Individu als will always be the center and consummation of experience, but what the individual actually is in his life experience depends upon the nature and movement of associated life.

— John Dewey

“Independence” . . . middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.

— George Bernard Shaw (Pygmalion, Act V)

SPEAKING BROADLY, to be “where the world is not” seems impossible, though we might like to believe—on the political Right or Left—that there is such a pure, functionless place. In this place, we would not be connected too much, we might have no duty to others or to any cause outside ourselves; we could judge art and all things objectively, thrive autonomously, upholding, ad infinitum, aesthetic disinterestedness and the romantic ideals of self-reliance and independence. Throughout this book I have delved into the many implications of believing in or arguing for the “where the world is not” view, showing that for decades, a heated battle was waged over the preservation of this autonomous realm: arguments flared about how it signals disinterest, refinement, truth, individuality, and beauty, and how it influences and interacts with democratic possibility. To be sure, the protection of the abstract realm as such is still being debated; yet, to a great extent, pragmatism helped to establish that far from there being a place where the world is not, everything and everyone are always of the world; its politics, machinery, meanings, and history cannot disappear, even for the sacred work of art. Yet where does this leave us? As writers, artists, citizens? As a world community? Within a world that we cannot escape? Yes, to some extent—but not wholly. This kind of confined understanding would be too deterministic, too discouraging, and not really accurate. Even if we cannot “lift” ourselves up into
Willa Cather’s “clear firmament” because it does not exist, we are none-the-less able to engage in a reshaping of our world.

Without recuperating aesthetic disinterestedness, I would finally propose that there is a progressive role for abstraction—one that promotes democratic engagement. After all, isn’t hope—as a form of utopianism—about that which is above or beyond the world, but that which is possible? Hope, as pragmatism notes, is a necessary, practical imagining, having everything to do with agency, politics, and social struggle. We do not cede the capacity or will to imagine a different, better world just because we think that detachment or disinterestedness is a fantasy. Nor do we fail to see that utopian thought can be used for practical purposes and does not necessarily deny the world. Anson Rabinach argues that at best, utopian thinking “points beyond the given [world] while remaining within it.”

Our ideal world is something we can thus continue to imagine with a democratic desire that outlasts and outperforms the concrete world built around us, so that the world evolves to reflect this desire. We can, as David Harvey has urged, vigorously take up the imagined possibility in hopeful action, jumping on Ellison’s raft, if you will, to challenge undemocratic realities. “There is a time and a place in the ceaseless human endeavor to change the world,” Harvey writes, “when alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces for change. I believe we are precisely at such a moment.”

If, as Harvey advocates, we try to make the world something other than what it is, something that serves the life-interests of all individuals and the planet, we are engaging in the project of active hope, which is a pragmatist project, a democratic project, and a humanly possible one at that. I would sum up at this point by returning to William James, who pragmatically admits “the presence of resisting facts in every actual experience,” but who also insists, in a formulation steeped in democratic desire, that “the world stands really malleable waiting to receive its final touches by our hands.”