


FOCUS ON DIALOGUE / FAISONS LE POINT — DIALOGUE

Doth He Protest Too Much? Thoughts on Matthew's Black Devaluation Thesis[†]

Michael S. Merry 

Department of Educational Sciences, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands
Corresponding author. E-mail: M.S.Merry@uva.nl

Abstract

I am broadly sympathetic to D. C. Matthew's analysis. However, in what follows, I restrict my remarks to a few areas where I think he either lacks empirical precision, or overstates his case.

Résumé

Je suis globalement favorable à l'analyse de D. C. Matthew. Cependant, dans ce qui suit, je limite mes remarques à quelques domaines où je pense qu'il manque de précision empirique ou exagère son argument.

Keywords: integration; phenotype; stigma; harm; devaluation; spatial concentration

1. Introduction

D. C. Matthew's argument is very dense and covers a wide range of issues. Yet, if we reduce the argument to its most basic claim, it is this: the self-worth harms of integration outweigh its ostensible benefits. This conclusion will not surprise many readers, and perhaps black readers in particular. However, what may surprise some readers is the strenuous — and, at times — overwrought, path Matthew takes in reaching this conclusion. In the main, I am quite sympathetic to the argument he puts forward, and therefore broadly agree with his analysis. However, in what follows, I restrict my remarks to a few areas where I think he either lacks empirical precision, or overstates his case.

2. Integration

Let's begin with Matthew's depiction of "integration." I generally agree with him that integration is often taken to mean 'assimilation'; plenty of historical or contemporary

[†]This article is part of the *Dialogue* series "Focus on dialogue / Faisons le point — dialogue," an Open Peer Commentary series in which a target article is followed by peer commentaries and an author response. For the target article, Matthew, D. C. "Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation," see *Dialogue* 62(1), 3–45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217321000251>. For the commentaries, see <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217322000439>.



evidence speaks to that. I further agree that even where it is possible to speak of racial progress, there is little warrant for cheery optimism. As he says: "What progress there has been has at times been halting, reverses have not been unknown, and there are signs that more reversals are possible." Moreover, I believe he is justified in saying that if "integration is to be viable at all, its advocates should have to make the case that it will eliminate or at least significantly reduce anti-black racism and discrimination." Hence, to the extent that integration threatens blacks' self-respect, "a concern to safeguard [blacks'] self-worth should outweigh the justice and other benefits that integration is supposed to bring."

I therefore think that Matthew is correct to repudiate a *demanding* conception of integration, and that one can do so for both moral and prudential reasons. Either its demands degrade those pursuits persons have reason to value; or it robs minoritized persons of a 'place to belong'; or it requires that one sacrifice too much in order to get ahead; or it leads to permanent subordination. Any one of these — let alone all of them taken together — suffice to indict "integration."

But, then, of course all of this hangs on what one understands integration to entail, and it is at least questionable whether it requires the demanding version Matthew attributes to it. Matthew's attempt at a definition leaves a lot to be desired, as, for example, when he says that integration "is the joining together of the members of distinct groups into some form of enduring association despite their different group membership." Most of the time, however, the word appears without much clarification. Instead, we are left to infer certain uncompromising claims about integration (e.g., prejudice reduction, civic equality) that others attribute to it. But why must we accept such a demanding view? Why must integration be framed exclusively in terms of something imposed? Indeed, why must integration even require spatial 'mixing'?

In any case, a far less demanding conception of integration may simply entail an ability to speak the dominant language, participating in the labour market, to one degree or another adapting to social and cultural norms, or exercising one's rights and responsibilities that correspond to broadly shared understandings of citizenship. In other words, the very things that majority populations often demand of minority others is something that most minorities are already doing, or striving very hard to do. And it is *this* set of features concerning integration that Matthew largely neglects.

Perhaps part of the difficulty with Matthew's discussion about integration is the habit of focusing on nation-states as the unit of his analysis, rather than, say, regions, counties, or cities, and more particularly how persons — black and non-black — navigate those spaces in ways favourable to their needs or preferences. Or maybe not: perhaps we need to zoom in further to more particular neighbourhood economies to get a proper sense of *where* but also *how* people are "integrated." And surely the same kind of analysis ought to be deployed in the case of blacks, who may or may not deal with stigma or devaluation of any kind on a regular basis, whatever else the case may be elsewhere.

Can we say with any confidence whether middle-class blacks in, say, Washington DC or Atlanta — where it would not be inaccurate to say that there is a quasi-black power structure (e.g., at city hall, in the police department, the education system, real estate, the transportation sector, the athletic and music industries, etc.) — feel devalued by virtue of their skin colour, even if *poor* blacks in those cities fare very badly?

To simply presuppose this will strike many as dubious, particularly when blackness is unapologetically celebrated in many urban neighbourhoods, and even when those doing the urban gentrifying, too, are often black (Moore, 2009). Notice, too, that similar questions arise when we move out of the city: several of the highly diverse counties surrounding metropolitan DC or Atlanta, where more than 80% of local blacks live, are “integrated” by any discernibly common sense standard, quite irrespective of whether specific neighbourhoods are (Claytor, 2020; Lacy, 2007). My point is that stepping away from such untenably broad units of analysis is one way to speak more meaningfully about integration; but asking which behaviours are germane to integration is another.

The upshot is that Matthew appears to buy into a certain notion of “integration” that can and should be dismissed much more quickly, for it implies an unreasonable expectation for blacks — coercive spatial mixing — that does not seem to concern, let alone apply to, other groups. In point of fact, most white spaces are highly segregated, and yet no one seems particularly bothered by that. Neither does anyone seem bothered by a Koreatown, or a Jewish neighbourhood, or an enclave of LGBT or Deaf residents. And, as it concerns spatial mixing, it is the *affluent* — of whatever ethnic stock — whose communities are the least integrated of all. If, then, there is no fuss about these spatial concentrations, why all the fuss about black neighbourhoods, businesses, schools, etc.?

White liberal scholars will insist of course that it is because of historical disadvantage. Yet, to assume that black space *as such* implies disadvantage, one for which integration purportedly is a remedy, is problematic on its own terms. Even if such an analysis were correct (as it certainly will be in many poor and crime-ridden neighbourhoods), it is already morally suspect for how it is uniquely applied to *black* communities. I have little doubt that Matthew will concur. But, then, surely he does not need such a strenuous argument to repudiate the racialized paternalism, or to point out the curious double standard. After all, blacks have no greater obligation than any other group to demonstrate ‘being integrated.’

3. Harm and Over-Determination

This brings me to my second criticism, which is that Matthew’s position risks over-determining black stigma. This risk of over-determination manifests, first, by inordinately focusing on phenotypic devaluation and disadvantage, and relatedly, by arguably exaggerating worries about harm.

Let me start with *harm*. Take his claim that blacks “generally may be more at risk of suffering [...] self-worth harms.” There is an obvious sense in which this is true for blacks outside of sub-Saharan Africa, where minority status is likely inevitable. Moreover, to the extent that black skin and minoritized status correspond to stigma, it follows that said individuals — simply by virtue of their stigma — are uniquely harmed. Further, we both agree that, owing to these stigmas, “black self-esteem would be better protected in a segregated setting than in an integrated one,” and that there is “reason here to doubt whether the circumstances that protect black self-esteem will carry over to an integrated society.”

Even so, Matthew’s analysis paints a very bleak picture about the black experience — indeed, it tilts towards a kind of *victimology* — as when, for example, he says “that

assimilation in conditions of phenotypic devaluation or stigmatization makes it likely that blacks will internalize their devaluation.” But this is puzzling, given that he correctly directs our attention to studies that show relatively high levels of self-esteem among different minority groups, including blacks (and black females in particular). In light of these empirical facts, it seems odd that Matthew so forcefully stresses the importance of stigma, and the disadvantages deriving from it. Indeed it is striking that Matthew would not read the evidence a different way, namely one indicative of *resilience* — and, dare I say, *black pride* — rather than as evidence pointing to the probable internationalization of one’s inferior worth.

Because Matthew uses African Americans as his primary example, I also think it important that we look beyond the stereotypes, especially given the sheer volume of negative international media attention directed at American blacks. One need not contest the appalling statistics concerning black poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and mortality rate to acknowledge that the situation in the ‘black community’ is vastly more complex. Indeed, notwithstanding unceasing academic obsession with African American *disadvantage*, the numbers often tell a different story.

While blacks are *disproportionately* affected by poverty, the vast majority (roughly 80%) (Statista Research Department, 2021) of African Americans do not live in poverty. If we turn our attention to the political domain, the numbers are also counter-intuitive. Current black representation in the US Congress (U.S. House of Representatives Press Gallery, 2021) is roughly equivalent to the total percentage of blacks (13%) in the entire country; numerous high-ranking federal officials are black; more than a third (vom Hove, 2021) of the top 100 cities in the US have black mayors. Figures from the corporate world in the US (Black Demographics, n.d.) are also worth noting, where 9.6% of all businesses in the US are black-owned. While the academic world certainly lags far behind, with somewhere between 4–5% black faculty, comparable figures in the UK (Coughlan, 2021) are considerably worse. In the UK, less than 1% of university faculty is black, and the numbers virtually disappear in continental Europe, this despite there being more than 9 million European blacks and another 2.5 million in the UK (Wikipedia, n. d.). 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. Indeed this evidence may even suggest that many blacks in fact prefer “integration.”

But not even the discouragingly low figures in American academia neatly correspond to Matthew’s thesis. Quite independent of affirmative action related justifications, many North American colleges and universities have been endeavouring for some time now to recruit black and minority talent. To be sure, recruitment, promotion, and especially *retention* remain formidable problems, and I would be the first to question whether some of these efforts are done in good faith versus the morally dubious aim of demonstrating one’s ‘commitment to diversity.’ Either way, evidence of discrimination, or a sense of devaluation, need not be salient for many black academics to leave their institutions. Obsequiousness can be as offensive and unpleasant as overt racism, as indeed is an enduring sense of tokenism or isolation. Each of these is undoubtedly experienced by many black faculty in predominately white institutions. Consequently, any or all of these may be reasons why many blacks prefer to move on, not a few preferring lesser paying positions in Historically Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCUs), where the fatigue of being othered — and not necessarily ‘devalued’ — is greatly attenuated. At the same time, however, whether these difficulties are uniquely experienced by blacks is doubtful.

Let me now put aside the matter of harm and turn my attention to the other feature of my second criticism, viz., *over-determination*. “Blacks remain a highly stigmatized group,” Matthew writes. No doubt that is true in a general sense. But putting aside the wide socioeconomic differences among blacks, not to mention the equally wide spectrum of colour (and the harm of colourism) within the black community, which itself either exacerbates or mitigates devaluation, surely there is much more that matters than phenotype. Matthew attributes far too much significance to a number of claims from a single anthropological study (Hordge-Freeman, 2015) on racial stigma in Brazil (e.g., among other things concerning a “widespread” desire for white partners, or an obsession with the hair of white people, or a desire to “reposition oneself along the phenotypic continuum”). But discussions concerning hair texture or stylistic preference are much more complex, as Matthew undoubtedly knows. Is a preference for hair colouring or weaves evidence of the internalization of inferior worth, or might these simply be compared to other cosmetic accessories and enhancements? This is precisely how many black women would argue the point (Jadezweni, 2018; Mamona, 2020).

Similar objections can be raised concerning the reasons that many black women date outside of their race — or else do not date at all; the reasons, as Matthew surely knows, are vastly more complex. American black women are outpacing (Cohen, 2016, updated 2020) not only black men, but in fact *all other women* in terms of higher education attainment. This reality alone resigns many black women who otherwise would prefer a black man either to dating non-black (and mainly white) men, lesbian relationships (a small minority), or else permanent single status. Again, this is precisely how many black women have argued the point (Judice, 2018; Mathis, 2007). In short, however true it may be in certain cases, it is much too facile to reduce these preferences to a by-product of racist devaluation or an absence of self-respect.

Whatever one makes of these sweeping generalizations, I think it just as important to remember that in many predominantly white societies, the “racial arrangements” are not as disadvantageous to blacks as Matthew would have us believe. Indeed, blacks in many predominately non-black societies do not occupy a position at the bottom of the *racial hierarchy*. Few French, Dutch, or British blacks (of whatever ethnic stock) generally face pressure from the white majority to “integrate.” Indeed, blacks of whatever ethnic background are often viewed more favourably relative to other minority groups, notably Jews, Muslims, and the Roma, whose cultural and religious identities are also *racialized* (Fekete, 2014; Romeyn, 2014). Conversely, the pressure applied to Roma and Muslim minorities to demonstrate that they are “integrated” is relentless (François, 2020; Maeso, 2015). These examples of racism and exclusion are very real, notwithstanding the tendency among white Europeans to *deny* racism (Small, 2018). None of the foregoing suggests that we ought to ignore the reality of *anti-black* racism in Europe, or to downplay black stigma or discrimination. Rather, the point is that blacks are not uniquely harmed, and may even be comparatively advantaged.

Nor should we limit these observations to Europe, for the reality in North America is equally complex: immigration status, ethnicity, first language, cultural background,

religion, and even political creed all mediate blackness in important ways. Most importantly, social class (entailing, *inter alia*, income, educational background, occupation, speech patterns, attire, place of residence, activity preference) is conspicuous by its absence in Matthew's phenotype-focused account, an omission, ironically, that his analysis shares with that of integrationist philosopher Elizabeth Anderson (2010). In any case, these intersecting features add informative layers of nuance to the somewhat reductionist thesis of black devaluation.

4. Conclusion

None of these friendly criticisms should be interpreted as an effort on my part to discredit Matthew's philosophical account. After all, some years ago, I wrote a book-length defence of separation (Merry, 2013) for reasons that are congenial to Matthew's position. That said, what I have attempted to do in these brief remarks is at least trouble the waters a little concerning the totality of the black devaluation thesis. Taken together, then, a less demanding notion of integration, a more fine-tuned unit of analysis, the importance of black resilience, as well as the complexity of black experiences in predominately non-black societies suggests that perhaps not quite so much effort needs to be expended in rejecting dubious integrationist imperatives.

References

- Anderson, E. (2010). *The imperative of integration*. Princeton University Press.
- Black Demographics. (n.d.). Black owned businesses. <https://blackdemographics.com/economics/black-owned-businesses>
- Claytor, C. P. (2020). *Black privilege: Modern middle-class blacks with credentials and cash to spend*. Stanford University Press. <https://www.sup.org/books/cite/?id=25892>
- Cohen, P. N. (2016, June 7, updated 2020). Family Inequity: No black women are not the "most educated" group in the US. <https://familyinequality.wordpress.com/2016/06/07/no-black-women-are-not-the-most-educated-group-in-the-us/>
- Coughlan, S. (2021, January 19). Only 1% of UK university professors are black. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/education-55723120>
- Fekete, L. (2014). Europe against the Roma. *Race and Class*, 55(3), 60–70.
- François, M. (2020). "The enemy within": Is there a place for Muslims in France's secular republic? <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/place-for-muslims-in-france-secular-republic/12848512>
- Hordge-Freeman, E. (2015). *The color of love: Racial features, stigma, and socialization in black Brazilian families*. University of Texas Press.
- Jadezweni, A. (2018). ICYMI: Trust me, black women don't wear weaves because they aspire to be white. <https://www.news24.com/w24/style/beauty/hairstyles/trust-me-black-women-dont-wear-weaves-because-they-aspire-to-be-white-20170315>
- Judice, C. (2018). *Interracial relationships between black women and white men*. Cambria.
- Lacy, K. (2007). *Blue chip black: Race, class and status in the new black middle class*. University of California Press.
- Maeso, S. R. (2015). 'Civilising the Roma? The depoliticization of (anti-) racism within the politics of integration. *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 22(1), 53–70.
- Mamona, S. (2020). This is why black women unfairly spend so much money on their hair. <https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/why-black-women-spend-so-much-on-hair>
- Mathis, D. (2007). *Sole sisters: The joys and pains of single black women*. Agate.
- Matthew, D. C. (2023). Racial integration and the problem of relational devaluation. *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review*, 62(1), 3–45.
- Merry, M. S. (2013). *Equality, citizenship, and segregation: A defense of separation*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9781137033703#aboutBook>

- Moore, K. (2009). Gentrification in black face? The return of the black middle class to urban neighborhoods. *Urban Geography*, 30(2), 118–142.
- Romeyn, E. (2014). Anti-semitism and Islamophobia: Spectropolitics and immigrations. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 31(6), 77–101.
- Small, S. (2018). Theorizing visibility and vulnerability in black Europe and the African diaspora. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(6), 1182–1197.
- Statista Research Department. (2021, September 21). Poverty rate in the United States in 2020, by ethnic group. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/200476/us-poverty-rate-by-ethnic-group/>
- U.S. House of Representatives Press Gallery. (2021, May 11). Black Americans 117th Congress. <https://press-gallery.house.gov/black-americans-117th-congress>
- vom Hove, T. (2021, September 14). African American mayors. <http://www.citymayors.com/mayors/black-american-mayors.html>
- Wikipedia. (n.d.). Black Europeans of African ancestry. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Europeans_of_African_ancestry

Cite this article: Merry, M. S. (2023). Doth He Protest Too Much? Thoughts on Matthew's Black Devaluation Thesis. *Dialogue* 62(1), 69–75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217321000342>