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*The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy
and the Idea of Race Relations* (review)

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The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations. By Michael Rudolph West. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 274.)

Rather than presenting a conventional biography, Michael Rudolph West offers in *The Education of Booker T. Washington: American Democracy and the Idea of Race Relations* an interesting philosophical discourse into the experiential factors that shaped Washington's rise to "race leader" and the foundational ideas (and ideals) that Washington internalized, professed, and bequeathed others on his journey to what the author suggests is Washington's date with destiny. Framed in the terminology of solving his era's Jim Crow overshadowing of the United State's historical (and rhetorical) commitment to democracy, Washington's solution was a new concept of "race relations"—a sort of "reality" view of "progress" for his race within the rigid color boundaries imposed by white Americans of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In so doing, Washington provided the ideological origins of the modern civil rights movement. If he didn't invent the wheel, he certainly modernized it and, in the process, grounded it in the race relations theories that would influence later generations of leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. As West states: "What I have sought here is to show how Booker T. Washington and ideas that he gave voice to three-quarters of a century earlier lie back of the civil rights era's dramatic unfolding and ambiguous result" (4). The author's findings are in some cases fresh and stimulating, but at the same time often perplexing and unfathomable. What is more significant, however, is the author's success in prodding the reader to appreciate old wine in new ways.

Scholars and laypersons alike have long struggled to uncover the true Booker T. Washington. Was he a black conservative and naïve race man, a pragmatic and authentic race leader, a post-Reconstruction progressive, a tool of whites (an Uncle Tom), or a mixture of all these traits and factors? In truth Washington's character and legacy represent more of the latter than any of the former. He was both profound and fatuous. West demonstrates this by pushing his account of Washington past the conventional interpretations to the new level of a complex "visionary shaper of public opinion" (14). The tool West uses to construct this version of Washington is a longitudinal snapshot of the psychosocial ladder Washington climbed to reach the actual springboard to his popularity and impact as a race leader—the Atlanta speech of 1895. Even though whites promoted and perpetuated the quality of Washington's leadership, the much-touted "Atlanta Compromise"

speech did, in reality, mark the rise of Booker T. Washington as the foremost spokesperson of his time for African Americans. West's philosophical exploration into and development of Washington's early life experiences is meant as a corrective to the symbolic Booker T. Washington. West suggests that the race leader's greatest legacy has been his theory of "race relations." Race relations was a notion seldom used prior to the 1890s, but for today's generation Washington's greatest gift has been a solution for the historical racial divide based on his "idea" of race relations. West's version of Washington is not a romantic account, but rather a somber, philosophical exploration into Booker T. Washington as a sort of race man for all seasons. Even so, the author's psychosocial account of his subject's formative years and his attempts at portraying Washington as an important ideological precursor to the modern civil rights movement are not without flaws.

Throughout the book, readers may feel a bit uneasy about West's conjectural development of Washington's psychosocial formative years. Too often the author seems to rely on Washington's apocryphal autobiography, *Up from Slavery* (1901), and related stories, metaphors, and bromides regarding the education of Booker T. Washington. At times no story about Washington seems too insignificant to explore. Moreover, the author seems to dwell much too long on people like the Ruffners (prominent citizens of the youthful Washington's hometown) and Samuel Chapman Armstrong (director of Hampton Institute) in his attempts to tease out various seminal and lasting psychosocial causal factors in the life of Booker T. Washington. Readers may find other labored discussions extraneous to the arguments as well. For example, the extended discussions of Horatio Alger (113ff.) and the term mulatto (181ff.) appear to add little conceptual foundation to the study, as do many other topics. Scholars of the subject may wish to see more symbiotic linkages between W.E.B. Du Bois, T. Thomas Fortune, black church leaders, the National Negro Business League, the "Tuskegee Machine's" network of prominent blacks, and the Niagara Movement and the origins of the NAACP in 1909-1910, and they may benefit from a more synthetic treatment of precisely how "American Democracy" comports with the "education" of the complex historical character known as national race leader Booker T. Washington. Readers may also find West's writing style, especially his syntactical patterns, challenging reading. With the very first sentence of the introduction, West sets the tone for his ensuing discourse: "Before the present hawking of iconic images of the latest flavor in perishable celebrity; before the virtues of nonviolent passivity were uncoupled from the obligations of nonviolent resistance in the rush to enshrine Martin Luther

King as an abstraction that all Americans are presumed to worship; before the letter 'X' was transformed from the mysteriousness of that which is long gone into just another bit of merchandise; before culture and lifestyle and politics became synonymous, each and all commodities neatly organized and readily available for convenient browsing; before all that, a similarly conceived artifact from the dawn of mass-market selling enjoyed its own extended vogue" (1).

Even though this is a book that might better have been conceptualized and developed in a shorter journal article, it nevertheless is one that advanced readers and scholars who want fresh and challenging theories of race relations, African American history, and the roots of the contemporary civil rights movement will want to review. The author's philosophical construct of Washington's developmental period, including copious references to Washington's birth in Franklin County, Virginia, and multifaceted early formal and informal education in Malden and the Kanawha Valley of West Virginia, challenges readers to reconceptualize Washington's inner-clockwork and his infatuation with the idea of race relations. In conjunction with the latest edited work discussing the nature of Washington and his legacy, Rebecca Carroll's edited *Uncle Tom or New Negro?: African Americans Reflect on Booker T. Washington* and *"Up From Slavery" 100 Years Later* (2006), West's study will provide both reworked and new insight into the historical figure under review.

In the end, although sometimes in a belabored fashion, Michael Rudolph West reminds contemporary America just how complex and intriguing are the psyches and souls of race leaders like Booker T. Washington and, by implication, how redundant and sanitized much of the literature has been in regard to analyzing such leaders' psychosocial development in and contributions to the American "democratic" drama.

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The Divided Family in Civil War America. By Amy Murrell Taylor. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 319.)

Where the North met the South during the Civil War, Amy Murrell Taylor tells us, "Americans paid close attention to one another's loyalties and tried to explain what induced people to take one side or the other" (127). Taylor, a former Edward L. Ayers student, shows her scholarly kinship to