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The Gender Politics of Physical Beauty and Racial Integration: Comments on D. C. Matthew’s “Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation”[†]

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Abstract

In response to D. C. Matthew’s article “Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation,” I assess the politics of physical beauty in the intersection between the categories of race and gender. I scrutinize Matthew’s contention that being perceived to be physically attractive reliably results in either good treatment or high self-esteem. I argue that, on the contrary, gender can function as a means of social control, in which the appraisal of women’s bodies yields neither good treatment nor improves their self-esteem. This problem can persist among self-segregated intra-group racial communities.

Résumé

En réponse à l’article de D. C. Matthew, « Racial Integration and the Problem of Relational Devaluation », j’examine la politique de la beauté physique à l’intersection entre les catégories de race et de genre. J’évalue et je rejette l’affirmation de Matthew selon laquelle être perçu comme physiquement attrayant se traduit à coup sûr soit par un bon traitement, soit par une haute estime de soi. Je soutiens que, au contraire, le genre peut fonctionner comme un moyen de contrôle social, dans lequel le désir du corps des femmes n’apporte aucun bon traitement ni n’améliore leur estime de soi. Ce problème peut persister au sein des communautés raciales intragroupes autoségrégues.

Keywords: normative ethics; race; gender; integration; self-esteem

Introduction

If you want my body and you think I’m sexy
come on, sugar, let me know.
Rod Stewart

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In a sharply written and rigorously argued essay, D. C. Matthew asserts that racial integration can create more harm than good for victims of anti-black racism. His central claim is that white standards of physical beauty devalue characteristically black phenotypic traits, such as those pertaining to skin colour, facial features, and hair texture. The aesthetic devaluation of a stereotypically black phenotype damages black self-worth. Matthew distinguishes aesthetic devaluation from violations of morality and justice, and notes that, even in a racially integrated and ideally just society without intergroup racial animus, black phenotypic devaluation can persist. Consequently, racial integration can continue to undermine black self-worth; and this troubling prospect should invite caution, if not outright rejection, of racial integration in favour of de facto racial segregation or voluntary black self-segregation.

Matthew's article makes a powerful contribution to the contemporary debate about the politics of racial integration. Philosophers theorizing about racial justice should modify our proposals for redressing non-ideal racial realities to ensure that victims of anti-black racism do not disproportionately bear the burden of achieving a lauded political ideal, especially if it inflicts serious damage on the victims it was supposed to help. Matthew's article offers a powerful rejoinder to defences of racial integration that overlook the dominance of racialized standards of physical attractiveness and the potential of these standards to continue to damage black self-worth in a racially integrated society.

I agree with much of Matthew's assessment. His account of self-respect and racial separation is particularly incisive. In my comments below, I tackle the first sections of Matthew's article that use social scientific case studies to link the social recognition of physical beauty with high self-esteem. I find dubious the following key claims that Matthew makes:

- (1) Those who are considered physically attractive are treated 'well.'
- (2) Being considered physically attractive by others increases one's self-esteem.

In my discussion of these claims, I stress the need for clearer normative grounds that should inform the formation of interpersonal judgements of physical attractiveness and of intimate relationships in particular. To be sure, this is not Matthew's main concern, but it is one that I would like to address in my comments. I proceed to examine the gender politics of physical beauty in the intersection between the categories of race and gender. Men tend to assert control over women in their appraisals of their bodies. And demeaning appraisals of women can persist in intra-racial interactions. For this reason, further clarification of the normative grounds that ought to inform the social recognition of women's beauty in general and black women's beauty in particular is necessary.

Physical Beauty and Good Treatment

Matthew asserts that those who are considered physically attractive are treated 'well.' He cites extensive social scientific literature to support this claim. Though central to his argument, the meaning of the adjective 'well' is not clear nor is it clear how it

modifies the character of persons' interpersonal interactions or their judgements of each other's worth.

Matthew's view does not rest on the instrumentalist view that beauty secures more opportunities, such as better pay and opportunities, though he cites literature that confirms as much. He advances the non-instrumental view that denigrated relational value is an intrinsic problem for self-esteem, regardless of its downstream effects on matters of morality or justice. For, social circles tend to favour physically attractive persons. "The reason is obvious," Matthew writes, "people prefer to be around, and to treat better, those who they regard as physically attractive" (Section II). He proceeds to review numerous social scientific findings that link strong in-group affiliation to high self-esteem, but the central point gets lost: physical beauty yields 'good treatment,' so much so that, in his view, the apparent linkage warrants black self-segregation, or at least resistance to integration, to bolster intimate intragroup black partnerships. The assumption is that satisfying in-group positive standards of black beauty will result in overall positive intragroup treatment of persons, which, in turn, will enhance black self-esteem.

It strikes me that the connection between the intragroup affirmation of a standard of beauty and 'good treatment' needs more support. Consider the intersection between race and gender. Affirmative intragroup judgements about physical beauty, say those that celebrate the distinctive beauty of a certain racial phenotype, do not necessarily result in the better treatment of the people who meet that standard by others. In other words, being considered attractive by others, whatever the relevant standard of beauty, does not necessarily entail one will be treated well. On the contrary, as Matthew concedes, being evaluated on the basis of appearance is a powerful mechanism of social control that degrades women. What is more, women's membership in vulnerable ethnic and racial groups means that even women who are considered attractive by mainstream standards will not evade poor treatment.

Consider the case of ethnic Uyghur women in China. Uyghurs are subject to a state-sponsored campaign of arbitrary and indefinite detention. Uyghur women endure forced sterilization and abortions, as well as horrific sexual and physical abuse. Yet Uyghur women grace the covers of Chinese fashion magazines and appear as lead actors in films and television shows because they tend to have more stereotypically white phenotypic features. This confirms Matthew's contention that the white phenotype informs standards of physical attractiveness around the world. And yet though Chinese popular culture views Uyghur women as desirable, that hardly stops the Chinese military from ethnically cleansing them. Likewise, popular narratives about the sexual allure of Native women in North America dovetails with their systemic rape and femicide with impunity, predominantly at the hands of white men. In these cases, the 'enjoyment' of the woman's body is consistent with their brutal state-supported domination.

Matthew might object that I am describing special cases that do not apply to Afro-descendent women who share a stereotypic black phenotype. But I believe the heart of my objection stands: appraisals of black women's beauty can be a function of gender-based forms of social control that do not elicit their 'good' treatment at the hands of those who desire their bodies. We need additional norms to guide how one ought to 'enjoy' the body of a woman without making her an appendage

of male or state or community power, whether black or non-black. In his discussion of black women specifically, Matthew cites a social scientific case study in which black women rate *themselves* to be physically attractive, given their strong positive sense of their own black racial identity. Telling, the case study does not mention how their gender or sexual identity shapes their interpersonal interaction with others, black or non-black. So, the fact that positive group identity can bolster the self-esteem of black women does not mean that intragroup intimacy *reliably* elicits their good treatment by others. We require further normative grounds for determining the *normative character* of intimate relationships. In rejecting white standards of beauty, 'positive feedback' must be sensitive to the ways that black women can be hurt or belittled by expectations to satisfy the sexual desires or aesthetic judgements of others. For, as W. E. B. Du Bois cautions in *Darkwater*, demeaning appraisals of black women's bodies can persist in intragroup black communities and the focus on physical appearance locks them in an oppressive social position due to their gender identity. In celebrating the beauty of black women, Du Bois rejects the social expectation for them to be judged disproportionately on their physical appearance alone: "The world still wants to ask that a woman primarily be pretty and if she is not, the mob pouts and asks querulously, 'What else are women for?'" (Du Bois, 1920, p. 182).

Physical Beauty and Self-Esteem

Self-worth reflects a relational standing that affirms our social value in the eyes of others, but it is not clear how the social recognition of one's physical attractiveness improves one's feelings of self-worth. Consider Rod Stewart's question, "Do ya think I'm sexy?" The narrator makes a second-personal address to a particular prospective partner. This suggests something important about why and how the social recognition of physical beauty can enrich their subjective sense of self-worth. It helps build self-esteem when it is conferred from a second-personal perspective and aims to meet basic norms of human flourishing in an ongoing interpersonal interaction. As Matthew notes, our relational standing in a concrete social circle is critical to our sense of self-worth. In its absence, positive appraisals of attractiveness will not improve self-esteem. In fact, they can be awkward and even menacing, especially for women and gender non-confirming individuals for whom external judgements about their physical beauty or bodies function as a mechanism of social control.

Let's revisit our earlier discussion to pose a question: do ethnic Uyghur women in China or Native women in North America enjoy more self-esteem *due to* the popular affirmation of their physical beauty? I think not, for these appraisals do not elicit positive treatment or interpersonal relations that are conducive to their flourishing. Sexual appraisals only matter for self-worth if they result in the formation of interpersonal bonds that meet certain basic conditions of human flourishing, namely, another person genuinely seeks to take your ends as their own. This is what Stewart does when he directs his question to a *particular* prospective partner, 'Do *you* think I'm sexy?' and tries to meet his partner's needs and expectations. In other words, what increases self-esteem is not the mere fact of being considered physically attractive by another, but that another actually treats you well by taking your ends as their own.

I suspect that Matthew might concede all this and object the following: the popular acceptance of white standards of beauty illustrate that those who approximate them can more readily establish intimate partnerships that affirm their beauty in the eyes of others and, as a consequence, can enjoy the 'positive' uptake of their needs and expectations by others. They move through a social world that caters to them. But this seems vague to me. We need clearer normative grounds for how social interactions improve or undermine their self-esteem, given the overall character of the second-personal evaluative attitudes that others adopt towards them.

References

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