

INHERITED PRAGMATISM: RACE, REPRESENTATION, AND TECHNOLOGY IN RALPH ELLISON'S *INVISIBLE MAN*

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ABSTRACT

Scholars who turn to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* to address issues of race and representation often employ the thinking of American pragmatists such as John Dewey. However, Dewey's record on race and that of other classical pragmatists have been shown to contribute little on the topic. As a result, some scholars have suggested that Ralph Ellison brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism in ways thinkers before him do not. This interdisciplinary study challenges this view, revealing how the philosopher Immanuel Kant brings attention to race in pragmatism. In fact, Charles S. Peirce, considered the originator of American pragmatism, often credited Kant as the source and inspiration for his development of the concept and its supporting principles. As such, this study explains why illuminating Kant's philosophy, his troubling views on race, and their continuity in the sociology of Robert Park warrant a reevaluation of race as a form of technology, particularly as it is explored in contemporary scholarly assessments of a missing chapter from Ellison's novel. Ultimately, a technological reevaluation of *Invisible Man* helps to advance it as a refutation of the racialization of black identity in Enlightenment thought, an intellectual legacy many writers in the African American literary tradition have challenged long before and after Ellison.

Keywords: American literature; pragmatism; racial representation; technology.

When scholars discuss the ways in which pragmatism and technology overlap conceptually, they seldom consider how their theorizations might be enriched or advanced by African American authors who use their literary texts to challenge racism and its Enlightenment heritage (Bella et al. 2015; Garnar 2020; Gates 2014, 2024; Hickman 2001, 2007). Similarly, when scholars appropriate the novels of Ralph Ellison to index Emersonian or Deweyan pragmatism, they seldom consider the role that technology plays in the substantiation of racism. Yet, such studies are often informed by genealogical recalibrations that ask us to value Ellison as a pragmatic philosopher rather than a literary artist steeped in an African American literary tradition that is just as significant scholastically and historically (Albrecht 2012; Gates 2024; Magee 2004; Posnock 2005; Rasmussen 2020). As a result, the reproduction of Enlightenment values

in our preoccupation with Ellison and his writings seem to signal the need for a (re)conceptualization of pragmatism, technology, and race that facilitates an understanding of how they intersect. Therefore, my goal in this study is to advance this effort by offering an alternative view of pragmatism that recalibrates the roles that Ellison and *Invisible Man* often play in its incessant rearticulation.

CONTEXTUALIZING PRAGMATISM

The term *pragmatism* is permeated by diverse and often complex descriptions. Therefore, our interpretations and appreciations will depend on the context in which pragmatism is used. For some, the concept is considered a philosophical approach that values the connection between theoretical and practical judgments and how they are informed and operationalized by the rational use of experiences, concepts, and language for intentional results (Peirce 1955; Rydenfelt 2019). For others, it is valued as an anti-foundational form of inquiry that accounts for actionable meaning in the pursuit of logical responses to complex phenomena or problems (Garnar 2020; Richardson 2014). As a philosophical impetus or world view, pragmatism and its various characterizations are inseparable from the orientations and aims of its progenitors and their advocates. Most scholars agree that the originators or *classical pragmatists* include philosophers such as Charles S. Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead (Lawson and Koch 2004). Peirce is generally credited with inaugurating pragmatism and his contributions are essential to Dewey's development of the term. In fact, Prawat (2001) argues that Peirce's thinking in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century paved the way for Dewey's complex elaboration of pragmatism and other subjects. He claims that "any attempt to develop a comprehensive view of what Dewey was about [...] must take into account Peirce and the influence he exerted on Dewey's thinking after the First World War" (669).

However, in assessments of pragmatism as a *uniquely* American contribution to philosophical thought, Peirce's contributions tend to get overshadowed by the valorization of Dewey. In their examination of how black scholars engage pragmatism to address the legacy of slavery and the racism left in its wake, Stenhagen and Hytten (2022)

largely overlook the contributions of Peirce. They report, “Pragmatism, the philosophy most associated with John Dewey and American democracy, is a philosophical tradition that has waxed and waned in prominence over the past century” (134). For Stemhagen and Hytten, pragmatism is a philosophical way of life in which inquiry and reflection can help us live and learn in the present. It runs parallel to the American experiment in democracy. As a leading iconoclast in pragmatic philosophy, West’s (1989) evaluation is more measured. He argues, “American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action” (5). As such, Hickman (1990, 2007) draws attention to the significant role that *instrumentalism* plays in Dewey’s thinking. To distinguish his brand of pragmatism from Peirce and others, Dewey (1938) adopts terms such as *instrumentalism* and *technology* to emphasize the importance of the use of tools in influencing how we think and what we do. Therefore, the problems of philosophy and technology become entwined in Deweyan pragmatism, as he considered ideas, goals, and language to be artifacts as well as tools that condition knowledge and behavior (Dewey 1916a, 1916b).

In other words, the key to understanding Dewey’s view of pragmatism is his contention that all inquiry that involves tools and artifacts, whether they are tangible or intangible, are inherently instrumental and valued as a form of technology. Since its earliest inception, the term *technology* has been interdefined with the use of tools and instruments (Hickman 1990). However, like philosophers of technology such as Heidegger (2013) and Foucault (1995), Dewey uses the concept to characterize the development and production of material and non-material things. He understood that technology, as a concept, involves tangible tools and machines as well as abstract thought and cultural practices (Hickman 1990). Based on Dewey’s understanding of technology, Hickman (1990, 2001) argues that novels would also be considered a form of technology. However, critics such as Feenberg (2003) suggest Hickman overstates Dewey’s philosophy of technology, minimalizing the ways in which technology can be configured by those in power to maintain their prerogatives and privileges. However, Hickman insists, “What a novelist is doing is a kind of technology. There are tools, there

are raw materials, there are intermediate stock parts, and there are skills, all of which enter into the finished product. What's not technological about that?" (Bella et al. 2015, 4).

This question suggests that the musings of scholars may be as technological as those of novelists. For example, Albrecht (2012) introduces a pragmatic genealogy of individualism beyond classic liberalism by turning to several influential American thinkers. In this lineage, Albrecht includes philosophers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and John Dewey. He also includes writers such as Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison, thus repositioning them and conflating them with the classical pragmatic philosophers in American intellectual culture. These thinkers are all influenced by Emerson, who Albrecht (2012) considers a precursor for American pragmatism. He claims, "The notion that Emerson is a seminal figure or precursor for American pragmatism is no longer new or controversial" (18). For Albrecht, the tradition of American letters that runs from Emerson to Ellison provides a uniquely pragmatic approach to democratic selfhood. More specifically, he argues that Ellison revises and extends this influence in *Invisible Man*, placing Emersonian individualism within the context of modern race relations in the United States (Rasmussen 2020). In his reading of Emerson, Magee (2004) also challenges the traditional genealogy of pragmatism. Like Albrecht (2012), he situates Ellison firmly within the pragmatic philosophical lineage that he also claims is inaugurated by Emerson. Using Emerson's philosophy, Magee reveals how African American culture, literature, and jazz embody American pragmatism. For Magee, Ellison's *Invisible Man* represents a key manifestation of this interrelationship. The connections that Magee makes are rooted in Emerson's commitment to abolition, which helps to situate him as a pragmatist and the spiritual ancestor of the classical pragmatists and black writers such as Ellison. In fact, Magee finds Dewey's idea of democracy lacking because his philosophy "never exactly admits race or ethnicity as a category relevant to the expansion of democratic designs that he calls for" (21). The implication is that Emerson is a more radical pragmatist than his descendants since he contemplated race in America in ways the classical pragmatists often did not (Fallace 2017; Rasmussen 2020; West 1989). Magee (2004) claims that one of the compelling aspects of Ellison's

thinking on the topic of pragmatism is that “he is the first person since Emerson to offer an insistent and sustained description of the pragmatist method that relates it causally to the struggle by Americans (both empowered and disenfranchised) to make sense of their cultural identity vis-à-vis the symbolic agency of their founding documents” (22). This assertion might be the reason some reviewers of Magee’s study have claimed that he believes that Ellison brings the idea of race, as it is exemplified by Emersonian philosophy and abolitionism, to pragmatism (Harris 2006, 106). However, it appears that few studies have been introduced to challenge this claim or consider what a revaluation of Ellison and *Invisible Man* using the philosophy of Immanuel Kant can teach us about the overlap among pragmatism, technology, and race (Carter 2023; Conner and Morel 2016; Germana 2018; Muyumba 2009; Rasmussen 2020; Roynon and Conner 2021).

INTRODUCING KANT

Below, I argue that the writer who brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism is not Ralph Ellison or his namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is Immanuel Kant, the Enlightenment philosopher whose racial worldview has been directly and indirectly challenged by writers in the African American literary tradition long before and after Emerson and Ellison (Gates 2014, 2024). This claim troubles the view that pragmatism is an inherently American or democratic philosophical contribution inaugurated by classical pragmatists such as Peirce, Dewey, James, and Mead. Although Peirce is considered the originator of pragmatism in the United States, his inspiration and founding ideas are derived from Kant’s philosophy. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant ([1787] 2007) characterizes pragmatism as a way of actualizing the means to certain actions. As humans, he claims that we have to make judgments and choices in life that ultimately shape the ways in which we understand and interact in the world. In this sense, one might say Kantian pragmatism denotes the different imperatives or beliefs that inform our judgments, actions, and their consequences (Henschen 2011; Rydenfelt 2019). It is informed by the basic view that our minds construct and condition our understanding of concepts and the representations of objects. Without the cognitive structure provided by the categories in our minds and reason, Kant ([1787] 2007) argued that our

thoughts represent nothing more than the play of representation, prohibiting us from achieving the clarity that we need to inform our judgements and actions (Gava and Stern 2016; Prawat 2001). While Peirce (1955) admired Kant's thinking in this area, he did not agree with Kant's structure of the mind and his separation of theory from practice or perception from conception. Prawat (2001) notes, "Where Kant had drawn a firm line between perception and conception, Peirce sought to connect the two" (689).

Therefore, Peirce (1955) developed a triadic conceptualization of cognition and logic or *semeiotics* to explain the interrelations between empirical consequences and human agency. In clearer terms, Peirce intellectualizes perception by developing ways to help us to understand how our concepts and representations influence our practices (Dennis 2022; Gava and Stern 2016; Prawat 2001). To recognize the intellectual debt that he owed to Kant, Peirce appropriates the term *pragmatisch*, initially preferring this word over *practicalism* or *technicalism* (Rydenfelt 2019). Peirce (1955) reports, "Suffice it to say once more that pragmatism is, in itself, no doctrine of metaphysics, no attempt to determine any truths of things. It is merely a method of ascertaining the meaning of hard words and of abstract concepts" (271). Prawat (2001) argues, "Peirce was adamant about the essential role that Kant played in his thinking and development as a philosopher" (685). While Peirce's admiration for Kant is well known, many of the scholars mentioned above tend to focus on Dewey and absent Kant's contributions to pragmatism along with Peirce's development of the concept. West (1989) would agree that scholars often undervalue how significant Kant was to Peirce's philosophical achievements. He reports that Peirce's "lifelong struggle with Kant is well known. What is less noted is that Peirce saw Kant as a 'scientific man beneath the skin,' as one who came to philosophy from physics" (West 1989, 50). What attracted Peirce to Kant, according to West, was Kant's methods and his effort to model philosophical thinking on approaches used by scientists.

As a leading philosopher of the Enlightenment, Kant is considered one of the most influential thinkers in the Western intellectual tradition (Dennis 2020; Gates 2024; Roberts 2011). According to Andrews (2021), "Kant is just one philosopher, but he is an important starting point because his work has all the ingredients that are so potent in

the regimes of knowledge that underpin and maintain the current unjust social order” (7). In fact, his contributions to scientific or biological racism are foundational to some of our most aggressive and ubiquitous stereotypes about the image, culture, and capacities of people of color around the world, particularly those of African descent. Furthermore, Kant’s declarations about different races are not easily separated from his philosophical views discussed above (Andrews 2021; Kleingeld 2007). In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant ([1798] 2006) explains how reason acts as a regulatory force in cognition. But he also establishes it as a priority for assessing the intellect and character of the races. For instance, during the Enlightenment, philosophers such as David Hume, Thomas Jefferson and Kant were notorious for ranking different humans on their ability to reason, particularly through writing (Jefferson [1785] 1999). To contemplate the protocols and limits of reason, “Kant writes off those who are not White” (Andrews 2021, 4). More specifically, to explain the intellectual inferiority of people of African descent, Kant relies on biological differences and racist ideologies. Andrews (2021) reports, “To think rationally is what separates man from beast, and the whole basis of the Enlightenment is that rational thought is the sole possession of the White man” (10). Kant and his contemporaries used what Gates (2014) calls the *absence and presence* of reason and writing ability to circumscribe and differentiate the humanity and intellectual capacities of different people—particularly men and women of African descent.

In many ways, Kant’s views give the idea of *race* the veneer it needed to legitimate the enslavement, colonization, and marginalization of those considered Others (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002). According to Kleingeld (2007), “Kant himself saw his race theory as significant” (579). He defined his understanding of the concept in terms of inheritable characteristics and what he perceived as intellectual and physical differences among different people. In fact, race would also become the primary way that Western thinkers categorize and organize humanity according to metrics that often include physical characteristics, ethnicity, culture and customs, and religious affiliation. As the coextension of race, the term *racism* is used in many countries and communities to characterize the hostility and discrimination directed against a group for any number

of reasons (Fredrickson 2002). Although the term is caustic and sometimes employed loosely, it is generally used to characterize an attitude of superiority. It also signifies a set of beliefs about human differences and the institutions, structures, and practices through which they are overtly or covertly operationalized and politicized. As such, power and difference are the key elements that give racism life and drive its mercurial character (Fredrickson 2002).

Moreover, what makes race and racism in the West so conspicuous and paradoxical for many of us is that they are often advanced alongside Enlightenment ideas that champion individual liberty and democracy (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002; Gates 2024). For example, Gates (2014, 2024) claims that the pernicious combination of rationalism and biological racism were imprinted during the Enlightenment by philosophers such as Kant. As such, his views have iterated through the centuries in a variety of traditions and forms, particularly as it relates to the representation of people of color. Gates (2024) reports, “This unscientific and historically dangerous conflation of character with ‘characteristics’ was born in the eighteenth century, precisely when Europeans were attempting to justify the slave trade even in the discourse of philosophy” (18-19). In referencing Kant’s contributions to the discourse on race, he reveals that Kant tended to speculate rather freely on the nature of different groups and their character and capacities, usually based on conjecture more than the scientific method that many Enlightenment thinkers often championed (Andrews 2021).

Nonetheless, Kant’s troublesome views on race appear to reverberate across space and time, helping to legitimate many of the racist views that classical pragmatists in the United States advanced and/or failed to refute (Stemhagen and Hytten 2022). In many ways, scholars have indicated that Peirce’s sentiments on race and slavery are not too distant from the thinking cultivated by Kant. Raposa (2021) argues that Peirce “embraced and defended discernibly racist beliefs and attitudes” about slavery and its abolition (32). This might explain why critics often argue that classical pragmatists have contributed very little on the topic of race and its correlates (Eldridge 2004; Neville 2018). More specifically, Lawson and Koch (2004) report that the founders of pragmatism express minimal interest in giving prominence to the question of race in their

writings. The authors claim, “The writings of the founders of pragmatism do not reveal much interest in racial questions. This omission reflects an older consensus account of American history and culture in which problems of race are not given prominence” (3). In his assessment, Carter (2023) accuses pragmatism—historically and presently—of being deficient on the question of race, particularly with respect to the African American intellectual tradition. For Neville (2018), Peirce and the other classical pragmatists did not pay enough attention to racism for their views to be sufficiently relevant to the topic today. Therefore, he and others would agree that racism should inspire a change in our understanding of pragmatism and a recognition of its Kantian origins (Stemhagen and Hytten 2022; West 1989).

Paradoxically, Ellison (1995a, 1995b) has also been critiqued for his contradictory positions on racial reform in the United States (Bland 2023; Purcell 2013). The historian John Hope Franklin contends, “I always felt that Ralph was an artist in the purest sense, and this precluded his rolling up his sleeves and getting into the action that was necessary to reform our society” (quoted in Rampersad 2007, 473). Some critics suggest that Ellison’s prominence rested on his status as an iconic writer and intellectual—but also his role as a member of an anti-communist vanguard with an often paradoxical allegiance to the prerogatives of the American ruling class (Purcell 2013; Rampersad 2007). However, according to Ellison’s supporters, Ellison used literature as an art form and intellectual tool to challenge discrimination and racism in the United States and abroad (Conner and Morel 2016; Roynon and Conner 2021). Scholars such as Magee (2004) and Rasmussen (2020) claim that this also entailed challenging the intellectual legacy and contributions of classical pragmatists such as Dewey and the hollowness of their democratic ideals when it came to race. With that said, few scholars have considered how Ellison’s criticisms might also apply to Kant. Therefore, it raises the question, What are some of the ways that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* challenges the legacy and logic of Kantian philosophy and its substantiation of race as a biological construct?

To address this question, I describe Kant’s ([1777] 2000) hierarchical conception of race in works such as “Of the Different Human Races” and other writings. Then I reveal how the famed American sociologist Robert Park (1919) echoes Kant’s racial logic

in “The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro,” a text that espoused the kind of racial ideas and biases that would influence the field of sociology and the textbook used by Ellison as a college student (Ellison 1995a, 1995b; Wiley 2006). I explain why Ellison’s lifelong aversion to sociology is triggered by his rejection of Park’s racialized and gendered views of blacks. More significantly, I also show how the character known as Professor Woodridge functions as a literary tool that Ellison uses to challenge the thinking of iconoclasts such as Kant and Park. Ironically, most readers may not recognize this character from Ellison’s novel because the chapter was not included in the final version of the book. However, we are indebted to the scholarship of Ferguson (2004) because it helps readers to recognize how Ellison’s instrumentalization of Woodridge supports the work of Dewey (1938) and Hickman (2001, 2007). Dewey and Hickman encourage us to reimagine what novelists do as a form of instrumentalism or technology. However, I revalue their appreciation of the term *technology* to account for the significant role that race plays in Kant’s philosophy and how it continues to function as a tool for securing, legitimizing, and reproducing the values and privileges of those in positions of power and authority in society. I reimagine the term to highlight the multidimensional character of race as an instrument or tool for exercising power and enabling anti-democratic practices across space and time. More significantly, in privileging race as a form of technology, I illustrate how the African American literary tradition emerges largely as a refutation of the Enlightenment values and thinking promulgated by thinkers such as Kant and his ideological heirs in classical pragmatism and beyond. In this context, we discover that Ellison’s *Invisible Man* represents another instantiation of the ways in which African American literary artists refute Enlightenment racism—making it more challenging to argue that Ellison or Emerson brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism in ways thinkers before them do not.

KANT AND PARK ON RACIAL IDENTITY

In “Of the Different Human Races,” Kant ([1777] 2000) identifies four different races based on climate, geography, and biological characteristics. They include the *White* race, the *Negro* race, the *Hun* (Mongol or Kalmuck) race, and the *Hindustani* (Hindu)

race. According to Kant, the races are considered deviations that are consistently preserved across generations. As such, the landscape of all humanity and its diversity can be understood within these four categories. Humans were developed to withstand life in a variety of climates and geographical locations. Therefore, the identifying traits and predispositions that Kant associates with each group are either advanced or held back by climate changes, making the race fitted to its particular place in the world. For instance, he argues that extreme heat and humidity explain why people of African descent have thick noses and fatty lips. Moreover, the climate in which they develop also explains why their skin is oily, which helps to prevent heavy perspiration and the harmful absorption of foul and humid air. The climate also accounts for other identifying factors, such as the strength, fleshiness, and agility of blacks. Consequently, Kant ([1777] 2000) claims that, since blacks were so well supplied by their motherland, they are inherently lazy, indolent, and dawdling. Andrews (2021) reports that Kant's description of people of African descent was not only used to disparage them but also to legitimate their enslavement and brutalization.

In other writings, Kant ([1764] 2011) claims that the nature of blacks makes them unable to exhibit feelings that rise above the ridiculous. He challenges his readers to find a single instance in which a person of African descent has demonstrated talents or great accomplishments in the arts or sciences. Unlike blacks, Kant argues that there are always members of the white race who can rise from the lowest rabble and gain the world's respect. Though Kant had second thoughts about his views on race later in his career, Kleingeld (2007) reports that he did promulgate the idea that the white race is superior or non-deficient, exhibiting the kind of ingenuity and talents the other races do not. In fact, Kant claims that Hindus were also "superior to the Negroes, because they can be educated, but they can be educated only in the arts, not in the sciences and other endeavours that require abstract concepts" (Kleingeld 2007, 577). Kant also imagines the differences in the skin color of the black race and the white race to be as different as their mental capacities. To exact this point, he accuses blacks of being vain, talkative, and superstitious. Kant also critiques their religious practices or *fetishes*, which he claims are widespread among the race. He reports that objects such as bird

feathers, cow horns, or other common objects are often consecrated with words and venerated through oaths. Kant ([1764] 2011) likens these religious practices to a form of idolatry that sinks into a level of ridiculousness that is antithetical to human nature.

In “The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro,” Park (1919) echoes Kant’s views when he describes Negroes in the United States or African Americans. He observes them for his study on the ability of different racial groups to assimilate into American society, a process that he deemed slow, cumbersome, and not always complete. Park and other aspiring scholars in the emerging field of sociology wondered how one could Americanize and domesticate the different cultural populations and their particularities, especially the large influx of immigrants pouring into the country during the Progressive Era (Ferguson 2004; Wiley 2006). For Park, the temperament of racial groups could help him determine how successfully they could acculturate in the United States, particularly with the assistance of educational institutions. The Negro population was considered an ideal test case for determining how successfully immigrant groups could assimilate. Park (1919) reports, “For a study of the acculturation process, there are probably no materials more complete and accessible than those offered by the history of the American Negro” (115). He contends that Negroes brought few traditions and little intellectual baggage with them from Africa, making them unique in the American population. Park (1919) claims, “It is, however, in their religious practices that we have the nearest approach to anything positively African” (121).

In his observations of the religion and character of black people, particularly those in fairly isolated communities, Park offers assessments that further reflect a Kantian racial ethos. For instance, he attributes the superstition and conjuring associated with some of the religious practices of blacks a consequence of their living in an *intellectual twilight* on isolated plantations. Park (1919) determines, “On the whole the plantation Negro’s religion was a faithful copy of the white man’s” (123). While Park considered the average intelligence of the races to be nearly the same, he reports that it is expected that different races will exhibit certain traits and tendencies that are a manifestation of biological rather than cultural distinctions. For example, Park compares Negroes and Jews. He considers Jews to be sophisticated, possessing racial traits and

aptitudes that are apparently lacking in the black population. By comparison, Negroes are considered primitive, lending credence to Park's suggestion that different racial temperaments and innate characteristics often manifest in the objects of attention, tastes, and talents of different racial groups. This explains why Park wonders if the Negro's interest in music and bright colors could be attributed to race or merely a feature of a primitive people.

In his analysis, Park reports that the temperament of Negroes may very well predispose them to interests and attachments to "external, physical things rather than to subjective states and objects of introspection; in a disposition for expression rather than enterprise and action" (129). He goes on to claim that blacks are more interested in life itself and not its reconstruction or transfiguration. Park concludes that Negroes, by nature, are not *intellectuals* or *idealists* like the Jews. Moreover, they are not pioneering or adventurous like the Anglo-Saxons. According to Park, the Negro is "primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake. His métier is expression rather than action. The Negro is, so to speak, the lady among the races" (130). In other words, the racial temperament of blacks in the United States feminizes them in ways that the logical, contemplative, and adventurous nature of other races do not. Not only would Park's racist views of blacks go on to shape the emerging field of sociology but also the textbooks that college students such as Ellison used as an introduction to the field, black culture, and black representation in scholarship (Ferguson 2004; Lawrie 2016).

ELLISON'S LITERARY INSTRUMENTALISM

The *Invisible Man* is considered one of the most iconic texts in American literature. The work remains a mainstay of scholarly interest in a variety of fields and disciplines (Baldwin 2021; Conner and Morel 2016; Lawrie 2016). In the novel, the unnamed narrator elaborates his sense of alienation and invisibility as a black man living in the United States. In his attempt to establish a sense of identity and belonging, the narrator moves through a social odyssey that challenges him academically, physically, and ideologically. Interestingly, Ferguson (2004) evaluates an unpublished chapter of Ellison's novel found in his collected papers at the Library of Congress in the United States. Though

readers may never know why the chapter was excluded from the final version of the book, Ferguson notes that the existence of the chapter is seldom discussed. However, it can add a new dimension to our understanding of how Ellison instrumentalizes characterization in the novel to challenge the racial world views of Kant and his ideological heirs. As discussed earlier, the term *instrumentalism* is used by Dewey (1938) to distinguish his brand of pragmatism from that of philosophers such as Peirce. He claims that ideas and language are instruments or tools that we use to make sense of the world and determine our actions. For Dewey, instrumentalism empowers us to identify and transform social processes in ways that can alter and improve the lives of human beings and their cultural conditions. When Dewey's logic is applied to the work of novelists such as Ellison, we can discover how the novel itself functions as a form of inquiry set up to address problems and transform our perspectives (Bella et al. 2015; Hickman 1990). In this context, the character named Woodridge in the unpublished chapter of Ellison's *Invisible Man* illustrates what instrumentalism looks like as a literary strategy that challenges the racial logic of thinkers such as Kant and Park.

For example, Ferguson (2004) describes the character Woodridge as a black queer man who teaches at the college that Ellison's narrator attends. He is an outspoken intellectual who finds literature, philosophy, and sociology to be areas of knowledge production that promote illusions against life. Ferguson writes, "The lost character named Woodridge haunts the college and exists as an internal reminder of the college's proximity to nonnormativity" (61). As a respected professor, Woodridge rejects the idea that sociology is an objective science, particularly when its substantiation is predicated on the exercise of power, the operationalization of racism, and the weaponization of masculinity or lack thereof. As such, Woodridge would also reject Park's formulation of African Americans. For him, Park's views reduce the complexity of human life and its heterogeneity to serve the larger goal of Americanization, which is ultimately a form of social control for the maintenance of hierarchical power (Baldwin 2021; Ferguson 2004). Moreover, Woodridge's specific critique of sociology demonstrates Ellison's interest in the ways in which sociologists such as Park (1919) exercise power through their production of knowledge about African Americans. In some respects, Woodridge embodies

many of Ellison's own reservations about sociology as a scientific enterprise. In this sense, Woodridge's characterization acts as the literary tool that Ellison uses as a novelist to signify and critique the racialized practices of sociologists and their formulations of African American identity and culture (Ferguson 2004). With that said, we cannot fully appreciate the creation of the character Woodridge and his disposition without understanding why Ellison is critical of sociology as a social science.

In the period before World War I, sociology was considered the preeminent science for racial inquiry in the United States. For sociologists such as Park, race and its frictions were inseparable from world problems (Lawrie 2016). According to Wiley (2006), pragmatism contributed significantly to the establishment of sociology as an emerging academic discipline. During the formative years of sociology in the United States, several thinkers known as The Chicago School began the work of legitimating sociology as an academic field built on scientific methods. According to Wiley (2006), "Peirce's ideas are very close to those of the 1920s Chicago School generally, which was the first paradigm in the history, at least the American history, of sociology" (44). Sociologists such as Robert Park and Ernest W. Burgess are often recognized as prominent members of this group. They would go on to author the sociology textbook that Ellison (1995b) used during his time at Tuskegee University. Unsurprisingly, Ellison finds their book entitled *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* to be deeply offensive and consequential. In fact, it reiterates and advances many of Park's views in "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro" (Ferguson 2004). Ellison (1995b) reports that, before taking the path that led to writing, he faced the irony and humiliation of being taught at a Negro college by a Negro instructor who used Park and Burgess's sociology textbook for the course.

Ellison (1995b) is particularly angered by their claim that black Americans are considered the lady of the races. He is also alarmed by his instructor's disinterest in refuting the textbook's racist arguments about black culture. In this case, *culture* describes the beliefs, social forms, and practices that contour the image and representation of blacks in the imagination of Park and Burgess, which is repugnant to Ellison. Their depiction of blacks in the United States locates them outside of normal human

relations by distorting their history and diverse experiences then reducing them to caricatures. Rampersad (2007) claims that Ellison disliked “the idea that separate races existed with distinctly separate endowments, but believed instead in the fertility of culture and the dynamic of cross-cultural change” (78). Consequently, Ellison resents sociology, finding it dogmatic, arrogant, and unwilling to recognize its limitations and questionable practices (Rampersad 2007). Ultimately, Ellison determines that the demeaning representations of black life by sociologists such as Park and Burgess would not limit him as a writer. As such, he determines that “nothing could go unchallenged; especially that feverish industry dedicated to telling Negroes who and what they are, and which can usually be counted upon to deprive both humanity and culture of their complexity” (Ellison 1995b, xx). These experiences inspire him to become more aware of craft, technique, and the nature of the culture and society out of which literature emerges. For him, literature is a by-product of a writer’s imagination. However, Ellison (1995b) also discovers that it is a confrontation with the realities of the world as well as a way to convert experience into symbolic action. He claims, “Negro Americans have a highly developed ability to abstract desirable qualities from those around them, even from their enemies, and my sense of reality could reject bias while appreciating the truth revealed by achieved art” (Ellison 1995b, xx).

With this in mind, Woodridge appears to exemplify the kind of critical consciousness that Ellison (1995b) values as a way to combat the racial logic and identity formation advanced by sociology and its pioneers. After Ellison’s narrator is banished from the university, he turns to Woodridge. The narrator recognizes Woodridge as a figure of curiosity and a scholar with ideas and deep insights about culture and the workings of the world. As an outspoken intellectual and educator, Woodridge becomes an academic resource for the unnamed narrator (Ferguson 2004). While Woodridge’s homosexuality is often perceived as threatening, the narrator values him as an intellectual with critical insights about the real purpose of education and sciences like sociology and how they appropriate and devalue black humanity. He states that there were “certain rumors whispered about Woodridge and though I admired his knowledge of books and parlimentary [sic] strategy, I had always avoided his quarters. But now I had to talk”

(quoted in Ferguson 2004, 61). Ferguson (2004) elaborates, “In Woodridge’s room, the main character can claim an alternative humanity constituted outside of hierarchical arrangements that hark back to slavery and that make up the social relations of the university campus” (62). Ferguson might also agree that Woodridge’s character is antithetical to the idea of blacks as a race incapable of education or lacking in talent, ingenuity, or the ability to think abstractly. As a professor, Woodridge frustrates claims that people of African descent are incapable of being intellectuals, idealists, or pioneers. Moreover, his status as an intellectual undercuts arguments that suggest blacks are preoccupied with religion, idolatry, and bright colors—and therefore—doomed to a life of expression rather than one of action. Ellison crafts a fully realized human being in Woodridge, one who is the exact opposite of the kind of black person conjured in the writings of Kant and Park and Burgess. In Woodridge, our notions about identity, sexuality, and intellectual capacity become fluid and too complicated for categorization or racialization as Kant or Park and Burgess imagined. In many respects, Ellison’s *instrumentalization* of Woodridge establishes him as a technology for dismantling the racialization of knowledge about people of African descent, particularly in the United States (Ferguson 2004; Foucault 1995).

As we discussed earlier in this study, Hickman (1990, 2001) treats the terms *instrumentalism* and *technology* as synonymous concepts in Deweyan pragmatism. In advancing Dewey’s philosophy, Hickman has argued that what novelists do is a kind of technology. By extension, this assessment by Hickman would also include Ellison’s instrumentalization of Woodridge to challenge the logic of racism that operates in sociology and its substantiation by pragmatists who might think like Kant. According to Hickman, Dewey was writing about the philosophy of technology and power long before many of the icons associated with these areas—such as Heidegger and Foucault (Bella et al. 2015; Feenberg 2003). However, their insights also deserve consideration because they enrich our understanding of how pragmatism, technology, and race entwine and why African American writers have often instrumentalized their work to challenge and dismantle the kind of beliefs that Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers promulgated about people of African descent.

TECHNOLOGY AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

In his assessment of technology, Foucault (1981, 1995) assigns a central role to power. He claims that power is a form of action in a field of other potential actions. It is exercised rather than possessed, creating agents in some contexts and subjects in others. Power may operate according to a set of public or hidden rules, fixed norms, strategies, or techniques that are valued as tools or technologies for realizing a course of action or goal (Garnar 2006). For Foucault, the term *technology of power* describes the various means and mechanisms through which power is exercised for control. For example, the categorization and normalization of human beings are key indicators of its operationalization in society (Foucault 1995; Garnar 2006). Like Foucault, Heidegger (2013) employs the term *technology* to characterize the use of ideas and objects as a means to an end. He claims, “Instrumentality is considered to be the fundamental characteristic of technology” (12). However, what is distinct in Heidegger’s conceptualization is that he argues that technology is also a way of bringing-forth or revealing. When we imagine technology as a form of revealing, the essence of technology can be illuminated. Exploring the essence of technology helps us to understand its different meanings and historical significance. According to Heidegger (2013), the term technology originates from the Greek word *technikon*, which is often associated with the word *technê*. This term is generally used to describe the art, technique, or craft associated with a particular activity or skill. However, *technê* is also used to refer to the arts of the mind and the fine arts, describing a process of making, creating, and bringing-forth. Heidegger’s characterization highlights the fact that technology is more than simply the manifestation of human and non-human culture. Our understandings of its dimensions are entwined in the constructive nature of language and discourse. Heidegger suggests that it is through these mediums that the essence of technology as a tool and form of power can be examined and comprehended (Achterhuis 2001).

Therefore, in the Heideggerian sense of the concept, technology provides us with a framework for questioning and meditating on the construction of ideas, artifacts, and social reality. As such, Heidegger’s (2013) work has influenced the perspectives on technology advanced by scholars such as Chun (2009). She claims that Heidegger’s views of the relationship between humans and technology resonate with the historical

experiences of many people of color. In fact, Chun and others have used Heidegger's philosophy of technology to substantiate and advance race as a form of technology (Sheth 2009). Chun argues that race, like tools and equipment, is inherently instrumental, producing the kind of social, political, and economic conditions that reproduce inequality. In addition, race has been privileged in Enlightenment thought and beyond as a set of visible and invisible biological traits and unchanging characteristics that signal one's proximity to humanness. However, when race is treated as a form of technology, we can problematize "the usual modes of visualization and revelation, while at the same time making possible new modes of agency and casualty" (Chun 2009, 28). Such efforts are important because, traditionally, race has operated as an organizing and management principle for registering the identities and capacities of different people. It also produces and configures social relations across space and time in ways that often enable those in power to sustain and reproduce the privileges that accrue to them and those in their particular social and economic strata (Chun 2009; Coleman 2009; Sheth 2009). In her effort to explain how race functions as a technology, Thomas (2021) characterizes it as "the set of knowledge practices involved in the construction, legitimation, and enforcement of social categories—in this case, identity categories" (1887). Her broadening of our consideration of technology accounts for the ways in which race produces, legitimates, and enforces social beliefs and categories that essentialize racial differences in ways that distort the complexity of human identity and limit the synthesizing effect of culture. In this context, we move from cultural and biological considerations of race to how it is weaponized over time to benefit some at the expense of others. Chun (2009) argues, "At a certain level, the notion of race as technology seems obvious, for race historically has been a tool of subjugation" (10). Therefore, technology must be seen in broader terms to account for its material and non-material modes and pragmatic dimensions (Allen and Hecht 2001; Pitt 2000; Roberts 2011). As such, no understanding of technology is complete without both tangible and intangible understandings of the concept and attention to the ways they have been used throughout time to organize raw materials, knowledge, and people for the ends of others (Pitt 2000; Thomas 2021).

This (re)conceptualization of technology can help to explain why Ellison's novel and characterization of Woodridge represent another instantiation of the refutation of race and racism in the African American literary tradition—making it more challenging to argue that Ellison or Emerson brings critical attention to the idea of race in pragmatism when many writers before them have troubled the Enlightenment thinking on which race and pragmatism are substantiated and advanced in the writings of thinkers such as Kant and Park. Ellison's characterization of Woodridge recognizes and illustrates how, as a technology, race is a continuously applied practice that is always implicated in a greater objective, which is typically reinforcing the social, political, and economic control of diverse populations (Andrews 2021; Fredrickson 2002; Thomas 2021). Therefore, when we posit race as a form of technology, we move from a meditation on what race is to a focus on how it functions as a pragmatic tool. For example, Chun (2009) claims that considering race as a technology serves as an illustration of a simile, but one that encapsulates the logic of comparison, differentiation, and marginalization in society. She argues, "*Race as technology* reveals how race functions as the 'as,' how it facilitates comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar" (2009, 8).

However, to appreciate how race operates as a form of technology in the practical philosophy of thinkers such as Kant, we have to consider how these concepts overlap in Enlightenment thought, the philosophical and historical context in which Kant's thinking manifests then iterates over time. In his writings on Kant and the Enlightenment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Wellmon (2015) associates this period with scientific and intellectual advancements and concepts like *freedom* and *equality*. However, the term *enlightenment* also refers to a wide array of technologies like philosophical systems, racial taxonomies, and various kinds of texts designed to explicate, organize, and manage knowledge as well as people. Wellmon reports that these technologies were not simply tools. They were pragmatic instruments that functioned as material extensions of the "humans who controlled and determined their use" (Wellmon 2015, 6-7). In other words, these technologies or tools were imbued with the general ethos, beliefs, and values of those who operationalized them to serve their philosophical needs and those in charge of emerging nation states whose growth and

advancement often depended on racial chattel slavery and colonialism (Andrews 2021; Gates 2024). Rydenfelt (2019) reminds us that pragmatism, for Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant, is rooted in the imperatives and beliefs that inform our thinking and condition our actions. The racism that permeates Enlightenment thought and actualization aligns with Rydenfelt's assessment. This might explain why Enlightenment philosophy is often associated with racial logics that are flawed but invariably handy in helping to legitimate the human subjugation, marginalization, and exploitation of people who are deemed different or Others. To clarify this point, Gates (2014) argues that we tend to characterize the Enlightenment by its preoccupation with the categorization and systematization of all knowledge and humans. He claims that this disposition led directly to the relegation of black people to the lowest rung on the Great Chain of Being, a popular conceptual tool and metaphor used during the Enlightenment to value and stratify all creation—particularly humans.

As evidenced by Kant ([1777] 2000) and Park (1919) above, normative and descriptive accounts of racial groups and their ability to reason were often conflated and categorized according to racialized schemes. For example, Kleingeld (2007) reminds us that Kant's definition of race is built on his perception of the heritable differences in physical appearances. Moreover, she notes that Kant also connects "his understanding of race with a hierarchical account according to which the races also vary greatly in their capacities for agency and their powers of intellect" (574). According to Ferguson (2004), Ellison's depiction of Woodridge threatens Enlightenment normality and the forms of systemization often associated with Kantian philosophy. In many respects, the practices and regulations used to organize and manage the campus environment and academic structure in which Woodridge must function have their roots in Kant's architectonic notion of reason for man as well as education (Dennis 2020, 2024a). Ferguson (2004) claims, "Woodridge strikes at the very heart of American education by frustrating its claims to national ideals of equality and its promise of upward mobility" (63). He casts aspersions on these claims and the interpellating agendas that he associates with the sociology of Park and Burgess. The narrator in Ellison's chapter reports, "Woodridge was the teacher mentioned when there was a question of ideas and scholarship. He was

the nearest symbol of the intellectual to be found on the campus” (quoted in Ferguson 2004, 61). Woodridge recognizes that academic institutions organized around Enlightenment discourses that proclaim to advance equality are paradoxical in the sense that they are often more invested in the management and reproduction of racial differences and social class than critiques of these areas (Ferguson 2004). As such, Wellmon (2015) would agree that it is difficult to disassociate Enlightenment technologies from the systems of thought and paradigms that Kant and others have used to articulate their racial theories and social hierarchies. For Wellmon, technology is a way of revealing, but it also describes how humans and their various artifacts and tools interact, including different forms of texts and institutional practices. Wellmon (2015) claims, “Technology refers to this complex environment of interactions, replete with its own norms, practices, and emergent properties” (12).

In his study on the role of signification in the African American literary tradition, Gates (2014, 2024) identifies racism as a defining feature and interactive practice in Enlightenment thought. This dynamic has had a lasting impact on African American writers who often used literature to challenge and refute the ways racism and white supremacist ideologies manifested and advanced notions of black inferiority. Racism and its correlating logic are rooted in both the interpretation and exploitation of Enlightenment philosophy. Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant imagined that science and reason were the keys that could help determine who was and was not fit to be considered human or rightful citizens (Fredrickson 2002; Gates 2014). Gates (2024) has mentioned how Enlightenment philosophers would use writing as a technology to calibrate the reasoning ability of people of African descent. For such arbiters, writing and texts supported their normative conceptualizations of human beings as well as those forms and displays of knowledge that they considered legitimate. Philosophers such as Hume, Jefferson, and Kant have claimed that black writers were imitators rather than authors of original script. Their doubts likened the literary contributions of blacks to that of a parrot or mockingbird, often based on what they deemed to be a lack of originality or the ability to excel at mimicry or *mindless imitation* (Gates 2014, 2024). This Enlightenment skepticism is echoed centuries later when Ellison (1995b) questions why writers such as

Ernest Hemingway often failed to recognize the humanity of black people in their fiction. Ellison (1995b) claims, “Thus it is unfortunate for the Negro that the most powerful formulations of modern American fictional words have been so slanted against him that when he approaches for a glimpse of himself he discovers an image drained of humanity” (25).

The African American literary tradition and its aesthetics largely emerge as a response to the draining of black humanity and racialized thinking promulgated by Enlightenment thinkers and their intellectual and literary heirs. They often doubted the value, intellect, and abilities of people of African descent such as Olaudah Equiano, James Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, and Phillis Wheatley (Gates 2014, 2024). Masterful revisionary strategies and intertextuality would come to define the signification at the heart of the African American literary tradition, particularly in the works of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Ellison’s literary mentor, Richard Wright. To be original for African American writers, according to Gates, was not to mindlessly imitate one’s literary ancestors but revise and extend prior literary contributions in ways that were revelatory and powerful bulwarks against Enlightenment ideologies about race and its afterlife in contemporary intellectual thought (Dennis 2024b; Gates 2024). If people of African descent could reason and master writing and the sciences so prized by Enlightenment philosophers, then this capacity would trouble the differentiation, categorization, and racial hierarchies that race and racism were used to develop and legitimate. What is undeniable in Gates’s assessment is that the literary contributions of writers in the African American literary tradition represent a space in which black authors could establish and redefine their place in the human community, where they had been largely excluded by Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and the instrumentalization of conceptual tools such as the Great Chain of Being.

Gates (2014) and other scholars locate Ellison and his work firmly within this long tradition of African American literary resistance and those who sometimes helped to finance it (Lewis 1984; Purcell 2013; Rampersad 2007). In this tradition, many writers before Ellison (1995b) sought to challenge and dismantle the Enlightenment logic that underpins Kant’s practical philosophy as well as the racist taxonomies, ideologies, and

other technologies that it helped to reproduce. Gates (2014) reports that even Ellison had to recognize the debt that he owed to his literary ancestors and relatives, which includes writers such as Wright and Emerson. In the African American literary tradition, this influence is often demonstrated through the repetition of tropes or the use of vernacular language. It is also initiated by forms of literary instrumentalism as it is exemplified by Ellison's characterization of Professor Woodridge (Ferguson 2004; Gates 2014). Therefore, when we imagine Woodridge's characterization in Ellison's novel, we can more clearly recognize the ways his creation enriches the African American literary tradition as a technology that challenges the kind of Enlightenment thinking that distorts race and sets the stage for the misrepresentation and marginalization of black humanity (Ferguson 2004; Gates 2024). In this sense, Ellison and Woodridge stand on the shoulders of a long list of writers of African descent who have resisted and refuted race and racism in Western thought and far beyond it.

CONCLUSION

This study reconsiders the significance of Immanuel Kant's philosophical contributions to pragmatism. When we recognize Kant as a key progenitor of pragmatism, we can more clearly see that race is implicated in the pragmatic philosophical school of thought long before its consideration and refutation by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Ralph Ellison. This finding suggests that, in order to enact a thorough evaluation of race in the genealogy of pragmatism, we might start with Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and not classical American pragmatists or Ellison. The problem is that Kant's views are deeply problematic and reductive, thus setting the stage for the proliferation of race and racism that Emerson and Ellison later challenge. However, we find that Kant's thinking about race continues to have a long afterlife, reverberating in the writings of sociologists such as Robert Park and many classical pragmatists such as Peirce. This pattern inspires an appreciation of race as a technology and continuous practice that operates across space and time. As a technology, the concept of race illuminates and recalibrates our understanding of pragmatism and its Kantian inheritance. This alternative conceptualization invites us to consider new ways to contemplate and explicate the

character and representation of racial representation in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, particularly as we gain more insights about why certain material was left out of his novel. However, it would be a mistake to try to understand Ellison's novel or his characterization of Woodridge without understanding how both are situated in a long tradition in which black writers and their literary contributions have continuously pushed against some of the darkest recesses of our Enlightenment heritage.

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