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The Black Man’s Burden: Dilemmas of Black Masculinity in Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*

Booker T. Washington has always been a controversial figure in the history of African-American struggle for emancipation and the search for black national identity. In scholarly accounts, he is simultaneously represented as “the most powerful and influential black leader ever to have existed before or since his advent” and “the Great Compromiser” (Gibson 95; Lomax 13). This essay will analyze Washington’s rhetorical and political strategies of representation from the perspective of gender and sexuality studies. The concepts that are especially relevant in this reading will be Gail Bederman’s notion of nineteenth-century manliness and Michael Kimmel’s Marketplace Manhood as well as the models preceding it.

Washington’s autobiography has attracted some attention from masculinity scholars. Donald Gibson, in his analysis of the first chapter of *Up from Slavery*, claims that Washington strategically feminizes himself in order to achieve his goals with the support of white patronage. Maurice O. Wallace, analyzing the same text, admits that Washington’s self-creation is feminized, yet he maintains that there are subversive spaces which allow for the expression of heteronormative masculine sexual desire (96). In my analysis, I will argue that Washington, rather than feminize his persona, seeks ways to assert his masculinity and construct black national identity within the tradition of civilized manliness.

Gibson claims that Washington “wanted his audience to feel that his voice was not threatening but calm and placid” and, in order to achieve it, he feminized his autobiographical persona (95). Whereas it is hard to disagree with the former claim, the latter argument does not take into consideration the possibility of asserting one’s masculinity in a self-possessed way. Undoubtedly, Washington’s choice of a conciliatory voice constituted a strategic rhetorical gesture addressed to his white Southern audience, as the tone of his personal letters was much more indignant (Shapiro 137). The published text carefully omits any elements of violence, black male sexuality, or even resentment against whites. These
omissions are especially visible when *Up from Slavery* is contrasted with the urtext of African American autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). The two texts have been frequently compared since Washington’s text positions him as Douglass’s successor after his death in 1895. As far as the plot is concerned, both autobiographies trace the way from plantation slavery to freedom. Yet, Washington chooses to depict plantation idyll rather than plantation trauma which is epitomized by the central scene in Douglass’s *Narrative* representing his Aunt Hester’s flogging. Washington persistently repeats in his text that “there was no feeling of bitterness” toward white people (*Up from Slavery* 22, 23, 27, 49). Instead, there was sorrow and sympathy for the war wounds and deaths of Confederate soldiers. Reconstruction is characteristically the period which is assessed in the text as most violent. Washington compares Ku Klux Klan night raids to slave patrols and claims that the former were far more brutal. He does not provide any space for black responses to white violence, which were taking place, according to historical records (Shapiro 6). Additionally, he constructs his depictions of aggression with careful tentativeness. Whereas historians write of terror, assault, and oppression, Washington introduces Ku Klux Klan vigilante as men who “joined themselves together for the purpose of regulating the conduct of the colored people” (*Up from Slavery* 63). When he describes open confrontation between white and black people, the only man defending blacks and standing up to whites is a white Southerner, General Ruffner. The choice of Reconstruction as the symbol of white violence is a conscious strategy on the part of the author. This depiction is not a call for retribution or black defense, as according to Washington, this “darkest part of the Reconstruction days” is just an “unpleasant part of the history of the South” (64; emphasis added). He concludes that “To−day there are no such organizations in the South, and the fact that such ever existed is almost forgotten by both races. There are few places in the South now where public sentiment would permit such organizations to exist” (64). White violence in these passages is “regulatory,” “unpleasant,” and “almost forgotten.” Washington’s strategy is to forget, move on, and enjoy the contemporary bliss of interracial relations.

This also results in his persistent critique of the black exodus to the North. He openly states that “by far the greatest part of the Negro race is better off in the country districts and should continue to live there” (*Up from Slavery* 155). Also, his famous slogan “cast your buckets where you are” can be read not only as advocacy of conservative politics but also as a geopolitical reference to the increasing black migration. It is not surprising that Washington’s reactionary narrative aroused protests upon its publication since its presentation of race
relations in the 1890s as peaceful stage is in stark contrast to the historical data about lynchings, which are also provided by Washington’s Tuskegee Institute.

Washington briefly mentions lynchings two times in the text. At first, he does not even name the term itself, but indirectly speaks of “the practice to which the people in certain sections of the South have felt themselves compelled to resort, in order to get rid of the force of the Negroes’ ballot” (Up from Slavery 122). This “practice” causes “permanent injury to the morals of white man” and only temporary wrong to the Negro (121). At the end of the text, he refers to the incidents of turn-of-the-century lynchings as “superficial and temporary signs,” whereas, according to historians, these incidents greatly outnumbered Ku Klux Klan raids during Reconstruction (223). Washington is hopeful because he received “warm and hearty” support from the Southern newspapers in regard to the “the evil habit of lynching.” As historical records show, support for his anti-lynching claims was limited. When he spoke to the National Negro Business League, he openly stated that “The crime of lynching everywhere and at all times should be condemned” (Shapiro 137). Yet, what the Atlanta Constitution reported after the event was a story with the headline “Law-breaking Negroes Worst Menace to Race” (Shapiro 137). Also, Northern newspapers chose to publish his conciliatory calls, in which Washington expressed “very deep grief on account of the death of so many innocent men of both races because of the deeds of a few despicable criminals” (Shapiro 137). Thus, even though the tone of his private letters to Oswald Villard or Francis Garrison reveals outrage at “unspeakably cruel acts” and “criminal negligence” of the police, in his Up from Slavery persona, Washington chooses to diminish the influence of lynchings and represent black men as reconciled with the status quo and devoid of any kind of bitterness or aggression (The Booker T. Washington Papers 84). As the similarities between this vision and the records from the Southern newspapers indicate, Washington’s narrative was intended to appease white public opinion in the South.

Up from Slavery, however, cannot be reduced solely to the function of satisfying the white Southern community. When read in the context of the powerful lynching ideology, it can be interpreted as a particular strategy to rebuke the Southern myth of the black rapist used to justify lynchings. By advocating black self-control and restraint from retaliation and representing black people in a peaceful way, Washington argues that black men are devoid of aggression and do not have any reasons for retaliation. Thus, he undermines the myth that projects black males as aggressive and sexually unrestrained.

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1 See also Thomas E. Harris in Analysis of the Clash over Issues between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, 55.
Washington indirectly refutes the charges of black male sexual aggression by constructing the persona of a devoted and loyal slave:

In order to defend and protect women and children who were left on the plantations when white males went to war, the slaves would have laid down their lives. The slave who was selected to sleep in the “big house” during the absence of the males was considered to have the place of honour. Anyone attempting to harm “young Mistress” or “old Mistress” during the night would have had to cross the dead body of the slave to do so.

(Up from Slavery 22)

This passage represents the black male as devoid of sexual desire for white womanhood. The scene suggests that black men, far from being rapists, are loyal protectors of white women. Yet, it also provides a space for the exemplification of black bravery and honor. Even though Washington does not mention the slaves who joined the army, the black protector of women is also courageous and self-sacrificing as he is willing to give his life for the honor of white womanhood.

In his depictions of black men as non-aggressive, patient, and stoical in their attitude towards whites, Washington challenges the myth of the black rapist. Additionally, this strategy can also be interpreted as drawing on the tradition of civilized manliness. Bederman, in her study *Manliness and Civilization*, claims that nineteenth-century manliness was defined in terms of dignified conduct and noble character. Its ideology was based on self-mastery, restraint, and respectability. The values that are celebrated in Washington’s text run parallel to this tradition of white genteel masculinity. The appropriation of civilized manliness enables him to translate passive non-resistance into manly self-possession and self-discipline.

Washington’s embrace of the ideology of white nobility is visible in the very choice of the author’s name. An ex-slave boy without surname, Washington informs the reader, typically would choose Lincoln or Sherman as his symbolic father. The young Booker, during a school-roll, chooses “Washington” as his new surname and, emblematically, as his father figure.² In this way he claims his right to genteel manliness and privilege. The gentility of George Washington is invoked later in the text. The author of *Up from Slavery* quotes an anecdote in which President Washington lifts his hat to a black man to avoid being impolite, which according to the text makes him “a true gentleman” (79). Later, Booker adds his

² When juxtaposed with Douglass’s narrative, this choice seems even more meaningful, since Douglass, in his act of self-naming, changes his original name “Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey” into Frederick Douglass under the accidental influence of Walter Scott’s “The Lady of the Lake,” whose characters are among others James Douglass and Ellen Douglass.
middle name, Taliaferro, which was given to him by his mother. Thus, the composition of his final name comprises: a slave first name, Booker, a mother-given name, Taliaferro, and a symbolically chosen white father’s name, Washington. The full name neatly reflects his origins: a black mother and a white (slave-owning) father. It also manifests his choice of a particular model of antebellum gentlemanly masculinity.

The model of masculinity advocated in the text is most accurately illustrated by the descriptions of two other exemplary men: General Armstrong and President McKinley. Washington devotes a considerable part of the chapter on education to the head of Hampton Institute. He is “a perfect man,” clearly a paragon of masculinity that Washington wishes to emulate. The terms in which General Armstrong is depicted exemplify the nineteenth-century manliness as defined by Bederman. Armstrong is “the noblest human being,” “great character,” hard-working, self-sacrificing, “Christlike,” high, and pure (Up from Slavery 48–50). He is represented as a model noble patriarch, whose genteel manners and self-restraint evoke awe and respect in all Hampton students and teachers.

Another example of masculinity that ideally fits this concept of manliness can be found in Washington’s reference to President McKinley. This passage is slightly shorter than the three pages devoted to the celebration of General Armstrong, yet it also perfectly reflects the essence of manliness. Referring to his fund-raising experiences, Washington shares his reflections about men of success:

I have observed that those who have accomplished the greatest results are those who “keep under the body”; are those who never grow excited or lose self-control, but are always calm, self-possessed, patient, and polite. I think that President William McKinley is the best example of a man of this class I have ever seen. In order to be successful in any kind of undertaking, I think the main thing is for one to grow to the point where one completely forgets himself. (Up from Slavery 130–131; emphasis added)

This depiction is parallel to the characterization of Armstrong in the emphasis on self-sacrifice, which here is linked with the most characteristic features of manliness—self-control and patience. Praise for such ideals recurs in many other passages. For example, Washington’s “faithful secretary,” Mr. Scott is eulogized for his “tact, wisdom, and hard work” (183). The difficulties faced when founding Tuskegee Institute make Washington realize that patience, earnest effort, and endurance guarantee success in every kind of task independently of one’s race (117–118). Thus, also the ideals that are valued and taught at Tuskegee are “industry, thrift, and economy” (95). Washington proposes a noble, self-controlled
manliness as a role model to follow for black men on their path to civilized humanity.

The narrative uplift scenario in Washington’s autobiography clearly parallels the Horatio Alger’s “rags to riches” dime-novel tradition. Yet his narrative can be traced back even further, to Benjamin Franklin’s *Autobiography*—the text acknowledged as a secularized version of the Protestant work ethic. Washington too emphasizes a strenuous work ethic and discipline, with a focus on the material level of life. Moreover, Washington consciously alludes in the text to the very genre of (auto)biography in a manner which lends an air of authenticity to his own testimony: “I have a great fondness for . . . biography. I like to be sure that I am reading about a real man or a real thing” (186). Thus, he legitimizes his “rags to riches” story, in which from being “A Slave among the Slaves” in the title of the first chapter, he emerges as the leader of black people, who meets the president, travels to Europe, organizes Negro conferences, and is the head of one of the most influential black educational institutions. The text makes it clear that his success is due to his hard work and patience, hence, *Up from Slavery* is an autobiographical enactment of the Protestant work ethic. The references to Presidents Washington and McKinley and the application of core American doctrines of individualism, success, and the work ethic position black identity as constructed by Washington in the mainstream of American national discourse.

Characteristically, the head of Tuskegee strongly emphasizes his point of departure in the success story, when he is a “crying,” “frightened child,” fed like “dumb animals” (*Up from Slavery* 18, 20). Thus, he does not present himself as an extraordinary character. Quite on the contrary, he tends to stress his petty fears and minor deceptions. His autobiographical persona is easy to identify with even for poorest of black people. According to Washington, it is not courage but hard work, patience, and restraint that lead to success. He praises the blessed influence of menial labor as a necessary element of education. The timetable which he designed for Tuskegee strongly resembles Franklin’s routine. The students are occupied with useful activities from 5 a.m. until 9.30 p.m., and the day is carefully divided into studying, working, cleaning, and praying. The epitome of the moralizing success story is found at the very end:

As I write the closing words of this autobiography I find myself—not by design—in the city of Richmond, Virginia; the city . . . where, about twenty-five years ago, because of my poverty I slept night after night under a sidewalk. This time I am in Richmond as the guest of the coloured people of the city; and came at their request to deliver an address last night to both races in the Academy of music, the largest and finest audience room in the city

(*Up from Slavery* 223–224)
Washington’s real-life advancement from the lower class to the top of black social strata is a persuasive argument for his ideology of self-denial, endurance, and restraint. Moreover, his success is also a gendered success—as a leader of the black community, like General Armstrong, he becomes a role model of manliness for other black men to follow.

In the light of Washington’s persistent opposition to black migration and urbanization, Michael Kimmel’s concept of the pre-modern Genteel Patriarch can be used to classify the black subject and manhood as championed by the head of Tuskegee Institute. The Genteel Patriarch represents a pre-industrial ideology of masculinity which is defined by rural existence and whose privilege is rooted in land ownership. In contrast to the emerging Marketplace Manhood based on fierce competition in the public sphere, this model of masculinity was characterized by relative stability and a sense of security (Kimmel 13–15). By echoing the traditional rural mythology of American masculinity, Washington evades the anxieties of modern, predominantly urban, Marketplace Manhood.

In praising rural life, menial work, and industrial education Washington provides a special place for women. The situation of black women is used as a peculiar argument supporting technical education in opposition to “liberal education.” Both in Up from Slavery and in his text “Industrial Education for the Negro” Washington claims that liberal education constitutes a threat to black femininity. He argues that it is increasingly common and manifestly absurd when a (black) woman can converse intelligently about theoretical chemistry and cannot cook, iron, or launder. In his autobiography, he openly states that with a liberal education and no practical skills “the girls went to the bad” (Up from Slavery 72). Thus, according to the logic of the text, a liberal education for women is a straight path to prostitution. In this peculiar line of reasoning, Washington uses the concept of feminine purity as an argument challenging W. E. B. Du Bois’s advocacy of higher education in their classic debate.

Washington’s work ethic gospel is intertwined not only with the concept of manliness but also directly with the discourse of civilization. As the text is devoted to the history of Tuskegee Institute, the concept of civilization is primarily evoked in the context of the educational process. Washington accepts the prevailing hegemonic assumptions concerning the hierarchy of races and civilizations. He argues that black people in any other place in the world are not nearly as civilized as American freedmen after “the school of American slavery.” “African heathens,” turned into black slaves, became “stronger . . . materially, intellectually, morally, and religiously.” Thanks to the slave experience they gained the “spirit of self-reliance and self-help” (Up from Slavery 24–25). These valuable qualities
could be developed through the educational system at Tuskegee. The experience of slavery in Washington’s narrative is positioned as a necessary step in the racial uplift.

Significantly, in his depictions of education and civilization, Washington frequently refers to metaphors and images of cleaning and hygiene. The author himself entered Hampton Institute thanks to “the lessons...learned in the home of Mrs. Ruffner,” which proved “as valuable...as any education...gotten anywhere since.” This valuable education was based on “keeping everything clean,” “promptly,” “systematically,” and “honestly” (Up from Slavery 42). After such training, he was able to clean the recitation room at Hampton, which activity is depicted in meticulous detail. Washington states that “the sweeping of that room was my college examination, and never did any youth pass an examination for entrance into Harvard or Yale that gave him more genuine satisfaction” (47–48). The conflation of education, civilization, and cleanliness recurs throughout the text. Drawing on his experience from Hampton, where “the most valuable lesson...was in the use and value of the bath” and “The gospel of the toothbrush,” Washington persistently emphasizes that education must never be reduced to books and abstract knowledge (52, 126, 95). At Tuskegee “the students had come from homes where they had had no opportunities for lessons which would teach them how to care for their bodies...We wanted to teach the students how to bathe; how to care for their teeth and clothing.” Later he adds that “the only thing I have always insisted upon at Tuskegee is that everywhere there should be absolute cleanliness.” Such a compulsion for hygiene is directly linked, in the text, not only to education but also explicitly to civilization: “The use of the tooth-brush has had in bringing about a higher degree of civilization among the students” (95, 126, 127; emphasis added).

Washington’s rewriting of the discourse of civilization as obsessive cleaning has a number of implications. First of all, in terms of the nineteenth-century ideology of the separate spheres, it positions the black civilizing process chiefly in the domestic sphere of house-keeping and hygiene, which in the nineteenth century was coded as strictly feminine. This strategy enables Washington to represent blacks as civilized men, successful, and worthy of respect yet it does not challenge the position of the white man within the public sphere. Moreover, a persistent desire for “absolute cleanliness” and “whitewashing” might be interpreted as reinforcing the association of black people with impurity, which evokes a compulsory reaction of cleaning (Up from Slavery 42). The association of non-white races with impurity and was a significant element in nineteenth-century racialist thought and the logic of eugenics. Hence, Washington’s obsessive
preoccupation with cleaning can be read as an element of internalized eugenic ideology.

Interconnections between education, civilization, and hygiene are also visible in the chapter “Black Race and Red Race,” in which Washington experiments with educating Indians. Over one hundred “wild and for the most part perfectly ignorant Indians” were taken to Hampton to be civilized under the guidance of the young Booker as their “house father.” The Indians are represented as considering themselves “above the white man” and “far above the Negro,” on the one hand, and unable to be civilized, on the other (Up from Slavery 76). In Washington’s text Indians are proud savages, who, nevertheless, are behind black people in the civilizational progress. This representation echoes the words of Frederick Douglass, who, in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, claimed that “the black man (un-like the Indian) loves civilization” (Douglass 205). Both leaders construct black identity as civilized and closer to mainstream American culture by contrasting it with American Indians.

“The Negro students gladly took the Indians as room-mates, in order that they might teach them to speak English and to acquire civilized habits” (Up from Slavery 77). The process of civilizing, unsurprisingly, is based on cutting their hair, changing their clothes, and teaching them the rules of “absolute” hygiene (108). This episode mirrors one of the central myths within the civilization discourse—“the white man’s burden.” Washington accepts his place in the hierarchy beneath the white man and eagerly takes fatherly advice from respectable white role models. Yet, he establishes his own civilized position by assuming “the black man’s burden,” the role of the “house father,” consisting in civilizing the Indians. Such logic is explicitly stated in the text: “They [the students] lift themselves up in proportion as they help to lift others, and the more unfortunate the race, the lower in the scale of civilization, the more does one raise one’s self by giving the assistance” (77). The confrontation with another race, which can be represented as uncivilized and wild, enables Washington to construct himself as a noble civilizing man in the tradition of Victorian manliness. As Bederman argues, “The white man’s burden . . . linked white supremacy, male dominance, and evolutionary advancement in one powerful figure” (50). In light of Bederman’s evidence that “manliness” as a resource was available only to white men and describing a black man as “manly” was an oxymoron, Washington’s strategy is even more interesting—and daring. Washington appropriates this potent ideology in order to lift himself up in the progress to civilization and civilized manhood. Yet, the fact that he positions the civilizational “burden” in the sphere of cleanliness and domesticity voids his rhetoric of the authority and dominance inherent in the
original concept. Hence, his civilizing mission constitutes the intersection of the “white man’s burden” and the myth of female attempts at domination and restraint most memorably embodied by Widow Douglass and Aunt Sally’s civilizing influence in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Despite the fact that Washington appropriates rather than challenges the imposed cultural hierarchy, the introduction of ethnic and cultural difference embodied by Native Americans destabilizes the hegemonic ideology of white man’s burden. Even though *Up from Slavery* accepts the inferior position of black people, the inclusion of the Native American perspective opens up a possibility of a relative approach to the civilization discourse. Intercultural exchange makes Washington realize that “no white American ever thinks that any other race is wholly civilized until he wears the white man’s clothes, eats the white man’s food, speaks the white man’s language, and professes the white man’s religion” (77). The passage suggests that the standards of white civilization are arbitrary and are coercively imposed on “other races.” Although Washington clearly accepts these standards, this excerpt expresses a subversive potential for entertaining a hierarchy of values other than the “white man’s.” The fact that he admits a possibility of different cultural standards and yet follows the hegemonic route illuminates pragmatism of Washington’s emancipatory strategy.

On the whole, Washington’s autobiography proposes a strategic project for black subjectivity and masculinity, which is largely determined and limited by his intended audience: the white South. He carefully chooses his role models, who construct an interesting patriarchal lineage. Namely, both George Washington and Frederick Douglass are celebrated as the symbolic fathers in the text. The former stands for (white) noble manliness, while references to the latter position the head of Tuskegee as Douglass’s successor in the leadership of black community. Yet Washington is selective in his representation of Douglass. Instead of the militant race leader and intellectual, Washington’s Douglass accepts segregation in a stoical and gentlemanly manner (*Up from Slavery* 78). Hence, he does not contradict the model of black masculinity signified by President Washington. Its form of the success story, the role models it eulogizes, and the doctrines they represent all position black identity in *Up from Slavery* in the mainstream American discourse of individual success, work ethic, and imperial uplift of the less civilized. The strategic choice of the most distinctive American doctrines enables Washington to represent the black community as an inherent element of American society.

Even though *Up from Slavery* represents a model of manhood that is defined by its lack of virility and sexual assertion, Washington finds a way to enhance his
masculine powers in a way that would be acceptable to his white Southern audience. In order to simultaneously construct his auto-creation as humble and yet manifestly successful, he resorts to quoting selected accounts from Southern newspapers. This strategy allows him to remain unassuming and clearly avoid any traits of the conceived educated coon stereotype and yet to assert his success in a manner which gives an impression of ultimate objectivity. The selected fragments include depictions of Washington which emphasize his masculine virility and, hence, transcend the limits of Victorian manliness. In the report from the Atlanta Exposition address, which he chooses to cite, Washington is likened to “a Negro Moses” and “a Sioux chief.” He is represented as “a remarkable figure, tall, bony, straight, muscular, . . . high forehead, straight nose, heavy jaws, and strong, determined mouth, with big white teeth, piercing eyes, and a commanding manner” (168–169). His speech evokes an enthusiastic response from the audience: “The fairest women of Georgia stood up and cheered. It was as if the orator had bewitched them” (169–170). This description constructs Washington’s persona in terms that belong to the tradition of the more assertive ideology of late-nineteenth-century masculinity, which instead of gentlemanly self-restraint proposes sexual prowess and physical strength as defining features of a man. The author of the article focuses on the powerful bodily characteristics of Washington, depicting him in assertively masculine terms such as “strong,” “tall,” “straight,” “commanding” and “piercing.” The reference to Native American identity serves here not as a contrast to assert the civilized status of black people but, on the contrary, its function is to endow Washington’s image with virile “primitive” masculinity. The description of the women’s reaction constitutes also an indicator of the sexual appeal of Washington. Since the Atlanta Compromise speech was delivered to an interracial audience, it can be assumed that the phrase “the fairest women of Georgia” not only includes but even prevalingly refers to white women. Moreover, since the article Washington refers to is authored by a white man, the white gaze directed at Washington can be read as charged with homoerotic desire of the male author, which is just mediated through the figure of women.

In the context of the haunting myth of the black rapist, it would not be possible for Washington himself to state that white women were “bewitched” by his speech. A minor remark about willful relations between white women and black men in a black newspaper in Wilmington in 1898 was a pretext for violent riots, which were later recorded in the novel The Marrow of Tradition by Charles Chesnutt. The ventriloquist strategy of depicting one’s virile masculinity and sexual appeal with the use of the white voice is not only safe but endows the
narration with authority and objectivity. Thus, Washington manages to find a space for a more vigorous assertion of masculinity in the text which on the surface constructs black manhood in terms of gentle, self-possessed, and self-restrained manliness.

**Conclusion**

The rhetorical strategies employed by Washington in his autobiography were highly successful in a number of ways. In the context of the post-Reconstruction South, the tactic of constructing black manhood in terms of Victorian tradition devoid of any signs of resentment or militant tone enabled Washington to become an influential leader and effective educator with the support of white public opinion and its sponsorship. In his autobiography, he does not feminize his position but rather walks a tightrope to construct a vision of civilized black manliness, which does not openly challenge the white man’s status. This strategy might be also interpreted as a rebuttal of the myth of the black rapist. Throughout the text black men are devoid of aggression or sexual urges. *Up from Slavery* represents black men as protectors rather than aggressors in relation to white womanhood. In contrast to American Indians, they are paragons of noble self-restrained manliness. The comparison with Indians enables Washington to claim the privileged position of uplifting the savage peoples and, to some extent, to appropriate the power dynamic of “the white man’s burden.” Self-restraint combined with the protestant work ethic provides also the basis for the central figure in American national discourse—the self-made man. Washington draws on American respect for hard menial work in order to advocate a strenuous path to respectable working-class manhood. One of the most significant keys to the remarkable success of his autobiography is that Washington positions the black (male) subject as entirely consistent with the American national character as imagined at the time. The access to the public sphere that exists in the text, however, is severely limited since black men’s job opportunities are represented as related only to domesticity and cleanliness. Hence, Washington’s appropriation of the late nineteenth-century hegemonic discourses of civilization lacks the authority and privilege intrinsic in its original version. However, as I argued in the last part of the essay, Washington’s persona transcends the limits of the Victorian manliness and self-restrained work ethic advocated throughout his text. References to articles from the white press praising him as a powerful manly figure enable Washington to position himself in the emergent ideology of assertive and physically powerful masculinity.
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Works Cited


