

Racial Justice and Resistance to Integration[†]

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Abstract

D. C. Matthew makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate between integrationists and their critics. While Matthew's conclusion that blacks have a duty not to integrate is too strong, his account provides additional reasons why they may not want to integrate. Further reasons to resist integration may be provided by considering the contexts of integration, particularly with respect to the degree of coerciveness that they involve. I argue that resistance to integration should take the form of not only refusing to participate in it but also of engaging in collective political action in the pursuit of racial justice.

Résumé

D. C. Matthew apporte une contribution importante au débat en cours entre les intégrationnistes et leurs critiques. Alors que la conclusion de Matthew selon laquelle les noirs ont le devoir de ne pas s'intégrer est trop forte, son compte rendu fournit des raisons supplémentaires pour lesquelles ils peuvent ne pas vouloir s'intégrer. D'autres raisons de résister à l'intégration peuvent être fournies en considérant les contextes d'intégration, en particulier en ce qui concerne le degré de coercition qu'ils impliquent. Je soutiens que la résistance à l'intégration devrait prendre la forme non seulement du refus d'y participer, mais aussi de l'engagement dans une action politique collective pour la poursuite de la justice raciale.

Keywords: racial integration; racial justice; black solidarity; black nationalism; affirmative action; mobility programs

I. Introduction

D. C. Matthew stands in a long tradition of black political thought that rejects racial integration as the primary — or even as a viable — route to racial justice. His argument is distinctive, then, not because of its rejection of integration but because of the reasons that he provides for this rejection and the weight that he assigns to these

[†]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>.



reasons. Matthew argues not just that blacks¹ have moral permission to resist integration, but that they have a duty to do so. Furthermore, this duty is not primarily a duty that individuals have toward others, but a duty to themselves. If his account is correct, it has far-reaching implications not just for the “distant future” (Intro) that Matthew envisions, but also for the choices that individuals make in the present. Once those implications are spelled out, Matthew’s view begins to appear less plausible — or so I will argue in [Section II](#), below. In [Section III](#), I argue that the context of integration varies not only by domain but on other dimensions as well, especially involving the degree of coerciveness involved. The more coercive contexts of integration are most objectionable, while the least may not be objectionable at all. In [Section IV](#), I argue that Matthew’s account of resistance to integration should be augmented with additional forms of resistance. Matthew emphasizes resistance by individuals who refuse to integrate, but a more complete account would include collective political action in pursuit of racial justice.

II. A Duty Not to Integrate?

Matthew argues that blacks have morally weighty reasons to resist integration under conditions of stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation. Stigmatization is grounded in “the fact that blacks are subject to negative stereotypes, interpersonal rejection, and various forms of discrimination because of their race” while phenotypic devaluation refers to “the widely shared judgement that characteristically black phenotypic traits ... are less attractive than non-black ones, with the result that many consider blacks to be singularly unattractive” (Intro). Stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation threaten four aspects of black self-worth: they threaten black self-esteem and self-respect, and they give rise to feelings of inferiority and to relations of inferiority. One of the important contributions of Matthew’s account is his emphasis on phenotypic devaluation as distinct from the racism and racial discrimination associated with stigmatization. Matthew expresses cautious optimism about the possibility that racism might someday be overcome, and with it the wrongs of racial discrimination, but he believes that phenotypic devaluation is more durable. Even in a society free of racism, he argues, phenotypic devaluation would likely persist, and would therefore continue to provide reasons for blacks to resist integration.

These reasons to resist integration are extremely weighty, on Matthew’s account. The harms of integration to black self-worth provide both self-interested or prudential reasons as well as moral reasons — which amount to duties — to resist integration. Specifically, the self-esteem and feelings of inferiority aspects of the account provide prudential reasons whereas the self-respect and relations of inferiority aspects provide the moral reasons. On Matthew’s account, it is morally wrong to accept conditions that are incompatible with one’s self-respect; it is also wrong to accept relations of inferiority. Such acceptance is a wrong to *oneself*, and hence one has a duty to oneself to resist integration.

Matthew recognizes that there are serious trade-offs here, but nevertheless he argues that the considerations in favour of not integrating almost always trump the benefits of integration. First, the benefits that integration may advance include the interests that minority group members may have in taking advantage of, for example,

¹ I follow Matthew’s lead and use “blacks” throughout.

educational and career opportunities as well as increasing their range of choices with respect to place of residence and participation in other institutions and associations. Second, integration may advance the long-term goal of enhancing the justice and the democratic character of the society in which minority group members live. These are very weighty considerations. Clearly, promoting justice and democracy, as Matthew acknowledges integration might do, is an important goal, and from the point of view of an individual, educational and career advancements can be central to the success of one's life plan and to one's flourishing.

Yet Matthew argues that these benefits pale in comparison to the self-worth harms of integration — so much so that those harms will nearly always outweigh any benefits of integration. He acknowledges that “self-worth does not have absolute overriding weight such that it cannot be outweighed by anything else” (Section IV.4). When he elaborates on this point, however, it becomes clear just how much would be required to outweigh self-worth considerations. He writes:

So it is possible for the self-worth harms of integration to be outweighed by its benefits. Suppose that if blacks integrate, a protracted and deadly civil war, in which millions — blacks and non-blacks alike — lose their lives, is avoided. If so, the harms of integration are probably outweighed by its benefits. (Section IV.4)

The “probably” is telling, suggesting something about the relative weight that Matthew assigns to the considerations here. It leaves open the possibility that, even at the cost of millions of lives, blacks *might* nevertheless have a duty not to integrate. Hence, Matthew concludes that, under realistic assumptions about the costs and benefits of integration, “it is very hard to see how the benefits of integration could be so great as to outweigh the harms” (Section IV.4). Under such realistic assumptions, the harms of integration have “absolute overriding weight” (Section IV.4).

To appreciate the strength of this conclusion, we should remember that Matthew applies it to a much-improved future, where racism, racial discrimination, and stigmatization have been overcome, but where phenotypic devaluation persists. In a contemporary society (such as the United States) where both stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation are pervasive, the costs of integration are only higher, making their “absolute overriding weight” *vis-à-vis* the benefits of integration even more absolute. Under present circumstances, the nearly absolute character of the duty not to integrate amounts to a complete prohibition. If his account is correct, Matthew concludes, “blacks should consider [integration] off the table” (Section VI.1).

Consider the implications of this view. On Matthew's account, a black college applicant, deciding whether to attend a predominantly white university or an historically black college or university (HBCU) has both prudential as well as moral reasons — of nearly absolute weight — to attend the historically black college. The evidence regarding the benefits of attending one of these two types of schools is mixed, but there is some evidence that students who attend historically black colleges pay a penalty with respect to their future earnings (see Fryer & Greenstone, 2010). I doubt this and have argued elsewhere for the benefits of attending HBCUs (see Valls, 2018, 199–202), but let us grant for the sake of argument that there is such a penalty. Despite this, the implication of Matthew's argument is that the 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. She has a duty to attend the HBCU. Indeed, the implication of Matthew's argument is 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. Similarly, blacks who are presented with highly attractive job offers at predominantly white firms, blacks who could buy houses in very appealing but predominantly white neighbourhoods, etc., must forgo these opportunities and the benefits that they might bring. Blacks who participate in integrated institutions and settings — all or nearly all of them — commit a serious moral wrong by violating a duty to themselves.

Surely this view is too sweeping. The costs and benefits of such decisions are too varied, complex, uncertain, and incommensurable to be resolved by the overriding weight of one consideration. Even if Matthew is correct about the ways in which integration can undermine black self-worth, it is a mistake to suggest that this cost — serious as it is — is dispositive, providing not just a prudential but also a conclusive moral reason to forgo the benefits that integration may offer. Millions of blacks have been willing to bear the burdens of integration, both for their own sakes and for the sake of others, such as their family members for whom they wish to provide a better life, and for their racial kin, for whom they are trailblazers and role models. In the case of the United States, such individuals have also arguably advanced the causes of greater racial justice and enhanced democracy by making many institutions more diverse and opening up greater opportunities for others to follow. We cannot conclude with confidence that all of these individuals have made the wrong choices.

In a sense, Matthew's view is the mirror image of the view of the integrationists whose position he rejects. Scholars such as Elizabeth Anderson (2010) argue that blacks have a moral duty to integrate. Matthew argues that they have a moral duty not to integrate. Both make the same mistake: thinking of integration as generating individual moral duties on the part of blacks. Instead, I suggest, we should be less paternalistic in prescribing duties to individuals with respect to integration. We should 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. The primary task, on this view, is to specify what justice requires with respect to these circumstances of choice (see Valls, 2018, especially Chapters 4, 6, & 8).

III. Contexts of Integration

The above considerations notwithstanding, Matthew presents powerful arguments for the proposition that blacks have compelling reasons, both prudential and moral, for resisting integration. I have argued only that these reasons are not quite as powerful as he suggests, overriding as they do (on his account) all considerations, prudential and moral, for integrating. As noted at the outset, Matthew's argument against integration stands in a long tradition of black political thought that points out the serious and varied costs to blacks of integration, and his account of the costs associated with phenotypic devaluation is a contribution to this tradition.

Even if Matthew is mistaken in concluding that blacks have a nearly absolute duty to resist integration, then, his argument supports the position that they are justified in

doing so. They may not have a duty not to integrate, but nor do they have a duty to integrate. His argument supports a rejection of the integrationist view that blacks do have a duty to integrate: such a duty is implausible in light of the very serious costs that it imposes (some of which Matthew highlights), combined with the uncertain and long-term character of the benefits.

As Matthew would presumably acknowledge, a more complete account of resistance to integration would include additional prudential and moral reasons that support this resistance. His account focuses on the costs associated with stigmatization and phenotypic devaluation, but there may be other reasons to remain in, or support, predominantly black institutions and associations. For example, Matthew invokes racial solidarity only in the context of phenotypic variation, arguing that less phenotypically stereotypical blacks may have reasons of solidarity not to integrate — i.e., for the benefit of more stereotypical blacks rather than out of self-interest or a duty to oneself. Yet there may be other reasons to act out of racial solidarity, ones that track other dimensions of diversity among blacks. Most obvious here is differences in class, where better-off blacks may be able to do well for themselves by integrating but may feel the tug of racial solidarity, which may prompt them to participate in predominantly black institutions (see Shelby, 2005, especially Chapter 2). And, as Matthew does acknowledge, integration is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Individual blacks may choose to integrate in some domains but not others by, for example, living in a predominantly black neighbourhood but working in a predominantly white firm or being educated in a predominantly white school. We should think of blacks as free, I suggested above, to make these choices as they themselves see fit. They may pursue their own interests as well as discharge their duties to others by either integrating or refusing to integrate, and can do so by integrating in some domains but not others.

A more adequate account of resistance to integration would also distinguish among different contexts of integration. As a first approximation, I suggest that we distinguish three contexts of integration: integrationist opportunities, integrationist pressures, and integrationist coercion. We can think of these as points along a spectrum that represents the degree to which blacks may be induced to integrate. The more coercive the inducement, I suggest, the more objectionable — and therefore, *ceteris paribus*, the more worthy of resistance.

An example of an integrationist opportunity is an affirmative action program in admissions to a college or university. Affirmative action is inevitably integrationist, as it promotes the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, including blacks, in majority-dominated institutions (Anderson, 2010; Warnke, 1998). Such programs have long been defended as a means to create more opportunities for blacks and others, and as an indispensable component in the pursuit of a more racially just future (see Valls, 2018, Chapter 5). An implication of Matthew's argument would seem to be that affirmative action programs are objectionable because they tempt blacks to integrate, which means that they tempt blacks to do something that they have a moral duty not to do. I would argue to the contrary that affirmative action policies are not only permissible but should be vigorously defended against attacks by those who wish to end them. They create greater opportunities for blacks, though

of course anyone who wishes may decline to take advantage of such opportunities and may have good reasons for doing so.

More problematic are integrationist pressures. Here, I have in mind situations in which the totality of circumstances creates pressure to integrate, though this is not the intention of any agent. Imagine an upper-middle class African American who, other things being equal, would prefer to live in a predominantly black neighbourhood but who finds that the services, amenities, schools, etc. in his city are generally better in predominantly white neighbourhoods. (I leave aside for the moment the extent to which this disparity is indeed, in many cases, the result of intentional acts and policies.) This circumstance creates a distinct pressure toward residential integration, and it is thereby more objectionable than integrationist policies, such as affirmative action, which do not involve such pressure. It is objectionable because it induces blacks to integrate, even at the cost of, say, their desire to maintain racial solidarity by supporting and participating in a black community. In these circumstances, some blacks may choose, for both self-interested and perhaps moral reasons, not to integrate, but this decision will come with costs that in a more equitable world it would not.

Finally, there is integrationist coercion, where an agent, usually the state, undertakes a policy to promote integration in a way that skews the options presented to individuals to such an extent as to be coercive. An example is the Moving to Opportunity program in the United States, a program that is ardently defended by integrationists such as Anderson (2010) and Owen Fiss (2003). This policy provided vouchers to residents in high-poverty neighbourhoods that allowed them to move to better-off neighbourhoods. Although the policy was not explicitly race-conscious, it was modelled on an earlier race-based program and often operated as a policy directed at addressing concentrated black poverty in urban neighbourhoods. While the evidence of the success of the program is mixed, its defenders argue that this is just the kind of policy that is needed to address racial segregation and inequality. To its critics, however, scepticism toward such programs is warranted not only by their uncertain results but also by the skewed options that they create. In the absence of additional policies intended to improve the conditions in poor — often black — neighbourhoods, the policies present integration as the only route to a better life. The policy relies on the poor conditions in the targeted neighbourhood to provide the inducement to participate in the program. Even if such policies yield some benefits for those who participate in them, their decision to participate can hardly be thought of as an expression of their freedom, since the only alternative may have been to remain in a relatively deprived neighbourhood where there is little hope of improvement. Such integrationist policies are highly objectionable, on these and other grounds, according to their critics (see Shelby, 2016, Chapter 2; Valls, 2018, Chapter 6).

This tripartite division is obviously imperfect. For one thing, as noted parenthetically above, integrationist pressures created by the totality of circumstances may in fact be the result of actions intended to harm blacks. Indeed, even the attractiveness of what I have called ‘integrationist opportunities’ may be due in part to such actions. For example, a well-resourced predominantly white public university might be attractive compared to a public HBCU in the same state in part because of a long history of disparate funding.

Still, despite these complications, I hope that these distinctions are useful as a first approximation for thinking about a range of circumstances in which integration

might take place across a range of domains. If so, then the essential point is that not all such circumstances are equally objectionable. Integrationist policies that create additional opportunities in a way that does not rely on the paucity of other options can plausibly be seen as opportunity-enhancing without being objectionably coercive. Policies that offer the opportunity to pursue a better life only at the cost of abandoning a community to which one may be attached, however, may be opportunity-enhancing in a limited sense, but the costs that they impose as the price of that benefit make them more objectionable. They rely on the injustice of the background conditions and the unattractiveness of the alternatives to induce participation in the program.

This kind of integration may be most worthy of the kind of resistance that Matthew champions. Here, integration is not one among many attractive options, but the only hope for a better future for those who can take advantage of it. For those who cannot, or will not, integrate in this way, it offers no hope at all. Even here, though, I would not go so far as to say that blacks have a duty not to integrate and should refuse to participate in such programs. It is wrong for the state to frame the options of prospective program participants this way, but one can hardly blame those who choose to participate. They should have better options, but in light of the options that they have, it may be reasonable for them to think that they and their families would be better off if they do so.

IV. Resistance as Citizens

So far, I have argued that blacks are not under a duty not to integrate, but that they do have good reasons to resist integration. They may also, however, have good reasons to integrate, and both sets of reasons include not only those based on prudence or self-interest but also moral reasons. I have also argued that contexts of integration vary considerably. Matthew acknowledges some of this variety when he describes the “domains” of integration (occupational, educational, residential, etc.), but I have suggested an additional dimension of variation: the degree of coerciveness involved. The thought here is that the more coercive the circumstances of integration are, the more they are objectionable. Hence, while I wish to resist Matthew’s defence of a duty not to integrate, much of view that I am sketching is intended as a set of friendly amendments to his view, in the hope of contributing to a more complete normative account of integration and resistance to it.

Such an account would also augment Matthew’s view of how to resist integration. The kind of resistance that Matthew emphasizes is individual resistance, carried out in individuals’ private lives. That is, he argues that blacks should resist integration by choosing not to participate in predominantly white settings. Participation in predominantly white settings threatens black self-worth, and so blacks should avoid these. Matthew, then, conceives of resistance to integration primarily in a privatized, individualist way. Matthew does not state that this is the only way in which blacks should resist integration, but it would be a mistake to think that resistance should take this form exclusively, or even primarily. In this last section, I argue that blacks and other advocates of racial justice should resist integration through collective action and as citizens.

By focusing exclusively on individual, private acts of resistance to integration, Matthew leaves untouched the background conditions that, I have argued, make certain contexts of integration more objectionable than others. In a society like the United States, with its long history of racial discrimination and segregation, it matters a great deal whether integrationist opportunities are offered as part of an overall program to address the effects of past and ongoing racial injustice. Such opportunities should not be offered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, with no attempt to ensure that the costs of integration are mitigated or to ensure the existence of good, non-integrationist options. A plausible conception of racial justice, I have argued elsewhere, should concern itself primarily with the conditions under which individuals make choices such as these, rather than prescribing what these choices should be. Hence, a more racially just society would have both well-funded HBCUs as well as affirmative action policies in predominantly white colleges and universities, providing a range of attractive choices to black college applicants — some of whom may choose to integrate in this way and some of whom may choose to pursue their education in predominantly black settings. Similarly, resources should be expended to improve conditions in predominantly black neighbourhoods so that those who choose to leave them do so not just to escape bad circumstances. 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. The fate of black institutions and communities would be determined by the sum of individual choices made under such fair conditions (Valls, 2018).

The creation of such conditions depends on a great many things, including the willingness of institutions such as universities and major employers to aggressively open up greater opportunities to blacks. Among the factors that create these conditions, though, the most important may be actions by the state in the form of public policy. State policy regarding public investment, redistribution, compensation for past wrongs, etc., is enormously consequential to the pursuit of racial justice. Almost every area of public policy can have significant implications for the prospects of racial justice: housing policy, educational policy, taxation, redistribution, social programs, etc. All of these can advance or retard progress toward racial justice, particularly because in a society such as the United States blacks remain overrepresented among the less well off. Blacks, and all supporters of greater racial equality, then, have every reason to engage in political action to promote policies that advance their cause.

In working toward a more racially just society through political action, blacks have good reasons to resist policies that induce integration through undue coercion. If, as I have argued, policies like Moving to Opportunity unfairly skew the set of options available to poorer blacks with respect to their choice of residence, then they are well justified in arguing against such policies — at least in the absence of additional policies that improve conditions in the neighbourhoods targeted by ‘mobility’ programs. Blacks and others can oppose such policies not only on grounds of self-interest, but on grounds of justice, and they may oppose them not only by refusing to participate in them under current conditions, but by engaging in political action.

Matthew’s account of resistance to integration, which focuses on private individuals making the choice to integrate or (mostly) not, must be supplemented by a

robust defence of resistance to integrationist policies that fail to address racial injustice and offer integration as the sole or primary route to better life prospects. Such resistance would take the form of collective, political action. Only such collective action and political activism, I suggest, has any hope of advancing the cause of racial justice. Matthew's account of justified resistance to integration is persuasive as far as it goes, but the privatized, individual form of resistance that is his focus has little hope of changing the terms on which integration opportunities are offered. Only changes in public policy can do this, and changes in public policy require coordinated political action. This public, political, and collective aspect of resistance to coercive integration is a necessary supplement to Matthew's argument, an essential component of a more complete account of integration and how, when, and why it should be resisted.

V. Conclusion

I have argued that Matthew's conclusion that there is a nearly absolute duty not to integrate is unwarranted, but that his account nevertheless is a welcome addition to the tradition that highlights the costs of integration and therefore the reasons that blacks may have to resist it. The contexts of integration vary not only by domain but along other dimensions as well, including their degree of coerciveness. On this score, I have suggested that more coercive integrationist policies are more objectionable and therefore they provide additional reasons for resistance. This resistance, however, should not only take the form that Matthew emphasizes, where individuals resist by refusing to integrate. Rather, blacks and other advocates of racial equality should resist as citizens, insisting that integration be offered on fairer terms, where the decision to integrate or not (within one or more domains) can be a choice among good options. A more racially just society would support black institutions and communities as well as ensure that blacks have the opportunity to participate in predominantly white settings. Therefore, resistance to integration in its most objectionable forms must include collective political action in pursuit of a more racially just society.

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Cite this article: Valls, A. (2023). Racial Justice and Resistance to Integration. *Dialogue* 62(1), 53–61. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217322000099>