

“A Splinter in the Toe” *Mothering and Democracy in Grace Paley’s Fiction*

In her introduction to Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering (2004), Andrea O’Reilly repeatedly calls on feminist scholars to define, document, and imagine “[e]mpowered mothering, or what may be termed ‘outlaw mothering’ or ‘mothering against motherhood’” (4). Two years after the publication of Mother Outlaws, O’Reilly issued a similar challenge in her plenary address at the 2006 National Women’s Studies Association Conference in Oakland, California. She asserted that mothering continues to be described primarily in terms of what it is not—patriarchal motherhood—and asked for renewed vigor in defining and theorizing it. This article responds to O’Reilly’s call by arguing that in her fiction, American writer Grace Paley suggests a compelling model of empowered mothering and maternal well-being. I draw on nineteenth-century American urban history, turn-of-the-century theories of democracy, and the work of Adrienne Rich (1976) and Andrea O’Reilly in order to show that Paley’s mothers practice a version of democracy that challenges early-twentieth-century ideas of civic uplift and gender roles. Deliberately inconsistent, Paley’s female protagonists defy an easy categorization. Their only consistent commitment, I argue, is to work for social justice, both in the urban spaces they inhabit and in the world beyond. For Paley’s female characters, mothering ultimately involves sustaining and cultivating the kind of democratic engagement—always urban, inevitably incomplete and dissensual—that Dana D. Nelson (2002) has called “ugly democracy.”

Grace Paley has so consistently affirmed the connection between mothering and activism that it has become something of a commonplace in criticism to identify it as a major theme both in her life and in her stories. Similarly, Paley’s readers have routinely noted the importance of urban spaces in her fiction. For instance, Blanche Gelfant (1980) observes that “[f]riendships in Paley’s stories

are inseparable from place, from the neighborhood streets, playgrounds, parks,” the sorts of urban spaces that, Gelfant claims, foster “intimacy and interest” (284). Though critics have often commented on the overall importance of the city in Paley’s fiction, few have followed Gelfant’s lead to analyze the types of spaces in which Paley’s stories unfold. As I will show, Paley’s depiction of city parks and playgrounds challenges a long history of city planning that created such places in the service of male-defined social control. Contrary to expectations that women, especially mothers, use parks and playgrounds to carry out closely supervised “child training” (Curtis, 1917: 13), the work of mothering, for Paley, involves cultivating and sustaining the kind of democratic engagement—grounded in racial and ethnic diversity, inevitably incomplete and disruptive—that Dana D. Nelson (2002) has called “ugly democracy” (220). Paley, then, revises traditional narratives that connect the physical environment and women’s well-being by depicting women as working against patriarchal power. In Paley’s stories, maternal health is finally related to the urban spaces in which women not only raise children but also talk to one another, challenging male-defined social expectations.

Thus, Paley’s mothers anticipate and, later, respond to Adrienne Rich’s (1976) call for a mode of mothering outside of what Rich names “the *institution*” of motherhood (13, italics in the original). Published in 1976, Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* was the first text to draw the distinction highlighted in its title. Indeed, one of the book’s central claims is that mothering, “the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children,” should be distinguished from the institution of motherhood, “which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control” (13). More important, perhaps, Rich has repeatedly been credited for suggesting that mothering can lead to activism and transformation. In her introduction to *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (2004), Andrea O’Reilly suggests that Rich’s distinction “was what enabled feminists to recognize that motherhood is not naturally, necessarily, or inevitably oppressive, a view held by many early second wave feminists. Mothering, freed from the institution of motherhood, could be experienced as a site of empowerment, a location of social change” (2).

However, in *Of Woman Born*, Rich doesn’t theorize how one can achieve empowered mothering. Her only experience of this counter-cultural mode of mothering surfaces in a paragraph-long description of a summer she and her three sons spend in Vermont. Rich remembers: “Without a male adult in the house, without any reason for schedules, naps, regular mealtimes or early bedtimes so the two parents could talk ... we lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children” (1976: 194). Rich’s language suggests that this mood of delightful escape can happen only after she and her children leave the city. As O’Reilly commented in her plenary address at the 2006 National Women’s Studies Association Conference, for Rich “in the city one has to be part of a male-defined motherhood.”

The American city

That Rich's escape from the institution of motherhood entails an escape from the city is not coincidental. The American city's importance in promoting clearly designated gender roles, including a male-defined model of motherhood, emerged in a discourse of civic uplift well before Americans became a predominantly urban people. In 1848 landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing (1848) began a campaign to build public parks and gardens in the country's growing towns. On his return from an extended visit to Europe, Downing lamented his fellow citizens' weakening democratic spirit, what he diagnosed as an inclination "to raise up barriers of class, wealth and fashion, which are almost as strong in our social usages, as the law of caste is in England" (155). The remedy he proposed, following what he had observed in Europe, was to institute public parks and gardens to be "the pleasant drawing-rooms of the whole population; where they gain health, good spirits, social enjoyment, and a frank and cordial bearing towards their neighbor" (155). Although Downing did not develop his genteel metaphor, his vision of renewed democratic engagement entailed the Victorians' understanding of properly gendered behavior.

The debate that followed connected democracy, urban conditions, and gender roles in a public discussion about civic virtue.¹ Ostensibly, the writers of many popular books of the day were motivated by fears about the future of democracy in a country that was speedily urbanizing and industrializing.² They saw American democracy as threatened not only by the decline of face-to-face interactions in cities but also by what they variously diagnosed as "decreased vitality," "degeneration" (Wilcox, 1906: 113), "nervous strain," "a great increase in nervous disorders," "rapid increase of insanity," and "growing instability of the nervous system" (Curtis, 1917: 6). These descriptions of life in the modern city echo other contemporaneous accounts of urban life, which have by now become classics. Georg Simmel's urban stranger and Walter Benjamin's flâneur both experienced the kind of alienation that Delos F. Wilcox diagnosed as an American social malaise in *The American City: A Problem in Democracy* (1906). In linking urbanization and American democracy, Wilcox also seems to prefigure John Dewey's writings in the following decades. However, quite unlike Dewey, Wilcox revealed the main source of his anxiety whenever he wrote about the "untrained alien races" swarming the great American cities (13). These "races" included immigrants, black Americans, and the masses of urban poor, and they emerged as urbanization's severest threat in most of the literature on civic uplift in the United States at the turn of the century.

Given the scope of this threat, it is hardly surprising that some of the proposed remedies demanded a retrenchment of gender roles, masked behind civic rhetoric and elaborate descriptions of public recreational facilities. Manuals on how to create and maintain public parks and playgrounds simultaneously reflected and enforced then-current gendered practices. According to Henry S. Curtis, former Secretary of the Playground Association of America (founded in 1906) and self-styled social historian of the Play Movement,³ parks and

playgrounds should train children in proper social judgments and habits. They accomplish this, for example, by helping boys achieve physiques that are “as good as the physique[s] of their fathers” so that young men can once again pass army-entrance physical exams (Curtis, 1917: 6). Proper play and recreation can improve “the physique of women and girls” for, he wrote, “[n]early everywhere the birth rate is going backward. Motherhood is becoming more difficult and more feared. Women are less and less able to nurse their children. Woman is handicapped by her sex to-day as nature never intended she should be, and as primitive woman never has been” (7). In advocating well-supervised playgrounds, Curtis was, perhaps predictably, not primarily concerned about girls’ and women’s health. Rather, he prophesied, “If the tendencies which were ushered in with the coming of the public school, the age of machines, and the concentration of people in great cities, were to go on for a generation or two more, it would mean the elimination of the race” (7). And so the discourse of civic values at the turn of the century squeezed women’s bodies into acceptable shape: women were essential to democracy to the degree that they avoided “unnatural practices” in their marriage beds, submitted to their capacity for “normal motherhood” (Wilcox, 1906: 137), and took their children to the city’s playgrounds to have them properly trained and socialized. Wilcox (1906) insisted that, “[A]s life becomes more complex through the growth of cities ... the legitimate sphere of social control is extended” (158).

Paley’s mothers

Paley’s major female characters seem constitutionally unable to be “good mothers” who readily submit to social control. Unlike “good mothers,” who are invariably patient, unfailingly cheerful, and typically married,⁴ Paley’s women are often grouchy, always defiant, and usually single. Even when they do marry, as Rosie Lieber, the narrator of Paley’s first published story “Goodbye and Good Luck” (1956a), does, their cheerful mockery of the social conventions transforms the meaning of the rite. On her wedding day, Rosie asks her niece, Lillie, to tell Rosie’s story to Lillie’s mother, who has always disapproved of Rosie’s unconventional ways: “Tell her after all I’ll have a husband, which, as everybody knows, a woman should have at least one before the end of the story” (21-22). Or, as Faith Asbury pronounces in “Faith in a Tree” (1974), “I have always required a man to be dependent on, even when it appeared that I had one already” (80).

Just as important, Paley’s mothers practice a version of democracy that challenges turn-of-the-century theories of civic uplift, at the same time that it is firmly grounded in urban spaces. Faith Asbury, Paley’s most fully developed character, repeatedly affirms the importance of living in a city. Talking with her older son Richard about Arnold Lee, a Chinese American student in Richard’s class, Faith says,

Now Richard, listen to me, Arnold’s an interesting boy; you wouldn’t

meet a kid like him anywhere but here or Hong Kong. So use some of these advantages I've given you. I could be living in the country, which I love, but I know how hard that is on children—I stay here in this creepy slum. I dwell in soot and slime just so you can meet kids like Arnold Lee and live on this wonderful block with all the Irish and Puerto Ricans, although God knows why there aren't any Negro children for you to play with. (Paley 1974: 84)

In case we are tempted to believe that dwelling "in soot and slime" is against her preferences, later in the story Faith ironically pronounces that, "[s]omething is wrong with the following tenants: Mrs. Finn, Mrs. Raftery, Ginnie, and me. Everyone else in our building is on the way up through the affluent society.... But our four family units, as people are now called, are doomed to stand culturally still as this society moves on its caterpillar treads from ordinary affluence to absolute empire" (Paley 1974: 86). Both her mock dismissal of the city as a "creepy slum" and her not-so-subtle opposition to upward mobility underscore Faith's commitment to inhabiting a space that's multiethnic and multiracial. Under no circumstances will Faith become part of what she calls "absolute empire." Contemptuous of all repressive systems, Faith treats her children as adults ("I always treat Richard as though he's about forty-seven" [94]) and encourages them to challenge her and anyone else's authority. And, she admits, contrary to the recommendations of her psychiatric social worker friends: "I kiss those kids forty times a day. I punch them just like a father should. When I have a date and come home late at night, I wake them with a couple of good hard shakes to complain about the miserable entertainment" (80). Deliberately inconsistent and elusive, Faith defies any easy categorization. Her only consistent commitment, I argue, is to work for social justice, both in the urban spaces she inhabits and in what she calls "the world" (100). This, for Faith, constitutes the labor of mothering.

"Ugly democracy"

Most of the critical readings of Faith's exchange with Richard in "Faith in a Tree" (Paley 1974) have identified it correctly as Faith's, and Paley's, tribute to the city.⁵ However, Paley's critics have failed to notice both the passage's ironic inversion of the Play Movement's major concerns and the story's repeated allusions to the American city's troubled relationship with democracy. The story's echoes of an ongoing history of civic activism and conflict suggest that Paley's insistence on living with others in the city is not as lighthearted as it might seem.

Unlike Faith's commitment to the city, where, she suggests, children thrive precisely because of its racial and ethnic mixes, "public-spirited citizens" at the beginning of the twentieth century struggled to make the city more like the countryside (Curtis, 1917: 9). For them parks and playgrounds were to serve not only as pastoral escapes from "the brick walls, paved streets, and stifling

atmosphere of towns” (Downing, 1849: 11), but also, and more importantly, as spaces that were “safe and wholesome” (96). Safety entailed proper morals, correctly gendered behavior, and racial segregation. As Henry S. Curtis, the former Secretary of the Playground Association of America, wrote in 1917,

While the writer is a believer in the negro and in democracy, he is of the opinion that in nearly all sections where it is possible to have separate grounds for colored and white children, it is better to do so, for the reason that there is often prejudice on the part of white parents against having their children, especially the girls, play with colored children, and because the colored children are very apt to form a clique by themselves, and be an unassimilable element within the playground. (85)

In speaking to Richard, then, Faith challenges the fundamental premises of turn-of-the-century civic rhetoric.

Faith’s recognition of New York City’s difficulties as it negotiates racial, ethnic, and class differences surfaces prominently in a passage that critics have thus far overlooked. Unlike Faith’s exchange with Richard, this part of “Faith in a Tree” is simultaneously more historically specific and less explicit in its ironic commentary on American urban history. Characteristically, Faith changes the topic abruptly to say,

[I]t is not Sunday. For that reason, all the blue-eyed, boy-faced policemen in the park are worried. They can see that lots of our vitamin-enlarged high-school kids are planning to lug their guitar cases around all day long. They’re scared that one of them may strum and sing a mountain melody or that several, a gang, will gather to raise their voices in medieval counterpoint.

Question: Does the world know, does the average freedman realize that, except for a few hours on Sunday afternoon, the playing of fretted instruments is banned by municipal decree? Absolutely forbidden is the song of the flute and oboe. (Paley 1974: 80-81)

The fictional park Faith depicts here is modeled after Washington Square Park in New York’s Greenwich Village, known for its history of nonconformity and political activism. One of the park’s defining moments took place in the 1950s when Robert Moses, then Park Commissioner of New York City, finalized plans to extend Fifth Avenue through the park. Aided by Eleanor Roosevelt and Jane Jacobs, local residents, including Paley, fought successfully to keep cars out of the park.⁶ Faith’s playful description of the park in “Faith in a Tree” barely hides the tensions still simmering in it in the 1960s. Historically, these tensions resulted not only from the park’s accommodation of social activism in general, but also, more specifically, from a 1961 ban on folk performances

on the park's premises. Folk singers had traditionally been gathering there on Sunday afternoons, until they were denied their permit because they brought into the park what Parks Commissioner Newbold Morris called "itinerant singers and unsavory characters" (White, 1961). According to Ted White (1961), a Greenwich Village writer and activist, the "unsavory characters" targeted by the ban were minority groups, especially blacks, and "beatniks." And, he claims, "'beatnik' is just about anyone who speaks English without an Italian accent." In White's account, tension in the park resulted, at least in part, from the hostility of working-class Italian Americans to more recent immigrants and other minorities. In his illustrated history of Greenwich Village, *Around Washington Square*, Luther S. Harris (2003) concurs with White's analysis. Harris writes that, "[t]he year 1959 saw young Italian toughs attacking homosexuals and blacks, particularly black men escorting white women; windows of establishments catering to the new crowds were smashed, and these places were shaken down by minor hoodlums and Mafia gangsters" (267). Faith's seemingly innocuous mention of the playing of instruments that is "banned by municipal decree," then, signals her knowledge of New York City and its ongoing difficulties in accommodating difference.

Yet, it is precisely this difference that Paley has singled out as definitive of the city. She calls her writing "regional" and explains, "I'm an urban writer with a New York focus.... You want to tell your people's story, but if you've been living in Queens or wherever and you move to some other borough, you're still living among people from your region—15th Street Irish or Puerto Rican, blacks or whomever—they're *your* people; they're from *your* city" (Conway et al., 1978: 11, italics in the original). In her definition, "regional" includes even the people who appeared "unassimilable" to many at the time she was writing.

Significantly, Paley has claimed the label "regional writer" in order to reject a category she perceives as more parochial: "ethnic writer." She has repeatedly insisted that New York City is her home partly to be able "to avoid getting stuck in where my grandmother came from" (Conway et al., 1978: 11). Similarly, Faith owns her Jewish background only to the degree that it allows her to continue to look in from the social margins. In "The Used-Boy Raisers," a story from Paley's first short-story collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man* (1956), Faith surprises her current and ex-husbands with an unexpected "outburst":

I believe in the Diaspora, not only as a fact but a tenet. I'm against Israel on technical grounds. I'm very disappointed that they decided to become a nation in my lifetime. I believe in the Diaspora. After all, they *are* the chosen people.... But once they're huddled in one little corner of a desert, they're like anyone else: Frenchies, Italians, temporal nationalities. Jews have one hope only—to remain a remnant in the basement of world affairs—no, I mean something else—a splinter in

the toe of civilizations, a victim to aggravate the conscience. (131-32, italics in the original)

Just as she identifies with the city's mixed crowds, Paley simultaneously claims and redefines a collective history that allows her to stand with those in the world's "basement."

This, then, is the city in which Faith refuses to be a "good mother": it has a long history of trying to control women in the service of democracy; it simmers with tensions produced by its diverse people; it is covered in "soot and slime." Yet, it is in this city's public spaces that Faith lovingly practices her commitment to the well-being of women, children, and men. Her work entails campaigning for better playground facilities, praying for peace, breaking the rules of "proper" behavior, and raising kids as outspoken critics of their parents and the government alike. Most important, perhaps, Faith carries out the tasks of mothering by talking with others, mostly women and children, in the city's playgrounds. In a radical inversion of their creators' intentions, the city's green spaces enable women to support one another against the power of what bell hooks (2000) has called "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (71). Thus, Paley's playgrounds become the location for the kind of democratic engagement that Wilcox, Curtis, and John Dewey alike perceived as weakening in modernity. More recently, Dana D. Nelson has labeled this mode of democracy "ugly democracy." Situated in the messy, day-to-day relationships of ordinary people, "ugly democracy" doesn't affirm "wholeness and symbolic consensus but the inevitable incompleteness of always dissensual community" (Nelson, 2002: 220). "Ugly democracy" takes place through the face-to-face interactions of people who might disagree but continue to talk to one another. Faith's last words in "Faith in a Tree" echo Nelson's insistence that the work of democracy is necessarily incomplete: "Then I met women and men in different lines of work, whose minds were made up and directed out of that sexy playground by my children's heartfelt brains, I thought more and more and every day about the world" (Paley 1974: 100). Faith doesn't solve any of the world's problems at the end of that story, but she and Paley continue to walk and talk with others in other stories and in the world beyond.

¹Some of the popular books at the turn of the century were: *The Improvement of Towns and Cities or the Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics* (Robinson, 1901), *The American City: a Problem in Democracy* (Wilcox, 1906), *Civic Righteousness and Civic Pride* (Hall, 1914).

²As Delos F. Wilcox (1906) pointed out in *The American City: a Problem in Democracy*, men must have a footing somewhere. They cannot get off the earth, and it is in this primitive relation to land and locality that citizenship largely consists. But the development of railways, steamships, telegraphs, telephones, and other means of travel and communication has given men a certain appar-

ent ... independence of locality ... [which] tends to detach men from local interests and render them unable to perform political functions. (7)

³Besides *The Play Movement and Its Significance* (1917), Curtis also wrote *Education Through Play* (1915) and *The Practical Conduct of Play* (1915).

⁴See Andrea O'Reilly (2004), "Introduction."

⁵Here I am not conflating Faith and Paley. When asked about Faith, Paley has stated repeatedly that she does not identify with her. Rather, Paley has said, "That was a good friend of mine. I identify with some of her attitudes, and the times we spent together in Washington Square Park" (Conway et al., 1978: 5). Given Paley's expressed views about her relationship with the people who live in New York City, I think she would agree with Faith in this particular instance.

For Paley's views about her fellow New Yorkers, see Celeste Conway, Elizabeth Innes-Brown, Laura Levine, Keith Monley, and Mark Teich, "Grace Paley Interview" (1978). For the standard critical reading of Faith and Richard's exchange, see Blanche Gelfant, "Grace Paley: Fragments for a Portrait in Collage" (1980); Dena Mandel, "Keeping Up With Faith: Grace Paley's Sturdy American Jewess" (1983). In contrast, in his "Faith and the 'Black Thing': Political Action and Self-Questioning in Grace Paley's Short Fiction" (1994), Adam Meyer completely misses Faith's irony in this exchange. He writes: "In a passage like this all of Faith's politically proper actions are undercut, for Paley shows us her true feelings and motivations: she is giving up something she would prefer in order to do what she knows is the right thing" (81).

⁶Paley has repeatedly identified Washington Square Park as a place where she solidified friendships and engaged in social activism. See, for example, Celeste Conway, Elizabeth Innes-Brown, Laura Levine, Keith Monley, and Mark Teich, "Grace Paley Interview" (1978); Kathleen Hully, "Interview with Grace Paley" (1980); Kay Bonetti, "An Interview with Grace Paley" (1986); Eleanor Wachtel, "An Interview with Grace Paley" (1988). In her interview with Wendy Smith (1997), Paley said, "when my kids were very little, the city was trying to push a road through Washington Square Park to serve the real estate interests. We fought that and we won; in fact, having won, my friends and I had a kind of optimism for the next 20 years that we might win something else by luck" (128). Significantly, Paley's second husband, Robert Nichols, was one of the community architects who redesigned Washington Square Park in the fight against Robert Moses in the 1950s.

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