

Street Politics of Mourning

Narrating Loss in Housing Protests with and beyond Hannah Arendt

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Can Tears Speak?

Hannah Arendt's political theory has frequently been criticized for disregarding the body. This criticism is often directed at those passages of *The Human Condition* in which Arendt thinks of the body in terms of repetition and necessity. Other passages even suggest that the political and the body are opposites with no common intersection: for example, Arendt speaks of the sensation of pain as “the most private and least communicable of all” (Arendt 1998, 50). Since embodied pain transcends objective reality, Arendt writes, it also goes beyond any possibility of communicating it appropriately in public:

“Not only is it [pain] perhaps the only experience which we are unable to transform into a shape fit for public appearance, it actually deprives us of our feeling for reality to such an extent that we can forget it more quickly and easily than anything else. There seems to be no bridge from the most radical subjectivity, in which I am no longer ‘recognizable,’ to the outer world of life.” (Arendt 1998, 50–51)

This suggests that Arendt considers deeply felt pain to be incommunicable, indivisible and inaccessible, which can lead to the assumption that pain is to be located in the sphere of the private rather than the public. Indeed, such passages have led to the widespread misunderstanding that Arendt would consider the body *per se* an obstacle to agency, and thus want to identify it as fundamentally apolitical. Several commentators, however, have pointed out that the Arendtian body cannot simply be reduced to the sphere of the private (Butler 2012; Schoonheim 2019; Des Portes 2022). Nor is the distinction between the political and the private, between necessity and freedom, itself irreversibly grounded (Markell 2011; Gündodğdu 2014; Honig 2017). Arendt's reading of the story of Odysseus shows that even the most horrible suffering can become public and thus political (in the Arendtian sense). The *retelling of a story* can serve as a springboard for politicization: The moment Odysseus hears about his destined homecoming from someone else, he is able to internalize and incorporate the trials and experiences as his own. The incorporation of these memories takes the form of a fierce outburst of tears, which ultimately creates a public space in which the meaning of these tears can be explored



intersubjectively. Here, it becomes apparent that the (re)construction of *lost stories* is a condition for the possibility of telling a *history of loss*. Mourning, then, can itself take the form of speaking, insofar as it seeks to translate the resulting wound into a public space in which consolation, compassion, and solidarity can be received.

In this article, I explore the relation between mourning and protest, body and street politics, with and beyond Arendt. I argue that deeply felt pain requires a form of aesthetic translation in order to be effective as a means of protest. To the extent that dramatic singing can be understood as a figure of speech, as Stanley Cavell suggests (Cavell 1994, 136), opera can narrativize even the most profound and deeply hidden grief, and can thus address losses that are otherwise given little or no consideration. This is the case, for example, when it comes to homelessness and displacement through processes of gentrification and privatization. Using the Berlin protest opera *Who Owns Lauratibor?* as an example, I will show that the narration of stories, magic, and fiction through opera can not only be world-building, but also reveal the suffering associated with the loss of one's home. Arendt's understanding of storytelling provides a useful heuristic for thinking about how opera narrativizes loss. Storytelling allows us to reflect on our relationships with ourselves and the world, linking these relationships to their (material) preconditions. Publicly addressing these conditions and weaving them into stories thus reveals storytelling's power of preservation (Disch 1994; Cavarero 2000; Heuer 2012; Weißpflug 2014). The protest opera demonstrates, however, that simply *retelling* lost stories is not enough. As Saidiya Hartman seeks to show, it is also a matter of *inventing* stories, fabulating counter-narratives and counter-archives, and shaking up traditional historiography, as well as addressing the existence of irreparable ruptures and remnants. The "fantasy story" (Hartman 2008, 103) connects with the past without dwelling on it, and the protest opera appropriates the transgression of past events, in which the normative potential of storytelling lies hidden.

I will proceed as follows: (1) First, I interpret the protest opera *Who Owns Lauratibor?* to understand how its performers make the street a locus of their own public practice of forms of mourning, suffering, and remembrance. (2) Once we have visualized the key motifs of this opera, we can draw on Arendt's reflections on storytelling to examine the narrative gestures that give this form of protest its political foundation. Employing Kathrin Morgenstern's (2019) helpful distinction, we can relate this impact to its functions of destruction, transmission, and understanding. Even if all three of these components can ultimately be seen in its staged funeral marches, the protest opera goes far beyond a retrospective classification of historical experiences of dispossession, especially in its fictional parts. (3) Therefore, the third step will be a radical broadening of Arendt's understanding of narration that juxtaposes it with Hartman's method of critical fabulation to question the ambivalent process of history itself—the noble attempt to recover lost lives that at the same time fails to represent them adequately. I conclude by suggesting that productive or critical potential lies precisely *in* narrating the gaps (4). They form the starting point for a different way of thinking about loss, pointing to thoughts as yet unrealized and to stories as yet untold. This insight motivates a retrospective adjustment of Arendt's political thought and a re-evaluation of the

normative significance of demonstrating embodied suffering. To accomplish this, I conclude by returning to Odysseus's emotional outburst, which, as Arendt's reading implies, opens up a political space instead of closing it.

Opera as Protest

“It is precarious enough!” This is just one of the numerous cries of protest, responding to the increasing precarity that accompanies gentrification and privatization, in the Berlin protest opera *Who owns Lauratibor?*. With over a hundred performers, self-built mobile stages, and specially sewn costumes, the collective *Lauratibor* agitated against the displacement and oppression occurring in Berlin's Kreuzberg neighborhood, which for decades has been known for its left-wing alternative squatter scene.



Figure 1: Protest Opera. Picture by the Author. June 2022

In recent years, the neighborhood has been transformed from a “simple residential area”—as it was called when the Berlin rent index was in effect—into one of the most expensive areas of the city for new rentals. Believing that every property is a potential target of financial speculation, neighbors and tenants organized themselves, some as early as the fall of 2019, to complain about the far-reaching social consequences of the housing crisis through demonstrations, protest marches, and rent policy events (Weber 2022). As this alliance was built, interest in street-political mobilization and solidarization gradually increased. The genre of the protest opera seemed suitable for problematizing the

numerous distortions displacement causes, and for prefiguring how more equitable social and political structures could function as counter-spaces to the existing conditions (Sörensen 2023). Moving out of the opera house—where the capitalists, landlords, and speculators gather—into the neighborhood can itself be understood as a political gesture: one that enables the public staging of what Henri Lefebvre called the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 2016, my translation). This initiative not only counteracts the class-specific bias that treats opera as an exclusive resource, but also democratizes opera as the epitome of high culture by opening it up to all those who wish to participate in it as performers or spectators. In this logical shift, opera’s political nature appears and allows it to become a form of protest.

The protest opera centers on the characters Laura and Tibor, who became separated in the wake of neoliberalism,¹ but whose paths cross again due to investors’ intrusion into Kreuzberg. Faced with an increasingly contested residential area, they decide to join forces to fight the threat of gentrification. In their search for the “potion of resistance” (Lauratibor 2021, 10), they meet new landlords who initially assure the residents that they will be able to stay, but then declare their own needs or raise the rents. Laura and Tibor also get to know the tenants, who complain about their precarious situation and the unaffordable rents. The second act features the Berlin Senate, which considers various rescue proposals but always shies away from intervening in the free-market economy.² Towards the end of the second act, Laura and Tibor regretfully realize that a solution that protects the residents’ interests will remain inaccessible, not least because of the Senate’s complicity with the free market. Together with the “goddess of hope” (Lauratibor 2021, 13), they nevertheless imagine a better future: “Meeting places, playgrounds, personal growth, active contribution, colorful streets, open spaces, self-rule, youth, old age, free life, growing neighborhoods, [and] a roof over all” (Lauratibor 2021) are just some of the ideas that Laura and Tibor share with the rest of the inhabitants.

In the third act, a heated confrontation between the residents and the investors results in Tibor’s tragic death. After the investors take part in the “sell-out of the city” (Lauratibor 2021, 8) without regard for losses, thereby contributing to the organized displacement of small businesses, cultural spaces, and green areas,³ Tibor is already on the verge of exhaustion. Seeing the stolen magic potion in the opposing camp, he intervenes one last time before he collapses and dies of a “broken heart” (Lauratibor 2021, 22). After Laura laments Tibor’s death and dedicates a moving funeral aria to him, she holds up their front door key to admit defeat. Before she can hand over the key to the investor, however, an impressive funeral march forms on the streets of Kreuzberg. The scene takes place on Reichenberger Straße, more precisely at the place where, three months before the

1 This is evident from the opera’s libretto, which is used here as the basis for the interpretation of the protest. In the fifth act, Laura appears out of nowhere and tells the title characters’ story: “Laura and Tibor / Greatest couple in town / Their credo was the simple life / Love their only principle / They had little money / But much idealism / But then came neoliberalism” (Lauratibor 2021, 7).

2 The Senator sings: “I think about it all the time / How to save you / And have many solid ideas / The coalition agreement / Already lists them / Which is why we’ll surely rescue you / The free market dominates / But it is also our friend / Which is why we can’t bother him too much” (Lauratibor 2021, 16).

3 “The city has been partitioned / Your defiance will be punished / The power of the state protects property / Those who don’t leave will be expunged” (Lauratibor 2021, 22).

premiere of the protest opera, the collective that ran the leftist neighborhood bar Meuterei was evicted by an enormous police contingent after the landlord refused to extend the bar's rental contract (see Hutter 2021). The yodeling duo Donkey's Nightmare strides forward in mourning attire, followed by the evicted pub collective. The obituaries carried by the mourners stand out: they bear the names of residential buildings, cultural projects, and pubs that have been forced out of the city in recent decades.



Figure 2: Funeral March. Picture by the Author. June 2022

One way to make sense of the protest opera is to understand it as a political narrativization of radical mourning. This mourning is radical because it attempts to relate experiences that discriminatory orders of visibility keep from view. Indeed, the many funeral processions that are organized on the streets of Kreuzberg suggest an intent to politicize embodied suffering, reacting to the annihilation of social structures and the destruction of ways of life. According to an announcement on social media, the protesting mourners on the streets want to “tell of the people we have lost and the places we miss” (Lauratibor 2021). This draws attention to these losses, which are explored both scenically and musically, through a narrative prism composed of public bodies. If we now take a closer look at the performance of mourning that comes to light in the opera project, we can see that the story features a *double gesture*.

(1) The strict inclusion of fleeting facts, actual evictions, and the dissolution of associations, housing projects, and bars, as evidenced by judicial documents, shows that the protesters feel obliged to draw attention to the displacements and distortions that are associated with the gentrification and privatization of the public space. In other words, one aim of the protest opera seems to be a focus on the displaced, showing what secrets, desires, or hopes they harbored before they were evicted from their homes and

neighborhoods. Here the mourning concerns the actual losses that accompanied the inhabitants' departure,⁴ and the protest opera uses storytelling to make us see the political implications of loss. Despite some known lacunae, the opera remains faithful to the archive: it sticks to the empirical evidence it can unearth and uses it to reconstruct what might have happened. (2) This approach contradicts the second gesture, which involves a fundamental intervention in the logic of the archive itself. Here it is no longer a matter of painting over omissions, along the lines of historical research, but of brushing historiography itself against the grain, creating counterfactual histories where reality meets fiction. Gallagher and Greenblatt (2001) have shown, not least with reference to Roland Barthes, that heterogeneous elements such as anecdotes can provoke and challenge historiography by instigating an interruption that "would make one pause or even stumble on the threshold of history" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2001, 51). Contrasting narratives can provide new points of reference to steer events in different directions.

The protest opera seems to borrow from this technique when it repeatedly undermines the division between the "historical" and the "literary." Although the performers certainly refer to real incidents, and the dates of "death" which are visible on the housing projects' obituaries also suggest careful research,⁵ these are regularly interrupted by "fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated, uncanny, abjected, or exotic" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2001, 52), which break with reality or, at least, cannot be readily linked to it. Against this background, the fictional elements which are integrated into the protest opera can be understood not only as a concession to the operatic genre but also as a means of deliberately distracting us from an inaccessible reality. This makes it clear that storytelling in the context of the protest opera is itself situated within the tension between narration and invention, constantly oscillating between these two poles. In the following sections, I will elaborate on the specific function of these two aspects in the context of the opera project. As a first step, I will show, with Arendt, that the public narrativization of mourning can counteract the state that Arendt captures in the concept of world loss.

Narrating Loss, Reconstructing Worlds

To make sense of the funeral marches staged in the protest opera, it is worth taking a closer look at Arendt's concept of world loss, and particularly at how it can be subverted through storytelling—a practice that the performers of the protest opera adopt. A distinction made by Morgenstern can help us to recognize the specific potential of storytelling. In her reading of Arendt, storytelling has three qualities: a *destructive* one, which is concerned with "tidying up uniformity, logic, and coherence" (Morgenstern 2019,

4 The protest opera thus shows that gentrification has far-reaching social consequences and can even bring people to ruin. This becomes even clearer when one considers that some of those affected by the evictions in Kreuzberg have become homeless themselves and have had to live temporarily in homeless shelters (see Hutter 2021).

5 To name just one striking example, a death notice recalls the eviction of Mainzer Straße in November 1990, which led to a street battle over thirteen occupied houses in the former district of Friedrichshain, resulting in one of the largest police operations in postwar Berlin and the dissolution of the Social Democrats' and Green Party's coalition government (see Keseling 2006).

93, my translation), contrasts with a *preserving* one, which is dedicated to conveying what has happened and to making “marginalized voices audible” (Morgenstern 2019, 98, my translation). These two qualities strive, thirdly, for an *understanding*: a process of reconciliation, in Arendt’s view, that cannot be completed and that constantly calls for the introduction of new perspectives into the narrative. These functions of storytelling can also be found in the protest opera: within its losses are remembered via the path of destruction, whereby hidden worlds can be brought back to light and preserved anew. Complementing Morgenstern, however, I suggest that storytelling also has a central normative function that goes beyond understanding and calls on us to position ourselves in relation to these losses.⁶ Before emphasizing the normativity of storytelling, let us focus on where the protest opera’s themes begin: with the loss of the world, which Arendt gives her fullest consideration in *The Human Condition* (1958).

In theorizing about action, Arendt draws on various terms in order to consider a situation in which the world⁷ is fundamentally impoverished. In addition to the concept of world loss, Arendt speaks of “world alienation” (*Weltentfremdung*), of “deworlding” (*Entweltlichung*), or even of “worldlessness” (*Weltlosigkeit*). Other terms that are related to the concept of world loss are “world destruction” (*Weltvernichtung*) and “dispossession” (*Enteignung*). Even if these terms focus on different significances of loss, they all point to a lack of any shared frame of reference for certain patterns of meaning, and for relations between self and world. Such a loss may concern either of two different concepts of the world: the “world of things” or the “public realm.” In the first sense the experience of world loss concerns the “world of men and of manmade things” (Arendt 1998, 22), within which human beings are situated. According to Arendt, this world “would not exist without the human activity which produced it, as in the case of fabricated things; which takes care of it, as in the case of cultivated land; or which established it through organization, as in the case of the body politic” (Arendt 1998, 22). For Arendt, the world neither existed from the beginning nor came into being *ex nihilo*, but has been constructed through human practices and needs to be maintained through infrastructure and institutions. In other words, “world” refers to the result of a process of reification that can bring everyday human activity into a permanent form. The fact that human beings and the world of things are related to each other is made particularly clear by Arendt’s remark that “[n]o human life, not even the life of a hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings” (Arendt 1998, 22). The world is not merely the result of human practices, but the condition for human survival. The world, we could say, offers shelter: “Within its

6 I do not want to underestimate the importance that Arendt attaches to understanding. As Wolfgang Heuer argues, understanding can never be adequately grasped independently of the power of judgment (Heuer 2012). Thus understanding, for Arendt too, is an existential and identity-forming activity “through which we try to be at home in the world” (Arendt 1992, 76). By shifting the focus from the descriptive process of understanding to the normative process of positioning, I am merely attempting to think Arendt’s concept of understanding more broadly than she herself did.

7 Here, following Sophie Loidolt (2018) and Marieke Borren (2010; 2022), I understand Arendt’s concept of worldliness as a basic phenomenological concept. It not only navigates our relations of self and our encounters to a decisive degree, but is also indispensable for the paradigm of plurality.

borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all” (Arendt 1998, 7).

The second experience of loss goes straight to the heart of Arendt’s political thought, as she speaks of the world as a “space of appearance” (Arendt 1998, 199). Arendt’s reflections on this space of appearance begin with a frequent topic of critical discussion: her borrowings from the organizational forms of the Greek polis, whose reliability she bases neither on the physical existence of the city wall nor on the applicable law, but on a reality that has been established by “men’s life together” and assured by “action and speech,” as well as by the “deeds and stories which are their outcome” (Arendt 1998, 197–98). In order to establish the polis as the place that provided an “auditorium,” a “place of performance” where people could appear before an audience, Arendt draws on Pericles’s funeral oration:

The *polis* [...] gives a guaranty that those who forced every sea and land to become the scene of their daring will not remain without witness and will need neither Homer nor anyone else who knows how to turn words to praise them; without assistance from others, those who acted will be able to establish together the everlasting remembrance of their good and bad deeds, to inspire admiration in the present and in future ages. (Arendt 1998, 197)

The polis in Arendt’s re-reading is a place, then, in which what has been said and done becomes imperishable (Arendt 1998, 197–98). It thus becomes clear that both of Arendt’s worlds are driven by a hope of permanence, which refers on the one hand to the (material) stability and continuity of the built environment, as well as the infrastructure and institutions on which we depend, and on the other hand to the continuity of (symbolic) relationships with others in a shared and mutually shaped public sphere. The notion of world loss indicates the precariousness of this world—it reveals that worlds can be lost, and with them specific orientations, encounters, and horizons of possibility. Such a moment of loss is also evident in Laura’s mourning speech when her world seems to collapse with Tibor’s death: “How to carry on with love? Why carry on with love? In which world? In which world? You and I, we were the world that we dreamed of” (Lauratibor 2021, 21). Such narrative techniques can be used to intervene critically by bringing the course of events and the consequences of world loss back into play. This can be done, as Morgenstern suggests, in a *destructive* way: losses, even if the damage they have caused cannot always be repaired, can be retrospectively placed within a critical context if they reveal the political and economic background which a story mediates. Seen in this way, the protest opera depicts processes of gentrification and privatization that reveal the political conditions of precarious forms of living without reducing them to individuals’ fates. Moreover, storytelling serves a *preservative* task by attempting to trace the world of the precarious subject from this subject’s own perspective. Besides making forgotten or repressed worlds visible again, retelling stories in the context of such a protest opera can also make those worlds accessible to posterity from a different angle.

In addition to these two qualities and the process of understanding to which they lead, the story also has a valuable *normative function*: Recounting lives in which the question of housing arises every day can motivate us to broaden our own ways of thinking. It even

encourages, as María Pía Lara has aptly put it, a “disclosive imagination” (Lara 2007, 58). Stories about these precarious situations, which are first collected, scripted, rehearsed, and ultimately performed within the protest opera, provide a starting point for practicing forms of perspective-taking, creating distance from one’s own lifeworld, and ultimately gaining a more nuanced knowledge of different lifeworlds. This is why Arendt writes in *Between Past and Future* “that thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the *only guideposts* by which to take its bearings” (Arendt 1961, 14, my emphasis). The protest opera, then, serves as a normative compass: The story of the ever-lurking danger of losing one’s home can reach people whose everyday lives are also dominated by such fear. If the story succeeds in disrupting what one takes for granted and demonstrating what it means to be affected by housing shortages, it can even examine one’s own social position in the shared world.⁸ The story fosters critical views of our situatedness, encouraging us to incorporate other people’s perspectives into the shaping of the world, and the public sphere into our own actions.⁹

Against this background, it is also possible to understand why Laura’s public demonstration of mourning proves to be a nexus of solidarity: The funeral aria leads to a public mediation of pain, giving others an opportunity to relate how their own pain and loss have been caused by gentrification and the privatization of public space.¹⁰ After the “mourning women” (Lauratibor 2021, 2) have buried Tibor, and with him the ruined housing projects, Maximilius Profitikuss, one of the investors, holds the bottle containing the last of the magic potion in his hand, steps in front of Laura, and gives her an ultimatum: either buy the house for its purchase price or leave the city. When Laura refuses the offer and nevertheless affirms that she intends to continue living in the house, the investor, who celebrates himself as the “King of Lauratibor” (Lauratibor 2021, 27), drinks the potion of resistance and demands Laura’s front door key; she now admits defeat. The protest opera takes a surprising turn at this point: “on the horizon” (Lauratibor 2021, 27) of Berlin’s local neighborhoods—Wedding, Schöneberg, Treptow, Steglitz, Friedrichshain, and Marzahn—the people awaken and begin to demand justice (Lauratibor 2021, 27–28). While “an army of victimized retired women and men” appears from the East, it is the “banished forgotten families” who arrive from the West after

8 As Lisa Guenther demonstrates, using the example of homeownership, it can even question its own contribution to material inequalities. Drawing on Levinas’s ethical concept of dwelling, which is closely linked to questions of hospitality, she argues that homeownership can take on a form of what Rob Nixon has called structural violence. “The slow violence of homeowner citizenship,” she writes, “is a key component of the carceral state, even or especially if it is habitually coded as an investment [... and] is so [...] naturalized that it’s as difficult to imagine a world without securitized dwellings as it is to imagine a world without prisons” (Guenther 2018, 66). Broadening one’s perspective, or bracketing the “natural attitude” and making it the phenomenological subject of a critical analysis, can help to call the preconditions of such attitudes into question (Guenther 2018, 66–67). For an informative analysis of structural violence, see also Lauren Berlant’s reflections on “slow death” (Berlant 2007).

9 This ultimately shows that spectatorship is a necessary condition for the creation of a public space. Arendt makes this clear in her Kant Lectures: “[T]he judgment of the spectator creates the space without which no such object could appear at all. The public realm is constituted by the critics and the spectators, not by the actors or the makers” (Arendt 1992, 63). “And this critic and spectator,” Arendt continues, “sits in every actor and fabricator; without this critical, judging faculty the doer or maker would be so isolated from the spectator that he would not even be perceived” (Arendt 1992, 63).

10 This solidarity is reinforced by the fact that Laura thus inscribes herself in the tradition of female suffering in operatic arias, from *Lascia ch’io pianga* to *Casta Diva* in *Norma*. I thank Sergej Seitz for this remark.

Tibor's death, and likewise "maltreated creatives" from the North and "crowds of freaks and geeks" from the forests of the South arrive to express their dissent, to show solidarity with Laura, and to start agitating for the right to stay. This plot point ultimately demonstrates the world-creating function of the story: by leading to a public mediation of the pain of loss, it gives others the opportunity to associate that pain with structures of (slow) violence. Adopting a perspective drawn from Laura's experiences can ultimately provoke a political stance, expressed in a refusal to accept a common world in which people are pushed out of their homes.

Arendt's understanding of storytelling thus provides a conceptual tool for a critical examination of socially, politically, and economically generated forms of world loss. The critical thrust of Arendt's narrative political theory lies in the ability to track down buried histories and uncover them with the help of poetry.¹¹ This reveals that Arendt's storytelling, as Maïke Weißflug has emphasized, represents "a strategy of openness" (Weißflug 2014, 220), insofar as it is committed to what, following Koschorke, she calls "narrative diversification" (Koschorke 2012, 53). This narrative diversification consists of "rescuing experiential content of the political that is threatened by oblivion and feeding it back into the 'cycle of transmission'" (Weißflug 2014, 220). The protest opera is a pertinent example of how such a recirculation of lost stories and histories can succeed as an artistic performance. The opera project offers a potential for solidarity that demonstrates the effectiveness of this new form of protest, which brings these stories to the streets, where they can be collectively remembered, retold, and mourned. What remains underexposed in Arendt's ideas, however, is the fact that opera is designed to overwhelm the audience with emotions (Cavell 1994). Arendt's notion of understanding, which remains implicitly tied to the ability to form judgments, cannot make the specific nature of opera comprehensible. Even the protest opera does not leave it up to me to decide with whom I want to be in solidarity. On the other hand, opera has judged on my behalf from the very beginning; by its very nature, it relieves the audience of the task of judging. Furthermore, it seems as if we cannot make sense of certain elements of the protest opera—above all the magical components—with Arendt. In order to gain a better understanding of these aspects, I will now change the theoretical framework. Saidiya Hartman's fabulations form a suitable starting point for further reflection on these aspects.

Refusing the Archive, Fabulating Worlds

Even if central elements of the opera project can be theoretically framed using Arendt's conceptual tools, we come to a standstill when it comes to the invented and fictional aspects of the street protest, which include both objects (a "magic potion") and concrete figures (a "goddess of hope"). It is tempting, but premature, to attribute these fictional aspects to the structural nature of operatic art, in which miracles, magic, and other surprises are common stylistic devices. Yet these characteristic fictional elements do not merely follow an operatic aesthetic, but rather serve an important analytical purpose:

¹¹ I will come back to the role of poetry in my conclusions.

they point to the gaps in the narration itself. They must therefore be linked with questions of history and the archive. As Saidiya Hartman writes, the telling of “impossible stories” (Hartman 2008, 10) offers us the opportunity to expose the pitfalls of the archive and, in the process, to expose the “grammar of violence” (Hartman 2008, 4) already inscribed in history itself. As I will show below, stories can also draw on humoristic devices and elements of magic to construct counter-histories and counter-archives. For this reason, it seems to me that Hartman’s method of “critical fabulation” (Hartman 2008, 11) is suited to appreciating the fictional parts of the protest opera.¹² As Jacques Rancière has argued, fiction is about turning the usual course of events on its head and creating new relationships between appearance and reality (Rancière 2019). Fiction could be radicalized even further, insofar as Hartman’s “beautiful experiences” (Hartman 2019) are not only about reversing things, but rather about reversing history itself. Hartman’s (2008) *Venus in Two Acts* illustrates this. The development of this method is Hartman’s radical response to canonical techniques of historiography, which begin to falter before the “silence in the archive” (Hartman 2008, 90), and thus reproduce the omissions they are unable to hear.

Hartman’s reflection on the (transatlantic) archive and the method of critical fabulation begins with the (missing) story of a young woman who was murdered aboard the slave ship *Recovery* in 1792. This story comes to light in the files of a court case against the captain, who was on trial for two counts of murder. One of these two girls is “Venus”, as Hartman calls her in the absence of her real name (Hartman 2008, 1). Hartman makes it clear that this name is overdetermined: on the one hand, it functions as a term of embarrassment when it designates a dead girl whose story is obscured; on the other hand, the name is representative of “hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances” (Hartman 2008, 2) and whose coverage in major stories remains poor. Venus is therefore also the name of the other girl for whose death the captain is held responsible. What can be said about the life of Venus? Hartman clarifies that there can be no answer to the question of who “Venus” was. This is due to a dual structure of violence: On the one hand, the records and documents available to the court are merely imprints, and thus testimony to a fraction of the violence that was exercised and threatened. On the other hand, such documents as logbooks and sailors’ diaries are inherently violent, as they are permeated by omissions of this violence—omissions that are conditioned by structures of colonialism and racism. Given this background, we can understand why Hartman compares the archive to a burial site: “The archive,” she writes, “is a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” (Hartman 2008, 2).

¹² In using the method of critical fabulation as an analytical tool, I do not intend to neglect the specific historical framework of violence against whose background Hartman developed her method. Admittedly, the violence that the opera project interprets differs fundamentally from the violence that Hartman chooses as the starting point for her thought. However, while Hartman’s method of critical fabulation undoubtedly has a historical core, I think that she has taken it further, allowing her to redirect other fields of violence as well. This must be done sensitively and with awareness of the ruptures that accompany this translation. I will therefore not simply refer to the protest opera as critical fabulation, but rather speak of a *specific figure* of critical fabulation.

This is precisely where the method of critical fabulation steps in. According to Bonnie Honig, Hartman “takes what the archive has to offer and fabulates the rest” (Honig 2021, 73). As Honig notes, the fable “refuses the authority of the archive, contests its moral judgments, and defies the positivism in which it has historically been wrapped” (Honig 2021, 73). Fabulation is thus tied to a normative aspiration: Hartman, especially in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, is concerned with reconstructing stories and the lives distorted by them that have been lost through the logic of the archive (Hartman 2019).¹³ However, this requires a highly sensitive approach in order not to prolong the violence that the silence of the archive has already perpetrated (Hartman 2019, 88). This *deadly silence* can now only be broken in favor of another form of silence, a *living silence*—as Hartman illustrates when speaking about the necessity of “[n]arrative restraint” (Hartman 2008, 12). This consists in a fundamental “refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure” (Hartman 2008, 12), which brings Hartman close to Adorno’s prohibition of painting over a utopia (Bloch and Adorno 1985, 361). The tension between these forms of silence also reveals the constitutive paradox of critical fabulation: the attempt to restore lost lives, according to Hartman, must always fail to achieve its goal. The mode of negativity is a prerequisite for this method, as is the imperative “to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity” (Hartman 2008, 12).

While Arendt sees narration as a tool with which to open up new horizons of pluralization and solidarization through forms of perspective-taking, Hartman’s method of critical fabulation seems to aim more at conveying a sensuous experience of the voids and gaps that the archive exhibits. These voids and gaps can also be found empirically within urban structures. Against this background, fabulation, as Honig states in agreement with Hartman, “attaches us to the city that refuses to acknowledge us, and it commits us to return again and again, though we may fail” (Honig 2021, 75). Applying this to a theorization of protest action, we could, with Hartman, understand the fictional moments of the protest opera as a specific figure of critical fabulation: When the performers fabulate a story of solidarity in an internal narrative of the opera, it is not primarily with the aim of changing the city or of pointing to the contingency of history. Rather, they do so precisely to point to the absence of solidarity, and thus to their inability to dismantle the city’s existential power. Even if it becomes clear in the context of the protest opera that different marginalized subjects are affected by gentrification and privatization, and that the potential for solidarity certainly exists, the staging of solidarity serves to criticize the absence of people and the lack of alliances. The protest opera struggles with this unrealized potential to think about a different and fairer distribution of urban space—one which remains unrealized due to a lack of solidarity. In this way, the performers ultimately show, always hypothetically, what the positive outcome of solidarity-based protest could have been. Looking back, Tabor notes: “That’s how it was back then, in those last days of the fight for housing! And now you know how it came to be that today people once again come before profit, that no one pays rent any longer, and that all houses belong to those who need them!” (Lauratibor 2021). Seen in this way, the

¹³ Lola Olufemi pursues a similar goal when she problematizes the linear temporality of the historical archive that derealizes Black suffering (Olufemi 2021). For an insightful comparative analysis of the limitations of the archive in the writings of Bonnie Honig and Lola Olufemi, see Seitz 2023.

protest opera, paralleling Hartman's critical fabulation, "is a narrative of what might have been or could have been, it is a history with and against the archive" (Hartman 2008, 12).

If we now return to Hartman's discussion of Venus, we see how she weaves a story between past and future, between what might have been and what could have been. In response to her methodological concerns about inventing a story that was "unfettered by the constraints of the legal documents and exceeding the restatement and transpositions" (Hartman 2008, 9), she imagines "shipmateship" between the girls, who probably never knew each other: "Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents [...] Two world-less girls found a country in each other's arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility" (Hartman 2008, 8).¹⁴ Immediately after this escape into *uchronia*, with its longing for a friendship between two strangers, Hartman acknowledges the impossibility of this encounter. These are, as we might emphasize with Judith Butler, "figures of abjections" (Butler 1995, 47) or "ungrievable lives" (Butler 2004, 148). By virtue of fabulation, this un-grievability becomes legible for the first time against a background of obstructed freedom: "In a free state," Hartman writes, "it would have been possible for the girls to attend to the death of a friend and shed tears for the loss, but a slave ship made no allowance for grief and when detected the instruments of torture were employed to eradicate it" (Hartman 2008, 8). Critical fabulation, as Hartman develops it, thus succeeds in allowing subjects, friendships, and solidarities to be seen "which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance" (Hartman 2008, 12). Hartman's ideas reveal the power of the protest opera's fictional and magical elements. These stimulate a political or "radical imagination" (Seitz 2023, 2) that intentionally exceeds all physical possibilities to encourage an expansion of what is currently imaginable. Seen in this light, these elements, which cannot be fitted into our mundane reality, are at the service of an emancipatory aspiration that has been infused with a touch of magic. Surprisingly, it is Arendt, in her biography of Rahel Varnhagen, who points to the reality-expanding effect of magic: "Magic," she writes, "arose out of the boundlessness of Mood. [...] Expectation of the extraordinary never lets reality have its say, so to speak" (Arendt 1974, 60–61).

Equipped with these readings, we can now return to the power of radical mourning. We have seen that such mourning finds expression in two ways: through the narrated (Arendt) and the invented (Hartman) story. Both modes can make forgotten, lost, repressed, or veiled worlds visible in dreams, hopes, and fears. They do so in different manners, and yet they are both in the service of an archaeology of the lost. Let us conclude with one last point, which I believe marks a significant difference between Arendt's and Hartman's methods. We can see this difference if we look closely at

¹⁴ Against the background of this scene, Iris Därmann suggests that Hartman's "testing of anti-Sadist modes of writing" points us towards "the field of aesthetics" (Därmann 2023, 240). Därmann emphasizes the double face of aesthetics: On the one hand, we are dealing with an aesthetics "which, as a philosophical discipline, was entangled in various ways with the violent history of transatlantic enslavement by denying Black people any aesthetic capacity" (Därmann 2023, 240). On the other hand, she also addresses "the field of the aesthetics of the enslaved themselves, who have left a clearer trace than Venus" (Därmann 2023, 240). According to Därmann, the aim here is to draw attention to "minoritarian forms of speech such as the refusal of orders": such as "the proverb and song, the story, the gallows humor, the joke, the parody or the poem" (Därmann 2023, 240), to name just a few. It thus becomes clear that all these practices have a political potential that can be used for protest and resistance.

Hartman's short essay "The Chorus Opens the Way" in *Wayward Life, Beautiful Experiments*, in which she asserts the importance of the chorus for rebellion, upheaval, and revolution. The chorus is also central to the opera project, as it accompanies both the main and the internal narratives, and underpins the protest as such (Lauratibor 2021). However, when we ask what kind of story the chorus *should* present, Arendt and Hartman provide different answers. Whereas Arendt focuses on the immortality of the hero or on what is worthy of becoming immortal in him, Hartman is concerned with those lives whose suffering remains in the dark and does not become visible and recognizable on the public stage. The chorus, Hartman clarifies, "is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action" (Hartman 2019, 325). Even if both readings are permissible, Hartman's assertion seems more appropriate as a basis for interpreting the protest opera. Although Laura and Tibor are the focus of the story, it is the alliances performed in the funeral marches that form the "incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise" (Hartman 2019, 325).

Opera is not a Luxury

Let us conclude with a brief summary and an examination of mourning protests' capacity for social change. In this paper, I have used the example of the protest opera *Who Owns Lauratibor?* to show that a story staged as a protest opera can serve as a vehicle to make even the most "private" feeling public. Such a reading of the story makes it possible not only to address *where* and *when* the body itself becomes a political locus, but also to bridge the much-discussed gap between the private and the public in the reception of Arendt's political thought, doing so via an overlooked aspect of Arendt's ideas: the path of the story itself. The story, or rather storytelling, pursues a twofold goal: with Arendt, we have seen that it features a reality-building moment that can be identified as a process of understanding and positioning. A story, as I have interpreted it, not only puts what has happened into words and conveys it to others, but also enables us to solidarize ourselves by adopting another perspective. If this is the case, the story moves back and forth between the construction and destruction of what has happened. Hartman, on the other hand, has offered us a vocabulary for thinking about those irrecoverable pasts that cannot even become subjects of construction or destruction. In order to tell these stories, we have to fabulate them, as Hartman specifies. With the shift from storytelling to fabulation, the direction of the analysis also changes, away from determining the story's significance for relations between the self, world, and orientation, and towards questioning the story itself in light of its violent implications. With Hartman, the purpose is not merely to tell a story. She reminds us to ask *who* is telling this story and *from what position*, so that the political nature of history itself comes into view. Hartman's reinterpretation therefore makes it possible to expand Arendt's narrative political theory from the outset.

What can narrative practices of mourning accomplish in the context of street politics? In this article I have explored the intentional use of mourning practices as minoritarian forms of speech through the example of a protest opera, both with and beyond Arendt. The example of the protest opera has made it clear that mourning practices (among other aesthetic protest techniques) can uncover ruptures and gaps in historiography, and can highlight which subjects and places are missing from the city. The critical potential of mourning practices, then, lies in rejecting the “big” narrative in favor of the “small,” the repressed, i.e., the narrative that was not considered worth remembering. Nonetheless, minoritarian techniques of protest do have their limits. Insofar as they aim to break with the logic of the archive, they do not seek to incite an entire revolution. There would of course be “heterogenous forms of the sensible” (Rancière 2010, 143) if the performers of the protest opera were successful in demanding the right to the city. However, in the context of the opera project, this is probably not the primary purpose of the protest. Nor can such a project be expected to slow down gentrification and the privatization of public space. Nevertheless, such protest projects can broaden our understanding of the political by bringing something surprising to the streets, demonstrating that democracy is a creative process that must always remain open to the new, the different, the unthought and the unseen.

Seen in this light, the stories the protest opera conveys are not a luxury, but collective exercises in political imagination. The opera thus fulfills the function that Audre Lorde ascribes to the poem—and opera makes poetry its own when it is the instrument that serves to “give a name to the nameless so that it can be thought” (Lorde 2007, 26). Like Odysseus, who is only able to connect inside (grief) and outside (world) when experiences are made accessible to him in narrative form, Lorde understands the poem as a repository of “our hopes and fears” (Lorde 2007, 26). These considerations can help us to mobilize the aesthetic dimension of hope, which Lorde puts into perspective here. Political imagination can then mean

train[ing] ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before. (Lorde 2007, 27)

It thus becomes clear that Laura and Tibor’s protests are made of the material of fears *and* dreams that they are willing to share on the street. We may hope that they are not the last the magic potion will enchant.

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