



Self, other and other-self: going beyond the self/other binary in contemporary consciousness

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Abstract

Primarily relying on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois and Niklas Luhmann, this article discusses the effects of the mass media on contemporary consciousness, identity and self/other relations. This article proposes an approach to the self/other binary which opens up the possibilities for relations between individuals by including a third term, the other-self, which allows for a fluid, contextualized understanding of the self in a spectrum of relatedness to others in any given moment.

Keywords

Self/other binary, identity, relationality, mass media

The binary of self and other is perhaps one of the most basic theories of human consciousness and identity, claiming, in short, that the existence of an other, a not-self, allows the possibility or recognition of a self. In other words: *I see you. I do not control your body or hear your thoughts. You are separate. You are not me. Therefore, I am me.* The self/other binary seems to be an accepted division of how the modern individual comprehends who s/he is, by recognizing what s/he is not. Variations of this binary appear in the work of numerous thinkers², including media theorist Niklas Luhmann and racial theorist W.E.B. Du Bois. Luhmann uses the terms self-reference and other-reference to discuss the system of the mass media, while Du Bois uses the term double-consciousness to discuss the position of black people in white-controlled America at the turn of twentieth century. This essay seeks go beyond binary thinking to explore what happens when one relates to the other, seeing one's self in another's image, or when

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² The self/other concept is originally attributed to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). Additional scholars who use the concept include Williams (1997), Butler (2004), Butler (2006), Lorber (1994) and many others.

one behaves differently than one would typically act, causing the self to appear as other to the self. Using the work of Luhmann and Du Bois together, despite their stylistic and temporal differences, allows interesting insight into identity and media relationships. This, this essay will show how, particularly for the contemporary individual under the pressure of extensive mass media exposure, the self/other binary can triangulate into self, other and other-self.

In his text, *The Reality of the Mass Media* (2000), Niklas Luhmann establishes the fact that observing systems, specifically the system of the mass media, must distinguish between self-reference and other-reference in order to create boundaries to continue and sustain the closed system (5, 10). In the case of individuals, however, references and cognitive boundaries are not so clear cut. Instead, people understand things relationally and comparatively (Kenny and West 120). *I see two middle-aged white women in the mall, one is my mother and one is her friend from work. Both of these people are other than myself, but I immediately recognize and connect to the other person whom I call 'mother' in a way I do not connect with the woman whose general characteristics are exactly the same.*

While this essay is not specifically, or perhaps strictly, about mass media as defined by Luhmann, which excludes theatrical productions as well as interaction and interpretation, this discussion does relate to mass media in that the appearance of reality produced by the system of the mass media affects the interacting individuals with whom this essay is concerned (Luhmann 2, 4). Luhmann illuminates part of the relationship between the mass media and individuals by stating that “the reality of the mass media is the reality of second order observation” (85). He further explains that exposure to mass media teaches how to watch and observe by making its listeners and viewers into observers of observers (Luhmann 4). Through this act of second-order observation we become aware of our observer status and are thus able, even compelled, to observe themselves. Luhmann makes the connection between this observation and the self/other binary most clear when he states that “every observation has to work with the distinction of self-reference and other-reference and must fill the functional position that is other-reference *with some kind of content*” (90, emphasis added). As to what that content might be in the context of individuals, Luhmann does not explicitly state, however, he does hint that people fill the other-reference with content that is connected with themselves because “in order to be able to enter into communication, individuals have to assume that there are similarities of experience³ between them and others in spite of their systems of consciousness operating in fully individualized, idiosyncratic ways” (81). *I meet a man at a writer's conference, not knowing anything about him other than what I can see (Asian, twenty-ish, well-dressed, etc.), I fill the other-reference with content from the experience we currently share, that of the writers conference. I talk about books.*

³ A related theory of the assumption of shared experience in relation to communication involving metaphor was developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). Their cognitive metaphor theory, though problematic, is widely used. For a critique of the assumption of shared (bodily) experience see Vidali (2010).

A similarity of experience between self and other, namely black and white Americans, is a central topic in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (originally published in 1903). In the text, he uses a multidisciplinary approach, including history, sociology, ethnography, music, and personal essay, to analyze the situation of African Americans in the early twentieth century and to propose ways to improve the situation to his white and black readers. Du Bois' text is perhaps most known for the concept of double-consciousness which he explains in the following well-known paragraph, which is best quoted in full:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (9)

This paragraph is the only mention of double-consciousness as an explicit term in *Souls* and yet the rest of the text shows in full, through stories, statistics and ideas, how and why this two-ness exists in the first place. It is perhaps easy to focus on the text's consistent contrasting between blacks and whites as a self/other binary, but in actuality, double-consciousness suggests the possibility of both/and, a non-binary existence which has implications for all groups. Ange-Marie Hancock calls Du Bois' text "pre-constructionist," stating that since *Souls*' 1903 publication, Du Bois' "double-consciousness theory has extended its philosophical reach... [to be] an explanation for a certain kind of alienation experienced by marginalized peoples of many ethnicities and nationalities" (88, 87). Since Du Bois writes specifically on the relationship between black and white Americans, this essay will use race as a primary frame of reference, however, it's important to know that self/other/other-self is not exclusive to black people or even people of color. Like Hancock, I believe Du Bois "challenged the very binary of pure black victim/pure white oppressor that characterized much of African American thought during his life" and that the complexity of his theory, while not explicitly expounded upon in *Souls*, is indeed "not limited black Americans" (Hancock 97).

Self, other, other-self

The idea of double-consciousness, of the existence of both/and within the psychology and identity of an individual, complicates the stark boundaries of the self/other binary. This idea is support by psychological research in which "the self is often viewed as fundamentally interpersonal, composed of a repertoire of relational selves" (Kenny and West 120). In the humanities and other social sciences, as Hancock indicates, the concept of both/and sitting just below the surface of the theory of double-consciousness, has

been picked up and used by a variety of other thinkers, particularly feminist, black feminist, class and racial theorists. Deborah K. King uses double and triple jeopardy in relation to black women and black working class women (King 297). Gloria Anzaldúa develops a theory of mestiza consciousness for Mexican, Mexican American and Chicana women (Anzaldúa). Chen Xu writes about the existence of a third consciousness in the novelist Richard Wright's black male characters (Xu 40). In many ways, the use of this both/and, non-binary thinking is not unique, yet I am proposing an approach which takes a broad enough stance to be applicable to multiple groups at once, not exclusively those which are multiple marginalized in a traditional identity politics sense.

The basic self/other binary makes sense in that when one sees another person and recognizes that that individual is separate physically and mentally, then one understands that the separate person is not the self, is an other which is separate and cannot be controlled or comprehended physically and mentally, at least not as much as the self can be. On a basic physical and mental level, this division is acceptable, however, in a survey of psychological research on the self, Kenny and West conclude that "[t]he relationship between self-perception and perception of others is bidirectional," so though the basic theoretical division may be clear, the psychological influence is not (Kenny and West 134). Judith Butler proposes the concept of "vulnerability" to understand the way in which the self/other binary is not simple and clean, but rather the we are given over to one another and vulnerable to the touch and emotional effects of violence by or loss of the other (*Precarious Life* 31-32, 42-43, *Undoing Gender* 22-24). It is the vulnerability of the self and other, the permeability of our boundaries that allows for the possibility of the other-self.

Complicating this situation slightly, what happens when there is a third entity in the picture? What happens when the self comes into contact with two or more others, when one is hailed, to use Althusser, by more than one ideological position at the same time (127-187)? How do perceptions of self and other(s) change? It is in this situation in which it becomes possible to explore how the self can triangulate via a force which causes the self to identify with or behave as an other so that there then becomes a spectrum of relatedness between self and other, between which lies the other-self. For example, if a black self enters a room in which there is a white person and a black person, cognitively (though perhaps not consciously) the self would likely view the white person as more other and the black person as more like the self. But this example is too simple. When one enters a room s/he doesn't just notice races, but also gender, age, ability and a variety of other identifiers which affect our perception of others. And furthermore when one enters a room of people with whom one is acquainted, one is able recognize and assess multiple visible and non-visible identities of those individuals as well. It is not that every black person most identifies with every other black person, but that when in contact and communication with others, people are making constant calculations of their relatedness with others, or lack thereof. It is important to note, however, that psychological studies on self-other relations in group contexts show that the amount of acquaintance does not seem to affect how one sees one's self in relation to others as much as group membership does when the self identifies the other as being from a different group (Kenny and West 131). *I'm having a conversation at a party with a person I*

feel polar opposite to (a straight, white, rich, Republican man) and yet in the course of the conversation he mentions he grew up in Kentucky and went to the same undergraduate university as me. He immediately ceases to seem so other. In an instant, an other can suddenly become an other-self, a person with whom we somehow identify, whom we, in media systems language, re-incorporate into ourselves⁴. This other-self is not limited to people physically present either. One may also find an other-self connection in advertisement images, movies, or television shows, for as Niklas Luhmann shows, and as I will later discuss, mass media play a significant role in the contemporary sense of self.

In addition to an other-self occurring in relation to a separate person (physically or non-physically present) with whom the self identifies, other-self can also manifest cognitively as the self behaving as other. In this case, the triangulation occurs not because of an actual third person or image of a person, but via the force of a connection/identity factor which the self sees as a void between the self and other. In this instance, in an attempt to either fill the void for connection or extend the void for protection, the self behaves in a way that feels mentally and physically other than typical self behavior. *I am meeting with a professor for the first time. I feel she is far more intelligent and well read than me. I try to use academic language in the conversation and name-drop theorists I am familiar with. When she mentions authors I have not read, I pretend as if I know them.* Here, one senses one's self as being or behaving as an other-self in order to bring the self closer to the other across the spectrum of relatedness or to force the other further away. In this manifestation of the other-self, the self might assume, based on stereotypes or other socially received information, that the other will behave or think in a certain way. In response, the self might then act as an other-self in an attempt to communicate based on those stereotypes. On the other hand, the self might believe that based on the self's own social position, that the other has stereotypical expectations of the self to behave or think in a certain way, and in response act as an other-self in ways that either confirm or reject those stereotypes.

In these situations, the psychological term metaperception, is highly important. Metaperception is basically "what people think others think of them" and this "plays a key role in the formation of the self-concept... more so than other perceptions" (Kenny and West 125). Here, it is metaperception which makes the self think so much about how the other perceives them and then causes the self to behave as an other-self. This definition of metaperception almost explicitly replicates Du Bois' explanation of double-consciousness as "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 9). A recognizable example of this might be the high school student who sees another student as other because that student is more "popular" and in response the less popular student behaves as other than themselves in an attempt to connect to and become more like the popular student (discussing a new movie, complimenting their style, using their lingo, etc.). On the other side of that, however, a non-popular student

⁴ On the idea of relating to an other in hybrid ways, especially in relation to minoritarian subjects in subcultural spheres, I am influenced here by the work of Muñoz (1999). However, I am attempting here to develop a theoretical stance which can incorporate majoritarian positions and identities as well.

could just as easily behave as an other-self in ways that are spiteful or bizarre when interacting with a popular student as an attempt to increase the void between them and socially/psychically protect the self from extended interaction with the other. In these two ways, behaving as an other-self is a way in which the self identifies a person as particularly or significantly other and then makes choices/changes in personal behavior to connect with or create distance from that other.

Other-self: a literary example

To illustrate this second form of other-self (the self behaving as other) a bit more clearly, I refer to Tayna Barfield's play *The Blue Door*. In this play, the main character Lewis, a highly educated black male mathematician is experiencing insomnia in the night after his (white) wife leaves him. In the midst of this self-tortuous, sleepless night, Lewis is visited by ghosts of his male ancestors and deceased family members, while he also tells his own stories of how he came to this place of being so alone. Toward the beginning of the play, as the insomnia begins, Lewis sets the stage for the observing/observed severed self he embodies throughout the rest of the show, saying: "I have the sensation of being watched. I watch my wife leave. As she leaves, I divorce myself from myself. I become two selves — myself and the self that watches myself" (Barfield 12). In this division of self, Lewis has a moment of realizing the significance of race in his relationship with his wife. He says:

I am suddenly aware of the difference between my wife and me. Not that this hasn't occurred to me before. But I am suddenly *aware*, in a very new and unsettling way. We live very different lives, and it isn't only because I grew up in a large metropolitan area, not because of tree anxiety but because I can't fade into the country. I can't take a weekend trip without a strained obviousness that I am there. There's no choice attached to my difference, I can't suppress it in order to grant my wife a weekend in the country. Even if I dress differently, cut my hair differently, speak differently, I can't slip into the expanse... I can't not be black. (Barfield 15; emphasis in the original)

Here, Lewis begins to express the idea that there are inescapable effects of race in his life *in addition* to other factors such as where he grew up, something which he previously attempted to deny, believing firmly that with enough dedication, work, and intelligence one can essentially overcome all obstacles and influence of blackness. The psychological significance of this denial and the resulting personality and behavioral shifts Lewis must constantly perform is explained by Kenny and West when they write: "Self-concept differentiation also predicted mental health outcomes: Individuals who saw themselves very differently across roles were more depressed and neurotic and had lower self-esteem than individuals who saw themselves as similar across roles" (120).

At the start of the play, Lewis expresses an initial sense of two-ness like in Du Bois, but later Lewis clearly experiences the manifestation of an other-self: a third version of himself (or perhaps one of the many) whom he cannot fully recognize. In this portion of

the play, Lewis relates a story about attending a party at the Dean's house after accepting a position in the math department. On the way there, Lewis gets nervous wondering "what if they don't know I'm black?" then immediately explaining to the audience: "[h]owever, when we arrive it is instantly clear that they had been forewarned. They've been expecting me, and they are delighted to meet a black mathematician. I am, in fact, a rarity (like gourmet food that has been sent from abroad, ordered at an exorbitant price)" (Barfield 25). Despite this moment of humor, Lewis continues to uncomfortably relate the proceedings of the night, describing a specific moment among some of the professors' wives when he suddenly feels himself as being/behaving as other than or separate from himself:

I feel like a movie star until I notice one of the women staring at my hands like they are strange objects and she twitches with nervousness. And I wonder, hasn't she ever seen black hands [...] Is she scared of my hands? I drop my hands into my lap. (A non-threatening gesture that seems a little feminine.) But maybe I've imagined her fear and my whole body tightens not knowing where to put my hands. A part of me wants to take these strange objects and strike her — and then I become afraid for the woman and guilty.

The funny story continues. My laughter is now forced. Fight or flight. When will this terrible party be over? I hear the sound of my laughter rushing in my ears. I watch myself laugh. I observe myself observing myself trying to laugh. And the continual observation and self-consciousness seems to last a lifetime, but in fact it is only a few minutes. (Barfield 25-26)

Here the othering of self via observation, the triangulation of self, other and other-self caused by Lewis' heightened awareness of his race in a room full of white people, is explicit and obvious. Lewis verbalizes what is perhaps an often mental occurrence for the self when in a situation in which one feels s/he does not belong. Even when Lewis breaks off telling the story, the specter of Lewis' brother Rex speaks to the audience for him: "Lewis tries not to look at the woman looking at his hands" (Barfield 27). In a society in which race and other identity factors play such a huge role in how one is treated and in return, expected to behave, there's no escape from the material situation of such identities, even though, contemporarily, we intellectually understand things like race, sex, gender, class, sexuality and disability to be socially constructed. As Rex says to his brother earlier in the play: "Lewis, you a black man... Not a person who *happens* to be black... It's not an elective state of being" (Barfield 16).

The above party situation in *The Blue Door* and the previous italicized situations of the self making connections and disconnections with other individuals are just a few examples of the two ways in which other-self can manifest. To repeat, the triangulation of the self into self, other and other-self happens when a force, namely some recognized difference between the self and the other individual(s), causes the self to either identify with particular person(s) as an other-self or causes the self to sense a void between the self and other, which the self attempts to either bridge or make wider by behaving as an other-self. This concept, with its different yet connected variations of application, is

accounts for interpersonal behavior resulting from a variety of social identities and situations rather than specific social groups.

Social salience: a cautionary note

While the examples I have used to discuss the idea of self/other/other-self have been exclusively fictional, they do have real life correlates. Human beings do not solely operate on the most basic physical and mental levels which substantiate the original self/other binary. Instead, “the primary reality lies not in ‘the world out there’, but rather in the cognitive operations themselves” (Luhmann 6). People understand the world through their experiences and memories, some of which are collective, social and historical, and some which are quite individual and local. In this respect, I agree with José Esteban Muñoz who asserts that when approaching these issues theorists and scholars must understand identity making as “a process that takes place at the point of the collision of” essentialist and constructionist perspectives, since neither can alone give the full scope of identity formation (6). *As a black woman I have experienced racism. I have been face to face with white supremacist group members. I have been told my performance poetry should be a rap. I’ve had my hair touched by strangers because it is so “interesting.” Due my age, location of birth, and maybe luck too, I have not experienced segregation, lynching or police brutality. I have not been denied a job because of my race.* One’s experience of blackness, femaleness, queerness, disabledness, etc. will vary drastically individual to individual based on other personal and identity factors. One’s perception of events is colored by one’s variety of experiences, or as Luhmann says: “in the system’s perception, the distinction between the world as it is and the world as it is observed becomes blurred” (Luhmann 11).

It is important to state here that while the previous examples of other-self via the connection of alma mater or via the void of high school popularity may hold true, some identities are more likely than others to be the forces of triangulation into self, other and other-self. Those identities are also then more likely to take precedence when creating cognitive spectrums of relatedness between self and other because they have more cultural salience, defined by Robert Entman as something which is “more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences,” thereby increasing chance that such identities will be perceived and processed (53). Socially salient identities are therefore those which have a history of systematic oppression or privilege and which tend to be the most important in the psychological workings involved in communication and relations with other human beings. That said, while race, gender, class/socio-economic status, sexuality, and ability/disability tend to be listed as the most socially salient identities in early twenty-first century American culture, it is impossible to give a complete list of salient identities since all such positions are temporally, geographically and contextually informed, meaning what is most socially salient here and now may not hold true for the past, the future or other locations⁵. Black feminist theorists have long identified the

⁵ For a discussion of contextualization, especially in terms of geographic location, see Mohanty (1988).

double bind of being black and female, of being forced to choose which identity comes first and I am in agreement with theorists such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins⁶ in believing that one identity does not inherently come before the others; rather only in specific situations is it possible (though not always) to see one identity as having particular or more social weight. I am thus encouraging here an intersectional⁷ approach to identity through self/other/other-self which takes into consideration the dominant and marginalized identity of a subject.

Mass media and the proliferation of identity

As mentioned earlier, I am attempting to develop this idea of self/other/other-self in a way that is useful for referencing a variety of identities. However, the very existence of so many socially salient identities is truly a contemporary problem. If Du Bois believed that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line,” then perhaps of problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the multiple-identity line, for even dominant identity positions are now being interrogated for their historical development and contemporary contextual nuances⁸. Indeed, we have learned to become observers of observers, observers of ourselves and in this act of constant observation, of being told and taught about the many identity positions we occupy—some marginalized, some privileged—our sense of self has become severed or, if you prefer, multiplied. Du Bois suggests that this severing/multiplication happened specifically to African Americans which “limited their ability to view themselves independently” (Hancock 89). However, with the heightened emphasis on identity and multiculturalism today, we are all confronted with the total proliferation of our various social positions and that confrontation happens most forcefully in our contact with the system of the mass media.

When Du Bois was writing at the turn of the twentieth century, the extent of the mass media—at that time mostly limited to print newspapers and books since radio was just beginning to become commercially available—was nothing compared to what we experience today in an age of hyper-immediate technologies. Today technology such as digital television, cell phones, smart phones, and the internet are available and used in many locales extensively. Du Bois claimed that the four “main lines of action and communication” between the races were “physical proximity,” “economic relations,” “political relations” and “intellectual contact and commerce,” which he called “the less tangible, but highly important” form of interaction between the races (Du Bois 118). Today, due to the compression of time and space⁹ created by the far reach of technology, physical proximity (or lack thereof) does not necessarily determine the amount of knowledge we have, or think we have, about a people or place. *I’ve seen live images from China. I’ve had Skype conversations with friends in Spain. I can fly cross country*

⁶ See hooks (1981) and Hill-Collins (2000)

⁷ See Crenshaw (1989)

⁸ See recent texts on masculinity, whiteness or heterosexuality, such as Hill (1997) and Katz (2007)

⁹ See Harvey (2001)

in a few hours. I purchase tea online directly from Africa. I gave money to earthquake victims in Haiti. Indeed, even economic and political relations have shifted into intensely complex global, international and transnational phenomena due to technological and industrial developments. Perhaps then for contemporary purposes, the most useful of Du Bois' lines of action and communication is that of the intangible intellectual commerce, which today we might identify as the mass media: the contemporary version of a "community of intellectual life or point of transference where the thoughts and feelings" come into "direct contact," with now an innumerable amount of other human beings (Du Bois 130).

This identification of the mass media as the most contemporarily important line of action and communication between different groups of people reconnects with media theorist Niklas Luhmann. He writes that "[t]he social 'innocence' of the mass media, their harmlessness, is based on the fact that they coerce no one" (Luhmann 86). On the surface this statement seems true enough, for in no way do media outlets force people to buy products or act, dress, or think a certain way. However, scholars have done extensive work on the effects of the media¹⁰ on the minds, bodies and behaviors of individuals and the use of quotes around the word *innocence* makes clear that Luhmann understands there to be more to his statement than what first appears. As bell hooks writes: "the field of representation remains a place of struggle" (*Black Looks* 3). Later in *The Reality of the Mass Media*, Luhmann writes at length:

If we still define freedom as the absence of coercion, this function of the mass media to constitute freedom remains latent, or at least it is not discussed. One can only suppose that the mass media lead to an overestimation of others' freedom, whereas each individual is only too aware of the cognitive barriers to the amount of freedom he or she has. And this disbalancing of the attribution of freedom may have far more consequences in a society which at all levels has vastly expanded the scope for making decisions and has generated corresponding uncertainties, than the question of who definitively is being forced to engage or not to engage in a particular action. (Luhmann 87)

Here, despite Luhmann's distaste for discussion of individuals and interpretation, it becomes clear that media do affect individuals' personal understanding of the world, themselves and others, even if, in Luhmann's assessment, it is a benign effect that results in overall latency of the mass media system in relation to creating or preventing freedom. If the mass media have become the central lines of communication and action between us because technology in contemporary culture has seemingly collapsed or consolidated the other of Du Bois' lines of physical proximity, political relations and economic relations, then it behooves us to look closely at how this primary mode affects the way we understand the freedom of ourselves and others, creating the heightened awareness of our multiple social identities and severing the self into self, other and other-self in

¹⁰ See, for example, Bryant and Zillman (2002)

personal interactions, which are now occurring either physically or distantly through the printed word, digital image, moving image and other technological means¹¹.

Recalling Luhmann's definition of freedom which substantiates the argument in the above quoted paragraph one may notice that he defines freedom as absence of coercion which is only a partial definition of the word. Merriam-Webster defines freedom as "the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action" (Freedom 1; emphasis added). By not depicting a full range of choices for particular individuals (i.e. rarely showing black or female doctors, or hardly ever staging wheelchair users in positive protagonist positions, etc.) or on the flip side, always showing certain individuals in a wide range of roles and activities, while mostly placing marginalized group members in stock or stereotypical roles, does the mass media constrain the choices and actions of oppressed groups? Luhmann would argue no, that media outlets do not have that sort of control, but the piling up of various skewed, damaging or demeaning media images does seem to create an environment where, even if choices and actions aren't literally limited by laws, the created mental limitations for thinking about certain groups do have a direct impact on the consciousness of contemporary individuals. As Entman has argued: "Receivers' responses are clearly affected if they perceive and process information about one interpretation and possess little or incommensurable data about alternatives. This is why exclusion of interpretations by frames [such as the mass media] is as significant to outcomes as inclusion" (54). Furthermore, Du Bois writes:

It is, in fine, the atmosphere of the land, the thought and feeling, *the thousand and one little actions* which go to make up life. In any community or nation it is these little things which are *most elusive to the grasp and yet most essential* to any clear conception of the group life taken as a whole. (129; emphasis added).

In the current moment, the thousand and one little actions have been expanded into the billion and one little actions, words and images of the mass media: elusive, momentary, and yet essential to an understanding of the twenty-first century psychology which frames the way people interact with one another.

This is not to say that the system of the mass media is entirely evil, suspect, or unreliable—after all media cannot, as Entman states, have a universal impact on all subjects—but there is a need to place some sense of responsibility upon those directly involved, especially those in the upper levels of system (re)creation and circulation (54). At the same time there is a need to heighten individual awareness of the impact that these ever surrounding images, sounds, words and events have upon consciousness and senses of self. If it is true that the mass media can lead one to think that others have more freedom than they actually do, wouldn't it correlate that one could also come to believe that one has *less* freedom than s/he actually has, therefore potentially limiting the

¹¹ For a specific discussion on the issue of experiencing ourselves as other in media representation see Hall (1993).

way one thinks or acts¹²? It seems that if the former statement made by Luhmann is true, then the latter implication must also be true as well. While all of this may be pure matter of perception, I again quote Luhmann who explains that in this current technologically advanced system of the mass media which so dominates the way we receive information, “the distinction between the world as it is and the world as it is observed becomes blurred” and as a result, “[i]t is sufficient to weld together one’s own view of reality with one’s own identity and to assert it as a projection. Because reality is no longer subject to consensus anyway” (11, 94).

Conclusion

Does all this mean then that there is no such thing as reality? Perhaps so if reality means everyone all must agree on a single interpretation of current events. Perhaps not if reality means a solid understanding/interpretation by a particular individual. While this concept of self/other/other-self does imply that reality is highly individualized, not a matter of consensus and therefore more an issue of experience-based perception than fact or inherent truth, it does not forgo the possibility of altering reality via education and consciousness-raising and it does not assume that all aspects of reality are solely individual or easily alterable at that. These features of self/other/other-self are evidenced by the amount of weight issues of group membership have been given within this essay, acknowledging that historical group experience can affect later group members far removed from the actual reality of the earlier group situation. This comes up clearly throughout *Souls* as Du Bois discusses the ways decades of slavery influenced the actions and mentalities of black people born years (and perhaps one would now argue a century) after slavery ended. Group membership and a history of (group or personal/individual) marginalization—mental, physical, economic and otherwise—cannot be forgotten when surveying and consequently denying the self/other binary. In light of group influence then, I disagree with Du Bois’ call to “turn more and more to conscientious study of the phenomena of race-contact,—to a study frank and fair, and not falsified and colored by our wishes or our fears” (Du Bois 118). As Luhmann has made clear there is no study, no contact, no reality without the color of our wishes and fears; all one can do is attempt to recognize the influences of personal experiences, group history and the mass media, and then mediate their effect on inter-personal relationships, one’s position within the spectrum of self, other-self and other.

It is in this self-mediation there is vast possibility. The concept of self/other/other-self, by denying the rigidity of the self/other binary, leads to investigation of the spectrum between self and other, locating the many other-selves which exist in between. By doing this and learning to recognize similarities and connections with those previously viewed as inherently other, it becomes possible to find more other-selves, individuals with whom we are connected in unexpected ways. I have proposed here an approach to

¹² For more on this in relation to black people specifically, see hooks (1992) who writes that “we have collectively made few, if any, revolutionary interventions in the area of race and representation” (2).

understanding the self which goes beyond the self/other binary. Using Niklas Luhmann, W.E.B. Du Bois, and other interdisciplinary resources, I have suggested that while self and other exist, there is a third element of the other-self. The other-self is created in personal physical and non-physical interactions when the force of a socially significant identity factor forces the self to triangulate into self, other and other-self. Other-self is defined as either an other individual with whom the self identifies and connects with or as the self behaving as other in order to fill or expand the void of identity between the self and other. This concept thus encourages both/and thinking in relation to the self and other, to show that there is a spectrum of relatedness upon which self and other lie.

Additionally, I have shown that the reason the concept of a spectrum of relatedness is necessary for understanding the psychology of the contemporary individuals' conception of self is because of the influence of the mass media which has inundated people with a plethora of identity positions which they constantly occupy and negotiate. Though this essay most often used race as an illustrative example, self/other/other-self is applicable to multiple identity positions, even those which are not most widely socially salient, such as the given example of high school students. Finally, a charge may be leveled that this essay suggests that there is one inherent, solid self against which the other and other-self play. While the argument here does not insist upon unalterable, inherent self or soul, this essay does assume that most individuals have, at any given moment, a firm idea of who they are and are able to locate themselves in relation to others. Consequently, this essay also assumes that most individuals are able to sense when they are behaving in a forced or unusual way, even if no one else notices it. For some readers, these assumptions might seem to ignore important philosophical debates about the fractures state of the postmodern subject¹³. However, the point of this essay has not been to limit the possibility of a self that changes, develops or even fractures, rather, I have suggested that people can and do know themselves, if only partially, and they relate to one another based upon both the self they know in that specific contextualized moment and the many other-selves they find dancing around them in the spectrum of relatedness we all constantly oscillate within.

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¹³ For an overview of some of these theories and debates, see chapter one of Sandoval (2000).

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