Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?
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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Introduction.

'If you want my body
and you think I'm sexy
Come on, sugar, let me know.'

Rod Stewart

In a sharply written, 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 color, 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 favor of de facto racial segregation or voluntary black self-segregation.

In this article, Matthew makes a powerful contribution to the contemporary debate about the politics of racial integration. Philosophers theorizing racial justice should modify our proposals for redressing nonideal 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. This article offers an essential rejoinder to defenses 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 the 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 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 interpersonal judgments of physical attractiveness and the formation of intimate

relationships. 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 our 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.

I. 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 judgments of each other's worth.

First, 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 favor 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" (11). He proceeds to review numerous social scientific findings that link strong in-group affiliation to high self-esteem, but the central point gets lost: that 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, enhances 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 judgments about physical beauty, say those that celebrate the distinctive beauty of a certain distinctive racial phenotype, does 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 (Matthew 2021, 14). What is more, women's membership in vulnerable ethnic and racial groups highlights that the popular appreciation of their good looks will not save them from poor treatment.

Consider the case of ethnic Uighur women in China. Uighurs are subject to a state-sponsored campaign of arbitrary and indefinite detention. Uighur women endure forced sterilization and horrific sexual and physical abuse. Yet Uighur women grace the covers of Chinese fashion magazines and appear as lead actress 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. Likely this is due to global white supremacy that imposes racially denigrating standards of aesthetic judgment on human bodies. And yet though Chinese popular culture views Uighur 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 and -condoned 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 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* bolsters their self-esteem. We require further normative grounds for determining the *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 of satisfying the sexual desires of others. For as Du Bois cautions in *Darkwater*, demeaning appraisals of black women's bodies can persist in intragroup black communities and lock them in an oppressive social position on account of their gender identity. The goal, Du Bois writes, in celebrating the beauty of black women, is "not to also expect [them] to be merely ornamental" (Du Bois 1920, 183). For, "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?'" (182)

II. Physical Beauty and Self-Esteem

Self-worth reflects 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 matter enough to a person to enrich their subjective sense of self-worth. It only builds self-esteem when it is conferred from a second-personal perspective and aims to meet certain basic norms of human flourishing in an ongoing interpersonal interaction. The recognition that one is attractive from a 'general' public will not improve one's self-esteem in a meaningful and enduring fashion. Unless one's a lothario taking 'pride' in the prospect of infinite, forgettable sexual conquests, or aspires to 'win' the title of Most Beautiful of All, one is unlikely to care about the judgment of a faceless public. Persons looking for this kind of impersonal recognition of their physical beauty tend to have low self-esteem anyway. As Matthew notes, our relational standing in a concrete social circle is what makes the difference. In its absence, positive appraisals of attractiveness will not improve one's self-esteem. In fact, they can be awkward and even menacing, especially for women and gender non-confirming individuals for whom external judgments 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 Uighur women in China or Native women in North America enjoy more self-esteem on account of 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 conditions of human flourishing. Ergo, in his hit song, Rod Stewart directs his question to a *particular* prospective partner, 'Do *you* think I'm sexy?' and proceeds to try to meet his partner's needs and expectations, as his partner explains what they are—a cup of coffee would be nice, or maybe a matinee? That is, it not the mere fact of being considered physically attractive by another that increases one's self-esteem, but that another is actually motivated to treat you well by taking your ends as their own.

I suspect that Matthews might concede all this and object: The popular acceptance of white standards of beauty illustrate that for those who approximate them, they can more readily establish intimate relations that affirm their beauty in the eyes of others and, as a consequence, enjoy the "positive" uptake of their needs and expectations by others. They can move more readily through a social world that is prepared—and excited, no pun intended—to celebrate them. But this seems vague to me. To be sure, I grant that a system of social values that discourages black phenotypical valuation in general makes it difficult to establish an intimate relation with any particular non-Black person. But if this is the case, it seems that the relevant problem is *the system of social values that persists* to denigrate black beauty. As Matthew notes, this denigrating system of social values *also impacts black intragroup bonds*. Matthew is right to stress that challenging this social system is a difficult process of social transformation. Yet he expects intragroup black solidarity to mitigate the negative effects of relational devaluation of a stereotypically black phenotype. It strikes me that what is normatively relevant in a second-person address is precisely the earnest interest another person takes to cater to the well-being of another and be motivated to make them feel beautiful in a fashion that meets their needs and expectations. Might not such a robust evaluative attitude be elicited from non-blacks, if it can also be elicited from Blacks that have lighter skin tone or otherwise share fewer stereotypically black phenotypic features? The adoption of such a second-person evaluative stance that actively promotes the well-being of another seems to be the relevant factor that increases feelings of self-worth in the first place. I concede, however, Matthew's central concern that though laudable, these kinds of affirming second-personal addresses are too rarely invitations to celebrate black beauty in all its shades and diversity.

References

Du Bois, W.E.B. (1920) *Darkwater*. Dover.

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