"Missionaries of Culture"

DuBois’ “Higher Aims” in Ellison’s Invisible Man

Reading Du Bois pragmatically, then, is doubly illuminating. It reveals aspects both of Du Bois and of pragmatism that we would otherwise miss.
— Paul C. Taylor, “What’s the Use of Calling Du Bois a Pragmatist?” (Shusterman, 97)

That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect beauty sits above . . . the facts of the world and the right actions of men I can conceive . . . [but] here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable.
— W. E. B. Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926)

I. The Higher Aims and the Democratic Ideal

In the pages of the October 1926 edition of The Crisis, W. E. B. Du Bois declared that “all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of purists.” “I stand in utter shamelessness,” he continued, “and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy.” This, he asserts, is the role of art in a world in which art and politics—art and political struggle—are, as he puts it, “unseparated and inseparable.” And to those who believe that art is something outside of or above the world—to those who think, by definition, it should or must be—Du Bois directs an impatient hostility: “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.” Repudiating the plank of “purists,” who insist that art cannot be propaganda (for if it is, the argument goes, it is degraded, or in fact is not art at all), Du Bois exhibits in this 1926 article a particular consciousness concerning the classic or classicist distinction between art and utility; this consciousness, indicative of the struggles
undertaken by pragmatism, evolves over the course of his career, and can be traced back to his earliest and perhaps most famous work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), in which he grapples with the very same distinction.

Recent scholars have acknowledged the powerful influence that pragmatism had on Du Bois; James T. Kloppenberg has noted in his essay “Pragmatism and the Practice of History” that Du Bois’ early work “reflected . . . the impact of pragmatism,” and that Du Bois described himself as “a devoted follower of James at the time that he was developing his pragmatic philosophy.”2 Ross Posnock has also written about the impact early pragmatism had on Du Bois, in addition to other black writers, in the context of an argument about the public intellectual.3 Imagining Du Bois as a student and ally of pragmatism, this chapter will ask how Du Bois exhibits this impact, especially in his thinking about art and political struggle.4 By looking at the differing standpoints Du Bois takes over the years, I aim to show that his return, again and again, to the practical/aesthetic dichotomy indicates the degree to which this dichotomy functions as an obstacle to his goal of eliminating racial injustice and, on the more positive side, securing racial equality. Suggesting the centrality of this dichotomy to the construction of race overall (and to the maintenance of racial hierarchy in his particular historical moment), Du Bois’ work thus sets the stage for other black writers to examine the damaging role of this division in the evolution of their identities as writers, as artists—as individuals. Hence, I will first illustrate the complex, particular ways in which Du Bois’ work regards this dichotomy, and then establish the impact of his work on the concerns of Ralph Ellison, who draws on Du Bois’ powerful intellectual legacy in his acclaimed piece of fiction, *Invisible Man* (1952). If Du Bois continued to wrestle with this dichotomy—despite knowing how reductive and fundamentally incoherent it was—this is because it continued to manifest its tenacity and efficacy in every domain associated with the kind of status, recognition, and empowerment that he sought for black individuals.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, as in the *Crisis* article I cite above (as well as in many other writings), Du Bois sheds light on the implications of the art/utility distinction for understanding and describing both class and racial distinction; he consistently reilluminates the question of how best to accomplish the enfranchisement of black America as, inevitably, the question of how to negotiate the dilemma posed by the purist notion of an apolitical aesthetic realm (which is the same thing as an aracial or raceless aesthetic realm: such purist ideals are clearly linked, as will become evident in this chapter, to raciopolitics, not just politics per se).5 As generations of philosophers have insisted, in this realm there is no
place for the practical, which is to say no place for an agenda, so it follows that such a realm would seem to present an inhospitable face to someone like Du Bois; yet as profoundly goal oriented as he is, there are moments when Du Bois seems to suggest the validity of such a realm—when, for example, he talks about “universal understanding,” or “true art,” or alludes to truth and beauty as abstract, fixed ideals. These instances point to a paradox, for they seem to indicate that Du Bois believes in the possibility for disinterest, but this, I will show, is not the case. What he is suggesting, rather, is that while the concepts of “truth” and “beauty” are disinterested, they are not \textit{racially} disinterested—and therefore race interferes with the attainment of such things (“the apostle of beauty” is only “dog[ged]” by slavery, Du Bois writes, because slavery denies him the “right to tell the truth or recognize an ideal of justice”). Thus, when black artists and intellectuals are shut down, Du Bois argues, everyone suffers from the “narrowing of the field.”

If we can understand Du Bois to be saying that race is a thoroughly \textit{interested} (invested) category and, as such, actually prevents the possibility for apprehending ideals such as truth or justice (which, by nature, must be disinterested), in one sense, he was not so far off from arguing what some of his white contemporaries were arguing—as the intellectual Walter Lippmann wrote in his 1929 book, \textit{A Preface to Morals}, “pure knowledge” (what Du Bois calls “truth”) can be attained only in a state of “disinterestedness.” But unlike Lippmann, who broke with the pragmatism of William James to explore the life of the mind apart from practical, utilitarian considerations, Du Bois could not, and would not, part ways with utilitarian considerations: he always had the impact of race at the forefront of his mind; indeed it was impossible to escape the adversity it imposed. Never losing sight of the insidious interests of race, Du Bois remained clearly conscious of and actively \textit{pushing} an agenda of reform, even at the moments when he is most articulate about the importance of attaining a “pure” knowledge of “civilization,” or what Willa Cather calls a “purely cultural” education. He is perhaps at his most political, or most practical, it might be argued, precisely at those moments when he is championing a knowledge of the “high” arts or the great books, for it is at these moments that he is revealing the political aspects of (that thing called) “culture,” laying bare the complicity of culture in the vast and complex social network that decides, finally, questions of power, wealth, prestige, and opportunity.

If, as Willa Cather argued, art, or culture, is abstract and disinterested, and has nothing to do with economic, political, or practical concerns, then Du Bois confronts a twofold problem: on one hand, he must demys-
tify and criticize what he sees to be the false distinction reiterated by those like Cather. On the other hand, he must appeal to and even embrace the system of this distinction, for to the extent that its “higher” side—the side associated with culture, or the arts, or the idea of aesthetics—retains the key to political advancement, Du Bois realizes black individuals in the United States cannot afford to live without such “higher” knowledge, cannot afford to merely live in the practical sense, whether this means gaining economic independence, learning a trade, or finding a role in industry. This he makes quite clear in “Negro Education,” an essay from 1918:

Anyone who suggests by sneering at books and “literary courses” that the great heritage of human thought ought to be displaced simply for the reason of teaching the technique of modern industry is pitifully wrong and, if the comparison must be made, more wrong than the man who would sacrifice modern technique to the heritage of ancient thought.\(^{12}\)

It might sound here as though Du Bois is aligning himself with a humanistic perspective that, in many ways, because it tends to be dislocated from the particulars—the particular violences—of social experience, maintains a willful blindness to its own political or practical function. This, I think, is partially accurate, and on this point, it is worthwhile to note that he seems to be greatly influenced by the humanism of Matthew Arnold, who makes an almost identical statement in his 1869 essay “Literature and Science.” “If then there is to be separation or option between humane letters on the one hand and the natural sciences on the other,” Arnold writes, “the great majority of mankind, all who have not exceptional and overpowering aptitudes for the study of nature, would do well, I cannot but think, to choose to be educated in humane letters rather than in the natural sciences. Letters will call out their being at more points, will make them live more.”\(^{13}\) If students must make the choice, Arnold argues, between the arts or the humanities, on one hand, and the more technical, practical agenda of scientific pursuits, on the other, a knowledge of and exposure to the humanities should be chosen because it encompasses the history of civilization, which is precisely why Du Bois also privileges the humanities, or, as he puts it, the “great heritage of human thought”: above all, he is intent on disseminating culture, though, importantly, not just as an end in itself, and here is the point where he diverges from classic Arnoldian humanism, which advances the notion of culture for its own sake. Du Bois rather conceptualizes culture as a means to an end—political power and enfranchisement for blacks.
Yet, it must be acknowledged, the story is more complicated than this. This is the case for Du Bois only so long as there is racial discrimination, which is to say that he would arguably find culture disinterested, and approach it that way, if there were such a thing as racial neutrality. But part of the premise here is that Du Bois must see culture as a means (even while he does think of it as an end in itself), and embrace this activist stance, because this is the only way to remedy the injustice of race and arrive at the point where culture can be responsibly thought of in its own terms (as its own end). In this sense, culture is indeed both means and ends for Du Bois. Thus, while Arnold and Du Bois agree in one respect, they are also at opposing ends of this conceptual spectrum.

While Du Bois does become more tolerant of the idea of a technical or vocational education for blacks in the years following the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk*, acknowledging that industrial skill, trade training, and basic economic independence are indeed crucial in the struggle to improve the predicament of blacks in America—such accomplishments, he admits, will certainly make blacks in the United States visible within and indispensable to the industrial scheme, and to the commercial success of the nation overall—he remains committed to the idea that none of these accomplishments will bring black individuals “culture,” or a sense of, as Du Bois puts it, “what civilization means.” Sure, Du Bois writes, “it is far better to send out among the masses educated persons who lack technical training in methods of teaching rather than to send persons who have techniques without education.” Why? Because, Du Bois proclaims, the “mass” of “untaught people” need to learn not just “how to walk,” but “whither to go, and while logically we may argue that learning to walk ought to precede preparations for a great journey, yet as a matter of fact and history, it is the inspiration of some goal to be reached that has ever led men to learn how to get there.”

If, in effect, this is the same thing as saying that all practical considerations should be ideally interested, in the sense that they should be conceived as steps toward a higher ideal that is primarily intangible—the “goal,” in this case, would not be material—then it is a quest to resolve the distinction between the ideal and the practical that occupies Du Bois, especially during the 1920s and beyond, and by “resolve” I mean disrupt, deconstruct, or close the gap on this constructed binary, so that the interdependence and fluidity, the internal incoherence of each category, becomes apparent. Just as Du Bois begins his career by insisting that the abandonment of the aesthetic, ideal realm for technical, practical concerns is a mistake, his perspective evolves to the point where he realizes that this initial position is a mistake, for it fails to address the core of
the problem, which is, finally, the perpetuation of the legitimacy of the
distinction. The twofold problem that I speak of above is then perhaps
more of a dilemma, for Du Bois must somehow figure out a way to argue
the benefits of a cultural knowledge without furthering the cause of the
distinction between culture and utility. The history of Du Bois’ approach
to this dilemma can be apprehended in the evolution of his polemical
stance concerning what black folk are to be taught, which is to say what
defines (an) “education.”

Focusing his attention on the highly charged issue of black education,
Du Bois positions himself against the recommendations of his prede-
cessor Booker T. Washington, whom Du Bois dismisses as representative
of the “old attitude of adjustment and submission.” What is needed, Du
Bois insists, is an educational program that sends out “missionaries of
culture,” so as to inspire interest in the “higher aims of life.” Du Bois com-
plains that Washington’s program becomes “a gospel of Work and Money
to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow” such
aims. At this early stage in his career, Du Bois thus found himself in
the position of representing these “higher aims” as somewhat separate,
somewhat removed, from the domain of Work and Money. Aptly titled,
_The Souls of Black Folk_ criticized the leadership of Booker T. Washington
for ignoring or neglecting the souls of black folk; for failing to provide
anything but a formal training, a set of practical skills that would keep
black folk from starving, literally. Certainly the “souls of black folk,” as a
phrase, invokes the paradoxical imagery of both individuals (souls) and
the larger community (folk), but in either case, Du Bois is emphasizing
the spiritual, immaterial side of “black” life, something, he insists, that
Washington fails to do.

Because the program at Washington’s Tuskegee Institute was almost
exclusively focused on industrial education, Du Bois targeted it as an
agent of the captive (practical) mentality that kept blacks in America from
developing a tendency toward thinking; without such a conceptual ability,
Du Bois felt, there would be little means of envisioning any situation
outside of the current need to achieve economic stability. The problem,
then, was that Tuskegee limited the imagination of its students—rather
than providing more abstract goals that would require social and political
mobility, rather than calling out those aspects of human experience that
would inspire artistic impulses and aesthetic curiosity, Tuskegee taught
hard economic realities, encouraged a work ethic that refused the possi-
bility of class mobility, and, above all, accommodated racial hierarchy by
providing the South with a class of workers. With this kind of leadership
in place, it was almost of necessity that Du Bois turn the spotlight on the
“higher aims of life,” which, he was convinced, would never be addressed except in the form of a cultural education. An education in the high arts, a liberal arts or humanities education, was in Du Bois’ view the key to political and social advancement for black America, and Washington was recommending the exact opposite: that blacks postpone, indefinitely, any aspirations to higher education. I say postpone because it is clear that Washington believes that there is a historical dimension to the autonomous aesthetic ideal that Du Bois is after: Washington, in other words, does not yet feel it is time for this path, but he implies that the time will come—after blacks have achieved a measure of well-being. For Du Bois, however, such tolerance could not be tolerated. Even if this kind of patience could work, it would simply take too long.

In reading through Washington’s speeches, one becomes aware that he represented his own commitment to the purely practical as a commitment to the working class: he pointed out, time and again, that the degradation of manual work need not be internalized by the “race.” By taking this tack, Washington accomplished a number of things. Certainly, he appealed to and helped create an anti-elitist sentiment among working-class blacks. This sentiment, or this resentment, extended to accuse those blacks—however few—who had managed to acquire a cultural education. He also helped provide a model in which black workers could rationalize their own exploitation—he told them their work was as meaningful as that carried out by the cultural elite. These effects arguably helped forward the cause of racial domination. However, looking closely at the ways in which Washington phrased his argument, it is safe to say that he, like Du Bois, did place a substantial amount of pressure on the dichotomy of the practical, on the one hand, and the aesthetic (of culture), on the other, even though he did not intend to incite the same effects. For example, at the Atlantic Cotton Exposition in 1895, Washington told his large audience:

No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top. . . .

The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing.21

Certainly Washington links up the activity of writing a poem with the idea of “privilege,” even as he suggests that tilling a field should be con-
considered as dignified an act as writing a poem. Thus the “privileges” denied blacks are inextricably bound up with the idea of what is cultural, with what signifies *culture*—namely art forms, such as poetry—and so access to culture, *as a privilege*, emerges as the thing that signifies not only social equality and “progress,” but political freedom, which is, especially during the tenure of Washington’s leadership, racially determined.

What is essential to notice here, as well, is that the problem, or the question posed (why should there be any less dignity in tilling a field than in writing a poem?), suggests the constructed nature of the (writing/tilling) hierarchy, merely by suggesting that the race can and indeed must “learn” to think in an alternative framework. Hence, Washington’s remarks indicate how this hierarchy is steeped in—or merely *is*—the dynamic of class: the division between these two activities is the class division that constitutes and reconstitutes racial hierarchy; it is the very real division that purposefully puts one class of people on the “bottom,” and one on the “top,” in the sense that poetry is considered a luxury of the educated, elite class, and agricultural maintenance the lot of those who cannot afford (and are not allowed) the privilege of culture. Ultimately, Washington’s point—that writing poetry is an activity that is automatically dignified—is a powerful one, for it emphasizes the extent to which (the idea of) “art” as the highest form of expression really serves the purpose of (re)establishing cultural hierarchy.

Yet while Washington is, in effect, asking that black folk think independently of and indeed against one discursive strain of the value system set up by dominant white culture—you must believe that there is value in your work, he contends, despite the cultural discourse that would devalue this labor—he is still asking black folk to meet the demand of elite white society, which is, namely, to accept the caste system. His campaign to persuade black workers of the inherent value in their work is thus quite different from, say, other movements which sought to challenge the same classical depreciation of practical activity: consider that John Dewey’s pragmatism also criticized the classical assumption that there was more dignity in writing a poem than in tilling a field. Dewey pointed out that this attitude was the very same attitude that legitimated master-slave relationships, making obedience the duty of the laborer and authority the privilege of the thinker (poet/philosopher). Dewey argued this as early as 1899, in *School and Society*, and continued to elaborate and polish this argument in later works, such as *Democracy and Education* (1915), *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), and various essays, including “Education vs. Trade-Training,” and “Culture and Industry in Education” (1906). Like Washington, Dewey
spoke out against the denigration of manual labor or practical activity, arguing that such disparagement had no meaning outside of its own discourse, which is to say its meaning was based solely on the fact that its discourse was dominant; both Dewey and Washington were thus intent on exposing this attitude as merely an inheritance of an ancient system of thought. Unlike Washington, however, Dewey aligned himself with the political nature of such a critique, and explained that the denigration of practical activity and manual work was a problem because it was endemic to a class society. Posing a fundamental challenge to the social relations of capitalist production, Dewey protested that practical activity in the form of manual work—the kind workers were being trained for at Washington’s school—was “not free because not freely participated in,” so such workers “do what they do, not freely and intelligently, but for the sake of the wage earned.”

Going further than this, Dewey proposed an alternative system: he suggested, inversely, that practical activity itself could serve as an ideal by which people could order their lives. The comparison being drawn between Dewey and Washington is thus designed to underscore the difference between their respective celebrations of the practical—one has an explicit agenda to challenge the social order by refiguring the distinction between culture and utility, and the other tries to de-emphasize the very possibility of an agenda: Washington refuses to politicize his position, his consciousness, and instead calls for a halt to any efforts that would translate such independent thinking, or such consciousness, into political action. Seeking to persuade white Southerners that it is possible to isolate the realms of the economic and the industrial from the tensions of social and political struggle, and thus from the risks of racial clash, in an oft-quoted remark Washington tells his audience, “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.”

This suggestion incensed Du Bois, of course, who was determined to agitate “questions of social equality” and who, like Dewey, was fundamentally opposed to such a segregationist sentiment—it is impossible, Du Bois asserted, to keep the social separate from the industrial; nor is it in any way desirable or useful.

What Washington tries to suggest, then, is a paradigm of disinterest, for he is claiming that economic betterment can be politically and socially disinterested: he stresses that there is no hidden agenda in his program, no interest in acquiring social equality or a more visible political status. Offering to help pull “the load upward,” Washington is explicit in encouraging a black-white partnership based on the acceptance of political inequality and the economic tracking of blacks into agricultural and
industrial roles subordinate to white business interests. Seeking pay is, of course, an agenda, and trying to provide and implement vocational training for blacks is certainly an effort at reform, but Washington’s attempts to present this agenda for reform as a politically disinterested project neutralizes the effect such a program might have. For Du Bois, then, who approves of a focus on economics only to the extent that it is represented as a politically interested approach, it might be said that Washington’s program is too focused on practical issues, but at its core, not practical enough. Arguing that it is entirely impractical not to insist on voting rights and engage in other kinds of political activism, Du Bois asks whether it is “possible, and probable”

[t]hat nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men? If history and reason give any distinct answer to these questions, it is an emphatic No.26

Instead of money, or economic progress, then, it is the abstract ideal of “rights” that Du Bois puts above all else. A “firm adherence,” Du Bois concludes, to “higher ideals and aspirations will ever keep those ideals within the realm of possibility.”27 As he writes the following year, after the publication of _The Souls of Black Folk_, nothing is more important than the “great principle of free self-respecting manhood for black folk.”28

Railing against what he calls the “gospel of money,” the “wave of materialism” that he sees as “temporary” but no less damaging in its ephemeralness, Du Bois argues that the “great question” of what something is worth in monetary terms is obscuring the “ideals of human rights.” He sounds much like other critics of commercialism here—in her essays and novels, the famed author Willa Cather also rails against the “wave of materialism” and the “gospel of money.” But her complaint is grounded in the insistence that these rampant commercial values are threatening the existence of “culture” as a disinterested phenomenon; she has no agenda concerning “the ideals of human rights.” Her whole stance, rather, is based on an effort to dislocate ideals from practical questions, so what is being obscured, in her eyes, is the absolute distinction between material conditions and ideal considerations; between art, or culture, and purpose; between political, social reform, and the realm of aesthetics. In other words, Willa Cather and Du Bois are both opposed to commercial values, but while Du Bois opposes them because they obscure the greater (political) project of securing rights and defeating race preju-
dice, Cather opposes them for bringing result-oriented thinking to bear on all the things that should be immune to it (culture, art, education).

It is impossible to deny, however, that in privileging the mind, or the place of the intellect, in the battle against racial discrimination, Du Bois’ early position, though visionary, could also be interpreted as quite elitist. After all, he was able to spend his time fighting for a “principle” only because his own economic or material concerns were relatively minimal. He had been raised in the North, he had had the rare privilege of a higher education—at Harvard, no less—and he had traveled the world. His personal experiences made it possible for him to assume, for a time, the legitimacy of hierarchies and distinctions that, at their heart, worked to maintain class structure and the idea of a cultural elite. Adopting a platform which echoed that of white genteel liberals such as Charles Eliot Norton, who argued that the cultivated, “trained” set needed to lead the masses in moral and aesthetic training, and who believed in the necessity of the guidance of an educated minority, Du Bois formulated his widely known idea of a “Talented Tenth,” which he first identified in a 1900 essay as the professionally, culturally educated segment of the black population that would lead the way toward equality. This group—which quickly became known as the mostly Northern, well-educated, black intellectual elite—having had the opportunities denied the majority of the black population, were justified, Du Bois argued, in claiming a knowledge of how best to serve the interests of black communities within the United States: this group would lead the way, lead the less fortunate, the ignorant.

This claim to authority is, in fact, remarkably similar to the party line of genteel liberalism. In Charles Eliot Norton’s words, “the success of democratic institutions” required the “intellectual and moral training of the people” by an elite imbued with a sense of “patriotic duty.” This sense of duty was also crucial to Du Bois’ idea of an educated minority. The “Talented Tenth” would, Du Bois admitted, consist of a select few, but only these select few, having acquired a higher education, could possibly advance the race, and knowing this, he thought, they would dutifully take up this calling. Thus, the interest of the Talented Tenth was in reproducing or multiplying its own values, so its “members” were less inclined to acknowledge the unrealistic aspects—the idealism—of their position. At the turn of the century, when the Talented Tenth idea began to circulate, it directly conflicted with the sentiment expressed by Washington five years earlier in his Exposition Address. Calling for a realistic approximation of the future of most African Americans, Washington articulates a form of what might be called “racial realism” in this address. Like other advocates of realism(s) during this period, Washington calls for a look
at hard facts, and urges his listeners to be wary of idealistic thinking: “Our greatest danger,” Washington warns, “is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands.”

While the theory of the “Talented Tenth” did indeed overlook this fact (intentionally, in some respects), in that this elite sector called for higher education as the first goal to be attained, a crucial moment in this story occurs almost fifty years later, in 1948, when Du Bois revises his theory in “The Talented Tenth: Memorial Address”:

Some years ago I used the phrase “The Talented Tenth” meaning leadership of the Negro race in America by a trained few. Since then this idea has been criticized. It has been said that I had in mind the building of an aristocracy with neglect of the masses. . . . I want then to reexamine and restate the thesis of the Talented Tenth which I laid down many years ago.

Admitting the validity of the criticism his idea received, Du Bois goes on to acknowledge his own idealism in assuming that elite (educated) black individuals would automatically be committed to the cause of racial uplift, and not just to their own personal advancement:

When I came out of college into the world of work, I realized it was quite possible that my plan of training a talented Tenth might put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro problem was personal; personal freedom and unhampered enjoyment and use of the world, without any real care, or certainly no arousing care, as to what became of the mass of American Negroes, or of the mass of any people. My Talented Tenth, I could see, might result in a sort of interracial free-for-all, with the devil taking the hindmost and the foremost taking anything they could lay hands on.

“This, historically, has always been the danger of aristocracy,” Du Bois concludes, finally taking to heart the many risks of his Talented Tenth plan, the most prominent being its likelihood of fostering a “selfish” individualism—an individualism dislocated from all sense of civic duty. What Du Bois underestimated, then, is the function of the idea of private gain, finally realizing that such a pursuit could isolate individuals from one another, despite the factor of race.

If Du Bois’ program could produce the possessive individualism fostered by capitalism, and thus inevitably inhibit the formation of the participatory communities of democratic action that are (and were) essential
to self-development and social welfare, then this is another example of the dilemma he faced: how could he provide the opportunity for black students to develop as individuals, which is to say develop independent of racist dogma, yet still ensure the development of an obligatory consciousness concerning the race, or concerning racial solidarity? Early in the century, he wanted to believe that training a small group of “talented” individuals would result in this group’s effort to further the cause of democracy, yet he found that such a program could, on the contrary, produce an environment in which individualism would flourish at the expense of this social consciousness. If this means that Du Bois could not at once ask blacks to think beyond race—beyond the entrapments of race—and remember these entrapments enough to be committed to the cause of racial liberation, then this is another manifestation of the dichotomy of the practical and the aesthetic, in the form of a tension between the individual and the community. The community, as such, stays together in a context of identification—its definitive aspect is its dependence on its identity as a community. The idea of separate individuals, or independent persons, is antithetical to the idea of a community. For one thing, such independence requires an inward focus or commitment, which is not conducive to community: community is externally focused and defined. Hence, its very existence can thwart the development of “psychic individuation.”

The immense task of refiguring the oppositional relationship between the individual and the community is something Du Bois sought to do, in that he sought to create what might be called a community of individuals—a group of individuated citizens who retained a sense of racial solidarity. To accept one’s role as either a member of a group or an (insulated) individual was thus reductive for Du Bois. Following this, part of what he found to be problematic in Washington’s program seems to be that Washington’s platform legitimated the traditional aspects of the individual/community dichotomy, allowing it to remain descriptive and prescriptive of racial difference; when Washington pleaded with his black listeners to accept their station—“cast down your bucket where you are,” he urged, “in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service”—he was essentially asking black Americans to accept and perpetuate a group identity, or a community, that was imposed and defined through the very (practical) activities that made individuation all but impossible; as Dewey noted, the “great majority of workers” in these fields had no “direct personal interest” in the ends of their actions. In fact, it was the total lack of any claim to individuality in Washington’s representations of U.S. blacks that made these representations so palatable to white society—“we shall
stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach,” Washington assured, and even went so far as to declare that black workers had little personal interest in their own lives—so little that they would relinquish life: we are “ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours,” Washington announced to his audience. A complete sacrifice of individuality, an utter lack of personal interest and independence, Washington insisted, made these workers entirely dependable.

The struggle within each dichotomy—practical/aesthetic and community/individual—is thus similar because both dichotomies set up a tension between location, dependence, external responsibility, and context, on the one hand, and dislocation, independence, integral definition, and abstraction, on the other. What this indicates in terms of the sociopolitical sphere, or more particularly, in terms of the dynamics of race and identity, is that the aesthetic of individuality collides with the practical realities and practical concerns engendered by racial discrimination. For one thing, this means that the goal of eliminating racial discrimination is complicated by the fact that an idea of race sits at the heart of such a project, even while the desire to escape the violent boundaries of race is the motivating force. What we learn from the debate between Washington and Du Bois, then, is that individuality is the aesthetic (abstracted, disinterested, independent) version of identity, and as such an ideal, individuality (in this case) has the potential to be quite remote from the practical function of community, and from other practical issues, such as social reform or political activism, which are rarely about anything but the collision of two groups.37

To understand the aesthetic of individuality, in other words, is to understand the interchangeability of individuality and aesthetics: both claim a disengaged position, an independence, a noncontingency—a freedom, essentially, from the social, and from all that the social realm imposes.38 The myth of individuality and the myth of aesthetics therefore function similarly to provide the idea, or ideal, of an autonomous realm—of autonomy itself. When Willa Cather claims that “the artist is of all men the most individual,”39 she is giving voice to this intertwined history of aesthetics and individuality; indeed she is reiterating the classical conception of art as something that cannot be anything but an expression of autonomy, which, of course, means the artist cannot be anything but autonomous (and must be “where the world is not”). Cather’s claim that the artist is the “most individual” suggests, in other words, that the agenda of individuality—to individuate—and the agenda of the artist are one and the same: to detach oneself from the community, which means,
especially, from the trappings of the social and the political. Like art, Cather’s individuality is (or should) remain apolitical, and not at all interested in reform or location. Thus, the title of her essay—“Escapism”—adequately expresses the kind of idealist individualism she supports. Even Du Bois acknowledges the power, or the allure, of this idealism. “That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect beauty sits above . . . the facts of the world and the right actions of men,” Du Bois writes, “I can conceive,” but, he qualifies, “here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable” (511). 40 What Du Bois calls “eternal and perfect beauty”—the thing that sits above the world of politics, social dynamics, even morals—is what I have been unveiling as “art,” or the idea of aesthetics, and now, finally, the myth of individuality. As Du Bois concludes, this “beauty” is only an ideal, and the ideal is that of autonomy. In this article, Du Bois has evolved his theories to the point that he finds such autonomy temporally impossible, which would mean that ideals such as art, aesthetics, and individuality are also temporally impossible. The struggle Du Bois manifests over whether to give up on such idealism—which is closely related to the liberal humanistic notion of universalism, as well as classic democratic individualism—is taken up later by Ralph Ellison, whom I will now turn to, in order to investigate how these questions surface in the work of a writer who, in considering aesthetic theory from his own perspective, argues that fiction is “a thrust toward a human ideal” and that “it approaches that ideal by a subtle process of negating the world of things as given in favor of a complex of manmade positives.”41

II. A Raft of Hope: Fiction and the Democratic Ideal

Too often we’ve been in such haste to express our anger and our pain as to allow the single tree of race to obscure our view of the magic forest of art.

— Ralph Ellison, Interview, 196742

Though invisible, I am in the great American tradition of tinkers. That makes me kin to Ford, Edison and Franklin. Call me, since I have a theory and a concept, a “thinker tinker.”

— Ralph Ellison, from the Prologue to Invisible Man

“I am a novelist, not an activist,” Ralph Ellison says in an interview from 1966, suggesting the division between (his) art and political or social reform. Ellison quickly goes on to qualify this statement, however:
But I think that no one who reads what I write or who listens to my lectures can doubt that I am enlisted in the freedom movement. As an individual, I am primarily responsible for the health of American literature and culture. When I write, I am trying to make sense out of chaos. To think that the writer must think about his Negroness is to fall into a trap.\footnote{43}

The “trap” that Ellison is speaking of here is a sense of identity that is in the first place racially based, which is to say community-based. The racial community is a trap, then, if it obligates the individual to such an extent that there is no possibility for individuation. And as Ellison points out, the link between individuality and art is not just profound, but necessary, in an interactive, dynamic sense—he suggests both that the former must precede the latter, and that individual identity is a product of artistic exploration. “It is through the problems of art,” Ellison writes elsewhere, “that we seek our individual identities.”\footnote{44} The nature of the “trap,” then, is that it is an interference, a calling that will only mire the individual, keeping the individual from attaining the state of mind of an individual; so the trap of thinking of one’s blackness—of feeling obligated to constantly remember this—is finally an impediment to artistic expression, in the sense that the function of such a mindset is to impose limitations. This suggests, once again, that art cannot be apprehended or even produced within the confines of such categories: it is not black, it is not white, it is not gendered—it is rather a universal (human) expression, transcendent of political categories that would in their effects eliminate the climate necessary for the kind of (universal) individuality advocated by what is, essentially, Ellison’s liberal humanism.

A key aspect of Ellison’s remarks is that while he explicitly reiterates the classic distinction between art and politics—he is a “novelist, not an activist,” he is an artist, not a reformer—he also strives to show his consciousness concerning the fact that his work is indeed political, and capable of having great political impact. Furthermore, he exhibits a determined sense of responsibility, emphasizing that individuality does not mean unaccountability, and cannot be equated with a lack of duty or lack of concern. In fact, he maintains, it is just the opposite: as such, the literary individual is in his view “responsible” for the “health” of “American literature and culture.” Yet if the individual is responsible, Ellison argues, it is as just that: an individual, not a racial representative.\footnote{45} The difference is that every writer/subject is an individual and is thus responsible for the same “culture,” which although racially inflected, and even racially divergent within its fabric, is nonetheless constitutive of a greater, universal “American” culture that cannot finally be subsumed under the heading of
either (or any) race. His comments thus strike a careful balance between social responsibility—which, in this case, means racial and national consciousness—and individual expression. He claims individuality, but insists that this does not make him a traitor to his race, which is precisely what he was accused of after the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952.46

Declaring that one need not give up individual identity for racial (or black) identity, Ellison points to his own art—which, he says, is the fruit of his individuality—to prove that these two can coexist: he expresses a sense of his identity as both a man and a black man, an individual and a member of a specific, subaltern community. In this respect, he sheds an optimistic light on the problem of “double consciousness” that Du Bois depicted half a century earlier when he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* of the “twoness” that marked the lives of African Americans. The competition that Du Bois highlighted between the two identities of “American” and “black” can be understood as the competition between a wider human identity and a particular social identity. It is the competition, in other words, between an identity that has the privilege of humanistic neutrality (a deraced identity) and an identity that is defined through a process of highly visible social practices (black—racialized—identity). Ellison addresses the dilemma of these competing identities for the black artist/writer, which, in the paradigm sketched here, is already a contradiction: how can one sense or represent or capture the universality of art if one is so obviously caught in the particular and limited consciousness of the racialized, subaltern subject? The issues encompassed by this question—by the transparent function of this question, which is asked over and over again in order to block particular artists’ attempts to gain critical recognition and access to the marketplace—resonate at the heart of Ellison’s literary philosophy, as he struggles to reconcile an Emersonian liberal individualism with a historical, political consciousness concerning slavery and racial prejudice.47

The push for such a reconciliation is a process, detailed in Ellison’s criticism and essays, as well as in the text of *Invisible Man*, and the tension that animates it is a close-enough variant of the tension between art and business or aesthetics and practicality (or vocational and cultural education) to make Ellison’s work a comprehensive stage for the second act of the drama that began with the Washington–Du Bois debates. As Ellison undertakes to unravel and interrogate the coherence of the historically erected split between the realms of aesthetics and politics, he aligns himself with pragmatist principles in a number of important ways, working toward an understanding of philosophical pragmatism as a dialogue between the real and ideal (he asserts, after all, that he is a “thinker-
tinker"). A powerful example of Ellison’s preoccupation with these questions can be gleaned “from a long and splendid exchange” with Irving Howe in the pages of *The New Leader*, in which Ellison captures the dilemma imposed on, and internalized by, black writers (and artists), and reveals the extent to which black writers are pointedly forced, or at least aggressively expected, to write only as an act of political protest, or only in support of the political cause of racial justice. The exchange with Irving Howe began with Howe’s famous 1962 essay “Black Boys and Native Sons,” in which he chastised Ellison for not replicating “the hard-edged, polemical style of Richard Wright, and for indulging too readily in illusory freedom” from “the ideological and emotional penalties suffered by Negroes in this country.” Howe was primarily criticizing Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, and the essay expresses his disturbance at what he imagined was Ellison’s violation of the constraints placed on African American imagined life by the political and racial oppression of the early 1950s. Ellison’s reply, an essay entitled “The World and the Jug,” was a “bracing rejoinder” to Howe and to anyone (whether white liberal or black nationalist) who would attempt to circumscribe the expression of the black writer. Howe, Ellison persuasively argued, was trying to designate the role which Negro writers are to play more rigidly than any Southern politician—and for the best of reasons. We must express “black” anger and “clenched militancy”; most of all we should not become too interested in the problems of the art of literature, even though it is through these that we seek our individual identities. And between writing well and being ideologically militant, we must choose militancy. Well it all sounds quite familiar and I fear the social order which it forecasts more than I do that of Mississippi.

In this response, Ellison balks at Howe’s implication that black writers must stick to a form of literary expression that can be positively traced to a pragmatic purpose or, more specifically, to a political goal. In comparing such a position to the one taken by Southern segregationists, Ellison reveals the separatist sentiment at the heart of Howe’s critique, for what Howe demands is a racial differentiation that, far from neutral or liberating, only reproduces the racial hierarchy that is reflected in and perpetuated by the split between “art” and practicality/politics. In Howe’s view, black writers are not free, or should not feel free, to engage in aesthetic experimentation, or any artistic expression that does not have an explicit political agenda and declare its cause of origin to be political. This, of course, relegates the black writer to a domain of expression that gives pri-
ority to a group or community mentality, which discourages an individual relationship to art work, making it impossible for the artist/writer to ever be just that—an artist/writer—because she will always be, in the first place, a “black” writer, which is to say, at best, a writer who takes up the activity of writing only as a political act and not for the sake of itself, and at worst, a writer who is not capable of literary “greatness,” because such greatness is a status conferred on those who succeed in aesthetic terms, and aesthetics are disinterested, while black writers, of course, are not.

As Ellison’s remarks indicate, the problem is that the black writer must suffer under the weight of the aesthetics/politics dichotomy, for she “must choose militancy,” which in fact means there is no choice, but rather only the stability of a dichotomy that translates into racial terms and requires the pretext of ideological “militancy” as the singular explanation for a black writer. The claim of disinterest, then, on Ellison’s part, is a political gesture in itself, for it is a direct affront to the racial determination provided by this dichotomy. Like Du Bois, Ellison challenges the racial exclusivity of idealism, and declares that while art might indeed serve a political purpose, the black artist can be just as concerned with—and just as drawn to—“art-for-art’s-sake” as the white artist.

In aspiring to the ideal of disinterestedness, then, in the old-fashioned Arnoldian sense, Ellison is resisting the coercion intended by the dichotomy, for while he conscientiously discusses how black writers are denied the opportunity, or the freedom, to write as an act of what he calls “art,” he also shows, in Invisible Man especially, that an aesthetically conscious approach can be integrated with a polemical one, demonstrating this integration both internally and externally: the story of the text makes this point, for Invisible Man struggles to reconcile his personal identity with his racial identity, and Invisible Man makes this point, for it maintains a double commitment to a discourse of political protest—even militancy—and to one of individualism, despite its remoteness from such an agenda. For Ellison, the ideal reader of Invisible Man would be, as he put it, “the person who has the imagination, regardless of what color he is.” Such a reader, Ellison noted in Shadow and Act, must remember that “while objectively a social reality, the work of art is, in its genesis, a projection of a deeply personal process” and involves the “deepest psychological motives of the writer.”

The possibility for art to be deeply personal is then the possibility for the artist to be, on some level, autonomous, which is exactly what the character of Ellison’s Invisible Man suggests, for as Ellison points out, this character is an example of an “attempt to reveal personality living within certain conditions,” by which he means specifically African Amer-
ican conditions, or the conditions of racial oppression. The “attempt to reveal personality,” as a hopefully independent gesture, is what Invisible Man strives toward, even though he is continually de-individualized through the process of racialization. Yet while this character is committed to the ideal of individuality—to the idea of cultivating himself as an individual—while his own personal agenda is what drives him, this is only in the beginning of his journey; the underlying and lasting implication of the story has to do with the collective, universal nature of (human) experience, and with the reconciliation of political and aesthetic agendas, for Invisible Man suggests the possibility that his narrative might capture the experience of any reader, regardless of race: “Who knows,” the final line of the novel haunts, “but that on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?”

The suggestion of this statement—that Invisible Man can “speak” for anyone besides himself—is an idea that he initially resists out of a strong commitment to his own individuation, which is simultaneously a strong fear of his own dis-appearance in the event of his becoming (merely) a representative of the “race.” He finally comes to accept such an idea as he learns, throughout the course of the novel, that his sense of individuality need not be extinct in order for him to function as a political ally of the black community. Yet the novel carefully charts his “dread of absorption by the body politic” of the black community before it eventually takes such a stance, highlighting the complicated issues that come into play when the aesthetic of individuality is challenged by the emergency of racial politics, or racial discrimination. A powerful example of this point is the scene of the eviction, where Invisible Man makes his first “speech,” the result of which is his introduction to the Brotherhood and the business of political activism. When Invisible Man is approached by an impressed Brother Jack afterwards, and Brother Jack offers him a job, telling him “We need a good speaker for this district,” Invisible Man replies, “I’m sorry. . . . I’m not interested in anyone’s grievances but my own” (286). Denying that he has any political agenda outside of his own personal advancement, Invisible Man’s response here indicates his need to establish an individual identity by extricating himself from the “mob” that signifies the black community. He simply will not “speak” for anyone but himself: he is “not interested.” It is worth noting that “not interested” and “disinterested” are close enough to be representative of the other, both lexically and conceptually.

The fact that Invisible Man did indeed stop at the site of the eviction because, as he tells Brother Jack, he and the couple being evicted are “both black” is the paradox that continually resurfaces for Invisible Man,
as he struggles to navigate his way between his impulse to extricate himself from the black community and his almost instinctive loyalty to it. The centrality of this problem surfaces as early as the scene of the battle royal, which is the first chapter of the novel. In recalling this episode, the protagonist expresses his contempt for the other young men who participated in the melee; he distinguishes himself from the black community, convincing himself that because of his role as “the featured speaker” after the battle, he is different:57

I suspected that fighting a battle royal might detract from the dignity of my speech. In those pre-invisible days I visualized myself as a potential Booker T. Washington. But the other fellows didn’t care too much for me either, and there were nine of them. I felt superior to them in my way, and I didn’t like the manner in which we were all crowded together into the servants’ elevator. (17–18)

Imagining himself as “a potential Booker T. Washington” is for Invisible Man to imagine himself as utterly distinct from the rest of black America; as much as Booker T. Washington talked about the “masses,” and depicted himself as a representative of the masses, he was still a black man who had power, who had managed to rise above the masses to become a singular figure in the imagination of both white and black communities throughout the United States.

Moreover, although Ellison’s protagonist makes explicit reference to Booker T. Washington here, I would argue that this is one of the most apparent allusions in the novel to W. E. B. Du Bois: Invisible Man is singling himself out as Du Bois’ Talented Tenth—he is the superior one, and the other nine are representative of the black masses who need to be guided by such an educated, acculturated, elite leader.58 Invisible Man is, according to his own assessment as well as the broader standards of education, part of Du Bois’ “trained few.”59 Among the ten black men present, he is the one with an acknowledged talent. His future use of this talent, however, is projected onto the image of Booker T. Washington. He sees himself in Washington’s image, and the white Southern men who give him a scholarship to a black college modeled on Washington’s Tuskegee Institute associate him with Washington’s platform, so that he will continue in “the right direction.” This direction is very specifically not one toward “social equality” (which is what Du Bois called for): Invisible Man in fact makes a “mistake” in his speech at the smoker, and says “social equality,” only to be told that this is unacceptable and that he has “got to know [his] place at all times” (30–31).60
At this young age—Invisible Man is graduating from high school at the time the battle royal takes place—he is a wide-eyed fan of Booker T. Washington, revering him enough to quote him in his speech; but as Invisible Man’s recollection indicates (“in those days”), he attributes this veneration to his youth. Soon after he arrives at college—a model, as I pointed out, of Washington’s Tuskegee Institute, which Ellison attended in the early 1930s—Invisible Man becomes critical of the environment of such a school and, in turn, presents a critique of Washington. At the heart of the critique is Ellison’s consideration of Washington’s leadership as a self-serving activity; perhaps, Ellison’s narrative suggests, Washington’s role as a black leader served his own personal interests before—or above and beyond—the interests of the black community. That the “Founder” in *Invisible Man* is distinguished, somewhat, from Washington thus hardly prevents one from recognizing that Ellison is “anatomizing the assimilative pressures, the disdain for folk culture, and the personal aggrandizement” that Washington’s school might have encouraged. This critical perspective on Washington’s accommodations to racism is summed up in the famous statue of Washington (which actually exists at Tuskegee) in which the protagonist cannot tell “whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place; whether [he is] witnessing a revelation or a more efficient blinding” (36). The point here, then, is that Invisible Man’s perspective on the Founder evolves along with, or according to, his perspective on the dilemma of black individualism, which can be traced—and is traced in the text—back to the idea of the aesthetic realm being socially dislocated and politically disinterested. In other words, black individualism is a dilemma because of the historical, racially invested division between the political and aesthetic realms.

Thus, in the beginning of his journey, Invisible Man is concerned that his participation in the group activity of the battle royal will detract from the “dignity” of his speech, which is to say the dignity of his individuality. The aesthetic of the speech is what Invisible Man is worried about, which indicates, in turn, that the “dignity” of his speech is dependent on its aesthetic coherence, a coherence that will be disrupted to the extent that he is associated with the group. It is not just the particularly ignominious nature of the activity, then, that offends Invisible Man, but the overall fact of his being grouped—lumped—together with the other nine fellows, simply because they are all black. There is an offense to his dignity here because he has no status as an individual, only the status of a racialized subject, and there can be no aesthetic success in this status. The status he misses or seeks, however, is not merely that of an individual, then, which implies a deraced subject: rather, because there is no such
thing as a deraced subject, Invisible Man is seeking the status reserved for whites. Individuality, in other words, is reserved for white subjects, or for those who can assimilate into or at least approximate white identity. Like the idea of (disinterested) aesthetics, the aesthetic of individuality is maintained through a process of segregation from anything practical or political; it is attained or embodied only in a circumstance of dislocation from a collective agenda. Even though the white community is a collective or group as well, it is still only the black community that must contend with the inaccessibility of individual identity, simply because it is the white community that defines the terms of the dichotomy.

The association of white subjectivity with individuality is explicitly drawn early on in the novel in another key scene, in which Invisible Man is driving Emerson around, and thinking about some relics from his school’s early days:

—photographs of men and women in wagons drawn by mule teams and oxen, dressed in black, dusty clothing, **people who seemed almost without individuality**, a black mob that seemed to be waiting, looking with blank faces, and among them the inevitable collection of white men and women in smiles, clear of features, striking, elegant and confident. . . . I could recognize the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe among them. (39, emphasis mine)

Against the backdrop of a “black mob,” Invisible Man remembers whites as the ones who have individual identities in the photograph; this is contested only by Invisible Man’s declaration that he could “recognize” the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe (perhaps a character portraying Washington’s real-life successor, Robert Russa Moton), which explains why in his younger days, Invisible Man dreamed of being the next Booker T. Washington—this was his dream of being recognized, of being singled out from the black “mob.” Ultimately, the aesthetic of individuality is shown in this passage to be interchangeable with the aesthetic of whiteness.

While the adjectives used to describe the whites—“clear,” “striking,” “elegant,” “confident”—suggest Invisible Man’s aesthetically conscious relationship to white subjectivity and its own definitive relationship to individuality, he nonetheless recognizes as individuals two black men in the photograph. In the novel, both the Founder and Dr. Bledsoe are men, arguably, who signify assimilation; having successfully distinguished themselves from the rest of black America, these men are now recognizable, and it is not because they have expressed activist commitments to the cause of racial or social equality, but precisely because they have not. Like Booker T. Washington, they have both, on the contrary, accommo-
dated race hierarchy (if only on the outside), and derive their success from this accommodationist platform. Dr. Bledsoe’s advice to Invisible Man is to “let the white folk worry about pride and dignity . . . learn where you are and get yourself power . . . then stay in the dark and use it” (143). Bledsoe’s strategy thus appears to be entirely practical, and although it has little to do with the aesthetic that Invisible Man wants to embody, it does reflect or perhaps inspire Invisible Man’s impulse to singularize himself through the process of extrication from the black community. “[G]et yourself power” is what Bledsoe advises, which is prophetic, in some sense, of Invisible Man’s initial response to Brother Jack’s request that he “speak” for the Harlem district: “I am not interested in anyone’s grievances but my own” (286). Bledsoe and, in this moment, Invisible Man both embody the possibility that Du Bois finally came to terms with regarding his Talented Tenth theory: that it could, as Du Bois noted at mid-century, “put in control and power, a group of selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men, whose basic interest in solving the Negro problem was personal.”

Invisible Man is indeed aware of only a personal interest in this scene with Brother Jack, and goes on to articulate the purely aesthetic—conceptual, abstract, ideal—relationship he has to oration. “I wanted to make a speech,” he tells Brother Jack, refusing the job offer, “I like to make speeches” (286). Invisible Man’s insistence on this “art-for-art’s-sake” attitude—an irreducible fancy for speechmaking in and of itself—and his failure to admit or understand the power of his oratory to produce action by others manifest his inclination to relate to public oratory as a realm in which he can discover and protect his own individuality: he has no interest in using these skills as a means to a political end for the community, nor does he have any practical goal in the sense of wanting to produce action. The action he incites is, as he implies, out of his control, and certainly not intended: “What happened after [the speech],” Invisible Man tells Brother Jack, “is a mystery to me” (286). Brother Jack’s response to this insistence on dislocation and disinterest is to openly challenge Invisible Man’s commitment to his own individuality. “I can’t believe that you’re such an individualist as you pretend” (286), he says to Invisible Man, and then goes on to suggest that Invisible Man’s responsibility to the black community is not only natural, but inescapable: “You appeared to be a man who knew his duty toward the people and performed it well. Whatever you think about it personally, you were a spokesman for your people and you have a duty to work in their interest” (286).

With this argument, however, Brother Jack only elicits a stubborn response on the part of Invisible Man, who is convinced that this kind of
"duty" is the very thing that stands in the way of his individuality. In his view, he cannot succeed in his attempts at individuation if he is invested in the politics of racial liberation, for these politics are part of an external force that is readily located in a social, practical agenda of reform. "I only wanted to make a speech" (287), Invisible Man repeats after hearing Brother Jack’s appeal to his sense of "duty," thus reiterating his lack of interest in the plight of the black community and his commitment to the ideal of aesthetic production, to a disinterested mode of relating to oration as "art," an art, moreover—like all art—that if properly nurtured and segregated (from the practical realms of politics and social reform) will provide the route to individual identity: recall Ellison’s argument that it is through the “problems of art” that “we seek our individual identities.” Speechmaking, as Invisible Man’s art, is thus analogous to writing, which is Ellison’s art, and like Ellison, Invisible Man is dedicated to his art as such—sans an explicit agenda. Invisible Man tells Brother Jack exactly what Ellison tells his interviewer: He is an artist (or “novelist”), “not an activist.”

Thus, when Brother Jack challenges Invisible Man’s disinterested relationship to speechmaking by proclaiming his own disbelief—“I can’t believe you’re such an individualist as you pretend”—he is raising the question of how free Invisible Man really is to remain uninterested in, uncommitted to, or simply dislocated from the active fight for racial justice and equality for all blacks. Brother Jack is indeed implying that such individualism is not a possibility, especially because Invisible Man has a talent, and a talent cannot rightfully be pursued except in the interests of the black community (the notion Du Bois had hoped to advance with his Talented Tenth theory). Brother Jack is, in fact, suggesting something very similar to what Irving Howe wrote when discussing Ralph Ellison in “Black Boys and Native Sons”: that black writers/artists have no business engaging in artistic production except as an act of political protest. Recall how Ellison’s response to Howe, cited earlier, does indeed present a protest—a protest against Howe’s ghettoization of the Negro artist. Like Howe, Brother Jack is suggesting that Invisible Man’s “art” should be or already is linked up with a political agenda, a purpose that is traceable to an alliance with the black community—the possibility of Invisible Man’s individualism is practically unthinkable to him, so unthinkable that he does not believe (“cannot believe”) it is even real (Invisible Man is only “pretend[ing]” to be an “individualist”).

It is worth noting, however, that both Irving Howe and the fictional Brother Jack are presenting a welcome challenge to the classic dichotomy of art and politics, in that they both acknowledge that aesthetic produc-
tion is or should be political, which suggests that ideas are indivisible from action, or activism. In this view, both figures have an affinity with pragmatic principles, and are advancing an anti-aestheticist platform. Yet the mergence of the two terms of the dichotomy (the realm of aesthetics, art, ideas, or individuality with the realm of practical politics, action, society, reform) is not exactly revolutionary in the circumstance of black artists. This is because, as Ellison himself observes, the union between art and politics is in this case coercively established, and functions to marginalize black artists as such. Because art is only its definition historically, and because it has been historically—classically—defined as a practice and a product that is utterly removed from political, social, practical interests (despite the Marxist argument to the contrary), the classical culture of art is off-limits to any work that is entrenched in or associated with these interests.

For Ellison to proclaim his allegiance to the classical, aestheticist theory of art—“I think style is more important than political ideologies,” he specifically declared in one interview, sounding like his protagonist—is, therefore, a very particular kind of challenge to the practical/aesthetic dichotomy. It is the same kind of challenge that Du Bois presented merely by insisting that a liberal arts education, a “knowledge of culture,” was necessary to the healthy advancement of blacks in the United States, although such an education had no immediate practical location or ramifications, and even threatened to bolster an aristocratic idealism. The challenge they are presenting is largely conceptual, which is precisely the point: that the conceptual is and should be an accessible realm or facet of black education, black art, and black society in general. The point is thus not to suggest that Ellison is promoting an aristocratic concept of art and culture that, rooted in “style,” ignores the role of art as propaganda, but rather that Ellison, like Du Bois, engaged in a radical reconceptualization of the role of art in—or for—the black community, in the sense that he insisted that art and writing produced by black individuals could and should be stylistic and aesthetically conscious, and not necessarily politically interested or reform-oriented. This is, of course, a protest, and is profoundly political; it is an insertion of the black subject into the category of individuality, an insertion of black-identified art into the category of disinterested aesthetic achievement. While on the surface this insertion proclaims a decontextualization—a removing of the black artist from the context of raciopolitics and practical concerns, placing her finally “where the world is not”—it is actually a position that provides a more definitive contextualizing, for it illuminates the extent to which racial factors dictate the standards of aesthetics. More generally, to allow
for the ramifications of this position would be to allow for the claim that marginalized, subaltern artists or subjects who insist on the primacy of style can be progressive—merely because they are going against the tradition (if they are black) that is imposed by both the white and black communities—while white, or culturally dominant, artists who espouse this kind of aestheticism are just reiterating a tradition of exclusion, a tradition that is rooted in class and/or caste. It all depends, in other words, on the source—which is the same thing as saying that the political meaning or effects of aesthetic theory depend on that theory’s contextual origins.

It follows then that when Brother Jack insists that Invisible Man has a duty to the black community, he is asking him to never forget his racial identity, which is interpreted as a form of oppression by both Ellison and his protagonist—Invisible Man’s response is compatible with Ellison’s remarks concerning the constant internal reminder of one’s “Negroness”: to think like this is, for the black artist, “to fall into a trap.” Yet Invisible Man ignores the potential trap of raciopolitical activism, and agrees to join the ranks of the Brotherhood so that he may be paid to pursue his “art.” “It was, after all, a job that promised to exercise my talent for public speaking” (291), Invisible Man explains, specifying his lack of investment in the cause. The public performance of speechmaking interests Invisible Man solely because it enables him to hope that he will achieve the goal articulated by his college literature professor, who, in discussing James Joyce’s hero Stephen, tells Invisible Man that “our task is that of making ourselves individuals” (345–46). Although there is no mandate that individuality be private, it seems that Invisible Man’s desire to stand alone has required, up until this point, a degree of privacy, which is why it is ironic that Invisible Man turns to the most public of activities to develop and ensure the most private of entities: his individual self. Thus while the Brotherhood publicly rebukes individualism (“individuals . . . don’t count,” Brother Jack tells Invisible Man), the organization wins Invisible Man over precisely by taking advantage of his need for individualism—Brother Jack makes a point of emphasizing that Invisible Man’s job is “not to ask [the public] what they think, but to tell them” (462). If Invisible Man is not, in other words, interacting with the community in a give-and-take, cooperative relationship, where there is a mutual participation, but is rather isolating himself and determining the interaction between himself and the audience in a self-sufficient and indeed independent manner, this is what makes for individualism—of one kind.

But the minute the Brotherhood withdraws its support for Invisible Man, it becomes clear that he is largely dependent on the black community for his achievement of individuation. Charging Invisible Man with
“petty individualism,” the Brotherhood demonstrates its ultimate power over him, “removing” him from Harlem. Invisible Man is left with the realization that he is profoundly, undeniably connected to the community he has been “speaking” to, which is to say he realizes he has indeed been speaking for the community, as he would speak for himself: “I had learned that the clue to what Harlem wanted was what I wanted; and my value to the Brotherhood . . . depended upon my complete frankness and honesty in stating the community’s hopes and hates, fears and desires” (398). This identification with Harlem indicates the extremity of Invisible Man’s ties with the black community. He is so identified, in fact, that he understands his experience—his desires, his hopes—as indistinguishable from those of Harlem. Finally, he begins to see the impossibility of a disengaged, dislocated, disinterested pursuit of his own “art,” and finds his individual subjectivity in relation to the community. A persuasive example of this point is apparent in Invisible Man’s relationship to Tod Clifton, a black ex-Brother who is murdered by the police, for this part of Invisible Man’s story confirms that Invisible Man has experienced a revelation: he is finally capable of understanding the black community to be a group of individuals, at the same time that he becomes capable of understanding and willing to understand his role as a member of this community. I am reading Invisible Man’s examination of Clifton’s murder as exemplary of these claims based on two scenes; the first is Invisible Man’s speech—or eulogy—to the Harlem community after Clifton’s murder. The second is the disciplinary meeting that takes place between Invisible Man and the leaders of the Brotherhood after this speech.

In his speech to Harlem after Clifton has been murdered, Invisible Man focuses intently on the issue of Clifton’s “name,” repeating “his name was Clifton” over and over again, before each thing he says. With this tactic Invisible Man accomplishes the task of individuating this man, while ultimately realizing his own role as a “speaker” for this community. “They were listening intently,” he says of the crowd, “and as though looking not at me, but at the pattern of my voice upon the air” (444). Invisible Man is thus accepting the fact that to these people, he is not an individual at this moment, but a “voice” who will speak to individuate Clifton so that the community might fully comprehend this loss of life, both as a personal and as a political event. “Have you got it? Can you see him?” Invisible Man asks the crowd, personalizing the tragedy: “Think of your brother or your cousin John” (444). When he finishes his speech, he has transformed his view of both himself and the black community. Unlike the earlier impression Invisible Man had when he encountered a black group—recall he saw only a “black mob”—now he sees the com-
community in a drastically new light: “And as I took one last look I saw not a crowd but the set faces of individual men and women” (447).

Thus Invisible Man can now accept himself as a member of the community, and as a speaker for the community; he is no longer a singularly aspiring individualist who needs to differentiate himself from the “black mob.” Unlike his agenda upon arriving in New York, which led to his taking the job as speaker for Harlem, Invisible Man does not continue to be an example of Du Bois’ Talented Tenth gone awry—black men who acquired an education only, as Du Bois noticed, to pursue “the distinct and single-minded idea, of seeing how much they could make out of it for themselves, and nobody else.” Invisible Man is not interested any longer in turning his education and talent into advantages merely for himself.

The new posturing of Invisible Man as both an individual and a conscientious community member is captured in the phrase Invisible Man uses to explain why he took unauthorized action in organizing Clifton’s funeral. He went ahead, he tells the committee, on his “personal responsibility,” only to be castigated by Brother Jack and the others for taking the initiative as an organizer. The evolution of Invisible Man’s thought concerning the concept of “responsibility” is indicated in the fact that initially this word is preceded by “social,” and is accepted by the white men in the room when Invisible Man uses this phrase after his graduation speech: the particular phrase “social responsibility” is associated with the accommodationist politics of Booker T. Washington. It implies a responsibility to the white community, and to the idea of racial harmony without social equality. In the later meeting with the Brotherhood Committee, Invisible Man’s use of the phrase “personal responsibility” is a clear indication that he is now personally invested in the cause of social/racial equality for the benefit of the black community at large. But it is not so simple as saying that this means he is reconciled to the idea of self-sacrifice, which is what Brother Jack keeps repeating to Invisible Man in the disciplinary meeting as the foremost value of the organization. Invisible Man is interested now out of an impulse toward self-preservation. Once the Brotherhood tells him he is not an individual—“you were not hired to think. Had you forgotten that? . . . [Y]ou were hired to talk” (458)—Invisible Man realizes his role as speechmaker has not been what he thought. He was hired only as a practical hand, an instrument, and what he had conceived as his disinterested art form has turned out to be his participation in a structure that resembles the hierarchy of capital and labor.

Before this meeting, however, Invisible Man has already desegregated the realms of thought and action: he has embraced the political-activist
component of his job, abandoning the disinterestedness he began with. He is interested in thinking both for himself and for the community, talking for himself and for the community. His art has become his political form. This resolution of aesthetics and politics, art and reform, individuality and community, is sustained up until and reiterated at the very end of the novel when Invisible Man announces that he is “coming out” and “it’s damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it.” He then continues on, noting that his hibernation underground—which can symbolize, arguably, the most profound, radical individualism possible in that it is utter dislocation and isolation—is not the answer, and may indeed be his “greatest social crime,” since, as he puts it, “there’s a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (568). Recall that Ellison, echoing his protagonist, said that “as an individual, I am primarily responsible for the health of American literature and culture.” Part of this responsibility, then, Ellison implies with the last line of Invisible Man, is to illuminate the universal, collective aspects of humanity and art (the human family), while never losing sight of the particular experiences that do indeed construct social categories (that inspire racial self-identification) and the individuals who must live according to the realities imposed by these categories.

A Social Act

Individuality operating in and for the end of the common interest.
— John Dewey, defining a “positive conception of freedom” (Westbrook, 1991, 93)

In speaking about Invisible Man Ellison has said that in the end of the novel, his protagonist’s return from his isolation is “a social act; it is not a resignation from society but an attempt to come back and be useful.” This choice to “come back and be useful” after such a reclusive period signals Invisible Man’s reconciling himself with his racial identity, or agreeing, as it were, to take on this identity in a personal, pragmatist sense. This, as I have argued, means he is prepared to invest himself in the cause of the racialized community. Ultimately, he advances this cause by recommitting himself to the political agenda of racial justice—by determining that he has a “socially responsible role to play.” Ellison, too, is deeply interested in advancing the cause of social justice, which he accomplishes with the circulation of this novel, because, above all else, Invisible Man is a reconstruction of the fight against racial discrimination:
Ellison does not present a narrative—or characters—that can be easily categorized or fit to match the pre-existing shapes of this fight (nor did his own life reflect a conventional commitment to racial solidarity, if Arnold Rampersad’s 2007 biography is accurate). Instead, Ellison raises the most controversial questions—at an extremely, dangerously critical moment—and provides controversial answers. In effect, this novel set a new example, for according to Invisible Man, there is no simple definition of race, culture, politics, protest, identity, or art.

In the wide view, the very example set by Invisible Man has to do with the freedom black writers can exercise to go about their craft any way they like. By refusing to follow the dogmatic formula at work in the idea of “black art,” which demands that the writer make a clearly visible statement about his or her agenda, Ellison carved out a new territory of protest, and in this sense, he did not merely demand reform, or dictate reform agendas: he did reform. Invisible Man broadened the horizon of expression for black writers, and insisted that freedom—in art, in writing, in life—needed to be founded on the protection of an individual’s right to choose. No one finally convinced Invisible Man that he should rededicate himself to the cause of the black community; his decision is based on his own personal experience, and his allegiance to this community, rather than being blind, is cultivated in the process of a prolonged consideration of the many complex elements that characterize the individualist/activist dichotomy. In differentiating himself from his literary peers, Ellison exemplified the elusive and controversial idea of black individuality, and, one could argue, strongly suggested that the political meaning or effects of aesthetic theory depend on that theory’s contextual origins, which is a powerfully subtle critique of what might be called protest art. “I’ll be my kind of militant,” Ellison proclaimed, and then reaffirmed his sense of himself as a “black” man, in effect opening up the doors to a new way of thinking about resistance, which could only serve to promote the agenda of black liberation at mid-century.

In conclusion, it might be said that the idea of relationship is ultimately at the heart of Ellison’s aesthetic theory; as I point out above, this comes out at the end of Invisible Man: the “social act” of the protagonist is a fundamental endorsement of relationship, of dialogue—between the individual and the community, between races, between practicality (being “useful”) and aesthetics, between hope and change. In this work by Ellison, we thus find sociality or relationship affirmed as the most glorious enhancement of individuality and the most promising commitment one could make, as a person and an artist. The social act—or social activism—is thus a threat because it promises to discredit definitions of
culture and art that have historically and purposefully relied on the ideal of disinterest to refuel their influence and maintain the status quo. In the end, political or social activism, or efforts toward reform, can only continue to unmask the aesthetic ideals that would keep the formation of a more democratic society at bay. This is to say that in the end, there is an end, a purpose, to everything, and to restore conscientious continuity between this reality and the pursuance of something like autonomy—in art or aesthetics or personhood—is more productive than to deny the fact that autonomy, in the absolute sense, is nothing but an interested ideal.