

In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass describes how he endured the hardships of dehumanization as an enslaved man. Denied a formal education and nearly all human rights, Douglass is treated like an animal rather than a man, and after risking his life to attain freedom, he would spend the rest of his life fighting for the freedom of others. After the end of the Civil War, African Americans were still denied many basic rights and suffered through discrimination and segregation in society. Civil rights groups fought to oppose these prejudiced ideas, but the methods they used were wide and varied depending on the group. Eventually, two main ideas were formed and backed by two of the most influential African American social activists: Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington appealed to African Americans that believed that true, immediate equality was an unrealistic goal and called for the slow dissolve of discriminatory actions through respect earned from labor and hard work. Opposing him was W.E.B. DuBois, a sociologist who adamantly believed that immediate and total equality was the only option for African Americans, and argued that this would be achieved through education. After attaining freedom, Douglass became a powerful proponent of abolitionism and would inspire both of these men to strive to create a fair and just society. However, Douglass' ideas are more clearly in accordance with Du Bois' theory on how to create an equal society after the eradication of slavery. Like Du Bois, Douglass believed that the most effective way to oppose discrimination and segregation was to achieve complete equality by educating African Americans throughout the nation.

Booker T. Washington was a polarizing force in the civil rights movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the United States. Slavery was abolished with the end of the civil war, but prejudice and discrimination was still very common across the states.

Because slaves were so dehumanized, former slaveholders and citizens in support or compliance with slavery still saw themselves as superior to African Americans.

Washington was aware of this sentiment, and believed that a complete social equality was not feasible in the near future. Washington believed that the paradigm of anti-African American opinions that many whites held could be eventually changed through economic equality. By training and instructing African Americans in vocational schools, African Americans would learn the skills needed to become a valuable member of the American workforce. In his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, he recounted the speech he gave entitled, “The Atlanta Exposition Address” in which he argued that in professions like agriculture, domestic service, and manufacturing “...we shall prosper in proportion as we learn to dignify and glorify common labour and put brains and skill into the common occupations of life” (Washington 112). Ultimately, Washington believed that if African Americans prospered economically in common labor jobs, they would eventually begin to earn respect and socially equality to whites.

While initially supporting Booker T. Washington’s ideas, W.E.B. Du Bois would begin to oppose the “accommodation” that he believed Washington was offering to supporters of discrimination and social inequality in the United States. Washington advocated for African Americans to accept their current segregations and disenfranchisement, but Du Bois believed that African Americans should fight for immediate and full equality in society. Du Bois argued that if African Americans accepted their position as inferior in the eyes of the law and in common society, they would be much more likely to receive inferior resources, respect, and assistance from government and private citizens. In order to combat this perspective, Du Bois suggested

that African Americans should gain a liberal arts education as opposed to learning a skilled trade or specific occupation. Du Bois believed that any separation between the two races would be unjust, and in order to achieve true equality, African Americans must receive a higher education in order to compete for skilled and meaningful jobs that required college degrees. Promoting black education became the focal point of his civil rights campaign. According to his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois states, “the prime cause of the Negro’s failure to rise more quickly is his wrong education in the past; and...that his future rise depends primarily on his own efforts (Du Bois 57). In order to become fully equal, Du Bois believed that African Americans must become fully educated so that they may receive the same opportunity to succeed as any other race in the country.

Decades before Du Bois and Washington debated over the merits and demerits of accommodationism, Frederick Douglass took a firm stance on the idea of slavery and discrimination in the South. Douglass, a former slave, fought adamantly against both legal and social segregation after his escape from slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century after publishing *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. But before Du Bois had spoke on the importance of education for African Americans, Douglass had marked on the importance of the education he received discreetly as a slave. As an enslaved child, Douglass cherished every opportunity he had to learn whether it came from his former master or friendly white children in his neighborhood in Baltimore. And as he grew and experienced the true horrors of slavery and discrimination, his education, and the education of those around him, became even more important. *The Narrative* describes the immense importance that education would serve Douglass in his time as a slave. While

working for William Freeland, Douglass begins as school to help his fellow slaves learn how to read and write. Douglass risks his life and states, “I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race” (Douglass 55). The diction that Douglass uses here clearly delineates his true feelings on the idea of educating African Americans. He found teaching them to be “the delight of [his] soul” implying that there was nothing more important or noble than helping his fellow slaves to gain an education. Throughout his narrative, Douglass describes the lack of education and literacy as one of the main reasons that slaves were oppressed in the South. He repeatedly seeks to further his own education and takes great pride in assisting with the education of his peers. Du Bois also argued for African Americans to seek out an education. Rather than accepting inequality amongst the races like Washington, Du Bois and Douglass argued that African Americans must strive for an education to rival whites in the United States. Instead of “settling” for common labor jobs, these activists pushed for African Americans to compete for influential jobs requiring a liberal arts education.

Following the Reconstruction Era of the United States, two main theories of civil rights activism were formed. One argued for accommodation of the place in society for African Americans and earning economic equality through labor and hard work, and the other argued for absolute equality in society and that education would be the way to achieve this equality. Frederick Douglass’ theory was much more in line with immediate equality through education and the description of education in *The Narrative* is evidence of this idea.

### Works Cited

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