

Refugee Blues: Hannah Arendt, Statelessness, and the Limits of Identity

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Hannah Arendt, fleeing the Nazis through France, managed to escape an internment camp in Gurs and make it to New York, where she arrived with her husband, the philosopher Heinrich Blücher, in 1941 (Wild 30). Arendt soon had a regular column with the German-language refugee journal *Aufbau* but broke with the publishers a year later. One of the first pieces she wrote in English was an article for the January 1943 issue of *Menorah Journal* called “We Refugees.” It describes statelessness as a common misfortune and decries the tendency of her fellow refugees to misunderstand it as a personal problem that might be remedied through assimilation (“Refugees” 114). Jews who identified with Germans in Germany and with the French in France were nevertheless persecuted as Jews by the Nazis (“Refugees” 117). Arendt thus encourages her fellow refugees to embrace their Jewish identity as a way of realizing the political significance of their collective fate:

Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples—if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted. (119)

When states deny citizenship on the basis of identity, the stateless must rally behind the banner of that for which they are attacked.

Arendt ends her article with her call for Jewish identity, but she was already working towards a theory of totalitarianism as the politics (or “anti-politics” [Human 214]) of another kind of identity. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which originated in a series of English-language articles published on the heels of “We Refugees,” explores how imperialism and racism work in tandem to destroy the public and transform groups into mobs (*Origins*

124). Arendt's account of how publics degenerate into mobs is too complicated to go into here, but it involves the elites pandering to the underworld in order to outrage the bourgeoisie (Origins 333). Totalitarianism builds on this unholy alliance by promising the mob the recognition or significance normally denied to them in the public sphere. Arendt describes this as "pro- viding] access to history even at the price of destruction," and it involves redefining the mob in terms of an ideal (Origins 332). For communism the ideal is "classlessness" (Origins 316), for fascism it is race. Thus, contrary to many of her contemporaries, Arendt argues that the nation does not begin with race but ends there (Origins 157). "The organization of the mob will inevitably take the form of the transformation of nations into races," she argues from experience, first by outlawing Jews in the name of the nation and then by "outlawing" or destroying the nation per se (Origins 157, 333; "Refugees" 119). She held Germany to be one of the nations destroyed by German racism in the 1930s and 40s. Her famous—but still controversial—definition of totalitarianism characterizes it not as a species of nationalism but as a perverse form of "idealism," displaying an "unwavering faith in an ideological fictitious world," neglecting profit and material gain, and showing a marked "indifference to national interests and the well-being of its people" (Origins 417, 419).

Arendt's account of race as a pernicious political "ideal" differs markedly from her appeal to racial identity—or something very much like it—as a way of collectivizing the experience of refugees. How to explain her seemingly contradictory accounts of what are, in essence, two forms of identity? I propose to address the contradiction by suggesting that Arendt saw identity as a social matter that had to be distinguished from political structures. Society is based on discrimination, but politics—at least in a republic—upholds the principle of equality ("Little Rock" 51). Totalitarianism destroys political equality by mandating discrimination but with the ultimate goal of making all social relations superfluous. Arendt's call for Jewish identity was not an attempt to engage in friend vs. foe identity politics, but to reestablish legal conditions in which social discrimination would be irrelevant for matters of citizenship. In other words, Arendt supported a form of ethnic nationalism because she strictly separated the nation from the state, as Elisabeth Young-Bruehl points out in *For the Love of the World* (Young-Bruehl 174).

It is also possible to understand Arendt's two versions of identity as corresponding to two different stages in her immigrant trajectory. The *Origins of Totalitarianism* made Arendt's reputation when it appeared in 1951—the same year she was naturalized as a US citizen. Alfred Kazin, who helped the work get published by Harcourt, Brace & Company, saw it as an expression of statelessness: "The sense of exile was overwhelming" (New York 200,

198). Her solution, he pointed out, was to stress the importance of political community: "She reverted constantly to the image of the polis, the public realm, politics as true knowledge of the public interest. This was her protest against the unpolitical 'idealism' of German intellectuals who had abstained from politics, had condescended to politics, so had opened the door to Hitler" (New York 198). Kazin argued that Arendt's emphasis on the polis led her away from her commitment to refugees and their group identity towards a conservative faith in the United States: "She [...] came to believe more deeply in the Founding Fathers," he writes, "than any July Fourth orator" (196, 198; see also Benhabib 246).¹ In other words, she moved away from "We Refugees" to "We the People." While the argument is plausible, and it might explain her different conceptions of identity, it also ignores the difference between the social and the political in her work. In my view, Arendt preserves the collective nature of the refugee experience by assigning it to the social realm, which she strictly delineates from politics. In Arendt's thinking, it is the function of the political realm to create equal conditions so that individuals can associate with whom they please. Conversely, stateless people have to remain "conscious pariahs" or insist on their social difference in order to fight for a republic that offers the possibility of citizenship, but not at the price of assimilation ("Refugees" 119).

While this theoretical separation of the social from the political hardly provides a policy blueprint for immigration, it does establish the primacy of "the right to have rights" over identity in Arendt's thinking, i.e. of belonging to a political community that recognizes what one does over a social community reflecting who one is (Origins 296, 451). Although Arendt understands the social significance of identity, and encourages refugees to think collectively rather than fall into the trap of blaming themselves for their fate, she limits the political relevance of identity in relation to fundamental civil rights, and especially the right to equality. Since her emphasis on equality diverges in significant ways from many current accounts of difference, I will begin by mapping the relation of the political to the social in Arendt, in part by analyzing her controversial "Reflections on Little Rock" (1959). I will then turn to the poem that lends its title to this essay, "Refugee Blues" by W. H. Auden.

Why this poem? Auden and Arendt became friends late in life, and their migration trajectories, while not identical, intersect in suggestive ways.

1 This is not to say that her concept of political community was completely uncongenial to the left. Habermas, though initially skeptical of her work, would, after her death, credit her account of the political realm as one of the decisive influences on his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Wild 123).

Auden was not a refugee from Germany, but he did marry Erika Mann to allow her to naturalize as a British citizen before heading off on his own voluntary exile in New York, where he would one day become a United States citizen. The poem, reflecting some of these experiences, seems to confirm Arendt's privileging of the political over the social, but it also suggests that the two realms are not as neatly separable as she suggests. The poem's lyrical "we" strikes an elegiac chord that often seems to be missing in Arendt's militant response to racial oppression.

I hope to show that Arendt's account demonstrates both the necessity of identity and its limits. Identity has become a "necessary" idea for understanding the collective nature of human experience, as Gerald Izenberg has argued, but it should not become the goal of democratic politics, nor is it necessarily democratizing (371). At a time when white supremacists feel emboldened to organize a "White Civil Rights" march in Washington D.C.—though thankfully participants were far outnumbered by protesters—we should remember Arendt's emphasis on the political principles that hold citizens together over the feelings that drive them into separate ethnic groups. As Arendt argues, "No civilization—the man-made artifact to house successive generations—would ever have been possible without a framework of stability, to provide the wherein for the flux of change" (Crisis 79). In the United States, that stability is based on the political equality that allows for difference but does not seek its justification there. It took a former refugee to point out that the stable factor in democratic politics, and the most effective answer to racism, is full and equal citizenship. What she neglected was how second-class citizenship is often created by social practices that are never officially codified as laws or instituted as national "ideals."

The book in which Kazin remarks on Arendt's turn from Jewish identity to American patriotism is significantly entitled *New York Jew* (1978). It revises some of Kazin's own immediate postwar writing in ways that demonstrate his move in the opposite direction.² Kazin's late emphasis on his own Jewish identity, and his sardonic recollection of Arendt's Fourth-of-July-

2 For instance, Kazin revises his account of meeting Displaced Persons while participating in the first Salzburg Seminar. After retroactively stressing the resemblance between one survivor and his own father, he changes the title he gives to the man's account of suffering. In the original 1948 article, he calls that testimony a "Passover Haggadah," but in 1978 he renames it a "Holocaust Haggadah," marking the increased significance of the Holocaust in Jewish identity and the significance of the survivor's story to his own identity. See my "Death Is So Permanent" and Kazin's "Salzburg," 64, and *New York Jew*, 172.

zealotry, reflects the increasing importance of identity in post-1960s American writing, and the increasing identification of the New Left* with issues of race, class, and gender (see my *Pound Reaction* 67-83, and "Death Is So Permanent"). Arendt's "We Refugees" defends identity as a way of making collective sense of personal experiences. However, when she began to analyze the root causes of those experiences she thought it equally important to emphasize what Izenberg calls "the rival individualist idea of self" (263; see also my review of Izenberg's book). In other words, she sought to understand the relation of "We Refugees" to "We the People," theorizing particular markers of group membership in terms of more general principles of citizenship. Her writing of the 1950s, in particular, attempts to define society in ways that open a space for group identity without turning it into a political "ideal."

Arendt was not an identity theorist in the sense "identity" is used today—as an expression of the otherness of groups. On the contrary, she tended to understand otherness as an expression of individual, rather than group, uniqueness: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings" (*Human* 176). Politics, for Arendt, establishes a realm of equal rights where individuals can express themselves, "appear" in public, engage in memorable actions, and introduce something new into the world (*Human* 176-77; *Crises* 5-6, 78-79). As a newly arrived refugee, Arendt embraced her rather provisional right to speak from a Jewish perspective, but she became increasingly concerned with how the sameness of certain basic political principles—"the right to have rights"—enables individuals to seek ethnic and religious solidarity if they want to, but without reducing them to racial types.

It is not surprising that Kazin would characterize this line of argument as conservative—and not only because of the increasing importance of identity to the New Left. Arendt placed her trust in specific political traditions, and especially the American republican tradition, rather than in international³

- 3 Arendt defines the "pathos" of the New Left in this way: "They inherited from their parents' generation the experience of a massive intrusion of criminal violence into politics: they learned in high school and in college about concentration and extermination camps, about genocide and torture, about the wholesale slaughter of civilians in war [...]. Their first reaction was a revulsion against every form of violence [...]. The very great successes of this [nonviolent] movement, especially in the field of civil rights, were followed by the resistance movement against the war in Vietnam, which has remained an important factor in determining the climate of opinion in this country." However, she adds that by the end of the 1960s many anti-war protestors began turning to violence in the name of their non-violent ideals (*Crises* 115-16).

agreements or ideals. This put her thinking in line with a number of postwar Burkeans, like Peter Viereck and Russell Kirk, who understood themselves as guardians of conservative values (*Pound Reaction* 127-64). Her conservatism is evident in her assessment of the refugee crisis in the 1930s and 1940s, which she saw as marking the collapse of the post-WWI comity between nations. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt goes so far as to claim that the plight of refugees is an unintended consequence of the declaration of the Universal Rights of Man.⁴ She argues that declaring human rights universal strips them of any meaningful jurisdiction: "The Rights of Man, supposedly inalienable, proved to be unenforceable—even in countries whose constitutions were based upon them—whenever people appeared who were no longer citizens of any sovereign state" (293).

Her first-hand experiences as a refugee led her to agree with Edmund Burke in his preference for the rights and prerogatives established through custom over abstract notions of humanity which, in Arendt's opinion, were too easily perverted into "the abstract nakedness of being nothing but human" (300). Arendt's first book in English can be understood as an analysis of the processes through which the "juridical person" is torn from the traditions that give her "the right to have rights" (451). Her next major work, *The Human Condition* (1958), reformulates these traditions into ontological preconditions for people to act, speak, and "reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (*Human* 179; *Schmidt* 97).

The work that seemed to place Arendt most squarely in the conservative camp was one that perhaps made too many allowances for Southern customs and traditions. Or so it seemed to Arendt's liberal publishers and peers. Her essay on school desegregation, "Reflections on Little Rock," appeared in 1959 in *Dissent*. Arendt remarks in her preface that the article had been solicited but then rejected by *Commentary* because of her reservations about school desegregation. The editors of *Dissent* preface the preface by stating that while they do not agree with Arendt's opinions, they offer her a venue because of her "intellectual stature" and because they "believe in freedom of expression" (45). Arendt's seemingly conservative stance, already doubly

4 Arendt goes to great lengths to explain how concentration camps were designed to strip human beings of their human characteristics, beginning with their rights, so as to reduce them to raw material that could be molded through violence. However, this violent process presupposes first transforming Jews into stateless persons, which created an international crisis that led to the abolition of the "right of asylum," whose "sacred history dates back to the very beginnings of regulated political life" (*Origins* 280). The vulnerability of the right of asylum demonstrated the fictitious nature of the Universal Rights of Man.

insulated from the readers, is further framed by the response pieces affixed at the end; David Spitz directly targets her separation of the political from the social (56).

Much has been written on this essay, some of it suggesting that Arendt may have harbored unconsciously racist attitudes towards African Americans.⁵ Instead of engaging in debates about Arendt's alleged racism, I want to link her arguments about desegregation to her earlier writing and specifically to her experiences as a refugee. What is striking about "Reflections on Little Rock" is that Arendt returns to the concept of identity she first articulates in "We Refugees"—a move that Seyla Benhabib notes may be unique in her corpus (236). In other words, Arendt speaks from a collective subject-position and stresses the social importance of identifying with the oppressed. This would seem to align her with the kind of identitarian thinking that would soon come to dominate the New Left. However, she also argues that society is one thing and politics another, and this leads her to conclusions totally out of keeping with desegregation efforts. Both aspects of her thinking, I argue, reflect her refugee perspective but also, and more importantly, her conceptual separation of the social from the political.

The emphasis on collective identity is already evident in Arendt's preface, where she speaks "as an outsider" to the South and "as a Jew," and begs her readers to "take [her] sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed and under-privileged peoples for granted" because she takes it for granted herself ("Little Rock" 47). This is a weak profession of solidarity, which the article immediately bolsters by comparing the experiences of immigrants, who remain "audible" outsiders, to those of African Americans who remain "visible." The strength of this comparison is not the equivalency it posits between various forms of exclusion but the difference: "But 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

5 See Kathryn Gines, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*, for an overview of the debates. Any argument about Arendt's racism has to take account of her own developing ideas on racism in the United States. Her essay on "Civil Disobedience," collected in the 1970s volume *Crises of the Republic*, seems to qualify some of her earlier statements about the significance of protest and the significance of slavery in American history: "Not the law, but civil disobedience brought into the open the 'American dilemma' [this is a reference to Gunnar Myrdal] and, perhaps for the first time, forced upon the nation the recognition of the enormity of the crime, not just of slavery, but of chattel slavery—'unique among all such systems known to civilization'—the responsibility for which the people have inherited, together with so many blessings, from their forefathers" (81).

seen and heard, visibility and audibility are of prime importance" ("Little Rock" 47).

This important distinction between temporary and permanent markers of difference suggests a practical limit to Arendt's feeling of solidarity (though she always spoke English with a strong German accent). It also leads her to reflect on what keeps the United States the same in the face of so much difference. She remains true to another aspect of her immigrant experience here, arguing that what preserves American identity against successive waves of immigrant identities is the political principle that renders them equal. "In its all-comprehensive, typically American form," Arendt writes, "equality possesses an enormous power to equalize what by nature and origin is different—and it is only due to this power that the country has been able to retain its fundamental identity against the waves of immigrants who have always flooded its shores" ("Little Rock" 48; see also *Human* 214-15). If this suggests a limit to Arendt's solidarity, it also suggests a limit to her conservatism.

American tradition is not a custom in the sense of being the habitual practice of a particular group. Arendt distances herself from this sort of tribalism or localism by taking aim at William Faulkner, who famously stated he would defend Mississippi against federal intervention, even if Mississippians were wrong about segregation ("Little Rock" 47). From Arendt's point of view, this defense of custom makes Faulkner a European-style nationalist defending regional identity rather than a generalizable principle of citizenship ("Little Rock" 47). Arendt, on the contrary, endorses upholding a political tradition that is distinct from cultural traditions because it treats them all as equivalent. This equivalency must be granted to African Americans if the Republic is to remain true to its principles. It is here, I want to argue, that Arendt's experience as a refugee most strongly informs her arguments about segregation. She sees African Americans as citizens rendered foreign by unequal treatment and argues they must be allowed to naturalize in the name of equality—not for the sake of identity.

This distinction between equality and identity is an important one. Up to this point Arendt's position could be taken for a version of the kind of identity-based solidarity invoked by supporters of school desegregation. But while she sympathizes with the oppressed group, she identifies with the political principles that promise to neutralize—or naturalize—their difference. It is here that Arendt takes the turn that her editors found surprising, not because she is a conservative writing for liberal journals, but because her perspective—a refugee's perspective on naturalization—eschewed the liberal/conservative divide as it was developing during the Cold War. Arendt is neither a partisan of identity nor of tradition, which is essentially identity

understood in historical terms. She is a partisan of the public sphere. Indeed, like Richard Sennett, she would come to deplore “the fall of public man” for what it did to the *res-publica* or public thing, subordinating the common world, once distinct from the private, to the generalized intimacy of society, whose blending of the public and private effectively replaces politics with narcissistic displays of personal preference (Human 314-15).⁶

Arendt believed that the way to ensure equal rights—or the right to have rights—was not to force social acceptance but to sanction private choice and keep it private. This includes the inherently discriminatory choice of association (“Little Rock” 51). She supports her argument by drawing another parallel between African American and Jewish experience, in this case the experience of anti-Semitism at vacation resorts: “If as a Jew I wish to spend my vacations only in the company of Jews, I cannot see how anyone can reasonably prevent my doing so; just as I see no reason why other resorts should not cater to a clientele that wishes not to see Jews while on a holiday” (52). It seems strange that Arendt would countenance this sort of behavior, and stranger still that she would see vacation resorts as analogous to schools. The more obvious analogy for a segregated school would be exile, not travel.

6 I lack the space for a detailed comparison to Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man* (1974). However, there are numerous parallels between his account of the social as an expanded intimate sphere and Arendt’s account of the collapse of the public/private distinction. Sennett sees the modern emphasis on personality—basically a way of living out the private in public—as the expression of what is essentially a refugee perspective: “The development of personality today is the development of the personality of a refugee. Our fundamental ambivalence toward aggressive behavior comes out of this refugee mentality: aggression may be a necessity in human affairs, but we have come to think it an abhorrent personal trait” (260). People feel like refugees because they are alienated by both capitalism and politics. Sennett sees anti-Semitism, especially as it emerged through the Dreyfus affair, as a watershed event that encouraged liberals to abandon political principle for a feeling of solidarity: “The Dreyfus Affair involved the formation of community feeling at a national level; in contemporary society, this same formation of community is now tied to localism. The very fear of impersonality which governs modern society prompts people to envision community on an ever more restricted scale. If the self is narrowed to intentions, the sharing of this self is now narrowed to exclude those who are much different in terms of class, politics, or style. Absorption in motivation and localism: these are the structures of a culture built upon the crises of the past. They organize the family, the school, the neighborhood; they disorganize the city and the state” (263). This resonates both with Arendt’s argument that conflicts over schools take the place of real politics in Little Rock, and with her account of the social importance of the Dreyfus Affair: “Social factors [...] changed the course that mere political antisemitism would have taken if left to itself, and which might have resulted in anti-Jewish legislation and even mass expulsion but hardly in wholesale extermination” (Origins 87).

The attention to differences that allows her to distinguish between temporary and permanent markers of otherness, fails her here.

Perhaps this is because she seeks to draw another distinction—that between the political and the social—too starkly. In her efforts to defend the political principle of voluntary identification, Arendt neglects the political significance of identity. Identity can be an expression of personal choice, as when Jews decide to vacation with other Jews, but it also registers the way institutions form citizens, or disenfranchise them through exclusion. Identity, in other words, refers to both voluntary and involuntary associations—something Arendt had of course experienced first-hand as a refugee. As a former refugee, she wanted to make sure that involuntary associations did not become law. However, looking at segregation through the lens of anti-Semitism, as Benhabib puts it, she was misled by her own conceptual categories and simply defined the problem of extra- or supra-legal social organization out of existence (237). Society is not the same as politics if school policy can be described as the aggregate of personal choices, or so the logic goes. Thus, in her efforts to prevent social preferences from setting the political agenda, Arendt falsely assumes that society is as far away from politics as the Catskills are from New York—but no further.

As Benhabib argues, Arendt cannot have both political equality and social discrimination at the same time; they cannot coexist (242). Nevertheless, it is important to note that Arendt is neither arguing against political solutions to segregation, nor against Civil Rights legislation generally—just against their applicability to schooling and the social realm. Indeed, she argues that in many respects such legislation does not go far enough (“Little Rock” 49). African Americans should be guaranteed equality in the political realm, which includes voting, running for office, and equal access to transportation; they should also be able to marry whom they please. This is why, again speaking from experience, Arendt insists that the right to marry partners of any race or religion is even more fundamental than access to desegregated schools (“Little Rock” 45, 49). But just as the Supreme Court would never mandate mixed marriages, though it should sanction them, it should not mandate desegregation (49-50). Arendt sees schooling, like marriage or vacationing, as a private right—in this case, the right of parents to make decisions for their children. In her view, the right to have rights depends on maintaining the distinction between the political and the private. This means defining the in-between realm of the social as an aggregate of the private.

Arendt’s unorthodox position reflects her refugee perspective, not her liberal or conservative sensibility. Totalitarianism, to go back to *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, obliterates both the private and the political by transforming social discriminations into pernicious anti-political “ideals.” Arendt

does not want to forbid discrimination at the social level because doing so would be tantamount to mandating certain forms of sympathy (49). This could never work. She rather wants to prevent social preferences from becoming governing principles, as they did when Nuremberg laws criminalized mixed marriage in order to clearly distinguish those with rights from those without ("Little Rock" 53; Origins 300). Arendt's strict separation of the social from the political reflects what might be described as a Federalist belief in checks and balances provided by separate spheres: power, Arendt argues, is strengthened through pluralism; only force must be concentrated to be effective ("Little Rock" 54). Her position also reflects her reluctance to put children in difficult situations—to call on them to be heroes in the schoolyards when their parents cannot manage in the streets (50).

Today, most of us would probably reject Arendt's countenancing of anti-Semitic vacation resorts. We would also reject the analogy between resorts and schools. However, it seems to me that Arendt was right about the political primacy of enforcing equality over sympathizing with the oppressed. Indeed, her argument harmonizes with the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which determined that separate is not equal in matters of schooling. "Reflections on Little Rock" is an outlier essay when it comes to the Civil Rights debates, but it offers a reasonable—if flawed—next step in Arendt's systematic response to statelessness. Arendt the refugee stresses the importance of Jewish solidarity, but Arendt the citizen insists on naturalization. These positions are not incompatible. On the contrary, the only effective way to sympathize with refugees is to look at them as potential citizens, to provide a pathway from "We Refugees" to "We the People." Arendt identifies with outsiders but thinks that politics should preserve legal avenues of immigration, including for those rendered internal émigrés through racism. She was simply overly optimistic that segregated schools could become ports of entry, when in fact they barred their wards from full and equal citizenship.

Legalized racism, in Arendt's analysis, produces a kind of statelessness. Group identification is a valid and even commendable response to the experience of statelessness, but the true solution is citizenship. This argument, based on Arendt's own experiences, makes sense even if Arendt failed to see social discrimination as a political problem. That failure, I have argued, is due to her principled—but misguided—attempt to render the social as unpolitical, which is to say as private, as possible. I now want to compare her argument to a contemporary poem, or series of poems, that also brings together anti-Semitism and racism in its plea for citizenship. The poem I have in mind is W. H. Auden's "Refugee Blues."

Written in 1939, "Refugee Blues" soliloquizes the melancholy observations of a German Jewish refugee speaking to his silent interlocutor:

"Once

we had a country and we thought it fair, / Look in the atlas and you'll find it there: We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now" (265). This is a version of the subject position Arendt adopts in "We Refugees," but in Auden's case it both does and does not describe his experiences. The poem is lyrical and personal in its mode of presentation but is not, strictly speaking, autobiographical. Auden composed it four years after he married Erika Mann to provide her with British citizenship and the same year that he moved to the United States. Though Mann was of course German, and extremely vulnerable to Nazi persecution, neither she nor Auden was Jewish. They were also not the average married couple as neither one of them was straight. Theirs was purely a marriage of convenience intended to provide Mann with a passport out of Nazi Germany, and it did. Beginning in 1939, Auden lived with his partner, the Jewish American poet Chester Kallman, in New York. Thus the speaker of the poem is not Auden but potentially a collage of Auden's partners, legal and actual, and the exile he (or she) suffers—"If you've got no passport you're officially dead" (265)—is at least partially metaphorical, referring to the feeling of separation as much as to civil or actual death.

If Auden allows himself some poetic license with the theme of exile, he takes liberties with form as well. "Refugee Blues," as the title indicates, borrows its rhyme, meter, and narrative structure from the African American blues tradition. The second song in the series, "Calypso," draws on an Afro-Caribbean dance tradition, which it underscores by accenting syllables to mark the beat. These African American and Afro-Caribbean forms influence the treatment of the theme. The first poem, in keeping with the bleak outlook typical of the blues, ends with a dream in which the speaker and his partner are running on a snowy plain, pursued by soldiers with orders to kill. The second takes advantage of both the upbeat rhythm of Calypso, and the potential for gender-ambiguity in the parenthetical title ("Calypso" could also refer to Odysseus's mythological lover) to suggest that love is stronger than politics: "If I were the head of the Church or the State / I'd powder my nose and tell them to wait. / For love's more important and powerful than / Even a priest or a politician" (267, cited here without accent marks for typographical convenience). The series abandons these borrowed musical forms after the first two poems, but their influence on the theme—love conquering or conquered by politics—persists throughout. The final poem, published in 1947, marks a full return to Auden's trademark style, with its archaic vocabulary, metaphysical puns, and political commentary tinged with existential despair:

On and on and on
 The forthright catadoup
 Shouts at the stone-deaf stone;
 Over and over again,
 Singly or as a group,
 Weak diplomatic men
 With small defiant light
 Salute the incumbent night. (272)

These final lines also mark a return from the either/or treatment of the theme. The speaker finally abandons both the melancholy perseverance of the blues and the manic bombast of Calypso for a calmer and more resigned account of statelessness.

The resignation, marking a return from the earlier poetic license, also opens up the possibility for a kind of homecoming. Auden's poem comes back from exile and back from somewhat foreign forms. Homecoming is not citizenship, however. What the speaker returns to can only be described as a kind of asylum:

All, all, have rights to declare,
 Not one is man enough
 To be, simply, publicly, there
 With no private emphasis;
 So my embodied love,
 Which, like most feeling, is
 Half humbug and half true,
 Asks neighborhood of you. (272)

The "so" beginning the last clause must be read as both an analogy and a conclusion. The speaker is like the men who cannot live simply in public; he also retreats to the neighborhood of his lover because the inhospitability of that public proves inadequate to his private emphasis or needs. It is not clear whether the half-hearted declaration of affection—is "embodied love" true love, passion, or just actual love as opposed to an ideal?—resolves the problems of emotional exile that have haunted the series. Because it is flawed, like most human feeling, the love is not completely true. Nor is it straight, which is of course the implication of this particular embodiment, if the addressee is indeed, as I suspect, Auden's actual lover. Up to this point the series has presented itself in drag, draping the verse in half-appropriate themes and forms; these borrowed vestments half-conceal, half-reveal the non-humbuggery of Auden's feelings, which are finally outed as queer. The formal and thematic innuendos are, in other words, a version of camp. The poetry thus reveals—by concealing—the autobiography behind the lyricism,

which places Auden's desire in the closet. This is why the poem must end in asylum rather than full citizenship. The speaker makes a personal choice that cannot be fully recognized in public and therefore is not political—at least not in an Arendtian sense.

Auden invokes the ongoing debates in the United Nations over the Human Rights Convention, which would be officially declared just after the completion of this poem, to show that universal rights have no jurisdiction in his case. This is not because he is in the wrong nation. Rather, he cannot insist on the right to marry whom he pleases. Gay marriage was nowhere near being legalized in 1947. Even queer desire has to be hinted at, for instance through ethnic impersonation. The "neighborhood" Auden refers to is thus a replacement for official recognition, but it is neither public nor private. It is a community relegated to the shadows—seen perhaps in glimpses but not officially recognized. The gay community has a second-class status, in some ways similar to the status of segregated schools.

After the deaths of Kallman and Blücher, Auden proposed to Arendt. He seemed to believe in the institution of marriage, though of course he did not need to get married to remain in New York. Both Arendt and Auden had long been naturalized American citizens. Arendt turned him down gently—something she only mentioned in a couple of letters to her friend Mary McCarthy (*Between Friends* 269-72). I'd like to see this friendly rejection as more than the expression of a personal preference—perhaps even an acknowledgment of the limits of private rights to solve political problems. This is reading too much into the anecdote, of course, but I think that Auden nevertheless offers an important corrective to Arendt. They both agree on the importance of legal remedies to exile, and they are both skeptical about the jurisdiction of universalized human rights. However, Auden seems to sense that the social is political even when it is not the same as politics. He refuses, in other words, to reduce the social to an aggregate of personal choices.

This politicized social sphere goes by many names in cultural studies: identity is one of them. Identity, evoking both the continuity of personal experiences and their impersonal or group-specific significance, points to the limits of individuality—and the limits of individual rights, like choosing a partner or a school, to alter patterns of social exclusion. In other words, identity points to the way individual choices are shaped by norms that are not exactly legal but that cannot simply be ignored. Poetry can represent these norms, for instance through form and theme, but cultural representation is not the same as political representation. That is why writers turn to drag, which is really just another name for style. Arendt was also a stylist, but her drag sometimes assumed the form of an American patriotism that could come across as insensitive to victims of the "American dilemma."

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