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Retaking Standpoints:
Race, recognition, and the politics of position in Arendt and Biko

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“White supremacy is a crime and a lie, but it’s also a machine that generates meaning. This existential gift, as much as anything, is the source of its enormous, centuries-spanning power.”

-Ta-Nehisi Coates¹

This paper began with two intuitions which at first seemed unrelated, but now feel deeply intertwined. The first, born of a return to reading the writings of the anti-Apartheid thinkers and Bantu Stephen Biko in particular, is that there was an incisive liveliness in anti-apartheid thinking about the race divide within the anti-apartheid movement that has been lacking in the context of recent American race thinking and race movements. Biko’s sharp critique of white activism and “white liberals”² feels particularly prescient for the muddling-through that has often marked the substructure of how whites have engaged and allied with movements like Black Lives Matter and the network of anti-carceral campaigns. A revival of the motivations and thought behind his unique, militant stand on inter-movement race relations seems important for putting a finer point on how white allies think what they are doing in confronting racial domination in issues like mass incarceration. The specter of Jared Kushner haunts me.

The second intuition that has grown stronger with each passing editorial is that there is something seriously awry in the way that the politics of certain movements are being portrayed in some circles with the increasingly negative moniker of “identity politics”; that as it has generated more and more heat, the category of “identity politics” has become less and less relevant. Identity politics has long been a favorite loup-garou of the American right, used as a wedge term to denote sneakily un-democratic demands for special treatment and innately dangerous “identity radicalism”. More concerning to me, though, is that over the last few years it is a certain strain of the American center-Left, of an *The Atlantic* ilk, that has picked up the banner of decrying identity politics. My intuition is that this rise of a pugnacious, overwhelmingly white section of the Left³ that sets itself up as opposed to the politics of identity is based

¹ *We Were Eight Years in Power* (New York: One World, 2017), p. 215

² For the purposes of this paper, I use the language of “white liberals” as closely as I can to Biko’s usage, which might in today’s language best refer to white progressives. I do not think that Biko has much to say to white Liberals in the political theoretic sense of liberalism, largely because Liberalism as a force in Apartheid South Africa, such as it existed, was a “centrist” force within the regime and not a meaningful social force in the conflict over race relations and institutions.

³ This is not to say that there are no black or brown commentators that have aligned themselves with the white liberal critique of identity politics. However, for reasons I note below stemming from Biko’s views on the effective

on a fundamental misidentification of how it is that these movements practice their relationship to identity, and by extension how it is that this dimension of the (white) Left is really being asked to identify, itself. Students of the politics of the Civil Rights Movement will notice distinct parallels between contemporary Left critics of identity politics and the divisions in the white Left over black tactics and demands in the '50s and '60s; it is not a small irony that critics like Mark Lilla often begin their foray with a set of liberal bona fides drawn from the historical battles of race and rights in this country.

At the heart of the redirection suggested to me first by Biko, and then in a quite different fashion by Hannah Arendt, is the idea that the critiques of identity politics issuing from the Left are based on a fundamental category error, a misunderstanding born of the presumption that contemporary movements have simply taken over whole-cloth the theoretical trappings of their predecessors. The idea of identity politics in play in this anti-identitarian narrative might fit an earlier period of race politics, but not this one.

The Left identity critiques are not merely theoretically misplaced, but set up a kind of terrible phantom against which these new critics align themselves and fish for support, a support dangerously but unsurprisingly rich in the far Right. That is in itself a deeply troubling maneuver, but it is doubly troubling in the way that it undercuts the important work being done on interracial boundaries in social movements. Following Biko, identity politics critics are entirely right in the thought that it is an immensely important time to sharply interrogate the specific place of white participation in movements against racial domination. In focusing on the phantom of identity politics, though, these critics essentially misconstrue the stakes of the contemporary fight against white racial domination. This is, telling, precisely what Biko expects of his category of "white liberals". If identity politics exist in the form described, they are dominantly reactionary in character, the white identity politics of grievance fueled by an angry response to the bogeyman of black and brown identity politics. Identity critics are discovering (or failing to discover) something like Neils Bohr's observer effect for social movements: the harder and more critically one looks for identity politics, the more likely that particles of identity politics are what you will find. The jeremiad of identity critics, which reached its first crescendo on the Right during the Obama years, has given birth to exactly what it most feared, in inverse.

Rather than trying to defend or critique identity politics, I want to suggest that identity politics is no longer really the thing that we're talking about, that the social currents and movements that drive contemporary political debates can be better understood if we shed the framework of identity politics and attempt to reframe what is at stake. I want to try to perform the hermeneutic maneuver of shifting and

tactics and interests of white social criticism, I am concerned particularly with the white counter-identity thinkers; the organic growth of critiques of identity politics within black political thought is an important phenomenon and deserves its own treatment, if not by this unqualified author.

rereading the ground on which we take these movements to be operating as dealing in standpoints, rather than identities per se. The interpretive act is always dangerous if one is not self-conscious (and even if one is), it can stray perilously into the territory of putting words into another's mouth or telling others what they're really all about, but it is also a vital activity, particularly for people who come from places like where I come from: it is now an indissoluble fact of American "identity politics" that the most powerful identity politics movement, and perhaps the one to which the moniker is most apt, is the nationalist, class-conscious white identity politics of resentment. The hermeneutic maneuver provides the advantage of establishing an alternate vocabulary that highlights the essential difficulties with the lexicon that has been built up around identity. The language of standpoint politics has its own history to bring to bear, and if it is understood as a kind of provisional hermeneutic tool for understanding rather than as a template for into which movements must fit, it can provide some insight into where things have gone wrong in the sometimes impassioned and sometimes rocky white relationships to contemporary anti-domination politics. Anti-identitarian politics is founded on three essential misorientations: the mistaking of a politics of sympathy for a politics of position, the concomitant misapprehension of the question of action as one of belonging, and the substitution of authority for legitimacy.

It is in a dialogue between emplacement and displacement, an internal and external dialectic of relationships with others that allows us to be and act in public, that we can see what distinguishes contemporary standpoint politics from the phantom "identity politics". The fear of identity politics feeds on an anxiety that is inextricable from our condition of being both social and public beings, the fear of not belonging. If identity politics, as liberal critics suggest, sets up political lines of us versus them and shuts out alliances in favor of a rigid understanding of the "us" at stake, then of course the immediate question of whether or not people properly belong would become a central one. It is also not entirely surprising that this line of thought born out of belonging-anxiety would find its fiercest critics in two thinkers who were both controversially critics of the politics of integration and assimilation. The question, for Arendt, Biko, and I would suggest the contemporary crop of post-Occupy and post-Ferguson anti-domination movements, was never an us versus a them, but a question of how to constitute an us capable of articulating the who, the how, and the what of an anti-domination politics.

Where identity critics fear the essentialization of racial, gender, sexual characteristics, the ossification and narcissism of shared difference (which would seem like an oxymoron), standpoint politics takes differences in experience as the inescapable starting point out of which the possibility of similarity has to be built. Where, in the face of the anxiety to belong, identity critics worry that identity movements will otherize potential allies in search of the fantasy of perfect, uncontestable belonging – and this is a fear and fantasy particularly potent around race, which is assumed to be attached to incontestable signifiers like heritage and skin color – standpoint politics takes the contestability of belonging and

judgment to be precisely what makes the sharing of judgment, and the judgment of a movement possible. The dialogue between the emplacement and displacement of the self in the process could be put succinctly: we come to judgment only at the moment when we are both more and less than ourselves, when we take on the social conditions of speaking and judging as the necessary precondition for how we are able to make judgments in the first place. To play with David Simpson's phrase, it is not merely that we can't help "saying where we're coming from", but that in saying where we're coming from to others, we are engaged in building the platform from which we judge, a building process which occurs not within ourselves in the generation of authority, but outside ourselves in the gaze of others, and depends essentially on the acknowledgment by others of our judgment.

Identiphobia; or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Movement

To whit, it is worth disaggregating what it is critics (and supporters) are talking about when they talk about identity politics, for which I'm going to make a slightly Arendtian condensation on a truly voluminous literature. Very few of the movements which are now being called identity politics are in fact that; identity politics in its literal sense must by definition take the content of an identity itself as the political question at hand. There are, to be sure, strictly identitarian movements, vitally important ones, although the taproot of identity movements in America, like so much of the national public landscape, is essentially social. Par example, one of the now most deeply entrenched of these is the part of the LGBT movement that takes its public shape in the form of the networked annual gay, queer, and LGBT pride parades. This is an identity movement in its purest form: an attempt to celebrate and elevate a shared identity, in this case a characteristic constellation of sexualities, from the shadows of the public into the space of appearance proper to and belonging by rights to all those who lay claim to being a legitimate part of public life. To the extent that they have a politics, it is only insofar as the very practices and public appearance of the identity have themselves become political; I will confess myself confused as to how one could object to the demand to be able to appear in public as part of the face of a nation, unless one truly believes that Irishness, e.g., ought not to be an acknowledged part of that nation (the most important identity movements for modern pluralism and openness, of course, are precisely those that arise from subject positions that are un- or underacknowledged facets of the national life).

Things only become more complicated when the basic demand to join the public space of appearance is joined to more expansive political claims, and here is where the crucial distinction appears. To demand greater representation of non-cissexual members in the composition of a university's faculty, for instance, remains an essentially identitarian claim: it continues to take the representation in appearance of the identity category as its primary object, and simply specifies the peculiar place and

mode of representation expected. The movement against anti-sodomy laws is likewise identitarian, if we assume that identities have an innate dimension of practice: the denial of a right to be a practicing member of a group is an identitarian question. Again, I will admit to struggling to understand opposition to these movements, but I understand that comes from my peculiar relationship to plurality and public practice.

However, when we are talking about a movement like Black Lives Matter, now often waved about as the paradigmatic contemporary identity movement, we are talking about a different beast altogether, when it comes to the relationship between an identity and the political claims that attend the object of the movement. The claims have ceased to be solely or innately about the public appearance of the group as such; instead, a complicated relationship is posited between the experiences of a group, the public recognition of those experiences, and a certain set of political demands that arise from that experience. This triad is the essence of standpoint politics, as it's been articulated since its earliest 1980s and '90s incarnation. The baseline has shifted from what constitutes the public life of a group to how experience of a certain kind matters to political decision-making. That the experience of blackness in America provides a certain kind of lens and will on the question of the relationship of authority to violence does entail a demand for the recognition of the legitimacy of that perspectival position, but the power of its political aspect derives not from the identity itself, but the relationship between structurally-influenced group perspectives and issue sets. To say that being a black mother gives one a unique set of experiences, which inescapably form perspectives on the issue of the murder of black children by figures of authority, is not a political demand for the acknowledgment of black motherhood as such (although that becomes a precondition for the right to speak). Rather, it is setting up a circuit of meaning between black motherhood and institutional murder. That is a standpoint at work: the creation of circuits of meaning between societal positions-as-instructive, the recognition of experience, and political issues.

The question of what is and isn't strictly speaking "identity politics" is more than a semantic quibble over a rose by any other name; identity-political and standpoint movements have essentially different structures to their claims down to the deepest level, and excavating that distinction is the central move of the paper. When the question of being a part of or aligning with an anti-domination movement is constructed as centering on identity, rather than on a standpoint of speech, it presupposes a certain set of questions as the proper problematic and goals of "identification" with a movement. By constructing the problematic of anti-domination around identity, the question of alignment becomes two-fold: first, it becomes a question of belonging, whether or not the speaker properly belongs as part of the conversation; and second, it becomes a question of authority to speak. While these are on their face important questions for both questions of interracial participation in advocacy and for the structure of that advocacy itself, they are essentially misleading. "Identity" presupposes that the essential question of belonging posed is

one of an inherent quality in the speaker, something internal; and that the authority to speak issues from that singular character of the speaker. But the contemporary politics of standpoint on evidence in Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, are essentially relational in character - centered not on inherent aspects of a speaker but the set of relationships to other actors and practices in which the speaker is embedded – and derive their meaningfulness not from authority, but from a kind of legitimacy, the legitimacy of the speaker taking up the position of judgment. The question is not “do they have the authority to speak on this?”, but “do they have the judgment to speak here?”, and the process by which one would arrive at an answer to each of those questions is qualitatively different.

Whatever its flaws, the rise of Twitter-speech and the “hot take” culture has highlighted that the primary act of alignment with a movement occurs not through the authoritative aspects of the individual speaker-as-actor, but in the act of making judgments themselves and expressing them. The oft-noted sense that this is a culture deeply hostile to claims of authority is important, not because of some innate allergy to the authoritative, but because the assertion of authority misconstrues what it is that we ask of the speaker, indeed actively cuts against it. This is a central moment in which identity critics lose the plot. At stake is not authority, but the conditions of possibility for attaining legitimacy in the act of judgment itself. The legitimacy of taking up a standpoint is a crucially distinct question from the authority of the speaker: where the latter derives from distinguishing the speaker through their history, their qualifications, their previous actions, the former is built on the ways in which the speaker constructs the position of their speech in the present and embeds their qualities as a speaker in the moment in which a relationship between the speaker and the audience is constituted. Where authority is a quality, legitimacy is constructed and, crucially, *requested* of others in the moment of the speech-act itself.

Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, one of the earliest attempts to distinguish authority from judgment’s legitimacy, imagines this moment as one in which a judgment is made with a specific eye towards the possible assent of other judges; in requesting that assent, we present not only the judgment itself but the conditions under which we made the judgment, the process by which we arrived at the position on which we stand and from which we judge. Contemporary movement politics has politically universalized the deliberative process that Kant described as specifically belonging to taste and the judgment of beauty: the particular steps by which one achieves Kantian disinterestedness may no longer be the relevant criteria, but the same process character of presenting oneself to others as judge and seeking their assent has become an integral part (and in the case of social media platforms, a quite literal constructive part) of the speech-act itself. Different sets of criteria for a legitimately constructed position of judgment have been put into play in different situations, but there is a common template that combines a speaker’s relationship to other speakers in the movement, their relation to their own position as judge, and how particular judgments are derived from particular experiences.

I want to suggest, following Biko and Arendt, that what we demand of a speaker, as audience, is a sense that they have constructed the position from which they make judgments in a way that satisfies our expectations of what it takes to become an effective judge of an issue. The expectation is that, in taking up the stance or position of judge, the person's expression of their judgment carries with it the sense that person has engaged both the historical and contemporary background of the debate in such a way that their judgments carry meaning, meaning that contributes something to the collective process of meaning-making in which they are engaged. Meaning-creation itself, rather than a pre-established authority used to assert meaningfulness, becomes the gateway to taking up a position of judgment as part of the community of speakers and actors in a movement.

For Biko, drawing to a significant extent on Fanon, this is an essentially sociological problem: he locates this question of whether one has the judgment to speak in the strength of the community in which the author embeds herself, the social fundament behind a speaker out of which she draws her judgment. In both his vision of black self-reliance and his critique of "white liberal" "interlopers", Biko highlights that the speaker is never truly solitary in the act of judgment, as she would be in the authoritative voice. Instead, the speaker has to understand that their capacity to take up the position of judge is dependent on how the community itself to which they claim alliance constructs, allows, and polices its own conditions for becoming judge. The central problem of white liberalism under Apartheid was that, even as it decried conditions of domination, it retained for itself the power of public legitimization of the position of judgment; it was whites who, at least to their own minds, maintained the normative structure of the public space, and policed the question of whether or not other white (or black) speakers were in a place to render judgment. Biko's iconic frame for his journalistic advocacy, "I Write What I Like", was a defiance of exactly this condition.

If for Biko, taking up a position of judgment is first and foremost about emplacement, the issuing-forth of the speaker from the community out of which she speaks, for Arendt, that process of taking up the standpoint is a question of emplacement: to what extent is the judge able to make the process of judgment not singularly their own, but part of an imagined range of positions of judgment that expand the vision of the solitary judge. Arendt famously described this process of coming to a position of judgment as "going visiting" the "standpoints", the "conditions [others] are subject to",⁴ not merely considering the views of others but imagining as broad a range of literal view-points from which others stand. The process of coming to judgment then is a process of self-expansion and aggregation. Only by imagining ourselves as other than ourselves (and specific others of ourselves) can we generate a position out of which we can speak to the lives of others. To create an opening in the present, between past and

⁴ *Lectures on Kant's Politics Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 43.

future, one that can inaugurate the position and power of judgment, we must displace ourselves from our own position.

Patchen Markell has suggested that the literature around Arendtian recognition failed to grasp that at the heart of Arendt's story about recognition was a critical kind of self-recognition, the recognition of oneself as being-towards-death, as dying.⁵ I want to suggest that Arendt's writing on judgment suggests a second form of self-recognition: the recognition of oneself as a judge, which can only occur in the exercise of the capacity to displace oneself from one's particular time and place. There is an important sense in which the way we achieve the recognition of others as judge is the same process by which we come to recognize ourselves as judge, and that self-recognition as judge has neither the same meaning nor the same process as simply coming to recognize ourselves through others.

White Liberalism and Biko's Envisioned Self

For a critique of anti-identitarian rhetoric, Biko might instinctively seem like an odd choice: as he is generally read, his brand of Bantu black nationalism and hostility to the politics of integration seem almost hyper-identitarian.⁶ There may be a degree to which this is true in his broader thought, but when it comes to his critique of the politics of white (in-)action on race, the actual structure of his argument points both towards the fallacy of presupposing that the question of alignment within the anti-Apartheid movement was one of social belonging, and the obfuscation of alignment and legitimacy by authority in interracial anti-Apartheid politics.⁷ For Biko, the most pressing concern seems to be precisely that white politics must cease to be a politics of sympathy and fraternalism, and become a politics of position and self-critique. If there is a strong identitarian component to Biko's writing, it is as a kind of social precondition, the entryway into the possibility of an emancipatory politics, not those politics themselves; politics, in Biko's vision, plays out on the order of the societal positions and standpoints that arise out of but are not reducible to the social condition. If, according to Biko, white liberals particularly excel at the fruitless game of "internal mudslinging designed to prove that A is more of a liberal than B"⁸, it is because the politics of sympathy make it seem as if the social position of belonging most to the movement has been systematically mistaken for the building and speaking from actual, embedded political position.

⁵ *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003)

⁶ For an account that, correctly I believe, defends the subtlety of Biko's account of Black Consciousness against critics, see David Howarth, "Complexities of identity/difference: Black Consciousness Ideology in South Africa", *Journal of Political Ideologies* 2:1 (1992), 51-78.

⁷ Although I divide the critique of white liberalism differently than he, this account is in part informed by Derek Hook's "Retrieving Biko: a Black Consciousness critique of whiteness", *African Identities* 9:1 (2011), 19-32.

⁸ "Black Souls in White Skins?" [BSWS], *I Write What I Like* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 21

The texture and underpinnings of Biko's theory of raced community; the depth of the Fanon-inspired psychoanalytic component of his analysis of race relations and the condition of blacks under Apartheid; the continuities, via his reading of American black nationalism, between Biko's disentangled view of the role of races in racial reform and the tradition Ta-Nehisi Coates refers to as the "gospel" of "black self-reliance"⁹; these are all areas that would undoubtedly contribute to a more rich and full image of exactly what is going on in Biko's critique of white liberalism, but on which I am personally, intellectually, and ethically under-competent to write. More importantly, for a "white liberal" writer taking Biko's critique of white liberalism seriously, it would take a kind of performative contradiction to do so, ignoring Biko's admonition that "white liberals must...take care of their own business while they concern themselves with the real evil in our society – white racism".¹⁰ At stake for Biko in his response to the white liberal is precisely to what aspects of the shared world the social-experiential backgrounds and societal positions of the white speaker equip us to speak, and the ways in which the "concern" of the white liberal both depends on and reinforces a certain racialized structure of authorization to know and speak on all things and all peoples. If the question of identity politics and particularly of white liberal critiques of identity politics depend on a certain essential effacement of the centrality of standpoints, then it might be the move most true to Biko's own thought to excavate his description of the promises and perils of the white liberal. Biko's description of the white liberal is a biting satirical caricature to be sure, but in that it joins a long legacy of the use of satire to illuminate the most pressing and oppressing dimensions of the black-white relationship.¹¹ If it is decidedly uncharitable, it is in part because it is precisely the constant demand for charity and sympathy that are, for Biko, at the heart of the problem.

Perhaps no aspect of the white participation in the anti-Apartheid movement draws more scathing reviews from Biko than the fundamental mistake by white liberals that a politics of sympathy, which centers identification with blacks and a communal basis of understanding, can stand in for a politics of position based on whites experiences of the racism of their own community; whites create a false "identity politics" in the place of a politics stemming from their own communal position. Biko inveighs in his most sarcastic terms against "that curious bunch of nonconformists" that self-constitute as the white opposition, primarily because that group identification as the white opposition necessarily understands and "explain[s] their participation in negative terms".¹² Biko is concerned by the way in which the white liberal side commutes an essential identification with other whites in the negative – "they are not responsible for white racism and the country's 'inhumanity to the black man'" – into an equally a direct identification with black experience – "they too feel the oppression just as acutely as the blacks and

⁹ See broadly *We Were Eight Years in Power*, 12-32.

¹⁰ BSWS 23

¹¹ Zerilli, Linda, "Value Pluralism and the Problem of Judgment", *Political Theory* 40:1 (2012), 6-31.

¹² BSWS 20

therefore should be jointly involved” – as the basis for involvement. A sympathetic circuit is formed in which the white liberal claims a position in the movement precisely by disembedding themselves from the community out of which they come, racist white South Africa, in order to “prove” their sympathy as a kind of right to involvement: “in short, these are the people who say that they have black souls wrapped up in white skins”.¹³ White liberals, in Biko’s eyes, instinctively resort to precisely the mistake of modern identity movement critics: mistaking standpoint politics as identity politics. For Biko, this reversion to a politics of sympathy rather than a politics of speaking from one’s position has the corrosive effect of making the practical center of the politics the establishment that the white liberals themselves have the properly and elaborately sympathetic relationship to the movement (hence the mudslinging of “A being more liberal than B”) rather than having a practical center of a relationship to racist practice itself.¹⁴

In Biko’s prognosis, this replacement of the practical center of one’s relationship to the movement goes hand in hand with the concomitant misapprehension that the question of action, of how change can be created, is the second-order question to one of belonging, of being properly a part of the movement in the first place. Identification becomes the first pressing matter to be settled, practical opposition to racist institutions second. Because the first move in the realm of identification is essentially negative – liberal whites disidentification with racist white South Africa – the basic social ground from which whites can speak and orient action has been evacuated, and “the lack of common ground for solid identification is all the time manifested in internal strifes inside the group.”¹⁵ As identification becomes the first question, so to the first-order points of conflict are now suddenly internally oriented rather than externally oriented towards white racist practice, and the “irrelevant and therefore misleading” victory of creating any kind of mutual identification between participants in the movement is taken to be action in itself: “[liberal ideology] works on a false premise that because it is difficult to bring people from different races together in this country, therefore achievement of this is in itself a step forward towards the total liberation of the blacks.”¹⁶ The only ones concerned with the politics of sympathy and its promises and perils, on Biko’s account, are white liberals themselves.

As a counterpoint to this extended critique of white liberals, Biko poses the idea of the “true liberal”, a liberalism capable of moving forward the project of “true” organic integration through “attain[ing] the envisioned self”.¹⁷ This “envisioned self”, which lies at the core of both Biko’s version of black consciousness and his prescription for the social-political activities of whites, is the heart of his

¹³ BSWs 20

¹⁴ BSWs 22

¹⁵ BSWs 21

¹⁶ BSWs 22

¹⁷ BSWs 21

story about the future possibility of “actual integration” between the races both within movement politics and within the broader society. If white liberals’ attempts to distance and disembody themselves from racist white society by belonging to the anti-Apartheid movement “removes the focus of attention from” the “essentials” of “the problem”, that “WHITE RACISM” “lies squarely in the laps of white society”,¹⁸ the solution lies in the painful and guilty embrace by white liberals of their own subject-position as having been born into and being part of a racialized social structure, addressing themselves to white racism as the decisive dimension of the culture of which they are a part, rather than the “basically dishonest” move of casting themselves as apart from it.¹⁹ “A true liberalism” in which whites can “serve as a lubricating material” in the fight for racial justice²⁰ begins with a deep embedding, an embrace of “the place for their fight for justice is within their white society” down to the level of how the problem is formulated, “that they themselves are oppressed if they are true liberals and therefore they must fight for their own freedom”.²¹

This is in many way standpoint politics 101, and in many ways much of what Biko is pointing to is already a part of white alliance politics today. The meaning that thorough embedding of the “envisioned self” for movement politics, though, seems to have been lost on contemporary white anti-identitarians, in their haste to critique those who they view as involved in identity politics. It is not merely a question a misdirected critique, but that within the politics of sympathy arises the delusion, very much central to the alternative modes of politics envisioned by anti-identitarians, that it is ever possible to transcend standpoints in the first place. The politics without identity propounded in different ways and in different modes by identity critics depends in the first place on a “‘nonracial’ set-up of the integrated complex”,²² a space that maintains the illusion that everyone other than whites (equally, CIS-males) be able to check their baggage at the door, so to speak. Biko is quick to note, as black American political figures have going back to Sen. Blanche Bruce and before,²³ that this is an illusion only held by precisely those people whose speech and position can escape the demarcation of emanating from a racialized place; “we”, on the other hand for Biko, “are in the position in which we are because of our skin”.²⁴ If this is a time-honored argument, it takes on particular theoretic significance in a vision like Biko’s which suggests not only that it is possible for white liberals to re-embed themselves in their racialized space, but that the wages of doing so are a shift in the kinds of authorization of speech is taken to have, what I initially suggested as a distinction between legitimacy and authority.

¹⁸ BSWs 23

¹⁹ “Black Campuses and Current Feelings”, *I Write What I Like*, 17

²⁰ BSWs 26

²¹ BSWs 25

²² BSWs 20

²³ See, for example, Bruce’s famous Senate speech on the black expectations of reconstruction on May 31, 1876.

²⁴ BSWs 25

It has been a particular concern for identity critics that identity politics appears to deny the authority to speak to anyone from a counter-posed dominant-majority community. This is partially right, but only because it is the very relevance of authority as such that is in question. If the question of the basis on which speech attains significance and meaning is one of authority, for Biko, then one would rightly expect that even in the most liberal of settings the allegedly non-racial measures for the authority to speak would fall along the lines organized according to the principles of white speech. The resulting game of authority, which plays on established public norms of conduct precious to anti-identitarians, becomes one in which “the white a perpetual teacher and the black a perpetual pupil” in matters of public propriety and authority, inevitably results in a supposedly non-racial set of dictums about speech authority producing a practical situation in which “whites are the divinely appointed pace-setters in progress”.²⁵ Certainly, there is more than sufficient historical evidence from the American historical context to back up this concern; an instructive glance could be cast at James Pike’s astonished and horrified account of the conduct of the black-dominated legislature of South Carolina during Reconstruction.²⁶ But if, as Biko wants to suggest, the power to speak emanates not from the externally-established authority of the speaker, but from the degree to which that speaker can speak from an “envisioned self” – a self rooted and comfortable trafficking in the social conditions out of which speech arises – that has the virtue both of flattening the field of power between speakers, and ensuring that white liberalism is at its most meaningful in the moments when it speaks to those conditions with which it is most intimately familiar, the racism of whites. What should be a sociologically self-evident fact – that we can speak best to and be best heard on that with which we are most familiar – becomes a rubric under which the meaningfulness and impact of the speech-act can be understood and evaluated.

Arendt’s Process of Envisioning

I turn to Hannah Arendt’s thought primarily as a vehicle to describe a process that I have seen richly on display in the work of some of the best activists and organizers that I’ve known, particularly in the labor movement. If Biko is rightly concerned by disastrous effects of disembedding on white liberal participation in anti-racism, it would still not be enough to answer the critics of “identity politics” to leave it at the question of how that politics misunderstands the dynamics of contemporary movements and its own place in that discourse: there needs to be a positive model for understanding what truly is going on in movements today that both resists the alleged pitfalls of identitarianism and nevertheless provides a way of leveraging the insights of standpoints into action. It would be tempting to describe Arendt’s own

²⁵ BSWs 24

²⁶ *The Prostrate State* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1874)

version of the politics of standpoint at a normative-prescriptive level, but I want to suggest, even if only gesturally, that the way that she describes the thought-process of constructing self-recognition through visiting the material standpoints of others really is an active force in contemporary movement politics. The process in Arendt by which a subject takes up the position of judgment, establishes themselves as a more than the simple aggregation of past and future, presents a strong parallel to Biko's "envisioned self": a form of legitimacy, rather than authority, the emanates from the ability to position oneself in a richly informed present.

Acknowledging all the profound differences both in the places that they are coming from and the traditions out of which they write, there are some deep affinities between Biko and Arendt in this arena of race, recognition and standpoint. Perhaps the most important is also the most controversial, particularly for Arendt: each in their own peculiar way, both are anti-assimilationist, and both staked significant positions on questions of race on a critique of a top-down politics of integration. For Biko, it was a central tenet of his Bantu black nationalism that there is a distinction between "real integration" – which he says "one does not need to plan for or actively encourage"²⁷ – and an "artificial" integration based on "conscious manoeuvre rather than...the dictates of the inner soul"²⁸. Black Consciousness entailed a commitment to a kind of organic, internal nurturing out of which dialogue and interaction between communities could grow on the terms of equals, a process that could only be interrupted and stymied by the (on Biko's account, overwhelmingly white-driven) attempt to institutionalize and force that process.

Arendt's difficult and oft-rightly criticized response to school integration in "Reflections on Little Rock" hinged on precisely the same concern: that the prioritization of institutional change over social change threatened to short-circuit precisely the possibility of the latter, and represented a fundamental misapprehension of where in society integration must take place. Her own acknowledgment in her introduction that, of course, "as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged for granted"²⁹ is an opening to the proper question to be asked of her and which she acknowledges some of her critics have rightly pressed: whether, particularly in her understanding of the importance of education, she had sufficiently triangulated herself in precisely the way that she demands judges do, self-distanced with the necessary action of visiting the black standpoint (and indeed, if we take Biko, the degree to which that is possible). It is an ironic phrase, that she wants it to stand as given that she has a primary sympathy for the black cause, given that like Biko she, in *On Revolution*, argues that the misguided resort to sympathy as the basis of political orientation is profoundly dangerous.³⁰ Arendt has provided the order on which we might question her appeals in "Reflections"

²⁷ BSWS 21

²⁸ BSWS 20

²⁹ "Reflections on Little Rock", *Dissent* (1959), 46.

³⁰ *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

precisely in her larger argument that the politics of sympathy need to be replaced by the process of taking up the position of judgment. Her larger distinction between sympathy and the model of expanding one's viewpoint through the self-distance created in thought seems to be precisely what is at stake.

Across *Between Past and Future*,³¹ *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, and her late work *The Life of the Mind*³², Arendt describes a process by which we, as thinking actors, attempt to find and craft a place from which we are able to step out of the inexorable flow of history to make judgments, and make judgments among the people with whom we speak and act. Arendt's is a different kind of embedding from Biko's, but they share a family resemblance in the demand that speakers come to understand their own position through a thorough process of embedding, or coming to understand their own standpoint through the attempt to comprehend the standpoints of others. Arendt is particularly concerned with how the thinking judge is able to construct a position from which to think and speak, one that we can recognize, both in ourselves and in others, as having undergone exactly that necessary doubling of embedding oneself and seeing beyond the immediate situation in which the judge finds themselves. Recognition as a process becomes about one's own position as judge, one's own position in what she describes as the parallelogram of history between past and future, a standpoint that comprehends itself precisely in the degree to which that standpoint has been constructed through the taking in and understanding that of others. Our ability to meaningfully speak and self-position, for Arendt, is dependent on that process of assembling the position from which we judge, and this produces a kind of legitimacy, distinct from authority, by which the subject positions themselves in the world with others.

When Arendt finally turned in *Thinking* to her fullest description of the nature of this embedded, thinking subject, its powers and its resistances, it is perhaps unsurprising that she returned to her reading of Franz Kafka from *Between Past and Future* to describe the place the subject carves out for herself in the flow of history. Kafka's parable "HE" provides Arendt with the perfect model of the *nunc stans*, the "standing now" that the subject occupies as she surveys her world and positions herself in the stream of time between her no-longer and her not-yet. Her extended reading of "HE", reprising and elaborating on that in *Between Past and Future*, is concerned with "the time sensation of the thinking ego...our 'inner state'" where "mental activities" are "recoiling characteristically on themselves", and "the no-longer of the past is transformed by virtue of the spatial metaphor into something lying *behind* us and the not-yet of the future into something that *approaches* us from ahead", "a battleground" made literal by Kafka "where the forces of the past and future clash with each other".³³

³¹ New York: Penguin Books, 2002

³² [LM] New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978.

³³ LM 202-3. This reading is indebted to Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's "Reflections on Hannah Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*", *Political Theory* 10, no.2 (1982). Also on Arendt's interpretation of "HE", see Liska, Vivian, "The Gap Between Hannah Arendt and Franz Kafka", *Archadia* 38, no.2 (2003).

The militant metaphor of the battleground is important for Arendt, because “this in-between, and what he calls the present” is defined by its struggle, the “long fight against the dead weight of the past, driving him forward with hope, and the fear of a future (whose only certainty is death), driving him backward”³⁴. There is more than a tinge of German and French existentialism in Arendt’s attachment here to describing an “exhausting” fight, a “time-pressed, time-tossed existence”³⁵ in which “that past and future” which “manifest themselves as pure entities”³⁶, which leaves the fighter to “[dream] of the unguarded moment when time will have exhausted its force...long enough to give ‘him’ the chance of jumping out of the fighting line to be promoted to the position of umpire, the spectator and judge outside the game of life”³⁷. Thought here is a kind of activity, the crucial activity as we “defend [our] presence” and a kind of precondition for others, because “it is only because ‘he’ thinks, and therefore is no longer carried along by the continuity of everyday life in a world of appearances, that past and future manifest themselves as pure entities, so that ‘he’ can become aware of a no-longer that pushes him forward and a not-yet that drives him back”³⁸.

In outlining this temporal geometry of the judging subject, Arendt invests in the figure of the fighter her fullest account of the importance of the role of the judging subject. Contemporary readers have been struck and bemused by how at odds with her account of action this seemingly detached and inert this figure of the spectator appears to be, but Arendt suggest that on the contrary, that is precisely “the trouble with Kafka’s metaphor”: far from being “a passive object that is inserted into the stream” of action and history, the spectator is and must be its own particular kind of “fighter who defends his own presence” at the intersection of historicity and futurity by prying open the *nunc stans* through reflection. It is only in the active situating that the political subject performs that judgment becomes possible. The sense of distance that being a judge invokes, the sense that we are speaking from a place which is no longer reducible to our own limited experiences, is derived from taking in and considering the standpoints of others.

In the two acute angle formed between the force arrows of the past and the future by the line of traveling in thinking, the activity of thought does not step out of the field of time and experience to become a spectator, but remains within it in a kind of “quiet in the center of a storm which, though totally unlike the storm, still belongs to it”³⁹. The metaphor of movement within the field of time evokes her description in her Kant lectures of visiting the material standpoints of others to expand the visual range of

³⁴ Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1978), p.205

³⁵ LM 209

³⁶ LM 206

³⁷ LM 207

³⁸ LM 206

³⁹ LM 209

the judging subject: it precisely in the motion along this thinking line between past and future, not in the distance as such that characterizes classical models of thinking as detachment from the world, that we become “sufficiently removed from past and future to be relied on to find out their meaning, to assume the position...of arbiter and judge over the manifold, never-ending affairs of human existence in the world”⁴⁰. This constant process of self-positioning is also Arendt’s answer to the threat that focusing on the thinking process would result in a kind of solipsism, the actor presenting their selves to themselves: the position of judgment only appears in the space constructed between and among the material standpoints of others that we attempt to visit and understand.

The sum of this account of the thinking subject as constructing an alternative position within the field of experience from which to make judgments is a doubled sense of what it means to engage the world. On the one hand, the dependence of taking up the position of judgment on the process of visiting other standpoints creates a different kind of recognition, a recognition that being able to take up the place of judge relies on not just the presence of others, but taking seriously the standpoints (which are not the same as the views)⁴¹ of others, where they too stand among the forces of history. The oft-missing and necessary component of this process is that the process of producing distance from the initial standpoint of the actor also involves a kind of looking-back on the self; the position of judge is not only a judge of the world, but also the judge who has themselves in their own sights, so to speak. This is why it seems appropriate to draw a parallel to Biko’s “envisioned self”: what Arendt describes is precisely that process of envisioning, of establishing lines of sight back at the self grounded in the motion to other standpoints which creates a dialogue between the standpoint of the judge and the alternate standpoints which they must take up in order to produce that standpoint of judgment in the first place.

On the other hand, the assumption of the position of judge, because it entails a process of creating that standpoint, is also subject to a kind of test of legitimacy inhering in whether or not the subject seems to have sufficiently engaged in the standpoints of others to truly construct that position. Thus, Arendt could posit of Eichmann that he had systematically failed to think, by which she means precisely engaging his own action through thought and the creation of the distance required to make his own place in the events of the Shoah a problematic one for himself. It could equally and legitimately be questioned of Arendt whether, in her encounter with the questions surrounding school integration in *Reflections on Little Rock*, or if her writing puts on display the limits of her own traveling in thinking on the problem.

In tying the constitution of judgment to the material standpoints of others, Arendt constructs a kind of critical inverse of the liberal standpoint of judgment, a la the Rawlsian original position: where one tests the Rawlsian position according to the degree to which the subject abstracts from their concrete

⁴⁰ LM 209

⁴¹ *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 43

position in the world, one tests the Arendtian position of judgment according to the subject's ability to fill their own standpoint with the material of standpoints of others. The question of the legitimacy of the subject's standpoint of judgment is distinct either from the particular content of the judgment made (which could be entirely correct or persuasive, and yet not evince the necessary process to make it) or the authority of the speaker stemming from their own aspects, their professional position, their societal position, etc. Centering legitimacy over authority has the leveling effect (which I think we see heavily on evidence in contemporary sociopolitical movements) of entailing an activity that is, or at least can be, performed by all, and which necessarily embeds the standpoint from which the speaker judges in a dense network of understanding.

It would be appropriate, though, to introduce to Arendt's process of the construction of judgment and its legitimacy a corrective from Biko, one at the heart of his critique of white liberalism: that there remains, even in the creation of judgment, an unbridgeable gulf between the real and the imagined. Arendt is careful to repeatedly note that to take up the standpoint of another in the process of visiting is not the same as to take up their views and judgments, but it could equally be said with Biko that the judge must also acknowledge that there are meaningful, sociologically serious constraints on just how far and how deep the imagination can go in its travels. The false invocation of kinship claimed by the white liberal against which Biko inveighs is a kind of overreach of the power of the imagination; a white judge must acknowledge that there are limits to the degree to which a white thinker can really fully, meaningfully internalize the crushing material and affective experience of racial domination that the black thinker knows from within themselves. There is a kind of implicit critique in Biko, in the classic sense of describing the limit, of the power of white imagination, and a criticism of white liberalism in the practical dangers of assuming too much can be gained from outside the concrete experiences of domination. This is not at all an uncontroversial claim, particularly in philosophical circles, some of which retain that Platonic intuition that the sphere of their thought encompasses all that is and all that could be, but in conversation with Arendt the claim involves a simple but firm corrective that the process of imagining the material standpoints of others is not and cannot be the same as actually occupying them in one's living flesh, and it is upon that living flesh that racial domination is wrought.

Returning to the suggestion that this represents a kind of heuristic for understanding contemporary standpoint politics, Biko's critique provides another way of thinking about what is really going on and what is at stake when, for example, student movements challenge an older speaker over their speech-acts. Identity critics assume that what is being challenged is the authority of the speaker, that what is in play is an identity politics whereby no speaker has the authority to speak unless they are part of the identity involved. But, drawing the line between Arendt and Biko, it could equally be suggested that it is not the authority of the speaker that is being challenged at all, but a displacement of authority as the

central question by legitimacy: does the speaker seem to have done the necessary work in order to construct the position from which they speak judgments. That is of course a contestable question, and contestability is part of the point, but it is a contestation that occurs on an entirely different rubric than the traditional rubric of authority. It is a matter of reading the questions that are being asked of speakers, and I would suggest that those questions read systematically more as questions of legitimacy, in a sense that Arendt and Biko's "envisioned self" has captured, than as questions of authority.

Retaking Standpoints

Admittedly, a truly rich account of why identity critics might be missing the import of what is going on in contemporary sociopolitical movements would involve a proper, deep ethnographic engagement with the day-to-day dealings of movements. Fortunately, there is a great deal of truly excellent work being done of this kind, and I confess that what is here depends firmly on that work of others. But this is in part the importance of introducing an alternative hermeneutics for understanding: if one begins with the wrong hermeneutic for reading events and declarations, as I suggest identity critics do, then one can very easily see what one wants to see. Liberal critics, particularly white liberal critics, cannot be blind to the Bohrian observer effect. In the case of alleged identity politics, this is not merely an analytic error, but a deeply perilous sociological one: in decrying and bemoaning the rise of identity politics, liberal critics have systematically fed and given succor to the counter-reactive politics of white identity on the American right. Robert Wuthnow's study of the internal politics of rural America⁴² provides a compelling case study in the way that the nostalgic anxieties of non-urban whites not only feed on, but are constructed on the basis of a sensibility of being under siege, under siege in precisely the way that liberal identity critics so vividly describe.

Understanding contemporary movements means taking seriously the real content of a fact so often bemoaned by liberal identity critics, that the shape and activity of movements is in part a product of what is being called a post-factual politics: movements take place on an intellectual-affective landscape in which where a person is speaking from has an inherent tie to the meaningfulness – in the literal sense of meaning-making – of their claims. I have suggested that, following Biko's critique of white liberalism, that liberal identity critics make three fundamental mistakes. First, they mistake the politics of position that is so cherished by contemporary movements as being a politics of sympathy, which is exactly what a politics of position like Biko's and Arendt's rejects. Second, in believing that what is at stake is a simple question of sympathetic connection, identity critics substitute for the central question of action a question

⁴² *The Left Behind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018)

of belonging, as if in sufficiently belonging to the “identity” of the movement the meaning of speech gains traction. Finally, identity critics are relying on a now outdated understanding of authority as what activates and licenses speech, when in fact a much more complex politics of legitimacy is at stake. The sum of these mistakes is the very belief that what is occurring is a species of identity politics, rather than a politics of standpoint.

The proof of the error can be seen in the pudding of the actual activism being described. Identity, at least as it is described and employed by identity critics, is a static and internal category, which gives rise, through the belief that it is belonging that is at stake, to identity critics’ anxiety that movements are shutting out potential allies. The politics of the envisioned self, however, as it is imagined by Biko and Arendt, are essentially dynamic and external: the position of judgment is constructed by the constant and enlivening externalization of the point of speech, the vision the self has on itself. The anchor of meaning remains in the self, but only the anchor: the stuff of the “identity”, or rather standpoint, exists out in the worlds of others. The importance of standpoints is precisely the turning inward and outward at the same time, the actual thinking of the place we are from.

It is worth thinking seriously about a passage from Arendt’s “Reflections on Little Rock”, one in which she puts a point on the particularly relationship between race, standpoint, and the possibility of politics in a sphere which, as all publics definitionally do, preconditions us to certain kinds of questions of appearance:

“While audibility is a temporary phenomenon, rarely persisting beyond one generation, the Negroes’ visibility is unalterable and permanent. This is not a trivial matter. In the public realm, where nothing counts that cannot make itself seen and heard, visibility and audibility are of prime importance. To argue that they are merely exterior appearances is to beg the question. For it is precisely appearances that ‘appear’ in public, and inner qualities, gifts of heart or mind, are political only to the extent that their owner wishes to expose them in public, to place them in the limelight of the market place”⁴³

America has been undergoing for several decades a radical reconfiguration of what can and does appear in public, and the ways in which that appearance is acknowledged and negotiated. The intransigence of the problem of race, older in history than the country itself, lies in part in the fact that it deals with a set of categories which have been conceived, at any rate, as impossible to make publicly dis-appear: the apparent facticity of dermatological difference, even if it is only apparent, means that the politics of race, as a set of public questions, necessarily occur across a difference in visibility that seems irreducible.⁴⁴

⁴³ “Reflections on Little Rock”, 47.

⁴⁴ To say that this is a particular problem for racial politics in the history of this country is not to deny that apparently irreducible difference in visibility does not exist in other political issues: on the contrary, the growth of trans movements in this country has turned a focused spotlight on what had long been a staple of the feminist

The result, though, is not some kind of impossibility of any politics beyond identity politics – *all* politics by definition entails the negotiation of public difference – but a unique sensitivity to the question of precisely what meaning that apparently irreducible difference has for the public space of appearance. When we ascribe the term “identity politics” to a set of actions and speech, we are imputing on it a certain set of meanings through which the politics of a speaker articulates itself; we are reading them as having a certain set of concerns over how the irreducibility of difference can be understood. Identity politics has become an outdated paradigm for understanding the negotiation of visible difference and its creation of certain spaces from which one can speak. In Biko’s and Arendt’s “envisioned self”, we see an alternative paradigm for understanding the ways in which the positions generated by a permanent visibility of difference can operate, ways in which speakers can position themselves, and forms of legitimacy predicated not on the authoritative characteristics of the speaker, but their ability to embed their position in a network of the positions of others. If understanding that alternate way of constructing standpoints can lessen a little the terrible fear of identity that has gripped a portion of white liberalism, then perhaps that relaxing can in turn refigure the ways in which white liberals can engage the politics of race in the ways in which Biko says they must: a radical confrontation when the entailments and entitlements of the standpoints of white speakers, and the white racism now centuries-entrenched in the sociopolitical space of those positions.

movement, the question of how the visualization of gender and sexuality enters, is acknowledged, and is practiced in the space of the public.