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Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois:

An Ignored Literary Co-operative for African American Equality

“I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of
them that live within the Veil.”¹

The influences of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois on the advancement of equality for African Americans in post-emancipatory America have been debated since the late nineteenth century. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* will be examined in conjunction with secondary sources, in order to discover how both men influenced the movement for racial equality. Typically, Washington has been labelled as mediator rather than a representative of social change. Du Bois is seen to be the more outspoken of the two, and is used by critics of Washington to display his ineffectiveness. The importance of how Washington and Du Bois influenced an entire population cannot be overstated. Washington established a vocational training institution in Tuskegee, Alabama in order to provide a practical means of advancement for African Americans. Du Bois became an outspoken and highly recognized figure of representation for African Americans, especially after Washington's death in 1915. Both men were representatives of black people throughout America during an unsure period of post-emancipatory turmoil which followed on the heels of over four centuries of nationally condoned institutional slavery. A variable which is often overlooked in many sources

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of Black Folk,” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997. 613.

is the vast difference between the lives of Du Bois and Washington. Du Bois was born as a free man in the Northern United States, while Washington was born during slavery in the Southern United States. It is interesting that Washington is so often criticized using Du Bois as an example when the lives of both men were so fundamentally different. Instead of remaining at odds, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* and W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* are more beneficial and effectively used in co-operation with one another, combining to provide a more holistic solution to inequality than either could have done alone. There is a substantive quality to Washington's writing. What he urged black people to do could be physically performed immediately. Seeking a pragmatic and more immediate means of strengthening the African-American national position should not be negatively criticized, but instead, observed as contributing to the efforts of Du Bois toward economic, social, political, and civil equality.

Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* begins in an autobiographical style similar to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, while W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* shows its contemporary political and social commentary from the very beginning. Du Bois does write of his childhood awareness of the racial divide within his community, but uses his knowledge as an example to further the commentary toward what he calls "The Veil": the visually osmotic, but socially impenetrable separation between white and black Americans. Du Bois follows the African American tradition of narrative writing in his 1940 book *The Dusk of Dawn*, which contains a very similar autobiographical style to that of Douglass and Washington. The late appearance of an explicitly autobiographical text from Du Bois points to the urgency he saw for the need to disseminate a more politically and socially conscious work before concentrating on his own past. Chronology is important to Du Bois and Washington, but for very different reasons. Washington lived his life without exact knowledge of

his date and his place of birth—a life lived void of a knowledge of ancestry and origin—whereas Du Bois was greatly influenced by the time of his birth: “Less than a month after my birth . . . The Fifteenth Amendment enfranchising the Negro as a race became law and the work of abolishing slavery and making Negroes men was accomplished, so far as law could do it” (*Dusk* 9). The list of differences between the two men is extensive, and is the primary source of my argument against the use of Du Bois’ writings as a primary tool of negative criticism toward Washington. Although there is an increase in debate concerning Washington’s exact motives within his more conciliatory speeches and writings, scholarly criticism still largely undermines and undervalues Washington’s contributions to racial equality, while placing Du Bois on a pedestal. Focusing on some major differences between Du Bois and Washington is beneficial for raising awareness that Washington was working within the social and political confines he was presented with.

An example of the misconstrued interpretation of the goals of Washington and Du Bois can be seen in Charles P. Henry’s article “Who Won the Great Debate.” Although Henry rightly argues that the debate over the ideologies of Du Bois and Washington is more complex than the proffering of economic over political equality, he wrongly considers that both men disagreed upon policies of racial integration. Washington is said to have followed a policy of accommodation, viewing black culture as an “obstacle to advancement,” while Du Bois felt that the struggle for equality had to be “grounded in black culture” (Henry 16). Firstly, Washington was a major proponent of maintaining a distinct black culture, pre-emptively agreeing with Du Bois’ feeling of the societal “twoness” of African Americans, stating that “[f]rom any point of view, I had rather be what I am, a member of the Negro race. . . . I am conscious of the fact that mere connection with what is known as a superior race will not permanently carry an individual

forward [T]his I have said here, not to call attention to myself as an individual, but to the race which I am proud to belong” to (505). Secondly, Du Bois agreed with Washington’s methods during the late nineteenth century, claiming that Washington’s policy was a “promising start toward better conditions for blacks and improved racial relations” (Howard-Pitney 56). This agreement by Du Bois in regard to the positive impact Washington’s policy would have toward improving the lives of black Americans refutes any negative comparison between the two men. Washington worked toward a goal, and it was carried on by Du Bois. The policy of accommodation most criticized by those who prop up Du Bois over Washington was published at a time when Du Bois was agreeing with the same policies; this discredits the most powerful anti-Washington comparisons through the use of Du Bois’ writing. In *The Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois is very complimentary of Washington, especially when considering his origins: “One hesitates, therefore, to criticise a life which, beginning with so little, has done so much” (Du Bois, *Souls* 634). Du Bois realized that the social circumstances of himself and Washington were as polarized as the Northern and Southern United States, and his careful criticism of Washington was a method for further popularizing positivity toward the advancement of African American social, civil, and political rights.

Although they were only separated by twelve years of age, Booker T. Washington’s origins were as different from W.E.B. Du Bois’ as was possible at the time in a racially segregated country. Washington was born into slavery in the American South, living the first years of his life “in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings,” while Du Bois was born a free man to free parents in a Northern American town whose “surroundings were a boy’s paradise” (Washington 490; Du Bois, *Dusk* 13). Education was very important to both men, but was attainable to different degrees. Du Bois attended school regularly throughout his

childhood, and was expected to pursue academics to a high level; Washington, on the other hand, had no education while surviving as a slave, and had to fervently pursue an education after emancipation while he was still a child, at the same time as he was being forced to work in coal mines and salt mines by his stepfather. In addition to education, there are other primary ideologies Washington and Du Bois both placed importance on: The need for the development of black culture to strengthen social standing, and the need for strong leadership for black people who were still attempting to consolidate their role within the United States.

The fact that differences are the primary focus when comparing *Up From Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk* suggests that most readings are not done objectively, but with knowledge of the debate between the two men influencing critical evaluation. There are many more similarities within the texts than there are differences. Booker T. Washington's awareness of the necessity for the further development of black culture is shared with W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington assesses the position of African Americans within America:

The world should not pass judgement upon the Negro, and especially the Negro youth, too quickly or too harshly. The Negro boy has obstacles, discouragements, and temptations to battle with that are little known to those not situated as he is. When a white boy undertakes a task, it is taken for granted that he will succeed. On the other hand, people are usually surprised if the Negro boy does not fail. In a word, the Negro youth starts out with the presumption against him (503).

Washington does have a somewhat dejected outlook in terms of the current position of black people within American society, but through the examples set by his perseverance within his own difficult struggles, and his efforts toward providing educational institutions, he is far from exhibiting that he believes this position cannot be improved. Du Bois combines Washington's

realistic evaluation of the position of African Americans with a more overt statement of the capability of African Americans to rise above their current societal position, especially in comparison to the previously exploited and downtrodden position of blacks during slavery. Du Bois writes:

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance,—not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities. . . . [B]efore this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom ‘discouragement’ is an unwritten word (“Souls” 617-618).

This preceding combination of excerpts is essential for displaying that the efforts of both men were complementary to one another. Washington provided a necessary foundational commentary on the need for the advancement of African Americans, while Du Bois shared Washington’s view of the precarious social position of blacks, and tried to further their societal rights through a more overt call for equality.

In terms of literary form, *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Up From Slavery* are quite distinct from one another. These differences relate back to the socially and economically polarized origins of Washington and Du Bois. Washington uses a form similar to traditional slave narratives while also commenting on the contemporary situation of African Americans in the United States. *Up From Slavery* is an autobiography with a direct and conversational writing style separated by chapter breaks. Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk* is stylistically different from *Up From Slavery* in many ways. Du Bois gives credit to the poetic influences he experienced while attending Harvard by inserting an epigraph at the beginning of each chapter, featuring stanzas from the works of acclaimed writers from many different countries. Chronologically

these epigraphic tributes are not ordered. Each epigraph is topic-specific in terms of what Du Bois chooses to write about in the succeeding body of text. The epigraphs range from translated works by Persian poets to contemporary American poets. Du Bois, who was a poet himself, also includes selections throughout the body of his writing. Below the poetic epigraphs are accompanying musical compositions. These bars of music are borrowed from “communally composed African American Spirituals” (Du Bois, “Souls” 613). Du Bois taught English at Wilberforce University in Ohio, displaying his extensive literary knowledge via the wide variety of selections of poetry he inserts, while the bars of composed music show a strong cultural connection to his own heritage.

When considering content, *Up From Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, which have been used as sources of opposition, are very similar. Religious language and metaphors are prevalent within *Up From Slavery* and *The Souls of Black Folk*, used to provide a common ground between white and black Americans, and to attach a spiritual quality to the struggle for equality and acceptance. Washington’s “Atlanta Exposition Address” uses many biblical references, while Du Bois does the same within his text, and also through titling the first chapter with reference to spiritualism: “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” Word choice is very similar between the two works. *Strife*, *striving*, *ignorance*, and *degradation* appear frequently and evoke a sense of the challenges faced by the black population, but more hopeful words such as *aspire*, *liberty*, and *brotherhood* also maintain that adversity was not insurmountable in the minds of Du Bois and Washington. The survival of both men through adversity relates to a second major ideology shared between Washington and Du Bois. Both men were aware of the necessity of strong leadership for a race riven by inexperience remaining from the early days of emancipation.

The issuance of The Emancipation Proclamation and the end of legal slavery did not transform African Americans into adept and functional citizens of The United States of America. The shackles were physically removed but still metaphorically restricted them through a lack of accompanying social and political change. Further political change came with The Fifteenth Amendment to The Constitution of The United States, but the gulf between black and white remained. The immediate joy upon receiving news of the abolition of slavery is contrasted by the hesitation and lack of knowledge of the African American people for dealing with the realities of a post-emancipatory America. Washington has personal knowledge of the immediate post-emancipatory uncertainty while Du Bois grounds his observations in history. Considering this difference, both texts provide similar views of the anticlimactic aura of emancipation, and its propensity for maintaining a feeling of submission within the black American communities. Du Bois observes that

[t]he first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom . . . a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattainable ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people. (“Souls” 616)

Washington shares Du Bois’ observation of the inherently submissive position of African Americans possessing its origin within the early days of emancipation. He writes:

The wild rejoicing on the part of the emancipated coloured people lasted but for a brief period. . . . [T]he great responsibility of being free, of having charge of themselves, of having to think and plan for themselves and their children, seemed to take possession of them. (498)

Within this mixture of the immediate joy of being “free” and the slow, creeping worry over how to tangibly use this freedom, many former slaves stayed with the families that had been their

former enslavers. Washington personally remembers freed slaves initially wandering away from the property to ensure that they were in fact free, only then to return and work for their former masters (498). Washington's observance of the inability of many former slaves to actually leave the scenes of their captivity can also be heard in a sound recording of former slave Charlie Smith stating that when emancipation came he was well aware that he was free from slavery, but stayed on the farm of his former master and continued to work.² With his first-hand observation of the disadvantaged position of African Americans, it is not inconceivable that in Washington's mind the best approach for strengthening the position of African Americans was a policy of administering the coherence of independence and self-sufficiency before protesting for equality in all facets of society.

Although Washington seemed to be following a policy of accommodation within the racial boundaries of the United States, it is evident that he was synchronously working to achieve his more covert goal of black equality within the means offered to him. Washington's more rhetorically accommodating speeches, such as the often-criticized *Atlanta Exposition Address*, worked to draw support from powerful industrialists and wealthy philanthropists (Henry 13). Through promoting a policy of African American proficiency within a vocational economic arena, Washington was inserting a "wooden horse" into American society that could be opened when the time was right for a push toward further social equality. Washington, aside from using economic means of inserting African Americans into greater American society, covertly supported—often financially—more direct actions toward furthering social equality (Flynn 265). Du Bois was more overt in terms of his call for equality, but he did acknowledge that fundamentally Booker T. Washington "had no more faith in the white man than I do" (qtd. in

² Charlie Smith. *Former Slave Charlie Smith Discusses Work and Living Situation After the Emancipation Proclamation*. U.S. National Archives & Records Administration. Web. 2 Nov. 2011.

Flynn 267). At the core of his ideology, Washington was anything but conciliatory; this is strongly supported by the above-quoted recognition by W.E.B. Du Bois, Washington's own writing, and elsewhere by numerous other sources. Why then is the stigma of "Uncle Tom" still synonymous with Washington's efforts to raise African American equality during the post-emancipatory struggle? The answer lies within the African American mind-set that was established during the early days following emancipation. As blacks were thrown into the world unprepared because of their institutionalized and forcibly imposed ignorance, they looked for messianic leaders who would be figures of guidance, and represent them as a freed people within a nation that had previously held them in slavery. Frederick Douglass was a member of the abolitionist movement during the antebellum era, and became the leading representative of the African American population in post-emancipatory America until his death in 1895 (Howard-Pitney 49). Douglass was succeeded by Booker T. Washington who became the most prominent black leader from the time of his Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895 until his policy of cooperation with the white population became seen as stagnant in 1915. W.E.B. Du Bois became the next black leader, reverting to a call for equality more equal to the policy followed by Douglass. Part of the stigma attached to Washington can be attributed to his situation between two figures who approached black equality in a very contrasting manner, thus singling Washington out for negative criticism in comparison to both past and succeeding black messianic figures.

In conclusion, close examination clearly reflects that Du Bois and Washington hold more in common than is popularly or scholarly admitted. Both men share fundamental ideologies in regard to the benefits of an education, the need for a strong black leader, and the need for a distinct and fully developed black culture. In addition to broad ideologies, Washington and Du

Bois share a literary, historical, and social place of prominence within the long tradition of the struggle for equality; a tradition that should hold its leading figures together instead of maintaining them as adversaries.

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