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Old Silver Readings: Mythology, Portraits, and Booker T. Washington

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Images are unreliable sources, distorting mirrors. Yet they compensate for this disadvantage by offering good evidence at another level...in the form of meaning attached to the image.

—Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The uses of images as historical evidence*.

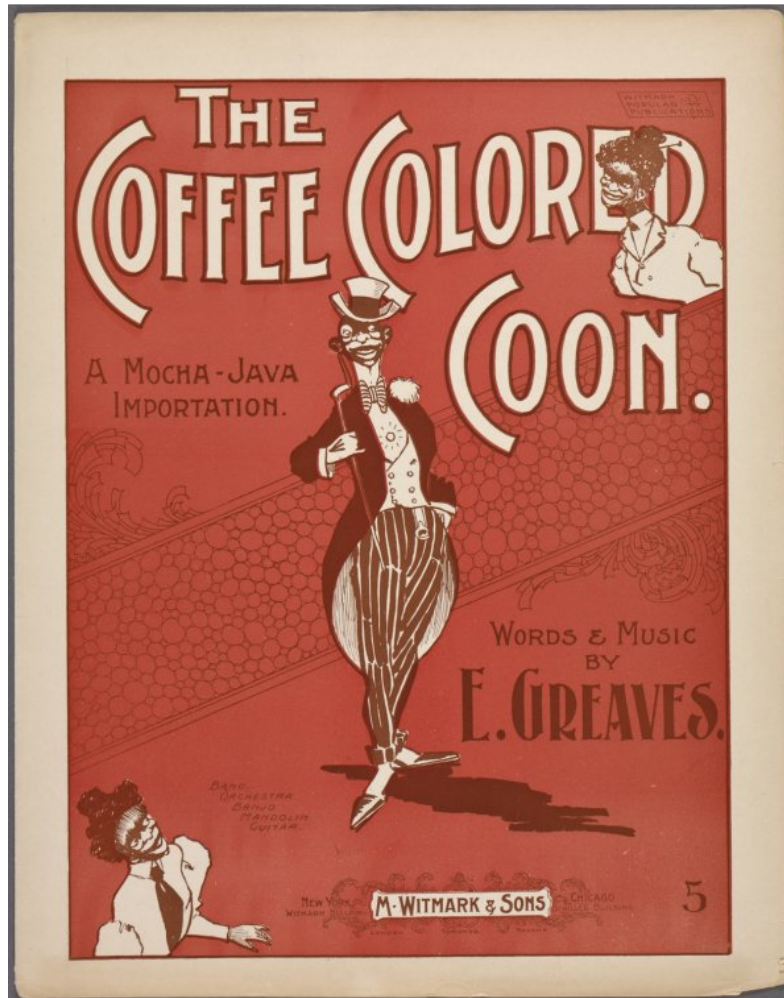
In a 2009 *New Yorker* article entitled “The Wizard,” author Kelefa Sanneh boldly states that “Before there was a black American President, black America had a president” (p. 26). As if to add a postscript to her retrospective, she includes a striking photograph of Booker T. Washington, dressed sharply in a tuxedo, pen in hand, seated regally at his desk.



**Figure 1. Booker T. Washington**  
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In her focus on Washington's political attitudes, however, Sanneh undervalues one of his seminal contributions to the election of America's first Black president, an event that took place ninety-six years after his death. While Booker T. Washington was certainly a pioneer in breaking ground for civil liberties with his gradualist arguments for equality, his visual rhetoric has also created an indelible impression on the African-American political landscape. Who could mistake the pedigree of President Obama's iconic campaign portrait, Shephard Fairey's (2008) red, white, and blue colored bust over the word "Hope," a painting now proudly displayed in the National Portrait Gallery? Like no other politician of his time, Booker T. Washington understood the power of image, a force that can shape and control discourse. Though his speeches and writings are already requisite reading in the field of American education, his visual biography tells an equally indispensable narrative for comprehending this history. For scholars of critical media pedagogy, scholars of critical race theory, and political activists in education alike, understanding the evolution and processes of Booker T. Washington's portraiture symbolism holds great importance. The strategies he developed and employed to advance a counterargument to the prevailing racist media of his time is crucial for understanding a foundational African American leader in these areas of study as well as a powerful heuristic for those continuing his struggle for racial equality in today's schools. Underscoring this media evolution, the following elucidates the context and evolution of Booker T. Washington's visual discourses, thereby answering the central question of how he elevated the aesthetic of his self-portraits from mere self-representations to potent visual mythologies. Developing a mythic aesthetic, Washington produced portraits that resisted alternate, racist interpretations of his self-image, and thereby contested these same prejudices towards images of African Americans.

From the beginning of his career as the leader of the Tuskegee Institute in 1881, Booker T. Washington faced an immense challenge overcoming racist attitudes in the United States. Unlike our time, however, the political visual debate was not over a palatable vision of an African-American president, but for the equal status of Black Americans as human beings. When Booker T. Washington entered the national stage as a leader for civil rights, the struggle for African-American civil liberties was overshadowed by grotesque representations of his people. White America understood prejudiced visual narratives as a natural order, not as racially biased images. Consider a musical sheet cover from 1899 for a production entitled "The Coffee Colored Coon" (Figure 2), one of myriad examples of racist artifacts from the time.



**Figure 2. The Coffee Colored Coon.**

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Adorning the cover of a racist musical published by the behemoth sheet music company M. Witmark and Sons, a grotesque depiction of the characters communicates the message of the equally racist lyrics found inside. With the caption sardonically reading “A Mocha Java Importation,” the exaggerated caricatures emphasize disproportionate, excessively happy, almost clown like faces on the man and two women. This prevailing image of Black Americans in drawings and portraits suggested African Americans were less than real or full people to White *and* Black masses alike. African-American educators and politicians were severely disadvantaged in a milieu so dependent on visual appeal in light of these misrepresentations (Morton, 1991).

In a gradual process, Booker T. Washington began to challenge this interpretation of African Americans and capitalize on the power of his own image

to re-define the popular perception of African-Americans. Though his prolific social commentary and school-building projects offered substance to his visual claims, the mass manufacture of counter-images through photography was revolutionary, providing a new vantage point from which mainstream America could come to understand Black Americans as equals. In his signature portraits, capturing his figure in formal wear reading at a desk or gazing nobly off the frame, we see not a man, but in all his perfection, a mythic ideal.

Under his careful scrutiny, Booker T. Washington's meticulously vetted photographers centered their efforts on communicating his power and authority through the semiotics of the photographic composition. In these portraits, he is neither an example of an educated African-American leader nor a mere symbol of this idea; instead, he is a living mythic embodiment. Roland Barthes (1972) underscores the importance of this semiotic distinction adroitly, stating that, "myth encounters nothing but betrayal in language, for language can only obliterate the concept if it hides it...driven to having either to unveil or liquidate the concept, it will *naturalize* it" (p. 129). At their best, Washington's portraits argue for an alternative reality, one that exposes the baseless foundations of racist ideologies of his time. Manifesting this new reality in a visual realm, his images contain the strategies of mythology – privation of history, tautology, and identification of the other (Barthes, 1972). Through these visual strategies, Washington aimed to redefine the very *nature* of African-American men and women in the gaze of White America.

Though Booker T. Washington certainly had the final say in the photographs that entered into his autobiographies, we would be somewhat naïve to assign ultimate design and power solely to him. The photographers and his scholastic colleagues at the Tuskegee Institute, dubbed the "Tuskegee Machine," all had hands in the production of Booker T. Washington's image; as such, all representations must be read with a hermeneutic of suspicion.<sup>1</sup> Though photography is a useful window into the past, historians must be aware that multiple architects designed the window to display a specific vista.<sup>2</sup> Working

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<sup>1</sup> No matter how much penultimate and subsequent control Booker T. Washington tried to exert over the process, his photographers by their actions of snapping the picture possess the authority in the instant the photo comes into being. As Susan Sontag (1977) notes, "To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power" (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup> Though "reading" may not be the first word that comes to mind when thinking about photography, historian of photography Alan Trachtenberg (1989) makes this argument well, stating that "Reading American photographs is also a way of reading the past—not just scenes recorded and the faces immobilized into permanent images, but the past as culture, as ways of thinking and feeling, as experience" (p. 288).

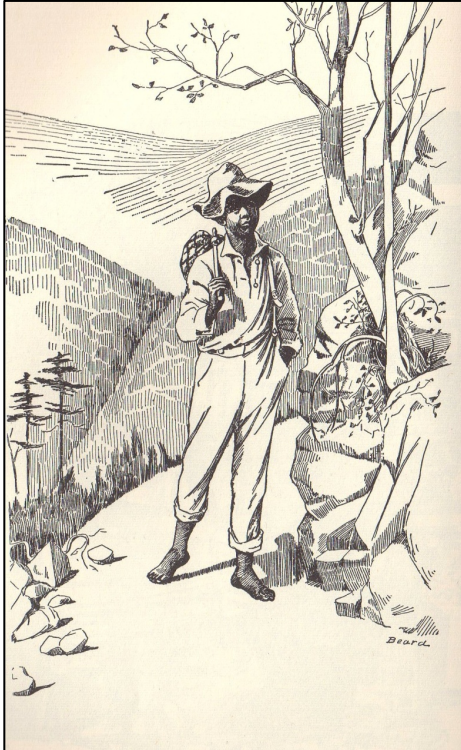
under the guidance of Booker T. Washington, his photographers decided the camera angles, direction, time, day, and composition. Taking into account multiple authors in the production of Booker T. Washington's images, this essay will examine and compare the photographs in each of these texts not as representations of a biographical truth, but instead as images laden with an intentional visual structure and grammar aimed at a "world making" process (Goodman, 1978). To better understand the mentalities of Booker T. Washington, the photographers, and those surrounding the world making in these early African-American political images, the discussion will focus on reading the portraits as artful, yet argumentative distortions.

While the complete corpus of Booker T. Washington photographs is beyond the scope of this essay, some valuable insights may be gained from focusing on images from his two most celebrated autobiographies, *Up from Slavery* (Washington, 1901) and *The Story of My Life and Work* (Washington, 1901). Both of these texts appeared as bound manuscripts in 1901, a year art historian and educator Michael Bieze (2008) cites as the "critical moment of transition as Booker T. Washington began to seize his own image" (p. 65). Mindful of over-exaggerating the importance of this date and these works, this author cautiously employs the two autobiographies to showcase a point of conceptual development in Booker T. Washington's pictorial savvy, a maturity of visual tactics that was perfected throughout his professional life. In *The Story of My Life and Work*, Booker T. Washington and his photographers crafted a visual storybook aimed at indoctrinating his less educated African-American audience into his moral outlook. While reasonably impressive as artifacts of targeted propaganda, the portraits found in this text do not achieve a visual mythology; as we shall discover in the discussion below, they are discursively evocative, not naturalized embodiments. In *Up from Slavery* on the other hand, Booker T. Washington and his colleagues achieve an iconic expression in his stately portraiture. Without a question, the man in the photos *is* noble. While these photographic presentations are not completely disparate, their divergent levels of achievement provide a glimpse Booker T. Washington's possible understanding of pictorial strategies for shaping discourse through mythology.

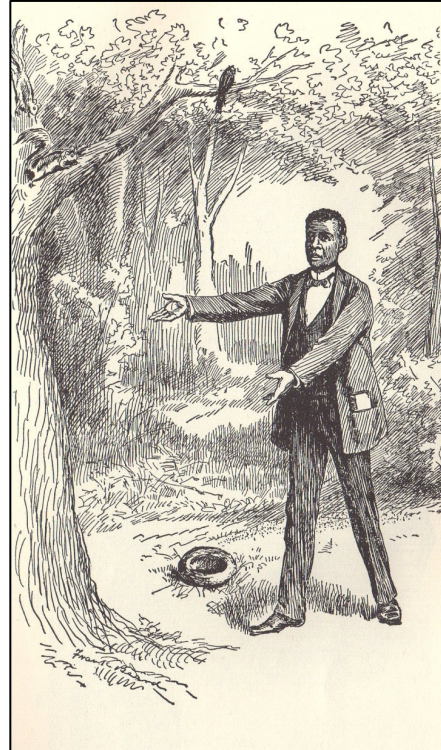
### **Pre-Revolutionary Washington**

Most images in *The Story of My Life and Work* portray Booker T. Washington in a folksy American "up by your boot-straps" tale, targeting less educated Black and White audiences. These portraits, featuring hand drawn sketches by Chicago artist and Civil War illustrator Frank Beard (1842-1905), create a romantic visual journey through the life of Booker T. Washington,

stressing his quest for self-development and enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> For the intended, less educated audience, these drawings offer a narrative not unlike stained glass panels in a church, depicting Booker T. Washington as a model child, respecting the collective wisdom of his Black *and* White elders. In these images, a reader can trace the moral development of Booker T. Washington as he learns to embody his education.



**Figure 3. Little Booker Starting for Hampton Institute**  
Drawing by Frank Beard.



**Figure 4. Booker T. Washington Rehearsing his Graduation Oration at Hampton. His First Speech.**  
Drawing by Frank Beard.

In one example, we see a portrait of sixteen year-old Booker T. Washington on his way to Hampton Normal and Industrial Institute (Figure 3). Washington wore his pants rolled high above his bare feet and all of his possessions are in a handkerchief tied to a stick. His floppy hat and pants held up by a single suspender complete the picture: a vision of lackadaisical sloppiness and unripe youth. The adjacent portrait is of Washington practicing his first

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<sup>3</sup> As argued by Hayden White (1978), histories (including photography) conform to prefigured literary emplotments as determined consciously or subconsciously by their writers; The four plot categories include tragedies, satires, comedies, and as the case with Booker T. Washington's autobiographies, romances: the plot of the unending quest.



speech, a Hampton graduation oration (Figure 4). In this depiction, Booker T. Washington has matured rapidly, appearing much older than the portrait from four years prior. In place of his bare feet and grubby clothing, he now wears a smart suit and tie. His arms stretch forward as if he is practicing his speech, while his head is oddly transfixed, gazing towards an imagined audience.

Two messages are salient in these lithographs. First, Washington's exaggerated maturation represents not simply education's power of self-determination, but even further, the scholastic power of transforming and disciplining the body, and in turn, the self-image. Absent from these portraits, however, are any indication of his study of reading, writing, or math. The culmination of his education is a formal speech; he has learned to present and represent himself to society-at-large. For progressive White America, this possibility was the answer to the race issue in the late 1800s. With an education like Booker T. Washington's, African-Americans could be transformed into law abiding, respectable, and perhaps even exemplary citizens.

Second, the visual narrative serves as a confirmation of African-Americans' educational potential. Even the lowest, shoeless, most un-schooled Black child can be transformed into a gentleman through education; a point that confronts the racist notions of Black mental aptitude present in visual culture of the time. For the African-American audience, the images establish a romantic path and model for success. None of the drawings depict barriers to Washington's educational success. We find no evidence of racism or poverty that might have stymied his scholastic journey. The world these pictures create is one of self-determination and endless possibilities for the enterprising African-American man.

One major drawback to these portraits was their aesthetic quality. In their choice of Beard as an artist, Washington and his colleagues mollified their radical message. As a conservative White artist from Chicago, Beard's drawings are paternalistic and "make Washington appear to be a man of a simpler past than a leader for the future" (Bieze, 2008, p. 65). Further, Beard's depictions of African-American faces re-inscribe the paternalistic stereotypes of liberal northern Whites. In *Social Settlement Movement* leader and photographer Jacob Riis's (1890/1997) *How the Other Half Lives*, for instance, Riis states that "Poverty, abuse, and injustice alike the negro accepts with imperturbable cheerfulness" (p. 117). Several of the drawings explicitly depict this attitude, showing Washington's contentment as an enslaved boy next to his jolly master. Beard's misapprehension of the whole point of this endeavor compromises the work and most importantly the authenticity of Booker T. Washington's image as a self-made, all-American populist leader.

Booker T. Washington was reportedly so upset with the final production of *The Story of My Life and Work* he refused to include a picture of the text's



ghost writer, the Tuskegee professor Edger Webber (Bieze, 2008). In populist narrative depictions of his life published after 1901, he never again used drawings for his portraits, settling instead upon the more sophisticated depictions of photographs. As he refined his aesthetic later in his life, he frequently commissioned the work of the Black photographer Arthur P. Be Dou (1882-1966), a New Orleans artist able to capture Booker T. Washington in natural settings “engaging with the Black populace instead of the White elites” (Bieze, p. 76). With Be Dou’s refinements, Washington’s life *was* the story of the African-American dream. These populist portraits would naturalize hope, possibilities, and success for African-Americans willing to work for self-improvement.

### **Booker T. Washington Joins the Revolution**

As the title of *Up from Slavery* suggests, this work contains a romantic employment of Booker T. Washington’s escape from a life of servitude into the upper echelons of American society, complemented by equally romantic visual representations (White, 1978). Compared to the images in *The Story of My Life*, however, the portraits in this volume are clearly of an entirely different class. As a visually concise and carefully edited text, early editions of *Up from Slavery* contained fewer than six photographs.<sup>4</sup> Published first as a serial in the *Outlook* magazine without visuals, *Up From Slavery* courts the liberal, educated, and mostly White audience of this periodical. For this audience, Washington and the Tuskegee Machine spared no expense; at an exorbitant rate, the renowned White photographer Gertrude Kasebier took the first and most prominent image in the book (Figure 5).

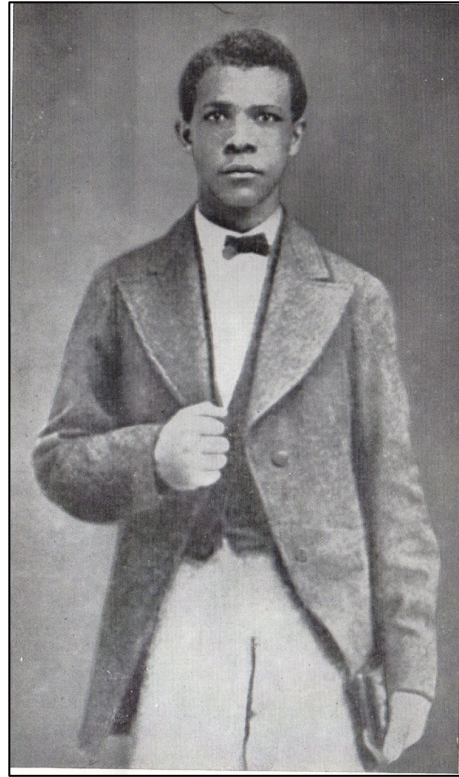
With a focus on a more educated class of readers, *Up from Slavery* contains a strikingly different visual narrative in the portraits, one that suggests an innate nobility for Booker T. Washington. Unlike the drawings ensconcing Booker T. Washington in a scene of hard work and self-improvement, these photographs have an uncluttered, focused quality, devoid of background altogether. Among these photographs is an early portrait of Booker T. Washington, most likely from his teenage years, by an unknown photographer (Figure 6). While the portrait was not explicitly taken for this particular text, the skillful selection of this portrait overtly communicates his connatural nobility. The image shows young Booker T. Washington standing tall, wearing a smart suit, and holding a book in his left hand. The expression of the photograph stems from his pose: his right arm nobly bent to grasp his crisp overcoat, while his face possesses calm determination.

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<sup>4</sup> Most current editions, much to the disadvantage of contemporary students attempting to better understand the importance of Booker T. Washington, contain few photographs. The economical Penguin Classics edition (1986), for example, contains only his adult portrait on the front cover.



*Figure 5. Portrait of Booker T. Washington*  
Photograph by Gertrude Kasebier.



*Figure 6. An early portrait of Booker T. Washington*  
Photography by unknown photographer.

In the context of the autobiographical narrative of his early years, the sole photograph creates a distinct lens from which readers are meant to see the text. Though a plethora of lines concerning his early life emphasize his humble beginnings, we are not meant to forget his inner nobility. The dignified portrait of young Booker T. Washington *is* him: the mythic aspect of the image resists interpretation and questioning of his nature.

Gertrude Kasebier's iconic portrait bridges the static nobility of Booker T. Washington into his adult life. Like the younger version of himself, Washington appears confident in his dignified, formal outfit, seated at his desk. The props within the portrait are few: a desk, a book, and a chair. The spartan frame allows the viewer to focus on the importance of the person of Booker T. Washington, not his context, which has little bearing on his person. Kasebier has replicated the artificial constraints of portrait painting within this photograph, creating an extra-temporal universe. The portrait displays a social performance, not a social reality (Burke, 2001), yet the performance is enacted to perfection, allowing us to forgo a dialogical experience of the image and instead meet the figure of Washington in a visceral realm. The resulting plot of this metamorphosis is not one of becoming, but one of revealing. Dignity is the unmitigated content manifested in his image,

and questions of his race and modest beginnings dissolve within the power of his image. For his mostly White, educated audience, this message was one of human and intellectual solidarity; through this image, liberal educated Whites would have understood him as groomed and cultured, thereby exemplifying the potential outcome for African American educational endeavors

### **The Mythology of Portraiture**

In developing a mythological aesthetic, Booker T. Washington was not breaking new ground in American politics. A hundred years earlier, our first president, George Washington, arguably the most famous Washington in American political history, enjoyed a similarly discourse-free public image, well-crafted by his many artists. In Gilbert Stuart's 1796 "Portrait of George Washington," for instance, we see a pristine, statuesque image that reifies the founding president, the beloved rock of American liberty.



**Figure 7. Portrait of George Washington**  
Copyright by Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery.  
Reprinted with permission.

In the depictions of Stuart and other notable painters of George Washington, realism was not the goal. The paintings communicate a static embodiment in which image envelops and becomes a language, simultaneously

communicating the bounty of the new country through the richness of Washington's ornate surroundings, his understated power through the sheathed sword, and the limitless potential of his ambiguous gesture and distant gaze. In Stuart's portrayal, George Washington *is* the face of the New Republic.

The primary difference between the mythological aesthetic of George Washington and Booker T. Washington is the discourses in which these men distributed their image. President Washington's history as military general, freedom fighter, and founding father so overwhelmingly preceded his image that American observers of Stuart's art could not help but augment his aesthetic manifestation. The minds of Americans were already primed for receiving George Washington as such; Stuart and his contemporary artists merely needed to paint him into this mythic role. Conversely, Booker T. Washington had to confront the racist social landscape of American in 1895, even after his famous "Atlanta Address." Because of his race, the majority of Booker T. Washington's White audiences started with a negative impression, ranging from paternalistic to outright hostile (Burke, 2008). Likewise, his Black audiences, people that had been reared under a system of White supremacy, faced a similar struggle in redefining their own reality in the face of textual *and* visual American racist media discourses.

Seen in this light, the actual success of Booker T. Washington's mythological aesthetic is nothing less than revolutionary. Though notable African American contemporaries such as W. E. B. Du Bois (Lewis, 2009) may not have credited him with this radical, activist project, Booker T. Washington did in fact transform the visual counterargument to American racism through his carefully crafted portraits and rejection of drawings. While the localized effect of these images was much the same for both of these American public figures, Booker T. Washington's choice to transfer between graphic mediums of drawings and lithographs to photography, greatly increased Washington's ability to disseminate his image as a tool for promoting his counter-image in response to the racist depictions of African-Americans. Instead of distributing hundreds of portraits for hanging in the houses of wealthy supporters as was the case with George Washington, Booker T. Washington was able to distribute tens of thousands of photographs to White supporters and African-American followers, and even as challenges to those people skeptical of his activist, educational projects. His photos appeared in books, on stamps, and on postcards. Within his own darkroom at the Tuskegee Institute, he was able to not only to manufacture his self-image, but also able to flood any receptive interest groups with an African-American counter-narrative that defied racists depictions of Blacks as not the equals of Whites.

Even with the plethora of photographic images of this iconic figure in the history of American education, the actual person of Booker T. Washington

remains ironically opaque. As his photographs were designed for consumption, most are not representative of the actual day-to-day person. But we should resist the temptation of agreeing with Jean Baudrillard's (1994) assessment of the image as pure façade, a view that argues that the "simulacrum is never what hides the truth – it is the truth that hides the fact that there is none. The simulacrum is true" (p. 2). Baudrillard's argument is a slippery slope into solipsism, stretching the analytical lenses of this essay to an untenable extreme. Though the person of Booker T. Washington is not entirely revealed in his mythic portraiture, the man and the message were in many ways united: a handsome, dignified African American scholar and leader.

At the same time, scholars and activists in education and critical media pedagogy can appreciate Washington's photographs as more than simply tactical representations of civil rights ideology overlaying a rich inner life of the actual person. Granted, the aesthetic processes developed by Booker T. Washington make him an essential case study for understanding the strategies and power of visual mythology in reshaping dominant media discourses. Further, the above analysis points towards further research in re-evaluating the ways other prominent African American figures in the history of American education have employed visual discourses to argue their perspectives. But as in *The Story of My Life and Work*, Washington's best intended strategies did not always go as planned. In the development of his image, we can catch a glimpse of this remarkable man. Among other qualities, he is a fallible innovator, an emotional perfectionist, and a romantic idealist whose journey into his self-image changed America's discourse of equal rights by creating and circulating a new genre of visual culture in the portrait of the Black leader.

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