



2018

Living with Others: The African American Experience

Arnold Rampersad
Stanford University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [Physical Sciences and Mathematics Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rampersad, Arnold (2018) "Living with Others: The African American Experience," *The Chautauqua Journal*: Vol. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://encompass.eku.edu/tcj/vol2/iss1/4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Encompass. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Chautauqua Journal by an authorized editor of Encompass. For more information, please contact Linda.Sizemore@eku.edu.

ARNOLD RAMPERSAD

LIVING WITH OTHERS: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The phrase “Living with Others” is especially intriguing in the context of race relations in the United States. At one level, it invites pleasantries about our natural wish for harmony and peace among diverse peoples, along with simple or even simplistic notions about what it takes to achieve this harmony and peace. At another level, however, it has the potential to be something much more complex.

Who are these “others” with whom one would or must live? With this question we come face to face with the matter of the dynamic between what we call the “Self” and the “Other.” In the realms of psychology and philosophy, the Other stands in opposition to the Self and is essential to a definition of the Self. We know who we are in large part by recognizing who we are not. We find this discussion most intriguingly presented, perhaps, in the outlining of the master-slave relationship to be found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Out of Hegel has come a fascinating discourse about the relationship between the Self and the Other. This commentary includes, for example, Simone de Beauvoir, whose influential book, *The Second Sex* (1949), draws on her application of the master-slave dynamic in Hegel to the man-woman dynamic as it has evolved. For our purposes, however, perhaps the most intriguing off-shoot of Hegel is the discussion of the Other to be found in Edward Said’s classic text, *Orientalism* (1978). Said outlined the powerful impulse on the part of imperialism to designate the objects of conquest as “The Other.” And so what we so casually identify as “others” in our title “Living with Others” has the capacity, in the context of race, to be linked to factors and forces involving subordination and conquest.

To speak of living with others against the backdrop of the history of black Americans is to ask the following key question. How does a minority people manage to live with the majority, when those other people, or most of them, have historically conceived of the minority group as the absolute Other—that is, as the embodiment of the opposite of all that is virtuous, beautiful and honorable, and almost incapable of being

fully assimilated? This question faced black Americans virtually from the first days of their presence in America. They had to live with others, who formed the majority, when they knew that the others viewed them as the ultimate Other. To some extent, this challenge still faces the nation.

Perhaps no African American writer has explored more provocatively the question of “living with others” from a black American perspective than the accomplished historian, sociologist, essayist and propagandist, W.E.B. Du Bois. In the first chapter of his classic, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois recalls the moment when “the revelation” broke upon him that he was the Other, the moment “when the shadow swept across me.” He was a little schoolboy in Great Barrington in western Massachusetts. The boys and girls decided to buy visiting cards and exchange the cards among themselves. Then one girl, a newcomer, “refused my card, —refused it peremptorily, with a glance.” At that moment, life changed for Du Bois, in an example of what is, and has been, perhaps the most painful rite of passage for black Americans. “Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness,” Du Bois continued, “that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.” What was the result? “I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows.” But then: “Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the world I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine.”

Du Bois resolved to excel in his studies and bring fame to himself and black America. But, he notes,

with other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny; their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house? The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls straight and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and

unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

We have here the division into three parts of the essential black response in America to its status as the ultimate Other. Among African Americans there are those whom some people would call sycophants, but whom others might call merely passive or even philosophical in the face of oppression. Then there are those some people would call haters, but whom others might call the righteously indignant and properly rebellious. Finally, there are those who recognize the dangers inherent in the two extreme positions and seek a middle way. The irony is that Du Bois himself exemplified each of these three general positions in the course of his long life (1968-1963). We have Du Bois as the young academic historian and sociologist, the champion of a dispassionate, scrupulous kind of writing and, presumably, reflection. Later, we have a disillusioned Du Bois giving vent to radical rage against racism. And we have Du Bois as the voice of an apparently disciplined separatism, as in the fact that near the end of his life he would renounce his American citizenship, join the Communist Party and move to Africa.

Du Bois understood early that he was involved in a drama of the Self and the Other in the context of race, and he grasped its psychological and other implications as no one had done before him. The Negro, he wrote famously in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is “born with a veil, and gifted with 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 twoness, —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.”

This statement captured the imagination of generations of black artists and thinkers in general. Du Bois had identified the black American mind as a living site

where the Self and the Other are locked in a state of constant struggle, a struggle of which whites are (or were) largely unaware. In every mature human being the Self and the Other should be linked in a living synthesis; in the case of African Americans, Du Bois seemed to say, there is, finally, only a volatile antithesis. The challenge of this antithesis has been at the core of the black American experience. Certainly the condition of the black American has improved in the century or more since Du Bois wrote his powerful words. A black American has occupied the White House as President of the United States. And yet the power of this antithesis has not been exhausted. We do not live in a “post-racial” USA. The effects of the antithesis are still many and complex.

But not all African Americans accepted (or accept) Du Bois’ view of racial reality. His major antagonist on this score was Booker T. Washington. The founder of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which he built into one of the best known vocational schools in the world, Washington became the most powerful black American of his age. The key moment in his career was the speech he delivered in 1895 at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta. Here, addressing a predominantly white audience, Washington spoke of the necessity of compromise and accommodation—with blacks compelled by the reality of American life, especially in the South, to do most of the compromising and accommodating. Washington ceded two key positions to whites. One was black acceptance of racial segregation as a way of life; the other was black surrender of the right to vote or to stand as candidates in public elections.

“As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past,” Washington declared in his speech (reprinted in his autobiography, *Up From Slavery* [1901]), as he negotiated the vexed racial area between blacks and whites, “so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours... In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” He continued: “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly, and that progress in the enjoyment of all the privileges that will come to us must be the result of severe and constant struggle rather

than of artificial forcing.” Blacks should one day have “all privileges of the law... but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of these privileges.”

Washington’s doctrine of accommodation and compromise was widely accepted by many, perhaps even most, blacks. Even young Du Bois welcomed it in 1895; but eventually he was one of the leaders in the radical minority opposing it. So too, if one looks to the generations before the existence of these two men, one sees the largely unarticulated but authentic polarization of attitudes about the right way for blacks to be “living with others” in America. Not altogether arbitrarily, four figures step forward here out of the mists of history to guide us by their examples: the poet Phillis Wheatley, the pamphleteer David Walker, the slave insurrectionary Nat Turner and the abolitionist stalwart Frederick Douglass.

Two U.S. Supreme Court decisions also cast light on the dilemma of blackness and otherness in America in the nineteenth century. One is the Dred Scott decision of 1857. In it, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney reminded America that in the eyes of the Founding Fathers of the republic, blacks from the start “had been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations, and so far unfit that they had no rights that the white man was bound to respect.” In some ways, this judicial declaration was the perfect adjunct to the racial science of Taney’s day and age, which held at its most radical level that blacks were a separate species altogether, and not human beings on a genetic par with whites. The other crucial legal decision was the U.S. Supreme Court ruling of 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Here the assertion of a “separate but equal” doctrine set in place the enforced legal separation of blacks from “others” until, nominally at least, the 1950s.

In the 18th century, Phillis Wheatley came to America from Africa as a young slave girl of about seven. Brought up in Boston by a benevolent white family who gave her access to an upper-grade education, she became the first black American and only the second American woman to publish a book of poetry with her *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). Wheatley wrote poems in the neoclassical manner of her day on subjects such as Fancy and Imagination; she showed off a familiarity with

Greek and Roman mythology; she was the author of a nationalistic paean to George Washington that led to an honorable meeting between the revolutionary general and the poet. In other words, Wheatley lived to induce or insinuate herself into the full cultural life of the society in which she lived, appearing to make little distinction between herself and others.

Her brief poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” sums up her combination of intellectual sophistication, on the one hand, and decorous spiritual and perhaps cultural abjection, on the other:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th'angelic train.

But how many people among the whites that she courted saw her as a potential member of “th'angelic train” is open to question. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* Thomas Jefferson made a sneering, perhaps gratuitous, reference to the quality of her poetry. Unable to produce another book, Wheatley slid into an unhappy marriage, poverty and obscurity. Whether she died satisfied with the basic choices she had made in life—or the choices thrust upon her—we do not know. What we can surmise is that her professional failure was practically foreordained by her status as a black in America. Her evident desire to be absorbed into the Other clearly was unfulfilled.

When we venture into the early nineteenth century, we see a radically different approach to the question of “living with others” when one is black and the others are white, in the writings of David Walker (1785-1830), and notably so in his landmark text, *David Walker's Appeal in Four Articles: Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States*

of America (1829). Here there is no dalliance with compromise and civility, no curtsying before whiteness and privilege. Underlying Walker's *Appeal* is the "full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began." Severe in his analysis of the black American condition, Walker expected to be "assailed" not only by slaveholders and others of their ilk but also by some of his fellow blacks.

Walker took the issue of "living with others" close to its most controversial limits. This, especially in the case of race in America, was the question of intermarriage between blacks and whites. "Do they not institute laws to prohibit us from marrying among the whites?" he asked (as indeed white Americans were doing). "I would not give a pinch of snuff to be married to any white person I ever saw in all the days of my life." Walker was even more caustic when he declared "that the black man, or man of colour, who will leave his own colour (provided he can get one, who is good for any thing) and marry a white woman, to be a double slave to her, just because she is white, ought to be treated by her as he surely will be, viz: as a NIGER!!!!" Although Walker prophesized that "there is a day coming when they [whites] will be glad enough to get into the company of the blacks," his writings are so profoundly pessimistic that it is hard for the reader to imagine such a change.

Reviled and banned in the South, David Walker's *Appeal* possibly contributed to the most violent slave insurrection in American history, when in August 1831 Nat Turner led an uprising in the slave state of Virginia. Here again, religion—Christianity itself—underwent strains and stresses as it negotiated the territory of slavery and racism. Religion had been a main factor in pacifying blacks, but the result in this case was apocalyptic fire. On a particular date that Turner later recalled by heart, he declared that

I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first... And by signs in the heavens that it would

make known to me when... I should arise and prepare myself, and slay my enemies with their own weapons. (*Confessions of Nat Turner*, 1831)

By the time Turner's campaign was over, about sixty whites, including many women and children, had been slain. In the aftermath, many blacks were killed in retribution.

To almost all whites, the revolt was an abomination. However, many blacks undoubtedly saw Nat Turner as a revolutionary hero. To do so is understandable, perhaps, but also requires at the very least a convolution of ethics made inevitable by the ruthless dynamic of racial "othering." What is evil in one context becomes "good" in another context, a context in which religion, philosophy and psychology are placed under vicious stress.

It was left to the former slave Frederick Douglass, author of three memoirs, including his bestselling *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), to chart the middle ground between the piety and submissiveness of Wheatley, on the one hand, and the despair and radicalism of Walker and Turner, on the other. Buoyed by his prominence in the abolitionist movement, Douglass would emerge as the preeminent black leader during much of the nineteenth century. His contentious and defiant but ultimately inclusive vision of America led him to become a leading supporter of the rights of women; he was the only man to speak at the historic 1848 convention of women activists at Seneca Falls. Both before and after the Civil War, when he was appointed to more than one prominent public office, Douglass embodied the twin ideas of the dignity of black Americans, on the one hand, and the necessity of finding humane ways of living with others, black or white, on the other. He even made peace with the whites who had once owned him as a child and youth in the days of slavery.

In concluding his *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), his third memoir, Douglass wrote of the many questions about race directed almost incessantly at him. Many of these questions—perhaps about his second wife, who was white—he found personal to the point of intrusiveness. Other questions he found putatively objective but in reality insulting. Above all, he aimed to keep his personal and philosophical poise. "Under this shower of purely American questions," he wrote,

I have endeavored to possess my soul in patience and get as much good out of life as was possible with so much to occupy my time; and, though often perplexed, seldom losing my temper, or abating heart or hope for the future of my people. Though I cannot say I have satisfied the curiosity of my countrymen on all the questions raised by them, I have, like all honest men on the witness stand, answered to the best of my knowledge and belief, and I hope I have never answered in such wise as to increase the hardships of any human being of whatever race or color.

Praised by most blacks, criticized as a compromiser by others, Douglass died in 1895. Booker T. Washington, in turn, died in 1915. The latter passed away just before the rise to prominence of the major apostle of black separatism in the new century, Marcus Garvey. The Jamaican-born Garvey's popular Back-to-Africa movement proclaimed Garvey's belief that, for blacks, living with white others was a proposition doomed to failure. His solution was a return by blacks to Africa. Garvey even went so far as to meet with leaders of the Ku Klux Klan to discuss ways in which his organization and the Klan could reach an accommodation. In his essay, "Africa for the Africans" (1921), he stressed what he saw looming as a profound racial rift in the world. Soon, he argued, his program would be seen "by the strong statesmen of the world, as the only solution to the great race problem. There is no other way to avoid the threatening war of the races that is bound to engulf all mankind, which has been prophesied by the world's greatest thinkers; there is no better method than by apportioning every race to its own habitat."

Garvey's dream ended for him—if not for all his followers, who clung to his belief in the necessity of race pride—in failure involving open conflict with other black leaders, federal prosecution for alleged mail fraud, deportation from the U.S. and exile in Great Britain. He never set foot on African soil.

For Langston Hughes, setting out as a poet around 1921, when he was only 19, this problem of the black Self and the white Other was a constant theme. But where Du Bois had complicated the question of black identity by emphasizing psychological conflict, Hughes as a poet chose to stress the positive by orchestrating his unconditional

love of the masses of black people. That love may be seen in such poems as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “Mother to Son,” “When Sue Wears Red,” “Dream Variations,” “The Weary Blues” and “My People” (“The night is beautiful, / So the faces of my people”). Perhaps Hughes’s most poignant early statement about the dilemma of blacks as others—as *the Other*—is his 1924 poem, “I Too.” Going beyond the popular idea of America as “melting pot” (a concept that often ignored the realities of black American life) he dared to dissolve the matter of Self and Other into the trope of America as family (“I am the darker brother”). Divided now and in the past, this family nevertheless one day would be united. Then would come the full recognition of the intrinsic beauty and humanity of blacks (“I, too, am America”), on the one hand, and the white admission of guilt and shame about racism, on the other.

But this was scarcely the last word for Hughes—or many other black Americans—on the subject of living with others. For him over the course of about a decade—especially during the Great Depression in the 1930s—as for Du Bois at the end of his life, the solution to the problem of racial division appeared to lie in radical socialism. Hughes’s race-based poetry disappeared in favor of a poetics that posited the oneness of all people everywhere, with political militancy an essential part of the equation. In some ways, the price of setting race aside as a factor was the fiery emphasis on class division, as seen in poems such as “Good Morning Revolution,” “Put One More ‘S’ in the USA and Make it Soviet” and “Goodbye Christ.” The Self and the Other are resolved into the concept of “the masses.” The proletariat becomes the model of social unity.

However, this triumph of leftist doctrine over what we might call liberal humanism lasted only a few years for Hughes as an artist. With the onset of World War II he returned, as he put it, to the more variable themes of “nature, Negroes, and love.” Instead of world revolution, he emphasized the challenges facing the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, Hughes held fast to his original vision of an ideal world. His poem “I Dream a World” from the 1940s underscores his search for the unity of Self and Other. The speaker of the poem envisages “a world where man / No other man will scorn,” a place where “love will bless the earth / And peace its paths adorn.” This is a

world “where black or white / Whatever race you be” will share “the bounties of the earth / And every man is free.” At the same time, it should be noted also, Hughes clung to his central charge as a writer, which was to delineate in rich detail the culture of black Americans. To the end of his life in 1967, he labored at this project in a variety of forms, from poetry, fiction and drama to history and children’s literature.

The *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision in 1954 putatively sounded the death knell for segregation across the United States. Now one group was no longer legally the Other to the mainstream. What followed, however, was an era of confusion. It saw an intensification of the civil rights struggle, massive white resistance in various places, the rise to prominence of the Nation of Islam and the Black Power and the Black Arts movements and a period of civil disorder that included many urban riots or revolts and various assassinations. Black separatism typically involved language often far more incendiary than anything offered by David Walker in 1829. And yet this separatism was seen as cathartic and essential to the building in blacks of a self-confidence and self-love, after generations of self-doubt and self-hatred, without which no healing would be possible. Only on such terms, it was argued, could there be an honorable closing of the racial chasm in America, the start of a genuine reconciliation between blacks and others.

Perhaps no modern leader understood the complexity—and potential danger—of this challenge better than Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Caught up in a protracted campaign to win civil rights for blacks but also to explore the moral center of America, Dr. King asserted certain basic principles. He would have no part of vituperation, or of confusion between the ethical and the unethical, or of declaring the notion of an impassable space between one group and others. In his celebrated “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), he faced the loaded question of whether or not he was an outsider injecting himself into a local dispute. “I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states,” he declared, continuing,

I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are

caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly... Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

In words reminiscent of Du Bois from *The Souls of Black Folk*, King wrote,

I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who... are so drained of self-respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle-class Negroes who... because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence.

King was conscious of his perilous place:

I have tried to stand between these two forces," he declared, "for there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle.

These words were written in April 1963. Later that year, in his March on Washington oration, Dr. King outlined his perhaps utopian dream of a united America, a people for whom the tension between Self and Other is not determined always and irrevocably by racism. "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair," he implored blacks and whites alike as he spoke of his dream that "one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'."

King's words have become a familiar anthem for those who believe in the binding of the racial wounds of the nation. His words speak to the continuing difficulty of negotiating the distance between the Self and the Other in a society as racially charged as is America. They also speak to the possibilities of harmoniously "living with others" through an honest and informed attention to the psychological and moral issues involved.