"This morning I read as angels read"
Self-creation, Aesthetics, and the Crisis of Black Politics in W.E.B. Du Bois’s Dark Princess

Perhaps they met sometime – the painter and the dandy. Both roaming the gaslit Parisian streets and boulevards after dark. Both genuinely modern men who were aware of the fact that they were experiencing something new. The beggars, the hustlers, the prostitutes, and the wild-eyed poets – all feeling a loneliness only the crowd (‘la foule’) could offer. The painter and the dandy understood that all these people in the big city appeared as characters upon a stage. It was of course Baudelaire who first called attention to this knowledge, and who at the same time, in his attempt to elucidate the meaning of modernity, underlined that the modern painter and the dandy set themselves different tasks. In Le Peintre de la vie moderne (1863), Baudelaire describes the painter Constantin Guys as a flaneur (think of Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire in this context). Guys, as Baudelaire maintains, is governed by an insatiable passion to see and to feel. In contrast to the dandy’s ‘impassibilité,’ his “cold detachment” (Baudelaire 2006: 399), the painter’s desire is to merge with the crowd. For the flaneur, “the perfect idler, […] the passionate observer,” life in the big city is full of adventures and miracles. ‘La fugitive beauté’ is central to “A une passante,” one of the most famous poems in Les Fleurs du mal, and it is this ephemeral beauty which the flaneur seeks in “the landscapes of stone” (400). Roaming the streets of Paris, Guys is drawn to those places “where poetry echoes, life pulsates, music sounds” (401). This solitary wanderer, endowed with an unusually active imagination, is looking for what Baudelaire terms ‘la modernité,’ and Guys shows himself capable of depicting the fascinating modern tension between the eternal and the transitory in his paintings.

Guys is a modern man, but as Baudelaire’s piece makes clear he is no self-fashioner. He does not create or invent himself. Self-creation is typical of the figure Baudelaire calls the dandy. The dandy is a wealthy and blasé man who does not have to work and who thus “has no profession other than elegance” (419). Characteristic of the dandy, following Baudelaire, is “the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions” (420). His is an artificial beauty which triumphs over nature. Nature only provides the raw material, as it were, for the dandy’s self-fashioning. From today’s perspective, dandyism appears as a truly protean term. Its contemporary fascination, however, most presumably derives from the fact that its various forms bring together self-creation, aesthetics, and politics in changing constellations. In this paper, I do not discuss the phe-
nomenon of dandyism but rather three different ways of understanding the notion of self-creation, as well as three ways of grasping the relation between the private and public sphere (and between aesthetics and politics). The first part seeks to elucidate the main differences between Richard Rorty’s and Michel Foucault’s respective notions of self-creation and the role it plays for an understanding of the relation between the private and public. This Franco-American conversation prepares the ground for a discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois’s second novel *Dark Princess: A Romance* (1928). I shall argue that in spite of Du Bois’s attempt to politicize the aesthetic, or to advocate the aesthetic as political practice, his novel is governed by a too rigid private-public separation which prevents him from fully realizing the idea of an innovative and progressive black leftist politics in his text. We shall see that not the least interesting aspect of Du Bois’s novel is that it indirectly problematizes the author’s own dictum that all art is propaganda.

The notion of crisis is central to *Dark Princess*. The novel’s protagonist, Matthew Towns, experiences a personal and existential crisis because of his involvement in Chicago machine politics. As a young and sensitive intellectual, he is plagued by a profound ennui. Furthermore, the notion of crisis also plays a role as regards black politics. The text repeatedly addresses the question of how difficult it is to develop an effective black leftist politics which shows itself capable of mediating between race and class, brain and brawn, as well as between black and white labor, and which also contributes to the development of a new understanding of democracy. The solution which *Dark Princess* offers to this personal and political crisis is a leftist cosmopolitanism or transnational and multiracial radical politics. In this context it is crucial to note that in Du Bois’s novel black leftist politics is exceptional insofar as it is an early example of a leftist cosmopolitanism which is developed in the confrontation with American capitalism and its negative exceptionalism. In *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West defines negative exceptionalism thus:

The American democratic experiment is unique in human history not because we are God’s chosen people to lead the world, nor because we are always a force for good in the world, but because of our refusal to acknowledge the deeply racist and imperial roots of our democratic project. We are exceptional because of our denial of the antidemocratic foundation stones of American democracy (2004: 41).

However, even if Du Bois’s idea of a leftist cosmopolitanism is an effective means of confronting the crisis of black leftist politics, we shall see that his novel does not answer a question which is of utmost importance: where is the poets’ place in this leftist cosmopolitanism, transnational radical politics, or Afro-Asian international? I shall seek to show the implications of Du Bois’s refusal to answer this question.
1. “Soucie-toi de toi-même:” The Idea of Self-Creation in a Franco-American Conversation

Whereas the American liberal Richard Rorty restricts the power of creative self-invention to the private sphere, Michel Foucault, in *L’Usage des plaisirs, Le Souci de soi* (1984), and other later texts, shows that self-creation (or the care of the self) on the contrary might have strong effects in the public sphere and that the idea of a radical private-public split is therefore untenable. How does the idea of self-creation present itself in this Franco-American conversation or theoretical dialogue? Both Rorty and Foucault were provocative self-fashioners in the field of theory. Moreover, both often felt closer to the poets than to the philosophers. As a young analytic philosopher Rorty experienced a profound melancholy because Platonism had not kept its tempting promise. In the late 1950s and 1960s Foucault’s writings on literature and art made it obvious how much he had been influenced by writers such as Nietzsche, Roussel, Blanchot, Bataille, Klossowski, Sollers (and the Tel Quel group), and de Sade. One should also think of his baroque writing style, for instance, in *Les Mots et les choses*. Nonetheless, the idea of self-creation plays a different role in Rorty’s and Foucault’s theoretical frameworks.

In the introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty contends that his book “tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable” (1989: xv). In the same book Rorty advances the idea that the ideal member of a postmetaphysical poeticized culture is a figure he calls the ‘liberal ironist.’ The notion of liberal ironism is central to Rorty’s neopragmatist thinking. The ironist, in contrast to the metaphysician (as Platonist), is a nominalist and historicist who radically rejects the notion of intrinsic nature, who dismisses the correspondence theory of truth as outdated and useless, and who constantly calls attention to the contingency, historicity, and creativity of the various vocabularies she uses. All of Rorty’s heroes abhor the idea of stasis in the sense of getting stuck in one final vocabulary. They constantly look for new possibilities of creatively and imaginatively redescribing and recontextualizing things and persons, that is, their desire for novelty, new sets of metaphors, and surprising gestalt switches lets them contribute to the establishment of a radically new kind of postmetaphysical culture in which the notion of correct representation no longer plays a role and in which final vocabularies are considered as ‘poetic achievements.’ According to Rorty, the ironist’s search for a new and better final vocabulary “is dominated by metaphors of making rather than finding, of diversification and novelty rather than convergence to the antecedently present. She thinks of final vocabularies as poetic achievements rather than as fruits of diligent inquiry according to antecedently formulated criteria” (1989: 77).
In many respects, Rorty’s liberal ironist is also a romantic. Rorty calls attention to a crucial parallel when he writes that “[t]he generic task of the ironist is the one Coleridge recommended to the great and original poet: to create the taste by which he will be judged” (97). This idea of creating the taste by which one will be judged is a profoundly Nietzschean gesture, of course, which illuminates the importance of the line which runs from the romantics to the modern writers of the twentieth century. What exactly are the parallels between the romantics, as Rorty sees them, and the liberal ironists? Both put a strong emphasis on the power of imagination and hence on the invention and introduction of new vocabularies or new sets of metaphors. This also signifies that both regard the adoption of new vocabularies by human beings and institutions as the motor of history. Both, in other words, make us understand that a story of progress has to focus primarily on linguistic change, the change of linguistic practices or the replacement of one (final) vocabulary by another. Furthermore, both draw attention to the contingency and fragility of our final vocabularies as poetic achievements, or to the transitory nature of our webs of beliefs and desires. Both make us realize the importance of creative and imaginative redescriptions and of the idea that these are all we have. What also unites the romantics and the liberal ironists is the notion of self-creation, self-invention, and Nietzschean self-overcoming – the infinite malleability of human beings as emphasized by William James in his lectures on pragmatism. Moreover, both certainly help us grasp the new kind of ‘redemption’ offered by a culture which has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy. The last parallel I want to mention is that both underscore the distinctly aesthetic component of modern subjectivity and thus the diversity of private purposes and the radically poetic character of individual lives. In this context, think of Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Baudelaire, Emerson, Wilde, Nietzsche, Huymans, Mallarmé, and Nabokov, for instance.

It has been repeatedly pointed out that one of Rorty’s most provocative ideas is that of a private-public split. For an understanding of the aforementioned Rortyan notion of a literary or poeticized culture the private-public

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split is of great importance. Rorty writes: “My ‘poeticized’ culture is one which has given up the attempt to unite one’s private ways of dealing with one’s finitude and one’s sense of obligation to other human beings” (1989: 68). While we can be playful and creative ironists or strong poets at home, Rorty wants to persuade us that it is crucial to concentrate all our energies on the attempt to establish a liberal consensus in the public realm. Rorty’s notion of self-creation and his liberal private-public distinction are also important as far as his critique of Foucault is concerned. What Rorty’s critique of Foucault boils down to is that the latter refuses to accept the liberal insistence on the necessity of a private-public split and too often wants his self-creation and radical autonomy to shape the public sphere. Following Rorty, there are many passages in Foucault that “exemplify what Bernard Yack has called the ‘longing for total revolution,’ and the ‘demand that our autonomy be embodied in our institutions.’ It is precisely this sort of yearning which I think should, among citizens of a liberal democracy, be reserved for private life. The sort of autonomy which self-creating ironists like Nietzsche, Derrida, or Foucault seek is not the sort of thing that could ever be embodied in social institutions” (ibid. 65). On Rorty’s account, one should “[p]rivatize the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity” (65). Rorty’s “political differences with Foucault” (67) become especially obvious in his piece “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault.” This essay starts with a discussion of a problem which is central to many of Rorty’s texts, namely, the tension which is characteristic of a romantic intellectual who is not only a self-creator, self-inventor, and ironic redescriber but also a citizen of a liberal democratic society. As long as this romantic intellectual is willing to leave his ironic redescriptions and his desire for conceptual novelty and stimulating sets of new metaphors behind when he enters the public sphere, there will be no problem. Rorty’s contention is that it is only when a Romantic intellectual begins to want his private self to serve as a model for other human beings that his politics tend to become antiliberal. When he begins to think that other human beings have a moral duty to achieve the same inner autonomy as he himself has achieved, then he begins to think about political and social changes which will help them do so (1991: 194).

It is interesting to see that Rorty avers that Foucault, in spite of the fact that he wanted to invent and create his own self as much as Nietzsche did, most of the time was willing to leave other people alone in their private sphere and was satisfied with the attempt to reduce unnecessary suffering and to fight injustice in the public sphere. In other words, Rorty claims that Foucault’s politics was often comparable to the liberal understanding of the task politics has to fulfill. However, there were other times when Foucault unfor-
fortunately “ran together his moral and his ethical identity – his sense of his responsibility to others and his rapport à soi. At these times, like Nietzsche’s case, the results were bad” (1991: 194). Foucault’s desire for radical autonomy, his Nietzschean anti-Platonism, antifoundationalism, and perspectivism, his nominalist historicism, his Blanchotian desire to be a rootless and faceless stranger to his audience (‘le philosophe masqué’), and his preoccupation with the notions of transgression and negativity – Rorty of course maintains that all this belongs to the idea of self-creation or self-fashioning in the private sphere and will moreover be a hindrance to the attempt to establish a liberal consensus in the public sphere. Rorty underscores that he wishes that Foucault “had been more willing to separate his two roles – more willing to separate his moral identity as a citizen from his search for autonomy – Then he might have had more resistance to the temptation to which Nietzsche and Heidegger succumbed – the temptation to try to find a public, political counterpart of this latter, private search” (196).

It should be clear by now that Rorty’s bête noire is an attempt to regard the ironic or romantic intellectual’s goal of self-creation or self-overcoming as a model for a liberal society. We can become the poets of our own lives in the private sphere, we can present ourselves as strong poets introducing radically new ways of speaking and new vocabularies in the private realm, but what we need in the public realm, according to Rorty, is a common vocabulary which can be understood and used by everyone. He speaks of a “banal moral vocabulary” (196) in this context. Faithful to John Stuart Mill, Rorty points out: “The point of a liberal society is not to invent or create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other” (196).

Rorty uses Foucault to draw attention to the allegedly damaging consequences of the refusal to divide the public from the private sphere. Rorty thinks that Foucault, like Nietzsche, “was a philosopher who claimed a poet’s privileges” (198). However, we have seen that when the (strong) poet enters the public realm there are two possibilities for him: he either behaves like the average liberal citizen and uses a common vocabulary, or he insists on his autonomy, purity, and creativity and thus becomes useless or at worst dangerous. In his essays on Derrida, Rorty repeatedly underlines how much he values the creative, funny, and allusive side of this French philosopher. But he simultaneously states that the line of ironist theorizing which runs from Hegel through Foucault and Derrida is “largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions. Ironist theorists like Hegel, Nietzsche, Derrida, and Foucault seem to me invaluable in our attempt to form a private self-image, but pretty much useless when it comes to politics” (1989: 83).

In “Foucault and Epistemology,” Rorty’s ambivalent attitude toward Foucault’s writings also becomes obvious. According to Rorty, Foucault on the one hand comes dangerously close to presenting a successor theory to epistemology and this is clearly incompatible with his Nietzschean attitude. Consequently, Rorty calls The Archaeology of Knowledge Foucault’s “least successful book” (1986: 43). On the other hand, Rorty contends that Foucault helped us
realize the possibility of establishing a postmetaphysical culture, a culture, that is, “which lacked not only a theory, not only a sense of progress, but any source of what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort.’ I do not know what such a culture would be like, and I am uncertain about both its possibility and its desirability. But sometimes I think that Foucault has caught a glimpse of it” (48). The Rortyan uncertainty as to the desirability of such a postmetaphysical or poeticized culture would of course vanish in his later texts. For our purposes it is crucial to see that as regards Foucault’s political position, Rorty once again emphasizes that “much of Foucault’s so-called ‘anarchism’ seems to me self-indulgent radical chic” (47).

In view of what I have said so far, the question inevitably arises as to how Foucault understands the relation between the private and the public realm. The two books which were published shortly before his death, L’Usage des plaisirs and Le Souci de soi (both in 1984), are particularly valuable in this context. As far as I can see, Rorty never discussed these later texts in his writings. The notion of self-creation was of utmost importance to the late Foucault. In “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” an interview with Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus, Foucault calls attention to the fact that the art of existence seem to no longer play any role in contemporary society. In a by now famous statement he formulates as follows:

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. That art is something which is specialized or done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life? (1983: 261).

What interests Foucault in Greco-Roman culture is what the Greeks termed ‘epimeleia heautou,’ which means taking care of one’s self (‘cura sui’ in Latin). Faithful to the idea of a Nietzschean genealogy as a critique of the present, a critique that is historical, material, multiple, and corporeal, Foucault maintains that this notion of a care of the self is almost forgotten now:

We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society that the principal work of art which one must take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one’s life, one’s existence. We find this in the Renaissance, but in a slightly academic form, and yet again in nineteenth-century dandyism, but those were only episodes (271).

In The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self Foucault seeks to answer the question of how and why sexuality was constituted as a moral domain in classical and late antiquity. Furthermore, he wants to elucidate how sexual activity and sexual pleasures were problematized through certain practices or technologies of the self and in what way individuals were offered the possibility of shaping themselves as ethical subjects. While The Use of Pleasure

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concentrates on classical Greek culture of the fourth century B.C., *The Care of the Self* discusses Greek and Roman texts from the first century B.C. to the first century A.D. Undoubtedly, one of the most stimulating aspects of Foucault’s last two books is his claim that what has always been his primary concern is “a history of truth” (1985: 6). Neither the archaeologist nor the structuralist nor the Nietzschean genealogist Foucault would have used this phrase in the way he uses it in *The Use of Pleasure*. Foucault of course does not use the concept of truth in a theoretical, that is, transcendental-Kantian way (in the sense of an epistemology of truth). Rather, the ‘jeux de vérité’ are to be seen in connection with the idea of an ethics of truth. For our purposes, however, it is not the concept of truth which ought to be of main interest, but the return of the subject to the theoretical framework of a formerly radically antihumanist thinker who relentlessly argued for the disappearance or dissolution of the subject (or for the even more notorious ‘death of man’ – think of *Les Mots et les choses*). It is the actions of men, their activity and creativity, which are central to the arts of existence. In the introduction to *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault explains the arts of existence thus: “What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (10f.). The late Foucault is interested in the way man creates him- or herself as a moral and as an aesthetic being. To a certain extent, this kind of self-creation can be seen as an internalization of the constraints of power relations. Foucault is of course perfectly aware that the project of self-creation is entwined with the power structures and mechanisms of Greek and Roman societies. However, I think his texts also show that the project of self-creation as self-fulfillment is more than an illusion of transitory freedom from the aforementioned power relations. Foucault focuses primarily on self-creation as transformation, on what Rorty would call gestalt switches. The Coleridgean and Nietzschean idea of creating the taste by which one will be judged by posterity also has to be considered in this context. Following Foucault, a history of the ways in which individuals constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct or form themselves as ethical subjects ought to be “concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (29).

In his important essay “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault discusses, among other texts, Plato’s _Alcibiades I_. This dialogue is one of the first texts where the concern with the care of the self is a central aspect. In the context of his discussion of the relation between the Delphic principle ‘Know yourself’ and the principle ‘Take care of yourself,’ as it is represented in Plato’s early dialogue, Foucault contends that for Alcibiades, a private-public distinction in the Rortyan sense is not feasible. On Foucault’s account, Alcibiades “must become active in the political and love game. Thus, there is a dialectic between political and erotic discourse. Alcibiades makes his transition in specific ways in both politics and love” (1982: 229). In contrast to the Rortyan attempt to confine self-creation to the private sphere, Foucault thinks that _Alcibiades I_ shows that “[b]eing occupied with oneself and political activities are linked” (231). In other words, the practices of the self, the technologies of the self, or the attempts at moral and aesthetic self-creation do have effects in the public sphere and therefore must not be analyzed in isolation. It is of utmost importance to see that Foucault repeatedly stressed that his discussion of classical antiquity must not be interpreted as showing a desire to return to the moral and sexual ways of the ancients. In many respects, as Foucault pointed out, these ways were severely limited and are utterly incompatible with our modern world. However, these ancient ways might be useful as heuristic guides for our own attempts at self-creation and self-fashioning. If the late Foucault is still a Nietzschean genealogist striving to grasp the complexity of the present, then this might indicate that he urges us not to confine the power of self-creation, the creativity of self-invention and the dark forces of self-overcoming, to the private sphere. To put this somewhat differently, one might feel inclined to suggest that Foucault, pace Rorty, at least indirectly warns against a depoliticization of self-creation.

In his discussion of Greco-Roman culture, Foucault regards ethics as the relation an individual has with himself, and at the same time he argues that an ethical practice which depends on aesthetic criteria and which is nonuniversalizing and nonnormalizing should be seen in the larger social context. Ethics in the Foucauldian sense also refers to the struggle of subjects against the forces that try to dominate, manipulate, and subjugate them. That the care of the self is a political endeavor also becomes obvious in the final volume of _The History of Sexuality, The Care of the Self_. As Foucault maintains, the care of the self “constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice” (1988: 51). Moreover, the care of the self in Roman culture appears “as an intensification of social relations” (53). In spite of important changes as far as the relation between the private and the public realm was concerned, the ancient societies, as Foucault underlines, “remained societies of promiscuity, where existence was led ‘in public’” (42). In those ancient societies, the idea and practice of the care of the self did not imply the imperative to withdraw from the public sphere and to engage in a socially irresponsible narcissism. The ancient self-fashioner was not only expected to create a beautiful private self which others might feel tempted to emulate, but the art of living also had the important function to prepare him for his role as public man (in many
cases this meant his role as a politician). Foucault’s contention is “that the doctrines that were most attached to austerity of conduct – and the Stoics can be placed at the head of the list – were also those which insisted the most on the need to fulfill one’s obligations to mankind, to one’s fellow-citizens, and to one’s family, and which were quickest to denounce an attitude of laxity and self-satisfaction in practices of social withdrawal” (42).

As far as I can see, in his discussion of the care of the self in classical and late antiquity Foucault never claims that the ancient societies saw the necessity of establishing a strict separation between the private and the public realm. On the contrary, what primarily preoccupies Foucault is the relation between the two spheres, the creative tension and reciprocal influence that can be detected between them. In an important passage he writes:

And if one wishes to understand the interest that was directed in these elites to personal ethics, to the morality of everyday conduct, private life, and pleasure, it is not at all that pertinent to speak of decadence, frustration, and sullen retreat. Instead, one should see in this interest the search for a new way of conceiving the relationship that one ought to have with one’s status, one’s functions, one’s activities, and one’s obligations (1988: 84).

Without doubt, the last sentence in this quotation refers mainly to public ‘activities’ and ‘obligations.’ Foucault makes clear that in Hellenistic and Roman thought the care of the self, in the context of our discussion this means the work of the self-fashioner as strong poet and creative redescriber, should not be regarded as an alternative to civic activity and political responsibilities. In contrast to Rorty’s liberal position, Greco-Roman culture urges one to realize that in many respects the aesthetic and the political are entangled with one another and that in complex ways politics begins with the care of the self. For us today this also implies that philosophers as strong poets and specific intellectuals might eventually turn out to be useful to the public. With regard to the idea of a specific intellectual one has to see that Sartre’s notion of the general or universal intellectual was one of Foucault’s bêtes noires (for most post-1945 French intellectuals, Sartre could only serve as a kind of negative foil). Concerning the aforementioned relation between the care of the self and the sphere of politics, Foucault writes:

But it is not in this choice between participation and abstention that the principal line of division lies; and it is not in opposition to the active life that the cultivation of the self places its own values and practices. It is much more concerned to define the principle of a relation to self that will make it possible to set the forms and conditions in which political action, participation in the offices of power, the exercise of a function, will be possible or not possible, acceptable or necessary (1988: 86).

In this first part of my paper, I have discussed two different notions of self-creation. Furthermore, I have sought to elucidate Rorty’s and Foucault’s different ways of understanding the relation between the private and the public sphere. While the American liberal Rorty proclaims the necessity of a radical private-public split and thus confines the work of the self-fashioner as strong poet to the private sphere, the French post-Nietzschean genealogist suggests that a discussion of the care of the self in Greco-Roman culture shows that
there are relations between the aesthetic and the political whose analysis might be useful for contemporary politics. Self-creation, in other words, must not be depoliticized.


The notion of self-creation and the relation between the private and public sphere play a crucial role in Du Bois’s *Dark Princess*. One would of course assume that this black intellectual and activist, like Foucault, argues against a strict separation between the private and public sphere and that he, moreover, emphasizes that aesthetics and politics are entangled with one another. Arguing for art as propaganda and an instrumentalization of the aesthetic in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926) and other pieces, Du Bois introduced his own version of black leftist aesthetics. Authors as different as Ross Posnock, in *Color & Culture* (1998), and Monica Miller, in *Slaves to Fashion* (2009), have advanced the idea that *Dark Princess* illustrates that one of Du Bois’s primary goals was to advocate the aesthetic as political practice. I wish to complicate this notion by suggesting that in *Dark Princess* Du Bois does not depict the full potential of aesthetics to affect the public sphere. In spite of his attempt to politicize the aesthetic, Du Bois’s novel is governed by a too rigid private-public dichotomy, and this prevents the author from fully realizing the idea of an innovative and progressive black leftist politics in his text. When Du Bois published *Dark Princess* in 1928, his fascination with Marxism had long been obvious. Undoubtedly, one might feel inclined to aver that materialist aesthetics, with the possible exception of Adorno, has always been deplorably anemic and vulgar and that it, sadly enough, culminated in Lukács’s mechanistic reflection theory of art developed during his so-called middle period. However, for our purposes it is important to see that *Dark Princess* is of only limited value if one seeks to use it in order to elucidate the possibility of developing a black Marxist aesthetics. Rather, this novel combines Marxist, revolutionary, and pan-African politics with a partly depoliticized understanding of the function of art and literature. To put it differently, while the radical activist Du Bois strives to use art as propaganda, the protagonist of his novel, the black intellectual Matthew Towns, leaves the impression as if he were incapable of regarding aesthetics and politics as mutually influencing each other. What role does aesthetic form play for black radical politics? Is it possible to use poetic sensibility in order to create new visions and vocabularies in the public sphere? How might a strong poet as romantic in the Rortyan sense contribute to the development of leftist politics? I shall argue that *Dark Princess* does not answer these questions, although one might have expected an answer considering the author’s political position.  

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4 It is crucial to appreciate the status of my suggestions. I shall not offer a critique of the idea that art should function as propaganda and that it is legitimate to instrumentalize the aesthetic. This has been done numerous times, and most of those critiques are
When Du Bois published “Criteria of Negro Art” in 1926, he wanted to express his dissatisfaction with the development of the Harlem Renaissance. In his review of Claude McKay’s first novel *Home to Harlem* (1928), Du Bois would later criticize the author for concentrating exclusively on black promiscuity and moral degeneration instead of contributing to the fight for black political rights. Du Bois’s review of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) was not as negative but it became obvious that Du Bois was unwilling to appreciate the formal complexity of this black modernist text. Underscoring that he felt “unduly irritated by this sort of thing” (1924: 1210), Du Bois seemed to hold that Toomer had been too much influenced by the formal experimentation of modernist writers such as Stein and Joyce and that this was damaging to his art. In “Criteria of Negro Art,” the author makes unequivocally clear that black art and literature ought to be seen as part of “a new battle” or “the great fight” (1926: 998, 993). In the most famous passage of this essay Du Bois contends: “Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness 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. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (1000).

At the beginning of *Dark Princess* the protagonist is confronted with this question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. After having fled a racist America in August 1923, the Hampton-educated, former medical student Matthew Towns becomes an exile in Berlin where he meets and falls in love with a beautiful woman of color, Princess Kautilya of India. Kautilya is the head of an organization, “a great committee of the darker peoples” (Du Bois 1928: 16; henceforth quoted as DP), which fights Western imperialism. Matthew immediately feels attracted to this Indian woman who elegantly combines socialism, anti-imperialism, and cosmopolitanism. At a dinner party given by the Princess, Matthew is introduced to a new world. The members of the committee of the darker peoples are sophisticated and cosmopolitan intellectuals from Japan, China, India, Egypt, and Arabia. “They talked art in French, literature in Italian, politics in German, and everything in clear English” (DP: 19). Allusions to expressionism, cubism, futurism, vorticism, Proust, Croce, Schönberg, Picasso and Matisse only puzzle Matthew. He feels excluded from the dinner conversation and thinks that the other guests “easily penetrated worlds where he was a stranger. Frankly, but for the context he would not have known whether Picasso was a man, a city, or a vegetable. He had never heard of Matisse. Lightly, almost carelessly, as he thought, his companions leapt to unknown subjects” (DP: 20). Moreover, during the conversation it becomes clear that the members of the committee are doubtful about the ability of people of African descent to contribute to their anti-imperialist struggle. As an African American, Matthew detects “the shadow of a color convincing. To many literary scholars, the notion of art as propaganda, or the idea of didactic art, is an abhorrence. I hope to offer a new perspective by calling attention to the question of how to interpret and productively use the difference between the theorist and activist Du Bois on the one hand and the political novelist on the other.
This morning I read as angels read” (DP: 22). Feeling “his lack of culture audible,” and in the confrontation with the doubt about “the ability, qualifications, and real possibilities of the black race in Africa or elsewhere” (DP: 24, 21), he suddenly finds himself singing a spiritual. By singing “Go Down, Moses” in front of these cosmopolitan intellectuals, Matthew seeks to urge his listeners to acknowledge the existence of African-American culture and its long tradition of resistance. While the cosmopolitan intellectuals show a rather elitist understanding of art and literature, Towns calls attention to the significance of the attempt to democratize culture and the aesthetic. This attempt, as he maintains, is typical of the U.S.: “America is teaching the world one thing and only one thing of real value, and that is, that ability and capacity for culture is not the hereditary monopoly of a few, but the widespread possibility for the majority of mankind if they only have a decent chance in life” (DP: 26).

The idea of democratizing access to art and the aesthetic is central to Du Bois’s thinking and to that of his protagonist in Dark Princess. In a Deweyan manner, Matthew strives to bring ordinary and aesthetic experience together.5 According to Ross Posnock, Du Bois questions the following oppositions in “Criteria of Negro Art”: “Truth and Beauty, propaganda and art, politics and culture, aesthetic experience and American blacks” (1998: 139). A questioning of these dualisms is also central to Dark Princess. However, it is important to note in this context that while Matthew’s aesthetic education draws attention to the necessity of linking aesthetics and politics, it does not show how the former might creatively influence and shape, or redefine, the latter. Although Du Bois’s novel is meant to be directed against the ideology of aestheticized self-culture, many passages are governed by the dichotomy of private aesthetic education vs. public (radical) politics.

In Slaves to Fashion, Monica Miller maintains that Matthew’s experience in Berlin has given him an “access to the aesthetic that bears a direct relation to politics and even revolutionary change” (2009: 153). I wish to submit that it is precisely this idea of a ‘direct relation’ that should be questioned. After having become involved with the Council of the Darker Peoples of the World in Berlin, Matthew goes back to the U.S. He first works as a Pullman porter, becomes active in labor politics, and takes part in a scheme to dynamite a train which carries a delegation of Ku Klux Klansmen to a convention in Chicago. In the last minute, Matthew is persuaded by Kautilya, who unexpectedly also rides on the train, not to commit this act of violence. In the third part of the novel, Matthew becomes involved in Chicago machine politics. Working for the black Chicago ward politician and shady businessman Sammy

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Scott, Matthew is soon elected to the Illinois state legislature. He marries Scott’s secretary, the pathologically ambitious Sara Andrews, and eventually finds himself a tool of diverse interests. Matthew is perfectly aware that he is being manipulated by Scott and Sara. All idealism gone, he “gave up all thought of a career, of leadership, of greatly or essentially changing this world. He would protect himself from hurt” (DP: 126). Matthew experiences a profound personal and existential crisis. His enthusiasm and his hope for political change are gone, and he sees life as “a great, immovable, terrible thing” (DP: 126). At the same time, the reader becomes aware of the fact that the protagonist’s personal crisis also has political dimensions and that it has to be seen in connection with the problem of black leftist politics. Matthew, as the narrator underscores, has “no illusions as to American democracy” (DP: 126). We shall see that the utopian element of black politics dominates the final part of Du Bois’s novel where the idea of a transnational and multiracial coalition becomes increasingly important.

At the beginning of Matthew’s political career he rents an apartment in an old house in a working-class neighborhood. This apartment he furnishes with nothing but a bed, a chair, and a bureau. Yet the aspect of his apartment slowly begins to change. In a secondhand store, Matthew buys a rug which “burn[s] him with its brilliance” and which fascinates him because of “the subtle charm of its weaving and shadows of coloring” (DP: 128). He also has a parquet floor put in the living room. In the following months “the beauty of that room grew” (DP: 129). Matthew’s awareness that self-creation in his public role as a local politician is impossible since he is nothing but a tool for Scott and Sara’s plans leads to his desire to fill this void. He is convinced that only the private realm offers a possibility of leading a different life, a life which consists of “beauty, music, books, leisure” (DP: 136). Clearly, Matthew seeks to counterbalance the emptiness and meaninglessness of his public life as a politician with private aesthetic bliss. It is this private-public dichotomy which governs most of the novel. Concerning Matthew’s wife Sara, the narrator states that her “private life was entirely in public; her clothes, her limbs, her hair and complexion, her well-appointed home, her handsome, well-tailored husband and his career; her reputation for wealth” (DP: 153). Her apartment “was machine-made, to be sure, but it was wax-neat and in perfect order” (DP: 137). In contrast to Matthew, Sara buys books not to read them but “to fill the space above the writing desk” (DP: 137). Shortly before their marriage, Matthew and Sara have to furnish their new house. It becomes obvious in the text that this house will never be a home for Matthew since it is part of the public sphere governed by manipulation, greed, firm hierarchies, and the power of classifications. In the new house, there is “new and shining furniture, each piece standing exactly where it should” (DP: 142). Furthermore, instead of a fireplace with real logs, which Matthew wants very much, there is “an electric log” (DP: 142). Matthew, the aesthete, also does not like the “pictures and ornaments” (DP: 142) in the house. Consequently, “he went downtown and bought a painting which he had long coveted. It was a copy of a master – cleverly and daringly done with a flame of color and a
woman's long and naked body. It talked to Matthew of endless strife, of fire and beauty and never-dying flesh. He bought, too, a deliciously ugly Chinese god” (DP: 142f). Sara, of course, exchanges this painting for a realist painting of a landscape and she also hides the Chinese god in a dark corner.

From what I have said so far it can be seen that the private-public dichotomy works on two levels. First, Matthew strictly separates his empty life as a politician from his moments of private aesthetic bliss. Second, the private-public dualism must also be understood spatially and geographically with his own apartment, growing increasingly beautiful, on the one hand, and Sara's apartment, later their house, his office, and Scott's office, on the other. The aversion of the (hyper)sensitive aesthete to the vulgarity, triviality, and depravity of (capitalist) modern society of course has a long tradition in Western literature. Its acme was reached in Joris-Karl Huysmans's À Rebours (1884) whose protagonist, the dandy and aesthete Des Esseintes, creates an artificial paradise which even Baudelaire could not have dreamed of. To what extent Matthew's perspective is that of the aesthete can also be seen in his reaction to his fellow politicians. As a member of the Illinois legislature he is in almost daily contact with corrupt politicians, lobbyists, and other people who consider politics as a means of becoming powerful and rich. Matthew, as the narrator underscores, “disliked these men esthetically” (DP: 146). The revolt which stirs in him “was not moral revolt. It was esthetic disquiet” (DP: 147). Matthew's revolt “was against things unsuitable, ill adjusted, and in bad taste; the illogical lack of fundamental harmony; the unnecessary dirt and waste – the ugliness of it all [...]” (DP: 147). As I will argue further below, Matthew does not try to mediate between aesthetics and politics, that is, he does not seek to use his aesthetic insights, the realm of beauty and form, to transform and redefine politics.

In spite of his ‘esthetic disquiet’ and his depressed mood, Matthew continues to play the political game. Having been elected to the state legislature, Sara and Scott's next goal for Matthew is a seat in Congress. The higher he climbs up the political ladder, the more important the realm of beauty becomes for Matthew. He still has the apartment in the slums, “chiefly because Sara would not have the things he had accumulated there in her new and shining house; and he hated to throw them all away” (DP: 192). The decoration of his refuge continues. Matthew buys a two-hundred-dollar “Turkish rug for the bedroom – a silken thing of dark, soft, warm coloring” (DP: 193). He also buys “a copy of a Picasso – a wild, unintelligible, intriguing thing of gray and yellow and black” (DP: 193). “[T]rying to counteract the ugliness of the congressional campaign” with the purchase of these beautiful things,
Matthew is fully aware of the fact that there “was no place in Sara’s house – it was always Sara’s house in his thought – for anything of this, for anything of his” (DP: 193).

One ought to note that Matthew’s apartment also is the place where he reads, or rather studies, books. Whereas Sara buys the collected works of Balzac since they nicely fill the space above the desk, Matthew’s books have been made “dirty and torn and dog-eared by reading” (DP: 193). The “pamphlets” he has studied will not “stand straight or regular or in rows” (DP: 193). Du Bois does not tell his readers what Matthew reads when alone in his apartment. The word ‘pamphlets’ of course indicates that he also studies political texts. However, the main problem, it seems, is that the author does not show to what extent Matthew’s (private) reading has an effect on his (political) thinking. If all art has to function as propaganda, according to Du Bois, the question inevitably arises as to why he refrains from depicting the changes which Matthew’s aesthetic education produces in his political thought. It is crucial to see that the private-public dichotomy not only structures the relation between aesthetics and machine politics, and between private and public space, but also that between aesthetics/art and labor politics. After having ended his career as a Chicago politician, and after having spent a beautiful time with his lover Kautilya, Matthew starts to work as a common laborer. He digs tunnels for the new Chicago subway. In this new work, he experiences “a sense of reality” (DP: 264) such as he has never had before. Kautilya, who is about to go back to India to engage in the anti-imperialist struggle, and Matthew dismantle the latter’s apartment, “this little space of beauty” (DP: 263), and he moves to a sparsely furnished room. In describing his work in a letter to Kautilya, Matthew points out how important his “physical emancipation” has become to him and that he almost fears “[d]reams and fancies, pictures and thoughts” (DP: 269) which dance in his head while he works. One day, Matthew arises with the dawn before work and starts reading *Hamlet*. It seems to him as if he were reading this drama for the first time.

This morning I read as angels read, swooping with the thought, keen and happy with the inner spirit of the thing. *Hamlet* lived, and he and I suffered together with an all too easily comprehended hesitation at life. I shall do much reading like this. I know now what reading is. I am going to master a hundred books (DP: 270).

Matthew is convinced that his new experience of reading will lead to his “purification,” and that it will offer him the possibility of rising “to the high and spiritual purity of love” (DP: 270).

The dichotomy of spiritual purification vs. physical emancipation is central here. Reading as angels read, the protagonist of Du Bois’s novel seems to cherish the idea of private perfection as long as it is separated from his physical emancipation. There is apparently no necessity of mediating between those two spheres since labor politics can go on as before. Workers that want their new aesthetic experiences, their angelic visions, as it were, to influence their politics would only be a hindrance to the emancipation of the (black) working class. Is that what Du Bois’s text says? How much Matthew’s think-
ing is governed by a traditional (or ‘bourgeois’ in a somewhat old-fashioned terminology) understanding of art and beauty becomes clear in the following passage:

If only I could work and work wildly, unstintingly, hilariously for six full, long hours; after that, while I lie in a warm bath, I should like to hear Tschaikowsky’s Fourth Symphony. You know the lilt and cry of it. There must be much other music like it. Then I would like to have clean, soft clothes and fair, fresh food daintily prepared on a shining table. Afterward, a ride in green pastures and beside still waters; a film, a play, a novel, and always you. You, and long, deep arguments of the intricate, beautiful, winding ways of the world; and at last sleep, deep sleep within your arms. Then morning and the fray (DP: 271).

Posnock has termed Matthew Towns a “political aesthete” (1995: 505). This is problematic insofar as a political aesthete sees it as one of his primary tasks to elegantly bring aesthetics and politics together, to create new dynamic tensions and to detect stimulating reciprocal influences between these two. By contrast, Matthew lets his aesthetic education and his political work and thinking exist almost independently of each other.

An important passage near the end of the novel confirms our suggestion that the private-public separation structures most of the text. Matthew is still a laborer, but one day he gets up and decides not to go to work. He goes to the art gallery instead. He is fascinated by the new exhibition which shows paintings from all over the world. Matthew visits this gallery day after day, completely forgets about his job, and bathes himself “in a new world of beauty” (DP: 279). He spends a whole week at the gallery, fascinated with paintings by Monet, Matisse, Gauguin, Cézanne, Renoir, Picasso, and Van Gogh. What effect does this week at the art gallery have on Matthew? Do the colors of Monet and Matisse, the “mad lines” of Picasso, or “the lucent blue water” (DP: 280) of Cézanne change something in Du Bois’s protagonist? Furthermore, the question arises whether the influence of art and aesthetics on the thought of a young leftist intellectual must always be as openly depicted as, for instance, in Peter Weiss’s materialist Bildungsroman, Die Ästhetik des Widerstands (1983). Matthew’s reaction after his visit to the gallery differs from that of Weiss’s young heroes. After having slept “to dreams of clouds of light,” Matthew “rose the next morning light-headed, rested and strong, and went down blithely to that hole in the ground, to the grim, gigantic task. I was a more complete man – a unit of a real democracy” (DP: 280). Apparently, the week spent contemplating modern art has refreshed Matthew, it has strengthened him, so that he can go ‘blithely’ back to his hard labor. Again, the question must be posed why Du Bois does not tell his readers to what extent his protagonist is capable of using French impressionism and Van Gogh and Picasso’s modernism to give a new direction to his thought. Is he willing and able to use aesthetic form, impressionist coloring, avant-garde experimentation, and the vehemence of the new for the development
of new political ideas and concepts? After his confrontation with this ‘new world of beauty,’ Matthew simply goes back to work, and joins the union after he is fired because of the week he stayed away from work. Modernist art and traditional labor politics again remain unmediated. What this also signifies is that aesthetic pleasure and traditional leftist politics exist in separate spheres.

‘I was a more complete man – a unit of a real democracy’ – this is as far as Du Bois goes. He depicts Matthew Towns as a black democrat and leftist intellectual with access to cultural capital who wants to democratize access to the aesthetic and who wants people to potentially use art and beauty in the fight for racial justice and black civil rights. Regarding the nature of the relation between aesthetics and politics, and the ways the former might have an effect on or even change the latter, the author remains deplorably vague. Following Monica Miller, Du Bois’s novel seeks to demonstrate that an “engagement with actual pieces of art, coupled with a sense of the potential liberating and focusing force of affect inspired by the aesthetic, serves rather than hinders the revolutionary cause” (2009: 155). By contrast, I argue that Du Bois’s novel would have profited from showing the consequences of the protagonist’s ‘engagement with actual pieces of art’ and that the text, moreover, does not at all explain in what way ‘actual pieces of art’ and the aesthetic in general ‘serve’ the revolutionary cause. Consequently, I disagree with Miller when she advances the idea that Matthew, especially in the second half of Dark Princess, establishes “a relationship between political progress, freedom of the soul, and the value of contemplating the beautiful” (160-61).

Having escaped from Chicago machine politics, the lovers Kautilya and Matthew spend a beautiful time together. They create for themselves a small world of beauty, a world full of music, paintings, lovemaking, delicious food, and poetry. Kautilya laughs “in the sheer delight of it all” (DP: 220). Their days are filled “with beauty and sound, full of color and content” (DP: 220). However, the radical activist Kautilya knows that this is not the real thing,

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7 Even those theorists who consider materialist aesthetics as old-fashioned, or never interesting in the first place, are often willing to admit that Adorno’s elaborations on the significance of aesthetic form, the central category of his late Ästhetische Theorie, are highly stimulating. Adorno of course abhors the idea of art as propaganda. On his account, art is part of society, but its function is that of an antithesis: “Kunst ist die gesellschaftliche Antithese zur Gesellschaft, nicht unmittelbar aus dieser zu deduzieren” (1973: 19); “Art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it” (1997: 8). It is form which lets art become ‘the social antithesis of society.’ In order to fully grasp the significance of form for Adorno’s aesthetics, the following two sentences are crucial: “Der Formbegriff markiert die schroffe Antithese der Kunst zum empirischen Leben, in welchem ihr Daseinsrecht ungewiß ward. Kunst hat soviel Chance wie die Form, und nicht mehr” (1973: 213); “The concept of form marks out art’s sharp antithesis to an empirical world in which art’s right to exist is uncertain. Art has precisely the same chance of survival as does form, no better” (1997: 141). In this context, see the chapter “T. W. Adorno; or, Historical Tropes” in Fredric Jameson’s Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), 3-59; and “Truth-Content and Political Art” in his Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic (New York: Verso, 1990), 220-25.
as it were. This world of beauty can only be a temporary refuge from the real world of politics and activism. After Matthew’s decision to work as a laborer, Kautilya enthusiastically cries out: “For us now, life begins. Come, my man, we have played and, oh! such sweet and beautiful play. Now the time of work dawns” (DP: 256). The dichotomy between play (in a not-quite-Schillerian sense) and work is obvious here. The world of beauty, throughout the novel, is too disconnected from the (real) world of work and politics to let Dark Princess illustrate the idea that the aesthetic might affect the public sphere.

At the end of the novel, Du Bois becomes explicit regarding the respective status of beauty and work. In a passage where his Marxist penchant is obvious he characterizes Matthew’s attitude as follows:

Now he would seek nothing but work, and work for work’s own sake. That work must be in large degree physical, because it was the physical work of the world that had to be done as prelude to its thought and beauty. And then beyond and above all this was the ultimate emancipation of the world by the uplift of the darker races (DP: 287).

To what degree Du Bois had incorporated the Marxian base-superstructure model into his thinking in the 1920s and 1930s can also be seen in the following important passage from his autobiography Dusk of Dawn:

[...] I believed and still believe that Karl Marx was one of the greatest men of modern times and that he put his finger squarely upon our difficulties when he said that economic foundations, the way in which men earn their living, are the determining factors in the development of civilization, in literature, religion, and the basic pattern of culture. And this conviction I had to express or spiritually die (1940: 775).8

Our contemporary perspective has of course been shaped by Althusserian and Jamesonian retheorizations of this Marxist model, yet for the purposes of this paper, suffice it to stress that the black leftist intellectual and activist Du Bois was admired for being a poet in the broadest sense whereas the same cannot be said of his hero in Dark Princess. Concerning Du Bois’s understanding of his role, Cornel West correctly maintains: “Like Emerson, Du Bois always viewed himself as a poet in the broad nineteenth-century sense; that is, one who creates new visions and vocabularies for the moral enhancement of humanity. This poetic sensibility is manifest in his several poems and five novels” (1989: 142). By contrast, Matthew’s ‘poetic sensibility’ seems mostly confined to the private sphere, limited to the task of aesthetic education and self-creation, and it thus does not lead to ‘new visions and vocabularies’ in the public sphere.

However, against my argument one could say that *Dark Princess* does offer a ‘new vision,’ namely, a leftist cosmopolitanism and transnational radical politics. Paul Gilroy speaks of an “intercultural, transnational anti-imperialist alliance” (1993: 144) in this context.9 This idea of a transnational radical alliance is indeed central to Du Bois’s novel. During the aforementioned dinner Kautilya explains the goals of the Council of the Darker Peoples of the World by underscoring “that Pan-Africa belongs logically with Pan-Asia” (DP: 20). Matthew’s “great dream of world alliance” and Kautilya’s vision of a “new vast union of the darker peoples of the world” and “a mighty synthesis” (DP: 187, 246, 286) not only refer to an ideal, but they also call attention to the existence of a new version of transnational politics. While Matthew is caught up in Chicago machine politics, Kautilya helps organize a congress in London where, for the first time, “the leaders of a thousand million of the darker peoples” are brought together with “black Africa and black America” (DP: 225). Kautilya makes clear that during this congress “one great new thing emerged,” namely, that the participants “recognized democracy as a method of discovering real aristocracy” (DP: 225). What this signifies is that Kautilya’s, and her fellow agitators’, theoretical approach, this stimulating mixture of socialism, antiracism, anticolonialism, and cosmopolitanism, strives to combine the liberation of the black masses and the black working class with the discovery and education of the Talented Tenth. Kautilya formulates thus: “We looked frankly forward to raising not all the dead, sluggish, brutalized masses of men, but to discovering among them genius, gift, and ability in far larger number than among the privileged and ruling classes. Search, weed out, encourage; educate, train, and open all doors! Democracy is not an end; it is a method of aristocracy” (DP: 225).10

Du Bois’s leftist cosmopolitanism, as he develops it in *Dark Princess*, ought to be seen as an answer to the crisis of black politics. In this context it is crucial to see that in the 1920s and 1930s Du Bois’s attitude toward communism and socialism was ambivalent. He claimed, for instance, that the “American Socialist party is out to emancipate the white worker and if this does not automatically free the colored man, he can continue in slavery” (1931: 590). What this boiled down to was his conviction that Marxism, a diagnosis and critique of the situation in Europe in the middle of the nineteenth century, had to be radically modified in the U.S., and especially with regard to the situation of black workers. In *Dark Princess* the seriously troubled relationship between black and white labor also plays an important role. Working as

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10 For a critique of Du Bois’s “inability to immerse himself fully in the rich cultural currents of black everyday life” and of his “inadequate grasp of the tragicomic sense of life,” see West (1996: 56, 57).
a scullion on a ship on his way back to the U.S. after his exile in Berlin, Matthew is forced to recognize that his fellow workers “despised themselves” (DP: 38). There is not the slightest trace of solidarity among the workers on this ship: “There was so little kindness or sympathy for each other here among these men. They loved cruelty. They hated and despised most of their fellows, and they fell like a pack of wolves on the weakest. Yet they all had the common bond of toil; their sweat and the sweat of toilers like them made one vast ocean around the world” (DP: 40). Further below in the text the formulations resemble those of Du Bois’s “The Class Struggle” and “Marxism and the Negro Problem.” The narrator’s contention is that blacks “looked upon the white labor unions as open enemies because the stronger and better-organized white unions deliberately excluded Negroes. The whole economic history of the Negro in Chicago was a fight for bread against white labor unions” (DP: 178).

While Du Bois’s ‘Romance,’ as Dark Princess is subtitled, seeks to cope with this crisis of black politics, it does not fully answer the question as to where the poets’ place is in this new political vision. In a letter to Kautilya Matthew writes: “They that do the world’s work must do it [sic] thinking. The thinkers, dreamers, poets of the world must be its workers. Work is God” (DP: 266). What becomes obvious in sentences like these is the tension between the self-creation of the poet who wrote The Souls of Black Folk and Darkwater, with their innovative and unpredictable combination of autobiography, history, sociological analysis, short story, and poetry, and Matthew’s understanding of art and the task of the poet. The difference between the author and the protagonist of Dark Princess illuminates the multilayered complexity of a black leftist aesthetics.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed three different ways of understanding the notion of self-creation, as well as three ways of grasping the relation between the private and public sphere. My discussion of Rorty and Foucault has prepared the ground, and offered the conceptual tools, for an analysis of Du Bois’s Dark Princess. Du Bois’s second novel is an interesting text insofar as it indirectly, and involuntarily, problematizes the author’s own dictum that all art is propaganda. Dark Princess combines Marxist, revolutionary, and pan-African politics – a leftist cosmopolitanism or transnational radical politics as an answer to the crisis of black politics – with a partly depoliticized understanding of art and literature that would rather find its place in a liberal framework. Furthermore, Dark Princess to a high degree is governed by materialist thought, yet uses it in too reductionist a manner. Du Bois’s aesthetics are dominated by the base-superstructure model, and this leads to his protagonist’s incapability of productively mediating between aesthetics and politics. I have argued that Matthew’s poetic sensibility is too consigned to the private sphere and too focused on the task of aesthetic education and
self-creation. Hence, the novel makes it difficult for the reader to imagine the possible consequences of the poet’s work in the public sphere. When the contemplation of art contributes to the development of a fuller self, as Du Bois’s novel suggests, the text seems to avoid an answer to the question of what would happen if the full selves of individuals with their creative energies were offered the possibility of shaping the public realm by means of their radical politics. Paradoxically enough for a political author, in Dark Princess the world of art and beauty is too disconnected from the (real) world of work and politics to allow this novel to contribute to an illumination of the idea that the aesthetic might affect the public sphere.

All three authors discussed in this paper, in spite of their profound differences, call attention to the importance of the following question: Where is the poets’ place? I have sought to elucidate some implications of the question of whether their versions of self-creation or self-fashioning ought to be confined to the private sphere or whether they on the contrary ought to play a role in the public sphere. Du Bois talks about his attempt to become “the poet of his own life” (cf. Nietzsche 1887: 538) in Dusk of Dawn. He concentrates on his poetic self-creation in the chapter “Education,” where he describes his reaction upon first arriving in Europe. Du Bois stresses that in Europe “something of the possible beauty and elegance of life permeated my soul; […] Form, color, and words took new combinations and meanings” (1940: 587). It is precisely this idea of ‘form, color, and words’ taking ‘new combinations and meanings’ in a transnational or cosmopolitan perspective which Du Bois repeatedly discusses in his texts. A cosmopolitan and political aesthete, Du Bois put an emphasis on the necessity of the attempt to mediate between aesthetics and politics, and he moreover advocated the aesthetic as political practice. His failure to depict a successful mediation between aesthetics and politics in Dark Princess, however, ought to be regarded as a questioning of his own dictum that all art is propaganda. Du Bois’s work as a poet in the Emersonian and Rortyan sense and Matthew reading like angels read show that in full modernism the autonomy of art, that is, the self-reflexivity, opacity, and radical novelty of those forms, colors, and words, productively complicates the relation between the private and public sphere.
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