

## Moten and Arendt: Objects, Antiracism, and Beginnings

The first sentence of Fred Moten's *In the Break* says: "The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist." Moten's work is animated by what it means for an "object" to resist, to enter into the realm of politics, while looking away from the order of politicality. As Moten goes on to say:

Blackness — the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that rearranges every line — is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed — infused, deformed — by the object it possesses. I'm interested in what happens when we consider the phonic materiality of such proprietive exertion.<sup>1</sup>

What kind of relations of subject and object, of human and thing, could be both resolutely political and stand in apposition to politics? What does it mean for the "object" not to seek recognition as a subject, for it to possess but to seek neither self-possession nor dispossession? To "consent not to be a single being," as Moten will come to formulate it? If we follow Rei Terada in her illuminating reading of the master-slave dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, we might speak of the "specific existence" of things, naming those beings that "are radically 'independent' and unconcerned with recognition." As Terada asks: "Aren't they, even worse than the bondsman, beings not ready even for servitude? What would it mean to be unsusceptible to servitude, if also to the political? Would it fit one for slavery? For anarchy? For freedom?"<sup>2</sup>

Hannah Arendt's work similarly raises the question of how objects are at once thoroughly political, worldly, and yet also apart from the human subjects whose action intersubjectively constitutes the world, and thus precisely those unworldly things that must be recognized by humans in order to become worldly. Arendt writes in *The Human Condition*:

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rei Terada, "Impasse as a Figure of Political Space," *Comparative Literature* 72, no. 2 (June 1, 2020): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00104124-8127438>.

The world in which the *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. . . . The objectivity of the world — its object- or thing-character — and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.<sup>3</sup>

Arendt may seem to be insisting on a dualism between objects and humans that is deaf to the way some humans *are* objects — and more generally the way in which the line between human and object is drawn is itself a political act, not a prepolitical one. Yet this realm of the prepolitical, of the independent “specific existence” Terada mentions, is precisely what constitutes the human condition of plurality: that “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.”<sup>4</sup> For Arendt, difference is the motor of politics: it is because we are each different that we can act politically at all and thus co-create the public world in which we live. Plurality is the impossible condition of this world-making, and politics is its expression in the form of the action in which freedom lies — or what we might perhaps name with Moten as the “extended movement of a specific upheaval . . . that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.”<sup>5</sup> What is at stake for both Moten and Arendt is the shape of freedom (if it is even possible to think freedom and politics).

More on this to come. But hold on. Who speaks in the “we” of “we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live”? How easily it seems we have fallen into a crass humanism, the very sort of liberal politics that is so infused with antiblackness. I want to both recognize this antiblackness that infuses Arendt’s thought and also recognize with Moten Arendt’s “desire for another language that would express, by way of a genuinely collective socialization, the

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<sup>3</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

capacity for difference that elsewhere Arendt so insistently valorizes as natal individuation.”<sup>6</sup>

The openness of Arendt’s work, for me, lies in precisely how as basic a category for her as “plurality” can be read as both liberal multiculturalism (“we are all born different, and our politics brings us together!”) and as radically as a form of black sociality (that “irreducible sound at the scene of objection” that is an ongoing irruption in subjectivity). Difference is at once the deeply problematic marker of “human nature” (to which only some subjects can accede) and that which comes about in, after, and through politics.

Moten writes in the same chapter of *The Universal Machine* of

an antiblackness that infuses and animates Arendt’s work, something perhaps not best understood as belonging to her, but rather as that to which she, along with many others, both black and white, neither black nor white (more than merely), belongs.<sup>7</sup>

Put banally, Arendt’s antiblackness can be expressed sociologically by her status as a German Jewish immigrant to the United States. We might then say that she was obliged to perform the American act of naturalization *par excellence*: the assimilation to whiteness through, as Moten puts it, “an elevated version of the task the refugee seems destined to perform as an obligation of naturalization, namely the putting of black people in their place.”<sup>8</sup> We would thus place Arendt on the same well-trodden path followed by many other Jewish immigrants (and Greeks, and Irish, and Italians), the “wretched” of Europe, who in America disavow radical politics to be compensated with what first Du Bois and then David Roediger called “the wages of whiteness.” Thus Arendt, who was denied an academic position in Weimar Germany on account of her Jewishness (and her womanhood), who never found “success” there, is acclaimed in the United States first as a theorist of “totalitarianism,” that phenomenon an American public is so eager to understand in 1948, and then as a “political theorist,” providing the nascent discipline of political science with some old-world class and

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<sup>6</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 73.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

legitimacy (not to mention plenty of Ancient Greek and German!). Thus, the same theorist who turned her astute eye to totalitarianism in Europe, tracing its historical links to the apparatuses of racism and violence developed abroad before coming home to roost in the heart of empire, becomes blind to the ongoing internal violences of her adopted home, the United States. The émigrée theorist, carrying her thick German accent and Jewishness into the apartments of the Upper East Side and the halls of American universities, must in a sense perform as the price of admission a theorization of difference that can be (mis)understood as little more than melting-pot multiculturalism.<sup>9</sup> To read Arendt's work in this way is to be an accomplice in what Moten calls the "silencing [of] its interinanimate movements of opening and foreclosure."<sup>10</sup> Thus the infusion of antiblackness that Moten names, and that oozes out nowhere more than in Arendt's infamous essay on Little Rock.<sup>11</sup>

But here, too, Moten wants to be careful, and we should take the time to think carefully with him too about the stakes of Arendt's antiblackness, which are of course at once sociological and deeply theoretical. Moten writes in a footnote:

I am neither asserting nor implying that Arendt's belonging to the Jewish people is equivalent or necessarily bound to antiblack racism. Rather, what I am trying to index is Arendt's belonging to — her having been given to or conscripted by — a modernity, and more specifically, a modern intelligence (not, or not simply a historicophilosophical trajectory, but rather something on the order of a *Weltanschauung* flawed by [the desire for] purity) for which the antiblack racism to which it is not reducible is, nevertheless, constitutive.<sup>12</sup>

As I read it, Moten wants us to acknowledge the inescapable fact of Arendt's antiblackness yet refuse to see it as just a *déformation professionnelle*, that useful French phrase that names

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<sup>9</sup> In a suggestive footnote, Moten speaks of "the endurance of a particular mode of New York intellectuality into which Arendt was welcomed and smoothly naturalized not only as its embodiment but also as the broken, displaced object of its Europhilic desire. That object's b-side (its breaking side; its already given brokenness) is, of necessity, a thing of darkness whose constant, negrophobic disavowal is also a hallmark of this particular New York state of mind ... Think of what I'm beginning to try to do here as a consideration of the relation between Arendt's antiblack racism, her particular brand of intelligence, and a natural(ized) pragmatism that might someday be better understood in its relation to an originary interplay (in Kant) of race and phenomenology." *Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> See Moten's lengthy discussion of Arendt's essay in the pages that follow, which rely heavily on the work of Danielle Allen.

<sup>12</sup> Moten, *The Universal Machine*, 252.

the “b-side (the breaking side; its already given brokenness)” of all “professional formation.”<sup>13</sup> What is genuinely interesting here is how Arendt’s thought itself leads us to a place not too far from this sort of conclusion. Was it not Arendt, after all, who famously named the *déformation professionnelle* of philosophers from Plato to Heidegger as being their “attraction to the tyrannical” in politics?<sup>14</sup> Did she not herself thus condemn her teacher and erstwhile lover for his visceral anti-Semitism, expressed as much professionally as philosophically? Yet is it not also she who hesitates to follow through with this condemnation, remaining unmistakably shot through with admiration for Heidegger until the end of her life?<sup>15</sup> Is Arendt’s relation to Heidegger in the context of his antisemitism not our relationship with Arendt today in the context of her antiblackness? (Again, who is the “we” named in this “our”?)

We return thus to the problem of thinking in politics, what I want to name as a common concern of Moten’s and Arendt’s: what the shape of freedom might be, if freedom can be thought at all in politics. Moten articulates this concern in *In the Break* and in his body of work in the twenty years since in terms of how to think the subject that *is not*, and the object that *is not there* (perhaps it has been dispossessed, perhaps looted, or perhaps it has run off to join the maroons in the hills). The problematic Moten takes up, as I understand it, is: if

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 254. For a useful commentary on the term “*déformation professionnelle*,” which I take from Arendt (see below), see John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 2–11.

<sup>14</sup> “We who wish to honor the thinkers, even if our own residence lies in the midst of the world, can hardly help finding it striking and perhaps exasperating that Plato and Heidegger, when they entered into human affairs, turned to tyrants and Führers. This should be imputed not just to the circumstances of the times and even less to preformed character, but rather to what the French call a *déformation professionnelle*. For the attraction to the tyrannical can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers (Kant is the great exception).” Hannah Arendt, “Heidegger at Eighty,” in *Thinking without a Banister*, ed. Jerome Kohn, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Schocken, 2018), 419–31.

<sup>15</sup> As she wrote in 1971, on the occasion of Heidegger’s eightieth birthday: “With these few [*viz.* great thinkers] it does not finally matter where the storms of their century may have driven them. For the wind that blows through Heidegger’s thinking — like that which still sweeps toward us after thousands of years from the work of Plato — does not spring from the century he happens to live in. It comes from the primeval, and what it leaves behind is something perfect, something which, like everything perfect (in Rilke’s words), falls back to where it came from.” Ibid.

freedom and slavery are constituted together in modernity, should one think outside of freedom? What are the conditions of this free thinking, thinking free?

I read Arendt, too, as rewriting freedom against its own history, thinking around and beyond liberalism, in part having been forced to think so by her formative experience of exile and genocide. For Arendt, the problem bubbles up most starkly in the terms of German philosophy (her “professional [de]formation”): *Objekt, Gegenstand, Ding, Sache*. Some of this vocabulary Arendt inherits from Heidegger (or, better, the *Ding* is formed in conversation between them; *Sache* is their mutual inheritance from Husserl’s famous injunction to return to “the things themselves!”); some, that which she would come to be seen as possessing “in her own right,” is developed as a concern with the role of “public things” in politics;<sup>16</sup> and some, at the end of her life, comes to be articulated through Kant’s third critique, which she reads unfaithfully as his never-written political philosophy.<sup>17</sup> But, in this essay, I do not want to trace this kind of scholarly development. I instead focus on a shared problem, a problem that exceeds both of them, a problem that calls for thinking today: what it means for objects to be(come) political without simply acceding to the order of politicality, or in other words, what it means to think freedom, politics, and the object.

One more common thread provides a way in: both Moten and Arendt use Marx as a (pre)text for their theorization. After publishing *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1948, Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers (her *Doktorvater*) that she wanted to “redeem Karl Marx as a lover of freedom” in his eyes.<sup>18</sup> That book on Marx was never completed, arguably because

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<sup>16</sup> As Bonnie Honig, for instance, usefully elaborates it: Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> In Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), published posthumously but intended as the basis for the never-completed last section of her last work, *The Life of the Mind*.

<sup>18</sup> In 1950, she wrote: “I would like to try to rescue Marx’s honor in your sight. Not that what you say about him isn’t right. But along with that ... there is Marx the revolutionary, whom a passion for justice has seized by the scruff of his neck. And this separates him most profoundly from Hegel and unites him, it seems to me, in a not entirely visible but very powerful way with Kant.” Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Hannah Arendt/Karl Jaspers Correspondence, 1926–1969*, ed. Lotte Köhler and Hans Saner, trans. Rita Kimber and Robert Kimber (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 160.

Arendt grew disappointed with what he might have to offer someone seriously concerned with politics and freedom;<sup>19</sup> but, instead, in some sort of compensation, or consolation, or perhaps surpassing of that book that was never written, Arendt writes her *magnum opus*, *The Human Condition*, published in 1958. Moten also seems to have a similar affect with respect to Marx, both disappointed and excited, irritated but perhaps, like an oyster, producing pearls from that irritation. (Arendt, riffing on her friend Walter Benjamin's own riff on *The Tempest*, described "thinking poetically" as a sort of "diving for pearls."<sup>20</sup>)

A central part of Moten's first chapter of *In the Break* treats Marx's counterfactual in the first chapter of *Capital*, "The Commodity":

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.<sup>21</sup>

Moten writes that for Marx, in this passage, "the object's speech, the commodity's speech, is impossible, that impossibility being the final refutation of whatever the commodity will have said."<sup>22</sup> In the first place, the commodity *cannot speak*; secondly, insofar as commodities might be able to relate to each other, they do so "only as a function of having been exchanged, having been embedded in a mode of sociality that is shaped by exchange."<sup>23</sup> Yet,

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<sup>19</sup> In 1953, she wrote to Jaspers: "The more I read Marx, the more I see that you were right. He's not interested either in freedom or in justice. (And he's a terrible pain in the neck in addition.) In spite of that, a good springboard for talking about certain general problems." Ibid., 216.

<sup>20</sup> As she wrote in the introduction to a collection of essays by Benjamin: "And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past — but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living as 'thought fragments' — as something 'rich and strange,' and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*." Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, ed. Ernest Mandel, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Penguin, 1976), 176.

<sup>22</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 9.

for Moten, Marx's counterfactual "is broken by a commodity and by the trace of a subjectivity structure born in objection that he neither realizes nor anticipates."<sup>24</sup> This does not mean that Moten wants us to imagine the commodity that speaks, and thus gains intrinsic value rather than extrinsic value, becomes animate as opposed to its inanimacy. The object's resistance is not to be read as its gaining access to the realm of politics via some Hegelian dialectic culminating in recognition. It is rather, says Moten,

the ongoing performance, the prefigurative scene of a (re)appropriation ... of value, of the theory of value, of the theories of value. It's the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion, the performance of the birth and rebirth of a new science, a phylogenetic fantasy that (dis)establishes genesis, the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performance(s).<sup>25</sup>

I think Arendt and Moten share an ear for that which interrupts, uncalled for, that which Arendt can only account for by appeal to the "miracle of birth" (natality, not maternity) and Moten "by way of an irruption of phonic substance that cuts and augments meaning with a phonographic, rematerializing inscription."<sup>26</sup> Moten names this as black performance, but I think this articulation of "an impossible natal occasion" that replays and reverbs, that origin that is not, what Husserl would call the "antepredicative" and Levinas the "anarchical *arché*," usefully names a shared preoccupation: the problem of beginnings. To put it baldly: Moten and Arendt (and Levinas) share an inheritance, or at least infusion of, twentieth-century German and later French philosophy that troubles origins and metaphysics. This philosophical conviction is in turn troubled by the *thing*. For Arendt, it is the thing (*Ding*) that conditions (*bedingen*) the human. The thing is that which (at the level of word and of world) constitutes the conditions of possibility (*Bedingungen der Möglichkeit* is Kant's phrase) of being human. The human condition (*die menschliche Bedingtheit*) is thingliness.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 14.



To say the problem again: slavery, it seems, is the condition of possibility of freedom (this not just in Euro-American modernity, but at the very least in Ancient Athens, too). The very order of politicality, what Arendt names the public realm, *requires* objection. Drawing the line between human and object is not just a political act: it may in fact be *the* political act, that which makes it possible to have politics at all. Arendt writes that for the ancients,

the lawmaker was like the builder of the city wall ... Before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and a structure built where all subsequent actions could take place, the space being the public realm of the *polis* and its structure the law; legislator and architect belonged in the same category.<sup>27</sup>

The free action of the *politēs* (the citizen of the *polis*) is not just premised on a political act of exclusion, but in fact is literally impossible without it. For action is like a performance: for a singer to perform, by definition, needs a stage, an audience, in short, a whole world to be created in order for the performance to begin. Even beginning, that most fundamental of actions, that which for Arendt is due finally only to the fact of our birth, is only possible because it begins in a world that pre-existed and long outlasts an ephemeral human life.<sup>28</sup>

Where and how does black performance begin? What is it to listen to the “replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion”? To register, to record, to reproduce, or even just to hear, “the terribly beautiful music of Douglass’ recitations of the beating of his Aunt Hester,” when “the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance is performance’s condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production”<sup>29</sup>? To think freedom, or politics, as Arendt does, is to think antiblackness: a fact that calls for thinking.<sup>30</sup> Are we then to think unfreedom? Is that not itself subjection, or else is it a yearning for that which lies *outside* freedom/slavery? Is that not to name the impossible desire to exceed the conditions of

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<sup>27</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 194–95.

<sup>28</sup> Every birth requires a mother, but Adriana Cavarero notes “the absence of the maternal figure” in Arendt’s thought, and even suggests that “Married twice but childless, perhaps Arendt, like Kant, lacks love for mothers, nannies, and children.” Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 115, 120.

<sup>29</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, 5. Italics in original.

<sup>30</sup> What *do* we call thinking? *Was heißt Denken?* was the question Heidegger posed to his students.

possibility of one's thought, to escape rather than live in that which Stanley Cavell calls "the specific plight of mind and circumstance within which a human being gives voice to his condition"?<sup>31</sup>

I want to end this essay as Fred Moten ends his acknowledgements in *In the Break* (that is, an end that literally faces the beginning of the book's thought), with Moten's own return to Cavell and to the maternity that conditions every beginning:

Over the past three or four years, in the course of finishing this book, I have often returned to Stanley Cavell's words at the end of *A Pitch of Philosophy*: "Am I ready to vow ... that I have the ear, that I know my mother's mother tongue of music to be also mine?" [For Cavell's mother, too, was a musician, and for Cavell too philosophy, thinking, was "some form of compensation for, or perhaps continuation of, the life of music."] My mother, B Jenkins, taught me the value of trying to reach for something and in her "absence" that value, the essence of her tradition, dawns on me every morning in a different way as old and new desire. I want to go as far out from where she was as she wanted me to go, all the way back to her ground and line. All my work is dedicated to her with all my love.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 240.

<sup>32</sup> Moten, *In the Break*, xii.