theories and methodologies

"What We Need Right Now Is to Imagine the Real": Grace Paley Writing against War

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HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE. ANOTHER FRIGID WINTER DAY. I AM WALKING TO LUNCH. THE DARTMOUTH COLLEGE GREEN IS COVERED IN SNOW, and temperatures are dropping. It is January 1991, the day after Operation Desert Storm was launched in the Persian Gulf. "STOP THE WAR!!" A few people carrying large and small signs stand on the corner closest to Main Street; you can see their breath as they chant. "US out of Kuwait!" The war is so new that no lectures or teach-ins have been scheduled on campus yet, and I see that the protesters are neither students nor faculty members: they are people, many of them older, from surrounding New Hampshire and Vermont towns. Ahead of the academics, once again, I'm thinking. As on other such occasions, Grace Paley is here, wearing her blue parka, purple wool hat, snow boots, and mittens, holding her sign.[1] The protests will continue every Friday at noon, in snow and ice, until the United States starts moving troops out of the Gulf in early March; I join when I can, but I often have conflicts on campus. Paley drives in from her home in nearby Thetford, Vermont, every time, without fail.[2]

Eleven years later, in the summer of 2002, she is again on the corner of Main Street and the Green. This time, I have been part of the group from the beginning. We decided to organize a Women in Black chapter in Hanover, and we invited women and men to join.[3] It is noon, on Thursday, and, wearing black T-shirts, we carry signs and hand out flyers about recent events in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the violence in Jenin and in Bethlehem. "Stop the occupation!" we chant. Passersby pause to ask, "The occupation? *What occupation?*" The West Bank and its woes could not be more remote from the green banks of the Connecticut River on a summer day or from the minds of people walking to lunch in the brilliant sunshine. Ever so patiently, Grace engages them in conversation, invites them to join us. She will be there every Thursday at noon throughout the summer. She has been doing this a long time: protests, demonstrations, handing out leaflets, in large cities and in small villages, in the town center and at the village dump, on the sites of nuclear power plants and in spaces

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far removed from conflict. Students, faculty members, administrators, townspeople, going about their lives, are provoked to stop and to try, for a moment, to "imagine the real" of lives lived in war, in poverty and need, somewhere across the world, and to think about the effects of those conditions on people here, whose lives are diminished, economically, psychologically, and spiritually, as their governments wage war and pursue policies of immiseration in their, in our, names. And through that act of imagination, to think about how to intervene.

Throughout her work, Paley distinguishes "imagining" from "just referring to things," which results in "los[ing] them entirely" (*Just As I Thought* 171). For her, to imagine is to envision the details and the materiality of the lives of others, across gender, age, geographic, and political divides. It is to understand the motivations even of those who wage war and inflict suffering and who, like George Wallace or Robert McNamara, later admit their mistakes after developing an imagination. It is to disrupt a dailiness that accepts war, poverty, and suffering as inevitable. In her protest and direct action, and in her writing, Paley practiced an embodied politics and an aesthetics of interruption and disruption, and of surprise. She did this tirelessly, with fresh energy and without discouragement, throughout a lifetime and a writing career.

Of the many actions and groups in which Paley was involved, the Women's Pentagon Action of the early 1980s perhaps illustrates best what it means to write and to act against war and the complacencies it breeds. In the Women's Pentagon Action Unity Statement, which she drafted and revised in a lengthy consultation with about two hundred other women activists, Paley practices a collective form of writing that emerges from the best work of feminist organizing and resistance. I would like to read it closely to ask, What are the ethical and aesthetic stakes, and what are the efficacies, of this collective antiwar writing practice?[4] How does this statement, which emerges from a particular action and political moment in the early 1980s, relate to Grace Paley's stories, poems, and essays and to her career as a writer?

"It all started in a Friends' meeting house in Hartford," Ynestra King, one of the action's primary organizers, recently told me. "We were sitting on very small chairs in the day care center, and Grace surmised that this had a leveling effect and that it made it possible for us to 'play'" (Personal interview). Participants in the historic conference Women and Life on Earth, held at Smith College in 1979, had begun to connect racism, sexism, heterosexism, and the disregard of the environment and the unchecked militarism that characterized the early Reagan era. The women's urgent insights and connections came with a pedagogical imperative—a platform of public education through visible acts of public intervention. "What came next, what naturally followed all that talking and talking, was action, finally: The Women's Pentagon Action in 1981," writes Paley in *Just As I Thought*, her volume of essays

Grace Paley (center) at a planning meeting for the Women's Pentagon Action. Photograph by Dorothy Marder. Reproduced by permission of the photographer's estate.

and speeches; with characteristic humor and humility, she continues, "A position or unity statement had to be written. . . . I would write that statement. It was an honor for me, and of course the women were also relieved that someone would do the job" (126, 7).

Taking notes in her small spiral notebook during meetings in New England and New York in 1979 and 1980, Paley went home to draft the Unity Statement:

> Still, it took weeks, because with the honor came the obligation to read and reread it at meetings—by phone to people who could not get to meetings. New ideas were introduced, and lots of questions. . . . The document we produced was not a consensual one, which is usually compromised by that perfectly honorable mediating process. It was exactly, at some length, what everyone believed and hoped. Me too. (127)

Arrived at neither by majority rule nor by consensus, the document emerges from a third possibility, which eschews compromise and cliché. Paradoxical and intriguing, this third possibility is evoked in the self-reflexive and self-searching feminist process of revision Paley describes in her recollections: "It seems odd now, but although we spoke emphatically about misogyny, it was late, almost before printing time, when someone said, What about sexual preference—homophobia? And this in an organization that was at least 50 percent lesbian" (127). Such suggestions are amalgamated, added to the drafts in a paratactic structure of inclusion. Instead of compromising, the drafters chose to let multiple voices and possibilities, and multiple emphases, sit beside one another, in the belief that the whole would indeed reflect "what everyone believed and hoped."

There were two women's Pentagon actions, on 17 November 1980 and on 16 November 1981, each drawing several thousand participants, each featuring the Unity Statement, distributed in English and eventually also in Spanish translation. Although the statement survives in textual form, in a

At the Women's Pentagon Action. Copyright © Diana Mara Henry / dianamarahenry.com.

number of versions reflecting the myriad revisions, its words have to be seen in the context of the large theater of protest organized in Washington. If we imagine and read it as a leaflet—widely distributed, read, crumpled and discarded or collected, reprinted, subject to renewed revision—it can perhaps acquire for us the performative force it had at the time, enlarging the circle of unity beyond Washington and beyond 1980 and 1981.

Preceded by a day of workshops and teach-ins, the actions sought to create a new form of demonstration, eschewing raised platforms, speeches, and stars in favor of a participatory and egalitarian form of what T. V. Reed calls an "exemplary . . . radical dramaturgy," inspired, no doubt, by the political theater of Bertolt Brecht, Augosto Boal, and the Bread and Puppet Theater and by other avant-garde tactics of the 1960s and 1970s (120).[5] Relying on the power of symbolism and theater and practicing a politics of disruption and surprise, the women used flashy props such as larger-than-life puppets created by Amy Trompetter, literally interrupting the work of the Pentagon by transforming the space and blocking the entrances where "[e]very day . . . the colonels and generals who are planning our annihilation walk calmly in and out the doors of its five sides" (Paley, *Just As I Thought* 142).

The performances had four acts, each mobilizing a particular affect. "Mourning" took place in Arlington Cemetery, where protesters created a women's cemetery with cardboard tombstones for feminist heroes like the Holocaust rescuer Hannah Senesh and the labor-union activist Karen Silkwood and for more general figures like the mother, the sister, the unknown woman. They then moved to the Pentagon for the second act, "Rage," brandishing giant red puppets, shouting at the building and its power, and smearing symbolic blood on the entrance pillars. In the third act, "Empowerment," they encircled the Pentagon, and in the fourth, "Defiance," they held aloft black puppets and wrapped the building in a

Tomb of the Unknown Woman. Photograph by Dorothy Marder. Reproduced by permission of the photographer's estate.

beautiful and ominous web of multicolored yarn. Hundreds of the women who, in Ynestra King's words, "use[d] [their] bodies to disrupt what goes on at the Pentagon" were arrested, and some spent weeks in jail, experiencing the sexism, racism, and homophobia that they had come to protest ("WPA").[6]

"For two years we have gathered at the Pentagon because we fear for our lives," the Unity Statement begins. "We came to mourn and rage and defy the Pentagon because it is the workplace of the imperial power which threatens us all" (*Just As I Thought* 142). The statement starts with a definition of who "we" are—our locations, ages, social statuses, and professions—and a revelation of our feelings and fears. It moves to a well-informed enumeration and explanation of the technologies of destruction being developed: stealth aircraft, nerve gas, nuclear power, neutron bombs, each succinctly explained. This pedagogical part of the statement also outlines the social and economic consequences of the

arms buildup: cuts in day care, school budgets, work opportunities, and welfare budgets; effects on black and Latino youth; the introduction of the Family Protection Act and of antichoice legislation; and the prevention of the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment (143). These connections then open out to include the ecological effects of this buildup on the lands and lives of indigenous peoples and its contribution to the growth of “racism, woman hating, and the old European habit of Jew hatred” (143). The statement is knowledgeable and authoritative, relying on precise terminology and on numbers. It is also poetic and rhetorical, personifying the Pentagon as it vilifies it: “Whatever help the poor receive is cut or withdrawn to feed the Pentagon, which needs about $500 million a day for its murderous health. It extracted $157 billion last year from our own tax money, $1800 from a family of four” (143). These are more than statistics: they are means by which we can “imagine the real[ity]” of individual and collective lives touched by militarism and war.

These accounts of information and condemnation are followed by an assertion of desire and by an opening: “We want to know what anger in these men, what fear that can only be satisfied by destruction, what coldness of heart and ambition drives their days” (144). Naming, personalizing, and wanting to understand anger, coldness, and ambition is another way of interrupting the well-worn motivations of military buildup. It is a different form of protest—more than a simple condemnation. But with this attention to “these men” comes a fundamental, radical turn to us and what we want. This is not the language of rights, not a set of demands, but a platform of need and desire that defines the “ordinary lives” of women, children, and men, here and in “new nations and old colonies” (144): good food, decent housing, access to health care, useful work, safe workplaces, safety from sexual harassment, honor in old age, freedom from rape and other violent attack, freedom of choice, freedom “to love whomever we choose” (145), “an education for children which tells the true story of our women’s lives, which describes the earth as our home to be cherished, to be fed as well as harvested” (165). Reversing accepted ideas about gender equality, the statement continues, “We do not want to be drafted into the Army. We do not want our young brothers drafted. We want *them* equal with *us*” (145).

As the statement gains momentum, the wants multiply and become at once more urgent and more ambitious. “We want” an end to racism and an awareness of the benefits that racial prejudice has brought to some women. “We want” to be reunited with the women who are spending their lives “in cages” (146). Then the statement moves to its most visionary section, about ecology, energy, and the earth. It calls for an end to the arms race and a return of the earth to “the people who tilled it.” It alerts to the destruction of certain animal species. It asserts the understanding of a deep “connectedness” that is violated by the gold and oil that are opposed to the human “we,” who are “made of blood and bone, . . . of the sweet and finite resource, water” (147). And it ends with a view of a different future, one that we already know because we have imagined it, and with a bold and defiant tone of intent: “We know there is a healthy, sensible, loving way to live and we intend to live that way in our neighborhoods and our farms in these United States and among our sisters and brothers in all the countries of the world” (147).

The Unity Statement was written in a collaborative, inclusionary process, by about two hundred women, in ordinary language that would be broadly available and inviting. The group drafting it was not a coalition of peace groups: although most of the women had already been involved in other groups, they did not represent these groups but came together as part of a new unit. Among the women and with all those to whom they reached out across space and time, *unity* becomes a performative term: in line with J. L. Austin’s

Puppets at the Women's Pentagon Action. Copyright © Diana Mara Henry / dianamarahenry .com.

definition of performative speech acts, its utterance summons and creates unity as a form of action that aims to transform the Pentagon and its many levels of influence. It becomes a means of empowerment that moves through mourning, rage, and defiance to transformation. And *unity* connects not only women and people who work for policy changes but also the different issues that it wishes to link to war and war's far-reaching effects.

Reflecting, as Paley writes, "exactly, at some length, what everyone believed and hoped," the Unity Statement also fit, "exactly," the character of the action that emerged around it. In my view, it is not only, as John Bell recently argued, a manifesto, because it is not only a "declaration of principles." It is, as well, a proclamation of needs, desires, and expectations that defiantly articulates and justifies the deep fears that war and militarism create. It provides a space in which these fears can be experienced and expressed, in which their repression can be undone. In the context of the demonstrations, the statement shows that fear need not be paralyzing and that it can lead to consciousness, meaningful action, and continued resistance.

The Women's Pentagon Action protests and Unity Statement were products of their moment, the early 1980s. Like other such events, the all-woman gathering was a laboratory for the practice of consciousness and coalition. Building on a long history of women's nonviolent peace activism by groups such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the Seneca Falls Women's Peace Encampment, and Women Strike for Peace, to name only a few iconic examples, the participants developed a complex feminist analysis of gender, imperialism, racism, and militarism and their reach across women's daily lives, in the form of poverty, rape, sexual abuse, and environmental neglect. The gathering was certainly "motherist," but not in the sense of celebrating any special knowledge that mothers bring simply as mothers. Rather, it highlighted the heightened concern for the future imbued by caring for children

and by knowledge of their bodies’ vulnerability.[7] It showed how motherhood, marked by this concern, could be mobilized as a powerful force of social critique. Responding to their historical moment, the statement and the actions were an inspired and inspiring, empowering and imaginative form of intervention—an effective medium through which to communicate, in symbolic form, complex intellectual insights into the social, intellectual, and psychic roots and by-products of militarism and war.

When she assembled *Just As I Thought*, Paley decided to include the Unity Statement, “since the writing was my responsibility” (127). Although she is not its sole author, its themes as well as its tactics of interruption and surprise echo across her fiction, poetry, speeches, and essays.

In the poem “Is There a Difference between Men and Women,” a series of declarative lines distinguish, without ever naming, those who are responsible for the arms trade, the slave trade, and the trade in the bodies of women from those who engage in household trade, in trade in the markets selling “melon mustard greens / cloth shining dipped in / onion dye, beet grass” (*Begin Again* 156). The women in Paley’s stories are mothers concerned with the safety of their own children and of other people’s children, on the playground, on the subway, and across the world. The male characters tend to be more distant, more isolated and tortured. In “Listening,” Faith wants to have another baby, but Jack stalls and tries to dissuade her. Like his male friend and interlocutor, he wants the freedom to commit suicide when he wishes. Eventually, he leaves for Arizona “to clear his lungs and sinuses and also to have, hopefully, one last love affair, the kind that’s full of terrific longing, ineluctable attraction, and so forth” (*Collected Stories* 385). “[A]nd so forth”—a simple and devastating deflation of masculine fantasy and its clichés. And yet in the late poem “Fathers,”

> Fathers are
> more fathering
> these days
>
> . . . .
>
> on the New York subways
> and the mass transits
> of other cities   one may
> see fatherings of many colors
> with their round babies on
> their laps
>
> . . . .
>
> these scenes were brand new
> exciting for an old woman who
> had watched the old fathers
> gathering once again in
> familiar army camps and com-
> fortable war rooms to consider
> the necessary eradication of
> the new fathering fathers
> (who are their sons) as well
> as the women and children who
> will surely be in the way   (*Fidelity* 6–7)

Note the adjective “fathering” and the plural noun “fatherings,” making of paternity a quality of care and a series of actions, perhaps a way at once to contest and to expand the motherism of the Unity Statement. Note also the enjambment that breaks “comfortable”: Paley’s poetic strategies contest comfort and its oblivions. Always ready to startle and surprise, her poetry and her prose provoke our vigilance and our readiness to perceive the small acts that are unexpected and out of the ordinary—to make space for change, such as the change in fathering.

Paley’s characters are political: they go to meetings, produce leaflets, distribute them, argue tirelessly about the world. They have layered histories, reaching back to the pogroms in Russia and Ukraine, to the tsars’ prisons, and to communist and Trotskyite commitments. They fought in World War II, in the Korean and Vietnam wars; they followed their men to army bases, and they created peace encampments. Their political efforts are often ef-

fective in local and global arenas, and yet they can be whimsical, absurd, even laughable.

In the deeply ironic story "Politics," "[a] group of mothers from our neighborhood went down to the Board of Estimate hearing and sang a song. . . . *[O]h oh oh / will someone please put a high fence / around the children's playground. . . . [W]on't the city / come / or their daddies to keep the bums and / the tramps out of the yard*. . . . By noon the next day the fence was up." The mothers in this action are immune neither to the fears and prejudices that support war nor to flirtations like the one that leads a young woman reporter to overlook a hole in the fence made by an attractive Tactical Police Force cop carrying a copy of Camus's *The Rebel* "for identification purposes" (*Collected Stories* 222).

In "Listening," Faith is handing out leaflets that cry out, "U.S. Honor the Geneva agreements" (*Collected Stories* 378). She overhears a young man in a coffee shop explaining to his uncle that the "wife" he left in Vietnam with a little girl she bore him would never want to come live in the United States: "I would like to find a good-looking American girl, someone nice, I mean, and fall in love and settle down, because, you know, I'm twenty-four already" (379). After she hands him a leaflet, "[h]e looked at it. He looked at me. He looked at the wall, sighing. Oh shit. He crumpled the leaflet in one hand. He looked at me again. He said, Oh, I'm sorry. He put the leaflet on the table. He smoothed it out." A series of small gestures in an encounter that this time interrupts both the young man's plans and the narrator's act of protest. Each has to stop and to listen, to look at the other across ideological divides. They share the daily space of the diner. "Oh shit" is the one unattributed comment. Is it the narrator's or the young man's expletive? We cannot know. "Let's go, said uncle Stan." The name, an echo of "Uncle Sam," stays with us as a reminder of the story's artfulness.

There are many ways to "imagine the real." In the Unity Statement, that act of imagination is devoted to exposing the truth of war and the reality of its effects in the workings of the military-industrial complex. In Paley's poems and stories, we are led to imagine the dailiness of her characters' lives, to hear their voices in everyday conversation, evoked in real and heightened surreal settings. In different ways, the poems and stories provoke us to stop over our sandwiches and to refuse to accept the givenness and the invisibility of war, destruction, poverty, and disease—the erasure of the other woman and her child.

"Three Days and a Question" narrates three days of walks through the city, three scenes, seemingly unconnected. Here Paley speaks in her own voice. "On the first day I joined a demonstration opposing the arrest in Israel of members of Yesh Gvul, Israeli soldiers who had refused to serve in the occupied territories." A woman watching the demonstration tells a television anchorwoman that the demonstrators are "anti-Semites," only to be angrily challenged by an elderly demonstrator holding up his arm for her to see: "Are you crazy? . . . How you dare to say that—all of us Jews. Me, he said. He pulled up his shirtsleeve. Me? You call me? . . . You look at my number, what they did to me. . . . My arm—you're afraid to look . . . my arm . . . my arm" (Paley and Williams, *Long Walks*; last two ellipses in orig.)

On the second day, the narrator and her friend Vera return from listening to a censored Czech writer read her stories. They encounter a young man with AIDS asking them for money so he can find a place to sleep. He also pulls out his arm: "No one will help me. No one. Because they can see. . . . Lesions, he said. . . . That's what people see." The women respond to his appeal with money and advice. "Separately, Vera and I think: A boy—only a boy. Mothers after all, our common trade for more than thirty years."

On the third day, the narrator talks to a taxi driver from Haiti. "Why?" he challenges her. "[Y]ou don't let us come. Starving. They send us back. . . . Why, he says, turning to me

again, rolling his short shirtsleeve back, raising his arm to the passenger divider, pinching and pulling the bare skin of his upper arm. You tell me—this skin, this black skin—why? Why you hate this skin so much?”

“Why?” the narrator herself wonders about the coincidence of “those gestures, those arms, the three consecutive days thrown like a formal net over the barest unchanged accidental facts.” She concludes, speculatively and whimsically, “In order to become—probably—in this city one story told.” Why, indeed. Three days, unconnected, three similar gestures exposing all the unacknowledged connections between war—the Holocaust, the Israeli occupation, dictatorships in Haiti—inner-city poverty and need, poor health care, racism, anti-Semitism, and an ethics of care that Paley casts with those in the mothering trade and those, men and women, who have been the victims of genocide. The raised arm and exposed skin, whether tattooed, full of lesions, or simply black, reveal the materiality of the real, there to be seen but often ignored as we walk through our cities and towns, as we walk home or to lunch. Sometimes, Paley shows us, we stop and look at each other, we listen, and sometimes we even respond. And this is the first burst of imagination, the first antiwar act.

Notes

The phrase quoted in my title is from Grace Paley’s essay “Of Poetry and Women and the World” (171). It also resonates with the title of another of Paley’s essays in the same collection, “Imagining the Present.” I wish to thank Srinivas Aravamudan, Lila Abu-Lughod, Susan Crane, Jean Howard, Alice Kessler-Harris, Dorothy Ko, Nancy K. Miller, Ivy Schweitzer, and Leo Spitzer for their incisive comments on previous drafts of this paper; Ynestra King, Amy Swerdlow, Barbara Selfridge, Judy Myers, Nina Kraut, and Eva Kolisch for their lively evocations of the Women’s Pentagon Action; Diana Mara Henry for offering her photographs of the Women’s Pentagon Action; Elissa and Eve Marder for permission to use the photos by Dorothy Marder; and Nora Paley for her help with Grace Paley’s archive.

1. Born in the Bronx in 1922, Paley published her first short story collection, *Little Disturbances of Man*, in 1959. It was followed by *Enormous Changes at the Last Minute* (1974), *Later the Same Day* (1985), and *The Collected Stories* (1994). She was also the author of three volumes of poetry, *Leaning Forward* (1985), *Begin Again: Collected Poems* (2000), and the posthumous *Fidelity: Poems* (2008); a book of essays and speeches, *Just As I Thought* (1998); an illustrated book of poetry and prose, with Vera Williams, *Long Walks and Intimate Talks* (1991); and a volume of stories and poems, with Robert Nichols, *Here and Somewhere Else* (2007). Before her death in Vermont in 2007, Paley engaged in a lifetime of antimilitarist activism with groups such as Women Strike for Peace, the War Resisters’ League, the American Friends’ Service Committee, the Women’s Pentagon Action, the Clamshell Alliance, Resist, and Women in Black, as well as with local antiwar and antinuclear affinity groups in New York and Vermont. She traveled to Hanoi on a peace mission in 1969 and to Moscow as a delegate at the 1974 World Peace Conference.

2. For Paley’s account of anti–Gulf War protests, see “The Gulf War” (*Just As I Thought* 254–70).

3. Women in Black is a worldwide network of women working for peace and justice and against militarism. It began in Israel in 1988 in solidarity with the goals of the first Palestinian intifada. Women in Black chapters around the world still organize weekly peace vigils.

4. Since the statement underwent numerous revisions, there are many versions of it in circulation. This paper draws on the version Paley published in her collection *Just As I Thought*.

5. On the relation of the protest actions in which Paley was involved to avant-garde art practices, see Bell.

6. Paley was arrested at the 1980 action with hundreds of other demonstrators. The sentences were unexpectedly harsh, and the prisoners were taken to the federal penitentiary in Alderson, West Virginia. Feeling responsible for the many young women who had never been to a demonstration and who suddenly found themselves in shackles, Paley agreed to be bailed out early so that she could intervene on their behalf. In a slightly conflicting account, she was released by the judge because of the media attention the arrests had garnered after Amy Swerdlow contacted the press. By all accounts, Paley refrained from civil disobedience in the 1981 action to avoid arrest because she had another case pending (Swerdlow; King, Message).

7. On “motherist” politics, see Kaplan; Orleck, Jetter, and Taylor.

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