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Author

Mehring, Frank

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“All for the sake of Freedom”: Hannah Arendt’s Democratic Dissent, Trauma, and American Citizenship

FRANK MEHRING

I rather believe with Faulkner, “The past is never dead, it’s not even past,” and this for the simple reason that the world we live in at any moment *is* the world of the past; it consists of the monuments and the relics of what has been done by men for better or worse; its facts are always what has *become* (as the Latin origin of the word: *fieri—factume est* suggests). In other words, it is quite true that the past *haunts* us; it is the past’s function to haunt us who are present and wish to live in the world as it really is, that is, has *become* what it is now.

—Hannah Arendt, “Home to Roost” (1975)

Introduction

As an intellectual Jewish immigrant, Hannah Arendt’s work is informed by two key factors: the failures of German intellectuals regarding the rise of fascism and the promise of American democracy. Arendt was haunted by the past and the memories of how the democratic structures of the Weimar Republic had been undermined, manipulated, and finally transformed into a totalitarian terror regime. The issues of freedom, equality, and the shortcomings of democratic societies form a transcultural nexus in her oeuvre. My reading of Arendt will reveal how her efforts to deal with a transatlantic traumatic past shaped the felt need to voice democratic dissent in the United States. While much has been said about her theoretical groundwork on the mechanisms of totalitarian systems, Arendt’s living conditions as a naturalized foreigner, her enthusiasm for American democracy, and her refusal to return to Germany have been to a large extent neglected. Arendt is usually rooted firmly in a

European philosophical context. She has been canonized as one of the foremost philosophical thinkers from Germany on the emergence of totalitarian systems and the Holocaust. Among her fellow intellectual émigrés and exiles, such as Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, or Fraenkel, Arendt stands out. She decided not to return to the new democratic Germany with its *Grundgesetz* fashioned along the lines of the American Constitution. Instead she insisted on becoming naturalized and used her transnational background as a basis to address democratic gaps from the vantage point of an American citizen.¹

As an immigrant from Germany, Arendt's work is informed by two key factors: the failures of German intellectuals and the promise of American democracy. In her work, concepts of freedom, equality, and the shortcomings of democratic societies form a transcultural nexus. According to her preface to her first literary effort, the biography of Rahel Varnhagen, she explains that the biography "was written with an awareness of the doom of German Judaism."² This awareness turned into a traumatic experience.³ Can trauma be an energetic impulse to effectively describe and criticize American democratic culture, or is it rather an obstacle? George Kateb envisions unproductive confrontations that arise from misunderstandings and false conceptions of American culture by European intellectuals: "It is caution I urge, especially caution in the use made by Americans, for understanding America, of theoretical frameworks devised by Europeans, but most especially, frameworks devised by them for European conditions and experiences or under the influence of European trauma."⁴ Is Arendt's criticism regarding the failures and inconsistencies of American democracy counterproductive as it does not, as Kateb concludes, feed "the imagination of democratic amelioration" (43)? In order to answer this complex question, I will need to take a detour. First, I will show in which ways Arendt identified herself as an American. Second, I will reconnect Arendt's democratic dissent with her efforts to become recognized as an American citizen.

1. "Such a Thing as Freedom": Cultural Acculturation and Naturalization

Hannah Arendt considered herself between all nations, a "stranger" in the sense of her literary alter ego Franz Kafka, who belonged "neither to the common people nor to its rulers."⁵ Nevertheless, Arendt never made attempts to reclaim her German national identity or applied for citizenship in Israel. Of all possible opportunities, American citizenship seemed to be the most appropriate choice. The moment of becoming an American citizen on December 10, 1951, offered Arendt a future in a democratic environment with its promise of equality and being recognized as a human being with inalienable rights. Undoubtedly, the oath of allegiance had special significance for her: "I hereby declare, on oath, that . . . I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same" (see Figure 1). For Arendt, being dedicated to the American Constitution meant unveiling traces of

undemocratic tendencies in American culture and politics. Arendt's lament over the failures of literature must be seen in relation to the promise she made when she became a naturalized foreigner.



Figure 1. Hannah Arendt's US Certificate of Naturalization, December 10, 1951. Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

As an intellectual immigrant, Arendt's work is informed by challenges of the more recent past in Germany and current challenges in the United States. The issues of self-identification and national belonging come into question. After the war, the discussion of the Holocaust relied on narratives by people who were labeled as immigrants, refugees, and displaced persons.⁶ Often these terms were used interchangeably. First-generation German Jewish immigrants tended to use the term "refugee" to convey constraints and expulsion. "Immigrant," in turn, suggested choice, free will. The latter included a sense of agency. Arendt fashioned herself actively into an American citizen, a detail that is often overlooked.⁷

It is crucial to understand that Arendt did not dream about becoming an American while growing up during the Wilhelmine Empire and Weimar Germany. When pressures mounted in Europe, her choices were limited. Crossing the Atlantic

seemed to be the only chance for a German Jew to escape deadly anti-Semitism. In 1943, two years after she had arrived in the United States, she penned a poem in New York's Riverside Park, in which she pondered her Jewish German identity. The past looms like an ominous shadow over the present. Her new situation in exile produces a feeling of solitude, isolation, irritation, combined with premonitions of an imminent catastrophe:

We went to play, embrace and laugh and hold
Dreams of past times.
We, too, have grown tired of streets, cities, of the rapid
Changes of solitude.

Among the rowing boats with their loving couples, like jewels
On woodland ponds,
We, too, could mingle quietly, hidden and wrapped in the
Misty clouds which soon

Clothe the earth, the banks, the bush and the tree,
Awaiting the coming storm.
Awaiting—out of the fog, the cloud castle, folly and dream—
The rising, twisting storm.⁸

When information about mass extermination throughout central Europe came to the United States, Arendt remained in a state of confusion and disillusionment. Shortly afterward, she started to work on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* as a means to come to terms with the loss of “dreams of past times” she had described in her poem. The process of writing represented a way to identify with the new sociopolitical environment. Turning to Rainer Maria Rilke's famous line “Wohl dem, der eine Heimat hat,” Arendt adds a revealing twist in another poem composed in 1946: “Lucky is he who has no home; he sees it still in his dreams” (188, emphasis mine). Arendt has often been referred to as a stateless person during this time. Her dreams continued to bring back memories of Germany. She still identified herself with her native language and German culture. The experience of racial humiliation, expatriation, flight, and knowledge of mass extinction exerted a paralyzing effect on Arendt. In her third preface to *The Origins of Totalitarianism* from 1966, she explained her emotional situation as characterized by a deep sense of sorrow, “but no longer in speechless outrage and impotent horror.”⁹ Writing meant breaking out of a state of silence.¹⁰

By 1946, Arendt's attitude toward the United States started to undergo a decisive transformation. She had turned from a more or less neutral observer to an active promoter of the American democratic promise. The beginning of the conversion can be traced back to the first two months after Arendt's arrival in the

United States, which she spent with a family in Winchester, Massachusetts. Participating in the everyday life of an “all-American” family and learning the English language left two strong impressions on her. On the one hand, she critically observed the narrow mentality of her hosts. As small-town folks and third-generation immigrants, the Giduz family was suspicious of “new Americans” and critical toward African Americans in the United States. On the other hand, Arendt was struck by their political commitment as citizens and their efforts to get involved, when, for example, Mrs. Giduz wrote an angry letter to Congress to protest against the internment of Japanese Americans. Even five years later, Arendt spoke fondly of this experience, describing them to Karl Jaspers: “thoroughly average people—what would have been called ‘petty bourgeoisie’ in Germany” protested and “insisted on the constitutional rights of all Americans regardless of national background.”¹¹ This dedication did not stem from close ties to Japanese Americans. Arendt ascribed it to a sense of justice and freedom that permeated the public spirit in the United States. The commitment to public life and a shared sense of responsibility marked a feature of American people that she found lacking among Europeans. Writing to a German philosopher in his Swiss exile, Arendt knew about the common notions and clichés of “America” from a German perspective. When she explains to Karl Jaspers the intuitive sense of freedom in the American democratic environment, she *nolens volens* reveals her own hesitations and doubts she must have shared with Jaspers before arriving in the United States: “There *really* is such a thing as freedom here and a strong feeling among many people that one cannot live without freedom. The republic is not a vapid illusion, and the fact that there is no national state and no truly national tradition creates an atmosphere of freedom or at least one not pervaded by fanaticism” (30, emphasis mine). Arendt responded passionately to the “thingness” of freedom and the experience of being an American citizen. “Es gibt hier wirklich so etwas wie Freiheit” is the German original.¹² Although the German original does not feature an explicit reference to thingness, the “etwas wie” (something like) refers to the existence of freedom in a sense that can be grasped in an almost physical sense. She continues to argue that the “republic is not a vapid illusion” to strengthen moments of congruity between the American promise and the experience of living in the country.¹³ The fact that the “melting pot” remains a goal rather than a fact does not appear to be an indication of failure. From Arendt’s perspective, the opposite is true. The existence of cultural and ethnic diversity counterbalances the principle of nationalism that had sent Europe on the disastrous road leading to two World Wars. In the United States, she encountered the reality of a democratic tradition that promised to offer an alternative solution to the humanitarian catastrophe Arendt had witnessed as a Jew in Germany. Getting involved and turning the American promise into a reality meant working toward a future beyond the totalitarian developments in Europe. This conviction must have been a powerful incentive to apply for citizenship and to become officially part of the cause of freedom.

Poetry and art in general become means to overcome what Arendt identified as “the crisis in culture.”¹⁴ The reason for a disruption in the thread of cultural tradition she finds in the “rubbish of educated philistinism.”¹⁵ Postwar America and Europe faced similar problems from an intellectual perspective. However, Arendt argues that American mass society might surprisingly be less of an obstacle than the European philistines with their focus on the usefulness of art for the sole sake of self-perfection. Poetry and political action form two sides of a single coin in American culture, which Arendt links with the work of Whitman and Melville (201). When she asks readers to “read its authors as though nobody had ever read them before” (204), she exemplifies her call for aesthetic judgment in an unusual interpretation of *Billy Budd, Sailor* in her comparative work *On Revolution* (1962). While her German contemporaries Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse tried to reestablish German critical thinking and philosophy as superior to developments in the United States, Arendt argued from a different perspective: “In this task mass society is much less in our way than good and educated society, and I suspect that this kind of reading was not uncommon in nineteenth-century America precisely because this country was still that ‘unstoried wilderness’ from which so many American writers and artists tried to escape” (201). Arendt explicitly addresses the connection between the cultural realm of literature and politics in her essay “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance.” It is crucial to understand that Arendt’s notion of mass society and mass culture moves away from Adorno’s suspicion of kitsch and superficiality perpetuated by the (American) culture industry. Instead she recognizes an appreciation for art in the United States that is different from European snobbishness. Arendt emphasizes less the “mass” than the “culture” in her analysis. “Culture” represents the time available beyond the burden of physically exhausting labor. Her positive attitude toward the potential of American democracy undoubtedly stems from the disappointment regarding the failure of cultural developments, artists, critics, and audiences in Germany after 1933. In a Tocquevillian vein, Arendt asks, “what happens to culture under the different conditions of society and of mass society” (197). The efforts of the bourgeois society to overcome the feeling of inferiority (based on their “middle-class” status) reduced “culture” to the function of a weapon. While not the same, culture and art are interrelated by the fact that “art works are cultural objects par excellence” (208).

By limiting the engagement with art to the function of educating oneself, European intellectuals failed to develop their senses properly: “The trouble with the educated philistine was not that he read the classics but that he did so prompted by the ulterior motive of self-perfection, remaining quite unaware of the fact that Shakespeare or Plato might have to tell him more important things than how to educate himself” (200). In the United States, mass society is more likely to approach literature with a sense of social disinterestedness and distance than European societies. Arendt discovers that a public element is encoded both in culture and politics. Political products—just like artworks—need a public space where they are

being perceived, discussed, and evaluated. Arendt needs to create this connection in order to come to terms with the failure of German artists to resist the persuasive power of Hitler's inhuman terror system and to explain the lack of sensitivity of the readers. She enlists Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* in her program to combine political judgment with aesthetic judgment. Her interpretation of Kant's "enlarged mentality" (*eine erweiterte Denkungsart*) calls for a reception process that creates communion.¹⁶ This communion transcends the dialogue between artwork and viewer, reader, or listener.

It is surprising that a nonconformist like Arendt stayed clear of dismissing American mass culture. By transcending the disappointing failures of American democracy, she pierced through the surface and recovered the democratic spirit of the American founding documents. Arendt's keen interest in American politics and culture sets her apart from those intellectuals who influenced her during her studies in Germany, most of all Martin Heidegger, her teacher (and lover) who recognized in the cipher "America" only "trostlose Raserei der entfesselten Technik" and "bodenlose Organisation des Normalmenschen."¹⁷

Although Arendt understood the contradiction of political freedom and social oppression, she cherished the guarantee of political freedom in the American founding documents above everything else. After her assessment that ostracized people encountered a deprivation of human rights, she argues for a "right to have rights" in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.¹⁸ The right to have rights demands commitment. Arendt wants people to be judged by their actions and opinions. From this assumption, she deduces her right to dissent. Dissent was not fundamental in the sense of her criticism of totalitarian systems. Rather the political freedom in the United States offered the framework in which she could develop her thoughts and use her intellectual capacity to engage within a democratic environment as an equal among equals. This basic conviction set Arendt apart from German cultural criticism, particularly Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.¹⁹

However, as a Jewish immigrant living in New York City, Arendt did not let herself be blinded by the common rhetorical tropes of democracy reiterated in inauguration speeches and patriotic rituals. She clearly saw the shortcomings of American democracy during and after World War II: "The high degree of practical political understanding, the passion to straighten things out, not to tolerate unnecessary misery, to see that in the midst of often cutthroat competition the individual is guaranteed a fair chance—all this has a flip side, however."²⁰ Among the things she found problematic ranked the death penalty and the country's fundamental anti-intellectualism. The chief problem, however, she recognized in the democratic gap: "The fundamental contradiction in this country is the coexistence of political freedom and social oppression" (31). Arendt shared this notion with German intellectual immigrants who came with an idealized image of how a democratic society should be organized and what opportunities it might hold for the individual. Arendt took issue with the fact that American society organized itself along "racial

lines” (31). Her prime examples were the double standards that Jewish people and African Americans faced in American culture:

This racial issue has to do with a person’s country of origin, but it is greatly aggravated by the Negro question; that is, America has a real “race” problem and not just a racial ideology. You doubtless know that social anti-Semitism is taken completely for granted here and that antipathy toward Jews is, so to speak, a consensus omnium. The Jews maintain an almost equally radical isolation and are, of course, also protected by that isolation. A young Jewish woman, a friend of mine born in this country, had in our home what I believe to be her first social meeting with non-Jewish Americans. This doesn’t mean that people would not stand up for the Jews politically, but socially both sides want to “keep to themselves.” (31)

The American democratic experiment represented a paradigm of a pure concept of the political, which Arendt never tired of analyzing from different angles. Arendt’s fascination with the American experiment and the democratic spirit of the people does not translate into an agreement with actual politics. On the contrary, her perspective is informed by a double focus seen through a Tocquevillian lens. She is both fascinated by the powerful dedication of the American people to the spirit of freedom expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the historical continuation of democratic organizations. At the same time, Arendt is keenly aware of the dangers of the American experiment by what Tocqueville described as the “tyranny of the masses.” Thus, Arendt uses the dramatic downfall of the Weimar Republic in Germany as a foil to critically evaluate forces undermining democratic principles.²¹ The experience of racial segregation, McCarthyism, Nixon’s military intervention in Vietnam, and the discrepancy between the promise of democracy and the reality of ethnic oppression kept Arendt time and time again going back to the founding documents of the American republic. Like Brecht, there were moments when she described living in the United States as hell. Unlike Brecht, though, she believed in the potential of the democratic experiment and committed herself to patriotic dissent,²² as she explained in her *Denktagebuch* from 1951: “The passion, ‘to make the world a better place to live in’ really did improve the world. In consequence, however, in the process of improving the world everybody forgot what it means ‘to live.’ Thus, the Americans find themselves indeed in the ‘best of all worlds’ and have lost the essence of *life*. This is hell.”²³ The very responsibility Arendt encountered in the common people in the United States strengthened her determination to use her writing skills as a means to express her dedication to the (American) democratic cause.²⁴ Arendt considered the United States a twentieth-

century modern society rooted in eighteenth-century political philosophy with a form of government different from any other system she had encountered. The United States was “among the few survivors of true political freedom, and among the ever few guarantors of that minimum of social justice without which citizenship is impossible.”²⁵

2. “Jewish Public Enemy Number One”: Transatlantic Trauma and Democratic Dissent

Arendt emerged as an uncompromising dissenter in the American cultural context. When she reported on the proceedings of the Eichmann trial for *The New Yorker* and edited the articles for a book, the subtitle *A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) became one of the most contested phrases of our cultural memory.²⁶ During the early 1960s, the publication caused no less than a “civil war” among intellectuals.²⁷ Particularly Jewish intellectuals and societies complained that she had “exonerated” Eichmann and “condemned the Jews.” Her efforts to understand the motivations of Eichmann and evaluate his alleged monstrosity without preconceived filters caused the disruption of many friendships and marked her as public enemy number one.²⁸ Arendt initiated a fierce debate between the Jewish community and the survivors of the Nazi death camps over the appropriate way to commemorate and remember the Holocaust. As Seyla Benhabib explains, Arendt was punished by the Jewish community because “she, like so many others who were also Holocaust survivors, had not found the right public language, the right discourse through which to narrate past sorrow, suffering, and loss.”²⁹ After Lionel Abel wrote in the *Partisan Review* that Eichmann came off better in Arendt’s account than the victims, and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith set out to denounce Arendt from the pulpit on the Jewish high holidays, the scandal grew out of proportion. Nationwide, critics started to discredit her in the academic world, and international lecturers denounced her as a “self-hating Jew” or even asked if she was indeed a Nazi collaborator.³⁰

I argue that Arendt transcended the strategies to cope with trauma, which Aleida Assmann describes as balancing, externalizing, blending out, silencing, or fabricating (“aufrechnen, externalisieren, ausblenden, Schweigen, umfälschen”).³¹ Trauma theory emerged in the 1990s with American scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman at the forefront.³² According to Caruth, trauma produces a disruption in time or history.³³ Instead of turning to what Anne Whitehead labeled “traumatic fiction,”³⁴ Arendt found other venues to deal with her own experience of loss and extreme forms of anti-Semitism, which in her years of exile on both sides of the Atlantic resisted expression in language.³⁵ For her it was not so important to address what was remembered but how it was remembered and why she could make a substantial contribution due to her transatlantic, bicultural background. She used *provocation* as a means to confront the very forms of traumatic responses she encountered in public, jurisdictional, political, and personal

discourse. From this perspective, the most debated parts of Arendt's book begin to make sense in a different manner. For example, in describing the revered former chief rabbi and head of the Berlin Judenräte Leo Baeck as the "Jewish Führer," she uses an irritatingly flippant tone.³⁶ The irony and sarcasm, which often were at the heart of the heated debates, function as a means to gain recognition. In addition, she uses calculated shock and breaking taboos to stun her audience in sentences such as these: "The whole truth was that if the Jewish people had really been unorganized and leaderless, there would have been chaos and plenty of misery but the total number of victims would hardly have been between four and a half and six million people" (5). Arendt argues that crucial questions such as "How could the Jews through their own leaders cooperate in their own destruction?" and "Why did they go to their death like lambs to the slaughter?" were left in abeyance (5). She describes the trial in terms of a theatrical setup to produce a sensational spectacle where "the audience at the trial was to be the world and the play the huge panorama of Jewish sufferings" (8). Arendt describes the judges at the trial far from being able to resolve the dilemma that Eichmann was not a "perverted, sadistic personality" but rather normal insofar as he was "no exception within the Nazi regime" (26). Arendt tries to understand the complexities of his personality and why he was able to conceive of himself as a "law-abiding citizen" (135). It is crucial to understand that Arendt set out to provoke and actively promoted the very heat in the ensuing debate. The harsh attacks turned her into a *persona non grata* among Jewish organizations. However, the last version of the preface she wrote for a new edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* distinguishes between factual errors and her style. The results of her revisions are telling: "The revisions for this edition concern about a dozen technical errors, none of which has any bearing on the analysis or argument of the original text. . . . Most of the additions are also of a technical nature, clarifying a particular point, introducing new facts, or, in some instances, quotations from different sources. . . . The character of the book as a whole is completely unaltered" (xxiv). Considering the critical responses regarding her style, tone, and wording in some passages of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, this preface is not designed to calm the eruptions she produced. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Arendt throws more gasoline on the fire. How can this response be explained? The answer may be gleaned from an event that Arendt considered to be one of the greatest honors, namely her awarding of the Emerson-Thoreau Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on April 9, 1969.

The opening lines of her speech are particularly interesting regarding Arendt's self-fashioning in a national context (see Figure 2). Arendt distinguishes between being recognized and being honored. While both forms are interrelated, the gesture of being honored by the award in question related to the founding figures of American literature. The gift she referred to in her speech transcended the award. It placed her within a line of American artists, a position she felt she did not deserve. She thought she had not earned this kind of honor. The opening lines express in a convoluted and complicated manner a very basic feeling—Arendt is particularly

proud to be recognized by an award that evokes the spirit of America's foremost literary artists and free thinkers:

It is good to be recognized, and membership in this body whose very distinction lies in its, today, almost unique combination of the arts and the sciences, means recognition that counts since it comes from one's peers. To be honored means perhaps not more, but something different. We may think that we have a claim to recognition; we earn it though we don't necessarily deserve it; but we never earn or deserve an award or an honor. These are gifts freely and gratuitously bestowed, and their meaning, at least to me, is not recognition but welcome. And if it is good to be recognized, it is better to be welcomed, precisely because this is something we can neither earn nor deserve.³⁷

The importance of being recognized among American literary artists reveals Arendt's suppressed urge to fashion herself into a literary artist. The Emerson-Thoreau Medal inaugurated her into the membership of two spheres with special significance for her intellectual development: the world of literature and the United States of America. After having been recognized as an American citizen in 1951, she expressed a particular gratitude to be part of the cultural center of American cultural identity.³⁸ The transcendentalist Emerson ranked among those American writers whom Arendt was "intimately acquainted" with before she arrived in the United States.³⁹ Arendt used her acceptance speech to quote extensively from Emerson's famous essay "The Poet," in which he outlined a program for American writers to live up to the promise of democracy. Emerson's dissent and nonconformist attitude impressed her most: "'I like the sayers of No better than the sayers of Yes,' said Emerson—a cheerfulness that is pervaded by a quiet, reconciled melancholy—'Every man is wanted, and no man is wanted much.' This, as it were, innocent cheerfulness, more innocent in Emerson than in Montaigne, is perhaps today the greatest difficulty for us" (283). Arendt casts Emerson as a courageous dissenter when he employs poetry to address the democratic gaps in American culture. Arendt also emphasizes his ability to find dignity and beauty in the most unexpected places, as the example of Emerson's poem "Music" demonstrates: "From all that's fair, from all that's foul, / Peals out a cheerful song. . . . But in the darkest meanest things / There always, always something sings. . . . But in the mud and scum of things / There always, always something sings" (283). Arendt's search for beauty, which she considered to be at the heart of the *cultura animi*, and her self-fashioning into a democratic dissenter functioned as a means to gain recognition. By putting Arendt in line with one of the most highly esteemed American poets, Emerson, the nature of Arendt's dissent

offers a new way of approaching her oeuvre beyond the familiar complaint that she “always seemed to be saying painful things, or unpleasantly exotic ones.”⁴⁰

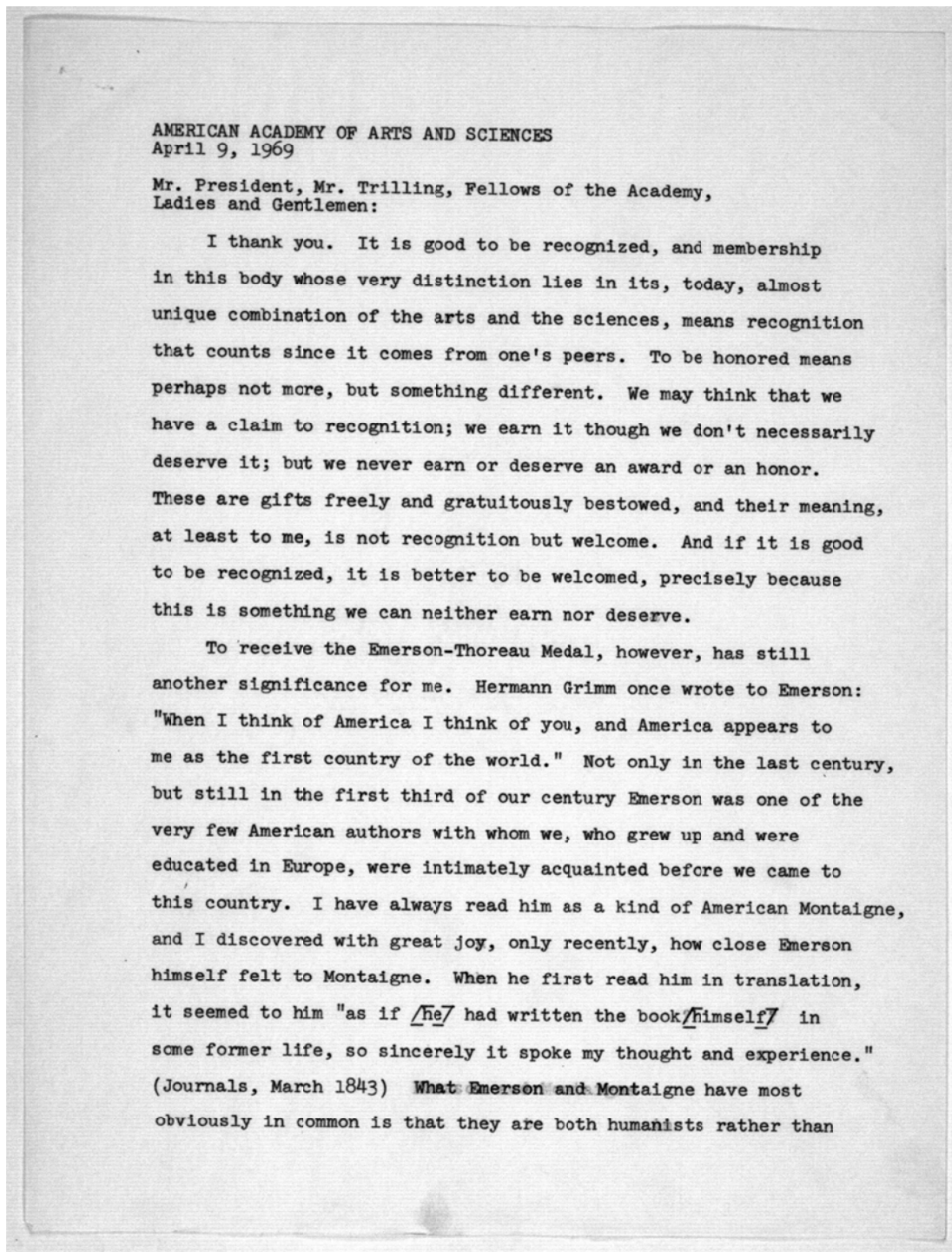


Figure 2. Hannah Arendt, Emerson-Thoreau Medal lecture, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1969). Speeches and Writings File, 1923–1975, n.d., Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, MS 023163, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

At the same time, Arendt's concept of democracy derives its power from conditions and shortcomings in the history of the United States—particularly in light of the escalating military intervention in Southeast Asia and the racial question called on by the civil rights movement at home. Thus, her perspective on the promise of democracy in the United States features the position of someone in-between. Her book *On Revolution* was concerned with the founding fathers and her increasing fascination with American politics and history. Her seminal writings on *The Human Condition* (1958) and *Between Past and Future* (1968) were all written by Arendt after she had been granted American citizenship. At the same time, the traumatic experience of war, mass killings, and genocide reconnected her with the German past. *The Burden of the Past*, the title of the British edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, makes the issue of Arendt's cultural heritage and its traumatic effects the center of the publication. The preface to the third edition links the impulse of writing with her traumatic experience. Thus, Arendt's book on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* originates in her traumatic experience:

The original manuscript of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* was finished in autumn 1949, more than four years after the defeat of Hitler Germany, less than four years before Stalin's death. The first edition of the book appeared in 1951. In retrospect, the years I spent writing it, from 1945 onwards, appeared like the first period of relative calm after decades of turmoil, confusion, and plain horror—the revolutions after the First World War, the rise of totalitarian movements, and the undermining of parliamentary government, the spread of all sorts of new tyrannies over the whole European continent.⁴¹

In the United States, Arendt was writing under the impression of the Jewish genocide in Germany and the rise of Stalinist totalitarianism. Thus, she was among the first to critically address issues of agency and patterns of manipulation that later shaped the discourse of the Holocaust. Her self-fashioning into an *advocatus diaboli*, a dissenter who provokes and consciously accepts and even welcomes outrage about her position, resembles a form of traumatic response. In a private letter to her friend Mary McCarthy from October 1963, she confided that she was the only reader of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* “to understand what otherwise I have never admitted—namely, that I wrote this book in a curious state of euphoria.”⁴² This surprising confession shows that writing about the Eichmann trial brought relief from a heavy historical burden. This delayed cure of pain, sadness, shame, and rage through the public performance of writing in *The New Yorker* and publishing her account as a book resembles a traumatic response. The provocative style of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* suggests that she found a way to cope with the sense of being part of a lost

generation and a way to find an integral identity in the new democratic environment of the United States. As a democratic dissenter who was willing to say “painful things” in drastic ways, she positioned herself as a model American. While reporting to the American public on the proceedings of the Eichmann trial, she confronted the “unmastered past” of the German people and the Jews all over the world, and she found a solution to deal with her own unmastered future.⁴³ In her postscript, she realized how she was able to penetrate the means of “image-making and opinion-manipulation” through dissent (282). By evoking controversy, she could bring to attention “general moral questions, with all their intricacies and modern complexities, which I would never have suspected would haunt men’s minds today and weigh heavily on their hearts” (283). Not only did these things stand “suddenly in the foreground of public concern” (283), she also gained attention as a public intellectual and naturalized foreigner. This was both a revelation and a means to confront the looming shadow of her Holocaust consciousness. Thus, Arendt’s dissent must be seen at least partly as a traumatic response in addition to becoming visible in the public arena of a democratic environment.

One of the remarkable manifestations of her dissent for the sake of the (American) democratic cause can be found in a speech commissioned to celebrate the bicentennial of the Republic of the United States (see *Figure 3*). Instead of drenching the national event in the common rhetoric of emphatic patriotism, Arendt spoils the party: “Ladies and gentlemen: We have come here together to celebrate a birthday party, the 200th birthday not of America but of the Republic of the United States, and I fear we could not have chosen a less appropriate moment.”⁴⁴ Right from these introductory remarks, Arendt makes clear that there are no reasons for celebration. First, she points toward the difference between the deplorable misnomer of “America” as a synonym for the USA. After two hundred years of democratic traditions, a serious crisis has become manifest that brought about the worst of American self-representations:

The present crisis of the Republic, of this form of government and its institutions of liberty, could be seen coming for decades, ever since what now seems a mini-crisis was triggered by Joe McCarthy, and that was followed by a number of occurrences which testified to an increasing disarray of the very foundations of our political life. To be sure, the McCarthy episode itself was soon forgotten, but its consequences was the total destruction of a reliable and devoted Civil Service, something relatively new in this country, and probably the most important achievement of the long Roosevelt Administration. It was in the aftermath of this period that the “ugly American” appeared on the scene of foreign relations, though he was

hardly yet noticeable in our domestic life, except in a growing inability to correct errors and repair damages.⁴⁵

Certainly, Arendt had not forgotten the McCarthy witch hunt and the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which to Arendt evoked patterns of suspicion and control within totalitarian systems. In the wake of a humiliating defeat in Vietnam, she deconstructs Nixon's rhetoric of a "peace with honor" as public relations hiding issues of corruption, drug abuse, desertions, and rebellion among American soldiers. The state of the American republic exemplified a swiftness in the decline of power, which Arendt described in an alarming tone. Referring to Watergate and media manipulations, Arendt draws on her transatlantic background to set up a comparative framework among the Hitler regime, Mussolini's fascist Italy, Stalin's Soviet Russia, and postwar Germany. Considering the occasion of the bicentennial, Arendt's criticism and patriotic dissent left her with few friends. By identifying the government under chancellor Adenauer as a "regime," she shows how lies have helped former Nazi collaborators to move on to a sense of normalcy. Arendt is concerned with image-making and the strategies to cover up lies and even mass murder of the past. Western Germany serves as a perfect example considering the economic success since the 1950s and the integration into western systems on economic as well as political and military levels.

Arendt distinguished between American citizens and foreigners who had not lived in a democratic environment with a Constitution that had been the touchstone of political decision-making for two hundred years. Calling on recent events such as the dangerous manipulations behind Watergate, the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, "the harassment of citizens through the Internal Revenue Service, and the attempt to organize a secret service exclusively at the command of the Executive," Arendt clearly positions herself as a patriotic dissenter: "But even we, who as citizens have been in opposition to the Administration at least since 1965, have had our difficulties in judging what happened even after the selective publication of the tapes."⁴⁶ Arendt's rhetoric becomes more and more radical when she suspects that Nixon's actions had followed an antidemocratic revolution, a "calculated assault on the basic law of the land, an attempt to abolish the Constitutions and the institutions of liberty."⁴⁷ Arendt clearly saw herself as a defender of the democratic cause in a tradition that goes back to the early German American abolitionists and the freedom fighters of the American Revolution. While she admits that some of these fears were ungrounded, she felt that Mafiosi-like figures had hijacked the country. Arendt is particularly concerned about the term "credibility gap," which in reality is a misnomer for a democratic gap produced by the Nixon administration. Her parallels regarding "dirty tricks" of politics, lying, and manipulation draw on her experience of how democratic Weimar Germany could be turned into a totalitarian empire in which the liberal metropolitan city of Berlin would be transformed into a fascist juggernaut called Germania. One of the most pressing questions that Americans asked in the

Nuremberg trials was the issue of why German politicians, businessmen, and average citizens trusted Hitler even at a time when total war and mass deportations had clearly turned him into a monstrosity. The issue of trust in the Nixon administration evoked “the same uncomfortable question” (MS 013195).

With reference to the proof found in Nixon’s audio tapes, Arendt turns to a proverb that resonated strongly with one of the most radical dissenters of the civil rights movement: “The events brought the facts undisguised in their brutal force into a heap of rubble tumbling out for a moment, it looked as though all the chickens had come home to roost” (MS 013195). No doubt this proverb, with its echoes of Malcolm X’s famous comment about the assassination of John F. Kennedy, put Arendt in line with those who had earlier denounced her as “Jewish public enemy number one.” In order to make sure that this quotation in the middle of her speech received attention, she calls her speech “Home to Roost.” The boomerang effect also refers to the emergency measures called *Notverordnungen*, which turned Weimar into the springboard for a dictator and Hitler’s fight against the Great Depression by changing economic developments into a war machine. Writing at a time when Nixon had appointed the unelected President Ford in order to tackle the most pressing economic and ecological crises, Arendt’s references to feedback loops in history are as culturally evocative as they are provocative coming from the mouth of a naturalized foreigner.

Arendt’s dissent stems from the political strategy to look ahead, to move forward, and to tackle the challenges of the future. Thereby, a form of oblivion and forgetfulness renders the past invisible. Arendt stands up as a witness and warns her audience not to forget. Although she identifies herself again and again as an American, her mode of comparison brings into focus the terrors of European fascist regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. The manipulative forces behind covering up the disasters of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other political cover-ups fell into a category that Arendt saw on par with totalitarian and post-totalitarian instruments. Of course, Arendt was far from equating different political systems: “In our case, not terror but persuasion enforced by pressure and the manipulation of public opinion is supposed to succeed where terror failed (MS 013194).

In the end, Arendt casts herself as a naysayer who firmly stands in the tradition of émigré dissenters who followed a moralistic response pattern. The last public appearance of Arendt during the Bicentennial Forum in Boston serves as a remarkable example of the struggles of a Jewish intellectual immigrant from Germany. In the final three sentences of her speech, she sums up her credo that citizens must be particularly alert to manipulations used in the realm of politics. In the end, her trust in the democratic foundations of the United States is emphasized by ending on the keyword that has inspired the cultural imaginary of “America” for all immigrants:

Ladies and Gentlemen, when we now slowly emerge from under the rubble of the events of the last few years, let us not forget these years of aberration lest we become unworthy of the glorious beginnings two hundred years ago. When the facts come home to roost, let us try at least to make them welcome, let us try not to escape into new false utopias—images, theories, or sheer follies. It has been the greatness of this republic that it gave due account to the best and to the worst in men, all for the sake of Freedom.⁴⁸

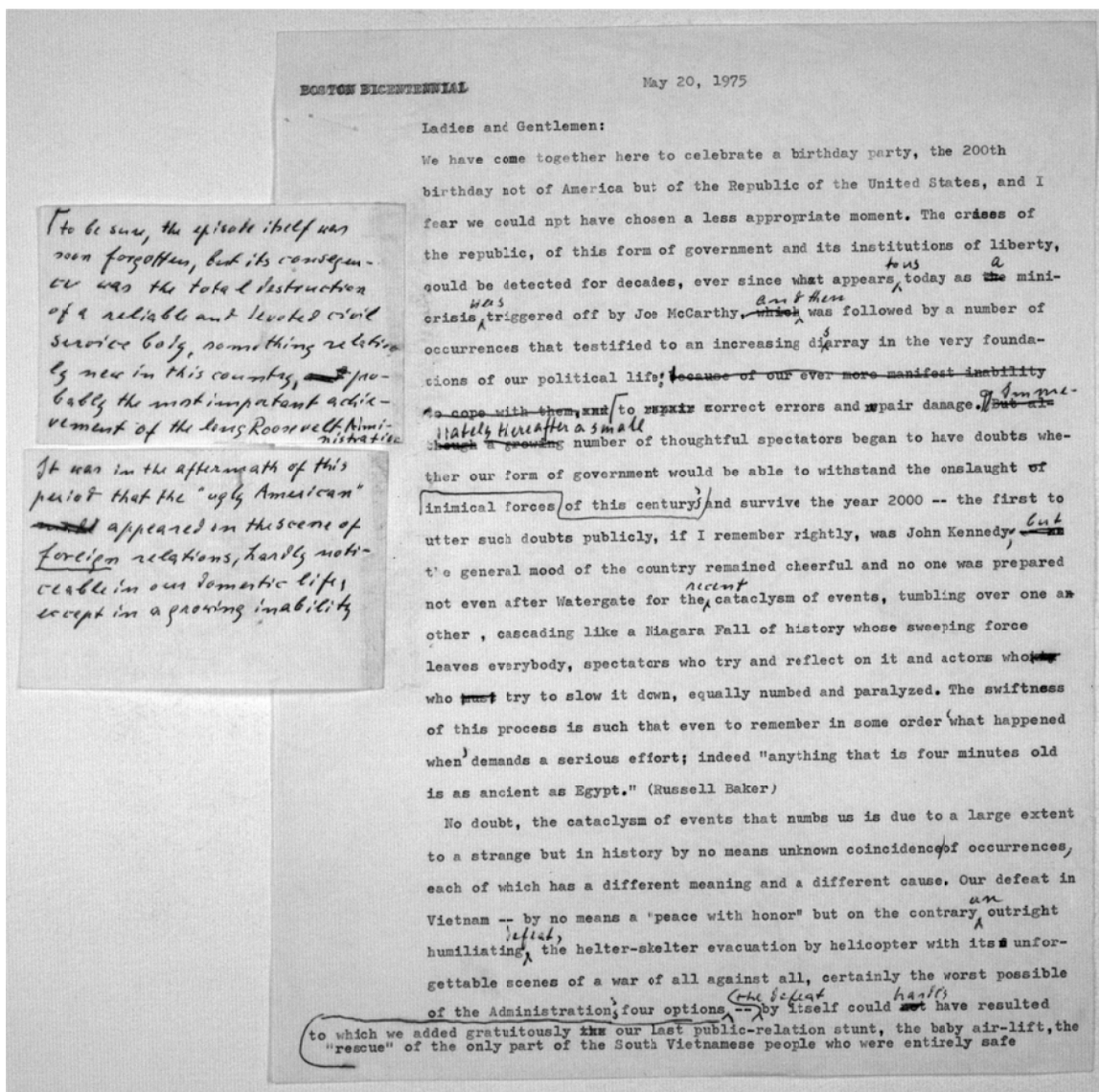


Figure 3. Hannah Arendt, "Home to Roost" speech, Bicentennial Forum, Boston, MA (1975). Speeches and Writings File, 1923–1975, n.d., Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, MS 023201, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Conclusion

The generation of German intellectuals who arrived in the United States after 1933 differed from foregoing émigrés in terms of their political motivation. Most of them chose the United States as one of the few countries left in the Western world that offered refuge from Hitler's terror regime. Thus, the dream of becoming an American citizen had not been a long-cherished fantasy. Often political dissidents such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, or Ernst Fraenkel regarded their stay in the New World as an interim, a phase of exile, before they would return to their home country. Among the largest group of émigrés who fled to the New World were Jewish people. The consciousness regarding torture, psychological terror, and mass murder in the Nazi death camps estranged them from the German part of their identity. Long-term traumas made a return inconceivable for many.

Hannah Arendt's approach to the cultural imaginary of "America" underwent decisive changes from alienation to critical empathy. Arendt set out to learn the language and engage with the political and cultural foundations of the oldest democratic nation in the Western world. This did not mean that she engaged in what Tocqueville described as "irritable patriotism."⁴⁹ Her enthusiasm for the American idea and democratic promise was counterbalanced by her relentless criticism of American politics such as McCarthyism and Nixon's foreign policy. Arendt's efforts to look at political and cultural developments in the United States from a distance and her willingness to say "painful things" catapulted her into the spotlight of the media. Her strategy to gain recognition was closely linked to the process of fashioning herself into a relentless dissenter. My reading of Arendt reveals an important nexus between the need to say "painful things" in the United States and her efforts to deal with a transatlantic trauma.

Arendt carefully combined elements of American patriotic rhetoric such as "glorious beginnings," "the greatness of this republic," and "Freedom" (with a capital F) with criticism. Her warnings of "false utopias," "aberrations," and the "worst in men" uttered "all for the sake of Freedom" addressed what Arendt considered a crisis in American culture. At the same time, she became an agent in what could be called a democratic culture in crisis. Naysaying in the Emersonian sense functioned as a means to inscribe herself in the American tradition of democratic reformers. Dissent offered a chance to create a masterable future for a female Jewish intellectual immigrant from Germany. At the same time, dissent allowed her to gain recognition as a proud American citizen. In spite of George Kateb's warnings, the experiences of European trauma can, indeed, be an energetic impulse to effectively describe, criticize, identify with American culture and feed the imagination of democratic amelioration—all for the sake of freedom.

Notes

¹ The analysis of Hannah Arendt's critical responses regarding the discrepancy between democratic principles and practices is part of my postdoctoral research project, "The Democratic Gap: Transcultural Confrontations of German-American Immigrants and the Promise of American Democracy" at the cultural studies department of the John F. Kennedy Institute for North American Studies, Free University of Berlin.

² Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, ed. Liliane Weissberg (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 82. Just as *The Origins of Totalitarianism* can be regarded as a sequel to *Rahel Varnhagen*, Arendt continued to move from literary immersion via *Durchschauern* to the concept of *cultural animi*. See in this context Liliane Weissberg, "Introduction: Hannah Arendt, Rahel Varnhagen, and the Writing of (Auto)biography," in Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 3–70, especially 20.

³ While the term "trauma" is derived originally from the medical field and in Greek referred either to the term "wound" or the verb "to pierce," it has been used in a vast array of discourses today. For a concise overview of the application of the term in psychoanalysis, philosophy, and aesthetics, see Kathleen McHugh, "The Aesthetics of Wounding: Trauma, Self-Representation, and the Critical Voice," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 241–53. I follow McHugh's suggestion that questions of representation in historical, fictional, autobiographical, and memorial accounts create ethical confrontations that are tied to aesthetic questions. She argues that "representation's inevitable referential failure weds aesthetics to trauma" (243).

⁴ George Kateb, "The Questionable Influence of Arendt (and Strauss)," in *Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss: German Émigrés and American Political Thought after World War II*, ed. Peter Kielmansegg, Horst Mewes, and Elisabeth Glaser-Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, ed. Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 84.

⁶ The term "Holocaust" remains problematic as continuing discussions of its proper meaning have not been able to arrive at a satisfying definition. In combination with the article "the" and capital letter "H," "the Holocaust" emerged as the "sole, most important Holocaust and the standard for other Holocausts." Judith M. Gerson and Diane L. Wolf, "Introduction: Why the Holocaust? Why Sociology? Why Now?" in *Sociology Confronts the Holocaust: Memories and Identities in Jewish Diasporas*, ed. Gerson and Wolf (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 9. While the Greek meaning of the term refers to a burnt sacrifice, Hebrew and Yiddish referents locate Holocaust within Jewish life rather than in world events. The Hebrew word "Shoah" meaning "disaster" or "catastrophe" is often seen interchangeably with "the Holocaust." In this chapter, I will use the term "Holocaust" and "Holocaust consciousness" to refer to the reception

history of the Jewish genocide during the Nazi regime in order to contextualize its memorialization with US discourse on slavery and the rhetoric of the civil rights movement. I will identify mechanisms of coming to terms with transatlantic traumas in a more general sense.

⁷ Due to Arendt's criticism of modern democracies such as the United States, George Kateb describes her as a German American philosopher whose influence should be resisted by "anyone committed to modern democracy" (Kateb, "Questionable Influence," 29). While Kateb criticizes her approach that not everybody should be granted citizenship, he overlooks the special experience of Arendt as a naturalized citizen. Like many of her precursors, she had to earn the right to call herself an American citizen while native-born representatives hardly seemed to appreciate their democratic gift. Therefore, Arendt does not defend equal citizenship as a fundamental political right of every individual. She rather considers citizenship an opportunity that should be granted to those who are willing to seize and commit to it.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, untitled poem, quoted in Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 185–86.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1994), xxiii.

¹⁰ Another crucial element of trauma theory permeated her thinking at the time: a sense of shame. The term even appears in a draft she sent to Houghton Mifflin to outline the book that would later be called *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. At the time, Arendt used the title *The Elements of Shame: Anti-Semitism – Imperialism – Racism* (Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 200).

¹¹ Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 30.

¹² Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers: Briefwechsel 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner (Munich: Piper, 1985), 66.

¹³ Slavoj Žižek describes the national identification of Americans as being sustained by a relationship toward the "nation qua thing" inaccessible to outsiders. See Slavoj Žižek, "Eastern Europe's Republics of Gilead," *New Left Review* 1, no. 183 (1990): 50–51. Nativists, naturalized foreigners, and cultural outsiders perceive this special connection with different intensity. Donald Pease draws on a recent example of transcultural confrontations, when the Mullahs used Alexis de Tocqueville's book *Democracy in America* to create homologies between Islam and US culture. He shows how the editors of *The New Republic* magazine expressed a "symbolic entitlement" to denounce foreign critics of American democracy as both incompetent and an external threat to American democracy. See Donald E. Pease, "Tocqueville's Democratic Thing; or, Aristocracy in America," in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 30–31. In Pease's argument, "America" resembles a European fetish. When Pease speaks of

Tocqueville's desire to obtain the "democratic thing" (32), he refers to the desire to understand, intellectually digest, and translate the received knowledge into democratic actions. This intellectual "desire" has to be distinguished from more essential desires of foreigners, who want to obtain American citizenship. As the democratic thing constitutes something that is lacking in another national history, interpretations of the Declaration of Independence differ between nativists and naturalized foreigners. Hannah Arendt is no exception as the following analysis will document.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 194. "Poets are there to be quoted, not to be talked about," Arendt once quipped about her own life-long concern with literature (Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 225). Although she did not consider herself a writer like Bertolt Brecht, Franz Kafka, Rainer Maria Rilke, W. H. Auden, Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or Mary McCarthy, fiction and poetry were central to her political thinking. She may have liked to ascribe herself a status that she found in Plato: "a great poet in philosopher's disguise" (225). While she composed poetry in private, Arendt recognized that her real talents lay elsewhere. Nevertheless references to and interpretations of literature continued to permeate her political writings both in Germany and the United States. Time and time again, she returned to literature and poetry to approach political developments from an unusual angle. In her shorter essays and reviews, German, French, British, and American writers feature prominently. Therefore, her political thinking needs to be reevaluated not only within the parameters of philosophy and political science but also from an aesthetic perspective. See in this context, for example, Robert Pirro's analysis on the impact of Greek tragedy on Arendt's writing. Pirro convincingly argues that Arendt inherited modes of storytelling based on Greek tragedy, which she inherited "from her philhellenic predecessors in the German tradition of philosophy and letters." Robert C. Pirro, *Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Tragedy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001), 9. This in turn shaped her understanding of democratic citizenship, her appreciation of political freedoms, and her conviction to intervene as a political dissenter in what Jürgen Habermas described as the "public sphere." See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 1.

¹⁵ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 201.

¹⁶ See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in Pragmatischer Hinsicht* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1986). Arendt discusses Kant's concept of "enlarged mentality" in "The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance," the sixth chapter in Arendt, *Between Past and Future*.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), 28. "America as a restless fury of technology out of control and a rootless assemblage of simple people" (translation mine).

¹⁸ Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, 296.

¹⁹ Dagmar Barnouw emphasizes the positive elements Arendt recognized in the political modernity of the United States in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer. See Dagmar Barnouw, "Autorität und Freiheit: Hannah Arendt und die politische Modernität Amerikas," in *Die Entdeckung der Freiheit: Amerika im Denken Hannah Arendts*, ed. Winfried Thaa and Lothar Probst (Berlin: Philo-Verlag, 2003), 48 and 67. According to Barnouw, these exiles were unable to acknowledge the modernity of the United States in its political and cultural dispositions. With the concept of "culture industry," Adorno and Horkheimer used the realm of culture to launch a critical and condescending program against American mass culture. However, as Thomas Geisen reminds us, the dichotomy is not that simple. Critical Theory was not only interested in criticizing mass culture but also in revealing a downward spiral of social injustice. Thomas Geisen, "Hannah Arendt und die Kritische Theorie Horkheimers und Adornos: Zum Verhältnis von soziologischem und politischem Denken," in Thaa and Probst, *Die Entdeckung der Freiheit*, 97.

²⁰ Arendt and Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, 30.

²¹ Arendt's reflections on American democracy, its institutions, and the dangers of totalitarianism, delivered as a lecture to the Boston Bicentennial Forum in the spring of 1975, aroused irritation. As so often before, Arendt was perceived as a German intellectual whose writings about European political issues were, if not utterly dismissed, acknowledged as profound contributions to political history. Nathan Glazer calls Arendt a teacher in terms of understanding the nature of totalitarianism and political dangers of ordinary life under modern social conditions. "But on the application of those teachings to the issues of contemporary America, and to the crisis of American government," he cautions, "she continues to be misleading and obscure, both in her apprehension of the facts and in her view of what the facts tell us about the realities of our situation today." Nathan Glazer, "Hannah Arendt's America," *Commentary*, September 1975, 67. Glazer is particularly concerned about comparisons between Germany and America. While acknowledging the problems of American history failing to live up to its democratic promises in the cases of Vietnam, Cyprus, Portugal, the Middle East, the Arab states, unemployment, crime, etc., understanding the connection between these political failures and institutions of liberty remains difficult and, he concludes, "Dr. Arendt gives us no help in doing so" (66).

²² With US culture as an ongoing story of individualization and increasing individual empowerment, patriotism seems to provide a challenging, if underanalyzed narrative of self-fashioning and performance. See Winfried Fluck, *Das kulturelle Imaginäre: Eine Funktionsgeschichte des amerikanischen Romans, 1790–1900* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), 21. Political and cultural activities to promote a heightened sense of democratic responsibilities contribute substantially in the knowledge production of "America." There is, as Stephen Nathanson remarks, "surprisingly little serious discussion about patriotism." Stephen Nathanson, "Should Patriotism Have a Future?" in *Patriotism in the Lives of Individuals and Nations*, ed. Daniel Bar-Tal and Ervin Staub (Chicago: Nelson-Hall,

1997), 311. New approaches in cross-national comparisons (like the work of Nancy Foner, George Frederickson, and Alejandro Portes) and migration theory (Caroline Brettell, James Hollifield, Aristide R. Zolberg, Günter Lenz, and Berndt Ostendorf, to name but a few) have contributed to understanding the complex dynamics of immigration and nationality. See, for example, Caroline Brettell, *Anthropology and Migration: Essays on Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and Identity* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003); Caroline Brettell and James F. Hollifield, eds., *Migration Theory: Talking Across Disciplines* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Nancy Foner, *In a New Land: A Comparative View of Immigration* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); H. George Frederickson, Gary A. Johnson, and Curtis H. Wood, *The Adapted City: Institutional Dynamics and Structural Change* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2004); Ulla Haselstein, Berndt Ostendorf, and Peter Schneck, eds., *Iconographies of Power: The Politics and Poetics of Visual Representation* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003); Günter H. Lenz and Klaus J. Milich, eds., *American Studies in Germany: European Contexts and Intercultural Relations* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1995); Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Immigrant America: A Portrait*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); and Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006). The aesthetic dimension of becoming an American citizen and engaging in patriotic acts has hardly been addressed.

²³ The original bilingual German version reads, “Die Passion, ‘to make the world a better place to live in’, hat erst einmal die Welt wirklich verbessert, aber auch zur Folge gehabt, dass im Prozess der Weltverbesserung alle vergessen haben, was es heißt ‘to live’. So stehen die Amerikaner heute wirklich in einer ‘besten aller möglichen Welten’ und haben das *Leben* selber verloren. Das ist eine Hölle.” Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, ed. Ursula Ludz and Ingeborg Nordmann (Munich: Piper, 2002), 105, translation mine.

²⁴ Scholars have repeatedly analyzed Arendt’s scholarly work on the Jew as pariah and her perspective as a German Jewish intellectual. Her broader interest in aspects of racial segregation and the failure of the melting-pot idea have largely fallen under the radar. Although Wolfgang Heuer acknowledges the contradiction Arendt described between political freedom and racial inequality, he does not continue to analyze the impact of racial segregation and condescendence among WASP Americans on Arendt’s oeuvre. See Wolfgang Heuer, “Von Augustinus zu den ‘Founding Fathers’: Die Entdeckung des republikanischen Erbes in der europäischen Krise,” in Thaa and Probst, *Die Entdeckung der Freiheit*, 27–46.

²⁵ Quoted from an unpublished manuscript in the Library of Congress in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 226.

²⁶ The publication of some of the most influential Holocaust narratives coincided with the radicalization of the civil rights movement. The English translation of Primo Levi’s *Se questo è un uomo* (*If This Is a Man*) appeared in 1958, Elie Wiesel’s *La Nuit* (*Night*) in 1960. The Eichmann trial as the first Holocaust media event initiated a heated debate on

Arendt's dissent. Her recognition as a dissenter is linked both to the experience of the Holocaust and engagement in the civil rights movement. Arendt had been continuously obsessed with the past and questions of cultural belonging. In her most famous books *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), she concerned herself with "natural rights" and mechanisms of cultural exclusion. Her prime example was the Jewish people and their struggle for equality in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. While she encountered rare cases of tolerance in German national history, Jewish people in general were oppressed and persecuted. Arendt's earliest efforts to assess anti-Semitism and cultural pressures for assimilation utilized the literary genre of biography. *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess* was drafted in 1933 before Arendt fled Nazi Germany. Written "with an awareness of Doom" (Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, 82), and published for the first time in English in 1958, the book addresses the issue of what it means to be German and what it means to be Jewish.

²⁷ Amos Elon, "Introduction: The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt," in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, by Hannah Arendt (New York: Penguin, 2006), vii.

²⁸ Arendt's dedication to her new homeland and the American cultural scene as an influential element in her oeuvre is almost nonexistent in critical scholarship. In the 1960s, the German Jewish immigrant thinker ranked as "American Jewish Public Enemy Number One." A Jewish newspaper described her as a "self-hating Jewess" who used her standing among *The New Yorker* editors to write a "pro-Eichmann series." See Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 134. Some scholars like Seyla Benhabib even charge Arendt with following an "elitist and anti-democratic project" in her writings on the political space of the Greek polis. Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1996), 270. Jules Steinberg discredits her as a manipulative writer who set out to "de-Germanize Nazism" in order to reestablish the revered tradition of nineteenth-century Germany culture. Jules Steinberg, *Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust: A Study of the Suppression of Truth* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 235. Others attacked Arendt for using the polis of antiquity as a model of authentic politics, denouncing it as "nostalgia." Noel O'Sullivan, "Hellenic Nostalgia and Industrial Society," in *Contemporary Political Philosophers*, ed. Anthony de Crespigny and Kenneth Minogue (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1975), 228. Arendt is accused of endorsing "nothing less than a fascist conception of politics" (Steinberg, *Hannah Arendt on the Holocaust*, 240).

²⁹ Seyla Benhabib, "Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 65. To be sure, Arendt had already become a target of public controversy and caused a storm among New York intellectuals when she withdrew her essay "Reflections on Little Rock" from *Commentary* and later published it in *Dissent*. Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent*, Winter 1959, 45–56. Arendt came to unusual conclusions that catapulted the vision of "America" as a future-oriented democratic experiment to new extremes

regarding the price to pay for equality and democratic plurality. Her thoughts on “the dilemma of difference,” to use a phrase by Martha Minow (in her *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion, and American Law* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990], 19), and her concerns for the future of the “Union as a whole” (Arendt, “Reflections on Little Rock,” 54) were inspired by a photograph that showed Elizabeth Eckford, one of the young black female students, surrounded by a screaming mob of pro-segregation activists. Arendt attempted to “break the dangerous routine” (45) in the discourse on segregation and discrimination, as she explained in her preliminary remarks. Compared to many intellectual immigrants, who committed themselves to the cause of the civil rights movement, Arendt criticized the Supreme Court’s decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which held that segregated public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the federal Constitution. In order to prevent misunderstandings in her argument, Arendt explicitly positions herself as being sympathetic to the cause of African Americans. She identifies herself as an outsider, but not in the sense of a German immigrant. She argues from the perspective of an American citizen who has “never lived in the South” (46). This is not a coincidence but a calculated decision: “[I] have avoided occasional trips to Southern states because they would have brought me into a situation that I personally would find unbearable” (46). Thus, Arendt refuses to expose herself to the prejudices against African Americans. Arendt describes the African American racial discourse as the “one great crime in America’s history,” thereby ignoring the genocide of American Indians (46). Her opening paragraph resembles a patriotic plea for the successful history of American democracy. Arendt uncovers the roots. She locates the responsibility for the current dilemma of racial segregation on the other side of the Atlantic. The slave trade grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nation-states. Arendt argues that the worldwide attention that the events in Little Rock attracted, was part of a “mob ideology” and “mob organizations” (47). As if speaking to an imagined European audience, she comes back to a crucial element of American culture that she had identified earlier as a stepping stone in transatlantic misunderstandings, namely that the “United States is not a nation state in the European sense and never was” (47). In order to underline her argument that enforced integration was the wrong solution for the racial question, she quotes from the Southern literary artist William Faulkner who equated this process with enforced segregation. Arendt draws on the Declaration of Independence to argue that other issues are even more pressing than the insistence on legally enforced integration. Arendt interprets discrimination in a surprisingly positive sense as an essential part of the American democratic system. Arendt argues that different groups’ “very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups on the same domain” (51). Ignoring the highly charged meaning of the term “discrimination” in African American history, she elevates discrimination to the level of a basic democratic right. For Arendt, the right of discrimination guarantees free association and group formation. These general observations transfer the specific cultural situations of Jews in diaspora and their (traumatic) memories of persecution to the confrontations African American face in the United States in the late 1950s. By emphasizing the right to discriminate oneself or a

group from others, she condemns social discrimination that is legally enforced: “The moment social discrimination is legally abolished, the freedom of society is violated” (53).

³⁰ Amos Elon offers a comprehensive list of attacks on Arendt in his introductory article “The Excommunication of Hannah Arendt” in the latest Penguin edition of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* from 2006 (vii–xxiii).

³¹ Aleida Assmann, *Der Lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 169. Experiences leading to trauma become manifest as a dissociated memory, which cannot be put into a coherent narrative. Trauma is, according to Aleida Assmann, the impossibility of narration (93). How can a borderline experience be represented and become part of cultural memory? According to Lyotard, “trauma” is the only adequate form to remember an incident like the Holocaust to avoid trivialization and thereby forgetfulness. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger und “die Juden,”* ed. Peter Engelmann (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 1988), 38. The Holocaust trauma created a gap between the actual event and the process of becoming conscientious about its monstrosity. The reasons can be found in the psychic dispositions of the victims and the sociocultural conditions. On the one hand, it takes time for survivors to confront their horrible experience. On the other hand, society might not be ready to listen to events that had become taboo. The Israeli psychologist Dan Bar-On described this dilemma as walls of silence between the survivors and their communities. Dan Bar-On, *Die Last des Schweigens: Gespräche mit Kindern von Nazi-Tätern*, ed. Christoph J. Schmidt (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 1993), 3. Arendt’s response, however, was quite different.

³² See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992); and Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

³³ See Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 172.

³⁴ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

³⁵ The drastic changes in the political landscape from the democratic Weimar Republic to the fascist terror regime and the experience of anti-Semitism became a turning point in Arendt’s life. In the famous interview with Günter Gaus from 1964, she critically assessed the burning of the Reichstag in February of 1933 and the wave of illegal arrests in the immediate aftermath. Arendt described the psychological effects as traumatic: “As you know, they all ended up in the cellars of the Gestapo or in concentration camps. That was such a shock to me that ever after I felt responsible. That is to say, I no longer felt that [I] could be simply an observer.” Quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 107. Feeling “responsible” triggered an intellectual engagement with feelings of personal guilt. In the

wake of the burning of the German Reichstag, she fled from Germany to fashion herself into a political dissenter for the cause of democracy. After various efforts to gain support in the fight against Nazism in Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and France, she finally emigrated to the United States.

³⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 119.

³⁷ Hannah Arendt, Emerson-Thoreau Medal lecture, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1969). Speeches and Writings File, 1923–1975, n.d., Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. The distinction between being recognized and honored comes into focus in Hannah Arendt's acceptance of the Sigmund Freud Award of the German Academy of Language and Poetry (Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung) only two years earlier. In her response to the award for excellence in German prose, she explicitly used the term "recognition" to explain her gratitude: "The Academy's prize is like a recognition that this has been well done" (quoted in Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt*, 392). In the case of Arendt, the award lauded her efforts to keep the German language alive although she had been living and writing in the United States for more than three decades.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt to Johann, General Secretary, German Academy, July 6, 1967, Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁹ Arendt, *Reflections on Literature and Culture*, 282.

⁴⁰ George Kateb, preface to *Hannah Arendt: Politics, Conscience, Evil* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1984). The political philosopher George Kateb claims that her fame resulted from two discourses: one surrounding her keen understanding of the events and traumatic experiences of the Holocaust, and the other surrounding the anxiety she aroused with her controversial writings.

⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, introduction to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 3rd ed. (1966), Addition I, 1966–1977, n.d., Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴² Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949–1975*, ed. Carol Brightman (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 168.

⁴³ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 283. Writing after the German *Historikerstreit* in the late 1980s about the comparability of the Holocaust and the confrontation with earlier traumas, Harvard historian Charles S. Maier published an account on the nexus of history, the Holocaust, and German national identity under the title *The Unmasterable Past: History, Holocaust, and German National Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988). Arguing that Germans and Jews have been locked into a special relationship, he asks, "how appropriate is analogy for understanding?" (160). Maier shows how the struggle over the controlling of political analogies unfolded in other

European nations such as Austria or Italy. Ultimately, he argues that “history should contribute to reconstructive . . . efforts by, as well as on behalf of, earlier victims” (168). The *Historikerstreit* exemplified the limits of historical methodology to distinguish between mourning, honoring, analyzing, and fetishizing traumatic events and traumas of groups. Hannah Arendt offered an approach to the nexus described above from an unusual angle that has not been sufficiently recognized. Before she emigrated to the United States, she had turned to the field of literature and biography writing as a means to understand in the sense of an emphatic penetration of Jewish culture in German history. It was not so much the past that presented itself as unmasterable but rather the future.

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, “Home to Roost” speech, Bicentennial Forum, Boston, MA (1975). Speeches and Writings File, 1923–1975, n.d., Hannah Arendt Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴⁵ Ibid. I quote from a rough draft of the manuscript instead of the published version (recently reprinted in Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn [New York: Schocken Books, 2003]) as the speech version is even more confrontational in tone than the polished print version.

⁴⁶ Ibid., MS 013193, MS 013194. In the printed version, Arendt put even more emphasis on the issue of American citizenship and the need to observe critically possible manipulations of government rhetoric and undemocratic practices: “But even we who are citizens, and who as citizens have been in opposition to the administration at least since 1965, have our difficulties in this respect after the selective publication of the Nixon tapes” (Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 266).

⁴⁷ Arendt, “Home to Roost,” MS 013194.

⁴⁸ Ibid., MS 013201. By ending on the positive goal-oriented expression “all for the sake of Freedom,” Arendt closes her speech, despite everything, on the upbeat note of an enthusiastic democratic reformer. The final statement differs only slightly in the printed version. However, the rearrangement of the syntax is crucial to distinguish between the public performance of a democratic dissenter and the persona Arendt constructed in print. Arendt strikes a more negative tone by ending on the word “worst”: “It was the greatness of this Republic to give due account for the sake of freedom to the best in men and to the worst” (Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 275).

⁴⁹ “There is nothing more annoying in the habits of life than this irritable patriotism of the Americans. A foreigner would indeed consent to praise much in their country; but he would want to be permitted to blame something, and this he is absolutely refused. America is therefore a country of freedom where, in order not to wound anyone, the foreigner must not speak freely either of particular persons, or of the state, or of the governed, or of those who govern, or of public undertakings, or of private undertakings; or, finally, of anything one encounters except perhaps the climate and the soil; and still,

one finds Americans ready to defend both as if they had helped to form them.” Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. and ed. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 227.

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