

Frederick Douglass Revisited: Booker T. Washington's Perspective on His Legacy

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Abstract

This essay explores Booker T. Washington's perspective on the legacy of Frederick Douglass, as presented in his 1906 eponymous biography. Douglass (1818-1895), an abolitionist, orator, journalist, and statesman, emerged as one of the most influential African-American leaders of his time. His autobiographical works, his speeches, his journalistic activity and his political activism solidified his place in American literature and historical discourse. Washington's biography presents Douglass both as a symbol of African American progress and as a pragmatic political leader. It also highlights Douglass's rise from slavery to national and international recognition, emphasizing his commitment to education, political engagement, and racial uplift. Through a critical analysis of Booker T. Washington's biography, this essay examines how Douglass's life and work were interpreted and repurposed to serve the evolving discourse on race and leadership in early 20th-century America.

Keywords: Frederick Douglass, biography, abolitionist, slavery, racism, biography.

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (1818-1895) was born more than two centuries ago as an African American slave, on a farm located in Tuckahoe, Talbot County, in the state of Maryland, as

the property of Captain Aaron Antony. He was a “mulatto,” whose father was probably his white master (Gray 127). Quite uncommon for a slave, he started learning how to read and write when he was eight, from Sophia Auld, when he was sent to Fells Point in Baltimore to care for her boy. After working on several farms, after years of physical and psychological abuse from his owners or lessees, when he was about 20 years of age, he decided to escape from slavery and become a free man. Consequently, he ran away and traveled to New York, where he changed his name to Frederic Johnson and married Anna Murray, a freeborn African-American woman. The couple left New York and settled in the whaling port of New Bedford, in the state of Massachusetts. Following his friend’s advice (Frederick and Anna were living at the time with Nathan Johnson and his wife), Frederick changed his name again to Douglass.

While in New Bedford, he started his activity as an abolitionist, and he soon joined the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and the American Anti-Slavery Society. During his first years as an abolitionist activist, he acquiesced to the policy of the American Anti-Slavery Society and, therefore, promoted a non-violent attitude towards slavery and slaveholders. Already famous as an abolitionist, a voracious reader, and a skilled orator, Douglass printed *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, his autobiography, in 1845. Ten years later, it was followed by *My Bondage and My Freedom* and, in 1881, by *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. These three autobiographies are the reason why he is celebrated today as “a major presence in American literature;” the first one, his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* is “a testament to the plurality of America. It is not, in other words, just a central text in this or that particular tradition; it is also an instance of how many great American texts exist at the confluence of cultures – and of how those cultures talk to each other and themselves” (Gray 130). The *Narrative...* exerted an almost instant benefic influence upon his own fate as, two years after its publication and after several public lectures he held in

Britain, he was purchased by a group of his English enthusiastic listeners and readers who granted him his freedom.

As a free man, Douglass moved to Rochester, New York, and started his journalistic career. During his lifetime, he published four newspapers: *The North Star* (1847), *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851), *Douglass' Monthly* (1859), and *New National Era* (1870), and wrote articles in support of his cause. While in Washington DC, Douglass became the first African-American U.S. Marshal (1877-1881), then he worked as a recorder of deeds and later left the capital to represent the United States as Consul General to the Republic of Haiti between 1889 and 1891, i.e. "Minister Resident and Consul General to the Republic of Hayti." According to one of his biographers, he accepted this office even though it might have not been the right time (Washington 297). Two years after his wife, Anna, died in 1882, he married his secretary, Helen Pitts, a white and much younger woman. After a life of struggle for the rights of the oppressed, Douglass died soon after his birthday, on February 20, 1895, in his home, in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington, D.C.

One of the most detailed Douglass early biographies is probably the one originally published by Booker T. Washington in 1906, entitled simply *Frederick Douglass*. He wrote it in appreciation of Douglass' personality, but also as an account of a significant period in the history of the United States of America, leaving out completely, or making just short references to the personal life of his and many others' role model: "While it is true that Frederick Douglass would have been a notable character in any period, it is also true that in the life of hardly any other man was there comprehended so great a variety of incidents of what is perhaps the most memorable epoch in our history" (Washington 6). In the preface to his book, Washington also mentions the "incalculable" contribution of "S. Laing Williams, of Chicago, Ill., and his wife, Fannie Barrier Williams," attesting to the fact that the author is, beyond anything else, one of Douglass' admirers who found the sources and resources required to compile such complex work.

Starting from the assumption that “[t]he life of Frederick Douglass is the history of American slavery epitomized in a single human experience,” he adds that his courage brought him great achievements and recognition: “He saw it all, lived it all, and overcame it all. What he saw and lived and suffered was not too much to pay, however, for a great career” (Washington 15). Some of the information provided by Washington is either inexact (for example he argues that Douglass was born in 1817), or it is collected from questionable sources, from a certain “tradition” and not from accurate, verifiable “written records” (Washington 15). This tradition is not always based on trustworthy sources, which is somehow fathomable since Douglass’ personality was sometimes described with language usually reserved for mythical characters rather than real people:

He was fairly overwhelmed with all kinds of schemes and propositions that were carried to him, urging him to do this or that for the protection and elevation of the race. It required a mind of more than ordinary shrewdness to discriminate between the practical and impractical. Many of the Negroes seemed to think him capable of performing miracles in the way of undoing the effects of slavery. (Washington 273)

Nevertheless, most of his sources, including Douglass’ own work, such as *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), “My Escape from Slavery” (an article published in *Century Magazine* in 1881), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1882), and works by Douglass’ biographers, for example *Frederick Douglass, the Colored Orator* (1891) by Frederick May Holland, and “Frederick Douglass as Orator and Reformer” (published in *Our Day*, in 1894) by William Lloyd Garrison, etc.

Washington wrote the biography of Douglass, first and foremost, “to illustrate a model life of one who had escaped slavery,” but also to “show how important education was to the founding editor of the North Star toward establishing social respect and political responsibility” (Trotman 141). The book includes a

chronology, three chapters about his life as a slave and his escape from slavery, eleven chapters focused on his career and government appointments as a free man, as well as two chapters about his legacy and public recognition. As Washington declares in the Preface to his book, Douglass' life story is relevant on both a national and global scale, within a wider context, i.e. slavery seen as a social and religious problem that "has put to a crucial test the fundamental principles of our political life and the most widely accepted tenets of our Christian faith" (5). On a personal level, Douglass' life is obviously an inspiration for all his fellow "Negros" who have access to information about the struggles of "this great leader o [their] race" (Washington 5). Aware that "[p]rogress would come for African-Americans as and when it was earned by hard work, diligence, and thrift" (Gray 322), Washington found Douglass's life and his *Narrative*... deeply inspirational for himself and his people.

A successful man, a true leader, Douglass took several offices and positions that had been forbidden to African Americans, aware of the great significance of his endeavors for his entire race, and, according to his biographer, taking "failure" as a natural, mandatory obstacle on the way to his entire race's emancipation and progress:

[t]hrough all the confusion and clamor of wants, sorrows, sufferings and disappointments, Mr. Douglass kept his head, and was at all times philosophical, certain that the good accomplished was more important than the seeming failures; that the hindrances to progress were transitory, the forces of progress permanent. (Washington 273)

The "philosophical" mind of Douglass, and indeed that of his fellow African Americans, was sufficiently practical to comprehend that politics represented the primary domain in which both the educated and the less educated "Negroes" could attain a certain level of success. It was particularly in the South that African Americans were elected to occupy official positions: "Educated Negroes and those who had but little education, very quickly

mastered its tricks and made the most of their opportunities. In every Southern state colored men were easily elected to the state legislatures and to other high offices,” as well as “sheriffs, county clerks, justices of the peace,” postmen, diplomats, and even members of the United States Senate and the House of Representatives (Washington 279).

The African-American political world of the time was no different than the wider political environment, and Douglass, as any great political leader, was subjected to a few small, but powerful waves of enmity (for example, after his Baltimore speech) emerging from his own fellow “Negro” politicians, who, according to Washington, were just envious of his achievements: “Whatever hostility or indifference the colored people in the District exhibited toward Mr. Douglass, was probably due to jealousy of his leadership and a professed chagrin on account of the alleged willingness on his part to accept the office with the abridgment of the social privileges enjoyed by previous marshals” (Washington 290). Apparently, as Washington also observes here, Douglass had developed the skill to differentiate between his personal and his race’s “rights and privileges,” a trait that his people would soon come to treasure.

As Marshal of the District of Columbia, Douglass participated in the inauguration ceremony of the twentieth President of the United States of America, the brigadier general and former congressman, James A. Garfield, in March 1881, representing his community at the highest level for the first time in history. Douglass interpreted the honor to escort both the retiring and the new presidents as a personal success, but also as a great achievement of his own race. However, he realized that his appointment was merely accidental, that the “practical equality with other American citizens,” members of the “Caucasian race,” was yet to be achieved, but also that the “precedent was valuable” for all African Americans (Washington 291).

Even though President Garfield had promised Douglass he would be reappointed Marshal, he was eventually removed from office without, apparently, any solid reason. Symbolically, this

event almost coincided with the withdrawal of the federal army from the South (1877) and Garfield's assassination (he was shot in July and died in September 1881) causing the former Marshal and his people great distress and fear that their achievement would become insignificant within the new context. Nevertheless, soon, under President Arthur, Douglass acceded to a new public office, that of "Recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia," he held for five years, when the new President, Stephen Grover Cleveland "graciously wrote to know when it would be convenient for him to give up the post" (Washington 295).

Washington interprets Douglass's appointment as minister resident and consul general to Haiti as "a fitting climax to the long list of honors that came to him, not so much as a reward of party service as for his own high deserving" (297), and also as a great opportunity to visit and to study "the only republic established and carried on by black men in the Western world" (298), a country that he eventually came to admire.

The last two chapters in Washington's biography of Frederick Douglass leave the chronological description of his life and achievements to focus on his reception by his own people and his valuable legacy. The two chapters, pompously entitled "Further Evidences of Popular Esteem, with Glimpses into the Past" and "Final Honors to the Living and Tributes to the Dead" attempt an allegedly balanced portrayal of Douglass, which sometimes reads like an enthusiastic and laudatory description of a quasi-mythical figure rather than a balanced presentation of an outstanding, indeed, political and cultural representative of the African-American community. Washington refers to Douglass as one of the most prominent anti-slavery militants, whose innate leadership skills promoted him to some of the highest offices in the United States of America and brought him great recognition from his own community and the entire American society of his time.

Washington minutely describes Douglass's physical appearance mainly highlighting the features that would make him look like a white prince, were he not a "Negro." In other words, Douglass's blackness was in line with all the stereotypes assigned

by his contemporary society to his race, but what really helped him stand out were his lighter complexion and his graceful manners:

He was over six feet in height, broad-shouldered, well-proportioned, and his movements had all the directness and grace of a man who had been bred a prince rather than a slave. His features were broad, strong, and impressive. His complexion was that of a mulatto. His head was strikingly large, and crowned with an abundant crop of white hair of almost silken fineness. His eyes were brown and mildly animated. His voice was strong, but of mellow tone. When he was aroused, however, it would fairly thunder with the passionate earnestness of the man. In conversation he was delightful. His manner was graceful and wholly free from personal mannerisms. (Washington 303)

Washington's description of Douglass's physical appearance bluntly mentions his "complexion" (almost similar to his own), without explaining that this designation as a "mulatto" is as racist as that of "Negro," an opinion to which he probably acquiesced too. Nevertheless, we know that "Douglass blasted mulatto degenerationism as absurd and racist. It simply belied common sense and empirical observation. Rather than decreasing in numbers as the theory and equally dubious census returns might suggest, mulattoes, Douglass saw, were actually increasing numerically. In terms of physical constitution, industry, intelligence, and morals, moreover, mulattoes were like everyone else" (Martin 235).

His biographer also describes him as a self-taught, brilliant man, an avid reader of books of history, philosophy, and poetry, a lover of white British and American poets (Byron, Burns, Coleridge, Pierpont), but also a visionary promoter of African-American ("mulatto") poets, such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example:

His mental and moral faculties were well balanced. He was a man without technical education, yet he had more than ordinary learning. All that he knew was acquired outside of schoolrooms and without school teachers. His great library bore witness to his love of books. In the history of governments and of races, and in mental philosophy and poetry, he found special delight. No trained

elocutionist could recite verse with better effect. He was especially fond of Byron, Burns, Coleridge, and Pierpont. [He] had a peculiar fondness and interest in Paul Laurence Dunbar, who, at his death, was just beginning to be known as a poet, and who received his first real encouragement from Frederick Douglass. (Washington 303, 304)

Nevertheless, almost perfect as he was, according to Washington, Douglass cannot take credit for his flawless career and exceptional character, one of the most significant and influential gifts of his life being the existence of his wives and children, whose support and appreciation he greatly benefited from. Had it not been for his family, he would probably not have been freed from slavery, “fortunately free from family troubles,” happy, honored, and loved: “behind the great orator, the active politician, the anxious leader in a critical period, there was a real man, whose domestic tastes and disciplined heart give an added value to his public life” (Washington 306).

His social prestige was slightly diminished when he married Helen Pitts, a white woman. Moreover, his own people interpreted his act as “the most serious mistake of his life,” while he saw it as a way of achieving balance in his life and the lives of the two white and black communities in America, as he explains in the speech he delivered in Springfield, in 1893: “I am strongly of the opinion that you will want me to say something concerning my second marriage. I will tell you: My first wife, you see, was the color of my mother, and my second wife the color of my father; you see I wanted to be perfectly fair to both races” (Douglass qtd. in Washington 307). From a social point of view, Washington shared Douglass’s opinion that, to be fair to both whites and blacks in American society, one must understand that the members of both groups are victims of the “slaveocratic” system, of their birth circumstances, of their education, of the legislation in force (Andrews 9).

Nevertheless, the American society has always acknowledged his “fairness” to both races and his achievements as both a public servant and a promoter of true democratic values. Washington mentions, before quoting a long panegyric published in

the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle*, the placement of his bust at Rochester University, in Sibley's Hall, during his lifetime in 1879. The sculpture made by Johnson Marchant Mundy (a Rochester-based, visually-impaired sculptor) was later (1930) moved to River Campus (Washington 308-307).

A significant contribution to the promotion of democracy in America was Douglass's support for "the cause of female suffrage," for the rights of Chinese people to immigrate to America, and for religious freedom. Washington mentions Douglass's achievements in these areas, after listing his successful endeavors in politics and his activity as a "race leader." Not necessarily because he considers these latter areas less important, but probably because his intention, as Douglass's biographer, was to present him, first and foremost, as "the supreme man of the Negro race" (Washington 319).

Before the Civil War, Douglass had used religion in his speeches as a weapon against slavery in Christian America, but also as an argument for social progress. His attitude slightly changed after the war, perhaps within the context of his own reconsideration of his (Christian) beliefs:

In the antebellum era, as a leading abolitionist orator, Douglass spoke often of God's active work in history to ensure the destruction of American slavery. He also insisted that human beings, particularly radical activists like the abolitionists, played an essential role in achieving meaningful reform in society. After the Civil War, Douglass at times appeared far more hesitant to credit God for all progress in history, including emancipation. He certainly spoke more about the preeminent power people possessed to shape their lives and their world. (Dilbeck 142)

The final section of the last chapter, "Final Honors and Tributes," inaugurated by a few sentences in which Washington describes Douglass's death, is a summary of what his biographer describes as the most significant achievements of the one who was a valiant abolitionist and dedicated fighter for the liberty of all. His mythical figure emerges now in the light of the story of his life which

unfolds like a heroic poem featuring an ancient legendary character: "His emergence as an individual, capable of mental and emotional freedom now and literal freedom not long after, is the consequence of a fight worthy of one of the heroes of ancient legend. And it coincides precisely with his emergence as a man" (Gray 129).

According to Washington, the entire American society, all ethnic groups and all social classes, was saddened by his departure:

Douglass was dead – without pain, without warning, without fear, and at a time when life was sweet, full, and complete. His last moment of enthusiasm, like his first hours of aspiration when a slave-child, was for liberty; if not for himself, then for some one else.

The announcement that Frederick Douglass was dead came like a shock to every one, especially to those who had seen him about the city during the day, full of animation and apparent physical vigor. The sad news spread rapidly and produced a profound sense of bereavement among all classes of people. (341)

The chapter ends with five paragraphs written as a eulogy to Douglass, the champion of liberty, the abolitionist, the fighter for voting rights, for both African Americans and women, for immigration rights, for religious freedom, for progress: "In all this he was at once an American, and a man of his time. But Mr. Douglass was not merely an American, sharing the convictions and aspirations of the most progressive men of his day. . . . From his own point of view, the work he did for his race was not merely a duty, it was a high privilege" (Washington 350, 351).

As we have seen above, Washington's biography, entitled simply *Frederick Douglass*, presents the outstanding abolitionist as both a heroic, almost mythical, figure and as a model for racial or personal progress, aligning his life with Washington's own philosophy of self-improvement and economic advancement. Describing him both as a symbol of African-American progress and as a pragmatic political leader, Washington emphasizes Douglass's rise from slavery to national and international recognition, through his commitment to education, political engagement, and fight for

social emancipation. However, Washington's portrayal is not without its biases. His admiration for Douglass and his achievements sometimes veers into hagiography, omitting certain complexities of his subject's (few, after he was freed) personal and (many) political struggles.

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