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# Mumbo Jumbo: Booker T. Washington and the Environmental Humanities

IVAN GRABOVAC

Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that black people had to participate in Anglo-European print culture in order to achieve the status of human subjects and “destroy their status as objects, as commodities, within Western culture.” Eighteenth-century slave narratives did so by transforming the “trope of the ‘Talking Book’” into the literary representation of the black speaking voice.<sup>1</sup> More recent scholarship has considered the talking book in terms of the concept of the fetish.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that the fetish, in the eyes of Anglo-Europeans, involved confusion about causality and was used as a pejorative term for African superstitions.

Literacy was not the only way that Anglo-Africans resisted colonialism and slavery, however. From environmental as well as postcolonial perspectives, Susan Scott Parrish claims that “it was the talking woods more than the ‘Talking Book’ that was the ‘ur-trope’ of the Anglo-African experience.”<sup>3</sup> Relatedly, Monique Allewaert draws on theories associated with the new materialism to argue that Anglo-Africans corporeally aligned themselves with natural forces, not as the masters of those forces, not as human subjects versus natural objects, but as what she calls “parahuman” assemblages in relation to which natural forces could operate against the order of plantation slavery.<sup>4</sup>

My argument is informed by these debates among scholars of the eighteenth-century transatlantic world but returns to the question of literacy, indeed the liberal arts, at a key moment in more recent Amer-

ican and African American literary and cultural history. In the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, the education of newly emancipated blacks became a national concern. On the one hand, Booker T. Washington, the president of Tuskegee Institute in rural Macon County, Alabama, championed a vocational curriculum emphasizing industrial and especially agricultural training. On the other, W. E. B. Du Bois challenged him as the foremost exponent of the liberal arts.

I argue, however, that framing the debate about black education at the turn of the last century as a contest between Washington and Du Bois obscures the extent to which Washington's *Up from Slavery*, the autobiography and pedagogical statement he published in 1901, before Du Bois emerged as his archrival with *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, represents an extension of the colonial discourse critiqued by the scholars cited above—its adaptation for the United States after slavery, or for what has been called “the new slavery.” Washington suggested that African Americans had never completely relinquished their superstitious belief that books and book learning constituted fetish objects and practices. They continued to believe that literacy above the bare minimum required to perform practical tasks was a form of magic—not that books could talk but that books and book learning had the almost magical power to liberate them from bodily toil, particularly agricultural labor. As for whether talking books or talking trees are the ur-trope of the Anglo-African experience, Washington's polemic rendered this question moot, because it targeted both the fetishization of books and the fetishization of trees. Training the new class of black agricultural laborers entailed ridiculing books and book learning as mumbo jumbo, on the one hand, and commodifying nature and black labor, on the other.

I imply that this problematic remains relevant to the contemporary status of the humanities, particularly the environmental humanities. Scott Slovic observes that the environmental humanities “are often viewed” by university administrators “as the third wheel of environmental studies,” because they “seem less *practical* to the powers that be than disciplines that result in quantitative information,” “specific dollar amounts,” and “laws/policies that guide corporate or government practice.”<sup>5</sup> I suggest that Washington's denigration of the liberal arts as a kind of fetishism, especially for those seemingly destined to toil in low-status or manual occupations, still resonates in the different context of today's neoliberal university.

Let me begin, however, with the nineteenth-century example of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. Enslaved on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Douglass temporarily escapes from the slave breaker Covey and takes refuge in the woods. There he meets a fellow slave, Sandy Jenkins, who takes him to another place in the forest, "where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me."<sup>6</sup> The fetish root, worn on the right side of the body, becomes an extension of that body, a body guard, which blurs the boundary between human and natural bodies and derives its protective power from that blurring.

Douglass initially "rejected the idea" because he could conceive of no cause-and-effect relationship by which "the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said." When Douglass next encounters Covey, however, the latter speaks to him kindly, making Douglass "half-inclined" to believe that there is something to the root after all. But he ultimately dismisses the idea: "This superstition is very common among the more ignorant slaves."<sup>7</sup> His disavowal of belief in the power of the fetish is produced as a "turning-point" in the narrative—the flipside of his fight with Covey, which he insists is the *real* reason he is never whipped again.<sup>8</sup> He thereby emerges not only as "a man" (who was formerly reduced to "a slave," "a brute") but also as a rational man who champions literacy as instrumental to his achievement of freedom from enslavement.<sup>9</sup>

Ironically, however, despite persuading himself, and presumably his readers, Douglass conspicuously fails to persuade Sandy, who continues to believe in the power of the fetish root. Yet Douglass doesn't completely dismiss and denigrate Sandy, calling him both "ignorant" and "a clever soul."<sup>10</sup> This *is* the power of the fetish root. Before Douglass met Sandy in the forest, the latter was a slave with whom Douglass was only "somewhat acquainted." But after the intervention of the root, Sandy becomes a close friend and confidant, who at one point even plans to join Douglass in his escape to the North. "We loved each other," Douglass exclaims passionately, referring to Sandy and a group of other slaves he subsequently teaches "how to read the will of God," in a clandestine "Sabbath school."<sup>11</sup> He states, "We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since."<sup>12</sup> The fetish root not only blurs the boundary between hu-

man and natural bodies but also, as a displaced libidinal investment (fetish in the Freudian sense), binds black souls together passionately and protectively against the white man, even as the Book, the Bible, does in Douglass's school. The fetish root and the Book are not mutually exclusive; for to reiterate, Sandy never relinquishes his belief in the power of the root, even after he becomes Douglass's student and acquires some degree of biblical literacy. From Sandy's anticolonial perspective, it is not only African Americans who have fetishes and are disparaged for it, indeed denied the full status of humans because of it: the Bible is an Anglo-European fetish.<sup>13</sup> When Douglass followed Sandy's original directions and carried the root on the right side of his body, he did so to "please him," expressing less faith in the fetish than in what he calls the "dear souls," the "noble souls," of his fellow slaves.<sup>14</sup> But these cannot be completely separated.

Whereas Douglass opposes, or *tries* to oppose, the "superstition" of this African-derived fetish to his own rationality, literacy, and Christianity, Washington associates African "heathenism" and belief in the "supernatural," which persists "in the minds of a large part of the race," not with wearing a fetish root to ward off physical violence but with what he describes as the Reconstruction-era "craze for Greek and Latin learning," which is believed to protect one from physical toil.<sup>15</sup> The latter is associated by many African American students with slavery, or with what Donald Spivey terms the "new slavery" of "sharecropping, debt peonage, and convict lease supplemented by Jim Crow and down-home racism."<sup>16</sup>

After Douglass's death, Washington was widely viewed as taking his place of leadership in the African American community. *Up from Slavery* replays the contest, or ambivalence, between Douglass and Sandy (which is overshadowed by the contest between Douglass and Covey) to different effect, however. This time, the point is not to overcome whites but to gain favor from them, and employment. Washington's real bond is with whites, not blacks, whom he does not love but pities. The Sandys of the South are not ignorant with clever souls; they are just ignorant. They believe in the magic not of fetish roots but foreign languages. In Washington's school, however, they learn to drop such superstitious fancies once and for all.

It could not have been expected that a people who had spent generations in slavery, and before that generations in the darkest heathenism, could at first form any proper conception of what an

education meant. . . . The idea . . . was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labour. There was a further feeling that knowledge, however little, of the Greek and Latin languages would make one a very superior human being, something bordering almost on the supernatural.<sup>17</sup>

During Reconstruction, the minds of African Americans were “constantly agitat[ed]” by this idea, which Washington saw as leading only to teaching, preaching, and politics. Many of Washington’s students came to Tuskegee with an incorrect valuation of the liberal arts. This was based on their belief in “some unexplainable,” which is to say almost magical, cause-and-effect relationship between what Washington dismisses as “mere book-learning” and liberation from bodily toil.<sup>18</sup> It was based, moreover, on the entanglement of the spiritual and aesthetic values of book learning, which in their estimation was high, with its exchange value, which in the plantation districts was low. I propose that Washington adapts and extends a long colonial history by representing books and book learning pejoratively, as a kind of fetish among superstitious blacks.

My understanding of the fetish derives from William Pietz’s influential study.<sup>19</sup> On his account, the concept of the fetish emerged from cross-cultural encounters between European traders and African peoples in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was further elaborated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Europeans understood material objects “in terms of technological and commodifiable use-value, whose ‘reality’ was proved by their silent ‘translatability’ across alien cultures. All other meanings and values attributed to material objects,” such as religious, aesthetic, and sexual values irreducible to market values, “were understood to be the culture-specific delusions of peoples lacking ‘reason.’”<sup>20</sup> The latter, in short, constituted fetishism.

Pietz offers as an example of the cosmology of European traders “a bolt of cloth or a meat-yielding hog,” which “have a practical value independent of cultural interpretations and superstitious fancies.”<sup>21</sup> Washington offers what I suggest is an analogous American example:

One man may go into a community prepared to supply the people there with an analysis of Greek sentences. The community may

not at that time be prepared for, or feel the need of, Greek analysis, but it may feel its need of bricks and houses and wagons. If the man can supply the need of those, then, it will lead eventually to a demand for the first product, and with the demand will come the ability to appreciate it and to profit by it.<sup>22</sup>

The value of bricks and houses and wagons is universal—it requires no translation. These objects and practices cross the color line—“The individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of race”<sup>23</sup>—whereas black political activism puts the cart before the horse, as it were. Greek sentences are untranslatable, or there is no present demand for their translation. The value of Greek analysis is arcane, even occult, and hence it constitutes a fetish. Washington dismisses it not categorically but to the extent that it resists commodification. He is apparently willing to imagine that “it will . . . eventually” cease to be a fetish and constitute a “product” that consumers will “appreciate” and producers “profit” by, but the implication remains that, at best, it is premature to prepare for a future market when there is presently a market for more basic commodities.

In Marxist terms, which Pietz also derives from the colonial history he traces, Washington may be said implicitly to distinguish between two kinds of fetishism: what he considers a primitive kind, which he associates with African superstition assuming the culturally hybrid form of African American belief in the magic power not of forest roots but of Greek sentences, and a modern capitalist kind, which Marx terms “commodity fetishism.” More precisely, Washington remains blind to the fetishism of commodities, reserving that concept, with its pejorative connotations, for what precedes or exceeds commodification.

Washington’s account of his students’ superstition about books and book learning was eagerly cited by some of his white supporters. In their 1917 biography, *Booker T. Washington: Maker of a Civilization*, Emmett J. Scott and Lyman Beecher Stowe praise him for beginning

the long and difficult task of teaching his people that physical work, and particularly farm work, if rightly done was education, and that education was work. To secure the acceptance of this truth by a race only recently emancipated from over two hundred years of unrequited toil—a race that had always regarded freedom from the necessity for work as an indication of superiority—was

not a hopeful task. To them education was the antithesis of work. It was the magic elixir which emancipated all those fortunate enough to drink of it from the necessity for work.<sup>24</sup>

The term “elixir” is derived from the Greek word signifying “desiccative powder for wounds.” In its long history going back to the fourteenth century, the English word assumes alchemical and pharmaceutical meanings, including “quack medicine.”<sup>25</sup> To imagine that education is a “magic elixir” that emancipates blacks from “physical work, and particularly farm work,” is to imagine the latter as harmful to the body. This is supposed to be absurd because belief in magic elixirs is absurd; moreover if there is really no harm, then there is no need for a cure. But then what do we make of the enslavement of blacks in the first place? It is, above all, slaveholding whites who for “over two hundred years . . . regarded freedom from the necessity for work as an indication of superiority.” Slavery, however, is not a fetish. Dismissing African Americans’ pursuit of book learning as superstitious, Scott and Stowe implicitly justify whites’ practice of slavery and the new slavery as rational. Explicitly, they justify Washington’s pedagogy, which practically reduces to this: “farm work . . . was education” and “education was work.”

Of course, Washington infamously regards slavery itself as a “school,” which, notwithstanding its cruelty, taught black people valuable lessons; above all, it enabled their conversion to Christianity.<sup>26</sup> By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, African Americans—the spiritual descendants of Douglass’s Sandy, I suggest—were using the Bible as a “conjure book,” argues Theophus H. Smith. He cites a long “pharmacopeic tradition” of African and African American magical conjurational practices, a “folk pharmacy” entailing “the use of natural and artificial materials for medicinal and quasi-medicinal purposes.”<sup>27</sup> The result was a cultural hybrid, the “Afro-Christian project of curing racism and racist violence.”<sup>28</sup> For his part, Washington praises African Americans “returning to Africa as missionaries to enlighten those who remained in the fatherland.”<sup>29</sup> It is ironic that he remains in Alabama to enlighten those who profess cross-cultural beliefs in the pharmacopeic power of books, *especially* the Afro-Christian Bible. It is ironic, moreover, that Washington’s project of enlightenment on US soil, particularly in the Black Belt, referring to the color both of the soil and of the race that worked on the soil, did not protect him from becoming known as the Wizard of Tuskegee even as Tuskegee was known as “the plantation.”<sup>30</sup>

The passage above, from Scott and Stowe's biography, derives from and implicitly links two passages in Washington's autobiography. The first is the passage, previously discussed, about his students' superstitious belief in the power of books and book learning to liberate them, particularly from agricultural labor; and the second is the following, about the psychological, ecological, and economic consequences of disillusioning or enlightening them. The passage represents a pun on what Washington produces as the conflicting meanings of education as cultivation:

It was hard for them [his students] to see the connection between clearing land and an education. Besides, many of them had been school-teachers, and they questioned whether or not clearing land would be in keeping with their dignity. In order to relieve them from any embarrassment, each afternoon after school I took my axe and led the way to the woods. When they saw that I was not ashamed of work, they began to assist with more enthusiasm. We kept at the work each afternoon, until we had cleared about twenty acres and had planted a crop.<sup>31</sup>

Work implicitly prompts questions about identity: Who am I? What kind of work is appropriate for me? In Douglass's *Narrative*, these are precisely the questions that slavery seeks to quash. Douglass's participation in print culture intensifies his feeling of being unfit to be a slave and catalyzes his escape from bondage. Washington's students feel unfit for work in the fields. Many of them were formerly impoverished rural school teachers with varying degrees of education—sometimes less than their own students, but not altogether unacquainted with print—attending Tuskegee for more learning and a better chance in life. Washington seeks not to intensify their feeling of unfitness, however, but to deplete its energy, reallocating “enthusiasm” from book learning to farmwork. His students are “embarrass[ed]”: acutely and uncomfortably self-conscious. The source of their self-consciousness is the disconnect between, on the one hand, their still-open sense of who they are or aspire to be—“noble souls,” as Douglass would have said, possessed of what Washington terms a certain “dignity,” which, however, he conflates with arrogance and pretension—and on the other, who they or their people *were*, of which clearing the land reminds them too much.

Washington's pedagogical project is to make them “see not only utility in labour, but beauty and dignity,” to make them “learn to love work

for its own sake,” which Houston A. Baker Jr. denounces as “a zealous aestheticization of slavery,” or the new slavery.<sup>32</sup> Loving work for its own sake fetishizes work by ascribing to it an autonomous value—the students reify their “love” as the “beauty and dignity” of work itself. To put it another way, Washington wants his students to see beauty and dignity in farmwork, not in books and book learning—to fetishize the former, not the latter. In his school, they learn to love work; in Douglass’s, they learn to love each other. Finally, loving work for its own sake entails emptying the self of affects that energize resistance, producing a lack of self-consciousness and a kind of passivity. Then there is no disconnect between Washington’s pedagogy and his students’ (and their parents’) expectations, between clearing the land and an education.<sup>33</sup> Farmwork is education and education is work. Cultivation is cultivation.

The fetishization of farmwork at Tuskegee deflects attention from a material point, however, which may have been more pressing: “The majority of our students came to us in poverty.”<sup>34</sup> Another way to empty the self is by emptying the belly. Past a certain threshold of material hardship, one is forced to swallow one’s pride. The question of identity, especially in the affirmative psychocultural sense of *being someone*, can feel like a luxury the impoverished self cannot afford.

Gavin Jones theorizes poverty as a condition of “socioeconomic suffering.” It is “primarily material” (economic, environmental, ultimately corporeal), but it also “opens into the nonmaterial areas of psychology, emotion, and culture.”<sup>35</sup> On the one hand, poverty, especially hunger, can “destroy the intellectual self-consciousness and political agency of the poor, thus cutting them off entirely from the realm of literate culture.”<sup>36</sup> But on the other hand, it can *generate* “creative wants” and “imaginative consciousness,” with the result that literate culture is produced not as an “aesthetic luxury,” which is how Washington teaches his students to see it, but as “fundamentally bound up in socioeconomic suffering.”<sup>37</sup> This alternative view of the relationship between poverty and literate culture may be glimpsed by reading against the grain of *Up from Slavery*. “One of the saddest things I saw,” Washington writes, foregrounding his own sadness *against* the other’s, “was a young man, who had attended some high school, sitting down in a one-room cabin, with grease on his clothing, filth all around him, and weeds in the yard and garden, engaged in studying a French grammar.”<sup>38</sup>

What Washington makes his students do instead of studying French

grammar is cut down trees. It is striking how emptying the self is produced as one side of the coin whose flip side is clear-cutting. The implication is that self-consciousness is not separate from the materiality of the natural environment, any more than it is separate from the materiality of print culture, but bound up with it—an implication Washington uses against both books and trees. The self-conscious would-be students become un-self-conscious farmworkers whose commodified labor replaces trees with crops. Those crops both help to feed the students and are sold to help support the school.<sup>39</sup> Bellies are filled, and coffers are filled, at the expense of nature in its denigrated, African-associated, fetishized forms, such as Sandy's magic root.

This is not the “environmentalism of the poor,” however, in Ramachandra Guha and Juan Martinez-Alier's terms. They distinguish between “full-stomach” and “empty-belly” environmentalism. In the context of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States, the former describes the emerging movement of elite whites, whose principal concerns were wildlife and wilderness preservation. The latter are diverse movements of the poor, associated by Guha and Martinez-Alier primarily with the postcolonial global South, whose lack of material resources cuts them off from literate culture. The ecological content of their struggles—which from the full-stomach perspective are not ecological struggles, or are antiecological struggles, since the impoverished are blamed for destroying the environment—are therefore “made visible by writers and intellectuals associated with such movements.”<sup>40</sup>

This is not Booker T. Washington. Toward the end of *Up from Slavery*, he shifts attention from work to play. His favorite pastime, when he gets home from administering the Tuskegee Institute, is reading stories to his children, two of whom go on to pursue an elite liberal arts education at a Boston-area college and prep school, becoming, respectively, a pianist and a real estate broker.<sup>41</sup> His second-favorite pastime is walking in the woods, where he and his family

can live for a while near the heart of nature, where no one can disturb or vex us, surrounded by pure air, the trees, the shrubbery, the flowers, and the sweet fragrance that springs from a hundred plants, enjoying the chirp of the crickets and the songs of the birds.<sup>42</sup>

His third-favorite pastime is gardening, not to grow crops for the market but to grow food for his soul. “I pity the man or woman,” he writes,

“who has never learned to enjoy nature and to get strength and inspiration out of it.”<sup>43</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. Gates, *Signifying Monkey*, 129.
2. See Srinivas Aravamudan's reading of Olaudah Equiano in *Tropicopolitans*, 233–88.
3. Parrish, *American Curiosity*, 260.
4. Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*.
5. Slovic, “Commentary,” 180.
6. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 111.
7. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 119.
8. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 113.
9. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 105, 107.
10. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 119.
11. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 120.
12. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 121.
13. More precisely, from Sandy's anticolonial (and amodern) perspective, neither the root nor the Book are fetishes but “factishes.” Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*.
14. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 121.
15. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 47.
16. Spivey, *Schooling for the New Slavery*, 23.
17. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 47.
18. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 73.
19. Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, I”; Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, II”; Pietz, “The Problem of the Fetish, IIIa.” See also Allewaert, *Ariel's Ecology*, chapter 4: “An African priest's techne and an Anglo-European book are both fetishes,” she writes, but she is primarily interested in “fetishes that were not books” (120–21).
20. Pietz, “Problem of the Fetish, II,” 36.
21. Pietz, “Problem of the Fetish, II,” 40.
22. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 91.
23. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 91.
24. Scott and Stowe, *Booker T. Washington*, 13.
25. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “elixir,” accessed October 22, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/>.

26. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 9.
27. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 5–6.
28. Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 9.
29. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 10.
30. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 63. Tuskegee was built on the site of “an old and abandoned plantation” (75). It continued to be called that, recalled one student (Scott and Stowe, *Booker T. Washington*, 6).
31. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 76. This scene took place during the first few weeks after Washington purchased the abandoned plantation upon which he established Tuskegee Institute (75).
32. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 87; Baker, *Turning South Again*, 60.
33. “Quite a number of letters came from parents protesting against their children engaging in labour while they were in the school. Other parents came to the school to protest in person. Most of the new students brought a written or a verbal request from their parents to the effect that they wanted their children taught nothing but books” (Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 91).
34. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 87.
35. Jones, *American Hungers*, 3.
36. Jones, *American Hungers*, 144.
37. Jones, *American Hungers*, 139.
38. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 71. Washington encountered this young man in June of 1881, during the month that he travelled through rural Alabama before founding the Tuskegee Institute.
39. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 81.
40. Guha and Martinez-Alier, *Varieties of Environmentalism*, xxi.
41. Washington’s daughter Portia attended Wellesley College and eventually became a pianist. His son Booker T. Washington Jr. attended a Boston-area prep school and became a real estate broker. Norrell, *Up from History*, 266–67.
42. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 155–56. Toward the end of his narrative, Washington associates what we might call his environmental consciousness with his own relative affluence and leisure; by contrast, toward the beginning, he links poverty with pollution. The poor, notably the West Virginia miners among whom he lived and worked after emancipation, are dirty in multiple senses of the word: their bodies are filthy and domestic arrangements disordered; they are morally vicious; and they implicitly both cause environmental degradation and *are* a kind of pollution. This partly explains both Washington’s obsession with personal and domestic hygiene and the appeal of the unspoiled and unpeopled woods. To reiterate, Washington’s turn toward nature as a source of pleasure, strength, and inspiration for himself and his family, but implicitly not for his students, who toil in the fields, represents an African American middle-class example of the kind of full-stomach environmentalism typically associated with white elites. See also Kowalski, “No Excuses for Our Dirt.”

43. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 156.

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