A Moment in Time?

Arendt, Moten, and the Futures of Black Action in Little Rock

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On the morning of September 4, 1957, 15-year-old Black[01] student Elizabeth Eckford attempted to enter Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas. After decades of struggle, school segregation had been deemed unconstitutional, and nine African American students had been registered to attend the previously whites-only school. However, the governor of Arkansas defied the Supreme Court Decision *Brown v. Board of Education* as well as the federal government and made it clear on TV that no Black child would enter the school. Accordingly, Governor Orval Faubus ordered the National Guard to line up all around the school on the morning of September 4.[02] Still, the Little Rock school superintendent persuaded the parents and NAACP activists to send the selected nine children to the school, trusting they would be protected.[03] Later that night, the NAACP changed plans but was unable to reach the Eckfords in time.[04] As a result, on the morning of September 4, Elizabeth approached the school alone,[05] where she was already expected by a white mob shouting things like "Lynch her!"[06] The scene was closely followed by several photographers—among them Ira Wilmer Counts Jr., who captured a striking image for the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette,* later featured in *LIFE* magazine.

01 Throughout the article I capitalize the terms 'Black' and 'anti-Black' and keep 'white' in lowercase to disrupt the convention of either capitalizing or lowercasing both terms. I use 'Black' rather than 'African American' because it is a more inclusive term. See Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the N***o Question* (Indiana University Press, 2014), 13.

02 See Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (David McKay Company, 1962), 61.

03 Bates, *Long Shadow,* 63.

04 The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Another photo of the situation—paralleling Eckford's experience with that of Dorothy Count's—was featured on the front page of *The New York Times* on September 5.[07]

[51]

Soldiers and Jeering Whites Greet Negro Students

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.: As a white student walks through the National Guard barrier at the left, 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford is barred from entering Central High School.

Associated Press Wirephoto

CHARLOTTE, N. C.: A crowd of students follows Dorothy Counts as she is escorted to Harding High School by Dr. Edwin Tompkins. She became first Negro to attend school.

[52]

These pictures of Elizabeth Eckford and Dorothy Counts had a profound impact on the civil rights movement and the American political landscape.[08] In the images, the faces of Counts and Eckford are positioned more or less at the center. To observers, the hate-filled face of Hazel Bryan, 15 at the time, uttering an insult and the faces and gestures of white boys jeering immediately stand out. The contrast between the aggressive expressiveness of the white mob and the composed, deadpan faces of the Black teenage girls is striking. Elizabeth and Dorothy walk toward the camera, their eyes fixed on something we cannot see.

Among those moved by these pictures was Hannah Arendt, who most likely saw them on the front page of the *New York Times*.[09] She was particularly drawn to the faces of the teenagers and moved in such a way that she wrote an article arguing against school desegregation.[10] Seventy years later, Fred Moten was similarly moved by a photo of Elizabeth Eckford's face, her gaze hidden behind sunglasses. In 2018, he turned to the iconic photo in his search for radical potentials in Black history.

The point of departure for this contribution is two theorists who look at two Black teenagers' faces—and who develop differing interpretations of the photographs. Especially in Arendt's case, many scholars have already extensively contextualized her perspective on Little Rock, focusing also on the photographs and their relevance. These analyses typically

05 They did not reach the Eckfords because they did not have a telephone, see Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the N***o Question,* 16.

06 Bates, *Long Shadow,* 70.

07 The particularities of the photos are described in Ulrich Baer, "Die Zukunft in einem Bild aus der Vergangenheit erblicken: Hannah Arendt, Garry Winogrand und das Fotografieren der Welt," in *Hannah Arendt zwischen den Disziplinen,* eds. Ulrich Baer and Amir Eshel (Wallstein Verlag, 2014).

08 See Martin A. Berger, *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography* (University of California Press, 2011).

09 This view is shared in the secondary literature but cannot be definitively proved. See Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the N***o Question,* 16; Baer, "Zukunft in einem Bild," 217–18; Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 197.

either criticize or defend Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock" as an examination of a particular socio-historical moment.[11] However, what I aim to bring into focus is that both Arendt and Moten think about possible futures lying ahead of a racist moment captured in a photo. They do not merely see these images as capturing a critique-worthy moment in time but instead engage with the photographs as holding that very moment open for different figurations of the future.[12] Thus, I want to show that Arendt and Moten take up their theoretical work precisely because it is unclear what will become of this captured moment. Accordingly, the focus of my analysis is to explore how each looks at the teenagers' faces and projects different futures onto them.

My interest in the intersection between photography's captured moment and theory's speculation about futures is helpful in two ways. First, it highlights that both theorists constantly risk failing to do justice to the particular lives of those photographed. Second, it enables a reassessment of Arendt's and Moten's texts in a new light—structured by different visions of the future, ranging from progress and integration to impasse and revolution.

Accordingly, I do not attempt to provide an all-encompassing reconstruction of Arendt's or Moten's texts on Little Rock. Nor do I seek to examine the historical figures themselves (others have focused on Eckford's and Count's experiences).[13] Instead, this article aims to analyze Arendt and Moten as theorists who interrogate possible futures beyond a moment of racism, examining their differences while also identifying points of similarity. I read their texts as speculations about futures—attempts to move beyond a particular historical moment captured by photographs. Ultimately, I seek to reveal Arendt's and Moten's writings as dynamic force fields of conflicting temporalities in which they struggle to situate the moment.

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The "essay was written in 1957 at the request of the editors of *Commentary,* but did not appear until 1959 when it was published *by Dissent,*" Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 146.

11
For an overview of the strands of criticism and defense see Maike Weißpflug, *Hannah Arendt: Die Kunst, politisch zu denken* (Matthes & Seitz, 2019), 64.

12
See Baer, "Zukunft in einem Bild," 229.

13
For the particularities of Count's case, see Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the N***o Question,* 16–17.

Climbing up the Social Ladder, Pseudo-Politics, and Progress

Arendt starts her "Reflections" with an observation about the expression on Elizabeth Eckford's face. In fact, the secondary literature widely agrees that Arendt most likely mistakes Dorothy Count's face for Elizabeth's or merges both.[14] Nevertheless, Arendt refers only to Eckford's case, noting that "her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy."[15] Arendt misinterprets the two teenagers as lacking political agency, reading their facial expressions as merely displaying suffering.[16] However, she does not only look at the suffering in the moment it was captured, but suspects that the teenager's suffering has a (pre-) history and is directed toward a particular future: "The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero—that is something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be."[17] In making this claim, Arendt insinuates that Black civil rights activists and Elizabeth Eckford's father are engaged in a kind of action that leads to the suffering of teenagers, perhaps even deliberately causing it in order to achieve particular goals in the future.[18]

She implies that the future envisioned by Black parents and the NAACP is one in which a teenage girl's suffering is an accepted cost, as they are "involved in an affair of social climbing."[19] According to Arendt, both the parents

14 For instance all the texts referenced in footnote 9 above.

15 Hannah Arendt, "A Reply to Critics," *Dissent* 6, no. 2 (1959): 179.

16 For her perspective on teenagers see Sana M. Nakata, "Elizabeth Eckford's Appearance at Little Rock: The Possibility of Children's Political Agency," *Politics* 28, no.1 (2012): 19-25.

17 Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* 6, no. 1, (1959): 50.

18 Two things should be noted here. First, the background facts contradict Arendt's thesis that Eckford's parents expected Elizabeth to be facing the white crowd alone. Their latest information came from a meeting the evening before in which people from the school and the NAACP persuaded the parents to not accompany their children but trust a minimum of safety measures that would accompany the nine students. From this perspective it is still appropriate to say that the Eckfords, like Black parents all over the country, sent their children into such situations not knowing what would happen to them. Secondly, it should be noted that the trope of the absent Black father entails certain assumptions about Black men and is part of racist discourses in the USA, see Omarr K. Rambert, "The Absent Black Father: Race, The Welfare-Child Support System, and the Cyclical Nature of Fatherlessness," *UCLA Law Review* 324, no. 68 (2021). Additionally, Arendt only looks at the male parent to take up public action, not considering the mother.

19 Arendt uses this phrase in a statement that followed up on her "Reflections," see Arendt, "Reply to Critics," 179.

and the civil rights activists belong to an oppressed minority and as such "were never the best judges on the order of priorities in such matters and there are many instances when they preferred to fight for social opportunity rather than for basic human or political rights." The parents, in her view, accept their daughter's sorrow as a necessary sacrifice for social mobility. The NAACP pursues the same goal, being "almost exclusively concerned with discrimination in employment, housing and education."[20]

20 Arendt, "Reflections," 46.

Arendt—moved by suffering that demands change—conceives of the future of this moment in binary terms. On the one hand, she argues that a promising future will only become possible when Black people fight against discriminatory, racist laws, such as restrictions on interracial marriage and electoral rights.[21] On the other hand, she attempts to distinguish these legitimate struggles for equality from what she views as misguided efforts by Black people to gain access to white social spaces.[22] She defends the "social custom of segregation" with reference to the constitutional right to free association.[23] Arendt states that "discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right."[24] To support this claim, she defends Jewish people's right to restrict "vacation resorts … according to ethnic origin." In the same vein, she argues, white parents should be allowed to decide who their children go to school with.[25] For

21 It has been argued that a reason for this is that Arendt takes up elements of the integrationist and opportunist-parvenu figure from her historical analysis of modern totalitarianism (see Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 149) and leaves out the elements of the pariah, "rebels who defend Jews as a group, and justice, by public actions to make exclusion from citizenship a political issue," George Shulman, "Fred Moten's Refusals and Consents: The Politics of Fugitivity," *Political Theory* 49, no. 2 (2021): 293.

22 In fact, Arendt perceives buses and restaurants as not being part of the social. They are part of the public infrastructure; hence segregation should be even more vehemently fought, Arendt, "Reflections," 52.

23 Arendt, "Reflections," 49.

24 Arendt, "Reflections," 51. Discrimination in this case should be understood as the "right and freedom of like-minded individuals to associate, to communicate, and to create a space in common without making this accessible to all," Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism,* 150.

Arendt, schools are analogous to those vacation resorts for Jews only, since white parents and Jewish people alike make use of their right to free association. Consequently, she treats schools as a matter of free association and fails to acknowledge how unequal education leads to unequal participation in political processes.[26]

My reading elucidates the temporal dichotomy that structures this theorization of the photographs. On one hand, Arendt charts a clear path for a better future for Black people: "The right to marry whoever one wishes" should be fought for, as should "political rights, like the right to vote" for Black people. Arendt envisions a temporality of steady progress through an expansion of rights. However, such advancement necessitates the active presence of Black parents and activists in front of Little Rock Central High School and within the political arena. On the other hand, Arendt observes that parents and NAACP members appear in the photograph only by virtue of their absence. To her, they seem to shy away from their civic responsibility for the "world into which they have borne their children," a world that it is their task "to change or improve."[27]

With regard to the parents, this second future can be elaborated as follows: they remain stuck in their stories of non-progress and mere opportunism.[28] With regard to the representatives of the NAACP, Arendt suspects that while they do try to act in the political field, they do so by pursuing a mistaken strategy—one that indeed existed[29]—that relied heavily on a symbolic politics and the deliberate creation of images intended to arouse pity and sympathy. Thus, Arendt seems to perceive the staging of affect-producing images as a pseudo-political action that fails to contribute to a future of competition among equals through argument. From Arendt's viewpoint, the activists seem incapable

25 Arendt, "Reflections," 52–55.

26 For the relation between segregation, racism, and education see Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the N***o Question,* 26–27.

27 "Reflections," 49–50.

28 Or as Arendt puts it, in their "fight for social opportunity," Arendt, "Reflections," 46.

29 See Maurice Berger, *For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Yale University Press, 2010).

of a "public-political struggle [that] must transform narrow self-interest into a more broadly shared public or common interest."[30] According to Arendt, both the Black parents of Little Rock and the NAACP activists, by demanding mere integration, were acting opportunistically rather than creating possibilities for a post-racist future. Only the struggle for marriage rights and voting rights, or more broadly full legal rights together with Black participation in politics, are portrayed as capable of bringing equality to the Black population.

However, Arendt's gaze not only wanders to the promised land of law and politics. The lonely teenagers surrounded by racist violence also bring up a dark memory and lead her to project a totally different future onto Eckford's face.

30 Benhabib, *Reluctant Modernism*, 201.

31 Arendt, "Reflections," 48.

Stuck in an Impasse or Moving Towards Disaster

In "Reflections," there are moments where Arendt's gaze is averted from the possible future of steady progress. A few pages into the text, Arendt cautions that the increasing integration of Black people into society may inadvertently exacerbate their racialized status:

> The more equal people have become in every respect, and the more equality permeates the whole texture of society, the more will differences be resented, the more conspicuous will those become who are visibly and by nature unlike the others.[31]

In the parts of "Reflections" mentioned previously, Arendt projects a progressive future onto measures that extend equality in the realm of the "public domain," be it public transport or politics and individual rights. The quoted passage, however, puts those measures aiming for equality in a totally different light and inserts them into another model of the future. Now, political[32] and individual rights are no longer trusted to eradicate racial differences—indeed, quite the contrary. Arendt's sudden shift to this pessimistic view of the future corrects her idealizing views regarding the achievement of certain procedures for achieving political equality. She now seems to consider racism as something resisting change: "the principle of equality, even in its American form, is not omnipotent; it cannot equalize natural, physical

characteristics." This breaks down the opposition between opportunistic integration and political progress shown at work earlier. Instead, Arendt now encourages us to reassess American equality as Janus-faced: on the one hand, she describes it as having the "enormous power to equalize what by nature and origin is different." But Arendt also suggests that, on the other hand, Black people simultaneously keep being different and that the racialization of Black people is constant in its mere existence but changes its concrete form. Thus, she appears to hold the "natural, physical characteristics" of racialization as insurmountable through the "principle of equality, even in its American form." Arendt insists that racial otherness does not diminish in times of seeming integration but only shifts its appearance because it is absolutely necessary to American society: the racial otherness of Black people is needed because only then are the "differences by which people belong to certain groups" kept alive.[33]

I want to suggest that her defense of the free right to association, which is also the right to exclusion and discrimination in the social sphere, shows that the group identity of whiteness is bound to the right to discriminate against Black people. Arendt laments the fact that a group's identity "demands that they discriminate against other groups," but she diagnoses that the American way of life, the "pursuit of happiness," is only possible if discrimination is held as an "indispensable … social right."[34] According to this diagnosis, the equal opportunities and freedoms of the US need to be seen as inseparably interwoven with the right to discrimination, which can be described as a racist common sense that makes Black people appear to be different by nature. This

32 Arendt implicitly wonders what "qualities" for a new beginning a Black candidate can showcase when these criteria are set by the 79% of people sharing a deeply racist common sense. In a democratic election even the most radical "qualities" in "judgment and opinion" still "depend upon the qualities of the electorate," Arendt, "Reflections," 50–51. Thus she questions how a singular Black perspective aiming at a post-racist order could ever gain general value for the foundation of a political community which is built on devaluing Black life and at the same time change its way of togetherness.

33 Arendt, "Reflections," 48–51.

34 Arendt, "Reflections," 51.

perspective allows one to view white supremacist layers of racism—not only anti-Black racism[35]—as a *conditio sine qua non* of American society. Arendt works on this perspective in other parts of her oeuvre as well and warns that Black people are and might keep being excluded from the "tacit *consensus universalis* of the nation."[36] In the vein of this diagnosis, it is naïve to believe in a USA without racism and thus not to recognize how profoundly racial common sense shapes whiteness as a people's identity. Thus, Arendt sees two coexisting, interrelated futures ahead of Elizabeth Eckford's walk to school: first, the process that might realize comprehensive equality for all, and second, beneath this potential success story, a shape-shifting racialization that consists of perceiving Black people as others and being able to treat them differently. In the course of such an integration that keeps racism intact the "difference" of race may come to be "resented" even more.[37] For this threatening scenario, Arendt refers to a "danger point well known to students of history."[38] By following this reference to the escalation of antisemitic violence in the Europe of the 1930s and 40s, we can better understand how Arendt fundamentally revises her previous model of a progressive future. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism,* Arendt parts with the historical trajectory of a steadily secured and improved position of racialized Jewish people through an expansion of equality. Instead, she shows that the acceptance

35 It should be noted that the events of Little Rock encompass not only anti-Black racism but also antisemitism: Dr. Benjamin Fine, education editor of the *New York Times* at the time, who consoled Elizabeth Eckford on the bench of the Bus stop, reports the following: "A girl I had seen ustling [sic] in one of the local bars screamed 'A dirty New York Jew! Get him!' A man asked me, 'Are you a Jew?' I said, 'Yes.' He then said to the mob, 'Let him be! We'll take care of him later,'" Bates, *Long Shadow,* 71.

36 "We know that this original crime could not be remedied by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; on the contrary, the *tacit* exclusion from the *tacit* consensus was made more conspicuous by the inability or unwillingness of the federal government to enforce its own laws… An explicit constitutional amendment, addressed specifically to the N***o people of America, might have underlined the great change more dramatically for these people who had never been welcome," Hannah Arendt, *Crises of the Republic* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 90–91.

37 Arendt, "Reflections," 48.

of more and more Jews into social spaces, mostly on legal grounds, was accompanied by "social resentment against Jews" and the development of "ideologically charged antisemitism."[39] Steady inclusion went hand in hand with an equally steady racialization of the group, reinforced by self-contradicting ideological constructs to which mobs reacted with racist violence.

There are two aspects to this conception of a future that combines integration and continuing, even intensifying, racist violence. First, Arendt assumes that the equality granted to racialized people must be seen warily as only temporary. She understands the equality of Jews—and analogously that of Black people—"as an entitlement one secures when one is considered sufficiently normal by one's fellow citizens."[40] This granting of acceptance and "normality" leaves intact, even strengthens, the common sense of racial otherness.[41] Racialized people might be granted certain rights and a status of 'normality,' but they constantly have to prove that they adhere to white standards. This provisionally granted and therefore always endangered position leads to the other aspect of this temporality, the future danger point. Second, the racialized group, even when seemingly integrated, always remains on the brink of being rejected from the realm

38 Arendt, "Reflections," 48. For the relation of Anti-Black racism to antisemitism, see Danielle Allen, "Law's Necessary Forcefulness: Ralph Ellison vs. Hannah Arendt on the Battle of Little Rock," in *Multiculturalism and Political Theory,* eds. Anthony Simon Laden and David Owen (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 327.

39 Ainsley LeSure, "The White Mob, (In) Equality Before the Law, and Racial Common Sense: A Critical Race Reading of the N***o Question in 'Reflections on Little Rock,'" *Political Theory* 49, no. 1 (2021), 12.

40 Le Sure, "White Mob, (In) Equality Before the Law, and Racial Common Sense," 5.

41 "Whenever equality becomes a mundane fact in itself, without any gauge by which it may be measured or explained, then there is one chance in a hundred that it will be recognized simply as a working principle of a political organization in which otherwise unequal people have equal rights; there are ninety-nine chances that it will be mistaken for an innate quality of every individual, who is 'normal' if he is like everybody else and 'abnormal' if he happens to be different," Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Harcourt Brace & Company, 1964), 54.

of normality for arbitrary reasons. Whenever the ruling class or certain political actors consider it useful, the progressive reduction of racial injustices can be used to incite resistance on the part of the white population, which will defend its racial difference, its freedoms, and its privileges. If these privileges of racialization continue to be dismantled, the basis that made racial differences possible will be depleted and violence will seek other, even worse ways. With this temporal horizon in mind, Arendt is indeed very aware of the white violence captured in the photos but also senses that this could be only a portent of much worse anti-Black violence to come once Black people substantially endanger the realms of white privilege.

This opens up a new future emanating from Eckford's sorrowful face. Projecting the horror of Nazi antisemitism as a warning of a possible future, Arendt calls on Black people to refrain from further actions aiming at more social equality. She urges them to accept a certain amount of inequality and violence and not to fight for their rights because the price might be the breakdown of an order that sustains a minimum degree of protection.[42] Thus we can conclude that Arendt looks at Eckford's troubled face turned away from the white violence and reacts with two contradictory calls. On the one hand, we can hear her yelling at the parents and NAACP activists to "move forward," on the other, we can hear her hushing them, as if to say "don't move at all." In both cases the frame for thinking about possible futures beyond Eckford's suffering is Arendt's commitment to the "survival of the Republic,"[43] be it as the possibility for progress or the guarantee of a minimum degree of safety. We can interpret the coexistence and contradiction of Arendt's claims as central to the stability of American post-slavery society, in which Black people must believe in the ideal of increasing equality and their potential to one day "climb" the social ladder.[44] For American society cannot exist without this story of progress. Mostly because of the inclusion of Black Americans in the sphere of the free market, self-responsibility has proved to be useful and rewarding for employers.[45] But at the same time, the freed slaves and their descendants must stay "Black" people, as American society needs a white identity and its corresponding privileges. Gazing at Elizabeth Eckford's sorrowful

42
See Allen, "Law's Necessary Forcefulness," 327.

43
Arendt, "Reflections," 47.

44
Arendt, "Reply to Critics," 179.

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See the historical analysis in Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Norton, 2022), 201–368.

face with Arendt shows us a simultaneity of possible futures that shape American society: despite the existence of liberal rights, procedures, and narratives of progress, Black individuals continue to navigate a landscape marked by racism, in which not progress but standstill is felt. Progress, stalemate, and an intensification of racism are seen as scenarios lying ahead of Eckford's sorrowful face.

Once Arendt's commitment to the "survival of the Republic"[46] is seen as the tacit precondition to her conceptions of possible futures, we can ask what other futures could be projected onto the moment of the photograph. Eckford's walk and the pictures taken of it are now widely seen as a central and iconic moment in the struggle of Black people for a better life and for a post-racist order. In the history of this struggle, the extent to which the institutions and rights and the "survival of the republic" might be said to help or hinder the achievement of a post-racist *status quo* has always been controversial.[47] Accordingly, there have been diverse attempts to think about possible futures for Black people. In 2018 Fred Moten explored the photograph of Elizabeth Eckford also focusing on her face. He builds on an African-American tradition of thought which had to grapple with the realization that Black participation in politics, and even a Black president, could not make Black lives matter differently in the United States. The 60 years separating Moten from the events at Little Rock and Arendt's article make a difference insofar as certain visions of progress no longer hold any promise for the likes of Moten. Hence, Moten builds on the thesis that the civil rights movement not only demanded more rights for Black people but also sought to completely destroy the everyday life of the Southern states in order to invent a new reality.[48] Accordingly, he looks at Elizabeth Eckford's face in search of a future that radically breaks with Arendt's beloved American Republic.

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Arendt, "Reflections," 47.

47
This tension is aptly described as one of political movements and Black activists/intellectuals in Hortense Spillers, "The Crisis of the N***o Intellectual. A Post-Date," in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy,* eds. Tommy Lee Lott and John P. Pittman (Wiley Blackwell, 2003).

48
Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Duke University Press, 2018), 100.

An Ongoing History of an Already Existing Alternative

In the essay "Refuge, Refuse, Refrain," published in his book *Universal Machine,* Fred Moten looks at the iconic photo of Elizabeth Eckford and focuses on her eyes, describing them as "obscured by shadow and by sunglasses, which could be mistaken for a blindfold."[49] Moten criticizes the fact that Arendt and the political theorists who succeeded her all see Eckford's walk only as a preliminary stage to the steady path to legal and political equality. As I showed above, this criticism is already latently inherent in Arendt's own text.

Moten draws on historical analyses that show that the Western "political" relies on a concept of the autonomous universal human being endowed with equal rights, which was developed within capitalist nation-states in the same historical period that they were enslaving Black people.[50] This coincidence of the western capitalist nation-state and its procedures of political emancipation with the historical appearance of slavery leads Moten to state that the "ontological categories" of the political subject and the related progress story of its procedures are de facto predicated on grammars of anti-Black antagonism.[51] Hence, Moten can—against his own caricature of Arendt[52]—be read as radicalizing Arendt's questioning of the supposed success story of an expanding equality for the marginalized by means of social inclusion, democratic participation, and legal rights.

In contrast to Arendt, Moten makes it clear from the outset that he is reading something into Elizabeth Eckford's face, that he is theorizing a future based on his act of looking at her face: "Eckford appears to those who want to feel, to place her eyes and thoughts elsewhere." Moten's indeterminate "elsewhere" indicates that Eckford's walk is directed by her "alternative vision" aiming at a post-racist future. For this interpretation, Moten makes use of the photo's arrangement: Eckford's gaze is directed at the camera and, as it were, through and beyond the viewer. He thus states that Eckford's walk is moving towards something that most viewers are unable to see and imagine, a "refusal of time and place." This aims at "another mode of organization altogether,"[53] "something other than transcendental subjectivity," something that can so far only be "called nothing."[54]

49 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 76. Moten does not specify which photo he has in mind, which is why I assume he refers to the well-known photo taken by Counts.

50 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 100.

51 This thesis is developed in Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4. (2013), 739–40.

52 He portrays Arendt as the most important theorist of the political sphere of autonomous, isolated political subjects.

53 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 72–76.

54 Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness," 778.

This touches a central question of the discourse of Black Studies, namely the extent to which something positive can be attributed to Black life beyond negation. For present purposes, it is crucial that Moten speaks of Elizabeth Eckford as appearing to him through a photo, walking somewhere, someplace we don't know, and that he describes this appearance as a "nonperformance, which bears the story, the ongoing history, of an already existing alternative."[55]

Moten is not thinking about alternative futures we can read in or out of Eckford's act. Instead, he searches for "ongoing histories" that existed in Little Rock but have so far been neglected. In contrast to Arendt, he draws on further material beyond the photos to describe two "ongoing histories" into which, on his account, Elizabeth Eckford is to be inserted. These histories come as two different answers to the question of where Elizabeth Eckford "came from, and where she slipped to."[56]

In a first answer to this question, Moten inserts Elizabeth Eckford in the history and future of Black social bonds, of which families are seen as only one form. He states that Elizabeth Eckford, and Black people in the American South in general, need to be located on a continuum of physical and psychological terror. Moten takes up an argument that Ralph Ellison brought up in an interview directly responding to Arendt's "Reflections": that Arendt has "absolutely no conception" how the "terrors of social life" structure relations for Black people and their families in particular.[57] Ellison breaks up Arendt's binary between Black opportunism and political progress and makes palpable Arendt's incapability to imagine that Black parents in the South cannot guarantee safety for their children. Moten generalizes Ellison's insight by stating that violence and separation inevitably happen to any kind of Black relationship. With this he situates Eckford's concrete suffering on a continuum of situations in which Black people in the USA are constantly forced to experience what it means to live in a violently racialized Black body. The violence captured in the photo needs to be seen as an "intensification of previously existing conditions."[58] He states that this quasi-*a priori* woundedness of Black people does not mean that their relationships are constantly breaking apart or aim at

55 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 76.

56 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 76.

57 Ralph Ellison, "In Interview," in *Who speaks for the N***o?*, Robert Penn Warren (Random House, 1965), 344.

58 Moten, *Universal Machine,* 104.

integration, as Ellison argues. Rather, he asks how relationships and families are built around, answer, and "offer existing alternatives" [59] to this anti-Black violence.

Moten draws on Elizabeth Eckford's own account of the events that highlights how her family prayed with her in the morning and how her mother held her in her arms after the white terror.[60] By drawing on these practices of preparation and care, he suggests that a sociality between Elizabeth and her parents can be seen to "frame[s] what is supposed to be Eckford's abandonment." In Moten's account, the individual violence of the moment in the photograph that captured Arendt's attention dissolves in two conflicting temporalities. He inserts Eckford's shaded eyes into a history of never-ending racist violence that is always already interwoven with a counter-history of resisting sociality. This tipping figure of two dialectically interwoven histories and futures behind and ahead of the photo makes Moten speculate that Elizabeth Eckford's state of mind amidst the terror is drawn towards her parents in the sense that she anticipates, moves towards a different state of being-together he calls "assembly." This is epitomized in the thesis that the "absolute woundedness is also an absolute blessing."[61]

Such a conception of the future that sees in Eckford's woundedness a blessing runs the permanent risk of viewing Eckford's suffering as a necessary precursor to Black sociality. This is problematic because, so construed, Moten can only tell one story of the captured moment of violence, namely that it may and will be cured in sociality. Moten's story is in tension with Elizabeth Eckford's life, in which this very violence has remained haunting and traumatic. In addition, this temporality tends to romanticize the relationship between Elizabeth and her parents as establishing an ideal togetherness of care and love.[62]

But Moten's text does provide an antidote to these dangers and gives another answer to the question of where Elizabeth Eckford "came from, and where she slipped to."[63] He projects another future onto Eckford's shaded eyes by stating that one can perceive Eckford as "a soloist who is not one."[64] Moten doesn't argue that Eckford really performs a solo but uses the temporal logic of the jazz solo to situate Eckford's walk in a particular history: this ongoing history

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Moten, *Universal Machine,* 76.

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Moten references Eckford's own perspective in Allen, "Law's Necessary Forcefulness," 323–24, that references Bates, *Long Shadow,* 73–76, in which Eckford is quoted.

61
Moten, *Universal Machine,* 104.

62
Moten uses the paradigm of "love" in this regard but it should be noted that he frames it also as a "destructive revolutionary force," Moten, *Universal Machine,* 86.

63
Moten, *Universal Machine,* 76.

64
Moten, *Universal Machine,* 101.

is modeled after the way a solo takes up previous musical moments, another solo, or an ensemble playing in the sense that it formulates an expectation or request to be taken up and continued. Moten argues that musical improvisation and other cultural techniques[65] can be situated in a chain of actions in which each part gestures toward a juncture at which someone else is required to further advance the process. To look at Eckford's shaded eyes through the analogy of a jazz artist's temporal milieu means to describe Eckford's walk and her parents' actions as being at once preceded by actions, continuing them, but most of all being fundamentally uncertain and open for a continuation unknown at the moment of action itself. Just like the soloist does not know what comes after her solo has ended, Eckford's gaze is shaded or indeterminable because she cannot know what comes next.[66]

It is debatable whether Eckford's walk is indeed structured by the same radical openness that structures a jazz improvisation. It is certainly a bold poetic claim that Eckford's gaze anticipates and moves toward a continuation that may be wholly different, thereby embodying a belief that someone (or something) else will continue the struggle. To be clear: Moten makes his own gesture of looking at Eckford's face in this way transparent as a gesture of speculation. Nevertheless, he refrains from marking the limits of his technique of analogy. To do so, he would have to describe in detail how Eckford's walk engenders possibilities that differ from the possibilities that are enabled by a jazz solo. He does not spell out the obvious difference between improvising with other people and being attacked on the basis of your racialization. Accordingly, the incomparably greater risk for Elizabeth Eckford's actual body tends to be leveled out through his use of analogy.

The particular temporal logic into which he inserts Eckford is defined not only through the moment of radical openness towards another mode of continuation. His reference towards musical and cultural techniques is not only an analogy but also a claim about specific historical relations. He states that Black forms of struggle are intertwined with other cultural or religious techniques, which together point towards another state of order. Or, in Moten's words, Eckford's "alternative vision" must be understood as a "sight made plain

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The other paradigm is the religious gesture of blessing and "charismata," Moten, *Universal Machine,* 103–05.

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Moten is influenced by theorists like Amiri Baraka, who emphasize that the cultural activities historically developed by slaves and their descendants create relations and thereby experiences that enable running away, being fugitive, "making our refuge, on the run," Moten, *Universal Machine,* 243.

by sound or song."[67] This presupposes the well-established argument that Black forms of resistance unfold through a network of subterranean relations, between practices at different times—and that this network spread temporally and geographically across socio-cultural life in the Black Atlantic, cultivating a mode of believing in another future.[68] Moten does not spell out this thesis of interconnected, separate, and simultaneously connected practices. He only vaguely implies it to suggest that certain forms of practice are necessary preconditions for Elizabeth Eckford's performance. The exact juncture of the history of Black cultural-political practices and the concrete life of Elizabeth Eckford remain open, and Moten simply assumes that she visited Black churches, listened to Black music—or was in another way trained in the "aesthetic sociality" of "black music" and other Black cultural practices.[69]

These explanations are intended to make palpable the risks inherent in Moten's move to insert Eckford into what he calls the "ongoing history of an already existing alternative" in Black aesthetic practices.[70] But there are undoubtedly also benefits: Moten allows us to see through Eckford's walk, through her shaded eyes another version of a future beyond a racist moment. Moten thus can be said to highlight a particular aspect of Eckford's walk: that she engages in a history of Black cultural-political resistances against an anti-Black order and realizes a moment of unfulfilled potential in the cause for a post-racist society. Moten makes it transparent that he looks at the sunglasses and hears a "call," hears Eckford inviting, "out of a brutally imposed languishing,"[71] others to "go to the school we tore down and rebuilt for all of us."[72] This clearly doesn't refer to the High School and town of Little Rock that kept being a place of white supremacism and anti-Black violence.[73] He makes clear that the particular moment didn't reach the goal of a post-racist society and didn't build another form of High School. On the contrary, Eckford's endeavor can be said to share the feature of defeat with many undertakings in the history of Black people in the US. Moten's theory tries to rewire a broken but also interconnected web of cultural practices and forms of resistance aiming for "another mode of organization altogether"[74] that is ongoing and not yet fully realized. By looking beyond

67 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 76.

68 See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993).

69 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 74.

70 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 76.

71 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 127.

72 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 88.

73 For an account of the white terror in the weeks and years after see Bates, *Long Shadow*, 91–93 and 116–17.

74 Moten, *Universal Machine*, 72.

the established narratives about Little Rock and the objective historiography of Black resistance movements, Moten tries to gain something different from the pain and missed chances: a chain of beginnings, fragmented continuities, devoid of closure that keep the door to fundamental change ajar.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this article, Arendt's and Moten's theories appeared as continuations and sequels to particular moments in time captured by photographs. Each author employs different temporal registers of progress, stalemate, rupture, and rollback to grasp what lies ahead of the moment of the photographs. By doing so, they develop fertile tensions between conflicting conceptions of the future.

On the one hand, Arendt projects the future of steady progress through participation in democratic procedures onto Eckford's sorrowful face. On the other hand, she outlines a pessimistic vision of the future that sees racism as a necessary corollary, not to be overcome through democratic procedures, of the American Republic. Through this, Arendt's text opens up a simultaneity of futures that shape American society: despite the existence of liberal rights, procedures and narratives of progress, Black individuals continue to navigate a landscape marked by racism. The tension is fruitful because it makes clear that, besides the democratic procedures that aim to transcend or transform the established form of racist sociality, there needs to be a theory that acknowledges the ongoing dynamic of racism despite these reforms.

Moten looks at Eckford's shaded eyes and deepens that tension. He looks at Eckford's face and works through temporal registers that Arendt used as well (progress and stalemate) while urging us to think about a post-racist state beyond the mechanisms of the American Republic. Moten's theory moves toward the lived reality, the ongoing histories of Black people. His text leaves us with a theory of Eckford's walk that is demanding, speculative, problematic, and fascinating because he states that an alternative exists for Eckford. But he is also torn. Do the Eckfords realize a revolutionary and utopian sociality of preparation and care? Should Eckford and her family be placed outside the dialectical

temporality of suffering and liberating sociality? In trying to get beyond such a logic Moten suggests looking at the transhistorical continuum of Black cultural techniques and modes of being-together, ranging from the Black family's solidarity after the event to jazz improvisation. His technique of transhistorical collage links separate moments, of which Eckford's is one among many, and his own theory as well. From this perspective, empowerment and resistance cannot be thought of as happening at points in time changing a previous state for the better.

Moreover, he sees a temporal chain of different practices which are all oriented towards an "elsewhere" that no point in time sufficiently captures.[75] In order to do justice to the specificity of this committed theory position and non-Western theoretical languages (and to be able to criticize them), the intersection of theory and media warrants further investigation. Moten works with the same photos as Arendt, but relates himself to them differently, writing from a different position. This position of speculation—or fabulation[76]—is still foreign to dominant theoretical paradigms. Moten and other theorists in the field of Black Studies look at photos (listen to music, view artworks) and theorize ongoing histories which do not fit easily into models of progress through democratic institutions. In doing so, they write themselves into Black history. And they try to shed light on the openness and on future continuations still unthinkable at the moment of Eckford's action.

75
Moten, *Universal Machine*, 76.

76
See Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives: Beautiful Experiments* (Serpent's Tail, 2021).