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1

Introduction

MORAL LIFE UNDER OPPRESSION

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

—PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR, *LYRICS OF LOWLY LIFE*

AT AROUND 10:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 8, 1895, residents of the northeast section of Tuskegee, Alabama, were startled by the furious barking of dogs followed by several gunshots and agonized shrieks.¹ Moses Wright went outside to discover what had roused the dogs, and he saw Thomas Harris, the city's lone black lawyer, frantically telling his white neighbor, John Alexander, that he feared for his life. He had heard that a mob was coming to kill him that night. Harris pleaded with Alexander to protect him, but Alexander refused.² Catching a glimpse of several masked men in the distance, Harris yelled, "There they are now, coming to kill me!"³ When he tried to push past Alexander, the two middle-aged men began tussling.⁴ Seconds later, a masked man appeared in the yard and aimed his pistol at the back of Harris's head. At the instant he squeezed the trigger, Harris slipped, and the bullet hit Alexander in the neck.⁵ Harris, in turn, "ran through the crowd and out of the gate, and several shots were fired at him, one of which struck him in the thigh and [dropped him] a few feet from his own gate."⁶ Distraught that they had shot and likely killed a respected white man, the mob rushed Alexander into his house and tried desperately to save his life.⁷ Miraculously, he survived. The yelling of upset neighbors drew more men and boys to the scene, further swelling the mob.⁸ But amid the clamor and confusion, as the newspapers reported, Harris "managed to get up from where he fell and left town immediately and has not been heard of since."⁹

Harris's twenty-two-year-old son, Wiley, watched all this from his front door. Shaking himself free from the paralyzing horror of what had unfolded, he sprinted to his father. In the din and darkness of the moment, he got his father into a buggy and took him to the African-American college located a mile and a half from the center of town.¹⁰ They pounded on the door of its president, Booker T. Washington, and then explained what had happened. Washington, knowing that southern whites were adept at reading the tracks of their prey, understood that the mob would soon arrive at his door to lynch both father and son. He also knew Thomas Harris, having taught him more than a decade earlier. Yet, as he would soon explain to the mob—and later, to reporters—he refused to shelter the two men, since it would have been unsafe and unsound to do so.¹¹ The *Tuskegee News* said that “Washington, the president of the Negro school has ever conducted himself and the school in the most prudent and conservative manner, and learning that a mob was in pursuit of Harris told him that he could not be admitted there. What has become of Harris we do not know.”¹² Two weeks later, the paper reported that the whereabouts of Wiley and his gravely injured father were still unknown.¹³

The night Thomas and Wiley Harris came to his door, Washington faced an intolerable dilemma. Looking only at the public record, he made a heartless, if not cowardly, decision to refuse the two men sanctuary. However, sheltering them would have been taking a grave risk. If the mob learned that Washington had hidden them on campus, it would likely have burned down the school and maimed or murdered faculty and students. There is no doubt that Washington knew what was at stake. He had witnessed a sharp rise in mob violence in recent years. In 1881, the year he moved to Alabama, there were no recorded lynchings in the state and only fifteen lynchings nationally. In 1893 whites lynched 154 African Americans nationwide, with Alabama earning the contemptible distinction of the state with the most lynchings. Nearly eight hundred African Americans were lynched across the country between 1890 and 1895.¹⁴ As college president, Washington had a duty to protect the school and its faculty and students, an obligation that likely overrode whatever duty he had to shelter the two men. It is easy to imagine how heavily the choice must have weighed on Washington, and he must have been aware that some people would regard his turning away the men as an unpardonable moral failure.

Washington had built the college from nothing. When he arrived in Alabama to take up his post, the institution did not yet exist. All he had was a promise, the result of a political bargain. African Americans in the county had been told that if they voted as directed in the 1880 election, they would get a teacher-training and industrial school.¹⁵ Once the vote was in, the state

provided \$2,000 for faculty salaries, with no funds appropriated for purchasing land or buildings—a true guarantee (they believed) against the school ever becoming a reality.¹⁶ Washington had other ideas. He borrowed \$250 from his alma mater, Hampton Institute, and purchased a one-hundred-acre farm on the outskirts of Tuskegee, a small city located forty miles east of Montgomery. (According to the school's informational circular, the location had a salubrious climate that would be ideal for study.)¹⁷ He wisely deeded the property to the institution. The “state will have no control over the land,” he wrote to his former colleague, J.F.B. Marshall, so that if “the state withdrew its appropriation at any time the school could still live.”¹⁸ On July 4, 1881, the Tuskegee Normal Institute opened with thirty-three students, who were taught in a dilapidated cabin.¹⁹ By the end of the year, it boasted three instructors and eighty-eight students.²⁰ By 1895, the year Harris came to the campus with a bullet in his leg, it had thirty-four buildings on fifteen-hundred acres, seventy-five faculty members, and 750 students.²¹ The college had become an important outpost of racial progress—and it had provoked distrust, fear, and resentment among local whites, especially those tormented by unabating poverty and needing only a slight push to bring their violent bitterness to its doors.

It is in Washington's private correspondence that we find evidence that he frequently concealed his true intentions and subversive deeds behind compliant words. One exchange of letters suggests that he deliberately misled the public about what had occurred with the Harrises. Washington delivered his now-famous Atlanta Exposition address in September 1895, three months after Thomas and Wiley Harris sought his help. It was this speech that thrust him into the national spotlight, but it also prompted accusations that he was playing into the hands of southern whites. Early that November, his friend, the influential black pastor, civil rights activist, and editor Francis Grimké, wrote to Washington that at an annual meeting of a literary and historical society his denial of sanctuary to the two men had been discussed at length. One of the speakers recounted the incident, saying a black man from Tuskegee had been shot for sheltering in his home a white preacher who had come to town to lecture black residents. When the wounded man was taken to the school to get help, Grimké wrote, “You [Washington] positively refused to allow him to be brought in or the physician to attend him. [The speaker] stated this as a positive fact, that he knew to be true. . . . I felt it to be my duty to apprise you of what was said. I thought that you ought to know what is being circulated.”²² Washington replied that he had heard what others were saying about him and about the judgment he made that awful night regarding Thomas Harris.²³ Then he let Grimké in on what really happened that night.

After the man was shot his son brought him to my house for help and advice, (and you can easily understand that the people in and about Tuskegee come to me for help and advice in all their troubles). I got out of bed and went out and explained to the man and his son that personally I would do anything I could for them but I could not take the wounded man into the school and endanger the lives of students entrusted by their parents to my care to the fury of some drunken white men. Neither did I for the same reason feel that it was the right thing to take him into [my] own house. For as much as I love the colored people in that section, I cannot feel that I am in duty bound to shelter them in all their personal troubles any more than you would feel called on to do the same thing in Washington. I explained my position fully to the man and his son, and they agreed with me as to the wisdom of my course. And I now state what I have not to anyone before. I helped them to a place of safety and paid the money out of my own pocket for the comfort and treatment of the man while he was sick. Today, I have no warmer friends than this man and his son.²⁴

This new account is startling. Washington explained to Grimké that he was revealing his complete actions to him in confidence, and only in order to clear up with a trusted friend a “false representation” that he did not care to address publicly. “I simply chose to help and relieve this man in my own way rather than in the way some man a thousand miles away would have had me do it.” He attested that he had “no warmer friends” than the two men, whose lives he chose to save at great risk to himself.²⁵

Even though Washington opened up to Grimké, it is likely that he was not entirely forthcoming. Given the risks of escorting the two men elsewhere in the middle of the night with a mob after them, it is reasonable to think that he did conceal Harris and his son on campus or even at his home for some period that evening, at least until he could arrange to get them to the “place of safety.” In his not disclosing the full extent of his actions, even to his friend, lies the difficulty of reconstructing his acts of deception. It was typical of Washington to offer only a glimpse of what may have occurred and what he may have thought.

A letter Thomas Harris wrote to Washington on September 29, 1895, validated that Washington had saved the two men: “I remember all of your kindness to me. I will not take time to mention them. As you know them all.” Harris added, “I think I will [be] able one day to walk on my leg as well as ever. It will be a little shorter than the other.”²⁶ A week later, under the alias R. B. Jones, Harris confessed to Washington that he was deeply troubled about the consequences for Wiley, who had been indicted on trumped-up charges intended to punish him for aiding his father. Though Wiley had done nothing

that should require him to flee his home, the elder Harris put the situation succinctly: “The un-written law is much more in force than the written. . . . You will do me a great favor,” he implored, “to keep a watch after the matter concerning Wiley.”²⁷ Harris ended his communication by noting his own efforts to defend Washington and the school without exposing either to injury: “I have tried best I could to defend you and your intentions. I know I have made you many friends, out of those who do not or did not understand you, and in other words have been misled as to you and your School. I have done it because I thought it was my duty to do so. The newspapers mislead the people regard[ing] you and myself, on the night I came to the School when shot.”²⁸ Even though he was a victim, Harris hid the truth to protect Washington and the college from retaliation.

As Washington knew all too well, public life in the South was a deadly game for a black leader. It was imperative that white southerners, and many white northerners, see him as a leader they could trust, an advocate of moderate advancement within the prevailing southern order. From their epistemically constrained vantage point, that of seeing only the appeasing persona Washington presented, it was reasonable for them to believe he was unlikely to challenge the status quo. Refusing shelter to two black men fleeing a mob was entirely consistent with his reputation as a conservative leader. Neither the lynchers nor the reporters who came to his door questioned his account. An accommodationist mask deflected suspicion and thus created the space necessary for subversion. Deception was, for Washington, a fraught but crucial means of realizing political and moral agency.

Inheriting Booker T. Washington

We have inherited two incompatible Booker T. Washingtons. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois introduced Washington the accommodationist. Seven decades later, Washington’s biographer, Louis R. Harlan, presented Washington the corrupt power broker. Though both characterizations have significantly influenced the historical reception of Washington, neither is correct. To see why, remember that Washington’s legacy burned bright until the mid-twentieth century. He was widely lauded until the civil rights movement shifted the standards of black leadership. His compromising cadence surprised, unsettled, and shocked modern readers, some of whom concluded that he believed African Americans were hampered not only by social wrongs but also by moral defects. Others sought to recover Washington for this very reasoning, insisting that he provided a corrective to rising black radicalism.²⁹ Today, it is a commonplace assumption that his emphasis on character and virtue meant that he believed the inequalities that continually harmed the lives

of African Americans resulted primarily from moral failure rather than a history of racial oppression.

But if we step back further, to Washington's own day, we find that there was nothing unusual or conservative about his emphasis on character and virtue. Most people in the nineteenth century would have told you that advancement required social reform and moral development. Everyone agreed that imparting virtues to the oppressed was a means of uplifting them. They believed that character governed conduct, which in turn determined circumstance, and that virtues like industry, resilience, and dependability led to personal success. Good character protected a person from a competitive and hostile world and determined one's standing in society. In this framework, excellences of character (virtues) supported the acquisition of external goods, such as prosperity and prestige, and weaknesses of character (vices) impeded these achievements.³⁰ Contingent circumstances as well as character traits influenced how well a person fared in life.³¹

Champions and critics of Washington can find ample support for their views in his writings. Conservatives infer from his emphasis on the dignity of labor and his advocacy of uplift that he was rightly suspicious of both radical change and state intervention. Liberals, accepting this reading of his politics, insist that Washington was committed to the Gilded Age doctrine of individualism and cast him in a contemporary libertarian key, as an advocate of the misguided belief that social and political equality follow naturally from economic success.³² In this view, his blind faith in market-based, rather than political, remedies reinforced white supremacy. Essentially, Washington was a normative, not strategic, supporter of moderate reforms. However, emphasizing character and individual striving would not have made Washington a conservative in the eyes of his contemporaries. Even progressive reformers shared his belief that social transformation required abolishing arbitrary privileges and aiding moral self-development.³³

In his 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois introduced the now-common understanding of Washington as an accommodationist, arguing that Washington urged black southerners to prioritize economic empowerment—through land ownership, better jobs, and education suited to present market conditions—over direct political action. According to Du Bois, Washington believed that black southerners should focus their individual and collective efforts on building a strong material foundation from which they could eventually challenge white supremacy. While acknowledging the strategic nature of this advice, Du Bois criticized Washington for embracing the laissez-faire ethos of the era, aligning with the interests and prejudices of the robber barons who donated to Tuskegee. He observed that the most striking development in African American history since Reconstruction was

Washington's rise to prominence, and attributed that ascendancy to three factors: "It began at a time when war memories and ideals were rapidly passing; a day of astonishing commercial development was dawning; [and] a sense of doubt and hesitation overtook the freedmen's sons."³⁴ As Americans increasingly abandoned the ideals of the abolitionists, they placed their hopes for progress in the market. This shift, according to Du Bois, led even black southerners to retreat from higher ideals, leaving them susceptible to Washington's survival ethics and narrow politics.

Du Bois claimed that Washington had thoroughly absorbed "the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism, and the ideals of material prosperity," which made his politics inseparable from the capitalist and enterprising spirit of his age.³⁵ In the face of oppression, Washington championed the "dream of material prosperity as the touchstone of all success."³⁶ For "every social ill the panacea of Wealth has been urged, wealth to overthrow the remains of the slave feudalism, wealth to employ the black serfs, and the prospect of wealth to keep them working; wealth as the end and aim of politics, as the legal tender for law and order."³⁷ It was this emphasis on economic empowerment rather than political agitation that positioned Washington to be "the one recognized spokesman of his ten million fellows" and "one of the most notable figures in the nation of seventy million."³⁸ His "singleness of vision and thorough oneness with his age" won him the admiration of both black and white Americans, but Du Bois feared that this "gospel of Work and Money" would ultimately eclipse "the higher aims of life."³⁹

Du Bois's view of Washington as a capitalist and accommodationist remained marginal until it was recovered and repurposed during the civil rights struggle. The new generation of defiant black leaders sent historians searching for its forerunners, and Washington did not qualify.⁴⁰ At the time, definitive studies in African American history concluded that the reason white southerners preferred Washington was that his conciliatory politics did not appear to promote civil rights.⁴¹ Washington said publicly that social freedoms would result when black southerners gained a livelihood (though his clandestine conduct suggests he thought otherwise).⁴² Some criticism of his emphasis on earnings went far beyond Du Bois's critique and often ignored his emphasis on reducing white domination. Basically, mid-twentieth-century heirs of Du Bois argued that Washington was nothing more than a capitalist and coward.

The accommodationist view of Washington has the merit of making hermeneutical sense. After all, he regularly chose to avoid openly criticizing white supremacy, and he frequently downplayed the importance of civil rights and social equality while promoting economic empowerment. If we apply to Washington's public statements the principle that people say what they believe

to be true (unless they have compelling reasons to do otherwise), then the verdict is clear: He relentlessly compromised and capitulated. The further removed we are from his social context, the more inclined we are to accept that his public words express his beliefs and aims. If we lose sight of the threat of persecution Washington faced, we are less able to grasp the extent to which he practiced self-restraint in order to get a hearing from whites and how the self-censorship he adopted profoundly distorted his writings, subsequently misleading generations of readers.

Over the last several decades, however, historians mining the almost one million documents in Washington's archive in the Library of Congress have discovered evidence of another Washington. These scholars have replaced Washington the accommodating leader with Washington the ruthless politician, a self-serving and merciless black leader who sacrificed the welfare and interests of his people for personal gain. They found evidence that seemed to indicate that Washington had openly ingratiated himself with white elites and secretly crushed African American critics, that he was in reality less an accommodationist and more a hypocrite and a despot. This other Washington advised U.S. presidents—handpicking men to work in the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft—even as he told ordinary African Americans to refrain from politics. Confusingly, this Washington led secret legal challenges against race-based exclusion and discrimination while publicly questioning the value of voting and other civil rights.⁴³ In addition to being unscrupulous, this Washington was a veritable machine boss steeped in patronage politics.

This new analysis replaces the accommodationist vs. agitator dichotomy with a corrupt despot vs. principled democrat one. A recurring theme of this latter interpretation is that Washington censored opposing views, that he suppressed democratic deliberation among black leaders, and that he did so for personal rather than political reasons. The champion of this view of Washington as corrupt despot is Louis R. Harlan, whose two-volume biography of Washington was published in 1972 and 1983, over seventy years after Du Bois's accommodationist critique.

For starters, Harlan warns against considering Washington as a political or social theorist:

Those who try to understand Washington in ideological terms, as the realistic black philosopher of the age of Jim Crow, or as the intellectual opposite of W.E.B. Du Bois, miss the essential character of the man. He was not an intellectual, but a man of action. Ideas he cared little for. Power was his game, and he used ideas simply as instruments to gain power. Washington's mind as revealed in formal public utterances was a bag of clichés. His psyche

was the directing force of his private actions. . . . Perhaps psychoanalysis or role psychology would help us solve Booker T. Washington's behavioral riddle, if we could only put him on the couch.⁴⁴

As Harlan correctly observes, Washington used language instrumentally—his words were a means to achieve a specific end. But Harlan takes this further, concluding that Washington's writings and speeches are made philosophically illegible and intellectually useless because of that instrumental approach. He claims Washington said only what people wanted to hear, rather than what he believed to be true.⁴⁵ Washington's books, articles, and speeches were merely parodies of the prejudices and platitudes of the age, deployed to placate southern whites and please northern philanthropists, and offered no insight into what he really thought on any subject. But we could draw a different conclusion—namely, that Washington was untrustworthy, not unthinking.

Still, this Washington would seem to be drifting between opposing positions. Lacking a philosophical anchor, he floated effortlessly among paternalists, philanthropists, and politicians. Harlan hypothesizes that the complexities and contradictions of Washington's personality originated in his enslaved childhood, during which he became practiced, even gifted, at playing conflicting roles.⁴⁶ Harlan's theory is that having "been born and bred a houseboy," Washington learned early on to hide his true thoughts and to look for paternalistic protectors, becoming "inordinately attached to a succession of fatherly white men."⁴⁷ Washington longed for the white father whose identity he never discovered: "I do not even know his name," he wrote in his autobiography.⁴⁸ According to Harlan, this longing was behind his affection for men like Theodore Roosevelt and Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who mentored him as an undergraduate (Washington called him perfect, a "superhuman"⁴⁹). They and other powerful white men became Washington's symbolic fathers and paternal guardians, Harlan proposes.⁵⁰

Harlan offers a psychological explanation rather than a philosophical exploration of Washington's politics. He suggests that Washington remained in slavery's grip psychologically and perhaps morally. Harlan argues that it was common for "house servants" like Washington to identify with their masters in attitude and interest.⁵¹ He writes that from an early age Washington studied, interpreted, and had to respond to his master's every whim and demand and that these and other habits of enslavement became lasting character traits. As an adult, Washington instinctively wore the mask that fulfilled the expectations and desires of whatever subgroup of whites he was dealing with.⁵² Still, Harlan says, we should view him not as a "foot-dragging 'Uncle Tom'" but rather as more of a trickster, which Paul Radin defined as someone entirely "at the mercy of his passions and appetites."⁵³ Under the layers of the trickster's

secrecy and deception is “a person with a single-minded concern with power, a minotaur, a lion, a fox, or Brer Rabbit, some frightened little man like the Wizard of Oz, or, as in the case of the onion, nothing—a personality that vanished into the roles it played.”⁵⁴ In Harlan’s view everything turns on personality. That Washington kept his politics internal divests him of a political vision, and he becomes merely a symptom of slavery.⁵⁵

To be fair, Harlan did sense something tragic about his subject, but he decided that the causes of Washington’s reputational decline lay in his character flaws: his insatiable desire for power, his longing for acceptance from powerful whites, and his habitual vindictiveness. Harlan completed the first volume of the biography, *The Making of a Black Leader*, in 1972. The second volume, *The Wizard of Tuskegee*, which appeared in 1983, focuses on the idea that Washington sacrificed nobler principles for power as a result of moral injuries from his enslaved childhood. Harlan was also the editor of the fourteen-volume Booker T. Washington Papers, which also emphasizes that view. The final collection consists almost entirely of evidence of the operations of the “Tuskegee Machine.”

Harlan’s account of a manipulative and secretive Washington only added to the downward trajectory of his legacy, and its single-minded emphasis on Washington’s patronage politics obscured the covert efforts Washington made to improve the condition of black southerners. Harlan’s psychological interpretation led him to conclude that Washington’s life and writings lacked substance and coherence and are worthless for the study of politics.

Thus we have wound up with two Washingtons. Du Bois presented Washington as an accommodationist through a consequentialist argument: Even if Washington complied with Jim Crow policies for strategic reasons, his public affirming of them confirmed the legitimacy of white supremacy, inadvertently strengthening the system. Then, we have Harlan’s version, Washington as a shrewd, ruthless, and self-serving politician who was deliberately, rather than inadvertently, complicit with white supremacy and its primary agents. Both versions are blind to the ways that the oppressive context of the South drove Washington’s words and deeds apart. To reveal that process, this book combines philosophical exploration with historical excavation. It aims to shed light on the politics and ethics of a much-misunderstood man and allow a less stained Booker T. Washington to emerge from his own, carefully crafted, shadow.

Dark Virtues

This book challenges the two prevailing interpretations of Booker T. Washington by advancing a new view, that of Washington as a tragic realist, someone who possessed the wisdom and prudence to make political choices that were

necessary but were morally, even psychologically, costly. It is a more sympathetic reading of Washington, one that challenges both the familiar accommodationist narrative and the portrayal of him as a corrupt power broker. In these pages, I recast Washington as a political realist who prioritized building autonomous black institutions to resist white supremacy under the guise of being an accommodating black leader willing to work within the southern political order. In speech, Washington presented himself as an accommodationist; in practice, he pursued a sustained campaign of resistance behind the cotton curtain, concealing from contemporaries—and, inadvertently, from us—the radical character of his politics. The compliant mask he crafted and maintained made his subversive actions possible. Black southerners, who themselves often adopted accommodating fronts to survive and resist, recognized to some degree that with Washington appearance often belied reality. Their understanding of this dichotomy was partly why he became, and remained, the acknowledged leader of the race until his death.

Seeing this more complete picture of Washington required reading his published writings in their immediate political context and in light of the material in his archives. This immersive research has led me to believe that the real source of Washington's moral self-negation was the emergency conditions in which he lived and led. He was repeatedly forced to make tragic choices as a black leader living under the yoke of white supremacy and to choose between genuinely incompatible but equally undesirable options. He realized that whatever he did in those situations would come with a great cost, including harsh criticism and disapproval from many.⁵⁶

None of us, oppressed or otherwise, should be exempt from normative scrutiny, but any analysis of our choices and behavior should consider the context in which we make those choices and take those courses of action. Neither Du Bois nor Harlan was attentive to the fact that political judgments are “all things considered” judgments. Black southerners at the turn of the century had a much narrower range of possibilities than the average person, black or white or anyone else, living in contemporary America. They faced strategic and moral calculations very different from those faced by Americans today. Washington, like every other black person living in the Deep South at that time, did not have the luxury of maintaining a political morality that would suit even the less dreadful conditions in the North. That was why Washington offered a conditional justification for the deception he practiced and quietly encouraged between the lines. He thought it was a right and reasonable response for black people living in the South.

In this study, the boundaries of context are vigilantly drawn, even within the South. Understanding the strategic choices of an individual requires a clear sense of their specific situation. According to the vantage point he presented

most often in his writings, Washington believed self-restraint was more prudent than self-assertion; openly protesting against the injustices of white supremacy could get a black person evicted, maimed, or killed. The Harris affair showed how running afoul of racial etiquette could get a black man lynched no matter what his position in the community might be.⁵⁷ Political theorist Judith Shklar warns that demand for self-sacrifice has no place in politics: “There is absolutely nothing elevated in death and dying,” she writes. “Self-sacrifice may stir our admiration, but it is not, by definition, a political duty.”⁵⁸

Just staying alive in the Jim Crow South obliged African Americans to exercise a distinct and regrettable political subjectivity. Given that the ethics that nearly all Americans practiced linked moral character and social fate, this agent-centered morality had a significant role in shaping Washington’s thinking, conduct, and teachings. Like most of his contemporaries, he considered virtues and vices rather than theoretical principles when judging conduct. Motives and consequences mattered, but for blacks living in the South, cultivating the right character was crucial for safeguarding one’s life and achieving success. Virtually everyone saw character as the mainspring of, and what guided, conduct.⁵⁹

The idea of character dominated nineteenth-century thought, including Washington’s.⁶⁰ Most people saw character as vulnerable to circumstances, but they also believed a person retained the capacity to reform their character and to control their social fate, no matter how difficult their beginnings or how discouraging their current situation. “We are exactly as capable of making our character, *if we will*, as others are of making it for us,” John Stuart Mill wrote.⁶¹ Samuel Smiles, one of the era’s most famous moralists, defined character as “the individual will acting energetically under the influence of religion, morality, and reason.”⁶² Leslie Stephens, the Victorian scholar who advanced a socially instrumental view of character somewhat similar to Washington’s, said the goal was to modify “a man’s character in such a way as to fit him to be an efficient member of the social ‘tissue.’”⁶³

At the risk of introducing a coherency into the folk virtue ethics of the day, some terms are worth defining here. I follow the common meaning of *character* as the composite of a person’s virtues and her vices. Character traits shape perception, thinking, and action.⁶⁴ A *virtue* is a disposition that enables perceiving, thinking, and acting well in response to the ethically salient demands of the circumstances, and a *vice* is a disposition that impedes one’s efforts to do so—that is, that leads to perceiving, judging, and acting poorly in those same situations. Because virtues are excellences of character and vices are defects of character, having sound character means possessing the virtues that enable you to respond effectively to the world’s demands. Overall, virtues derive their normative force from a given context.⁶⁵ Homeric virtues, for

example, were quite different from the virtues Benjamin Franklin or Horatio Alger extolled. In a condition of persistent war, martial virtues are cardinal virtues. In the competitive and capitalist culture of nineteenth-century America, perseverance and industriousness were not only commercial virtues but also moral ones.

Focusing solely on motive can elide the socially sensitive nature of virtues. In a different context, traits considered virtues might become vices. The role morality of soldiers in war and the role morality of citizens in peace are, at times, incompatible—*role morality* being the norms and duties associated with a given role, occupation, or office. The way we speak of “reentry” when discussing a soldier’s transition back to civilian life captures this idea.⁶⁶ Living in the Jim Crow South, one can argue, was akin to living under the conditions of war, compelling African Americans in the region to acquire virtues that would aid their survival and resistance.

Today, we acknowledge that entire groups of people have lived under severely oppressive conditions for several generations and that, for them, adapting their behavior was a strategic imperative for survival under those circumstances. However, it is my experience that most readers of political theory remain Augustinians, holding on to the belief that truthfulness and sincerity are exceptionless. We follow Augustine when we view deception as lying and therefore as a sin—that is, we commit a wrong by saying the opposite of what is in our heart, when the purpose is to deceive.⁶⁷ Immanuel Kant famously stated that there is an unconditional duty to be truthful: “Truthfulness in statements which cannot be avoided is the formal duty of an individual to everyone, however great may be the disadvantage accruing to himself or another.”⁶⁸ Lying injures the liar’s character and undermines social trust—the lifeblood of any community—which is why lying requires justification but telling the truth does not. This overly moralized conception of political action places an impossible burden on those who are the subjects of this book and results in obscuring the political meaning of Washington’s life.

Du Bois was a moral conservative, embracing the premise that deceit was always wrong. Washington, by contrast, was a moral radical. He is not alone in defending deception as a virtue; some philosophers have argued that in an acute crisis or overriding emergency, a person has to be discerning with the truth.⁶⁹ The injunction to be truthful with everyone was simply impossible for black people to obey in the Jim Crow South. They lived in a Hobbesian world, in an atmosphere of conflict and suspicion. In that world they could not trust or have confidence in whites. In Washington’s realist worldview, sincerity and truthfulness were not exceptionless virtues but, rather, context-sensitive ones.⁷⁰ As David Hume remarked, there is a floor beneath which certain moral expectations no longer hold for us and others.⁷¹

Implicit in Washington's realism is the contention that certain ethical obligations may be overridden in emergency conditions, and, for blacks, life under Jim Crow certainly qualified as an emergency.⁷² They owed no duty of truthfulness to white southerners, who either perpetrated or supported the oppression they endured. By upholding the Jim Crow system, whites forfeited any claim that they were owed normal moral duties. The situation with white northerners was different. Many of them—especially those who supported racial uplift—retained their right not to be deliberately deceived. Washington had a duty to be honest with them, but if fulfilling that duty would be harmful to black southerners, it was normatively permissible for him to override it. Washington could not have openly articulated his true aims for black southerners without provoking violence from white southerners and the withdrawal of crucial northern funding. (It should be noted that Washington's northern benefactors often attached paternalistic conditions to their support—conditions that expanded opportunities for black southerners while simultaneously imposing firm ceilings on their social and economic progress.)

The duties Washington owed fellow African Americans held even greater complexity. On one hand, he had a clear obligation to shelter Thomas and Wiley Harris that night; neither man had done anything to forfeit his claim to protection. On the other hand, openly fulfilling that obligation would have exposed Tuskegee's faculty and students to grave, perhaps mortal, danger. Under those circumstances it would be right for Washington to override his duty to help the two men. Yet overriding that duty completely would have left him with a moral residue, a distress that Washington mitigated by fulfilling his duty *in the dark* to Thomas Harris and his son, lessening the shame that resulted from his public claim that he turned both men away.

Like war, oppression favors the dissembler. If virtues are dispositions that equip a person to respond well to the demands of their social world, what should count as a virtue for an enslaved woman? Should she tell the truth no matter what? Washington, who carried the scars of bondage, knew viscerally that slavery at times forced enslaved people to deceive. He expanded this reality into political thought. For him, the oppressed are not only permitted to deceive their oppressors and the people who abetted those oppressors, they are morally required to do so. Concealment undermines the subjugator's capacity to frustrate the subjugated person's goals. Misleading or misdirecting your oppressors by camouflaging your intentions and movements lessens their power over you and disadvantages them epistemically and strategically. The capacity to be equivocal, cagey, and deceitful without inviting suspicion offers the oppressed a vital asset in their struggle against domination.

Throughout history, enslavement or colonization has been the experience of most of the world's population. Nevertheless, scholars rarely consider

slavery and Jim Crow to be overriding emergencies. Sissela Bok offers a distressingly common view when she writes, “Such emergencies rarely arise, if ever; [and] should one arise, it is not likely to be repeated. And the situation is so extraordinary as to provide no reason to generalize the need for lying.”⁷³ In this view the traits needed to survive and resist domination undermine a person’s ability to flourish, challenging oppression is considered to be as morally damaging as the oppression itself, and resisters experience regret and remorse over having had to acquire the dismaying habits necessary for their survival and battle.⁷⁴ For Aristotle and his heirs, to flourish was an estimable goal, but those who wrote about the good life took life itself for granted. By contrast, African Americans in the South had to work hideously hard merely to safeguard their own survival. In that circumstance, flourishing seemed an impossible goal.

Too often, we exaggerate the moral cost of a survival ethic. The grave dangers that accompany extreme conditions make self-preservation the overarching concern for victims. When destitution and demise are among the goals of an oppressive system, finding ways to resist these outcomes can be an essential source of self-respect and dignity. For survivors of domination, dissembling does not necessarily incur regret and remorse. In the 1930s, the sociologist Charles S. Johnson studied African American youths in the Jim Crow South. One of his subjects, George Carter, reported that he had “learned to flatter and conceal his own feelings as a means of preserving his own estimate of himself.”⁷⁵ Carter was able to frustrate the goals of white supremacy by exploiting the racist attitudes it fostered in whites. Just fighting the odds on a slave plantation or Jim Crow town should count as moral heroism.⁷⁶

In crafting his political response to white supremacy, Washington looked back to the skills he had learned as an enslaved child, skills that had enabled him to survive and to subvert the institution and its guardians. He came to recognize that the subaltern realism of the enslaved would be valuable for combating the structural form of race-based domination that followed Reconstruction.⁷⁷ Given how entrenched white supremacy was, Washington was convinced that it would endure for decades, even for a century. He believed his people needed to prepare themselves for a new and prolonged war.

The political morality Washington practiced and penned echoed the writings of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, both of whom described slavery in the hopeless decade of the 1850s.⁷⁸ Jacobs argued that cunning was “the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants.” She was clear: We should understand the relationship between master and slave as a strategic struggle based on asymmetrical power. “I like a straightforward course, and am always reluctant to resort to subterfuge. So far as my ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon slavery. It was that system of

violence and wrong which now left me no alternative but to enact a falsehood.”⁷⁹ For Jacobs, living in slavery was akin to living in a state of permanent war: “I had felt, seen, and heard enough, to read the characters, and question the motives, of those around me. The war of my life had begun; and though one of God’s most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.”⁸⁰ Enslaved people were not ethically responsible for their falsehoods or subterfuge because, as Douglass wrote, “Freedom of choice is the essence of all accountability and responsibility.” The “morality of *free* society can have no application to *slave* society,” he concluded.⁸¹

Washington agreed. While he never wrote explicitly about his *own* use of deception or justified his lying in public, he, like Jacobs and Douglass, offered a conditional defense of the politics of deception on several occasions.⁸² For example, in his first autobiography, *The Story of My Life and My Work* (1900), Washington recalled that when he was an enslaved child his mother, on more than one occasion, stole food to feed him and his siblings.

Some people blame the Negro for not being more honest; but I recall many times when, after all was dark and still, in the late hours of the night, when her children had been without sufficient food during the day, my mother would awaken us, and we would find that during the day she had gotten from somewhere something in the way of eggs or chickens and had cooked them during the night for us. These eggs and chickens were gotten without my master’s permission or knowledge. Perhaps, by some code of ethics, this would be classed as stealing, but deep down in my heart I can never decide that my mother, under such circumstances, was guilty of theft. Had she acted thus as a free woman she would have been a thief, but not so, in my opinion, as a slave.⁸³

Washington argued that enslaved people were not bound by an ethical code of transparency and honesty with their enslavers, who had forfeited their right to that duty. In many cases, Washington explained, the slave had to depart from ordinary ethics to survive and resist bondage. Slavery made it strategically disadvantageous, and at times essentially impossible, for enslaved people to live up to the moral code of the society that was permitting their enslavement or even to obey the code of those seeking to abolish slavery.

Black southerners had to practice equivocation, concealment, and deception to check the power of whites without inviting suspicion and confrontation. These reflective dispositions are what I term *dark*, or *subaltern*, *virtues*. The word *dark* has within its orbit of meaning ambiguity, cunning, and duplicity and makes use of the common association between lack of light and lack of good intentions. Dark virtues derive their political force from remaining in the dark; they are effective because they are unseen by whites. After all, strategic

dishonesty works only if others believe you are honest. White and black citizens alike considered deception morally troubling, even wrong, which compelled Washington to bury his heretical teachings between the lines and beneath the surface of his written work, thus consigning them to the dark.⁸⁴ Most readers, then and perhaps even now, are unreceptive to any justification for deception, including a conditional one. Washington's radical political projects depended on his ability to deceive northern, but especially southern, whites into believing he was a conservative and reasonable black leader whom they could trust and who was willing to work for moderate improvement within the system of white supremacy.

Washington agreed that many of the virtues white Americans considered vital to being a good person and a respectable citizen were likewise crucial for African Americans, and he advised the cultivation of qualities like perseverance, resilience, and amiability. But he believed that blacks in the South needed to also possess dark virtues, those qualities that would enable them to carefully and effectively resist white supremacy. Prevailing norms and mores that regulated conduct and determined social and economic horizons were applied differently to white Americans than to black Americans. A naughty white child might trigger tolerant smiles and modest disapproval from white adults, but those same adults would likely respond to a boisterous black child with insults and even threats. Telling a white person what she really thought of them would put a black teenager at risk of death. Making it to adulthood forced black children to cultivate contradictory inclinations. In public, they had to appear amenable, even submissive, and their manner, speech, and conduct had to evince compliance with a system they loathed. But offstage, among black people, they could be sincere, honest, and independent.⁸⁵ Momentarily discarding their mask, they could allow the rage of injustice to creep into their voice and a hatred of oppression to flicker in their eyes.

The renowned writer and former Tuskegee student Ralph Ellison described the need for preemptive deception in the South. In his autobiographical notes, he explains that "not all Southern whites were hostile, but it was wise to act as though they were until convinced otherwise. And even then, you tried to anticipate how much they deviated from tradition." However, the presence of southern whites who were not racially hostile "hardly mattered because they were a minority."⁸⁶ For the rare white person who did aid the oppressed, dark virtues became a morally permissible tool.⁸⁷ For example, two years before the Harris affair, in February 1893, a mob of enraged whites swarmed the Tuskegee city jail, aiming to lynch three black men accused of sexually assaulting a white woman who lived seven miles from campus.⁸⁸ They were unable to get into the building, but fear hung over the Tuskegee Institute campus for months. Local whites seethed; they believed the crime demanded popular justice

(i.e., lynching). The accused were being held, awaiting trial, less than two miles from campus, and faculty and students feared a wave of antiblack violence that would engulf the whole school. That April, while out of town, Washington received a message from Warren Logan, the school's treasurer: "It has turned out that the men charged with rape of Mrs. Cox are innocent, but the feeling against them is running very high and it is not unlikely that they will be lynched."⁸⁹

The accused were saved by a lawman's cunning. On April 14, the *Weekly Advertiser* reported that "100 men fully masked, heavily armed, and provided with every implement necessary to tear the jail to pieces went to the town, going directly to the jail, and but for the timely and judicious action of the Sheriff, who shipped the prisoners out of the jail before the arrival of the mob, hid them away during the night and carried them to Montgomery early the next morning, the three negroes would have been, in all probability, forcibly taken from the jail and immediately hung by the mob."⁹⁰ Sheriff W. W. Thompson knew that neither he nor his deputies could confront the mob and live. He made the decision to evade and deceive the mob by slipping away with the inmates. He could have opted to assert the state's authority in the face of mob violence and to openly uphold the unassailable principle of the rule of law, but, outnumbered and outgunned, he reckoned that facing the intoxicated white mob would get the prisoners lynched and he and his staff murdered. It would turn out to not be the last time Sheriff Thompson relied on *dark virtues* to save a life.⁹¹

There are four core normative conclusions from the above discussion. The first is that, under exigent circumstances, it can be legitimate for subaltern actors to override ordinary moral duties. If deception, ambiguity, and concealment enable subaltern actors to minimize harm to the groups they represent, then these tactics should be understood to be political virtues—*dark virtues*. The second conclusion is that when, under conditions of extreme injustice, public confrontation and protest will predictably lead to more harm than good, it is best to adopt a realist approach that favors pragmatic, feasible, and often less visible methods. The third conclusion is that this realist strategy will often involve resistance that is concealed by constructing subaltern economic, civic, and educational institutions that foster solidarity and sustain self-help efforts. These organizations are aimed at securing economic self-sufficiency and independence, thereby freeing individuals from relations of domination. They also enable the building of collective power. The fourth conclusion is that creating these institutions will frequently require strategic compromises with self-interested political actors.

The moralist view is that Washington should not have lied to the lynchers and reporters about what happened the night Thomas and Wiley Harris

sought protection. But at that moment, a truthful response would have been wrong, making Washington's deceptive actions ethical. Washington did the right thing, even though he must have known he would be widely assailed in certain quarters for having apparently turned the men away. The public lie earned him applause from white southerners, but to some of the members of his race, including ones whose respect he valued most, he appeared to be a coward and a traitor, an Uncle Tom. Yet it was that lie that saved two black men from a lynch mob.

Methodological Approach

Neither of the prevailing interpretations places Booker T. Washington's thinking and actions in an intellectual tradition. The dominant view says he was an accommodationist. The psychological interpretation describes him as a corrupt politician. There is some truth to both. But far more important is that neither of these characterizations gets at the essence of Washington's political thought. His prose can be deceptively simple and maddeningly inconsistent at the same time, hence his dismissal by Harlan and others. But I argue that his pattern of shuttling between different ideologies—liberal and republican—going from one example to a seemingly contradictory one, was intentional. Instead of trying to iron out the inconsistencies and clarify the contradictions, I have sought the esoteric message they allowed to flicker. By intentionally pursuing these inconsistencies and interpreting them in light of the archival work I have done, I recover a far deeper Washington, someone who considered life under oppression to be an apprenticeship in realism.

The subjugated, Washington believed, needed to take full measure of the limits of their lives, of the dead ends perpetually in their paths, if they were to resist effectively. They needed to admit that their political action would always entail some degree of moral triage. The consistent thread in his political thought and conduct was the belief that oppression obliges the dominated to practice dark virtues. And even if oppression makes engaging in deception necessary and therefore morally unblameworthy, no one should engage in such behavior without feelings of sorrow, regret, or remorse. Washington recognized that the political ethics according to which black southerners must live, the dark virtues they had to embrace, were, on the one hand, essential for surviving and resisting and, on the other hand, a source of ethical remorse for himself and regret that he lived and led under conditions that compelled him to cultivate and teach such virtues.

The central methodological claim of this study, then, is that we must interpret the writings of subaltern actors differently from those of other political theorists. We should not assume that their published works candidly express

their convictions. Such texts often affirm the beliefs and prejudices of the audiences whose support or protection they must secure. Their public writings function as masks and are therefore unreliable guides to their actual views. Recovering those views requires reading between the lines and, crucially, going beyond the text—ideally into the archives. This means situating their writings within the concrete political constraints and incentives they confronted, rather than assuming an abstract or generic condition of persecution. It also requires examining private correspondence, institutional records, and hidden deeds to determine what they said or did outside public view—and to assess how to weigh conflicting claims within the text itself. Such conflicts are common in the works of subaltern actors.

I am hardly the first to argue that Washington lived in an oppressive context that compelled him to practice a kind of public moderation.⁹² His most recent biographer, Robert J. Norrell, shows that Washington was frequently a target of death threats and other forms of intimidation from white supremacists.⁹³ Norrell asserts that the despotic conditions of the South forced black leaders in the region to assume a far less radical stance than their northern counterparts and that despotism, rather than an obsessive will to power, explains Washington's compromising politics. He lived in "an awful time that set narrow and unjust limits on what he could do to pursue his ends," Norrell writes. In the end, his life proved "not just a struggle up from slavery but also a great effort to rise above history."⁹⁴ Countering the images of Washington as mere accommodationist or power broker, he presents a nuanced description of him as a pragmatic leader who sought to build coalitions with moderate whites. Such alliances were usually based in efforts to check the most extreme practices of white supremacy, like lynching, rather than a mutual desire to abolish the ethos of white supremacy that even moderate whites of the region embraced.⁹⁵ Ironically, Norrell's account submerges Washington beneath the history it recovers, rather than lifting him into clearer view. To uncover a more principled Washington, Norrell relies exclusively on the sources Harlan curated several decades earlier while writing the second volume of his biography—documents that reveal the inner workings of the Tuskegee Machine.⁹⁶ This reliance inadvertently reproduces some of the biases that informed Harlan's selection of those sources, some of them documents that portray Washington as a backroom politician. Although Norrell's is a sympathetic interpretation, it nevertheless seems to concede to Harlan's judgment of Washington as unthinking and has almost nothing to say about the dozen books and hundreds of articles Washington wrote.⁹⁷

It is hardly an overstatement to say Booker T. Washington has garnered almost no serious philosophical consideration in over the century since his death. The scholarship on him has largely comprised biographical studies or

examinations of his role in American social history.⁹⁸ Despite his enormous significance, there is no intellectual biography of Washington or study of his political thought.⁹⁹ In many cases, he serves merely as a historical site upon which scholars and citizens wage an ongoing war over the value or danger of black conservatism. Today, black conservatives tend to claim him as a precursor, which is perhaps an easy case to make, but not an accurate one.¹⁰⁰ On the opposite end of the spectrum, taking this co-optation as an accurate representation of Washington's political thought, critics attack him as a conservative.

Only Houston Baker Jr. has grounded his judgment of Washington as a complex thinker in engagement with his writings. Baker was the first person since Du Bois to approach Washington as a real thinker, and an exceptional one at that. Through an analysis of *Up from Slavery*, Baker concluded that Washington ought to be considered a seminal figure in American literature. He insisted that *Up from Slavery* is exemplary in its use of multiple voices to simultaneously accommodate and resist, affirm and subvert the racism of the day. Washington used stereotypes and appropriated racist imageries, Baker wrote, toward a "liberating manipulation of masks and a revolutionary *renaming*," which makes *Up from Slavery* a "record and representation of Afro-America's mastery of form."¹⁰¹ A decade later, though, Baker withdrew that judgment, and instead argued that gaining power and prestige was what motivated Washington and guided his cunning pen. Baker credited his about-face to having read the second volume of Harlan's biography of Washington.¹⁰² If Baker had followed his initial instinct through Washington's published writings and archive, he would likely have discovered, as I have, that Washington was not just a man who responded to awful circumstances by becoming a great practitioner of deception. As I gathered the shards of his history, a more complex story came into focus.

The methodological approach taken in this book allows us to see that Washington was a particular kind of realist—someone who relied on dark virtues to do good. He shared the realist conviction that security, stability, and subsistence are the foundations of political life and must come first. But his realism bore a tragic cast: His intentions, judgments, and actions were both shaped and tragically constrained by white supremacy. He faced a paradox: The very principles and virtues that secured success under normal conditions jeopardized survival in the South for African Americans. Black southerners had to accept their narrow repertoire of political possibilities and rely on feasible, if regrettable, means like strategic ambivalence, concealment, and deception. The methodological challenge is not only to make this visible but also to demonstrate that the philosophical richness of Washington's thought lies in the gap between appearance and reality—or, more precisely, in his deliberate masking of both his means and his ends.

Washington's realism becomes much clearer when it is distinguished from political realism in contemporary thought and from the idea of infrapolitics advanced by the political scientist James Scott.

There are at least three ways in which contemporary theorists conceive of political realism.¹⁰³ The first realist view regards politics as an amoral or non-moral realm of social action and reasoning. For some time, this understanding of political thought and behavior has nourished the popular conception of thinkers like Machiavelli and Washington as immoral pragmatists. The second view holds that politics has its own internal normativity; this is an ethical outlook sensitive to how context shapes the pursuit of power and the realizing of interests. Political life needs principles internal to the political order and conduct appropriate to that order. This view rejects the understanding of political ethics as either applied or everything-goes morality. The third outlook envisions politics as a realm in which politicians must get their hands dirty for the good of others and must, therefore, override universal moral rules. A political actor who overrides a moral prohibition is not relieved of responsibility, for her act will often leave some moral and psychological residue: feelings of guilt, regret, or remorse.¹⁰⁴ The difference between the second and third views is complex, but at the risk of oversimplification, the third account accepts ethical certainties but overrides them in some circumstances.

There are, however, no clear standards for deciding when getting your hands dirty is justified.¹⁰⁵ Even so, if any situation justifies overriding some of the moral considerations we owe to others, the Jim Crow South does. Washington did not contend with hypothetical ticking time bombs—he faced actual lynchers at his door. The corner of the world in which he lived forced him to get his hands dirty, to make decisions that were politically necessary, morally suboptimal, and ethically remorseful.

All three glosses of realism shed light on Washington's political thought and action. But they also err in treating *all* politics as politics *in extremis*, and they therefore risk trivializing the existence of actual emergency conditions or, worse, unwittingly giving license to political behavior that would be justified only in extreme conditions. The first view assumes that violating moral principles is part and parcel of ordinary politics and encourages the perception that all politics occurs in extreme situations. It is common to enlist the service of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and even Carl Schmitt to defend political realism as providing a richer account of the role of disagreement, contestation, and conflict in politics.¹⁰⁶ This view rarely says whether lying is appropriate only in extraordinary circumstances, as opposed to being permissible to some extent in both ordinary and extraordinary circumstances.¹⁰⁷ Moreover, Washington did not view disagreement, contestation, and struggle as opening a path to political deception and other dark virtues. The realism Washington sketched

presupposes an emergency condition in which a group of people, *as a group*, faces severe and sustained threats to their safety and survival. These threats are what generate an extreme situation that overrides the *prima facie* duties citizens otherwise owe and restrict the applicability of Washington's dark virtues to similarly oppressive situations.

Three interrelated features set Washington's realism apart from contemporary political realism and compel us to form a different method of reading his writings and interpreting his conduct. First, Washington was a pessimist. He believed that white supremacy would endure for decades, perhaps a century, due to its entrenched beliefs and structures (chapter 2). Second, this judgment stretched the temporal horizon of political justice; emancipation from Jim Crow would be won only through a long, grinding struggle. Third, taking into account this extended timeline and realist concession, Washington concluded that black southerners would need to fight on two fronts at once if they were to protect themselves and their institutions from racist reprisals.

This last imperative required mastering what I am calling *dark virtues*: equivocation (chapter 3), concealment (chapter 4), and deception (chapter 5) to protect oneself and others while at the same time resisting. These virtues allowed Washington to safely and effectively wage a secret war against Jim Crow, relying primarily on shadow diplomacy and clandestine civil-rights litigation (chapter 6). Yet because any meaningful victory lay a lifetime or more away, Washington believed another front had to be fortified simultaneously. Black southerners needed to secure economic independence to exit individual relations of domination, such as sharecropping (chapter 7). Economic independence, in turn, increased the likelihood that black communities could cultivate civic capacity and build collective power. Washington envisioned the creation and maintenance of local institutions as essential to this task. These subaltern institutions were not merely sites of instruction; they were social and political hubs that provided goods the state withheld and spaces where black southerners could relate to one another as social equals, democratic citizens, and co-conspirators (chapter 8).

There is no established method for studying someone like Washington. Rather than accept the prevailing methods of political theory, I have adopted a mixed-methods approach better suited to recovering and conveying his political thought and conduct. His conduct, as the Harris affair revealed, often ran counter to what he wrote, creating serious methodological challenges for the historian of ideas. To explain why Washington concealed his more subversive politics from the public—and at times even from allies—I draw on the mid-twentieth-century political philosopher Leo Strauss, who remains the most insightful theorist and practitioner of esoterism: the idea that the text can have latent meanings purposely hidden from view by the author. This

argument counters the typical way of reading texts in political theory, which is to assume that the writer intends their words to be taken at face value. Instead, Strauss argues that under conditions of persecution authors may convey multiple meanings to avoid repression. But Straussian esoterism has tended to proceed by claiming that these authors, usually philosophers fearing persecution, conceal their subversive truths, trusting that the select few—those readers trained in parsing words, sensing irony, and connecting contradictions across written tracts—will find these hidden meanings through intratextualism. Such esoterism feeds an aristocratic vision of political theory as a site for a transhistorical elite whose skill at textual interpretation allows them to learn enduring truths about politics.

While Washington is best understood as engaged in an esoteric approach to writing and public reasoning, where the evident meanings and the latent meanings of his texts often diverge, his esotericism did not arise from an aristocratic desire to impart political lessons to the select few. Rather, it exemplifies the profound role of esoterism in the everyday life of oppressed people. Black readers and listeners knowing that what he wrote or spoke would be read or heard as well by white audiences, usually interpreted his words against this backdrop of constraint and so approached his public statements differently. They, too, carefully guarded their expressions in the presence of whites in order to avoid persecution and were therefore skilled at burying their own subversive thoughts beneath accommodating gestures. The method of esoteric analysis that follows, then, entails far more than close reading of texts like *Up From Slavery*. It also places textual analysis alongside meticulous reconstructions of the contextual conditions that shaped Washington's private and public communications, and so shaped how various competing audiences were inclined to understand what he said and wrote.

Washington was thus using the classic “weapons of the weak,” in the language of James C. Scott—concealment, equivocation, deception—to contest existing forms of power, but he was also not the sort of subject Scott studies: an impoverished peasant. Washington occupied a position akin to those of colonized elites and indigenous leaders. He was not, however, a captive leader who indirectly ruled the black masses in exchange for wealth and power.¹⁰⁸ Like many colonized elites and indigenous leaders, he neither simply surrendered to domination nor waited passively for the people to overthrow their oppressors.¹⁰⁹ In the process of recovering Washington, not only do I defend him as worthy of inclusion in the canon of American thought but I also demonstrate an alternative method for teasing out the intellectual seriousness of political thinkers who often fall outside the canon; figures typically either ignored in the history of political thought or denied their philosophical complexity.

Scott's pioneering account of the everyday resistance of subaltern actors is helpful in uncovering why Washington said one thing in public and did the opposite in private. Scott shows how the poverty and powerlessness of peasants in East Asia left them at the mercy of landlords, effectively forcing them to rely on ambivalence, concealment, and deception as means of resistance.¹¹⁰ He terms these practices *infrapolitics* and contrasts them, perhaps too starkly, with formal politics. Unlike protest or rebellion, infrapolitical actions must go unnoticed to be effective: small acts of sabotage, instances of concealed deviance.¹¹¹ Scott takes inspiration from enslaved people who waged similar wars of attrition: pilfering food, feigning ignorance, shirking labor.¹¹² The plantation was a battlefield in which survival itself was a form of resistance.¹¹³ Infrapolitics involves a complex relationship among publicity, deception, and judgment, a reality that places scholars in an epistemically uncertain position when it comes to assessing the behavior and judging the ethics of the oppressed. Before scholars decide if a particular act of deception is defensible it first has to be discerned. When subaltern actors dissembled for life-and-death reasons, the public and historical record cannot fully reflect reality.¹¹⁴ The public transcripts they left behind show only the masks they wore to avoid harm, while beneath this outward conformity they were often actually resisting. The challenge for us today is first identifying and then interpreting what they concealed.¹¹⁵

In Washington's case, time and deceit have left us in darkness. According to the public transcript of the events of June 8, 1895, Washington denied Thomas and Wiley Harris sanctuary; the hidden transcript shows he saved them from a lynch mob. His true act was concealed, and the concealment itself discloses more of his political thought than anything he wrote. Scott's theory carries us only so far. His method infers strategic motives from observed acts, illuminated by years of close ethnographic study. It does more than impute intention. But how can we today amass enough observable data to ground inference from a single act, statement, or gesture from a century ago? The answer is immersion in the subject's lifeworld: years spent absorbing his context, reading every published word by him, knowing his entire archive. Only then is one in an epistemic position to interpret his politics.

My approach breaks with Scott's in two further ways. First, Scott draws a stark line between infrapolitics and ordinary politics, claiming the former follows an entirely different logic. He insists no strong public claims are made; every act is intended to obscure the actor's true intention behind a veil of innocence. The politics of the oppressed is a war of symbols, forever cold. This view overstates invisibility. The oppressed do cover their tracks to avoid harm, which, in the end, "eliminates much of the documentary evidence that might convince social scientists and historians that real politics was taking place."¹¹⁶

Here, Scott veers toward Leo Strauss's account of classical philosophers who masked their true teachings.¹¹⁷ There is a difference between concealment and ambiguity, however. Strategic ambiguity allowed Washington to make subtle criticisms of the South while retaining the plausible deniability of having done so. He also did not confine himself to oblique criticisms. Washington worked behind the scenes with moderates from both political parties to kill disenfranchisement laws and to cause bills to languish in legislative committee. The sociologist Max Weber, who admired Washington personally and visited Tuskegee Institute in 1904, could have been speaking of the shrewd and yet virtuous college president when he wrote that the work of a politician is "a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective." Weber thought a true political leader soberly armed himself with steadfastness.¹¹⁸

Second, Scott confines resistance to informal networks of kin, neighbors, and friends.¹¹⁹ That may be true of the groups he studies, but it scarcely fits black politics in the Jim Crow South. The resistance I describe drew its strength from institutions, formal and informal organizations that supplied the skills, aptitudes, and resources to make resistance possible.¹²⁰ These subaltern spaces nurtured solidarity, coordinated interests, enabled collective action, and sustained a more durable politics. But rooting resistance in institutions carried costs. Members muted their voices out of responsibility to the group. The institutions themselves—built of brick, timber, and stone—were targets, exposed to terrorism, which only deepened the need for dark virtues. The larger point is that politics under extremity is more intricate than mere deviance and sabotage, and less public than mass mobilization. It occupies a middle ground between the pilfering peasant and the civil rights leader.

Institutions leave chains of receipts that shadow who or what passes through them.¹²¹ These records form some of the most essential transcripts of Washington's political thought. I have delved into the institutions he ran and recovered from their archives the receipts that document his beliefs, intentions, judgments, and conduct.¹²² Errors and blunders often demanded explanation; I have searched for moments when Washington was forced to respond privately, responses that unwittingly expose his thinking and motives and show how often his true aims diverged from his public words. Hidden transcripts are not free of ambiguity or deceit, but a pattern emerges when enough are studied. Records of practice, finance, and curriculum carry less bias and can corroborate or contest claims made elsewhere. If Washington told a friend he was funding a test case against vagrancy laws, we need not take him at his word. We can trace the correspondence, follow the money to his lawyers, track the case through the courts, and watch its reception in the press. Since words cost less than lawyers, I follow the money. When claims in a text conflicted,

archival materials helped me adjudicate among those assertions, allowing me—slowly, haltingly, but with growing assurance—to identify his true beliefs.

Substantively, this method allows me to re-read Washington as developing a rich account of the politics, ethics, and practice of the oppressed. His focus on dark virtues shows how under extreme conditions those subject to violent oppression often develop forms of resistance that diverge from the type of public reason-giving and transparency associated with political engagement in a liberal democracy. What emerges is an account of Washington as a thoughtful theorist and practitioner of political realism—of how to relate means and ends to pursue change under conditions of intense structural constraint. In addition to sketching the utility of such tragic realism, this book also considers its potential dangers, as underscored by Ida B. Wells (chapter 9) and W.E.B. Du Bois (chapter 10): how the practice of dark virtues reinforces the racist ideology underlying Jim Crow and undermines the dignity of the practitioners of such realism. Whether one ultimately agrees or disagrees with Washington's politics, he was among the great American contributors to the realist tradition and, if anything, the great American interlocutor in the canon of political thought with figures like Machiavelli.

Essentially, I have treated Booker T. Washington as an ethical case study of political leadership under conditions of extremity—circumstances in which declaring your true convictions openly is too costly for yourself and for the group you represent. What we call radical politics usually presumes that defiance will not end in long prison terms, exile, or death. Most progressives today consider themselves an unflinching radical like Du Bois, but when faced with actual tyranny, most conduct themselves like Washington. They reach for masks to keep their jobs, to feed their children, or to simply remain in the country. Because the United States has not faced, in recent decades, anything akin to Jim Crow, we have grown impatient with realism. Perhaps only by backsliding into tyranny will we appreciate the tragic realism of Booker T. Washington.

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