BOOKER T. WASHINGTON'S PHOTOGRAPHIC MESSAGES

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Many prominent African American intellectuals employed photography to claim and make visible new social and political identities at the turn of the twentieth century. Among them, Booker T. Washington stands out for the sheer quantity and variety of his photographic production. He commissioned portraits by famous photographers, and hired staff photographers to represent Tuskegee Institute, illustrating books, magazines, postcards and albums. In this essay I'd like to consider two of his most notable uses of photography: Frances Benjamin Johnston's formal photographs of Tuskegee Institute, made to illustrate Working With the Hands, and A. P. Bedou's "action" photographs made to document Washington's 1915 speaking tour. The two sets of images could not be more different: As Johnston's photographs are formal, quiet, and still, Bedou's seem almost to veer out of control with action, movement, and sound. Johnston's photographs aim to exemplify the Tuskegee program of character building through discipline and manual labor, while Bedou's images seek to capture the dynamic and exhilarating effects of Washington's speech.

Washington's use of photographs seems at first to accord with ideas about the transparency and veracity of the photograph, ideas that decades of scholarship have taught us to mistrust. In making his case for industrial education, Washington sought to "put into visible, tangible, indisputable forms the products and signs of civilization," arguing that "one farm bought, one house built, one home neatly kept" would demonstrate more than "abstract eloquence" could plead. If material results, rather than abstract ideas provided the most convincing evidence of progress, photography, so closely tied to the "visible" and the "tangible," seemed the ideal form of representation to demonstrate such advances. But as Washington actually employs photographs in the two projects under consideration, one sees a more subtle and nuanced understanding of photography emerge. Reading across the two bodies of work, one finds Washington negotiating the complicated relationship between image and text—using photographs not only to illustrate his words but also to perform them.

Working with the Hands: The Pen, the Press, the Photograph

Working With the Hands, Washington's 1904 sequel to Up from Slavery, outlines his educational program at the Tuskegee Institute, the influential industrial school he founded in...
The book is illustrated with thirty-two photographs, twenty-nine of them made by Frances Benjamin Johnston, a white woman photographer famous for her photographs of Hampton Institute (Washington's alma mater), which were displayed in the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exposition. At Washington's invitation, Johnston visited Tuskegee in the fall of 1902, and made over six hundred photographs. The images chosen for publication replicate her signature style; they are perfectly balanced, formal photographs of students at work in classrooms and outdoors, performing the tasks of various trades.

*Working With the Hands* describes in detail the program of education at Tuskegee, emphasizing Washington's conviction regarding "the value of hand work in the building of character." It includes discussion of Washington's philosophy of manual labor and industrial training, as well as specific details of the curriculum for full-time students and those who work during the day and attend classes at night. A good portion of the book is devoted to the work that Mrs. Washington performs with women students in domestic training. The book provides extensive examples of the successful employment of graduates and of students who are able to secure better jobs and homes after completing only part of the curriculum in technical training.

The sequel to Washington's overwhelmingly popular autobiography was published at a moment when Washington's role as prominent race leader was coming under attack by a younger generation of intellectuals born after the end of slavery. In the early years of the twentieth century, his critics, including W. E. B. Du Bois, began to challenge his perceived accommodation of segregation, which he had pronounced in his famous "Atlanta compromise," the speech he delivered at the 1895 Atlanta Exposition in which he declared that in all social matters African Americans and whites could remain as separate as the fingers on the hand. The year of the Atlanta compromise was also the year of Frederick Douglass's death, and as Washington took the mantel of race leadership, he argued that while Douglass's era had been a political one, the twentieth century would be a commercial age, and a "New Negro" was needed for the new century; in the era of commerce, according to Washington, "the black businessman was the logical social arbiter." In the face of disfranchisement in the post-Reconstruction south, as states adopted education and property restrictions on voting rights, Washington argued, "Every revised constitution has put a premium upon intelligence, ownership of property, thrift and character." Working With the Hands was Washington's response to his critics, his lesson in how to develop the qualities he saw as necessary to succeed in a new century of commerce.

The subjects of Johnston's Tuskegee photographs (like her earlier Hampton subjects) by and large do not address or acknowledge her presence behind the camera. All are posed as if lost in their work, and captured by an invisible viewer. With two possible exceptions, no one returns Johnston's gaze with a curious glance or stare. The lack of returned looks is particularly pronounced in photographs such as *Class in Mechanical Drawing* (Figure 1), and *The Tailor Shop*, in which it seems awkward and even difficult for students facing the camera so squarely not to look at it. This aspect of the images serves to underscore the discipline of
students committed to learning and engrossed in their training, as well as the fantasy that the images provide an unaltered glimpse into everyday scenes. More ambiguously, the downward looking poses might also suggest the objectification of African American students who play their roles for the white lady photographer and other white patrons.

The first photograph presented in the volume, the frontispiece titled *Mr. Washington in His Office at Tuskegee*, is unusual in this regard in that Washington looks directly back at the photographer (Figure 2). He is seated at a desk covered with papers and ledgers. The desk is situated at an angle, almost perpendicular to the camera, and Washington turns his head to look at Johnston. Two inkwells anchor the bottom right corner of the image, and a decorative vase with fresh roses, perhaps from Washington's garden, is placed close at hand, near enough for Washington to smell the flowers. He poses, pen in right hand, suspended over paper, in the manner of the literate man of purpose. Strong side lighting illuminates the left half of his face. It is as if he has paused from his work for a moment to consider the photographer. 11

The photograph and its placement in the volume introduce Washington as not only the face but also the author of progress. Returning the gaze, he is the subject who provides the story that animates Johnston's still and silent photographs. The downward-looking, disciplined students are object lessons in his tale of education and uplift.

By the turn of the century, posing a man at his desk with pen in hand, suspended over paper, was a classic way of suggesting his intellect, power, and importance. Such posing

**Figure 1**: Frances Benjamin Johnston, *Class in Mechanical Drawing*, in Booker T. Washington, *Working With the Hands* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1904).
was particularly pronounced and symbolically laden for African Americans because it was first and foremost a display of literacy, the capacity that Frederick Douglass famously equated with manhood in the mid-nineteenth century.

Washington turns the pen to a slightly different task in making his case for industrial education. Here the pen is not only the sign of mental training, but also a tool, like any other, wielded to produce real things in the real world. And it is as a tool that the pen serves to sharpen the mind. Washington proclaims: “There is something, I think, in the handling of a tool that has the same relation to close, accurate thinking that writing with a pen has in the preparation of a manuscript. Nearly all persons who write much will agree, I think, that one can produce much more satisfactory work by using the pen than by dictation.”12 Here, in shorthand, is Washington’s argument about manual training—working with the hands, with tools, is ultimately, for him, the best way to improve the mind.

The framing photographs for *Working With the Hands* highlight the production of texts. In the first photograph, writing is seen to be the unique and embodied labor that issues forth from Washington’s own hand—indeed, writing is one of the principal ways he “works with his hands.” In the last photograph, seven men are shown “typesetting” in the “printing office” (Figure 3). The “writing tool” Washington celebrates at the beginning of the book, the pen, is transformed at the end of the book into the press, and his script becomes mechanically reproduced print. The individual characteristics of his handwriting are transformed into
Photography is also, of course, a reproducible medium, and the advent of the halftone reproduction process, used to illustrate the volume, dramatically increased the ease with which photographs could be reprinted and circulated with text. Importantly, the halftone process enabled photographs to be printed within texts, as embedded in texts rather than added to them. In other words, the halftone process enabled photographs to function as part of the text and its argument in new ways. Here then, the photograph becomes an ideal vehicle for Washington’s propaganda not only because it shows “real” progress in a “tangible” manner, but also because it can be reproduced and circulated widely with and even as text. The photographs show not only the “Tuskegee method,” but also how it will be reproduced and circulated.

The 1915 Tour: The Voice of the Photograph

Washington clearly understood the power of photographic propaganda. Several years after he commissioned Johnston to document the activities of the school, he created a position for an “official Tuskegee photographer,” and hired Charles D. Robinson to fill that role from 1909 until 1914. As Michael Bieze has demonstrated, during those same years two other
prominent African American photographers vied for the privilege of being Washington’s personal photographer, C. M. Battey of New York and A. P. Bedou of New Orleans. Both photographed Washington, and Bedou traveled with him to photograph his speaking tours starting in 1908. In 1913 Bedou finally beat out his rival, and Washington hired him to replace Robinson and to serve both as Tuskegee’s official photographer and as Washington’s personal photographer. Bedou moved to Tuskegee in 1914, and documented Washington’s speaking tours throughout the south, including his last tour of Louisiana in 1915.13

Washington’s final tour was initiated in the fall of 1914, when J. S. Clark, the new president of Southern University, invited him to visit Louisiana to bless and dedicate the school’s new campus in Baton Rouge. Washington accepted the invitation, and in April 1915 he toured Louisiana, visiting six cities in three days (April 13-15), and giving nine speeches. He gave short lectures of twenty minutes and longer addresses of forty-five minutes on the topics of industrial education and “right living.” He spoke to children, men and women, young and old, black and white. He spoke to audiences ranging from eight hundred to nine thousand people, in arenas and theaters, on platforms in parks, in chapels and city centers, and from the back of the train. He was wined and dined by Louisiana’s elite at breakfast receptions, luncheons, and banquets.14

Bedou traveled with Washington on this whirlwind tour, and made many striking photographs of Washington lecturing and of the crowds that came to see and hear him. In the photographs that focus on the orator, he is larger than life, his body seething with energy. In one of them, Washington stands tall on a platform, bent slightly toward the crowd that surrounds him, his arm flung out, finger pointing at an unknown subject. In another he bends forward, peering down through his glasses, as if to hear a question that comes from the audience, or as if he has stomped his feet to emphasize a point. His face is expressive, and his body looks strong. Without any amplification, it must have taken tremendous energy to project his voice out across a sea of thousands, but the photographs suggest he was up to the task.

In a notable photograph I have discussed elsewhere, Washington stands on a platform looking amiably down into the crowd of people gathered around him (Figure 4).15 He is framed nearly in the center of the image, his body turned away from the photographer. It appears as though something has attracted his attention in the crowd, and as he looks down, the camera captures his face in profile, beginning to break into a smile. Looking at him from behind, one sees the seemingly endless rows of people that extend up and out of the frame on the other side of his narrow platform. The crowd is registered in a soft focus that makes individual faces nearly indiscernible, blending bodies into a mass of black and white. The only figure rendered in sharp focus, Booker T. Washington draws the eyes of later viewers to his arresting presence, just as he commanded the attention of his immediate audience.

In the image the orator is still, his mouth closed. But the effects of his speech are still rippling through the audience, brightening the indistinct faces with smiles. Washington is
enjoying his effect on the crowd, listening to the echoes and stirrings of laughter and appreciation. As Louis Harlan has argued,

An audience brought out his latent powers of persuasion. . . . On the platform he lost a little of his formalism and dignity, scored points by humorous anecdote and inverted metaphor, played one part of his audience against another like a choir director, and evoked in each segment of his audience in turn the emotions of pride, hope, nostalgia, amusement, and mutual esteem.¹⁶ (262)

Fred Moten has taught us to listen for the sound of the photograph, to hear its shattering shout and moan. And although the sound of this photograph is not the wail of anguish Moten hears, not the cry that ruptures the image, this photograph registers the shout of a call and response.¹⁷ The sound of this image is the crackle of an electric energy generated by the famous orator, delivered to his audience, and circulated back again.

The photograph infuses sight with sound. It emphasizes Washington’s power as an orator, registering his effect within and beyond the image, inviting one not only to look, but also to listen. The image heightens the embodied presence of its photographed subject. Bedou’s
photographs do not illustrate the content of Washington's lectures, but their performance. The photographs are traces of the lectures—indicators of the spoken word. One sees Washington as the embodied vehicle of a voice one does not hear. Nevertheless, the photograph marks his commanding presence within and across time and space.

Final Thoughts on the Photographs: Presence and Proliferation

A changing sense of photography is at play across these two bodies of work, and one that accords with shifts in the understanding of one of photography's most prominent theorists—Roland Barthes. In his early essay “The Photographic Message” (1961), Barthes famously calls the photograph “a message without a code.” He argues that an accompanying text can “quicken” the photograph, harnessing its denotative function to specific registers. The text of Working With the Hands provides an extensive narrative frame for Johnston's photographs, focusing them on Washington's educational plan as object lessons. But even here the photographs also provide a narrative of their own, one that frames the text as it performs it. If words make the photograph's “message” apparent, here photographs also show the production of texts.

Bedou's photographs of Washington on his last speaking tour float unhinged from a particular text (even though they were likely meant for publication in some form). Nevertheless the photographs are animated by the spoken word, tied to speech one cannot hear. Despite their silence, they underscore Washington's embodied presence—the “that-has-been” that Barthes would call the very essence of photography in Camera Lucida (1980). The photograph's capacity to capture the presence of its subject and preserve it across time and space is, for Barthes, the photograph's greatest power. Here then is the message without a code that will not be tamed by cultural inscription. Here is Washington reverberating. It does not matter that one does not hear his words; one senses them powerfully.

The photograph then is like the voice and also like handwriting; it is the unique trace of an individual's embodied presence. But the photograph is also reproducible. What one finds reading across Washington's archive is both the unique presence and proliferation offered by the photograph, a combination that neither the spoken word nor the printed text can provide.

For Barthes, the presence of the photographed subject is also always marked by its passing. In the temporal dissonance of the photograph Barthes sees foretold the subject's death. And the death that so haunts Camera Lucida also haunts Bedou’s photographs of 1915, for mere months after his tour, Washington would collapse exhausted and pass away. The photographs of his tremendous energy foretell his death, even as they also preserve him alive, radiating energy. The photographs register sound although they do not reproduce it; they visually mark the voice that one can no longer hear.

Shawn Michelle Smith
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NOTES


Since the publication of Gates’s essay, several literary scholars have studied the play of image and text in the cultural construction of the “New Negro.” Most of these studies focus on the later period of the Harlem Renaissance, often evoking Alain Locke’s influential volume of 1925, The New Negro, as a watershed text. See Anne Elizabeth Carroll, Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), Martha Jane Nadell, Enter the New Negroes: Images of Race in American Culture (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, Portraits of the New Negro Woman (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), and Sara Blair, Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).


5 In roughly twenty years the school enrolled six thousand students, and constructed seventy buildings to house seventeen hundred people. Booker T. Washington, Working With the Hands, 200 and 205.

6 Michael Bieze, Booker T. Washington and the Art of Self-Representation (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 68.


9 Harlan, Booker T. Washington, 34.

10 Harlan, Booker T. Washington, 10.

11 Harlan, Booker T. Washington, 34. According to Louis Harlan, an Indianapolis Freeman cartoon, supporting Washington in the face of his critics, presented a similar image of Washington, “seated at his desk, pen in hand, while his black critics depicted as pygmies clambered toward the desk top.”
12 Washington, Working With the Hands, 59.


According to Michael Bieze, Washington wanted “snapshots” of himself in action to document his tours, photographs that could then be assembled into narrative form in albums. Bedou complained of the difficulty of making such action shots, but nevertheless complied, lobbying Tuskegee for a camera with a faster shutter speed. Bieze, 78.


16 Harlan, Booker T. Washington, 262.

17 Fred Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 192–211.


20 My thoughts along these lines were inspired by Augusta Rohrbach’s discussion of Sojourner Truth’s multifaceted uses of photography and text. Augusta Rohrbach, “Shadow and Substance: SojournerTruth in Black and White,” in Pictures and Progress, 83–100.