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Grace Paley's Urban Jewish Voice: Identity, History, and "The Tune of the Language"

Victoria Aarons

- 1 Grace Paley once described the textures and sounds of language, those "world-inventing words," to borrow a phrase from one of her characters, as "the tune of the language," a melody bequeathed through time and "the shoals of every day," those strains and intonations that are vehicles of history, identity, community, and memory ("Ruthy and Edie," *Later the Same Day*,¹ 126; Interview with Aarons 50; "Faith in the Afternoon," *Enormous Changes in the Last Minute*² 32). Language is, for Paley and her characters, malleable, fluid, and alive: "I would just throw words up in the air," Paley tells us, "and see where they fell" (qtd. in Darnton). Language carries Paley's characters to places both recognizable and unknown to them. Driven by words, Paley's garrulous characters determinedly advance into the silence and make it verbal. Her short, economical fiction moves by way of dialogue. Paley's short stories depend upon dialogue as a means of fashioning and amplifying character. Her characters are driven by the words that precede them: resolute, purposeful, relentless, and distilled. Like her characters, "as a user of words," Paley is "merciless" (Interview Dee, et al. 1). Plot, for Paley, is always subservient to character. As Paley has said, "I begin by writing paragraphs that don't have an immediate relation to a plot. The sound of the story comes first" (Interview Dee, et al. 3). And from the sound emerges character, which Paley treats as a cluster of tones and thus of affects. One of Paley's characters will say to another "You don't have to tell stories to me in which I'm a character" ("Listening," *LSD* 203). She does not because character is the story for Paley. Language is the means by which her characters negotiate their way through their ordinary worlds of husbands and wives, children, and neighbors. With eloquent, concentrated simplicity, Paley's characters move about in the delimited spaces of their narrating lives, their lives opening up to them and to others through talk and through the transmission of stories that define them. Ordinary and largely undistinguished, Paley's narrators transform themselves and the worlds they inhabit

with words. Her characteristically dialogue-driven stories are peopled with sound, her characters propelled forward in significant acts of courage by, as Paley has suggested, "the ordinary language of your time—which, though I use the word 'ordinary,' is always extraordinary" (qtd. in Ulaby). It is so because the ordinary, quotidian, and declarative language of Grace Paley's post-war urban Jewish landscapes is, very simply, both strategically preemptive and unexpectedly transformative. "I want to go on with the story," one character will say to another, "Or perhaps begin it again" ("The Story Hearer," *LSD* 134). The language of Paley's post-war America, like the cityscapes she writes about and the people who inhabit them, is packed, compressed, thick with nuance, and filled with sound, with the sounds of people living and talking. Her playgrounds, city streets and parks are, as one character happily affirms, "full of noise. Everybody got something to say to the next guy" ("Zagrowsky Tells," *LSD* 173). It is the noise of a diasporic people living, imagining, and struggling to make sense and keep control of their lives.

- 2 As one of Paley's characters says to another, "I like your paragraphs better than your sentences" ("Listening," *LSD* 205). What he really likes, in other words, is the ongoing rush of words strung together, the continuous, steady momentum and rhythms of sound, the "tune," that holds the promise of movement, of passage from the otherwise constrained and narrow worlds of city blocks and neighborhoods, stoops, windows, and doorways from which her characters' voices expansively spill out into the streets. As Paley put it, it is "the tune of the language" that is "in your ear [...] you suddenly realize you know... and that is the most important thing" (Interview Aarons 50). And it is so because this persistent tune, a "sad melody," as one of her narrators insists, a "song... learned in her mother's kitchen," links her characters to a community and inheritance of suffering and possibility, loss and gain, the twin counterparts and complements of diasporic Jewish history ("Politics," *EC* 139). Paley's characters are, in many ways, the voice of the diaspora, the rhythmic psalm of reinvention: determined, strong-willed, and indefatigable. To be miserly with words is, for Paley, a failure of imagination, and, as the narrator of the short story "Listening" admits, "a great absence of yourself" (*LSD* 210). Word stinginess is viewed by Paley's characters as an abdication of one's ethical responsibilities, of one's obligation to others, as well as a failure to imagine possibilities and secure a future, as the narrator of the story "Friends" concedes, the "roots of the littlest future, sometimes just stubs of conversation" (*LSD* 83). Paley's characters are attuned to each other and to their shared place in the communities in which they live and work and play and dream. But the "tune of the language" also connects them to a history of communal melody, a Jewish lament that her characters always come back to with "their ears to the ground, listening to signals from long ago" ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 31). Thus they are also tuned into a counter narrative of suffering, one that takes into account "that dark ancestral grief" ("The Immigrant Story," *EC* 171). The densely distilled dialogue and ongoing flow of words that shape Paley's fictional narratives—characters who form and reaffirm communities through talk—acknowledge and extend a distinctly Jewish history of suffering, one that has implications for the immediate worlds her characters inhabit.
- 3 For Paley, the "tune of the language"—the sounds that shape memory and identity—is passed along intergenerationally, from, as she says, "our great grandfathers [...] through my father and mother and grandmother," and invokes a "speech and a life" intrinsic to and defining of both character and, in Paley's words, "social feelings," of continuity and

survival (Interview Aarons 53). As with her recurring character Faith, like Paley, the child of immigrants, who "feels herself so damply in the swim of things that she considers crawling Channels and Hellespontos," Paley's characters, "asweat with dreams," navigate the world through talk, through the efficacy of articulated expression that gives presence to what otherwise might be absence ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 33). For, as one of her characters cautions, "in the grave it will be quiet" ("The Loudest Voice," *The Little Disturbances of Man*³ 55). This is an admonition not to be taken lightly. Up against "the tendency [...] to forget," as another character warns, is, for Paley, the resiliency of language to carry the weight of memory ("Friends," *LSD* 72). For, as one of her characters assures another, "Though the world cannot be changed by talking [...] it may at least be known" ("Friends," *LSD* 78). In this way, Paley's characters will attempt to navigate the conditions of their collective history and individual histories through an articulated presence that calls upon a conscious and gritty self-reckoning. To this end, Faith's immigrant father will tell her a story that she should take to heart:

There's an old Jew. He's in Germany. It's maybe '39, '40. He comes around to the tourist office. He looks at the globe. They got a globe there. He says, Listen, I got to get out of here. Where you suggest, Herr Agent, I should go? The agency man also looks at the globe. The Jewish man says, Hey, how about here? He points to America. Oh, says the agency man, sorry, no, they got finished up with their quota. Ts, says the Jewish man, so how about here? He points to France. Last train left already for there, too bad, too bad. Nu, then to Russia? Sorry, absolutely nobody they let in there at the present time. A few more places...the answer is always, port is closed. They got already too many, we got no boats...So finally the poor Jew, he's thinking he can't go anywhere on the globe, also he can't stay where he is, he says oi, he says ach! He pushes the globe away, disgusted. But he got hope. He says, So this one is used up, Herr Agent. Listen—you got another one? ("Dreamer in a Dead Language," *LSD* 19)

- 4 Paley's characters will, in the face of antagonism and catastrophe, construct their own, knowable worlds, and they will do so through shaping the language of their experience, an insider's language that is protective of and fortified by collective good-will, a project of being consciously attuned to the privations and anguish of others.
- 5 Paley's characters are committed truth-tellers, believing, as does Faith, that "A few hot human truthful words are powerful enough" to defend against obscurity ("Friends," *LSD* 73). As one outraged character, brandishing herself in the face of an unforgivably remiss storyteller, protests, "you've just omitted me from the other stories and I was there. In the restaurant and the train, right there [...] Where is my life? [...] Why have you left me out of everybody's life?" ("Listening," *LSD* 210). To be left out of the cultural "life" of the Western world is the historical plight of the Jew. To be left out of the representation of a "life" of one's own making is a symptomatic anxiety resulting from the fear of erasure, of being moored in a diaspora without agency and hope. From this fear emerges the communal character of Paley's fiction and its emphasis on storytelling. Paley's stories, the ways her characters live and talk in the world, are brutally honest about the fear of isolation and the vulnerability that comes with it. The public articulation of sorrow, grief, pleasure, and want is, for Paley, a measure of the determination to mitigate loss, revealing the post-war Jewish paradox of the sheer pleasure of being in America as measured against a looming history—both distant and proximate—of shared suffering. Thus Paley's narrators will make emphatic the lives of others whose histories they share—if only by imagined consanguinity—so that "those names can take thickness and strength and fall back into the world with their weight," in other words, to insist on a

future even if manufactured—sutured together—by the threads of memory and story (“Friends,” *LSD* 79).

- 6 The “tune of the language” is, for Paley, an inheritance that draws upon a narrated past, a melody with origins in the Jewish tradition of both lamentation and midrashic responses to it, rupture and continuity. This inheritance responds to the obligatory conditions of the shared transmission of narratives and individual testimony. As one of Paley’s characters insists, one must “tell stories [...] in order [...] to save a few lives” (“Debts,” *EC* 10). Paley’s fiction is a matter of talking lives, the making of character through the defining space of the sounds and textures of language, a language that draws from the inflections and cadences of the past, of shared history and myth, an inheritance that takes pleasure in the sounds of invention and self-fashioning and that draws upon the celebrated achievements of self-expression. As one of Paley’s characters satirically and with interpretive, even midrashic, “interlinear intelligence” maintains, “that Isaac, Sarah’s boy—before he was old enough to be taken out by his father to get his throat cut, he must have just lain around smiling and making up diphthongs and listening” (“The Story Hearer,” *LSD* 144). That is, the sound and shape of language, its design and presence, is an act of serial, interpretive creation in the face of vulnerability to catastrophe. The refusal to participate in the ongoing, generational discursive project becomes in Paley’s stories a potential “assault” on the preservation of Jewish identity, for, as Faith’s immigrant father, with deep conviction, reminds her, “to a Jew the word ‘shut up’ is a terrible expression, a dirty word, like a sin, because in the beginning [...] was the word!” (“Faith in the Afternoon,” *EC* 41).
- 7 This context comprised of the intersections of speech, history, and identity is, of course, the immigrant’s “story” in harmony with the self-asserting narratives of the first generation American-born children, those who with anxious dispatch, as the narrator of Paley’s “The Immigrant Story” purports, “grew up in the summer sunlight of upward mobility” (*EC* 171). Many of Paley’s stories are narrated by the children of immigrants who straddle a Jewish immigrant past and an ascending Jewish American middle-class. In many ways, Paley’s fiction is on the threshold of a generational divide, an exchange of existences, escorting out a generation for whom self-formation “is of great consequence,” as an immigrant parent will remind his daughter in the story “A Conversation with My Father” (*EC* 232-237), and ushering in a generation of Jews—the children of immigrants—for whom an ironic assessment of American life is for the first time an indulgence (163). As Paley says of her writing, “I hardly ever write of a single generation [...] I’m interested in intergenerations—the young people and the old—because I’m more interested in history than I am in psychology” (qtd in Darnton). We see in Paley’s short stories the urban landscape of America through the eyes of both the immigrant in the early years of the twentieth-century and through the competing perspective of the children of that immigrant generation, whose view of America was circumscribed “from Coney Island to the cemetery [...] the same subway [...] the same fare” (“The Loudest Voice,” *EC* 55). Paley’s fiction, especially her early stories, gives voice to this intergenerational dialogue, conversations among those who reinvented themselves as Americans, having “shot like a surface-to-air missile right into the middle class” under the auspices of “the American flag on wild Ellis Island” (“Enormous Changes” 122). But this transition from immigrant to middle-class American is fraught with complication, as it is for Paley’s “Faith,” who “really is an American [...] raised up like everyone else to the true assumption of happiness,” but who “is absolutely miserable,” a “willful unhappiness,” of which she, “in

the middle of prosperous times," should, as her mother admonishes her, "do your life a little better than this" ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 33, 34, 36). After all, as the ailing father reproaches his daughter in "A Conversation with My Father," "a person must have character" (*EC* 167). That is, a person must not squander opportunities for cultural assimilation.

- 8 The stories in Paley's first collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, published in 1956, were written in the direct aftermath of World War II and reflect the expansion of socio-economic opportunity as well as the diversity of ethnic immigrant neighborhoods comprising America's burgeoning urban landscapes. Very few of Paley's stories address the fate of Europe's Jews, and it is surprising that someone with Paley's commitment to social activism and to *tikkun olam* ("repairing or healing the world") would turn from an explicit reckoning with and response to the Holocaust in her fiction. However, despite this absence of direct engagement with the Holocaust, the Holocaust is palpably present in Paley's early fiction. It is present in the specter of loss, in a felt sense of anxiety in Jewish and other immigrant neighborhoods, in ethnic discourses of protected and vested interests that define and circumscribe shared suffering, in an insider's intuitive knowledge of the tenuousness of place, and in a deeply rooted, felt connection to history. Paley's stories of these protective immigrant communities are post-Holocaust narratives, stories written against—however implicitly—a landscape of loss. Her characters have, as it were, a finely tuned ear for trouble. As such, her communities are fortified by characters who intuitively recognize danger when untethered from their communities and who share their experience of living on the margins of a refugee culture. As one of her characters says, "I hate to be in the hands of strangers" ("Enormous Changes" 127). Paley's characters are most secure when buttressed by those who share a common history and finely tuned sense of their present precariousness. Talk becomes a defense against intrusion, as characters perceive the intrusiveness of a stranger, an interloper who would trespass on the vulnerability of one of their own. In the short story "Zagrowsky Tells," for example, Paley's small but persuasive gathering of neighborhood women, although seemingly preoccupied with the promise of gossip, will sense the unwelcome intrusion of a stranger, and although they stand at "a considerable distance" from the projected effrontery, "lucky they got radar. They turn around sharp like birds and fly over to the man. They talk very soft. Why are you bothering this old man, he got enough trouble? Why don't you leave him alone? [...] I seen you around here before, buster, you better watch out. He walks away from them backwards. They start in shaking hands" (*LSD* 174).
- 9 Paley's urban characters come to life against the backdrop of "the cruel history of Europe," an acute memory of loss and grief, a tacitly acknowledged "sorrow [...] due to history," both remote and all-too-proximate ("The Immigrant Story" 171) Thus Paley's characters emerge into "the summer sunlight of upward mobility" with a reckoning of the perils and possibilities of their moment and place in history ("The Immigrant Story" 171). As one of Paley's characters, with magnanimous optimism, affirms: "I thank God every day that I'm not in Europe. I thank God I'm American-born and live on East 172nd Street where there is a grocery store, a candy store, and a drugstore on one corner and on the same block a shul and two doctors' offices" ("The Immigrant Story," *EC* 173). Her enthusiasm for such good fortune is a measure of just how far and how close her own relation to that "cruel history" is. For such wildly unrestrained buoyancy is ironically calculated against its niggling antagonist: a willful obliviousness to a legacy of suffering. To his companion's conviction of happiness and self-determination, the adult child of

immigrants in "The Immigrant Story" can only accuse her of a deliberate "rotten rosy temperament" and a puerile, naïve denial of the clear antecedent of events and the weight of their lingering, formative shadows: "You fucking enemy, he said. You always see things in a rosy light [...]. You were like that in sixth grade. One day you brought three American flags to school" (EC 173). Paley here dramatizes the opposing sides of "the immigrant story" and the ways in which the American-born view their place in the inheritance of history. To the narrator's disclaimer that "Rosiness is not a worse windowpane than gloomy gray when viewing the world," her antagonistic companion can only respond with the fear and imperiled vulnerability of one who grew up, as he insists, "in the shadow of another person's sorrow" (EC 171). And here the competing perspectives are made emphatic in the paradox between the simple, direct, and uncensored language of Paley's characters and the complex nuances that underlie their expression. Her characters play against the shades of both proximate and historical sorrow, dancing to the tune of "the summer sunlight of upward mobility" on the urban streets of their making ("The Immigrant Story," EC 171).

- 10 Paley's talking communities speak in a characteristically Jewish urban tongue. Theirs is a language of the streets, a vernacular of city dwelling, where "every window is a mother's mouth" ("Loudest Voice," LDM 55). The landscape of Paley's urban fiction, "with its widening pool of foreign genes," is home to a lively and raucous street drama, a theatre of disposition and temperament set against an array of linguistic resonances ("The Story Hearer," LSD 135). As Paley explains, "In the city, there's a sudden density of population, and there is a constant communication of people [...]. [O]utside in the street there is a thickness of life that's stimulating, constantly stimulating and constantly exciting, so it's quite marvelous" (Interview Aarons 57). For Paley, both the vernacular of the streets and the city itself are places—and discursive *topoi*—of possibility. Here for Paley is the connection between the urban environment and the language that both defines it and arises from its confluence of sounds, generations, and cultures: this convergence of city life and speech makes possible the promise of reinvention, "the happy chorus of my inside self," as one character puts it ("The Loudest Voice," LDM 55). The interplay and overlapping of the languages of the diaspora become, in Paley's craft, a vernacular of city dwelling that defines self, class, and communal cultural inheritance. Paley's characters speak in a shorthand colloquialism filtered through the languages of its ancestry. Her fictive settings are neighborhoods peopled with immigrants and the children of immigrants, all speaking to the tune of, as one character puts it, a "remembering tongue" ("The Loudest Voice," LDM 62). It is, for Paley's characters, an insider's language that emerges from an explosion of linguistic conditions and backgrounds. Paley's characters instinctively draw upon the nuances of an array of languages. As Paley suggests, "our parents, grandparents, a few of us as babies, had probably spoken Russian, Yiddish, Polish, German. We had those languages in our ears—those tones, inflections, accents" ("Foreword" 7).
- 11 Jews historically have negotiated more than one language in their daily and religious lives. Hebrew, the *loshn koydesh*, the holy tongue, has traditionally been the language of scripture and prayer. For the majority of Eastern European Jews before the Holocaust, Yiddish was the language of daily life, the *mame loshn*, the mother tongue of domesticity, the language in which one loved and labored, the voice of mothers calling children, of navigating a circumscribed yet precarious life as a marginalized, targeted people. In addition to Hebrew and Yiddish, the increasingly mobile and secularly educated Jews of

Europe, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, also spoke the languages of their "host" countries: Polish, Russian, German, and so forth. Thus the majority of Jewish emigrants to America from Eastern and Western Europe arrived equipped, not only with multiple languages, but with a penchant, a history and a necessity, of acquiring the languages of refuge and inclusion, a well-honed "capacity for survival" ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 32). In America, acquiring English was, of course, the price for the immigrant of the ticket to middle-class ascension and cultural assimilation. In Paley's story "Enormous Changes," acquiring English is a mark of character for the immigrant father who, "working like a horse, he'd read Dickens, gone to medical school," and emerged into the middle-class of American opportunity (122). Yiddish, the language of the diaspora and the mark of difference, is viewed, not entirely uncomically and not without irony, by many of Paley's immigrant characters as a vestige of dispossession. In assessing his wife's attempts to "Americanize" herself, one of Paley's characters ironically appraises the wisdom of her linguistic self-reinvention: "She says, Ai ai. She doesn't say oi anymore. She got herself assimilated into ai [...] Don't think this will make you an American, I said to her [...] Naturally it was a joke, only what is there to laugh?" ("Zagrowsky Tells," *LSD* 159-60). Here the comic gives way to the precarious conditions of the diaspora: a measure of loss, displacement, and an exilic uncertainty and longing. Zagrowsky is, after all, right: "What is there to laugh?" On the other hand, Paley's characters, for the most part, move to the rhythms of their self-fashioning lives, reaching back, when the moment calls for unmediated and unequivocal expression, to the language of their not-so-distant pasts: "Ach," to borrow a phrase from another character, an expression of "absolute digestive disgust" ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 49). Once safely in the lap of status as a successful "American," one can then, as another one of Paley's immigrant characters maintains, make claims to a past: "I have spoken altogether too much English in my life," and so, finally ensconced in America, "safely among her own kind in Coney Island," she will learn "real Yiddish [...]" and as soon as all the verbs and necessary nouns had been collected under the roof of her mouth, she took an oath to expostulate in Yiddish and grieve only in Yiddish, and she has kept that oath to this day" ("Faith in the Afternoon," *EC* 32, 33). Yiddish, the language of Ashkenazic Jewry, becomes in the "next generation," no longer the mark of threatened outsider status, but a vehicle of the linguistic reaffirmation of the history of that threatened existence, an embrace of historical identity in the midst of historical change brought on by the successful immigration to America.

- 12 Thus Paley's urban landscapes reflect the presence of Yiddish and its gesticulated orality as well as the resonances of other linguistic influences on her characters' speech. But this inheritance is more than a carry-over of the "verbs and necessary nouns" of a language; rather Yiddish and a culture of linguistic fluidity and suppleness was, for the post-war Jews of Paley's urban neighborhoods, a way of approaching the worlds they inhabit. The texture of the language is both an ethic and a defining characteristic of identity, collective memory, and consanguineous alliance. On the streets of immigrant America for Jews, Yiddish existed alongside English, creating the character of those urban settings. As Paley has said of the influence of such a legacy on her own developing prose, "I understood I'd found my other ear. Writing [...] stories had allowed it—suddenly—to do its job, to remember the street language and the home language with its Russian and Yiddish accents, a language my early characters knew well, the only language I spoke" ("Two Ears" x). Indeed, the recognition of the rich and elastic fusion of languages is not lost on her characters: "They debated a little in Yiddish, then fell in a puddle of Russian and

Polish" ("The Loudest Voice," *LDM* 62). And although Paley's neighborhoods are, to a large extent, circumscribed and insular, the infusion of languages is widening, enlarging the scope of their worlds.

- 13 The language, like the city, reflects the elasticity of change and possibility. As Hana Wirth-Nesher correctly suggests, this melding of languages, like the generational blending of immigrants and their American-born offspring, is intuitive, existing often beyond the reach of memory but part of the texture of life. She writes:

[F]or many Jewish American writers subsequent to the immigrant generation, Hebrew and Yiddish are sources of self-expression and identity even if the authors cannot "remember" them in the sense of ever having possessed them as a means of communication. Their understanding of what these languages signify is always the result...of both descent, a continuous cultural legacy, and consent, an embrace of American English that also structures their sense of those Jewish languages and accents. Their remembering, therefore, is not the result of an essential Jewishness that hearkens back to some racial memory but the result of socialization where practices, expectations, and assumptions about the entanglement of language and identity linger in their consciousness. (5)

- 14 Paley's characters speak a secular, evolving urban tongue, a voice that calls to them from the doorways, stoops, and windows of their lives, a richly compressed expression of place and belonging. As Wirth-Nesher proposes, the language of Paley's characters and narrators makes claims for the pull of history and the intersection of generations and "illustrates not only traces of the immigrant generation's Yiddish but also continued traces of accent in the writing of native-born Americans, through syntax, tone, volume, and register" (23). Rather than a rejection of one language—one history—for another, Paley's wordsmiths embrace the languages of the diaspora in the sounds of the streets, demonstrating, as they speak, a polyglot, a babel, a happy confusion of sound. As Wirth-Nesher further suggests, Paley's "American-born speaker retains the transposed syntax, vocal markers, and literary allusions of the immigrant generation to showcase the new ethnic American voice coming into its own with such verve [...] her Americanization lies not in her rejection of these languages, but rather in embracing and bending them for her own purposes" (29). Such speech acts, for Paley's characters, happen in the open, from windows, in parks and playgrounds, in shops, standing behind counters, in cluttered kitchens, on subways, and on the streets of their neighborhoods. As Paley acknowledges, "My Yiddish [...] is that sort of street Yiddish more than anything else, like people yelling at each other or calling the children, or my grandmother saying 'you never eat enough'" (Interview Aarons 50). In other words, their talk is communal, a seemingly endless stretch of talk and meandering conversation, one story ending where another begins, stories nestled within one another like Russian dolls but also expanding outward in creative gestures of self-representation.
- 15 Thus, the stories they tell are the narratives of the diaspora, but also the narratives of emergent mid-century American city life. And while, as one of Paley's characters contends, "There is a long time in me between knowing and telling," their stories erupt with the force of discovery ("Debts," *EC* 9). Their capacity for ironic and self-parodic pronouncement always defensively ready, they do not stay silent for long, as one character, exhibiting a characteristic self-conscious assessment of their hold on talk, acknowledges: "Oh, the way words lie down under decades then the Union of Restless Diggers out of sheer insomnia pulls them up" ("Listening," *LSD* 206). Word gluttons, Paley's voluble characters tell the story of America's urban performance. Murray

Baumgarten, in an essay on "Urban Rites and Civic Premises," aptly suggests that "Out of the small forms with which she works, from these lyric stories, Paley proffers a large and redeeming effort [...] Through this dramatic encounter and theatrical voicing of the ethnic accents of contemporary city life, Paley proposes no less than the articulation of the language of America. It is an urban tongue, quick, explosive, intersected, meditative and honest, steady and direct in facing its respondents [...] What Grace Paley thus provides us is a language by which to conceive our urban selves" (406). Indeed, the city is the perfect place for self-fashioning and for the animated, sensory collisions of self-expression. As the narrator of the short story "Listening" characterizes post-World War II urban diversity, "our own beloved city [is] crowded with day and night workers, shoppers, walkers, the subway trains [...] so handsomely lined with pink to dark dark brown faces, golden tans and yellows scattered amongst them" (*LSD* 204).

- 16 Surrounded by the sounds of people talking, their demands and entreaties intersecting, colliding, and colluding, Paley's characters will insist on both recognition and reckoning made possible through talk. "My voice," the young Shirley Abramowitz in the story appropriately titled "The Loudest Voice," will make abundantly clear, "was certainly the loudest" (*LDM* 63). There is a kind of abundance, a profusion of plenty, in the freedom and openness with which Paley's characters and narrators talk their way through their days, in and out of kitchens and libraries, old-age homes, and taxi cabs, pursuing ordinary domestic life as if continuous speech will give them the time and opportunity they need to create the conditions of their determined project of living well. As one of Paley's characters insists, "Since I already began to tell, I have to tell the whole story. I'm not a person who keeps things in. Tell! That opens up the congestion a little—the lungs are for breathing, not secrets [...] [I]f you want to breathe, you got to tell" ("Zagrowsky Tells," *LSD* 161). Storytelling, for Paley, is both structural and thematized in her fiction. And it is no surprise that she depends on the short form, which, in its brevity, density, and sharply purposeful dramatic overtures, compresses action so that voice gives rise to the making of character. A typical story in Paley's oeuvre begins and concludes with talk, talk that forms and coalesces character. Thus, the opening line of the story "Ruthy and Edie" sets the stage for the kind of dialogue that places character and conflict in motion: "One day in the Bronx two small girls named Edie and Ruthy were sitting on the stoop steps" (*LSD* 115). Other stories begin similarly: "A lady called me up today," opens the short story simply titled "Debts" (*EC* 9); "I saw my ex-husband in the street," begins the story "Wants" (*EC* 3); "You would certainly be glad to meet me," introduces the story "Distance" (*EC* 16); and so forth. Typically Paley's stories begin with the possibility for discourse, the conditions for lives to intersect and, very simply, for her characters to talk to one another. "I wanted to tell," one character, with absolute certainty, will proclaim ("Zagrowsky Tells," *LSD* 167).
- 17 The beginning of the story, for Paley, is the beginning of lives lived and shared, and collectively braved, where tenements and doorways and stoops give way to stories that engage the broadest circumstances of Jewish and American history. "Plot" for Paley, if overly conceited, misses the point of the way speech structures the trajectory of individuals and communities. As the character Zagrowsky insists, "You have an opinion. I have an opinion. Life don't have no opinion" ("Zagrowsky Tells," *LSD* 159). For Paley, the emphasis is always on how something is talked about, not on *what* happens, and so her reading of the experience of Jews in post-World War II urban America is fashioned through the performance of language that, not only replaces plot, but *makes* plot. Plot, for

Paley, is merely "the absolute line between two points," as one of her contentious characters ironically asserts to her dying father in defending her own speech centered stories, stories that insist on possibility and compassion ("A Conversation with My Father," *EC* 161-2). Plot, for this character and, I suspect, for Paley herself, can be constrictive of storytelling, to the formation of character, and an impediment to its ethical possibilities. Indeed, as the narrator of this story maintains, "I had a different responsibility" to characters who are her "knowledge and invention" (*EC* 167). Her quarrel with plot is not based on "literary reasons," but on intuitive, affective, and imaginative grounds: "because it takes all hope away. Everyone, real or invented, deserves the open destiny of life" (*EC* 162). That is, Paley's optimism hopes to create lives fashioned in defiance of endings. After all, conversation implies openings, a conceivable, expressible future, "gabbing into evening" ("Friends," *LSD* 87). Speech, for Paley, as so many of her stories show, is empowering across generations of 20th century Jewish experience. It is especially so for the immigrants and their children in her stories, who live on the urban edge of the process of assimilation into mainstream, middle-class American life and who do so with the weight of Jewish history fully on them. Thus, deeply invested and "interested in [their] own courage," they talk ("In the Garden," *LSD* 44).

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NOTES

1. The abbreviation LSD will be used in references to this collection.
 2. The abbreviation EC will be used in references to this collection.
 3. The abbreviation LDM will be used in references to this collection.
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ABSTRACTS

Dans ses nouvelles minimalistes et expérimentales, Grace Paley construit un monde urbain d'après-guerre typiquement juif américain. C'est avant tout par le dialogue qu'elle donne vie à ses personnages qui sont toujours décrits dans des lieux de convivialité et de rencontre (perrons, cours d'école, rues ou squares du quartier) et dont la place dans l'histoire est définie par le langage. L'intrigue pour Paley est purement secondaire : c'est par le langage et la transmission des histoires qui les définissent que les personnages déterminent leur rapport à eux-mêmes et au monde. Diverse, compacte, nuancée et éloquente dans sa simplicité même, la langue de l'Amérique d'après-guerre de Grace Paley, de même que le paysage urbain qu'elle évoque, est tissée des voix d'une population diasporique s'efforçant d'appriivoiser un réel toujours récalcitrant. Ce qui importe chez Paley, ce n'est pas tant ce qui arrive que la façon dont on en parle. Le langage tout à la fois explique et transforme le monde.

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