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Reply to Critics: Racial Integration

Racial Integration and Devaluation: Reply to Stanley, Valls, Basevich, Merry, and Sundstrom[†]

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Abstract

In “Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation,” I argue that blacks should reject racial integration on self-protective and solidarity grounds. Integration will intensify the self-worth harms of stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation by leading blacks to more fully internalize their devaluation, and while the integrating process itself might reduce the former, it may well leave in place the latter. In this paper, I reply to the challenges to these arguments presented by Sharon Stanley, Andrew Valls, Elvira Basevich, Michael Merry, and Ronald Sundstrom.

Résumé

Dans « L'intégration raciale et le problème de la dévaluation relationnelle », je soutiens que les noirs devraient rejeter l'intégration raciale pour des raisons d'autoprotection et de solidarité. L'intégration intensifiera les dommages causés à l'estime de soi par la stigmatisation et la dévaluation phénotypique en conduisant les noirs à intérioriser davantage leur dévaluation. Bien que le processus d'intégration lui-même puisse réduire la stigmatisation, il pourrait bien laisser en place la dévaluation phénotypique. Dans le présent document, je réponds aux critiques opposées à ces arguments par Sharon Stanley, Andrew Valls, Elvira Basevich, Michael Merry et Ronald Sundstrom.

Keywords: racial integration; self-worth; phenotypic variation; racial solidarity; colourism

In “Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation” (Matthew, 2022), I argue that blacks should reject racial integration on self-protective and solidarity grounds. I distinguish between two aspects of black devaluation, a ‘stigmatization’

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aspect and a more aesthetic aspect that I call ‘phenotypic devaluation,’ and argue that integration will intensify the self-worth harms they inflict by leading blacks to more fully internalize their devaluation. While the integrating process itself may indeed, as integration advocates argue, reduce stigmatization, I argue that this may well leave phenotypic devaluation — and so its associated self-worth harms — in place.

In the long period of its gestation, I knew that what turned into “Racial Integration” was going to be about many things — including discrimination in private life, phenotypic variation and differential incorporation, and above all, black self-views — *before* I knew that it was going to be about racial integration. The paper is in large part an attempt to make sense of the racial dynamics of the (part of the) city in which I was living, and it was my understanding of these dynamics, as this developed over time, that eventually led to its concern with racial integration. Resistance to integration, I came to believe, may be the best way to protect black self-worth. As this implies, I came to regard black self-worth as more under threat than is usually recognized.

As I write, it has been over two years since I first submitted “Racial Integration” to *Dialogue*. The arguments that it contains still strike me as compelling, and in what follows readers will find a robust defence of them. And yet, over the course of the long publishing process, I have had occasion to think anew about the concerns that influenced its construction, and I now see that not all of these are explicitly reflected in the text. In one of my replies below (that to Andrew Valls), I explain how one particularly important concern would now lead me to extend the argument. In addition, there are some points I would now seek to emphasize more if I were to write the paper again. These are also indicated below.

I am grateful to the editors of *Dialogue* for making “Racial Integration” the focus of this symposium, and I also thank my commentators for their engagement with my arguments. I will reply to the commentators in the order in which they appear in the journal, thus starting with Sharon Stanley — whose reply appears first — and ending with Ronald Sundstrom.

I.

In “Racial Integration,” I argue that the self-worth harms that we can reasonably expect from integration outweigh the benefits that we can realistically expect (Matthew, 2022, Section IV.4). Sharon Stanley takes issue with the cost-benefit analysis that this suggests. In her view, I do not give adequate consideration to either the benefits of integration or the costs of not integrating. Furthermore, she objects to one of the points I make about how racial inequality might be reduced without integration, writing, “Matthew’s argument against the costs of continued segregation possibly outweighing the costs of integration amounts to a simple assertion of optimism: ‘I believe that we should not underestimate what a committed and determined black population can achieve despite the significant obstacles that it faces.’” But this ignores my earlier argument that if self-worth is as valuable as I argue, then “even the fullest realization of the benefits [of integrating] that we can realistically expect could not outweigh the harms that we can reasonably expect” (Matthew, 2022, Section IV.4). This means that the current harms of segregation, even if they were *not reduced at all*, would not outweigh the harms of integration that we can reasonably expect. So my main argument for why the costs of continued segregation do not outweigh the costs of integration lies elsewhere. The point about what a committed and

determined black population can achieve is not essential for my argument to work. What it adds is one reason to think that the level of inequality associated with segregation can be reduced without integration.

Also relevant here is something mentioned in the paper that I would now seek to emphasize more if I were to write it again. In a footnote, I noted that, while the value of self-worth is race-neutral, “certain facts about a group’s history may amplify the significance of some self-worth harms, giving the group additional reasons to resist them.” I added, parenthetically, that “These additional reasons should be added to more ordinary reasons when weighing the harms of integration against its benefits” (Matthew, 2022, Section IV.4, n. 44). This surplus, race-relative value of self-worth would play a more significant role if I were to write the paper again. This is not the place to even begin to explain how such an argument might work. The point is simply that, when these additional reasons are considered, the high costs of integration become higher still, thus outweighing even more the costs of not integrating.

But Stanley is not done with my point about what a committed and determined black population can achieve. In fact, she makes this issue the main focus of her response. She goes on to write,

Matthew’s rhetoric about a committed and determined black population inadvertently reinforces this very idea of black cultural deficiency, echoing longstanding conservative ‘culture of poverty’ arguments that pay insufficient attention to the structural form of racism ... my concern here is that the idea of a black community having the capacity effectively to will itself into a better social, political, economic, and educational position through its own internal effort ... comes dangerously close to implying that the persistence of all these problems lies in a lack of sufficient black will and effort. (Stanley, 2022)

I have spent decades thinking about the role of culture in the explanation of the inter-generational persistence of racial inequality, and I have long thought that it should be acknowledged by those concerned about racial inequality. Enforced inequality over generations can, in my view, generate norms and values that, however functional they might be in some respects, are counterproductive in others. And yet in my view the main cause of racial inequality in the US is historic racial oppression, for which white America has a continuing responsibility to address, although contemporary discrimination plays an important role as well. These two views are not incompatible: to whatever extent a dysfunctional culture contributes to the persistence of racial inequality, it too is the result of racial oppression. Moreover, if culture is a problem, cultural reform can be a solution, and, contra what Stanley appears to suggest, blacks are not powerless to bring this about. I could say much more, but will stop there, since I am sure readers of this symposium were not expecting an extended discussion of this issue.

Stanley also takes issue with my discussion of racial solidarity. In my paper, I try to solve the problem of phenotypic variation by appealing to considerations of solidarity (Matthew, 2022, Section V.3). Less phenotypically stereotypical blacks who could integrate without experiencing a high level of self-worth harms, I propose, should refuse to integrate out of solidarity with their more stereotypical fellow blacks, who

would receive the full brunt of the harms. Stanley complains that “This framing of the problem implies that decisions about the pursuit of integration boil down to considerations of personal gain” (Stanley, 2022). But this is exactly wrong. I am claiming, in effect, that the decision to integrate *should not* be purely self-regarding, and indeed that harm to other members of the group should trump one’s personal benefits. The focus on purely self-regarding considerations up to this point in the paper is largely a product of my desire to create some suspense, where I wanted to first show how the problem of phenotypic variation arises, and then, without tipping my hand, offer my solution. I did not suddenly realize that other-regarding considerations also matter.

II.

In the course of his discussion, Andrew Valls makes a number of interesting arguments and observations. However, in crucial moments, he interprets my arguments in uncharitable ways, making them seem much less plausible than they are. Furthermore, his discussion of the circumstances of choice is of little value for my project.

Valls begins with an excellent summary of my argument. Unfortunately, he goes astray when he decides to emphasize, in describing my argument, a “duty” not to integrate. Thus I am said to argue that blacks have a “nearly absolute” duty not to integrate (Valls, 2022, Section II). This emphasis is not present in my paper. Instead, I suggest that, assuming something reasonably close to a worst-case scenario, the four elements of self-worth *together* provide absolute overriding weight compared with the realistic benefits of integration, and I somewhat tentatively suggest that two of these elements — self-respect and not accepting that one is anyone’s inferior — arguably go beyond providing merely prudential reasons to resist integration and may instead provide moral reasons, with these reasons perhaps even constituting moral duties (Matthew, 2022, Section IV.4). I never suggest that the other elements of self-worth could provide anything more than prudential reasons.

Valls goes on to argue that my conclusion is too strong, pointing to what he regards as its implausible implications. According to him, faced with a choice between attending a predominantly white college or university or an historically black college or university, on my view, a black applicant has “an overriding duty to herself to forgo the benefits of attending even an elite predominantly white institution that will open up further opportunities and provide a lifetime of benefits” (Valls, 2022, Section II). He goes so far as to claim that it is an implication of my argument that “even if declining an acceptance from an elite predominantly white institution means that she will not attend college at all, she must decline the offer” (Valls, 2022, Section II). This is indeed highly implausible, but even a reasonably charitable reading of “Racial Integration” (Matthew, 2022) should have led Valls to see that I could not have meant this.

My argument claims that blacks will internalize their devaluation when they assimilate in conditions of stigmatization and/or phenotypic devaluation, and it suggests that assimilative pressures are greater when they are integrated in multiple domains at once since this means more sustained close contact. And while it identifies residential integration as posing a special threat, it does not single out integration in any single domain as sufficient to lead to assimilation, although it does suggest

(Matthew, 2022, Section VI.1) that having all white friends should probably be avoided. It is puzzling how Valls concludes from this that young adults have an absolute duty to avoid integration in the domain of education.¹

Valls suggests that integration may be more or less objectionable — and so resistance to integration more or less worthy — depending on how coercive of an inducement a context of integration represents (Valls, 2020, Section III). For example, if some upper-middle class blacks prefer to live in black neighbourhoods, but find that white neighbourhoods generally have better services, amenities, and schools, this would constitute an objectionable context, since it would induce blacks to integrate at “costs that in a more equitable world” would not exist (Valls, 2022, Section III). Decisions to integrate in such circumstances — where there are no good non-integrationist options — can hardly be described as ‘free.’ Valls thinks that this would violate what a plausible conception of racial justice would require. As he writes,

Justice requires creating conditions that support the liberty and equality of black citizens, and once conditions that do this have been created, then the choice to integrate or not, and in which domain(s), can and should be left to individual choice. (Valls, 2022, Section IV)

But I am afraid that adopting Valls’ proposal here would essentially require abandoning my argument. I am, above all, interested in black self-views, not racial justice. In fact, if my argument is right, it follows not only that racial justice is not all that should matter to blacks in matters of race, but that there is something that *should* be a great deal more important. So I freely admit that I am more interested that blacks make certain choices than anything about the coerciveness of the circumstances of choice. (This is so in part because these choices might still reflect the internalization of devaluation, though made in circumstances that are perfectly non-coercive in Valls’ sense.) To “take a more agnostic view of how individuals should weigh the costs and benefits of integration and focus instead on the circumstances in which they make their choices” would be, in effect, to abandon the concern with self-views (Valls, 2022, Section II).

Speaking of choices, for most of “Racial Integration,” I argue that blacks should make choices about integration based on self-regarding considerations. This is until Section V.3, when I introduce the problem of phenotypic variation and argue that some blacks should reject integration on grounds of solidarity. This was part of the plan from the beginning: the problem of phenotypic variation is a central problem — perhaps even *the* central problem — driving “Racial Integration.” In any case, on reflection, if I were to write the paper anew I would broaden the relevant considerations beyond the self even more, as I now explain.

In the paper, I argue that blacks who are less stereotypical are likely to experience less phenotypic devaluation, and so integration would not impose the same degree of

¹ Part of the problem here may have to do with the fact that “Racial Integration” (Matthew, 2022) doesn’t lay out all of the circumstances in which integration, on my view, would and would not be permissible. However, I was working with limited space, the paper is very long as it is, and there were other important things to discuss.

self-worth harms for them. This is how the problem of phenotypic variation arises. This, of course, assumes that there *are* blacks who are more stereotypical. But suppose that over time, as racial mixing continues and even blacks who don't directly mix procreate with the offspring of such mixing, there comes a time when there are no blacks who are stereotypical phenotypically, and yet phenotypic devaluation — the aesthetic judgements involved, even if these have no occasion to receive expression — continues to exist. In such circumstances, should blacks integrate? In my view, the answer is a clear 'no.' I would now seek to defend this answer by appealing to something like *solidarity across generations*. I think that there are backward-looking obligations that present and future generations of blacks have owing to the trials and tribulations of earlier generations (who were more stereotypical phenotypically), obligations that I believe would preclude integration in the circumstances just described. Now it would be a tall order to defend such a view, and clearly the arguments involved would have to go far beyond those contained in "Racial Integration." And yet I believe that such an argument can be made.

III.

In her contribution, Elvira Basevich makes some astute observations about the connections between physical beauty and good treatment, on the one hand, and physical beauty and self-esteem, on the other, with which it is difficult to disagree. She errs, however, in deploying these observations to criticize my argument. Basevich takes issue with what she regards as two key claims in my argument: (1) that those who are considered physically attractive are treated 'well,' and (2) that being considered physically attractive by others increases one's self-esteem. Let's take (1) first.

On the one hand, in "Racial Integration" (Matthew, 2022), I claim that while black self-esteem, at least in the US, has been impressively resilient, we should not expect this to carry over to an integrated society. This is because in such a society blacks will not have the positive group identity that is protective of self-esteem. They will then be left more vulnerable to the self-worth harms of receiving poorer treatment as a result of others' judgements of their physical attractiveness. On the other hand, I claim that blacks' self-esteem will be better protected in a segregated environment, suggesting, Basevich thinks, that "satisfying in-group positive standards of black beauty will result in overall positive intragroup treatment of persons" (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Good Treatment). In both cases, the assumption seems to be that "physical beauty yields 'good treatment'" (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Good Treatment). But Basevich counters that "being considered attractive by others, whatever the relevant standard of beauty, does not necessarily entail one will be treated well" (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Good Treatment). Furthermore, "even [outgroup] women who are considered attractive by mainstream [in-group] standards will not evade poor treatment" (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Good Treatment).

This point is well taken, but I do not say or imply that those who are judged as more attractive are generally treated well. What I do say and imply is that those so judged are treated *better* than those judged less attractive. Furthermore, those treated better for this reason may still be treated badly, all things considered. There is also more at stake in judgements of attractiveness for women, who are more likely to

be evaluated on this basis. As Basevich notes, “being evaluated on the basis of appearance is a powerful mechanism of social control that degrades women” (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Good Treatment).

Turn now to (2). Basevich also takes issue with the paper’s account, as she understands it, of “how the social recognition of one’s physical attractiveness improves one’s feelings of self-worth” (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Self-Esteem). Not just any positive appraisal of one’s attractiveness will improve self-esteem, she argues; rather, such appraisals enhance self-esteem when they are “conferred from a second-personal perspective and aims to meet basic norms of human flourishing in an ongoing interpersonal interaction” (Basevich, 2022, Physical Beauty and Self-Esteem). In her view, the norms in question concern taking the appraisee’s ends as your own.

Basevich seems preoccupied with how things look from the perspective of those who are judged to be *above* average in attractiveness, whereas I am thinking of things more from the perspective of those judged to be *below* average in attractiveness. I am much more interested in the impact aesthetic judgements have on the latter than the former. I do not claim that those judged more attractive will always have higher self-esteem than those judged to be less attractive — not even all things being equal. Rather, the claim is that the chronic character of negative feedback about one’s attractiveness can have a negative effect on self-esteem over time. The impacts of positive and negative feedback might *not* be entirely symmetrical; that is, positive feedback about a person’s attractiveness may require more (such as adopting the ends of the appraised in an ongoing interpersonal interaction, as Basevich suggests) to result in a self-esteem boost, whereas even chronic negative feedback from fleeting encounters with strangers can have a negative impact. And whether or not the positive feedback results in a self-esteem boost, those judged to be above average in attractiveness will be spared negative feedback and its consequences.

IV.

Michael Merry argues that, while I am right to reject a “demanding” conception of integration, it is questionable whether integration should be so demanding. What, exactly, is so demanding of my conception? Merry doesn’t say directly, but he does question why integration must be “framed exclusively in terms of something imposed” (Merry, 2022, Section 2). But my paper doesn’t frame integration this way, and so I am not sure what Merry is talking about. He also sketches a less demanding conception of integration that includes things like speaking the dominant language and participating in the labour market, which, he says, “most minorities are already doing, or striving very hard to do” (Merry, 2022, Section 2). I can confirm that this is indeed a less demanding conception of integration that I might have focused on instead. But it is also, plainly, a less interesting one, especially for the populations that I am interested in.

Merry asks, “Can we say with any confidence whether middle-class blacks in, say, Washington DC or Atlanta ... feel devalued by virtue of their skin colour ...?” (Merry, 2022, Section 2). But since even middle-class African Americans largely live in a black world — in their social networks, in the particular corners of popular culture they tend to inhabit and, usually, the neighbourhoods in which they reside

(Cashin, 2004, Ch. 4) — my argument does not suggest that they would. Even when blacks do largely live in white worlds, the very existence of black ones in the same society may serve to protect black self-worth by providing something of a ‘base’ from which individuals venture out, as it were.

Merry wonders why I should feel the need to argue so strenuously against integration. Blacks, he says, “have no greater obligation than any other group to demonstrate ‘being integrated’” (Merry, 2022, Section 2). On this, we are in agreement. But the fact that he raises the issue suggests a possible misunderstanding concerning who my intended audience is. Ultimately, my argument is not directed at anyone other than blacks. It is blacks who are harmed by integration, and it is the protection of black self-worth that is my chief concern. And integration, as I suggest in the paper, still retains considerable appeal for many blacks, especially if we direct our attention outside of the US.

Merry complains that my position “risks over-determining black stigma” (Merry, 2022, Section 3). He sees this risk as manifested in two ways. First, it arguably exaggerates the harm of stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation in painting a picture of the black experience that he considers unduly bleak. Merry also finds it puzzling that I would paint this picture since I also present evidence showing that African Americans have been able to maintain high levels of self-esteem. He wonders why I don’t see the evidence as pointing to a remarkable resilience rather than the likely internalization of their devalued status. But this misses the crucial point that it is a certain feature or consequence of segregation itself — group boundaries — that, I argue, has made it possible for African Americans to be so resilient. These will not carry over to an integrated society, at least so I argue. So while I highlight African American resilience, my point is that this resilience is not unconditioned or without limits.

Merry also questions whether African Americans are quite as disadvantaged as the picture I paint, pointing to figures about black representation in politics, business, and academia. None of these figures contradict anything that I say or imply in the paper. What is odd is that Merry argues that these facts “not only problematize stereotypes about the plight of African Americans, or the exceptionality of American racism; they also adduce non-trivial evidence to impugn phenotypic devaluation” (Merry, 2022, Section 3). However, he does not elaborate how exactly they do this. These facts are in my view consistent with phenotypic devaluation being a widespread phenomenon. Furthermore, in the paper, I point to evidence suggesting that blacks who are less stereotypical phenotypically are less disadvantaged (Matthew, 2022, Section V.3).

The second way that I risk over-determining black stigma is that I present a “somewhat reductionist” picture of black devaluation, suggesting that phenotype is all that matters, ignoring the complexity of the black experience (Merry, 2022, Section 3). For example, social class, immigration status, and religion all matter as well. This is true enough. In emphasizing phenotype, I do not mean to suggest that phenotype is all that matters. But it does matter, and sometimes I would venture that its influence dwarfs everything else. More interestingly, Merry points to evidence that he says shows that “blacks in many predominately non-black societies do not occupy a position at the bottom of the *racial hierarchy*” (Merry, 2022, Section 3). For example, he

says that few French, Dutch, or British blacks face pressure to integrate. It is not clear if Merry considers whether this may be because they are already integrated to a significant degree, or are judged to be undesirable candidates for integration.

V.

Ronald Sundstrom contends that integration is “a political virtue that values open communities and open opportunities” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 3). He seems to complain that, given my understanding and rejection of psychological integration, I am committed to opposing even innocuous extracommunal collectives for blacks. In retrospect, it does seem that my conception of psychological integration is an unduly broad one that, given my rejection of it as a main conduit for assimilation, forecloses recognition of a larger identity.

But Sundstrom tries to situate my argument in ways that does more to mislead than illuminate. He compares my argument with Alastair MacIntyre’s (1984) counsel to communities concerned about losing their traditions to adopt ‘the Benedict/Delaney option’ by “retreating behind social-cultural barricades” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 2). We both, Sundstrom argues, share a “grave concern that their traditions and lifeways have been and remain under threat from the dissolving forces of modernity and the interactions it impels” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 2). This is surprising for someone who expressly allows that black assimilation is not objectionable in itself (Matthew, 2022, Section II). Sundstrom’s way of situating my argument misleads by making it sound more concerned with cultural conservation than it is.

Sundstrom allows that it is legitimate for groups to stand in solidarity to oppose group-stigmatization, but he argues that “living life with others and pursuing preferences, goods, and even greatest good ... should not be hinged on passing tests of group authenticity, loyalty, and social, cultural, religious, or ideological purity. Relational 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*” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 2). But nowhere does my paper challenge individuals’ right to exit, even when this is pursued by those who display the clearest evidence of a shattered self-worth. Further, it is not enough to note that it is a consequence of my argument that individuals may be subjected to some ‘purity’ test or another; what is needed is some *argument*, or arguments, that show where my arguments go wrong. No doubt, the general thrust of my arguments has been reached by others in ways that seem far more open to objection (think, for example, of most arguments against interracial marriage); the challenge for those who are uncomfortable with my conclusions is to show where my arguments go wrong. I am afraid that there is not much in Sundstrom’s reply that makes any significant progress in this respect.

Sundstrom makes a number of objections to my argument that largely depend on ignoring its nuances about the various motivations that it acknowledges that individuals have. For example, he says that “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?” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 5). But in the paper, I merely say that blacks who have internalized their devaluation may seek to escape blackness by identifying as mixed race; I do

not say that those who identify as mixed race must be self-hating. And I explicitly say that “people date and marry interracially for a variety of reasons, and not all of these raise questions of self-worth” (Matthew, 2022, Section IV.1). So I explicitly allow for what Sundstrom calls “non-self-hating motivations” (Sundstrom, 2022, Section 5).

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