of the Reich," as he always claimed to have said] on my conscience gives me extraordinary satisfaction." He did not jump, and if he had anything on his conscience, it was not murder but, as it turned out, that he had once slapped the face of Dr. Josef Löwenherz, head of the Vienna Jewish Community, who later became one of his favorite Jews....To claim the death of five million Jews, the approximate total of losses suffered from the combined efforts of all Nazi offices and authorities, was preposterous, as he knew very well, but he had kept repeating the damning sentence *ad nauseum* to everyone who would listen, even twelve years later in Argentina...It was sheer boasting when he pretended he had "invented" the ghetto system or had "given birth to the idea" of shipping all European Jews to Madagascar. The Theresienstadt ghetto, of which Eichmann claimed "paternity," was established years after the ghetto system had been introduced into the Eastern occupied territories, and setting up a special ghetto for

certain privileged categories was, like the ghetto system, the “idea” of Heydrich [Eichmann’s superior]...What eventually led to his capture was his compulsion to talk big... (EJ 46-47)

If we think of Eichmann as he who Kristeva would label an “actor,” Arendt acts as spectator in this passage when she strings together fragments of the *reality* of Eichmann’s lived experiences and actions. By telling stories that reconstruct Eichmann’s perspective within a greater, verifiable context—that he did not himself murder millions but actually felt guilty for once slapping a prominent Jew, that he could not have invented a ghetto system that preceded and outranked him—Arendt rewrites a history through thought and recollection of the events Eichmann himself could not comprehend as the actions of others. Arendt continues, “But bragging is a common vice, and a more specific, and also more decisive, flaw in Eichmann’s character was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow’s point of view” (EJ 47-48). Arendt then cites Eichmann’s propensity for stock phrases and clichés as further evidence of his lack of perspective. Eichmann’s “empty talk” was devoid of context and specificity such that

The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else. No communication was possible with him, not because he lied but because he was surrounded by the most reliable of all safeguards against the words and the presence of others, and hence against reality as such. (EJ 49)

Eichmann’s “inability to speak,” Arendt argues, is symptomatic of totalitarianism’s high level of control over public and private life. Subjects under totalitarianism lack a polis or a true political arena in which they are free to appear to and communicate with each other. Eichmann is so insulated from reality that he is unable to see, understand or speak to others. As evidenced by the

lack of diversity or nuance in his speech patterns, Arendt's critique of Eichmann centers on his inability to grasp the nature or very existence of a standpoint, his own or otherwise.

Paley demonstrates a keen ability to not only understand but vocalize her standpoint and the standpoints of others. I have chosen to focus on three selections from *Just As I Thought*, "The Illegal Days," "Other People's Children" and "The Seneca Stories: Tales from the Women's Peace Encampment." The first contains experiences that influenced Paley's own feminist standpoint, and the second and third are born of her belief that anti-abortion rhetoric, misogyny, institutional control over women's bodies, war, imperialism and the destruction of the environment are all powerfully interconnected issues. What these selections trace in Paley's collection is what Rich calls "The growing urgency that an anti-nuclear, anti-militarist movement must be a feminist movement, must be a socialist movement, must be an anti-racist movement, anti-imperialist movement" (BBP 225). Each of the three pieces embody some of Paley's strategies found elsewhere and throughout *Just As I Thought*, and each is in a different section of the book—*Beginning*, *Continuing* and *More*—an otherwise chronological collection of fragmented historical and personal events fused together under vague, time-oriented titles. Paley's most studied works—short fiction collections titled *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1959), *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974) and *Later the Same Day* (1985)—confirm her preoccupation with time and the everyday events and thoughts that shape, break and reshape our perceptions of it.

"Other People's Children" and "The Seneca Stories: Tales from the Women's Peace Encampment" ("The Seneca Stories") were originally published as articles in *Ms.* magazine in 1975 and 1983, respectively. Written for the liberal feminist magazine's audience of American women, these essays express the connections Paley makes between feminism and pacifism and

environmentalism, with the latter two presented as women's issues in each. Paley originally gave "The Illegal Days" as a talk for *The Choices We Made* (1991), though the stories told throughout took place before the Roe v. Wade decision of 1972. In *Ms.* magazine's first issue, printed early in 1972 before Roe v. Wade was announced, a letter written by Barbaralee D. Diamonstein under the headline declaration "We have had abortions" was printed along with 53 well-known women signees. On that list of women who publicly admitted to having had an abortion was Grace Paley. Paley's participation in this feminist, activist advertisement in the first issue of *Ms.* foreshadows more public acts of linguistic and literary resistance to come. Paley's political writings and speeches function to protest dominant narratives and bring marginalized perspectives to the fore.

Paley writes for [women of] the public—not for academics or political theorists—so highfalutin jargon is nowhere to be found in these selections, or anywhere in *Just as I Thought*, for that matter; Paley's language has activist aims and so is made consistently accessible to a popular audience. Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, writes often for an audience of her own peers—political philosophers, other public intellectuals—even though the subject of much of her writing is the political functionality of the public sphere. The illumination of history serves to produce a public, the only space in which subjects fully "appear" to each other. In "Hannah Arendt, Agency, and the Public Space," Andrea Thuma argues:

Even though Arendt emphasizes the significance of political equality in the public space as a crucial condition for interaction, she does not pay attention to factors which may limit this kind of equality, e.g., social, cultural or communicative differences.

Fundamental equality in the public space and the capacity to act together with others may be constrained by subjective limitations such as an insufficient socialization into common

codes of action and communication, lacking communicative competence due to differences in education, language, or class, or an inaccurate assessment of one's own abilities, which may lead to the "voluntary" retreat from shared communicative spaces.

(par. 9)

While Arendt does most often refuse to focus on social inequality in the modern sense, it is important to note an essay in which she not only identifies with a social collective but analyzes the "social, cultural or communicative differences" that affect said group's lived experience. In "We Refugees," Arendt explains her community's aversion to the label "refugee" and the stigma of cultural and linguistic difference that pressure an especially traumatized group to perform assimilation. "The less we are free to decide who we are or to live as we like, the more we try to put up a front, to hide the facts, and to play roles," she laments (JW 270). This essay is, however, the only instance of such collective consciousness from Arendt; nowhere does she analyze her own identity—especially never with attention to her gender. Paley, a socialist-feminist-activist, is unlike Arendt *primarily* concerned with the factors that limit equality in the public space when she chooses to write for a popular audience. Through accessible language and compositional strategies, Paley is able to use stories to illuminate otherwise hidden or marginalized lived realities in both her fiction and nonfiction—though she herself would not have endorsed such a genre binary. Paley described this political writerly project in an interview with Kathleen Hulley by declaring, "Stories illuminate. That's the purpose of a story for me. To shine a light on what's dark and give it light. And the balance is something else....It's justice" (qtd. in Taylor 4). Paley, then, might take up an Arendtian project of illumination through storytelling, but she does so with a particularly feminist notion of standpoint that intertwines equality with justice and thus differs greatly from the one Arendt lays out in her own theoretical frameworks.

It is Arendt's general refusal to pay attention to the issues of social identity that limit entry into or equality within the public realm, particularly in relation to "work" and women's relegation to the private realm, that Adrienne Rich so criticizes in "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women." In her 1976 essay that contains criticism of Arendt's conceptions of "work" devoid of female consciousness, Rich describes the experience of reading *the Human Condition*:

I found her essay illuminating, not so much for what it says, but for what it is....The withholding of women from the *vita activa*, the "common world," and the connection of this with reproductivity, is something from which she does not so much turn her eyes as stare straight through unseeing...To read such a book, by a woman of large spirit and great erudition, can be painful, because it embodies the tragedy of a female mind nourished on male ideologies. In fact, the loss is ours, because Arendt's desire to grasp deep moral issues is the kind of concern we need to build a common world which will amount to more than "life-styles." (OLSS 211-212)

Rich takes issue with Arendt's participation in a longstanding, masculine tradition, in which women's work is dismissed as corporeal necessities for survival. As a woman, from Rich's feminist perspective, Arendt fails to acknowledge women's experiences when their work is devalued, erased and confined to the private realm, so that men can occupy professions, perform 'real' work and be free to build a common world in the polis. In "Husband-Right and Father-Right," Rich reiterates the argument upon which her critique of Arendt relies. "For fundamental to women's oppression is the assumption that we as a group belong to the "private" sphere of the home, the hearth, the family, the sexual, the emotional, out of which men emerge as adults to act in the "public" arena of power, the "real" world," (OLSS 215). In sum, what Rich suggests, more

broadly, is frustration with Arendt for her loyalty to “male ideologies,” her endorsement of the rigid split between public and private spheres that relegates women to the latter, her refusal to write “as a woman” or identify publicly with a community of women at all.

Seyla Benhabib discusses Rich’s feminist critique of Arendt’s philosophical preoccupation with a staunchly traditional (indeed, ancient) public/private divide in “The Pariah and Her Shadow: Hannah Arendt’s Biography of Rahel Varnhagen.” Benhabib acknowledges Arendt’s “almost total silence on the woman’s question,” and that shared Arendt’s “identity as a woman and the sociopolitical and cultural dimensions of being female in the modern world do not find explicit recognition” in her political writing despite her “self-consciousness as a Jew” and the centrality of “the fate of the Jewish people” (5). Of Arendt’s opinions one would now classify as outright antifeminist, biographer Elisabeth Young-Bruehl writes, Arendt “was suspicious of women ‘who gave orders,’ skeptical about whether women should be political leaders, and steadfastly opposed to the social dimensions of Women’s Liberation.” (qtd. in Benhabib 5). Benhabib even recognizes “one can easily gain the impression [from *The Human Condition*] that Arendt not only ignored the woman’s question but that she was almost a reactionary on the issue in that she accepted the age-old confinement of women to the private realm of the household and their exclusion from the public sphere” (5). However, Benhabib ultimately accuses Rich of reading Arendt too harshly, through the anachronistic lens of radical feminism. Of such a misapplication of contemporary politics, Benhabib writes:

The second commonly shared postulate of interpretation, and the one most prominently displayed by Adrienne Rich, can be named the *self-righteous dogmatism of the latecomers*. In posing questions to the past, this attitude assumes that our already attained answers are the right ones. This kind of reading of past texts is particularly prevalent

among activists of social movements who, very often, simply juxtapose the misunderstandings of the past to the truths of the present. For the art of reading and appropriating the past such an attitude is inadequate. If we approach tradition and thinkers of the past only to "debunk" them, then there really is no point in seeking to understand them at all. Such dogmatism kills the spirit and dries up the soul, and it is certainly not conducive to the task of "building a common world," in Adrienne Rich's words, "which will amount to more than mere 'life-styles.'" (6)

What Benhabib expresses here is a frustration with late-twentieth century radical feminist hermeneutics, which she claims often leads to blind dismissal of past works through ahistorical misapplications of new "truths." In some cases, this type of hesitation to endorse an unproductive literary criticism might actually prove quite valid. However, Rich makes a point to remind us that her concerns are not chronologically misplaced, as Arendt did not entirely precede feminist thinking:

The issue of women as the laborers of reproduction, of women as workers in production, of the relationship of women's unpaid labor in the home to the separation between "private" and "public" spheres, of the woman's body as commodity—these questions were not raised for the first time in the 1960s and 1970s; they had already been documented in the 1950s when *The Human Condition* was being written. Arendt barely alludes, usually in a footnote, to Marx and Engels's engagement with the theme; and she writes as if the work of Olive Schreiner, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Goldman, Jane Addams, to name only a few writers, had never existed. (OLSS 211-212)

Reading Benhabib, then, one is left to wonder—exactly how old, important or steeped in "tradition" must a work be in order to obtain immunity from cutting, socially progressive

criticism? While Benhabib *understands* how Rich could arrive at her interpretations of *The Human Condition* (she devotes her opening paragraphs to making Rich's case), she herself purports Rich's critique to be unjustly retroactive and even dismisses Rich's disappointments with Arendt as mere dogmatic gripes. Benhabib's offense seems to hinge on Rich's line, "I found [Arendt's] essay illuminating, not so much for what it says, but for what it is" (OLSS 211). But Rich's rereading of *The Human Condition*, in which she feels more enlightened by an understanding of the text as historical object rather than her understanding of the text's content (the details of which she does, however, carefully unpack), is not simply a dogmatic feminist attempt to debunk one of the most important political theorists of her time. Later in "Conditions for Work," Rich explains:

I cannot imagine a feminist evolution leading to radical change in the private/political realm of gender that is not rooted in the conviction that all women's lives are important; that the lives of men cannot be understood by burying the lives of women; and that to make visible the full meaning of women's experience, to reinterpret knowledge in terms of that experience, is now the most important task of thinking. (OLSS 213)

Here Rich collapses the private and political into one—a major sticking point between Arendtian and radical feminist theories. However, Rich's last clause on knowledge and thinking at once validates her own interpretation of *The Human Condition* and provides a point of entry for feminists to "reinterpret," from the standpoint of women's experience, both Arendt and the act of thinking she so stresses as foundational to free, political life. Although Rich herself does not directly advocate for this treatment of Arendt, Benhabib writes in "Feminist Theory and Hannah Arendt's Concept of Public Space,"

there are also contemporary feminists who argue not only that, despite the apparent hostility and antagonism between feminist goals and Arendt's political thought, a deeper reading of her work will yield categories which bear a genuine affinity to the radical claims of contemporary feminism, but also that in the experience of the women's movement one has rediscovered those phenomenological aspects of revolutionary politics which Arendt had so brilliantly analyzed. (99)

This study focuses on the linguistic techniques that activist-writer Grace Paley employs in her feminist, socialist, pacifist and environmentalist nonfiction essays and talks. Therefore, the "categories" most relevant to radical "revolutionary politics" within the scope of this project are Arendt's understanding of storytelling; the meaning assigned to history through the illumination of experience; the freedom that hinges on recognition and knowledge of standpoints outside our own. Paley and Rich are each committed to the standpoint feminist catchphrase "the personal is political" (BBP 181). Both feminist writers embody feminist reinterpretations of Arendtian thought when they illuminate stories from the inherently political perspective of women's experience.

Generationally and geographically once removed from Arendt, Paley and Rich are bound together in more ways than one: both Jewish, like Arendt, Paley and Rich were each mothers to young children in the 50s and 60s; both were leftist fixtures of New York and Vermont; both were writers, poets and political activists, to varying degrees. Though both were also the daughters of doctor fathers, Rich and Paley came from relatively divergent socioeconomic backgrounds. Paley, a first generation American, was raised in the urban immigrant Bronx by two socialist Russian Jewish parents; leftism came to her at birth, so to speak, with feminism following later once she became a young mother. She found success as a fiction writer without

any completed degrees of higher education, and later taught creative writing for several decades at the college level. Rich, on the other hand, grew up in Baltimore, the daughter of a prominent, Alabama-born Jewish pathologist and a Southern Protestant mother; she went on to Radcliffe College and first came to popularity as a poet, then spent much of her career serving in various professorships in English and creative writing with, arguably, one foot always in academia and theory and the other in art, poetry and politics. Paley and Rich both signed the "Writers and Editors War Tax Protest" pledge in 1968, vowing to refuse tax payments in protest against the Vietnam War in a published activist advertisement (much like the 1972 "We Have Had Abortions" ad Paley signed in *Ms.*). While the two hypothetically might have crossed artistic and ideological paths throughout their lifetimes, Paley and Rich have yet to be seriously treated in dialogue with each other, perhaps because of Rich's lasting popularity within the feminist and women's studies establishment and Paley's enduring though fragmented fandom among short story lovers and the remaining Jewish Left.

Just As I Thought functions almost as an encyclopedia of the many standpoints Paley has come to understand (through experience, proximity, listening) and convey (through writing, speaking, activism) over the years of her life as a politically engaged woman and mother. These range from the orphaned and supposedly orphaned children of Vietnam—victims and then adoptees of the American people—to the women's peace activists who camped out in upstate New York and the townspeople they encountered outside their object of protest, a nuclear power plant. Rich encourages women to "learn to watch for what is left out, to listen for the unspoken...[and] affirm the outsider's eye as the source of legitimate and coherent vision." Paley gives meaning to several decades' worth of events in history as she puts words to "the flashes of insight that came through the eye of the outsider" (BBP 3). Rachel Blau DuPlessis' note that

“giving voice to the voiceless and making visible the invisible are two prime maneuvers in a feminist poetics” further echoes an Arendtian concern for the standpoint of the invisible and helpfully locates Paley at the intersection of an Arendtian type of political storytelling and the activist aims of second wave feminism (qtd. in Taylor 8).

Standpoint feminism maintains that all knowledges, or memories formed through thought and reflection, are fundamentally shaped by one’s social position. Arendt laments the modern replacement of a political realm with a social one, as the concept of the social blurs the distinction between the public, where citizens ought to be free of hierarchy, and the private, to which rulership ought to be confined. Without a polis in this sense, Arendt argues, it is difficult for knowledge to circulate and thought to proliferate, which leads to political catastrophes such as totalitarianism and genocide. Feminist standpoint theories, however, propose that it is precisely from socially nondominant or marginalized perspectives that awareness most actively occurs. In fact, standpoint feminism cites the epistemic *advantage* of those on the periphery of power, who are better equipped to understand their own positions and the positions of others from the decentered vantage of the spectator. Feminist standpoint theorists ultimately call for “research,” which can be understood to include any attempts to shed light and meaning on sociopolitical events or phenomena, or the formulation of theory, to “begin with the lives of the marginalized” (IEP). Despite her misgivings about the social realm’s destruction of a public/private divide and her refusal to endorse any “ism,” let alone feminism, Arendt’s own commitment to the illumination of otherwise invisible standpoints through storytelling is similar to the goals of standpoint feminism. In “News,” a poem anthologized in *A Grace Paley Reader: Stories, Essays and Poetry*, Paley calls on us to face realities as elucidated by women:

although we would prefer to talk
and talk it into psychological the-

ory the prevalence of small genocides
 or the recent disease floating
 toward us from another continent we
 must not while she speaks her eyes
 frighten us she is only one person
 she tells us the terrible news we
 want to leave the room we may not
 we must listen in this wrong world this
 is what we must do we must bear it (328)

Paley invents a woman character, gendered feminine with the pronoun “she,” who delivers harsh truths from around the world to an “us” Paley leaves undefined. Are “we” feminists? Activists? Americans? All of humankind? In several essays and talks collected in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, Adrienne Rich notes the issues of an implied or ambiguous “we” in narratives of political change and the associated challenges when individual experiences are translated into broader theories. Rich often wonders, *who is included in which collectives?* or *what are the limitations of speaking for others?* or *when does theory lose sight of its material foundation?* In “Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” originally a talk, Rich urges listeners to

Begin with the material. Pick up again the long struggle against loft and privileged abstraction. Perhaps this is the core of revolutionary process, whether it calls itself Marxist or Third World or feminist or all three. [...]

Abstractions severed from the doings of living people, fed back to people as slogans.

Theory—the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the trees—theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn’t smell of the earth, it isn’t good for the earth. (BBP 213-214)

Paley's poem similarly calls on us, undefined as "we" may be, to resist the cowardly urge to speak issues into theoretical abstraction. According to Rich, if theory is not rooted in experience, if it is simply an end in itself and not a means to a revolutionary end, it helps no one. Rather than turn to theories that only serve to linguistically alienate us from material issues, Paley pleads, we ought to listen to stories told of lived experiences, especially from the perspective of a woman.

In their attempts to illuminate yet untold stories from nondominant perspectives, whether in longform portraits, poems or articles, Arendt and Paley each rely on their own implementations of irony in order to "signify a split perspective between appearance and reality" (Kaufer 92). If we aim to understand the rhetorical strategies with which Paley brings political storytelling and standpoint feminism into clearer dialogue with each other, it helps to juxtapose Paley's understudied strategies in *Just As I Thought* with Arendt's and Rich's better-documented practices and theoretical frameworks. Irony serves as a useful starting point for this study of Paley's political storytelling because irony, no matter its aim, fundamentally interrogates the sets of common knowledge upon which any narrative is built.

Scholarship on Arendt has focused on her ineffective or offensive use of irony in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* in particular. In *Tough Enough*, Deborah Nelson describes Arendt's portrait of Eichmann as "often ironic and, for many, scandalously insensitive" (46). A good example of Arendt's ill-received irony comes in Part III of her Eichmann trial reportage, when she addresses Eichmann's relationship to Zionism. One offense taken by members of Arendt's audience was her apparent blaming of German Jews for their own systematic destruction. Arendt writes:

In the words of the *Reichsvertretung* of the Jews in Germany (the national association of all communities and organizations, which had been founded in September, 1933, on the

initiative of the Berlin community, and was in no way Nazi-appointed), the intention of the Nuremberg Laws was “to establish a level on which a bearable relationship between the German and the Jewish people [became] possible,” to which a member of the Berlin community, a radical Zionist, added: “Life is possible under every law. However, in complete ignorance of what is permitted and what is not one cannot live. A useful and respected citizen one can also be as a member of a minority in the midst of a great people” (Hans Lamm...) ...[Jews] generally believed that a *modus vivendi* would be possible; they even offered to cooperate in “the solution of the Jewish question.” In short, when Eichmann entered upon his apprenticeship in Jewish affairs, on which, four years later, he was to be the recognized “expert,” and when he made his first contacts with Jewish functionaries, both Zionists and Assimilationists talked in terms of a great “Jewish revival,” a “great constructive movement of German Jewry,” and they still quarreled among themselves in ideological terms about the desirability of Jewish emigration, as though this depended upon their own decisions. (39-40)

One understands how early-1960s readers of this passage might have taken offense to Arendt’s ostensible implication of German Jewry in its own demise. Arendt assumes we take her Jewish identity and oft-positive political interpretation of Zionism for granted, likely because she understands her Jewishness as an immutable fact and has written extensively on both elsewhere. But by *not* restating these positions, the main points Arendt seeks to make here—that Eichmann was no “expert” on the Jewish question, that German Jews discussed but truly had no final say in “the desirability of [their] emigration” —become lost. Further reading confirms Arendt sought to use irony and sarcasm to unravel Eichmann’s sinister reputation by making fun of his claim to any real knowledge of Zionist political philosophy. She continues:

...The first thing that happened was that his new boss, a certain von Mildenstein...required him to read Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat*, the famous Zionist classic, which converted Eichmann promptly and forever to Zionism. This seems to have been the first serious book he ever read and it made a lasting impression on him...In order to help in this enterprise, he began spreading the gospel among his S.S. comrades, giving lectures and writing pamphlets. He then acquired a smattering of Hebrew, which enabled him to read haltingly a Yiddish newspaper—not a very difficult accomplishment, since Yiddish, basically and old German dialect written in Hebrew letters, can be understood by any German-speaking person who has mastered a few dozen Hebrew words. He even read one more book, Adolf Böhm's *History of Zionism* (during the trial he kept confusing it with Herzl's *Judenstaat*), and this was perhaps a considerable achievement for a man who, by his own account, had always been utterly reluctant to read anything except newspapers, and who, to the distress of his father, had never availed himself of the books in the family library.

Through sarcasm, Arendt seeks to expose the truth of Eichmann, a man so lacking in intelligence and incapable of independent thought that the notion of him as well-read or embedded in the Zionist movement should elicit immediate laughter. Nelson cites *On Revolution*, which Arendt published just before she began to work on *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, as a source for understanding the political beliefs behind Arendt's use of irony. Nelson writes, "[Arendt's] ideas about emotion—specifically compassion, love, pity, and sympathy—and, as she put it, their "disastrous" effects on politics and public discourse would have been very much present to her as she arrived at her analysis of the Eichmann trial" (48). Arendt's refusal to contextualize her report of the trial with her own feelings on the matters at hand (save for her laughter at

Eichmann) aligns with her distaste for Eichmann's inflated reputation, one she claims is so falsely constructed by emotions.

On the contrary, I will argue that Paley's writing points to the value placed on emotion in politics and public discourse. Her descriptions of the bonds between women in "The Seneca Stories" undoubtedly herald compassion and love as powerful fuel for effective and meaningful activism, and it is a sympathy for others and the generations to come that undergirds all the work she does. Though hardly ever melodramatic, Paley never shies away from an honest expression of how a particular event or moment made her *feel*, whereas Arendt as a theorist denounces that slippery move "to shift emphasis from an event to feelings about the event" (Nelson 52). Of her own writing, Paley wrote, "I had been sold pretty early on the idea that I might not be writing the important serious stuff. As a grown-up woman, I had no choice. Everyday life, kitchen life, children life had been handed to me, my portion, the beginning of big luck, though I didn't know it" (CS x). Perhaps Paley's *unserious* writerly self-image is precisely what allows her to freely make playful, sarcastic or tongue-in-cheek comments about otherwise "serious" subjects, like the arrest of abortion providers before *Roe v. Wade*, the theft of "orphans" from their war-torn families, or the threat of global environmental destruction posed by the production of nuclear weapons. Arendt's prose, on the other hand, carries the burden of an assumed solemnity. "The reputation of this esteemed political philosopher, a German Jew who had herself fled the Nazis, assured the readers of the book's seriousness," Nelson writes of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (46). It's immediately clear, here, that while Paley and Arendt share the mode of political storytelling and the rhetorical strategy of irony, Paley approaches each from a very different political, theoretical standpoint—that of a woman and a feminist, and a socialist one at that. Paley implies that her position as a woman writer places her outside the reach or normative definitions of "important

serious stuff.” With this outsider’s eye, Paley crafts the standpoint from which she is equipped to “face reality,” most often through the irony, sarcasm and satire that make up her signature effective sense of humor.

In “Other People’s Children” Paley shows she is more than capable of earnest acknowledgment—“facing reality,” for Arendt—and calls on her readers to see through the dominant compassion narrative of supposedly benevolent wartime/post-war Western adoption in order to understand the political elements (imperialism, white paternalism, etc.) that crystallized into the orphan airlift as an event or story. Paley often alternates between comedic allusion or minimalization and candor, a technique that subtly forces the reader to engage with a harsher “truth” once Paley’s previous euphemistic use of sarcasm is revealed. Similarly, Taylor views “Paley’s joking as central to her absolutely serious challenge to dominant meanings” (48).

In “The Illegal Days,” originally a speech recorded for *The Choices We Made: Twenty-Five Women and Men Speak Out About Abortion*, Paley focuses on her own experiences as a woman patient but also manages to recognize the predicaments abortion providers faced prior to *Roe v. Wade*. “And you were always hearing about somebody who once did abortions but wasn’t there doing them anymore,” she understates. Shortly thereafter, Paley describes her first abortion:

The nurse was there during the procedure. He didn’t give me an anesthetic; he said, “If you want it, I’ll give it to you, but it will be much safer and better if I don’t.” It hurt, but it wasn’t that painful. So I don’t have anything traumatic to say about it. I was angry that I had to become a surreptitious person and that I was in danger, but the guy was very clean, and he was very good, and he was arrested within the next year. He went to jail.

(JT 16)

Paley's maintenance of rhythm in the penultimate sentence highlights the absurdity of the criminalization of abortion; by following "but the guy was very clean, and he was very good," with "and he was arrested within the next year," Paley plays with our instinct to read (or listen) for logical connections between successive clauses in order to make a succinct yet obvious argument in favor of pro-choice politics. Taylor argues that "One of the most basic characteristics of Paley's humor is her irreverence... Her humor is survivalist humor—that is, humor created in order to survive oppression. Such humor is generated by an oppressed group to call attention to the absurdities and tunnel vision of a dominant perspective that assumes its own universality" (49). Indeed, a dark sense of humor emerges in the cold, quick succession of "clean," "good" and "arrested." The juxtaposition of words is unexpected, and the illogical clash of the doctor's professional and criminal statuses warrants cheeky laughter or a knowing snort. Paley is forthright when she ends, "He went to jail," which raises the stakes of her earlier vague allusion to "always hearing about somebody who once did abortions but wasn't there doing them anymore" (JT 16, 15). This reference would be apparent to many—at least to women, survivors of abortion-related violence and oppression—easily read or heard as an implication of criminalization in the indirect language of everyday. When Paley drives us to "...and he was arrested within the next year. He went to jail," the surprise she produces is not only at the fact that even "good" or "clean" abortion providers went to jail, but at the lack of linguistic and informational transparency reflected in the casualness of "hearing about somebody who once did abortions but wasn't there doing them anymore" (JT 16, 15). Paley neither glosses over nor belabors her point: that unjustifiable, material consequences and punishments to women and doctors—hidden within whisper networks or untold stories—are part of the reality of the 'illegal days' that we ought to face.

Nelson describes “abrupt understatement” as Arendt’s “most characteristic rhetorical technique.” Of Eichmann’s shameless testimony in defense of himself, Nelson writes:

Arendt concedes that “this, admittedly, was hard to take” and moves on with her analysis.

By explicitly naming Eichmann’s duties, which certainly he did not, Arendt pauses to make his crime concrete and visible, but in tersely confessing the pain his defense inflicts, she hurries past the emotional reaction while also minimizing it. (52-53)

Nelson argues this technique is part of Arendt’s rhetorical tendency to attempt to *suggest* the “horror” of a life or political event “by *not* dwelling it, instead letting the rhythm of her prose convey the weight of the evidence” (53).

When Paley uses vernacular rather than highfalutin language, the *reality* that Arendt philosophically demands we face achieves its legibility because the language through which average Americans experience said reality is preserved by Paley as speech on the page. As a Russian Jewish rather than German Jewish woman, not steeped in the serious, masculine culture of philosophical argumentation, Paley is free to take up “serious” subjects because her writing speaks with a familiarity and sense of humor less palpable in Arendt’s work.

Several scholars have located Paley’s *fiction* in the oral tradition, especially those interested in tracing the orality of Jewish or activist elements in her stories. In “A Matter of Voice: Grace Paley and the Oral Tradition.” (in *Women and Language*, Spring 2000) LaVerne Harrell Clark describes Paley’s literary voice as a “mastery of New York City speech through borrowings from oral tradition, particularly in relation to different ethnic dialects of New York City with which Paley, a native New Yorker, shows familiarity”(18). Of Paley’s use of Jewish humor, Taylor writes, “Paley notes that the Jewish culture she grew up in is an extremely verbal culture and a culture that has learned strategies for coping as a group with centuries of

unrelenting oppression. For a verbal people, language will offer a crucial means of resistance, and humor can serve as one of the more subversive strategies available through language” (58-59). Rich also writes of “the debt that poetry owes to the historical impulse of oral tradition,” and the fact that “Many of the enduring devices of the earliest written poetry were mnemonic in origin—repetitions of sound and phrase built into the structure of a narrative to assist memory, the first purpose of the poem being to keep alive the memory of a people” (BBP 137-138). In fact, many of the pieces in *Just As I Thought* were originally spoken and then later transcribed for inclusion in the collection, but Paley’s consistent, conversational tone throughout makes it nearly impossible for readers to distinguish her originally-spoken from made-for-print work without the contextual information provided in Paley’s chapter introductions. Paley might accurately capture the unspoken nature of certain political narratives precisely because she does not attempt to translate them into academic language; she illuminates political realities, alternative to hegemonic narratives, using the everyday language in which they are already deeply embedded, and with which they are ordinarily made to remain in the dark.

“Other People’s Children,” Paley’s *Ms.* article on Operation Babylift, begins with two uses of “our” that ambiguate perspective and reflect Paley’s geopolitical awareness. “Our national grief at the thought of Vietnamese children who would be homeless after the American war seemed somehow more bearable during the war, when all our know-how was being used in making orphans.” (JT 111). “The American war” indicts the U.S. based on the nature of American intervention in Vietnam—the war should be read here as a war waged *by* America, the nation fully culpable for escalating Vietnam’s civil conflict into an international one. Thus Paley charges the U.S. with the war’s gross damages and makes a sadly rare gesture towards the existence of a Vietnamese perspective so often left unheard and unread; with this in mind it

comes as no surprise that in Vietnam the war is referred to as *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*, or Resistance War against America. By using what Isaacs deems her “polysemantic language” or “multiple frames of reference,” Paley introduces the Vietnamese standpoint and immediately troubles the American war narratives with which readers might be primed to approach her piece (27).

Paley continues with an exposure of the hypocrisy with which adoption agencies, World Airlines and the Ford administration orchestrated the orphan airlift in her dig at their sudden intolerance for the plights of Vietnamese families, whose destruction “seemed somehow more bearable during the war, when all our know-how was being used in making orphans” (JT 111). What makes the ambiguous perspective from which Paley writes this first sentence so impactful is her use of satire to mock American sympathy for Vietnamese victims of war. Paley uses sarcastic and then biting humor to expose the hollow, American grief claimed by the parties responsible for the airlift. It’s ironic for Americans in favor of Vietnamese adoptions to claim “grief” as their primary motivation, Paley implies, if the same level of care went unexpressed during the war itself. This early accusation of “making orphans” and embellished grief introduce Paley’s ability to swiftly disarm dominant, political narratives through the use of accessible language and comprehensible rhetorical moves.

Paley creates a subtle juxtaposition with her next two paragraphs, a journalistic/research-based paragraph—it begins with that clinical “According to...” —followed by a personal anecdote about her friend Karen, a displaced child during the Second World War. First, Paley offers the example of family reunification after the Nigerian-Biafran war as concrete evidence that Western adoption need not be the knee-jerk response to children’s displacement worldwide. She explains that when the civil war (1967-1970) left 50,000 children homeless, Nigerians and

Biafrans refused to permit their adoption—a solution offered by the United States, among other countries—and instead “With the help of the International Union for Child Welfare in Geneva, all but twenty-seven of the children were reunited with family or village communities within two years” (JT 111). Paley includes this model from the recent past to insist upon the consideration of viable, proven alternatives to the American impulse of post-war adoption. Then, when Paley begins the story of Karen’s WWII childhood with “Here is another lesson from history,” she assigns Karen’s individual, lived experience equal value to the Child Welfare League of America’s credible reportage on Nigerian-Biafran family reunification. Paley often transitions to or prefaces passages this way; she uses phrases like “Here are some of the stories,” and “A story:” in “The Seneca Stories” to highlight individual incidents that render the encampment’s narrative as an event dynamic and populous. Rich makes a similar move in “Split at the Root,” a gathering of stories and experiences that produce her standpoint and identity as a Jew, when she introduces two related anecdotes as “*Two memories:*” (BBP 104). The links Paley forges between large-scale and individual cases, all lessons, stories or memories from history, embody radical feminist theory’s commitment to illuminating the connections between micro and macro-level political issues as well as to giving more qualitative, personal meaning to quantified or abstracted political information.

In the Karen anecdote, Paley clarifies the technical term “displaced child” with her own sarcastic rephrasing. Of her friend’s displacement, she writes, “That is, she was lost in one direction, and her parents, if alive, were lost in another direction, far from home.” The substitution of “lost” for “displaced” highlights the notion that displaced persons are *never* simply “lost” or misplaced but are deliberately and forcefully moved and/or separated by agents of war, persecution or disaster. Without the context of WWII, Karen, “lost in one direction,” and

her parents, “lost in another direction,” might sound as though they became incidentally separated by the everyday forces of a large crowd or busy street. Paley takes issue with “displaced” as a passive term that does not account for the forceful disruption of, and material damage to, the lives of people affected by war and its perpetrators.

Here Paley also captures the seldom acknowledged perspective of a child, achieved through the innocence of her spatial terms. Paley places Karen and her parents both “far from home,” that which is so unknown to most but especially to children, who when lost are unlikely to possess the experience, geopolitical knowledge or sense of scale necessary to describe their displacement in terms any more specific than these – of being lost in different directions. By not attempting to accurately portray the specifics of Karen’s traumatic childhood, Paley relies on our existing knowledge of war and genocide in order to expose the triviality of the language used to minimize war-induced familial separation. Paley humorously interrogates terms like “displaced” and “orphan” as part of her overarching effort to demystify and critique the airlift’s execution, especially the hypocritical positions and false language used by its architects to mislead the public about the status and needs of Vietnamese children after the War.

Paley’s care for the figure of the displaced child comes from “the natural responsibility of all adults for all the young” she believes in and possesses (JT 112). This is crucial to her very maternal style of feminism, which she voices at the end of “The Seneca Stories” when she overhears a young woman at the encampment phone home to her mother, who would like the young woman to leave the activist camp. Hearing this, Paley writes, “I wanted to take the phone from her and say, “Ma, don’t worry, your kid’s okay. She’s great. Don’t you see she’s one of the young women who will save my granddaughter’s life?” (JT 156) The hypothetical dialogue from the women’s anti-nuclear proliferation encampment highlights Paley’s activist philosophy, which

is rooted in concern for the survival and quality of life of future generations, as well as her affinity for the vocalization of causes through real or imagined dialogue. In “The Soul of a Women’s College,” Rich—not a fiction writer like Paley, but indeed a fellow poet and activist—launches into several pages of imagined dialogue with the founder of Scripps College on the topic of women’s education. “It is difficult, from the inscriptions on college walls, to gain a three-dimensional picture of a human being,” Rich admits, “Yet, irresistibly, I have found myself in a running conversation with Ellen Scripps, based on those letters. For example, she says to me: ...” (BBP 193). Rich uses dialogue to “induce a kind of *wishful thinking*,” or “placing our desires out before us and then seeing how to go about making them possible.” It is in this vein, Rich believes, that “Feminism has always been shaped and fired by the question *How can things be other than they are? What if...?*” (BBP 190). One successful way to model this feminist process of change is to record or produce dialogues in which speakers, real or imagined, use questioning and wishful thinking to “[will] the future into being” (BBP 150).

Paley’s rhetorical question to the worried mother on the phone is optimistic about the future because of the endurance of a lineage between generations of women activists, the existence of which Paley first delineates at the article’s start through her emphasis on the encampment’s significant locale:

We came into a careful, conservative New York area that had once experienced extraordinary history. In the 1590s, the women of the Iroquois nation had met in Seneca to ask the tribes to cease their warfare. In 1848, the first Women’s Rights Convention met in Seneca Falls. During the 1850s Harriet Tubman led slaves north through this country. Her safe house still stands. The towns and countryside of Seneca County seemed to be a geography of American Herstory, where women of color and women of less color once

lived powerfully and rebelliously, offering their female leadership in a dream of peace and justice for women—and men, too. In fact, the planned encampment was named just that, the Women’s Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice. (JT 148)

By mapping “a geography of American Herstory” onto Seneca County, Paley not only situates the 1983 Women’s Encampment within a preexisting legacy of women’s activism, but also places local and geopolitical concerns for peace, gender and racial equality on literalized common ground. Of the power of such a spiritual, activist lineage, Adrienne Rich writes, “I believe that every woman’s soul is haunted by the spirits of earlier women who fought for their unmet needs and those of their children and their tribes and their peoples, who refused to accept the prescriptions of a male church and state, who took risks and resisted...” (BBP 7). This spiritual continuity is invoked when Paley writes stoically of Harriet Tubman¹, “Her safe house still stands,” so as to say the foundation or structure for women-led activism continues to endure. When Paley looks back at historical women’s activism in Seneca County and ahead at the potential generational impact of the work of women (like the young protestor she witnesses on the phone), she frames the Women’s Encampment as a heed to Rich’s call to “Try to be worthy of your foresisters, learn from your history, look for inspiration to your ancestresses... Learn to be worthy of the women of every class, culture, and historical age who did otherwise, who spoke boldly when women were jeered and physically harassed for speaking in public,” (BBP 9). The “history” Rich refers to is not simply a women’s history but a feminist history, which she defines as

¹ In 2015, a non-profit, grassroots organization Women On 20s held a public vote to nominate an inspiring woman from American history to replace Andrew Jackson, “a symbol of intolerance,” as the new face of the \$20 bill. Harriet Tubman was chosen, and Women On 20s presented President Obama and the Treasury Department with a petition informing them of the results. Women On 20s’ goal was to “have a new bill in circulation before the 100th anniversary of women’s suffrage in 2020,” but the status of any redesign of the \$20 bill has remained unclear under the Trump administration.

history charged with meaning. Women's history, to be sure, always has a feminist potential... To see patterns, connections, which the false assimilation of liberal humanism obscures. To draw strength: Memory is nutriment, and seeds stored for centuries can still germinate. As differentiated from women's history, feminist history does not perpetuate the mainstream by simply invoking women to make the mainstream appear more inclusive. It is not simply contributory; it demands that we turn the questions upside down, that we ask women's questions where they have not been asked before. Feminist history is not history about women only; it looks afresh at what men have done and how they have behaved, not only toward women but toward each other and the natural world. But the central perspective and preoccupation *is female*, and this implies a vast shift in values and priorities. (BBP 146-147)

When Paley connects the Encampment's anti-militarist women protestors to their predecessors, she does not simply construct an analog women's history to supplement the mainstream, implicitly male history. She instead tells stories of women who fought for peace and freedom on behalf of their tribal, racial and gender-based communities to create a feminist history of activism.

Indeed, Paley describes the Encampment as a continuation of Native American, white and black women's historic political engagement in the area, though she does so with a play on political correctness that would hold up even today—36 years on—when she wittily describes said role models as “women of color and women of less color.” This type of joke is typical of Paley, who across all genres is known for “Her distinctive voice, almost always on the edge of laughter, [which] may easily bespeak an intimacy between grandmother and granddaughter as comment on a policy of international cultural revolution” (Isaacs xi). Paley's demonstrated

commitment to social justice and the proliferation of perspective through language (be it spoken or written) indicate this particular quip is aimed at critics of the left's focus on the power of words to enforce and transform systems of control. During "Imagining the Present," a talk Paley gave in 1996 at the Teachers & Writers Collaborative, she declares:

I'm happy to have lived into this period when we hear the voices of Native Americans—twenty or twenty-five years ago you didn't even know they were writing, apart from token publication. That was the general condition of American literature at the time. The voices of African-American men and women, the voices of women of all colors, Asian women, Asian men, all these people—*this is our country*—and we're living at a time when we can hear the voices of all these people. So whenever I hear complaints about what's going on in literature in this country—those people without imagination talk that way—I want to remind them: When before now did this happen? Then they will say with that denigrating tone, "multiculturalism." Or "diversity." Or "political correctness." They use those words to try to shut all of us up. This is what the imagination means to me: to know that this multiplicity of voices is a wonderful fact and that we're lucky, especially the young people, to be living here at this time. My imagination tells me that if we let this present political climate defeat us, my children and my grandchildren will be in terrible trouble. (JT 203-204)

A lack of "imagination," for Paley, is akin to what Arendt deems "thoughtlessness" in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann and the roots of totalitarianism. Each term describes the inability or refusal to see or think outside one's own perspective and grasp the position of another person or group. Imagination is progress, then, as each begins with the acknowledgement of others' voices—not for the sake of their representative tokenism but, rather, in order to understand the nature of nondominant *standpoints*.

As an activist-writer, Paley often aims to reveal language's role in struggles for and processes of social change. By 1988, William Safire reported for the *New York Times Magazine*, "the phrase *people of color* has never been more in vogue," to the confusion and dismay of white Americans not accustomed to the diminishment of their authority over the English language (18). A pull quote from Safire's *On Language*² column gets at the comical confusion with which white people processed (and continue to process) any vocabulary for racial/ethnic identity dictated from those on the periphery of power. Safire asks, "What is the opposite of *people of color*? How does one refer to this minority, surprised as it may be to be so categorized? 'People not of color? Colorless?'" offered a source in Michigan. The answer is *white*" (20). Safire's Michigan source dances around the unfamiliar racialization of whiteness—a subtle linguistic pattern that reinforces the othering of people of color through the omission of racial signifiers for white people. The phrase "people of color," then, disrupts the normalization of white as the ubiquitous, unnamed default identity for humanity. "People of color" continues to prompt white people to recognize their own identities and the privileges and assumptions they carry as a result; race can no longer be understood as something "other people" have.

What the umbrella term "people of color" still today presents is the reality that our world is populated by a majority of people who are not white. That this language and the stories unearthed in the dig for diversity come as a shock to white people, who are so unaccustomed to their own decentering, is indicative of the relationship between imbalances of power and representation. Rich explains well the political necessity for this type of recognition in "Invisibility in Academe":

² *On Language* was a regular column in *New York Times Magazine* from 1979 until 2011, when the column was canceled as part of editor Hugo Lindgren's redesign overhaul. Safire was the column's most frequent contributor, from its inception until his death in 2009.

When those who have power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than theirs, when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing. Yet you know you exist and others like you, that this is a game with mirrors. It takes some strength of soul—and not just individual strength, but collective understanding—to resist this void, this nonbeing, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard. (BBP 199)

Rich and Paley are not interested in representation as an end—Rich would deem this a linchpin of liberal feminism or simply liberal individualism—but rather as a means to revolutionary politics that require marginalized perspectives to be made visible in order for questions and dialogue from the periphery of power to be audible enough to dictate both radical theory and praxis. Or as Rich put it simply, “Breaking silences, telling our tales, is not enough. We can value that process—and the courage it may require—without believing that it is an end in itself” (BBP 145). Identity-based collectivity is crucial for Rich and Paley but refused by Arendt, though Arendt is also concerned with the connection between political revolution and the process of making others visible through stories, regardless of her seemingly racist or antifeminist arguments against identification with a collective. When Paley chronologically sandwiches the Seneca Falls Convention between the peace activism of sixteenth century Iroquois women and Harriet Tubman’s revolutionary work on the Underground Railroad, she does not frame the contributions of women of color as anecdotal to an implicitly white, male history. Instead she rightfully equalizes a diverse, multicultural legacy of women’s activism in Seneca County with the phrase “women of color and women of less color,” which serves as a witty jab at those

confused by political correctness or dismissive of writers of “protest literature” as “grinding a political axe” (BBP 179). This type of destabilization of white hegemony through language is crucial to Paley’s project as a writer who issues correctives to dominant political narratives as she reports on her activist experiences.

It is essential to understand that Paley deploys rhetorical strategies beyond (though sometimes in conjunction with) humorous tones in her mission to illuminate the ways in which those in power obfuscate reality. In “Other People’s Children,” Paley offers historically proven, straightforward alternatives to mass post-war foreign adoption. She also performs two important translations as part of her effort to make space for the voices of others, a philosophy that frames her case against foreign post-war adoption. First, Paley elaborates on the reunification story of her friend Karen, who rejoined her father after a year and a half with the assistance of the Red Cross following World War II. “Had [Karen] been adopted away into Italy or the United States or Japan in some well-meaning child-consumers project, her records filed and sealed, they would have never met; she would have become an orphan and he the father of a dead child” (JT 112). Paley’s description of foreign post-war adoption as a “well-meaning child-consumers project” is one example of what Neil D. Isaacs deems her use of “directly playful paradox” in *Grace Paley: A Study of the Short Fiction* (27). The glaring contradiction between benevolence and the objectification of children elicits small scoffs from Paley’s fellow airlift objectors or horrified, furrowed brows from those in favor of the adoptions. In either case, the paradox jumps out at the reader against an otherwise tonally direct paragraph and plants a seed for one of Paley’s harsher critiques to come—that the airlift’s culpable parties were primarily motivated by a racist consumer culture endemic to a white-dominated capitalist system.

Paley furthers her use of Karen's story by transposing Karen's memory onto hypothetical Vietnamese children:

Karen told me that the streets of German cities were full of pictures of children. "Have you seen this child, Anna Marie; she was wearing a blue smock; she wandered away from our camp..." Translated for Americans today, whose kind hearts and open purses intend to take Vietnamese children into the finality of adoption, there may well be pictures posted on the walls in Saigon or Danang: "Has anyone seen Phuoung, last seen in a blue smock; she let go of my hand for a minute... (JT 112)

The transfer of Karen's memories of post-WWII Germany onto Vietnam through imagined dialogue (a feature not limited to Paley's fiction) gives borrowed life to the anonymous children caught in the crosshairs of foreign adoption. Though Arendt refers to a type of traditional, length biography—Rosa Luxemburg's, to be exact—she beautifully describes the transfer of life onto history when she writes, "history is here not treated as the inevitable background of a famous person's life span; it is rather as though the colorless light of historical time were forced through and refracted by the prism of a great character so that in the resulting spectrum a complete unity of life and world is achieved" (Portable 419). For Paley, a "great character" can be a female friend—not a notable historical figure, but a person whose experiences as a girl add meaning to historical events. Refracted through Karen's life story, Paley names Phuoung to remind us of Vietnamese humanity; she follows more straightforward, statistically and historically established arguments against the airlift with this translation of pathos from Karen's anecdote onto the imagined standpoint of post-war Vietnamese children and parents.

Paley's second translation is more literal, as she sheds light on Vietnamese culture in order to further her argument that many separated families not only sought but were prepared to

support an *infrastructure* of reunification despite the rampant mislabeling of Vietnamese children as orphans. Paley delivers cultural knowledge, perhaps gathered on her 1969 trip to North Vietnam to bring home prisoners of war, when she relays:

In Vietnam there is a saying: “If mother is lost, there is auntie; if father is lost, there is uncle.” The parentless child becomes the child of the large household, the village, old aunts who may not even be blood relatives but who share the natural responsibility of all adults for all the young. This has already happened in North Vietnam, where there is only one “home” for orphans. This is happening now in South Vietnam—grown-up refugees and children in the tens of thousands are returning to their villages in what the Provisional Revolutionary Government called the “Campaign for the Return to the Homelands.” (JT112)

Paley’s inclusion of how Vietnamese people conceive of family structure is important because it represents her commitment to honor a multiplicity of voices. Though indirectly, Paley contributes to the emergence of a non-white, non-Western theory of kinship based on Vietnamese culture and experiences. By amplifying the standpoint of others in this way, Paley does not fall into the trap Rich describes as an issue for many feminists when she accuses herself and other white women of “marginaliz[ing] others because our lived experience is thoughtlessly white” (BBP 219). To be “thoughtlessly white” as Rich means it here traces back to Arendt’s definition, which deems thoughtlessness the inability to understand one’s own standpoint and the differing perspectives of others. Paley showcases her ability to *listen* rather than talk for or over others when she lets Vietnamese family values speak for themselves. More concretely, she decenters the white, western concept of the biological, nuclear family as the ideal standard for family structure. As a result, Paley destabilizes the myopic ideological assumptions of post-war

foreign adoption, which erase a diverse range of definitions of “family” held outside the white, middle class population of the United States.

Paley raises the rhetorical question, “Well how did the orphan airlift happen, then, considering these histories, these facts?” In doing so, Paley “tries for memory and connectedness against amnesia and nostalgia” (BBP 145). Her reply is cutting and compact; it is the first instance of “I” in this article, and Paley makes her ability to ‘face reality,’ free of any sarcasm, immediately apparent. “I have to say it coldly. The war in Vietnam, which began in ignorance, self-congratulation, and the slaughter of innocents, ended in much the same way” (JT 112). The acerbic second sentence refuses any linear plot structure found in pro-war or pro-airlift propaganda; Paley instead collapses the motivations for the war and the airlift onto each other, claiming both were rooted in misinformation, ego and violence. Paley damns the airlift—marketed as a solution to the *effects* of war without assignment of any guilt to the war’s American architects—as a final act of war itself.

In Paley’s subsequent explanations for how and why the adoption of Vietnamese children could take place, particularly through a mass airlift, she uses metaphor sparingly but subtly to dismantle the misconceptions of American foreign war adoption. Paley allegorizes, “The orphan airlift in April was a balloon of sentiment that raised some 2,600 Vietnamese children and floated them across 12,000 miles of sky. The groups most responsible for that sky of flying/dying babies were the following...” (JT 112). The balloon metaphor is powerful in part because it is an easily imaginable signifier of childhood. The balloon also avoids the violent imagery of babies being torn from the arms of their mothers (fathers, aunts, uncles, etc.), a trope one might expect from a feminist critique of familial separation. A balloon fueled by Americans’ warm and fuzzy feelings for Vietnamese children is exactly how the airlift’s actors would have

liked to portray the operation, and the total absence of power or force from the metaphor underscores the unacknowledged system of political dominance *actually* behind the airlift, a web of control as mechanically intricate as the airplanes used in the airlift itself. Deployed sarcastically, the metaphor allows Paley to poke fun at the belief that the airlift was made possible simply by the power of benevolence (sentiment). Following the levity of a giant, floating balloon, the image of a “sky of flying/dying babies” becomes all the more disturbing. Paley makes clear that she unequivocally condemns the groups directly responsible for the airlift by strategically invoking the horror of young, decreasingly vital bodies flailing across the globe, indicting the airlift’s three main co-conspirators as nothing short of murderers.

Paley carries the rhetorical style of the balloon metaphor through the descriptions of the three groups she names as responsible for the airlift itself. She describes each group as having humanlike emotions—certainly agency—that motivated and allowed for their parts in the execution of the airlift. Adoption agencies had already begun working to bring Vietnamese children to the States during the war, and “panicked” when the lifeblood (literally) of their business might disappear should children be “absorbed into the life of their own country” after the war’s end (JT 112-113). Paley also argues that World Airways was “anxious to add [a] love of children to its reputation,” accusing the airline of spinning a love she herself champions into a not-unheard-of public relations play. Paley even defines World Airways “in the person of Ed Daley, who owned 81 percent of its stock,” and cites published figures of the “fortune amassed” by Daley/World Airways during the war so as to remind her readers that corporations are not anonymous, lifeless entities—the human beings associated with a corporation perpetrate and benefit from actions done in its name. The Ford administration is only slightly more damned: Paley describes its participation as a “cynical political decision...to use the children in order to

dig military aid for Thieu out of Congress” (JT 113). Again, Paley need not quote political theory—she makes her socialist critiques of capitalism, conservatism and white supremacy’s subtle iterations known without any use of the often-inaccessible language typical of Marxist feminists, political philosophers and/or academics. Instead, she uses less culturally coded language to suggest the entities responsible for the airlift are groups of agential human beings, refusing the depersonalization of the airlift’s perpetrators just as she challenged the erasure of their Vietnamese victims.

Paley devotes two later paragraphs to “the iron-hearted god of irony,” another personified metaphor she uses to expose the reality of the airlift hidden behind its decontextualized narrative of anonymity.

Still, it’s the iron-hearted god of irony who points out that children who might be subjected to racial prejudice were being sent to the United States, the center of that pathology; that handicapped, war-mutilated children had been taken from a country where it would be the responsibility of family and community to keep them functioning in the ordinary life of the world. They were brought into a society which specializes in institutions, dumping grounds for the handicapped and the old, whose own Vietnam veterans are hidden in the recesses of the Veterans Administration hospitals, whose black or handicapped orphans are unadoptable (and there may be as many as 100,000 of these children). (JT 114)

What Paley reveals through these contradictions are cracks in the foundation of all arguments in favor of the airlift. Paley’s “iron-hearted god of irony” exposes a Western hypocrisy that enabled the “adoption” of children affected by the war such that Vietnamese children subject to racism and what we now call ableism in post-war Vietnam would be better off in *America*, where

institutional ineffectiveness and prejudices of all kinds run rampant in a culture that isolates its own veterans, non-white, disabled, and/or elderly persons from the mainstream of society. The notion that children were categorically saved by the American airlift is attacked when Paley continues:

That same iron-hearted god of irony (who usually works in literature) spoke even louder, for we have the moral deafness of self-congratulators. A C5A, a plane that had at other times suffered structural problems (and was actually grounded for these problems in 1971), was stuffed with weapons, howitzers, sent to Vietnam, where it deposited the howitzers intact at the airport, then had its bare compartments filled with Vietnamese babies and older children “orphans,” took off for the United States, and crashed in flames. (JT 114-115)

The children mirror the transported weapons, here—each filling the same compartments of a knowingly unsafe airplane—just as the airlift mirrors the war itself when Paley earlier equates the two as sequences of “ignorance, self-congratulation, and the slaughter of innocents” (JT 111). What, though, does Paley convey when she writes of “That same iron-hearted god of irony (who usually works in literature)”? Of course, Paley is best known for her fiction; she is a storyteller—not a political theorist—and literature is her trade. Cruel ironies, Paley implies, are unfortunately not simply figments of the literary imaginary. Ironic events—such as the plane crash that killed Vietnamese babies and children during an attempt to “rescue” them from their homeland through American adoption—occur in our lived reality, with consequences so dire one has trouble imagining such a level of flagrant irony could be possible anywhere but on the pages of a work of fiction. The personification of irony’s “iron-hearted god,” then, continues Paley’s mission to add a human element to the airlift’s detached narrative.

The flagrant use of an unsafe airplane and the crash that killed 78 children in the operation's very first flight reveals the harsh truth that Paley manages to convey clearly: that childcare was not at all central to the airlift's mission, despite its purported aim. Her placement of the word "orphans" in quotation marks reflects the discrepancy between the *language* used to produce the airlift's popular narrative and the *reality* of many Vietnamese children's lives when she bluntly reveals, shortly thereafter, that some of the rescued orphans "are not orphans at all" (JT 115). How did non-orphans end up on this and other mass flights, then? Paley explains:

Children were brought to these [orphan asylum] institutions during the war by parents who thought they would be safe. They were brought by women or men who were unable to care for their babies, and who believed they would have a better chance at a couple of meals a day in such a place. [...] All these people might hope or expect to reclaim their kids at the end of the war. (JT 116)

Paley undoes the erasure of these families, who wanted to provide adequate care for their children but could not do so precisely because of the effects of the American War. Paley's feminist position is, in short, that the airlift and adoptions can be traced to the social ill of racist paternalism.

Once the falsehood of the very term "orphan" is exposed, Paley lists examples of "rescued" children who had not come from orphan asylums at all. Successively she brings simplified versions of several children's harsh, hidden stories into the light, writing of:

a child who'd survived the C5A crash but lost his mother's map and address; an eleven-year-old who later ran away from his foster parents in California, crying to go home to Vietnam; a boy who'd been in a refugee group from Danang and who had been separated

from his mother; and the twenty-nine Cambodian children who arrived, mysteriously and without papers, on the East Coast of the United States. (JT 116)

The fragments of lived realities listed here are both separated and welded together by Paley's semicolons, which at once give each child individual attention and acknowledge the systemic patterns that undergird and connect their stories. Paley uses semicolons similarly in "The Seneca Stories" to sew together moments from the encampment she deems events in their own right, "The story of the flag; the story of the TV camera crew; the story of the woman who climbed the army depot tower and painted out the words MISSION FIRST—leaving the words PEOPLE ALWAYS;..." (JT 149). The semicolons function as visible stitches as Paley makes clear that she, like Rich, is "destined to piece together...the history of the dispossessed" (BBP 176).

Suzanne Dosh, a *Ms.* reader who worked for an adoption agency and personally adopted four children from Vietnam, writes in a published reply to Paley's article that she sees women's maternal instincts and agency at the root of this adoption process. Dosh does not question the normativity of the nuclear family—these children deserve "the promise of a mother and father instead of no one," she writes—and feels she is on the same team, so to speak, as the mothers of her/all adopted children (JT 120). Paley and Dosh express an alignment with maternal values, though from different perspectives: Dosh heralds the nuclear family at all costs, and Paley is interested in other configurations of family that subvert western or patriarchal power structures (single motherhood, extended or chosen families, etc.). Paley's reply to Dosh is unsentimental, using the same list format she uses in the original piece (in each, she numbers a section of points 1, 2, 3). The numbered lists in both the original article and the response suggest she wants to stick to the facts of what has transpired—Arendt might approve of this—rather than give in to Dosh's 'emotional' response. These facts of hers were, "The Orphan Airlift was a cynical

political game played by the government,” “Many children in that airlift were not orphans,” and “There are other solutions to the problem of homeless children after war,” citing examples again from post-WWII Europe and Nigeria (JT 120-121).

In “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Rich criticizes *Ms.*, “a mass-circulation women’s magazine” and Gloria Steinem, its “liberal-feminist editor” in particular, for Steinem’s 1984 interview with Sally Ride after Ride became the first American woman in space in 1983. Rich notes that the interview touches on the mutually-beneficial potential for space and private industry, then writes, “But this experience of [Ride’s] has nothing as yet to do with the liberation of women. A female proletariat—uneducated, ill nourished, unorganized, and largely from the Third World—will create the profits which will stimulate the “big companies” to invest in space” (BBP 222-223). What Ride and Steinem fail to make together, then, is any critique of such a space-military-industrial complex let alone of the exploitative, unequal nature of capitalism in general. Rich’s frustration with *Ms.*, which is named only in a footnote (Steinem looms large but is left unidentified), points to an ill-defined schism in late twentieth-century feminist movement—that between liberal and radical feminism. Steinem’s interview with Ride focuses on the astronaut’s exceptional, *individual* experience (a liberal feminist preoccupation) rather than the underlying socioeconomic structures that will continue to negatively and disproportionately impact less privileged women around the globe (a more “radical” concern). In “Disobedience and Women’s Studies,” Rich cites Minnie Bruce Pratt’s essay on “Rebellion” to describe this radical critique of liberal feminism in broader terms:

To understand where as white women we have been situated in the overall system of oppression which also oppresses us is crucial knowledge if we are serious about our lives.

Pratt’s essay is really about the difference between true and false rebellion. False rebellion is

to varying degrees in varying places acceptable to the white fathers. True rebellion is something that, with each step we take, cuts us further off from identification with racist patriarchy, which has rewarded us for our loyalty and which will punish us for becoming disloyal. (BBP 80)

Rich's issue with the Ride interview is that the "feminist" narrative produced by Ride, Steinem and *Ms.* is one of false rebellion—an indication, for Rich, of liberal feminism—because it fails to contextualize Ride beyond her individual role as one of the first women in a professional sector dominated by men. Though the interview focuses on the casual sexism and patronization Ride endured on her journey to become the first American woman in space, Rich rightfully censures Steinem and *Ms.* for their failure to see or think beyond a standpoint which centralized white, western women and purports shattered corporate glass ceilings to be the end goal of feminism. What liberal feminism fails to do, according to Rich, is interrogate the hierarchical systems of oppression that shape women's lives on the periphery of power—be they women of color, of lower socioeconomic status, of developing countries—that occur no matter, indeed sometimes as a result of, the individual success of professional-class white women.

As a theorist and academic, Rich is concerned with formal knowledge creation: who can make theory; how feminist theories rooted in lived experiences can be distributed and used to create material change; when and where theory embodies a disconnect between women's studies or otherwise academic journals and radical magazines outside the academy (BBP 86). Paley—an activist and writer—is not considered an academic (she held no degrees but taught creative writing at the college level for decades) or a feminist theorist like Rich, who advocated for the democratization of the power to vocalize experience into theory. Despite Rich's valid, ideological concerns about liberal feminism and her distaste for popular women's platforms (like

Ms.) that seemingly prioritize liberal feminist values, it is undeniable that Paley's articles for *Ms.*, such as "Other People's Children" and "The Seneca Stories," actually *focus* on capitalism, racism and the American military-industrial complex as interconnected, feminist issues. Does Paley not write to subvert the magazine's liberal feminist propensities from within its own pages when she presents her own radical feminist perspective to *Ms.* readers? And does her exchange with Dosh, who defensively replies to Paley's condemnation of the mass American adoption of Vietnamese children after the Vietnam War, not then embody Rich's radical feminist condemnation of the systemic blind spots of white liberal feminism?

Paley's mention of the Equal Rights Amendment in "The Seneca Stories" further supports my claim that Paley writes a bridge across the divide between liberal and radical feminist movement. The Equal Rights Amendment—which failed to reach ratification several times from the 1920s to 2008 (most notably in 1979) despite bipartisan support—continues to be a rallying cry for liberal or "equity" feminists who focus on legislative solutions to sex and gender inequality. Liberal feminism might prop up the ERA as an end goal whereas radical feminism might understand the ERA as a constitutional starting point, at best, in the sense that although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a necessary landmark law, it did not "solve" racism in America. In response to coverage of the spite and scorn women protestors faced from local residents at the Seneca Women's Encampment, Paley writes:

A great deal has been written about that hostility at Waterloo, as though a country that refuses to pass something as simple as the Equal Rights Amendment would not have pockets of vicious misogyny, as though a nation with tens of thousands of nuclear bombs, army bases, weapons factories in the midst of unemployment would not be able to raise a furious patriarchal horde. (JT 152)

The ERA would have been a central topic for *Ms.* readers, and Paley's description of the Amendment as "simple" indicates her leftist position: the ERA would have been a basic benchmark, a legal gesture even, but certainly no landmark piece of legislation. Paley's mention of the ERA might grab the attention of a liberal audience, then through strategic proximity she draws a connection between the failure of ratification and misogyny and a military-industrial complex that benefits only the few.

Earlier in "The Seneca Stories," Paley recalls her experience climbing over the fence "that looked to us women—young or old—a lot like the school fence that encircled girlhood, the one that the boys climbed adventurously over and over again" (JT 154). Later, though, she describes "the civil disobedience actions of Labor Day, when women chose to dig a hole under the fence instead of climbing over it" (JT 155). When Paley calls back to the fence a second time, women protestors search for a new way of being—a true rebellion, so to speak—rather than follow the patterns set forth by boys/men. These choices are yet more examples of Paley's insertion of anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist politics into the magazine's editorial content.

One key component of revolutionary praxis for Paley and Rich is the pursuit of accountability, not just from men or other women "situated within white patriarchy as well as against it," but from themselves (BBP x). As the two writers invest in the exercise of self-accountability, both tend to issue reflections upon earlier writing, often in response to external or self-criticism, or tell stories of their political evolutions on topics like identity and disability. Rich especially contends with her positionality as a white woman scholar and attempts to convey the difficulty of decentering herself from feminist dialogue. In "Notes towards a Politics of Location," she admits:

It's hard to look back on the limits of my understanding a year, five years ago—how did I look without seeing, hear without listening? ... Yet how, except through ourselves, do we discover what moves other people to change? Our old fears and denials—what helps us let go of them? What makes us decide we have to re-educate ourselves, even those of us with “good” educations? A politicized life ought to sharpen both the senses and the memory. (BBP 223-224)

Rich's use of rhetorical questions here models the painful process she wishes to endorse, one in which a revolutionary politics of change is possible *only* if those invested in change are willing to look inward and analyze their own past prejudices. Rich, who experienced a far more complicated journey than Paley or Arendt towards her Jewish identity, famously recalls the ingrained antisemitism in which she was socialized as a child and young woman in “Split at the Root.” In this essay Rich tells numerous stories; one stands out for its brutal honesty, when Rich admits she once, as a teenager, instinctively denied her Jewishness to a seamstress who was likely a recent immigrant and Holocaust survivor. “Eighteen years of training in assimilation sprang into the reflex by which I shook my head, rejecting her, and muttered, “No.”” Rich recalls, working to understand the social forces, like assimilation, that influenced her reaction (BBP 109). Even if her relationship to her own Jewish identity has evolved or remains difficult or unsettled, Rich demands,

...we can't wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process.

This essay, then, has no conclusions: it is another beginning for me...It's a moving into accountability, enlarging the range of accountability...The poet who knows

that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful.

The woman trying, as part of her resistance to clean up her act. (BBP 123)

Rich's move to consider and publicize her personal, political evolution as part of an overall social project of feminist resistance is radical in that she does focus solely on her actions as an individual; rather, she draws connections between her experiences, mistakes or regrets and the social contexts in which we all stumble in order to advocate for a collective process towards accountability.

Once again, "We Refugees" serves as Arendt's only analysis of issues in the social realm that affect individual members of collectives based on identity. The type of assimilation to which Rich holds herself accountable is not unlike the one against which Arendt argues in "We Refugees." As both immigrants and native-born marginalized peoples are subject to self-erasure for the sake of cultural acceptance and survival, to different degrees of urgency. Rich describes this well when she writes, "To assimilate means to give up not only your history but your body, to try to adopt an alien appearance because your own is not good enough, to fear naming yourself lest name be twisted into label" (BBP 143). When Arendt explains why she and other European Jews "don't like to be called 'refugees'," she unpacks the stigma of a label feared by those who want to survive and escape their history of persecution (JW 264). Arendt, criticized for her otherwise dismissal of the social realm save for its harm to the sanctity of the polis, uncharacteristically admits:

Man is a social animal and life is not easy for him when social ties are cut off. Moral standards are much easier kept in the texture of a society. Very few individuals have the strength to conserve their own integrity if their social, political, and legal status is completely confused. Lacking the courage to fight for a change of our social and legal

status, we have decided instead, many of us, to try a change of identity. And this curious behavior makes matters much worse. The confusion in which we live is partly our own work. (JW 271)

If we juxtapose Arendt's description of assimilation with Rich's story of identity denial, we understand that Arendt both recognizes the social forces that shape her collective standpoint and takes ownership, on behalf of her identity group, of their shortsighted complicity in behaviors harmful to themselves and others. But Arendt rarely comes this close to accountability for her own misguided words or actions, even in the face of viable criticism. For example, in "Reflections on Little Rock," Arendt argues against the forced integration of schools due to her belief that legal actions meant for the public realm were misapplied to the social realm in which schools and social discrimination, according to her logic, ought to be confined. This piece undoubtedly continues to contribute to her reputed racism, as she never publicly admitted to the harmfulness of her opinions. When "Reflections on Little Rock" was published in 1959, Arendt had already withheld the essay from the public for a year. In the "Preliminary Remarks" she includes with the essay in *Dissent*, Arendt acknowledges but dismisses several critiques of the essay pre-publication; she also attacks "opponents" for failing to understand her essay in "A Reply to Critics," printed in the following issue of the magazine. The first comes from Sidney Hook, a white male philosopher, who felt Arendt's preoccupation with laws against intermarriage over school segregation did not reflect the concerns of the black population itself. Arendt condescendingly replies, "This is understandable; oppressed minorities were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters and there are many instances when they preferred to fight for social opportunity rather than for basic human or political rights" (Portable 232). Such a comment is racist, to say the least, but Arendt's obsession with intermarriage

undoubtedly stems in part from “the infamous Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which had prohibited intermarriage and sexual intercourse between Jews and Germans” (EJ 7). Arendt of course refuses to admit, here, that her own biases or misgivings might result from the standpoint she developed through her experiences as a Jew in Nazi Germany. This silence indicates that Arendt’s objection to sharing “feelings about an event”— she believes feelings are antithetical to *thinking* from the standpoint of an event—leads to a lack of accountability for and in her work (Nelson 52).

When placing “Other People’s Children” in *Just As I Thought*, Paley felt it necessary or (at the very least) important enough to warrant an additional reply, to herself and Dosh, more than twenty years later. Paley does this nowhere else in the book, though she does explain, contextualize or reflect upon all of her selections in the short introductions to each of the book’s chapters. In the follow-up to “Other People’s Children” for *Just As I Thought*, Paley admits she had not taken the issue of racism against mixed-race children in Vietnam seriously enough, though she remains firm in her belief that “the “orphan” airlifts were an outrageous political ploy” (JT 121). Despite her rather terse initial reply to Dosh decades prior, Paley is willing to do what Rich advocates and what Arendt refuses; she owns her past analytical shortcoming without abandoning her responsibility to illuminate events in history with the color of life and meaning. Paley ends this updated reflection with a personal anecdote:

Still, at a poetry reading organized by the Joiner Center at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, I heard American vets and Vietnamese vets read stories and poems. Among them, a wonderful American poet, a young Vietnamese American, Christian Langworthy. I told him how fine his work was, then felt obliged to truthfully tell him how angry I’d been when he and others first came to the United States, as children, part of one of America’s war games;

how glad I was that he was here with another language tune in his head to give our English the jolts it has learned over the centuries to use so well. (JT 121-122)

Paley's semicolon here holds her seemingly contradictory feelings of past anger and present gladness in compatible tension with each other. Rather than bury one feeling under the other, she links the two together and owns each emotion, for better or worse, in perpetuity. This anecdotal follow-up, in addition to the original back-and-forth between Paley and Dosh in *Ms.*, points to Paley's belief in the possibility of change and her feminist commitment to hold herself accountable to her own evolving point of view. Even more important, Paley shows she is still able to derive newly found meaning from the event of post-war adoption through her encounter with Langworthy; though her original article is fixed, her appreciation for the effects of diversity on and within language allow her to imagine a future in which an event like the orphan airlift can be compatible with an optimism for progress.

With 2019 not yet over and already notable for legislative pushback on abortion rights and the militarization and grossly neglectful and abusive behavior of police and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement against innocent civilians, this is an appropriate time as ever in American political life to revisit the work of Grace Paley—activist, writer, poet, woman, mother, daughter. *Just As I Thought*, Paley's critically ignored guide to her experiences and perspectives spanning the second half of the twentieth century, ought to place Paley in conversation with Hannah Arendt, Adrienne Rich and the other theorists or public intellectuals whom we turn for insight and better understanding of our current though historically-grounded issues and events. She successfully uses her signature humor, irony and sarcasm as well as prosaic fragmentation through grammatical and formal choices to illuminate political stories in language accessible to common readers. *Just As I Thought*, through the person of Paley herself, provides a study of

activism in writing and contributes to an ongoing, feminist understanding of recent American history that all people interested in revolutionary change—scholars in the traditional sense or otherwise—would do well to read.

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