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## **Little Rock Revisited – On the Challenges of Training One’s Imagination to Go Visiting**

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# Little Rock Revisited

## On the Challenges of Training One's Imagination to Go Visiting

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### Abstract

In this working paper, I ask whether or not whites could and should write about concerns of People of Color. To this end, I deal with Hannah Arendt's controversial article "Reflections on Little Rock" from winter 1958/59. In her article, Arendt comments on the de-segregation of black school children in the USA and the associated unrests in Little Rock (Arkansas) and Charlotte (North Carolina) on September 4, 1957. My analysis of her article is initiated by a confrontation of two other texts. In the first, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* Reni Eddo-Lodge argues that white people are not able to understand the point of view of people of color. In the second, *On Kant's Political Philosophy* Hannah Arendt advocates for the contrary that people can understand each other's point of view when training their imagination to take visits. Since Arendt's "Reflections on Little Rock" is considered to be a failure, especially in regards of grasping the problems of people of color in the USA, my general question is whether Eddo-Lodge is right, and whether there is no understanding possible or if Arendt missed a crucial step in her own attempt to go visiting? To clarify this, my analysis focuses on Arendt's use of the term "discrimination".

**Key words:** *Reni Eddo-Lodge, Hannah Arendt, Immanuel Kant, Ralph Ellison, Racism, Thinking, Enlarged Mentality, Discrimination, Segregation, Integration, Black Lives Matter*

## I. Who can talk and write about racism?

I am not affected by racism in the first place. I am white, male and I have a German passport. I hereby mark my standpoint because it points to the most unfavorable situation imaginable to speak about issues of racism. I simply do not know how racism would affect me because I have never experienced racism related to skin color. Therefore, I am clearly not qualified to write nor talk about matters concerning people of color. However, other authors do. One of the most famous intervention on this topic has been provided by Hannah Arendt. In her article “Reflections on Little Rock”, she comments the unrest regarding the de-segregation of schools in the USA in Little Rock (Arkansas) and Charlotte (North Carolina) on September 4, 1957. Just like me, she puts some words before. However, unlike me, she justifies her comment on the happenings:

I should like to remind the reader that I am writing as an outsider. I have never lived in the South and have even avoided occasional trips to Southern states because they would have brought me into a situation that I personally would find unbearable. Like most people of European origin I have difficulty in understanding, let alone sharing, the common prejudices of Americans in this area. Since what I wrote may shock good people and be misused by bad ones, I should like to make it clear that as a Jew I take my sympathy for the cause of the Negroes as for all oppressed or underprivileged peoples for granted and should appreciate it if the reader did likewise. (Arendt 1959/I: 45)

This statement marks a crucial point. Is Arendt entitled, despite highlighting her Jewishness, to write about racism against people of color? Is adhering to a persecuted minority a justification for writing on other minorities, and to address them with [n-word]? Is she able as a white person to grasp what racism for people of color is like, how it works and how it affects them? Not only are these questions specific to Arendt, they also lead to more fundamental questions: Can one address issues that do not concern anybody but oneself? Can the gap between affected and not affected people be bridged? And if not, what does that, in turn, mean for social and political issues? What situation or what abilities can actually allow people to understand something they obviously will never experience in the same way? Since Hannah Arendt’s article is commonly said to be a failure in this regard, I want to reconstruct the main arguments of the text on Little Rock in order to suggest a way out of this dilemma.

However, first of all, I will briefly summarize two other texts to show the range of the problem. On the one hand, Reni Eddo-Lodge argues in her book *Why I No Longer Talk to White People About Race* that there is no understanding of black issues by white people possible. On the other hand, Hannah Arendt advocates in her lectures on *On Kant’s Political Philosophy* for a universal ability to make visits by imagination, which shall be the basis to make political and critical judgments. In that way I ask, who and how is someone allowed to speak on matters of people of color?

British author, journalist, blogger, and person of color Reni Eddo-Lodge has dedicated a very illuminating book to the topic of whether white people are able to understand the standpoint of

people of color. *Why I No Longer Talk to White People About Race* aims to address the injustices that are rooted in traditional and systemic racism. Eddo-Lodge claims that white people cannot understand people of color and are rarely able to grasp the implications of being white or non-white. White people, Eddo-Lodge insinuates, live and move confidently and trouble-free in the world, whereas people of color always feel like strangers. In other words, the world is not given to people of color the same way it is given white people, as a matter of course. Eddo-Lodge says:

I can no longer have this conversation, because we're often coming at it from completely different places. I can't have a conversation with them about the details of a problem if they don't even recognize that the problem exists. Worse still is the white person who might be willing to entertain the possibility of said racism, but who thinks we enter this conversation as equals. We don't.  
(Eddo-Lodge: xi)

Eddo-Lodge draws attention to the fact that the history of the people of color has been discriminated against and kept under cover. Our common culture, such as films and literature, depicts a predominantly white world. The traditional and familiar experience of everyday life is white, not black, nor yellow nor brown. Eddo-Lodge calls this structural racism; which whites do not even acknowledge as such. White people in a white everyday life are blinded and cannot see the difference towards the life of people of color, and therefore whites act like there was no difference at all (Eddo-Lodge: 76-77). Eddo-Lodge states: "Color blindness does not accept the legitimacy of structural racism or a history of white racial dominance." (Eddo-Lodge: 83) According to her, being white is a privilege as it is the absence of the feeling of being a stranger in the first place. "White Privilege is an absence of the negative consequences of racism." (Eddo-Lodge: 86) We all know that in this world, there are many other reasons to feel like being a stranger or foreigner, but I think we should take this point seriously. White privilege primarily denotes, on the one hand, the everyday unawareness of the relevance of skin color and, on the other hand, the veiled advantages and the opportunities associated with it (Eddo-Lodge: 116).

White Privilege gives rise to the fundamental problem of understanding each other, which I consider to be a problem of epistemological relevance: Eddo-Lodge raises the question: "Why am I saying one thing, and white people are hearing something completely different?" (Eddo-Lodge: 215) She describes white people's tendency towards occupying a universal point of view, which they are unaware of, and from which they therefore systematically relativize the experience of people of color. Eddo-Lodge draws a conclusion from this: "The politics of whiteness transcends the color of anyone's skin. It is an occupying force in the mind. It is a political ideology that is concerned with maintaining power through domination and exclusion." (Eddo-Lodge: 170)

I do not want to dwell on the consequences of racism any further, mainly because of the main reservations that Eddo-Lodge made the subject of her book. Her text, however, appears in contrast to one of Hannah Arendt's most essential findings of in her lectures on *Kant's Political Philosophy*, namely that critical thinking is the ability to take on someone else's point of view and thereby gain the ability to better reflect on common concerns.

Arendt's finding is rooted in her astonishment about Adolf Eichmann and the question of what made him work on the killing of six million Jews. Remarkable, as she thinks, "was his almost total inability ever to look at anything from the other fellow's point of view" (Arendt 1963/2006: 47). Moreover, according to Arendt, Eichmann spoke only in phrases and folk wisdom leading Arendt to conclude that he was incapable of thinking (Arendt 1963/2006: 49), and only capable of "consoling himself with clichés" (Arendt 1963/2006: 55). For all of this, Arendt ultimately invented the catchphrase "the banality of evil" (Arendt 1963/2006: 252). But what does "inability to think" mean? In her essay "Thinking and Moral Considerations", which appeared a few years after the Eichmann book, she explicitly comes back to Eichmann and asks in a general way what thinking is to unveil what he was lacking. (Arendt 2003: 159)

This still seems very strange to us. It is quite difficult to imagine that the chief dispatcher of the Holocaust was not able to think. Someone who has built an Europe-wide infrastructure of industrial killing must have been able to think. According to Arendt, however, there is a difference between knowing (how to do things) and thinking (about things). Hereby, Arendt refers to Immanuel Kant's distinction between knowledge and thinking, or between intellect and reason: "We owe Kant the distinction between thinking and knowing, between reason, the urge to think and to understand, and the intellect, which desires and is capable of certain, verifiable knowledge." (Arendt 2003: 163) Knowing denotes the ability to recognize something in its presence and to connect it logically to other things, while thinking is the ability to abstract from oneself and imagine the life and feelings of, for example, other people.

This distinction needs further explanation: According to Arendt, in knowing we dedicate ourselves to the objects that are present. That is, to those things that we can experience. In contrast to this, thinking always has to do with objects "that are absent, removed from direct sense of perception." (Arendt 2003: 165) Arendt states: "An object of thought is always a representation, that is, something or somebody that is actually absent and present only to the mind which, by virtue of imagination, can make it present in the form of an image." (Arendt 2003: 165) It means that when we are thinking we are set apart from the current events. We are with our thoughts somewhere else. It also means that by thinking we are able to imagine the suffering of other people although they are not in the near distance. That is the capacity Eichmann lacked. He could build the infrastructure which made the Holocaust possible, but according to Arendt, he was not able to imagine that Jews are human people. In the posthumously published lecture series *Kant's Political Philosophy*, Arendt, therefore, calls thinking the "enlargement of the mind" (Arendt 1992: 42).

Here, we arrive at a very crucial point. The "enlargement of the mind" becomes Arendt's catch for her late political theory. "Enlargement of mind" is a universal tool and represents the ability to think from other people's positions. It means to think in their place, using one's own imagination. Arendt says: "comparing our judgment with the possible rather than the actual judgement of others, and by putting ourselves in the place is called imagination" (Arendt 1992: 43). She quotes Kant again and refers to the capacity of imagination. "Imagination (*facultas imaginandi*) is a faculty of perception in the absence of an object" (Arendt 1992: 79). According to Kant and Arendt, the faculty of imagination is the human ability to mentally step out of one's

own position in order to grasp how an object looks from a different angle. This way of thinking is that of an “enlarged mentality”. But apparently, no one is born with that kind of mentality. Therefore, Arendt says: “enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting.” (Arendt 1992: 43)

Arendt sends a warning regarding this finding: “The trick of critical thinking does not consist in an enormously enlarged empathy through which one can know what actually goes on in the mind of all others“ (KPP: 43), quite the contrary. It should rather serve to free us from holding on to our own prejudices that we carry within us. We are not able to take the standpoint of others, but we are able to deconstruct our standpoint with the help of the enlarged way of thinking:

‘Enlarged thought’ is the result of first ‘abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgment,’ of disregarding its ‘subjective private conditions..., by which so many are limited,’ that is, dis-regarding what we usually call self-interest, which, according to Kant, is not enlightened or capable of enlightenment but is in fact limiting. (Arendt 1992: 43)

By this, enlarged thinking is a process of being aware of one’s own limitation. Moreover, it will help us see other people differently, or in a broader context. Finally, it guides our judgments.

Referencing on Eddo-Lodge’s arguments, it seems highly doubtful that thinking is possible in the way Arendt conceptualized it with Kant. Especially the universal approach is doubtful: How can one be sure to recognize the standpoint of others? How can one be sure that they are truly reflecting on the other point of view? How can one adopt another’s point of view while it is still them who think and judge? Because of this, it is doubtful, if people can abstract from themselves or train their imagination to make visits to places where they never have been before. Or to put it differently: How can I understand a person who will obviously never be myself? Is this really possible as Arendt seems to suggest?

My close look at Arendt’s article “Reflections on Little Rock” tries to answer these questions. Because in this article Arendt undertakes the “try to go visiting”, remarkably not without elaboration *her* point of view.

## **II. Reflection on Little Rock**

“Reflection on Little Rock” is one of the most popular examples of Arendt’s attempt to think with an enlarged mentality. Besides her book on Adolf Eichmann, this text is also known as one of her biggest misjudgments. Moreover, it is often argued that Arendt shows a racist attitude in her article. In the following, I do not want to clarify whether or not Arendt was a racist. However, I would like to ask the following question: What does her likely misjudgment tell us about the ability of a white person to talk about racism? What does it say about the enlargement of thought? Does enlarged thinking work? Or does it have limits? Is this kind of universal thinking possible? In this sense, the question arises of whether Reni Eddo-Lodge is right when saying that it is pointless to talk to whites about racism?



I would like to briefly situate the text before I'm going to highlight key arguments that will help me answer the questions mentioned above.

On September 4, 1957, the persons of color Dorothy Geraldine Counts in Charlotte (North Carolina) and Elizabeth Eckfort in Little Rock (Arkansas) are allowed to attend a white high school for the first time. This is supposed to finally end segregation in schools – which is still common in several Federal States. In both cities, the situation escalates. In Charlotte, Dorothy Counts is insulted by white students but she is able to enter the high school. In Little Rock, Governor Orval E. Faubus of Arkansas sends the National Guard to prevent Elizabeth Eckfort and her black classmates from entering. A day later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower eventually dispatches the 101 Airborne Division to escort the students into the school.

Both events are covered by the *New York Times* (NYT: 1, 20) and a few weeks later by *Life Magazine* (LIFE: 24-31). The *Times* and *Life Magazine* use the same photos of that day.<sup>1</sup> But *Life Magazine* compiles the photos in such a way that hardly anyone can distinguish which photos were taken in Little Rock and which in Charlotte. Dorothy Counts and Elizabeth Eckfort are virtually cropped together. *Life Magazine* was published on September 16, barely two weeks after the events. The front page of the *New York Times* is from September 5, a day after the events occurred. Here too, both girls are pictured, but in very clearly separated photos. Eckfort above in a light dress, Counts below in a dark one. In addition, the *New York Times* – in contrast to *Life Magazine* – describes the events in two separate articles. The article on Charlotte simply recounts the events as Dorothy Counts is escorted to school by family friend Dr. Edward Thompkins. The second article describes the events in Little Rock in more detail. The article also discusses the deployment of the National Guard. This deployment, however, counters a Supreme Court ruling that outlawed segregation in 1954 and called for the integration of people of color. Because of this dispute, a telegram from Governor Faubus to President Eisenhower is attached to the article (NYT: 20). In the telegram, Faubus stresses that the federal court's ruling would be an encroachment on state sovereignty. Moreover, he says that his concern was the maintenance of "peace and good order," which he felt was in jeopardy at the time. Therefore, he says, did he send the National Guard in the first place. The *New York Times* shows that the events mark not only a dispute between black and white, but also between a Federal State and the US-Government. I will come back to this point, but before I would like to ask why Arendt commented on the events.

Apparently, the journal *Commentary* had asked Arendt for an article quite soon after these events. At least that is what Arendt herself says in the preface to the article, which then does not appear in *Commentary* in 1957 but in the magazine *Dissent* one year later (Arendt 1959/I: 45-56). *Commentary* rejected Arendt's article, due to a controversy over its content. The text thus appeared more than one year later in the journal *Dissent* in the winter of 1958/59. In the *Dissent* issue, Arendt's text was accompanied by a warning: "We publish it, not because we

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<sup>1</sup> LIFE Magazin is completely digitalized on Google Books:  
[https://books.google.de/books?id=VD8EAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs\\_all\\_issues\\_r&cad=1](https://books.google.de/books?id=VD8EAAAAMBAJ&source=gbs_all_issues_r&cad=1)



agree with it – quite the contrary! – but because we believe in freedom of expression.” (Arendt 1959/I: 45) The text was also followed by two rebuttals by David Spitz and Melvin Tumin (Spitz: 56-65, Tumin: 65-71). One issue later, in spring 1959, Arendt answered her critics in a statement of her own (Arendt 1959/II 179-181).

These time gaps are not insignificant. While Arendt’s actual article responds to a current event and has been written in 1957, she wrote the preliminary remarks quoted above for the *Dissent* in 1958, and she wrote a response to her critics a few weeks later – perhaps in early 1959. These intervals are important in order to be able to consider the form of the thinking and judgement. But more on this later.

Before, let me highlight some arguments of the text, which is not properly published in the book *Responsibility and Judgment* of Jerome Kohn (Arendt 2003: 193-213), and misses the preliminary remarks written for *Dissent*, but starts with Arendt’s reply to her critics of 1959. However, I think the preliminary comments are remarkable.

Firstly, in the preface she opposes the “repetition of liberal clichés” (Arendt 1959/I: 45). One can only guess what she means by this, but apparently Arendt disliked the reactions of the so-called liberal, probably more left-wing elites of her time. Secondly, Arendt parades minorities when she claims “oppressed minorities were never the best judges on the order of priorities” (Arendt 1959/I: 46) when it comes to the difference between social issues and human or political rights. This is remarkable because Arendt’s difference between the social and the political occur out of the blue and is not explained. One gets immediately the impression she puts aside social questions – which would mean she puts aside what hurts people first.<sup>2</sup> Third, Arendt makes a biographical argument, which I already quoted above. She admits to be “an outsider”, but she also says that as a Jewish woman she sympathizes with “all oppressed and underprivileged peoples”. These three points mark Arendt’s point of view: She sees herself as an intellectual outsider, but also as a person with experiences of being not welcomed. It is probably part of the tragedy of the article that Arendt neither reflects on this point of view nor moves away from it. More on that later, too.

In the following, Arendt discusses the forced integration of black students and what happened on September 4 on three levels. I am leaning on Maike Weißpflug’s differentiation of Arendt’s arguments here (Weißpflug: 62-98).

The first level of arguments concerns the constitutional level. In particular, Arendt doubts the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court in this line of reasoning. On the one hand, she argues that the Supreme Court is not responsible for the practice of racial segregation, but can only decide whether it could be “legally enforced”. According to Arendt, this should not be allowed (Arendt 1959/I: 49). There should be no legal basis for segregation. But that does not mean that integration should be forced. Integration is a social process, not a political one. Therefore, this is followed by a normative gradation of rights, according to which the human right to marry

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<sup>2</sup> In her later writing this difference is more elaborated but never explained sufficiently.

someone and to build a household as well as the right to vote take precedence over the right to choose where to go to school.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Arendt doubts whether the Supreme Court and the federal government are responsible for the constitutional affairs of the states. At this point, she agrees with Governor Faubus, who opposed federal government interference in Arkansas affairs. With this, Arendt reacts very clearly to the reporting in *The New York Times*. Although she describes Faubus' involvement with the National Guard an „extraordinary misbehavior“ (Arendt 1959/I: 49), she argues that nothing should damage the separation of powers, because that would result in an unpredictable concentration of power (Arendt 1959/I: 54). However, she ignores the fact that Faubus himself, by encroaching on the sovereignty of the counties who are responsible for the high schools, circumvents the principle of separation of powers in his own way. Since I'm not a constitutional lawyer or a political scientist, I do not want to discuss this level any further.

On a second – and more systematic – level, Arendt discusses the difference between equality and distinction. By doing so, she differentiates between political and social spheres. Both are diametrically opposed to each other in questions of equality and distinction. In these arguments, a racist attitude on the part of Arendt seems to show. It is sparked by the word “discrimination”.

In order to be able to act in the political sphere, according to Arendt, equality is the prerequisite or the formative principle. Without equality in politics, there could be no debate, only violence. No democracy is possible without the equality of votes in an election, and the equality of participants in a democratic decision-making process – that's how I would like to sum up Arendt's argumentation here. In contrast to that, the social level would be determined by the principle of differentiation or separation. Here, she makes a concession to plurality, that is, that no person is like another. According to her, on the social level people are different “by nature” (Arendt 1959/I: 48). This led to opposition early on. Her critics complained about the choice of words “by nature” or “natural, physical characteristics”. Additionally, and in relation to this, they criticized whether Arendt argued against equal starting positions in life, such as a comparable school education, and she is therefore said to have a questionable attitude towards people's possibilities of changing their living perspectives (Tumin: 67 and 71).

However, the most bewildering point is her use of the word “discrimination”. According to Arendt, “discrimination is as indispensable a social right as equality is a political right.” Moreover, she suggests that “without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear.” (Arendt 1959/I: 51)

The strange thing about the sentences is the juxtaposition of discrimination and the possibilities of union and association. At some later point in time, Arendt concretized this wording with the example according to which one must be able to freely choose with whom they would like to spend one's vacation, for example among Jews in special holiday resorts (Arendt 1959 / I: 52)

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<sup>3</sup> This is a very Arendtian point of view, which has its roots in her theory on property. For Arendt, property is the basis for participation in politics and society because it frees one from the burden of belonging to someone else.

or, as I would like to say, perhaps only under LGBTIQ+ people in special clubs which excludes straight people. She states “There cannot be a right to go into any hotel or recreation area or place of amusement, because many of these are in the realm of the purely social where the right to free association, and therefore to discrimination, has greater validity than the principle of equality.” (Arendt 1959/I: 52).

As you can see, I keep stumbling across this idiosyncratic use of the word discrimination and there is a reason for that. In the English language “discrimination” does not only have the pejorative meaning that we are mostly familiar with, especially in German. Heinrich Blücher, Hannah Arendt’s second husband, also uses the word “discrimination” in his lectures *Sources of Creative Power*. There, however, “discrimination” is equated to “differentiation” (Blücher: 15/2). In his reply to Arendt, her critic David Spitz also uses the word “discrimination” first and foremost in the context of “we distinguish, we discriminate, between its beneficent and baneful application.” (Spitz: 56) Moreover, if one looks up the expression in an English dictionary, one will find at least three meanings: 1. “unfair treatment of someone because of their religion, race, or other personal features”. This use is indicated by the concretization “against”. 2. “the ability to judge whether or not something is good or suitable”, and 3. “the ability to recognize the difference between things” (Macmillan: 387). Discrimination thus refers either to “unfair treatment” or to differentiation. However, it is not related to an unfair treatment per se.

Arendt’s use of the term “discrimination” seems arbitrary and idiosyncratic. Sydney Hook, who wrote the very first critic of Arendt’s article, sums up the problem as follows: “The nub of many [...] error[s] here is the confusion, where social relationships and memberships in social groups are involved, between ‘discriminating against’ and ‘discriminating between’ and treating them as synonymous expressions.” (Hook: 12). Does Arendt really don’t know how to use the term? This seems highly questionable, especially because Arendt is very deliberate with words. If we look into the text, we see Arendt also uses the concretization “against” only twice.

What matters here is not personal distinction but the differences by which people belong to certain groups whose very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain. In American society, people group together, and therefore discriminate against each other, along lines of profession, income, and ethnic origin, while in Europe the lines run along class origin, education, and manners. (Arendt 1959/I: 52)

By writing about “discrimination against”, Arendt refers, on the one hand, to a historical description of existing unfair discrimination but, on the other hand, she points towards the fact of excluding and demarcating in the sense of protecting one’s own group “whose very identifiability demands that they discriminate against other groups in the same domain.” (Arendt 1959/I: 52) This double sense of historical injustice and the demarcation of one group against another is the problem here. Arendt connects the hostility against certain groups with a characteristic of empowerment from the common need of the groups to defend themselves against this hostility. In all other cases, where Arendt uses the term “discrimination”, she does

not mean this kind of treatment and reaction towards it. There, the word is clearly associated with the delimitation of separate areas, in which people can gather as a group and the belonging to one another becomes visible. However, if Sidney Hook was right, it would be better to use “between” or generally “distinction” to specify this (Hook: 12).

If you take this type of meaning into account, as I am doing here, Arendt, by discrimination, means in many instances nothing more than distinguishing features in order not to get lost in the crowd and be neglected. Social discrimination points to possibilities of staying “among yourself,” that is to say, in today’s language, of creating *safe spaces*. And in this sense, there can be no right to prevent discrimination and there can be no law to enforce discrimination.

Nevertheless, it is still a mystery to me why Arendt insisted on the word “discrimination”. She uses the word “separation” in similar passages in the *Human Condition* (e.g. Arendt 1958: 28 and chapter 7, 8, 9). In contrast, in her *Origins of Totalitarianism*, she almost consistently uses “discrimination” in the pejorative form (e.g.: Arendt 1958/1951: 55). Therefore, the use of the word “discrimination” is highly interesting in relation to the development of Arendt’s thinking. I suppose that we can see Arendt’s systematic effort to find the appropriate English terms in this. In this sense, “Little Rock” is more of a failed attempt between the *Origins of Totalitarianism* and the *Human Condition*. Her use of “discrimination” can be seen as a marker of her searching for the right terms in political theory rather than a term to describe the situation of people of color. It is also a term related to her own experiences of discrimination being a Jew. Therefore, her writing on discrimination does miss the problem of people of color in the USA .

This brings me to the third level and back to my initial question. Is there a chance to understand other people’s point of view? Is there a chance for white people to see the standpoint of people of color? Or is Reni Eddo-Lodge right when refusing to talk with white people because they are not able to grasp the cause of people of color? Why did Arendt write about the events in Little Rock and Charlotte anyway?

On a very personal level, Arendt discusses the role of the teenagers who were sent to white high schools on September 4. Central to this argument is a description of the pictures I mentioned before. There is still uncertainty as to which image Hannah Arendt actually refers when writing (see also Weißpflug: 74, Berkowitz 137).

I think no one will find it easy to forget the photograph reproduced in newspapers and magazines throughout the country, showing a Negro girl, accompanied by a white friend of her father, walking away from school, persecuted and followed into bodily proximity by a jeering and grimacing mob of youngsters. The girl, obviously, was asked to be a hero – that is, something neither her absent father nor the equally absent representatives of the NAACP felt called upon to be. (Arendt 1959/I: 50)

And even one year later, Arendt explicitly remembers the photo in the written response to her critics:

The point of my reflections was a picture in the newspaper showing a Negro girl on her way home from a newly integrated school: she was persecuted by a mob of white children, protected by a white friend of her father, and her face bore eloquent witness to the obvious fact that she was not precisely happy. (Arendt 1959/II: 179)

I am sure Arendt refers to the photo taken from the *New York Times* from September 5 in which, regrettably or through negligent cursory observation or bad memory, she added the remarks one year later, she mistook Dorothy Count's father's black friend for a white man. Because only in the *Times* article is this man named as Dr. Edward Thompkins and a friend of her father. Where else could she have gotten this information from? Regarding the picture, what is really astonishing is not the question of which picture Arendt has in mind, but her obvious emotional involvement. This is supported by the question she posed to herself: "What would you do if you were a Negro mother?" (Arendt 1959/II: 179) and her answer "under no circumstances would I expose my child to conditions which made it appear as though it wanted to push its way into a group where it was not wanted." (Arendt 1959/I: 179)

In her opinion, this pupils are unprotected in society for the first time. They had to leave the security of the private space and are suddenly among others who they do not know and who do not know them. The point that students have no choice whatsoever seems important to Arendt. She even speaks of the adults shifting their problems onto the children. She thinks that the adults put vulnerable children in a situation where they would be exposed to hatred without protection from the private realm.

We all know Arendt's assessment of Martin Heidegger's remarks about being thrown into the world.<sup>4</sup> To her, nothing was more disconcerting and inhuman than this sudden being thrown without even having a kind of protective armor. In this sense, Arendt's considerations are at least understandable, provided that she thinks about protecting the children. – But they were not at all. Arendt confuses her experiences with that of the children. She judges emphatically.

Of all the texts I know of Arendt, this is the only one in which Arendt takes a decidedly personal point of view. She abandons the constitutional argument as well as the systematic level. This seems to be an almost irreparable slip on her part. Arendt is trying to pass judgment about a situation not by learning to understand the point of view of the mother or the children, and thus perhaps also her own. Instead, she takes her own biographical, antisemitic experiences as a yardstick and does not reflect at all on how she brings prejudices into play that may have protected her but are completely worthless to the students of color in the United States.

It was black writer Ralph W. Ellison who publicly pointed out this mistake to Arendt. In 1965 he indicated in an interview with Warren Penn that the reality of life for the people of color was already shaped by hostility. Children could not learn to deal with it early enough. Arendt "has absolutely no conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents when they send their

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<sup>4</sup> "Heidegger is wrong: man is not 'thrown', 'in the world' – no differently from animals – onto the earth. Man is precisely guided, not thrown, precisely for that reason his continuity arises and the way he belongs appears. Poor us, if we are thrown into the world." Arendt 2003c: 549, August 1955 (68). Translation Samantha Rose Hill. Hill: 143.

kids through those lines of hostile people” (Warren: 344). Arendt would not have understood the “ideal of sacrifice” and the “rite of initiation” associated with it in order to prepare the young people for an already hard and hostile life. After Arendt read this interview, she writes very briefly to Ralph Ellison:

You are entirely right: it is precisely the ‘ideal of sacrifice’ which I didn’t understand: and since my starting point was a consideration of the situation of Negro kids in forcibly integrated schools, this failure to understand caused me indeed to go into an entirely wrong direction. [...] I now see that I simply didn’t understand the complexities in the situation. (Arendt 1965)

You notice that up to this point I have dealt quite defensively with Arendt’s article and actually could not find racism anywhere. In this reply, however, a tragic disinterest in the life and faith of people of color flickers in Arendt’s thinking. Marie Luise Knott spoke in an article in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in October 2020 of a quick reply to Ellison that Arendt would have written shortly before a new trip (Knott). Maïke Weißpflug sees a failure of judgment in the text “Little Rock” anyway. She thinks that Arendt’s inability to understand the situation of the people of color simply shows the limits of judgment in the imagination (Weißpflug: 84). As understandable as these two attempts to defend Arendt retrospectively are, they also ignore the fact that Arendt had a lot of time to train her “imagination to go visiting“ and therefore come to a reflective judgment.

What I find particularly remarkable in the answer to Ellison is that Arendt has made no attempt anywhere in the years since 1957 to really pursue an understanding or a thinking with an enlarged mentality. She judged simply on the basis of a photograph and her own experiences. Maïke Weißpflug remarks quite correctly: “Judging on the basis of a photo, especially a media-staged image, is always problematic and precarious.” (Weißpflug: 84) I agree that Arendt should never have made her assumptions regarding Little Rock based on a mere photograph, and certainly not on the basis of her own experiences as a Jew in Germany. One’s own fate, in spite of one’s good will, does not justify judgments based on it. More than anything, however, it is bewildering that since and despite 1957 and the debate about the article in the editorial office of the *Commentary*, Arendt has not been able to occupy herself more thoroughly with the cause of the people of color. Arendt has not moved away from her point of view of the first draft of the article for *Commentary* in 1957. Instead, she simply published the same version one year later in *Dissent* and has not even changed her mind within the answer to her critics in spring 1959, almost one and a half years later. Moreover, not even Ellison was worth more than 20 lines, almost eight years later! At no point did Arendt think of a “conception of what goes on in the minds of Negro parents” and at no point did she take thinking with enlarged mentality into consideration.



## IV. Conclusion

But what could Arendt have done in 1957 and 1958 when the publication was pending and in the following years? She could have done the same that she did before writing *Origins of Totalitarianism*. She should have surveyed literature, gaining experience before judging. A single book might have sufficed for that aim, although at least four critically acclaimed ones were on the market in the 1950s: Richard Wright's *Native Son* (published 1940) and James Baldwin's reply to it, *Notes of a Native Son* (published 1955), or Ann Petry's *The Street* (published 1946), and of course Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (published 1952). The plots of the latter two works of fiction were taking place practically on Arendt's doorstep, on 116th Street and on 7th and 8th Avenue. A stone's throw away from Morningside Drive, where Arendt and her husband lived until 1959!

The text "Little Rock" does not show the limits of judgment, as Maike Weißflug has it, but rather points to something essential. "Training one's imagination to go visiting," of which Arendt speaks in her lecture *On Kant's Political Philosophy*, requires a bit of work and not just a cursory glance at a photo, in which even black and white are confused. Every enlarged thinking must be preceded by intense work. This work can consist of researching in Harlem, which was certainly not without danger for a white woman then,<sup>5</sup> or of devoting oneself to art and literature, as Arendt practically always did. Arendt could have very well attained a comprehensive picture of what might be going on inside the mind of the mother of a black child and what might be going on within the child themselves, considering that there were all kinds of literature on that.

So let me come to an end with a look at Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and two quotations from it. In the last third of the book, the unnamed main character mourns his best friend, who was shot by a police officer shortly before:

His name was Tod Clifton and he was full of illusions. He thought he was a man when he was only Tod Clifton. He was shot for a simple mistake of judgment and he bled and his blood dried and shortly the crowd trampled out the stains. It was a normal mistake of which many are guilty. He thought he was a man and that men were not meant to be pushed around. But it was hot downtown and he forgot his history, he forgot the time and the place. He lost his hold on reality. (Ellison: 457)

Black people, as Ellison wants to put it here, cannot just walk downtown New York City and forget their history. They must always remember that they are not able to be somewhere they want the way it feels natural for white people. They need to be more attentive. If they forget this, they are risking their lives. What is a warning for black people should be a reminder for us white people, a reminder of the unacceptable conditions that many fellow people are burdened with.

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<sup>5</sup> But not impossible, as Simone de Beauvoir shows in her memories of visiting Harlem with her friend Richard Wright (sic!) in 1947. De Beauvoir: 55 pp.



In another much earlier scene, the unnamed main character is discovered as talented speaker and asked to speak in front of a gathering of people of color. In this meeting he develops a new self-confidence, he is seen for the first time:

I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong, I feel able to get things done! I feel that I can see sharp and clear and far down the dim corridor of history and in it I can hear the footsteps of militant fraternity! No, wait, let me confess ... I feel the urge to affirm my feelings ... I feel that here, after a long and desperate and uncommonly blind journey, I have come home ... Home! With your eyes upon me I feel that I've found a new family! My true family! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of our vision, a native of your fraternal land. (Ellison: 346)

Here, it becomes obvious that the problem of black people is not visibility, as Arendt suspects in her text "Little Rock," but invisibility. It's about being seen as a person and thus being able to say to oneself: I am a person.

In this sense, the events of 1957 appear in both a different and new light. The "ideal of sacrifice", that Ellison spoke of, finally means that being visible in all of one's humanity! As a person who wants to go to school, as a citizen of the USA. Amazingly, Hannah Arendt did not want to see it that way. She dedicated a text and 20 lines to Ellison to this humanity – but nothing more as far as we know today. Arendt did not fail thinking with enlarged mentality, in my opinion Arendt did not even tackle the thinking itself.

That brings me back to my initial questions of how can one judge a situation? How can I understand other people even though I am still me, never him, her or them? Why is Reni Eddo-Lodge so reluctant to talk to whites about skin color? I think, using one's own imagination to visit does not mean using one's common sense, as some quick thinkers keep saying, but rather going on a journey. And this trip is not done with a glance at a photo and the transfer of one's point of view. To the contrary, it entails extensive travel preparation: It is work. Maybe this does not lead to a universal thinking Arendt advocates with Kant but is much more persuading in coming to a more objective judgment.

Ultimately, Arendt is to be credited with the fact that she at least corrected herself in the 1970 lecture *On Kant's Political Philosophy* by suggesting that one must *train* one's "imagination to go visiting." She also noticed afterwards that empathy is a poor basis for judging the other person's point of view. Because of this, as well as the lack of research Arendt herself invested on black lives in the USA, the text "Reflections on Little Rock" were doomed to failure. I am strongly convinced that this failure could have been circumvented.

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