

Integration and Reaction[†]

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Abstract

D. C. Matthew argues that although integration offers blacks social and economic benefits, it also creates the conditions for phenotypic devaluation that leads to harm against black self-worth and servile behaviour. Therefore, he advises against integration because the resulting self-worth harms outweigh the benefits of integration. I argue that Matthew's cost-benefit calculation against integration lacks the requisite evidence, and amounts to a luxury belief that will result in more harm. Moreover, his interpretation of behaviour — which he construes as being indicative of a lack of self-worth — is unfounded. Further, his cost-benefit calculation results in socially reactionary sexual policing and ideological purity tests.

Résumé

D. C. Matthew soutient que bien que l'intégration offre aux noirs des avantages sociaux et économiques, elle crée également les conditions d'une dévaluation phénotypique qui conduit à nuire à l'estime de soi des noirs et encourage de leur part un comportement servile. Par conséquent, il déconseille l'intégration parce que les préjugés qui en résultent pour l'estime de soi l'emportent sur ses avantages. Je soutiens que le calcul coût-bénéfice de Matthew contre l'intégration ne fournit pas les preuves requises et équivaut à une croyance de luxe qui entraînera plus de mal. De plus, son interprétation du comportement — qu'il présente comme étant révélateur d'un manque d'estime de soi — est sans fondement. En outre, son calcul coût-bénéfice aboutit à une surveillance sexuelle socialement réactionnaire et à des tests de pureté idéologique.

Keywords: integration; race; blackness; self-worth; mixed race; interracial relationships

1. Introduction

In “Racial Integration and the Problem of Relation Devaluation,” philosopher D. C. Matthew writes that “the problem with integration is that it will tend to dissolve group boundaries,” because it fosters interracial contact, particularly involving

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intimate relations, which are the principal “conduit for these pressures” (Section V.4). Thus, integration presents a dilemma in this formulation: stand apart and suffer continued exclusion, or integrate and suffer group dissolution. It is a formulation consistent with black nationalist thought that both seeks to conserve the group and protect its members from anti-black stigmatization and insults to their dignity.

Excepting those groups wedded to unreasonable doctrines (i.e., ones that act out their intolerance of the rights of others), groups — including racialized groups — should have the freedom to thrive. The price of justice should not be social-cultural extinction. Matthew captures this idea with a “same race test” thought experiment: “if a society’s ‘racial arrangements’ make blacks want to be something other than black, then they are inconsistent with black self-worth and so should be unacceptable to them” (Section IV.1). To “make,” as in compel, is the operative verb in this test. Individuals are not fully sovereign over their minds and experiences and neither, to the chagrin of the keepers of orthodoxies of all stripes, are groups. They exist and are conditioned, as Matthew’s social egalitarianism recognizes, in relation to other persons and groups in complex and dynamic social networks. Neither the state nor other collectives have the right to hinge moral and civic equality of individuals on the cultural, religious, or ideological extinction of groups with which they associate or to which they are ascribed.

2. The Delany Option

Matthew’s admonition against integration is reminiscent of another warning of group dissolution seemingly far from the context of his concerns. Alastair MacIntyre (1984), at the end of *After Virtue*, urgently counselled that communities dedicated to conserving their moral traditions and systems adopt the Benedict option by retreating behind social-cultural barricades. The “barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for some time,” MacIntyre warned, to which he added, “it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament.” The solution he forecasted lay not in “waiting ... for a Godot, but for another — doubtless very different — St. Benedict” (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 262).¹

This comparison might seem like an off-the-mark response to Matthew’s argument. After all, MacIntyre’s concern was in arguing for the superiority of Aristotelian virtue-based moral traditions over Nietzschean morally negating projects, while Matthew counsels blacks in North America and across the world to be wary of integration because of its potential injuries to black self-worth (Section VI.2). However, they share a through-line in the grave concern that their traditions and lifeways have been and remain under threat from the dissolving forces of modernity and the interactions it impels.

Standing against the melting of thick communal solidities and the profanation of their value — be it orthodox religious solidarities or racialized ones — that is what the supporters of the Benedict or (let us call it the) Delany options stand for.² These

¹ MacIntyre is referring to St. Benedict of Nursia, a sixth century monk and author of an influential set of rules for monastic life.

² Martin R. Delany (1968) is a figure in the history of American black nationalism. He was a 19th century African American abolitionist and author, among other works, of *The Condition, Elevation,*

options, considered together, are fundamentally socially conservative projects. That is not a criticism: conservative projects contribute invaluable ballast to liberal democracies and sanctuary to a diverse array of doctrines and groups. However, when those options pivot from protecting members from group stigmatization or insults to dignity toward surveying and judging the social and intimate lives of those it *claims* for its own, it gives off a whiff of the reactionary.

Groups standing in solidarity to oppose group-stigmatization are perfectly legitimate, as is the mitigation of status inequality as far as reasonably possible in matters of distributive and procedural justice. Likewise, however, living life with others and pursuing preferences, goods, and even greatest good, while standing in equal relation, should not be hinged on passing tests of group authenticity, loyalty, and social, cultural, religious, or ideological purity. Relational equality, with its normative basis in moral and democratic equality, ought to be consistent with the deep and enduring values of group belonging, but also social change and even the individual right to *exit*.

3. Civic Affinities

Integration is the vector of self and group debasement and dissolution that the Delany option seeks to keep at bay, and what that is depends on one's vantage point. Matthew, drawing on philosopher Michael Merry's (2013) classifications of types integration, defines it as "the joining together of the members of distinct groups into some form of enduring association despite their differing group membership" and identifies "psychological integration" as the site of transmission (Section III). Psychological integration denotes, according to Merry, "a feeling of belonging (Merry, 2013, p. 8)." For Matthew, it is a "psychological orientation, on the part of members of *some group*, of feeling a part of *some other group*" (Section III, my emphases).

The feeling of belonging that psychological integration purportedly points to could, first, be viewed as the mutual recognition of formal moral equality. It could, second, gesture toward a related but more profound sense of mutual interpersonal recognition. That is what Martin Luther King, Jr. was reaching for in his contrast of integration, which he viewed as "creative" and "genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing," from merely formal desegregation, which he characterized as "physical proximity without spiritual affinity" (King & Washington, 1991, p. 118). The first and second interpretations are reasonable estimations of a moral disposition necessary to achieve civic integration.

Matthew interprets psychological integration in a third way. For him, it is a sense of identification of *some group* with *some other group*. This is psychological integration as sameness of nationality that intertwines moral and political claims with social-cultural ones. It is a view of mutual civic belonging expressed throughout the history

Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States. I identify Delany with this option because of his specific reaction to anti-black stigmatization recorded in *The Condition* and his place in contemporary black political philosophy (Shelby, 2005). However, just as MacIntyre's use of the figure of Benedict departs from the specifics of his projects, my association of Matthew's argument with Delany does not require a uniform alignment between their projects. Compare both projects with similar discussions about assimilation involving other groups, such as Jewish Americans (Sarna, 2019).

of African American social-political thought that sharply contrasts with the Delany option.

At a minimum, successful civic integration requires that the populace have attitudes and beliefs that affirm mutual moral recognition. That requirement, however, does not require the total identification of citizens with a singular social identity. Civic integration proscribes formal residential, educational, and general social-spatial segregation of racialized groups and other protected classes, but is consistent with a degree of voluntary residential clustering and social separation. Nor need it be associated with compelling participants in housing assistance programs, as philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (2010) does, to participate in mobility initiatives that remove them from the neighbourhoods in which they wish to remain (Shelby, 2016). All in all, Merry's statement that "integration is not a proxy for justice" distills the error in the ways we have idealized it (Merry, 2013, p. 22).

Yet, justice opens the possibility, and social spaces, for integration. What is worth holding on to, therefore, is integration as a political virtue that values open communities and open opportunities. I call this vision of integration, "reconstruction" (Sundstrom, *forthcoming*).

4. To the Citadel

The Delany option has no objection to open opportunities. The explicit and state-sponsored denial of equal personhood and citizenship instigated it in the first place. The problem is that the open communities lead to interracial contacts and psychological integration. That contact, as Matthew recognizes, "can reduce intergroup anxiety and trigger the affective process," which reduces prejudice (Section V.4). So far, so good. However, that contact also applies a dissolving force to group boundaries and increases the likelihood of assimilation. Nothing is wrong per se with assimilation; the problem is that it is a conduit for injuries to group-based or black self-respect (Section V.3). Hence, the benefits of integration come with the heavy price of "self-worth harms of integration" (Section V.4). This cannot be easily skirted with an injunction for blacks to be socially aloof when they otherwise integrate. It is the price of the ticket.

Here is how the infection spreads and appears. Integration exposes blacks to racist stigmatization and aesthetic devaluation that specifically disvalues typical black *looks* or, rather, black phenotypic expressions. Although integration reduces the effect of stigmatization, it leaves in place and possibly exacerbates phenotypic devaluation, which functions as an injurious status inequality that is endemic in white-majority societies. Anti-black phenotypic devaluation persistently affronts blacks' self-esteem. Fortunately, however, blacks have been resilient to these insults (Sections I–II). Although individual self-esteem proves sturdy, nonetheless, their self-respect is also regularly undermined, and within integrated social settings, they are pressured to adopt beliefs and attitudes and act in ways that undermine their self-respect and self-worth as black people (Section IV.1). The injury to black self-worth may appear in the form of servility. It is also expressed through the act of passing, which Matthew, in the contemporary context, identifies as the

adoption of mixed-race identities and engaging in interracial intimacies (Section IV.1). He expressly cites dating and marriage as possible “signs of the internalization of one’s devaluation,” but even interracial friendship is suspect (Sections IV.1 and V.4). In addition to injuries to black self-esteem and self-worth, phenotypic devaluation leads to feelings of inferiority and corresponding relations of superiority and inferiority.

Integration is not a salve for these injuries; it aggravates them. Therefore, the assaults it permits against black self-respect outweigh its possible benefits (Section IV.1). What is more, anti-black aesthetic devaluation is a relational inequality that formal moral and political equality and procedural and distributive justice cannot entirely excise. Therefore, the Delany option urges blacks in multiracial societies everywhere to shelter in black enclaves or, better yet, in citadels more impervious to the barbs of group devaluation (Section VI.2).³

5. Race Mixing

Caste (or group-based) and status inequalities are severe threats to justice. While just procedures can mitigate the former, the latter are harder to eradicate because they are evergreen and multifarious, and expressed through individual choices that are protected by fundamental rights, and can, in sum, have profound social consequences. What makes it worse is that status indicators are frequently intermeshed with caste stigmas. Accordingly, it is an imperative of justice to engage in the perpetual struggle to limit the effects of both.

For all that, integration works (Chetty et al., 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). So, for the Delany option to be sound advice for those otherwise desirous of a racially integrated society or needful of its benefits — not to mention its broad potential social and political impacts — it must meet a high evidentiary bar.

The evidence, however, is lacking. Blacks are resilient to racist insults to their self-esteem, which, of course, is not a sufficient response to group devaluation. Likewise, the proof offered that integration harms black self-respect is based on contestable interpretations of individual choices in complex social conditions in site-specific contexts, such as the startling behaviour of some Afro-Brazilian girls to gain status by climbing the “phenotypic continuum.” No statistical evidence is given about how widespread such practices are in North or other parts of Latin America or their deleterious effects (Section IV.2). Still, Matthew claims that, even if the self-worth harms of integration do not reach Brazilian levels, the harms outweigh the benefits (Section V.2). Based on what evidence? The magnitude of the problem bears on the question.

For evidence, Matthew points to behaviour that he portrays as servile, such as individuals adopting mixed-race identifications or participating in interracial intimacies (Section IV.1). That he identifies those two behaviours as indicative of a lack of self-worth invites another look at the Delany option’s problem with

³ My use of ‘enclave’ and ‘citadel’ draws on Peter Marcuse’s (2002) distinction of ghettos, which are sites of involuntary segregation, from enclaves, which are voluntarily formed, and citadels, which in addition to being voluntary are exclusive.

integration as a vector for phenotypic devaluation and group dissolution. Matthew's argument reveals that the actual problem he has with integration is that it fosters race-mixing, an old American racist bogeyman (Hollinger, 2003).

The Delany option is a response to anti-black racism, so to accuse it of old-fashioned racism is inadequate. What is adequate, in addition to the question of evidentiary fact, is, first, that the Delany option is a *luxury belief*, an ideological equivalent of a Veblen good, which can be entertained with little cost by a highly educated and economically secure elite who live socially and economically integrated lives. The heavy price of this option, largely involuntarily pursued because of racist discrimination and enduring effects of structural injustice, is paid by those who can least afford it.

Second, where is the evidence that identifying as mixed race and loving across the colour-line are problems for *those involved*? The Delany option judges in-group members by a second-order desire that they have a first-order desire to conserve their group-based identity. Then — through the same race test — it judges the lack of that first-order desire as *ipso facto* evidence of a lack of self-worth. The same race test is an ideological trap, operating monocausally, that negates the possibility of non-racist, non-self-hating motivations (Sundstrom, 2008). In doing so, it is patronizing and presumes the truth in the hearts of others.

Third, the Delany option adopts a hermeneutic of suspicion toward the lives of those who do not display what it presumes to be the appropriate level of group solidarity and self-respect. Racial eliminativists, integrationists, or other ideological 'heretics' are implicitly suspect, regardless of their valid points. Individuals who identify as multiracial or get involved in interracial intimacies are likewise inferred to be servile and self-hating; why would they do so if there was nothing wrong with being black?

The Delany option reduces complex human behaviour to a simple black or white question. This ends with sexual and gender policing. The reactionary logic of the Delany (or Benedict) option inevitably turns from the choice of neighbours to friends and eventually to the bedroom and finally to the womb and the loyalty and purity of mixed progeny.

6. Conclusion

Matthew is right to criticize the corrosive force of phenotypic devaluation. The racist and sexist scaling of bodies is toxic to personal and group dignity and justice. For that reason, the Delany option is a legitimate response and will appeal to some blacks in liberal multicultural societies. Nonetheless, as the above objections demonstrate, there is not a straight line from racial integration to self-degradation, and that reveals that the dilemma of integration, as starkly presented, is false. Instead, integration as the substantive opening of communities and opportunities is a positive social and political good that societies should strive to realize for the sake of the common good. Finally, I would add that a reactionary scheme of intragroup sexual policing and racial authenticity tests is neither morally justified nor an adequate response to the racist scaling of bodies, and it will not make a single person more free or equal.

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