

The “Doubleness” of Blackness and Whiteness: A Review of Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery

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Abstract

Booker T. Washington, a prominent African-American leader during the late 19th century and early 20th century, produced an autobiography called Up from Slavery, which disclosed his racial strategy as an African-American leader. This autobiography perfectly demonstrates his “double consciousness”, a concept put forward by W. E. B. Du Bois in The Souls of Black Folk. This essay, therefore, intends to examine the causes and effects of Washington’s “doubleness” from the perspective of African-American criticism, with the help of Du Bois’s view on the “two-ness” of Afro-Americans. The analysis of “double consciousness” in Washington is of vital importance to understand the struggle and settle the issue of African-American citizens in terms of cultural identity.

Keywords

African-American; Doubleness; Booker T. Washington; Up from Slavery.

1. Introduction

Booker Taliaferro Washington (1856-1915), a half-blood African-American, is an educator and reformer, the primary developer of Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (now Tuskegee University). Born into slavery on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia, upon receiving education after emancipation, he grew into the most influential spokesman for his race as well as one of the most prominent African-American leaders during the late 19th and early 20th century [1].

His autobiography, Up from Slavery, published in 1901, has been “the most important source in understanding Washington’s thoughts” [2]. This book starts with the author’s childhood as a black slave on the plantation, keeping a record of his arduous effort and struggles to survive and thrive, and “ends with his days of triumph over caste and color prejudice” [3]. With his years in the Tuskegee Institute being the central theme of the book, Washington writes about his labors there “with a simplicity that appeals powerfully to the reader” [3], which tremendously draws people’s attention to the significant role that he has played in terms of African-American education.

Therefore, former scholars, domestic and overseas, predominantly focused on Washington’s educational thought and practice, his “accommodationism characterized by coherentism and progressivism” [4], as well as his dispute with W. E. B. Du Bois over racial strategy. It was majorly argued by previous studies that Washington, “the representative figure of Afro-American integrationism” [2], was a realist coming from the Southern state Virginia, who “had a better understanding of the racial tension in the South” compared with Du Bois, the idealistic freeman from the northern Massachusetts [5].

However, what might be less obvious is that there is a strong sense of “doubleness” in Washington, as is shown in his autobiography Up from Slavery. This “doubleness”, according to Du Bois, another black leader in that age, denoted that “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” [6]. This article

explores the “doubleness” or “two-ness” in Washington through his autobiographical book from the perspective of African-American criticism, in an attempt to stress the strenuous struggle of African-American citizens in terms of cultural identity, as well as shed a light on the temporary concession of some in the face of the difficult economic, political, social and cultural context in mainstream Anglo-American society.

2. The Causes of Washington’s “Doubleness”

2.1. Personal Experiences

Washington was born in the year 1858 or 1859. Though Washington himself did not know the exact time of his birth, he was certainly born before emancipation. His childhood recollections encompassed the plantation and slave quarters. According to the autobiography, his life began “in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings” [7]. However, “this was not because his owners were especially cruel, for they were not, as compared with many others” [7].

The childhood stories detailed Washington’s embarrassments as a black slave in terms of the living environment, food and clothes, schooling, and so forth “in the spirit of fairness and frankness” [3]. For example, his mother, his two siblings, and himself were stuck in a small, shabby cabin without a door, a window, a floor, or a bed, which was also used as the kitchen of the plantation and the cat’s living place. The hardship in boyhood for roughly 7 or 8 years unavoidably left Washington with the legacy of slavery -- endurance to suffering, and thirst for dignity. This could be viewed as a manifestation of his “blackness”.

Apart from the virtues he obtained, it is possible that Washington, more or less, had accepted the supremacy of white people and the inferior state of his race since then. In this book, he narrated his tribulations in a grateful tone, defined the servitude of black slaves as loyalty and generosity, and further described the relationship between black slaves and their white masters as fraternal friendship. It is obvious that Washington greatly sugarcoated his experience on the plantation. It could be his optimism that made it possible for him to always see things from the bright side, or it could be his endeavor to ease the tension between the Anglo-Americans and the African-Americans to at least maintain a type of superficial peace.

When freedom came, Washington’s situation did not appear promising as he narrated in *Up from Slavery*. “Dire poverty ruled out regular schooling... At age nine he began working, first in a salt furnace and later in a coal mine in Malden, West Virginia” [1]. Fortunately, in his workplace, Washington was acquainted with a literate black youth and learned from him with admiration. Since then, he began to learn furiously while working at the same time. In the process, he “established a principle that education is utilitarian, and it can change the quality of people’s lives” [4]. He was also put into contact with mainstream white values by the Puritan mistress Lewis Ruffner, who was extremely strict with the teenager, not permitting him to make any mistakes, but allowing him to receive education in his spare time [2].

Under this principle of pragmatism, he headed off to Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute alone, where he encountered General Samuel Armstrong, the founder and principal of the school, as well as his lifelong guide. “The formation of Mr. Washington’s character was influenced by one of the strongest personalities in modern education, and the wide-reaching moral earnestness of General Armstrong himself”, according to the introduction of *Up from Slavery* written by Walter H. Page [7]. Washington was immensely influenced by the tenets of the white bourgeoisie that Armstrong taught him, including “the missionary zeal of New England” [7] containing industry, thrifty, and self-discipline, as well as the “entrepreneurship of northern bourgeoisie, that is, integrity, punctuality, and self-confidence” [4]. Thus, Washington received the “white” spirits from Armstrong at Hampton Institute, which further contributed to his “whiteness”.

Not only did Washington gain the white spirits from Armstrong, but he also inherited the doctrines and principles over racial issues from his life counselor. For example, Washington agreed with Armstrong that black people should focus on ameliorating vocational skills to sustain themselves, and that they should not be involved in political affairs. As a matter of fact, the compassionate Armstrong was a relatively liberal white who provided education for Afro-Americans. He was well-intentioned to help black people survive in the mainstream Anglo-American society. In order to achieve this goal for his race, temporary concession and even submission might be acceptable.

Nevertheless, the Hampton Institute, which offered education and training for the blacks, also inculcated the mainstream values of the whites to the blacks. In this sense, this school was viewed as “a place for the whites to implement cultural hegemony” [2]. It seems that Washington himself failed to stay clear of this ubiquitous white oppression. In particular, “the inferior, subordinate, and suppressed group”, which referred to the black in this context, “are extremely vulnerable to cultural hegemony” [4]. Thus, Hampton’s education, along with the role model Armstrong, engraved white marks in Washington, including white spirits, white doctrines, and white ideology.

Furthermore, reproducing the mode and training programs of Hampton Institute, Washington established the Tuskegee Institute providing vocational education for black people. It could be concluded that Tuskegee Institute, like its father Hampton and its founder Washington, provided “white” education with “black” characteristics, specifically cultivating their basic life habits and living skills for the black youth.

2.2. The Call of the Times

In addition to personal factors, Washington’s doubleness was also shaped by the macro background of his time -- the restoration of white supremacy and Social Darwinism. “White supremacy is defined as the belief that the white is superior to other races and the advocacy of white dominance in political, economic and social life” [5]. With the restoration of white supremacy during the late 19th century and the early 20th century, “whites grew ever more indifferent and hostile towards blacks, rendering blacks further down to an inferior and subordinate place” [5]. For instance, southern whites claimed that blacks were “inferior, immoral, criminal”, who would “never catch up with the superior whites in the Darwinism competition”, and that living freedom and franchise to African-Americans meant nothing but “a reverse to barbarism” [5].

The racists among southern whites were not in the minority. Apart from the radical ones, even the most open-minded whites accepted the “truth” that the blacks were born lazy, and lacked self-discipline, including Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute. Since the blacks were, from the perspective of the whites, born to be inferior, they should be eliminated in natural selection, according to the principle of Social Darwinism -- survival of the fittest.

In fact, both Washington and Du Bois acknowledged that “poverty, ignorance and crime are the hurdles impeding the black people from reviving and thriving” [8]. However, they did not attribute the predicament of their race to innate inferiority, but to the lack of acquired education. They both agreed on the racial strategy that black people should change the stereotype and bias of white people regarding their own race through settling their own problems by means of education, though one proposed vocational education equipping them with living skills, such as sewing, ironing and cooking, the other, who regard economic sufficiency as the mean to the end, put forward the Talented Tenth that provided the most talented black youth with higher education [5]. Compared with Du Bois purely for the benefit of black people, Washington seemed to be less “black” but more “white”, in that he sought to win the recognition of the white, and the education he promoted probably led the blacks to low-status jobs, which still put the blacks in a subordinate position.

When the southern white rulers in power were promoting racist policies and oppressing the black people and their political campaigns, it was not sensible, in Washington's view, to combat them directly, which would only cause more severe oppression, as well as more loss of his race. Since racial tensions at that time were grave, Washington decided to apply a more pragmatic racial strategy -- accommodationism that features progressivism and integration.

The progressive attitude of Washington, however, should be distinguished from the Progressive Movement of that era, which was a white-dominated campaign marginalizing the "black" issues. "Segregated from whites, blacks were out of sight and indeed out of mind from Progressive reformers and practically omitted from the reform programs" [5]. Even though the racist, regressive Progressive Era coincided with Washington's progressivism, this article would not discuss its influence on the formation of Washington's doubleness. The progressivism mentioned here was actually gradualism, a moderate reform in striving for the rights of black citizens.

One of the most overt manifestations of Washington's accommodationism and progressivism was his Atlanta Address on September 18th, 1895, in which he expounded his opinions on settling racial issues and gained huge success. He recalled in his autobiography that the Atlanta Compromise was one of the incidents in his life that "excited the greatest amount of interest, and which perhaps went further than anything else in giving me a reputation that in a sense might be called National" [7].

Unfortunately, Washington the gradualist was constantly misunderstood as the traitor of the black and the minion of the white. His concession and deference to southern whites, more often than not, was interpreted as servility and piety. His proposal that the blacks should postpone pursuing the right to vote and other civil rights was stigmatized as a betrayal of his own race. On the surface, Washington was totally "whitened", serving the purpose of the whites more than that of the blacks, and losing all of his dignity as a black man. Are Washington and his proposals more "white" than "black"? The author believes that the effects of his policies count more in deciding his "color" as well as in analyzing his doubleness, which will be discussed in the following part.

3. The Results of Washington's "Doubleness"

3.1. Achievements for Both the Black and the White

The book truthfully recorded Washington's life, "as every product of Mr. Washington's pen... proved of value to both friends and enemies" [3]. By the same token, the prototype of the autobiography himself proved of value to the advocates and the hostile, as well as the black and the white. As an African-American possessing duality as a black man and an American citizen, he was concerned about the interests of both parties.

As for African-American people, Washington's educational proposals ameliorated their overall quality, making them useful citizens. "From the perspective of political science, it [Washington's thought and practice] initiated the self-revitalization of African-Americans, which has long-term political significance" [9]. In Tuskegee Industrial Institute, to which his heart and soul are unselfishly devoted, Washington "felt the hope of his race is in its industrial advancement... His people must learn to read and write in order to be better workmen; but good workmen they must be, and they must lead decent, sober, honest lives to the same end" [10].

In Tuskegee, the former racist state of America, where the infamous "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" was conducted, now was turned to a new chapter because of Washington's educational feat. What he was striving for was the precious opportunity of education for his race, which he himself went through struggles to obtain even after emancipation. "To teach the Negro to do skillful work, and responsible work, which is education and character... this is to change the whole economic basis of life and the whole character of a

people” [7]. Washington firmly believed that through education, African Americans were able to achieve self-prosperity and win dignity and respect. In this respect, Washington was genuinely on behalf of black people, and for the benefit of black people. He deserved the title of the black’s spokesman.

When it comes to the United States, a consistently white-dominated nation, Washington’s racial strategy satisfied the whites and eased the racial tensions of his time. “From the perspective of sociology, Washington effectively improved America’s racial relations between the black and the white, and had positive social significance” [9]. He achieved this accomplishment through his tactful speech and discourse -- emphasizing the common interest and ignoring the differences. It should be noted that he never overtly revealed his dissatisfaction with the whites and their wrongdoing to the blacks. Instead, he blamed the historical remains for racial problems and perceived both the black and the white as victims. “The whole Republic was a victim of that fundamental error of importing Africa into America” [7].

In Up from Slavery, Washington said nothing wrong about his irresponsible white father whose name was unknown to him, and called him a victim of the slavery system, just like his slave mother. He entertained the idea that “notwithstanding the cruel wrongs inflicted upon his race, the black man got nearly as much out of slavery as the white man did... the hurtful influences of the institution were not by any means confined to the Negro” [7]. For example, the blacks acquired the skill sets, “the spirit of self-reliance and self-help” from forced labor, while the whites could not survive after emancipation without the help of their black “friends” [7].

In addition to common gain and loss from the slavery system, Washington further put forward the common interest between African-Americans and Anglo-Americans in the Atlanta Compromise of 1895 “to an audience of 2,000 people composed mostly of northern and southern whites”, and what he said “seemed to be received with favour and enthusiasm” [7]. In his five-minute speech, Washington concluded his pragmatic approach with the famous phrase: “In all things that are purely social we can be separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” [7]. By arguing that industrial and economic equality benefit both races, for the trained black people would serve as useful work force in Reconstruction and Post-reconstruction, Washington successfully “bring the white into a kindlier and wiser relations with the black than they had known before” [10]. This pragmatism and comprehensiveness in viewing racial issues was Washington’s most astonishing talent, which was one of the fruits of Washington’s “double consciousness” as an Anglo-American and African-American.

3.2. Insidious Consequences for Black People

Although Washington’s thoughts and practice featuring “doubleness” on Black issues had the salutary effects mentioned above, it is undeniable that his double consciousness could bring about risks for his race as well, including the loss of talent and political rights. These consequences have been pointed out by Du Bois, Washington’s contemporary Black leader who disagreed with him, so that many of Du Bois’s theories and practices would be presented for comparison and contrast.

The most salient trait of Washington’s Tuskegee education lay in its vocational skills training. Washington the educationist argued that “No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top” [7]. In this respect, we could see the “blackness” in him, for he was for the benefit of his race in a pragmatic and practical manner. While overall vocational education equipped black people with essential skill sets, it could also indicate the deficiency in tertiary education. This education philosophy worried Black intellectuals, including but not limited to Du Bois, who feared Washington’s sole emphasis on vocational skills would hinder the academic development of African-American people. From Du Bois’s perspective, it was foolish to provide

a uniform education for “one or seven or sixty million souls” [6]. “Shall we teach them trades, or train them in liberal arts?” Du Bois put forward the question and answered it himself: “Neither and both: teach the workers to work and the thinkers to think; make carpenters of carpenters, and philosophers of philosophers, and fools of fools” [6].

In comparison to Washington’s educational policy, Du Bois’s educational philosophy and practice was relatively more plausible, since oversimplified, one-size-fits-all approach could not compare with teaching students in accordance with their aptitude. Furthermore, it seemed that Washington catered to the requirements of the southern whites, because such industrial vocational education would produce large quantities of cheap labor force for their economy.

Washington’s pursuit was arguably more pragmatic and feasible, for he satisfied the interests of the whites, and thus he could gain support and raise funds in developing his Tuskegee Institute, whereas Du Bois, the idealist, would find his plan facing tremendous obstacles from the white-dominated society which had no tolerance for Black education. Hence, judging from the temporary effect, Washington’s practical accommodationist plan gained from “doubleness” overwhelmed the idealized proposal of Du Bois, who protested against the “double consciousness”.

Yet in the long run, there would be few, if not none, academic talents among Black Americans, for the all-vocational education system cultivated only honest workers and no scholars and leaders. This could be one of the insidious consequences brought by Washington’s “two-ness”, even though it was in line with the times and circumstances. The potential thinkers and philosophers among African-American people, dubbed “Talented Tenth”, should not be buried in the swarm of industrial education and occupation. “The portion of the intellectual elite”, suggested by Du Bois, should be picked out to be “committed to the uplift of the black population through the pursuit of civil rights, the support for higher education, and the attainment of political power” [6]. According to the opponent Du Bois, “no such educational system ever has rested or can rest on any other basis than that of the well-equipped college and university”, and “there is a demand for a few such institutions throughout the South to train the best of the Negro youth as teachers, professional men, and leaders” [6]. What Du Bois proposed actually offered the solution to offset the negative influence brought by Washington’s “two-ness”.

Apart from vocational education, an even more criticized policy of Washington was to delay pursuing the political rights of his race. He induced his fellow Blacks, most of whom were impoverished and illiterate farm labourers, to temporarily abandon their efforts to gain civil rights and equal political power, and instead prioritize their industrial and farming skills so as to attain economic security, as discussed above. According to Washington’s designs, Blacks would temporarily accept segregation and discrimination, but their eventual acquisition of wealth and culture would gradually win them the respect and acceptance of the white community. This would break down the divisions between the two races and lead to equal citizenship for Blacks in the end.

In this sense, Washington had limitations owing to his “doubleness”, for he was too obedient and compliant in front of the Anglo-Americans. What he did not understand was that political rights, especially suffrage, play a pivotal role in the freedom and development of the blacks, without which they would still be restricted and manipulated by the whites. As a matter of fact, African-Americans had to struggle for civil rights, for it was not merely a political matter. Even economic profits and self-sufficiency, on which Washington put great emphasis, could not be immensely affected without “the right to vote, civic equality and the education of youth according to ability” [6].

The insidious results of Washington’s racial strategy full of “doubleness” could be concluded with Du Bois’s words:

“The way for a people to gain their reasonable rights is not by voluntarily throwing them away and insisting that they do not want them... The way for a people to gain respect is not by continually belittling and ridiculing themselves. On the contrary, Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys” [6].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Washington, as his blood suggested, possessed “double consciousness” as both Anglo-American and African-American, as a consequence of his life experiences and the hostile racial environment. His doubleness results in a satisfactory educational feat for both races, yet the insidious threats to the blacks, as can be sensed from many details of his autobiographical book, *Up from Slavery*, in comparison with Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*.

To judge Mr. Washington’s double consciousness, it would be better to take into account the criticism of Du Bois, Washington’s lifelong “enemy” in terms of racial strategy, for it is always your “foe” who knows you best. Du Bois perfectly concluded the triple “doubleness” in Mr. Washington:

1. He is striving nobly to make Negro artisans businessmen and property owners; but it is utterly impossible, under modern competitive methods, for workingmen and property owners to defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage.
2. He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run.
3. He advocates common-school and industrial training, and depreciates institutions of higher learning; but neither the Negro common-schools, nor Tuskegee itself, could remain open a day were it not for teachers trained in Negro colleges, or trained by their graduates” [6].

This judgement about Washington’s paradoxical traits from Du Bois succinctly pointed out the potential plight caused by Washington’s “double consciousness”. It should be said that the doubleness in African-Americans, producing accommodationism and progressivism beneficial for racial relations, must not become the mainstream nor long-term plan among Afro-Americans. Otherwise, the prospect for them would be gloomy.

Therefore, Washington and his followers, who possess the “two-ness” and thus are good compromisers and accommodationists, ought to remember the counsel from the stubborn Du Bois that “only a firm adherence to their higher ideals and aspirations will ever keep those ideals within the realm of possibility” [6].

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