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On McPherson and Shelby

Commentary on McPherson and Shelby's "Blackness and Blood"

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Not too very long ago, a close reading and consideration of Lionel McPherson and Tommie Shelby's "Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity" might well have led a reader to conclude that they were, indeed, "race men": that is, men concerned with supporting and advancing efforts to defend the people-hood of folks of African descent in the United States of America who identify themselves, and are identified by others, as such. I think such a conclusion warranted even today though the reader would be compelled to state clearly, at the outset, that such people-hood for McPherson and Shelby is not strictly determined by heritable biological characteristics that determine other important individually and socially defining factors (intelligence, culture-production capabilities, ethical significance, sociality). For these two agile and thoughtful scholars take care to sketch out a complex notion of social identity as involving several modes or dimensions, each of which, in actuality, is taken up, if at all, with differing senses and intensities of

commitment, and, overall, in different combinations, in varying socio-historical circumstances, by individuals who identify as black folks. And they do so, McPherson and Shelby argue, for very important *pragmatic* reasons in response to conditions of life in a social order thoroughly conditioned by hierarchical notions of raciality that have long been invidious for folks of African descent. The pressing concerns of everyday life—the existential need for *solidarity* in order to endure racialized oppression while fostering and sustaining praxes devoted to fashioning individual and group lives of freedom, justice, and flourishing—are what motivate reasonings, practices, and behaviors through which black folks in the U.S. take up racialized social identities, not the demands of formal logical reasoning for coherence and consistency.

In arguing this stance McPherson and Shelby take issue with Kwame Anthony Appiah's critique of the supposed incoherency of much African American social identity that he takes to be grounded in essentialist notions of raciality. In doing so they revive an injunction issued to black folks nearly two centuries ago by Martin R. Delany, a man some have called the father of Black Nationalism: "Moral theories have long been resorted to by us, as a means of effecting the redemption of our brethren in bonds, and the elevation of the free colored people in this country. Experience has taught us, that speculations are not enough; that the *practical* application of principles adduced, the thing carried out, is the only true and proper course to pursue" (52, emphasis in original).

Is this an appropriate way to read and cast the efforts of McPherson and Shelby? Certainly, for very important reasons it must be left to the two of them, individually and together, to certify the characterization of their efforts and the relation to their own identities. Still, ample room is left to weigh in on their disagreement with Appiah and to take stock of the argument and argument-strategy they employ to make their case in opposition to his call for work by a liberal and democratic state to craft the souls of its citizens such that they do not develop, or are educated away from, incoherent social identities that, when drawn on to formulate and follow life-

plans, render persons unlikely to be able to have ethically and morally satisfactory lives.

McPherson and Shelby approach the matters of the basis and viability of social identities very much in keeping with the injunction of Delany, namely, by attending to practical experience, to “the thing carried out”: “On our view, the social identity of a group is most clearly revealed in the behavioral dispositions of its members, not in abstract conceptual propositions to which they might assent if queried by a clever philosopher or probing social scientist” (175). With this declaration the two scholars seem well on the way to recognizing that matters of the propriety and viability of social identity are beyond the jurisdiction of arguing academics who would be misled in assuming the authority to prescribe norms of reasonableness by which such identities should be formed and maintained.

What role, then, for philosophers in the complex processes of forging, refining, and sustaining social identities? This is the vexing question that is prompted by my close reading and consideration of “Blackness and Blood: Interpreting African American Identity.” McPherson and Shelby are convinced that black folks enduring the vicissitudes of life in a problematically racialized and capitalist social order have developed pragmatic strategies for fashioning social identities required for and reinforced by intraracial *solidarity*, a necessity for endurance and flourishing (though hardly sufficient). And while I applaud their turning to people’s practices and behaviors to anchor their interpretations of these people’s social identities, McPherson and Shelby don’t go far enough: rather than endeavoring to find out what *in fact* folks believe about themselves, the authors resort to a “clever” philosophical move—a *thought* experiment—rather than to empirical research.

This, in my judgment, is a failure to follow the force of their insight and conviction that is not redeemed or excused by noting the difficulties encountered in opinion research. Their argument against Appiah requires that they go all the way to empirical research and thereby seek either to confirm or falsify their claims about African Americans’ notions of social identity. How else to resolve a conflict of *interpretations* of African American identity if not by querying African

Americans? Until they do so, either themselves or by relying on the cooperative or complementary work of colleagues in the social sciences, this important discussion will remain an unresolved debate among scholars. No thought experiment is an adequate or appropriate substitute *if* the objective is to have an interpretation be true of those of whom it is made: that is, that it be confirmed or disconfirmed by them as an accurate account of their sense of themselves.

It is here that the rubber meets the road: where the work and possible contributions of philosophers concerned with such social matters of consequence either meet or fail the testing of our theorizings and interpretations by putting them up against the social realities of living persons for the latter’s critical review. If we fail to take this crucial further step in our work, the significance of our debates for folks beyond the Academy will remain in serious doubt, and our scholarly efforts will fall short of the noble examples of dedicated service of thoughtful race women and men of not so long ago who assumed responsibility for endeavoring to have their intellectual endeavors be of service to the enhancement of living and well-being of those they regarded as their *people*, and of other peoples as well.

References

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