

“Frederick Douglass, the Self-Made Man, and Racial Uplift”
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In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin captures the general conception of self-made men. The basic idea is that a person of lowly origins (the son of a candle-maker in Franklin’s case), against steep odds, struggles out of his low station to achieve a new and successful identity. The key components of this rise are hard work and a steadfast moral character. The idea of the self-made man is an important aspect of the Horatio Alger’s rags to riches story.

In this paper, I shall explain what Douglass means by self-made-men (persons)¹ by contrasting his account with the one offered by Benjamin Franklin². Then I shall spell out in some detail Douglass’ account of what morally decent people are allowed and required to do in their efforts to overcome prolonged and systemic oppression. Next, I shall compare the views of Bernard Boxill³, Douglass⁴, and Booker T. Washington⁵ on racial uplift. Finally, I interpret and explain Douglass’ views about what self-made people should do to combat racial oppression and how his views differ from Booker T. Washington, one of his most famous contemporaries.

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¹ Frederick Douglass, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself,” in Nina Baym, ed., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th edition, New York: Norton (2003): 2032-97 and Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” in John Blassingame and John McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One, Vol. 5*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1992):545-75.

² Benjamin Franklin, “The Autobiography,” in Baym (2003): 538-610.

³ Bernard Boxill, *Blacks and Social Justice*, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld (1984): 176-179 & 191-195.

⁴ Frederick Douglass, “The Present and Future of the Colored Race in America: An Address Delivered in Brooklyn, New York, on 15 May 1863,” in Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 3 (1985); Frederick Douglass, “The Negro Problem: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on 21 October 1890, in Blassingame and McKivigan, eds, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, vol. 4 (1992).

⁵ Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*; Booker T. Washington, *My Larger Education*; Booker T. Washington, “Atlanta Exposition Address