

**BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, “ATLANTA EXPOSITION ADDRESS,” ATLANTA, GA
(18 SEPTEMBER 1895)**

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Abstract: Widely regarded as a compromise with the segregationist South, Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Address, 18 September 1895, has drawn the ire of commentators, historians, and scholars of rhetoric alike. This essay approaches the speech differently—not as a compromise but as a strategic, polysemic statement of Black empowerment. Carefully crafted in response to racial injustice at the end of the nineteenth century and to the distinct dynamics of the U.S. South, Washington’s address communicated different messages to white and Black listeners, fostering cross-race identification and ultimately demanding justice and equality for millions of African Americans throughout the region.

Keywords: Booker T. Washington, Tuskegee Institute, race, Progressive Era, Atlanta compromise

As soon as Booker T. Washington finished his speech, Rufus Bullock, former Georgia governor and Confederate soldier, rushed across the dais to shake Washington’s hand. It was 18 September 1895, but the Civil War, now thirty years past, still haunted the scene. Here on stage in Atlanta, the heart of the South, a former slave shook hands with someone who had fought to keep him enslaved. As they shook, a thronging multitude of people—Blacks and whites, men and women, northerners and southerners, foreigners and Americans—cheered the historic occasion. The *Atlanta Constitution* noted the significance of the scene: “It was the first time a colored orator had even stood upon a platform before such a vast audience with white men and women.”¹

The occasion was the Cotton States and International Exposition, otherwise known as the Atlanta Exposition. To newspapers across the country, Washington’s speech was nothing short of a masterpiece. Met frequently with “thunders of applause” from “Southern as well as Yankee” listeners, wrote the *New York Tribune*, the oration “marked an epoch in the history of the South.”² “So moderate, so sensible, so instinct with true patriotism” was the speech, declared the *Washington Post*, it overshadowed every other aspect of the ceremony. Washington, the paper concluded, “is doing noble and splendid work for both races.”³

To be sure, it wasn’t just white-run newspapers that praised the speech; Black-run papers came to much the same conclusion. The *Levenworth Herald* noted approvingly that “colored papers throughout the country” were recognizing Washington “as the next Moses of the race.”⁴ The *Omaha Enterprise* kept the Moses-theme going: “If the masses of our people would but follow his teachings, he might verily prove to be the Moses to lead them across the Dead Sea of prejudice, and sectional hatred, into the Promised Land of equality before the law.”⁵ The *Colored Harvest* called the speech “masterful and eloquent and direct,” a statement of “incalculable value” that showed in full relief “Negro capabilities and activities.”⁶

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Washington received countless accolades in the mail as well. Mary Stearns, an old abolitionist and friend of Washington, told him that he had “struck the keynote of *Twentieth* century civilization in America” with a speech that would rank alongside Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address “in eloquence, elevation, and far-reaching influence.”⁷ Burnwell Harvey, an African-American minister in Georgia who was in the audience for the speech, remarked: “Leadership along the vital lines which you so earnestly and manly advocate will carry the race up the sure road to success in all walks of life.”⁸ Another note was briefer but also congratulatory:

My Dear Mr. Washington:

Let me heartily congratulate you upon your phenomenal success at Atlanta—it was a word fitly spoken.

Sincerely yours,
W.E.B. Du Bois

Du Bois’s praise for a word fitly spoken is especially noteworthy because of his subsequent excoriation of the Atlanta Exposition Address. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois rebuked Washington’s program of racial uplift for practically accepting “the alleged inferiority of the Negro races.” According to Du Bois, Washington preached “the old attitude of adjustment and submission” for the sake of economic expediency, all the while setting aside efforts for political power, civil rights, and higher education for Black Americans.⁹

Whether Du Bois changed his mind about the Atlanta Exposition Address or initially praised the speech for strategic reasons, his criticism has become the controlling interpretation of what happened in Atlanta. Today, Washington’s speech is widely known as the “Atlanta Compromise” because of Du Bois’s labeling. Indeed, commentators, historians, and scholars of rhetoric have, since at least the middle of the twentieth century, followed Du Bois’s lead and chided Washington for his words at the Atlanta Exposition.¹⁰ On that fateful day in 1895, we are told, Washington submitted his people to white control for the sake of earning a buck.

Given the notoriety, even infamy, of Washington’s speech, we would do well to remember that Du Bois’s interpretation is, at the end of the day, simply that—an interpretation. There are other ways to understand this pivotal speech, to understand why countless Americans—Black and white, northern and southern, men and women—celebrated Washington’s program for racial uplift as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Accordingly, this essay will return to the Atlanta Exposition Address to offer a different interpretation, elucidating the speech not as some placation of the segregationist South, but as an eloquent vision of Black empowerment. Washington chose his words in Atlanta carefully, strategically, and crafted a speech that threaded the needle of racial tension during an especially challenging period for African Americans after emancipation.

Key to understanding the Atlanta Exposition Address is recognizing that Washington offered very different messages to different audiences. In particular, the speech invited white listeners to see Black Americans as reliable laborers serving the national economy, while it invited Black listeners to see themselves as agents of change capable of forming strong, resistive Black communities across the South. In that way, Washington’s address advanced a strategic polysemy, enabling audience members to take away from the oration different ideas according to their needs, interests, identities, and preconceptions.¹¹

Labor and Learning in the Life of Booker T. Washington

Washington's advocacy in Atlanta grew out of his understanding of the interconnection between labor and learning. Mutually reinforcing, labor and learning were essential for people, families, and communities to thrive in the modern world. This was a lesson Washington learned as an enslaved person and, more fully, after emancipation. It was also a lesson grounded in the brutal realities of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era in the United States.

Born into slavery in 1856 in Hale's Ford, Virginia, just east of the Blue Ridge Mountains, Booker—his only name at the time—grew up performing many small tasks around the home of his enslaver, James Burroughs.¹² Booker's mother, Jane, was also enslaved on the plantation, along with several siblings. His father, however, was somewhat of a mystery, save for the fact that he was a white man. Rumor had it that he was either the owner of a nearby plantation, a local blacksmith, James Burroughs himself, or one of Burroughs' sons. Whatever the case, Washington insisted he never knew his father's identity.

A child of mixed parentage, Booker worked on the Burroughs' fields and in their home. It was in helping with domestic work that he received his first captivating glimpse of formal education. Often required to carry the books of the Burroughs children to the nearby schoolhouse, Booker one day looked through the school's open door and saw what appeared to be a joyous community of learning. He smarted at the injustice of being excluded from that community because of his skin, but his frustration quickly turned to resolve; he would get an education however he could.

After emancipation, Booker, his mother, and his siblings set off on foot for Malden, West Virginia. There they met up with Washington Ferguson, a man they knew from Hale's Ford and who became Booker's stepfather. Settling into the new town, Booker soon got his first shot at formal education. Black residents of Malden organized a school for local children, and after begging his mother to attend, Booker was able to enroll. At the school, he quickly realized that he was different from the other kids—specifically when it came to names. He had only one name to speak of, but the other children gave a first *and* last name when the teacher took roll. Thinking fast to come up with a suitable last name, he announced his full name as “Booker Washington”—partly because of his stepfather and partly because of the nation's first president. It seemed as good a name as any, and it stuck.

Booker's journey with labor and learning blossomed further when he went to work at the home of Viola Ruffner. The wife of Union General Lewis Ruffner, who owned the local salt mine, Viola put out word that she needed a new houseboy. Booker's mother recommended him for the position, and he earned his chance. Though he hated the work at first—Viola was meticulous and demanding—Booker stuck with it and learned to meet her exacting standards. She, in turn, gave him what he most desired: an education. Viola helped him with his reading and writing and gave him several books, which became the seeds of his own personal library.

Then came his big break. One day he overheard two men discussing a newly established school for Black students in Hampton, Virginia. The school even allowed poor students to attend and to work off their tuition. He vowed to get there however he could, even though he had to make a perilous, 500-mile journey over mountains and down to the sea. But that's what he did. Dirty and tired, with only a handful of change in his pocket, Washington finally arrived at the

Hampton Institute in the fall of 1872. Because he did not have enough money for tuition, he had to prove his mettle by cleaning a recitation room to the principal's standards. Washington swept the floor three times and dusted the furnishings four times. Viola Ruffner's meticulous demands had prepared him well for the test.

Hampton turned out to be the perfect environment for Washington to thrive. Begun in 1861 as a loose-knit education group for free African Americans and formalized in 1868 as part of the Freedmen's Bureau, the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute became an icon for the Black community through the leadership of Samuel Armstrong, a white general who had commanded Black troops during the Civil War.¹³ Hampton's mission centered on practical experience and helping students learn the skills they needed to earn a living, to support their families, and to advance their communities. More often than not, practical experience meant work, including work in industrial and agricultural settings as well as trades that could lead to small-business ownership later on. Because most students could not pay for their tuition, they worked on the school's farm, in the kitchen, on the building crew, in janitorial services, and elsewhere. Washington himself worked frequently as a janitor. Of course, they also learned the usual academic subjects, including algebra, physiology, botany, Bible, music, and history. But Hampton inexorably linked labor to higher education for Washington, and he would take the same approach in running his own institution later on. He would also speak throughout his career about the intersection of labor and learning on public stages across the North and South.

In 1875, Washington graduated from Hampton and headed back to West Virginia, where he taught school for a couple years. Then General Armstrong invited him back to Virginia to lead a living-learning-laboring dorm for Indian students at Hampton.¹⁴ After a couple years directing the dorm, Washington received the offer that would radically change his life and, indeed, the direction of racial politics in the United States. In 1881, representatives from a small town in Alabama wrote to Armstrong for the name of a white man who could launch a school for African Americans. Not knowing a white man who fit the bill, Armstrong instead recommended Washington, whom he deemed "the best man we ever had here."¹⁵ The representatives thought the matter over, then agreed. At twenty-five-years old, Washington moved to Tuskegee.

When he arrived, he realized how little he had to work with. But with some upstart funds from the state, he purchased 100 acres on a hilly area northwest of Tuskegee's town square. On this site, he built an institution that resembled Hampton in its learning-laboring orientation, but far surpassed the Virginia school in its visibility and influence. At Tuskegee, students farmed the land for their food, constructed buildings for their studies, and ran the operations needed for the school to thrive. Of course, they also studied more traditional academic subjects, often marrying their work with their classroom assignments. A student who labored on the farm, for instance, might write English papers on animal husbandry. Washington believed it imperative that labor and learning progress together. Everyone from students to faculty—even Washington himself—did their part inside and outside the classroom.¹⁶

Given Tuskegee's growth and success, it is tempting to romanticize Washington's time overseeing the institution. But that would be a mistake. Tuskegee the school and Tuskegee the town were challenging places for many reasons, not the least of which was opposition from whites. Threats of violence against Tuskegee faculty, staff, and students were constant; actual violence was at least an annual affair. In fact, three months before the Atlanta Exposition Address, a lynch mob shot one Black resident and tried to kill another, all for supposedly

promoting miscegenation. The man who was the target of the mob's outrage managed to flee the confrontation and make it to Washington's doorstep. Acting quickly, Washington hid the man off campus and arranged secret passage for him to Montgomery. When the mob arrived, Washington told them he had turned the man away and did not know where he was. The mob left Washington's house satisfied.¹⁷ Through years of experience, Washington had learned how to help people of his race and simultaneously assuage the violent white establishment.

It was a valuable lesson to learn, because Washington was becoming a national figure, and white violence against African Americans was a national affair. At the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, racial progress seemed to be heading in the wrong direction. The Gilded Age and Progressive Era are generally considered the "nadir" period of race relations in the U.S., but not for lack of effort by Black leaders. Many did what they could to combat pervasive, systemic racism. Besides Washington and Du Bois, leaders such as Ida B. Wells, Mary Church Terrell, T. Thomas Fortune, Reverdy Ransom, and William L. Bulkeley strategized and organized to advance Black America, only to run into strident opposition.¹⁸

Their strategizing and organizing often took place in large Northern cities, even though most Black leaders of the era had been born in the South. For instance, Fortune grew up in the rural Florida panhandle before making his way to New York City. Wells grew up in rural Mississippi, moved to Memphis, was effectively exiled from the South, and finally relocated to Chicago. Terrell grew up in Memphis and ultimately settled in Washington, D.C. Bulkeley grew up in Greenville, South Carolina, before moving to New York City. The South was violent and oppressive, they realized, so they moved North for a better chance at changing the nation. Of course, it didn't work out the way they had hoped. While the urban North may have been less explicitly violent for African Americans than the rural South, it was nonetheless still a violent place, especially around the turn of the twentieth century. What's more, although Jim Crow was not officially the law of the North, it was still the *de facto* standard. The urban North was not the promised-land of freedom it had seemed.¹⁹

This was something Washington seemed to intuit. Early on in his career, he encouraged fellow Black Southerners to remain in the South where their chances for advancement would be better, despite the violence. The reason for his hope was the land available in the South. Owning land, buildings, and resources in the North would be well-nigh impossible because of white control, especially in the realm of finance, in over-crowded cities. But the South was much less developed. Black Americans could buy large tracts of land, create their own communities, and reap the fruits of their labor.²⁰ In the South, their wealth could accumulate across generations in ways that would be impossible in the North. Washington well understood the importance of generational wealth for Black progress, and the best place for that, he argued, was in the rural South.

To be sure, Washington traveled regularly around the country during his career, raising money for and spreading the word of Tuskegee in rural villages and sprawling cities, from the Northeast to the Southwest and elsewhere. What's more, many of the great Northern industrialists of the era—including Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller, among others—contributed huge sums of money to Washington's labor-learning vision in the South. But the money he raised in the North he brought to the South for the benefit of the Black people and communities below the Mason-Dixon line. Washington's base of operation would

always be Alabama, as he remained unflinchingly committed to the millions of African Americans who could not or would not move North.

Because he chose to remain in the rural South rather than follow other Black leaders to the urban North, Washington could not speak, act, and organize exactly like they did. He had to speak in a way that would beckon to Black southerners while keeping white violence at bay. The situation called for a strategic discourse that could navigate the grim realities of the region while enabling him and his school not just to survive but to thrive. Washington responded brilliantly, and nowhere was that brilliance more apparent than in the Atlanta Exposition Address.

The Atlanta Exposition

In the 1880s, journalist Henry Grady, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, preached a gospel about the New South—a South that had shed its old slave-holding ways and was now open for business to investors from the North and abroad.²¹ The unofficial capital of this New South was the city of Atlanta, on its way to becoming a New York below the Mason-Dixon line. It made sense, therefore, to promote the New South in Atlanta via an international exhibition showcasing how the region could contribute to the industrial march of the coming century.²²

If only it were that easy. Although the exposition was supposed to show how far the South had come with, among other things, race relations, it quickly ran into the realities of race in America. One of these realities was the horrifyingly commonplace violence against African Americans—an epidemic of lynching and the everyday violence associated with oppression and exploitation. Another reality concerned how to showcase the work of African Americans on a national and global stage. This issue had recently rattled the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. In the 1893 expo, African Americans had been effectively excluded from any role in planning the event. In response, Black leaders, including Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglass, wrote a protest pamphlet highlighting for international visitors the ongoing racial injustices of the U.S.²³

Protests about racial injustice were the last thing organizers in Atlanta wanted to confront. As a result, leaders of the Atlanta Exposition brought respected Black figures into the planning process.²⁴ Edward Randolph Carter and Wesley Gaines, both ministers in the area, helped organizers figure out how to showcase the industrial, cultural, and intellectual work of Black Americans. They were also instrumental in persuading the U.S. government to fund part of the exposition. Working alongside Carter and Gaines was Booker T. Washington, the person quickly on his way to becoming, at least in public perception, the new Frederick Douglass. Because of Washington's visibility in the South and his success in securing funds from the U.S. government, organizers of the Atlanta Expo asked Washington to oversee the "Negro Building," a role he declined because of existing commitments at Tuskegee. Ever the strategic operator, Washington recommended that I. Garland Penn—a friend who would put Tuskegee's contributions on full display—oversee the building instead. Penn accepted.

Of course, the very existence of a separate Negro Building was wholly unsatisfying to many African Americans, and soon the Atlanta Expo was engulfed in a racial controversy of its own. Critics noted the marginal location of the building on the fairgrounds, and its shabbiness once completed. Yet supporters, including Penn and Washington, thought having a separate Negro Building was better than having no space at all.²⁵

Then came the debate over the opening exercises for the exposition—specifically, the possibility of appointing a Black speaker at the ceremony. One side of the debate proposed a separate opening ceremony for the Negro Building; another side thought an all-white opening ceremony was just fine; yet another side wanted to put on full display the supposedly new racial realities of the South. Eventually, the idea of including a Black speaker on stage with whites won the day. But who should the speaker be? Washington was not, in fact, the first choice to be the speaker, but Penn kept pushing the name of his friend as someone capable of striking the right tone before a mixed audience. He eventually prevailed. Washington received the official invitation to speak at the opening ceremony on 24 August 1895, leaving him less than a month to craft the most important speech of his life.²⁶

Finally the day of the historic speech arrived. September 18 was a sweltering day in Atlanta, but that did not stop a massive crowd from gathering for this pivotal event. The program began at 1:30 pm inside the main auditorium on the expo grounds. Music, prayer, and oratory structured the afternoon. The president of the exposition spoke, as did the governor of Georgia and the mayor of Atlanta. Emma Thompson, President of the Women’s Board, spoke on behalf of women. Then it was Washington’s turn to speak. He delivered what the *Parsons Weekly Blade*, a Black newspaper published out of Kansas, called “a masterly production in thought and purpose, from beginning to end.”²⁷

The Atlanta Exposition Address

“The Atlanta Exposition Address” is a delicate text—delicate because it contains sentences and phrases that are apt to be wrenched from their historical and rhetorical contexts and quickly misunderstood. Carefully attuned to the distinct dynamics of the exposition and the era, the speech builds carefully through several key themes to a rather striking indictment of the white establishment. The analysis below will move through the speech from beginning to end, tracking its themes and showing how Washington’s rhetoric walked a fine line by appearing to court white approval while actually emboldening southern Black communities.

The introduction of the speech (paragraphs 1–3) articulated the points one would expect on such an occasion.²⁸ Washington praised the event, thanked the directors for their work, and acknowledged his role speaking on behalf of Black Americans. In voicing “the sentiment of the masses of my race,” Washington lauded “the managers of this magnificent exposition” for highlighting “the value and manhood of the American Negro” (2). He also repeated some of the ideas for which he was known in the South. After the Civil War, he explained, African Americans began their efforts at racial uplift “at the top instead of at the bottom,” seeking “a seat in Congress or the State Legislature” more than “real estate or industrial skill” and flocking to “the political convention” instead of “starting a dairy farm or truck garden” (3).

These juxtapositions so early in the speech played upon Washington’s reputation for promoting industrial education at the expense of political mobilization. But three points about these statements deserve mention. First, Washington never actually drew a conclusion from the juxtapositions; they were presented as statements of fact, not endorsements. Washington allowed them to hang in the air so the audience could draw whatever conclusion they felt warranted. Second, this was still the introduction of the speech. Washington was just getting started, and he had much more to say about these issues. Third, the juxtapositions ultimately concerned the first

key theme of the speech—namely, the number of African Americans in the South. In addition to pointing to “the masses of my race” (2), Washington opened the speech with a striking statistic: “One-third of the population of the South is of the Negro race.” The speech began, therefore, with a reminder about the number of Black bodies surrounding the scene. It would not be the last time he mentioned these bodies.

After the introduction, Washington moved into the body of the speech in an abrupt, jarring way. Instead of drawing conclusions from the economic and political juxtapositions he just offered, he presented an extended metaphor about a ship lost at sea (4). In the metaphor, a lost ship sends up a signal to another vessel—“Water, water, we die of thirst!” The friendly ship responded with a signal of its own: “Cast down your bucket where you are.” These two signals failed to achieve their desired result. Although each ship could see what the other was saying, the lost ship also saw the ocean around it, and it knew seawater would kill the crew dying of thirst. It was only when the crew of the lost ships stopped trusting what they saw—the signals—and cast down their bucket that they saved themselves with “fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River” (4).

The lost ship metaphor pitted two parts of the human body against each other. The first part was vision, as the sailors’ eyes failed them. They saw the signal, they saw the water all around, and they were paralyzed. The second part was hands. When the sailors finally grabbed their buckets, cast them down into the ocean, and pulled them up, they acquired the fresh water that saved them. Trust the work of hands, the metaphor suggested, instead of being deceived by vision. Time and again throughout the rest of the speech, Washington would reference the power of human hands.

But the metaphor was not yet finished; Washington had yet to apply it directly to the Black and white portions of his audience. Turning to Black audience members, he encouraged them to cast down their bucket in the South: “Cast it down in agriculture, in mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions” (5). The progression of clauses was important. Picking up on the economic-political juxtapositions he offered at the end of the introduction, Washington first pointed to work in the field and factory, then pointed to work of the professions—law, medicine, the ministry, and similar intellectual undertakings. Indeed, this was the kind of advice Washington regularly offered Black audiences. Those who could enter the professions via higher education should absolutely do so. But because higher education was closed to most Black Americans at the time, the masses should work the fields and factories of the region, building the wealth and acquiring the resources that could strengthen subsequent generations. “The masses of us,” he reminded Black listeners, “are to live by the productions of our hands” (6). To make the contrast between hands and vision even clearer, Washington then juxtaposed “the superficial and the substantial, the ornamental gewgaws of life and the useful” (6). The substantive, useful work of the hands could accomplish what the superficial, fleeting ornamentation of vision could not.

Hand imagery pervaded Washington’s oratory; it was not peculiar to the Atlanta Exposition Address.²⁹ Although it is difficult to know exactly why Washington used hand imagery throughout his oratory, the language of hands was well suited to multiple meanings. Because hands are dexterous, they can perform many kinds of tasks and movements. They can carry on the work of fields and factories, performing the menial labor that many white Americans believed appropriate for Black Americans. But hands can do much more. They can

grab, grasp, push, pull, even fight—the kinds of initiatives that beckoned to Black Americans eager to control their world. Hands were a perfect polysemic image for reaching both Black and white listeners, although in very different ways.³⁰

Washington then turned his extended metaphor directly to whites in the audience. Specifically, he insisted that whites should not trust the immigrants flooding into the nation as an appropriate labor force, even though they may look white. “Cast down your bucket where you are,” he told white investors (7), and realize the opportunity available to you because of the Black bodies of the South. Don’t trust what eyes see; trust what hands can do. As people of “foreign birth and strange tongue and habits,” immigrant laborers were ineffective compared to the “8,000,000 Negroes whose habits you know, whose loyalty and love you have tested in days when to have proved treacherous meant the ruin of your firesides” (7). This reminder about Black bodies in the South was both about numbers and about familiarity with American life and industry. Surrounding the scene in Atlanta were people who, Washington insisted, had long “tilled your fields, cleared your forests, builded your railroads and cities, and brought forth treasures from the bowels of the earth, and helped make possible this magnificent representation of the progress of the South” (7). Once again, the progression of clauses was important. In describing the work of Black hands, Washington began with fields, forests, and infrastructure, but he built to something bigger—a world where Black southerners would “buy your surplus land, make blossom the waste places in your fields, and run your factories” (7). In these clauses, white listeners could hear the language of labor—of field hands and factory workers. Simultaneously, Black listeners could hear the language of wealth, progress, and ownership. All of it came through the dexterity of human hands.

Washington’s strategic polysemy continued in the subsequent paragraph (8), which is also potentially the most problematic paragraph of the speech. When critics position Washington as a Jim-Crow accommodationist, they usually cite this infamous passage:

As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past in nursing your children, watching by the sick bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.

Before moving too quickly to condemn Washington because of this passage, several aspects of the paragraph deserve mention. First, Washington offered yet another polysemic progression. He began with terms of vision—“watching” by sick beds and following with “tear-dimmed eyes.” These were phrases attuned directly to the “you” and “your” of white America. But as the paragraph continued, the Black figures in the scene went from following to standing, then to taking an active role via their hands—“interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours.” In the work of interlacing, Black hands took control, as “our” life (the life of Black America) came before “yours” (the life of white America) in order to make both races “one.” Thus scenes of enslaved life morphed into an affirmation of Black agency in the South.

Also crucial was the explicit hand metaphor at the end of the paragraph: “In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” On the surface, the metaphor offers pretty clear support of Jim

Crow segregation. But again, surfaces depend on vision, which, as Washington made clear, can be deceiving. The metaphor is actually a coded reference to a very specific idea. When Washington referred to the separation of the fingers, he restricted that separation to “all things that are purely social.” Later in the speech he offered a similar reference when he declared, “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly” (13). In the late-nineteenth-century South, all things “purely social” and “social equality” did not mean what they seem to mean today. Today, the phrases suggest segregation in social settings—train cars, civic centers, waiting rooms, restaurants, and more. But in Washington’s day, social equality meant one thing in the South: miscegenation. Social equality was a euphemism for race mixing.³¹

Of course, the fact that Washington distanced his efforts from race mixing is still problematic, but even the most radical race leaders at the time distanced their efforts from race mixing. Miscegenation was a bridge too far in terms of public advocacy, in both the North and the South. Washington and countless others denounced race mixing because of its explosive potential. That was one reason Washington was taken aback when some of his critics misunderstood the social equality reference. “If anybody understood me,” he wrote to Ednah Cheney, an Africa-American woman, in October 1895, “as meaning that riding in the same railroad car or sitting in the same room at a railroad station is social intercourse they certainly got a wrong idea of my position.”³²

One other aspect of this hand metaphor deserves mention: the metaphor was not Washington’s invention. He almost certainly borrowed it from Rutherford B. Hayes, who used it in a speech at the Hampton Institute while Washington was a teacher there. Indeed, Hayes deployed the metaphor on 20 May 1880, to make a point about miscegenation: “We would not undertake to violate the laws of nature, we do not wish to change the purpose of God in making these differences of nature. We are willing to have these elements of our population separate as the fingers are, but we require to see them united for every good work, for national defense, one, as the hand.”³³ Although most in the audience would not have known the connection between Hayes and Washington, both orators nevertheless used the fingers-and-hands metaphor to distance their advocacy from miscegenation.

After the fingers-and-hand metaphor, which was effectively the midpoint of the speech, Washington’s address picked up steam and charged toward its striking conclusion. To push back against those who claimed he extolled industrial education at the expense of higher education, Washington praised “the highest intelligence and development of all” (9). He lauded “the fullest growth of the Negro” to make “him the most useful and intelligent citizen” (9). After quoting a Civil War poem by the abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier (10), Washington combined the themes of numbers and hands into one striking image:

Nearly sixteen millions of hands will aid you in pulling the load upwards, or they will pull against you the load downwards. We shall constitute one third and much more of the ignorance and crime of the South or one third its intelligence and progress; we shall contribute one third to the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or we shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic. (11)

This potent combination of numbers and hands deserves careful attention. After foregrounding the sixteen million powerful Black hands in the South, Washington issued a stark dichotomy: *either* the hands will pull with white America, *or* they will pull against white

America. There was no middle ground. At the same time, the word “shall” did important work. Black hands *shall* pull with or against—a strong assertion of agency. Reading the passage slowly, Washington’s words sound more like a warning than a resignation. Sixteen million Black hands will either pull with or against. If they are not included in intelligence, progress, and prosperity, they will become a body of death and retard the body politic. Of course, Washington never said whose death that was. But the point was ultimately about putting the nation on notice: either include Black Americans in economic progress, or Black Americans will work against the political establishment.

The stark demand continued in the remaining paragraphs of the speech. For instance, Washington insisted that “all privileges of the law be ours,” and that Black Americans “be prepared for the exercises of these privileges” (13). The concluding paragraph of the speech was even more striking in this regard. Reiterating the point of “hope and encouragement” that opened the speech, he brought Black and white Southerners together because both began their labors “practically empty-handed” in the wake of the Civil War. Then, a final warning: Only let this be constantly in mind—that while from representations in these buildings of the products of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters, and art, much good will come, yet far above and beyond material benefit will be that higher good that, let us pray God, will come in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicions, and in a determination, even in the remotest corner, to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of law and a spirit that will tolerate nothing but the highest equity in the enforcement of law. This, this, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and new earth. (14)

With sixteen million Black hands surrounding the scene, Washington subordinated economic, industrial, and professional progress (field, forest, mine, factory, letters, and art) to equality and justice. The demand for “absolute justice”—“even in the remotest corner” of the South—was the culmination of the speech and Washington’s final word on the matter. And of course it was. He could not have begun the oration with this demand. He had to build to it, fostering identification with Black and white listeners. He had to enable white audience members to see the possibilities of Black labor before he could call forth a legion of Black hands that could push, pull, and fight if they did not receive justice and “the highest equity in the enforcement of law.”

Of note is an important difference in the way Washington concluded the speech to his live audience and the way he printed the speech for posterity in his autobiography *Up from Slavery*. As delivered, the conclusion included two key phrases: “in a determination, even in the remotest corner” and “a spirit that will tolerate nothing but the highest equity in the enforcement of law.” These phrases were left out of the version printed in *Up from Slavery*. It is impossible to know why they were left out, but it may be that on the page, the phrases were too bold, too demanding, even though they worked well in oral delivery. After all, Washington’s point was that even in the remotest corner of the South, the Black community would not tolerate anything less than absolute justice and equality before the law. In the heightened energy and passion of live delivery, the demand connected beautifully to the crowd already on Washington’s side. On the page, the same appeal may have been too much for the heated tempers of the South.

Whatever the case, the speech as delivered culminated with a powerful demand for justice that was nothing short of biblical. When justice and equality combined with material prosperity, Washington declared, echoing the Book of Revelation (21:1), the South would be

remade as a new heaven and new earth. This end-times vision of a new world was ultimately hopeful, as the new heaven and new earth hinged on absolute justice and equality. At the same time, this end-times vision was a far cry from an accommodation to Jim Crow.

Conclusion

Did Booker T. Washington favor economic expediency at the expense of political rights? Not if we understand the full context of his oratory in Atlanta. The Atlanta Exposition Address culminated with a powerful plea for justice and equality. It culminated, in fact, with a demand that the white establishment provide justice and equality, or else sixteen million Black hands would become a body of death. Hands can work, Washington reminded his audience, but they can also fight.

To be sure, Washington was a strategic orator, and he knew he could not make these points explicitly at the start of the speech. He had to build identification with his mixed-race audience and draw white Americans to his side. After all, his home was the rural South, plagued by horrific violence and lynching. Direct rebukes of the white establishment early in the speech might have gotten him banished or killed. But Washington wanted to work on behalf of his fellow Black Southerners, so he carefully crafted his appeals to walk a fine line, sending one message to white America and another message to Black America. The result was a speech that enlivened a diverse audience for the cause of advancing the South. To both whites and Blacks, Washington was an oratorical Moses leading his people to a redeemed Southland.

Today, many commentators would scoff at the idea of calling Washington an oratorical Moses. Washington's efforts were misguided, critics would insist, especially in light of the Tulsa and Rosewood massacres of prosperous, independent Black communities. Had Washington been alive to witness those massacres, perhaps he would have reevaluated his statements in Atlanta. Or perhaps not. In Atlanta in 1895, Washington made the best case available for someone committed to strategizing within the realities of the U.S. South during the nadir of race relations. Ultimately, the power structure he confronted was more vicious and depraved than he was effective. But that was true for every race leader at the time. None of them—neither Du Bois nor Wells nor Ransom nor any radical activist—succeeded in tearing down the system.

Yet to suggest that Washington was a conservative race leader wholly apart from radical activists at the time also misses an important point. Washington spoke endlessly about work, hands, and the number of Black bodies in the South. But he also worked extensively behind the scenes to fund lawsuits against racial injustice, to build Black economic and political institutions (such as the National Negro Business League) that could help Black Americans out of their state of servitude, and to spread the gospel of Tuskegee around the country so Black Americans could accumulate the kind of wealth that would make an impact across generations.³⁴ Indeed, Washington worked on many fronts, often in conjunction with other race leaders, for the uplift of his people. That is why reducing his advocacy to a “compromise” with the white South, and thereby flattening his strategic organizing to economic expediency, turns a brilliant leader into a cardboard cutout. In our own age of racial injustice and multifaceted power struggles, Washington's contributions, including his Atlanta Exposition Address, deserve attention not for placating the status quo but for confronting the realities of his time while bringing together a diverse audience to create a new heaven and new earth.

Author's Note: Paul Stob is Professor of Communication Studies at Vanderbilt University. He wishes to thank Steve Lucas and Mike Hogan for their direction and feedback on this essay.

Notes

¹ "A Plea for His Race," *Atlanta Constitution*, 19 September 1895, 4.

² "Atlanta's Big Fair Opened," *New-York Tribute*, 19 September 1895, 1.

³ "The Speech of the Occasion," *Washington Post*, 22 September 1895, 6.

⁴ "Compliments," *Levenworth Herald*, 19 October 1895, 2.

⁵ Ella L. Mahammitt, "Woman's Column," *Omaha Enterprise*, 16 November 1895, 3.

⁶ "An Address by Mr. Booker T. Washington," *Colored Harvest*, 1 January 1896, 72.

⁷ Mary Elizabeth Preston Stearns to Booker T. Washington, 19 September 1895, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 4: 1895–98*, ed. Louis R. Harlan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 17.

⁸ Burnwell Town Harvey to Booker T. Washington, 25 September 1895, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 4*, 29.

⁹ W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 50.

¹⁰ For examples of commentators and historians on Washington, see Adolph Reed, Jr., "What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?: The Current Crisis of the Black Intellectual," *The Village Voice* (11 April 1995): 32; Kevern Verney, *The Art of the Possible: Booker T. Washington and Black Leadership in the United States, 1881–1925* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Rebecca Carroll, Ed., *Uncle Tom or New Negro? African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington and Up from Slavery 100 Years Later* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

For examples of scholars of rhetoric on Washington, see Andrew W. King, "Booker T. Washington and the Myth of Heroic Materialism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60 (1974): 323–327; Robert L. Heath, "A Time for Silence: Booker T. Washington in Atlanta," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 64 (1978): 385–399; Bradford J. Vivian, "Up from Memory: Epideictic Forgetting in Booker T. Washington's Cotton States Exposition Address," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 45 (2012): 189–212.

¹¹ For a full discussion of polysemy in American public address, see Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84 (1998): 395–415.

¹² The classic biography of Washington's life is Louis R. Harlan's two-volume project *Booker T. Washington: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856–1901* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); and *Booker T. Washington: The Wizard of Tuskegee, 1901–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). For an excellent, more recent biography, see Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). The biographical information in this section comes from these

biographies.

¹³ For a history of educational institutions like Hampton, see Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ See Donal F. Lindsey, *Indians at Hampton Institute, 1877–1923* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Quoted in Norrell, *Up from History*, 40.

¹⁶ For details on how Tuskegee integrated labor and learning for students, faculty, and staff, see Paul Stob, *Intellectual Populism: Democracy, Inquiry, and the People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2020), ch. 4.

¹⁷ See “A Shameful Episode,” *The Tuskegee News*, 13 June 1895; reprinted in *The Booker T. Washington Papers, Vol. 3: 1889–95*, ed. Louis R. Harlan (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 558–561.

¹⁸ For an overview of advocacy during this era, see Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

¹⁹ For more on geographical tensions in the struggle for Civil Rights, see Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007).

²⁰ A great indication of Washington’s commitment to Black independence, racial pride, and generational wealth can be seen in his work with Charles Banks. See David H. Jackson Jr., *A Chief Lieutenant of the Tuskegee Machine: Charles Banks of Mississippi* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002).

²¹ See Robert Iltis, “Textual Dynamics of ‘the New South,’” *Communication Studies* 4 (1992): 29–41.

²² See Harold E. Davis, *Henry Grady’s New South: Atlanta, a Brave and Beautiful City* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990).

²³ See Christopher Robert Reed, *“All the World Is Here!” The Black Presence at the White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

²⁴ For full details, see Theda Perdue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), ch. 1.

²⁵ See Perdue, *Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition*, 19–22.

²⁶ See *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 3, 570.

²⁷ “Booker T. Washington,” *Parson’s Blade*, 5 October 1895, 1.

²⁸ All passages from Washington’s Atlanta Exposition Address are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the VOD website.

²⁹ See Paul Stob, “Black Hands Push Back: Reconsidering the Rhetoric of Booker T. Washington,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 104 (2018): 145–165.

³⁰ For more on the symbolic role of hands in American rhetoric, literature, and culture, see Putzi, *Identifying Marks*; and Jay Watson, *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893–1985* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).

³¹ Julie Husband, *Antislavery Discourse and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 123. See also Nell Irvin Painter, “‘Social Equality,’

Miscegenation, Labor, and Power,” in *The Evolution of Southern Culture*, ed. Numan V. Bartley (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 47–67.

³² Booker T. Washington to Ednah Dow Littlehale Cheney, 15 October 1895, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 4, 57.

³³ Quoted in Michael Rudolph West, *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 188.

³⁴ For details on Washington’s “deceptions” and “black survival strategies,” see Jackson, *Booker T. Washington*, ch. 3.