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 story from rags to riches.

In this paper, I shall explain what Douglass means by self-made-men (persons) by contrasting his account with the one offered by Benjamin Franklin. 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 Boxill, Douglass, and Booker T. Washington 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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