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Blackness, Hypodescent, and Essentialism

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

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In their fascinating and thoughtful paper, McPherson and Shelby seek to defend everyday African American understandings of their own identity against the critique launched by Anthony Appiah in his Tanner lectures. I have no deep disagreements with their defense. Instead I will propose what I hope are useful clarifications of some of the key claims in that defense, and perhaps some further contribution to the discussion they have begun.

1. Roughly speaking, Appiah argues as follows: (1) African Americans typically adhere to the rule of hypodescent, understood as a criterion for membership in the group of black people. However, says Appiah, in conjunction with (2) the nationalist belief that black people owe special obligations of support or group solidarity to other black people, this adherence is problematic. For the truth is that (3) many

phenotypically white people in the United States in fact have black ancestors and thus, by a strict application of the rule of hypodescent, are black rather than white, regardless of appearance. Given this fact, (4) adherence to the rule of hypodescent requires black people (insofar as they are nationalists) to extend to many phenotypically white people the same kind of support they believe they owe to all black people. But this means (5) that the actions of black nationalists will, insofar as they are based on the facts, undermine the very project of black nationalism.¹ Appiah goes on to argue that in cases where a group's beliefs about its identity undermine its own political and social projects, the liberal state should intervene to "soul-make," that is, to reshape the understanding that group has of itself.²

McPherson and Shelby's response is complex, and their argument is not linear. One central element in that response is introduced by drawing on earlier work of Shelby's distinguishing a variety of different modes or conceptions of blackness. Crucial among these are the "racial mode" and the "political mode":

First, there is the *racial dimension*, which most people take to be related to the somatic or genetic characteristics and continental origins of human groups. Hence the racial label "African American" applies to Americans who satisfy certain physical criteria and are descended from inhabitants of Africa....Fifth, there is a *political dimension* to African American identity. This is generally taken to involve a commitment to certain political values (for example, equal civil rights, group political empowerment) and to particular strategies of resistance against oppression (for example, organized public protest, group solidarity). There is disagreement among African Americans about what a commitment to these political values and strategies of resistance precisely entails, in much the same way that there is disagreement among liberals about the exact meaning of equality, liberty, and tolerance. But some sort of commitment to

these values and strategies is widely accepted as necessary for the label “black,” in the political sense, properly to apply, though these norms generally fall short of requiring that blacks support specific social policies (176-77).

McPherson and Shelby rely on the distinction between these two particular “modes” of blackness to ground their argument that most African Americans are more committed to the latter, social-political way of identifying themselves than to the former, strictly “racial” way. They conclude that, if commitment to the former “racial” way of thinking undermines their social-political identity, most African Americans would jettison their current thinking regarding the racial mode. In particular, they would, under these conditions, give up their adherence to the rule of hypodescent as criterial of race membership. This is the burden of the first “thought-experiment” McPherson and Shelby propose (184).

2. This argument alone, however, does not address the question of what precisely the relationship is between the two conceptions or modes. I take it that McPherson and Shelby recognize this, and for this reason move on to make the further claim that “Appiah’s mistake is to think that common racial identity alone [as defined by the ‘racial mode’] justifies special in-group loyalty [as entailed by the ‘political mode’], when in fact a shared racial identity is only a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition [for being black in the political mode]” (186).

The strategy here seems plausible enough, but a deeper question remains. If, as Shelby and McPherson suppose, any social-political conception presupposes some underlying racial conception, then what racial conception should black people accept? More specifically, if we take the rule of hypodescent to articulate the underlying conception of racial blackness that most African Americans have, does this generate an acceptable social-political conception, provided only that we add self-identification to it?

I am inclined to think not. The rule of hypodescent is an embodiment of the trope of pollution by black blood. The notion that even a single drop of “black blood” somehow

disqualifies one for whiteness is not merely a rule about how to sort people. It is a notion that invokes old Anglo-European anxieties about the threat that the presence of blacks posed to the purity of the body politic. These anxieties were powerfully played out in the contentious history of racial identification in the United States, resulting finally in the widespread American acceptance of rule of hypodescent in the 1920s (Davis 1991). At a deeper level, these anxieties are undoubtedly a special case of the wider fear in European history about the presence among “us” of those who carry some disease or curse, traditionally conceived as “in the blood,” an idea too familiar from the long and ugly history of anti-Semitism.

Suppose then that Appiah is correct and the rule of hypodescent itself, if not the anxieties and fears that have underwritten its acceptance in 20th-century America, has been internalized by many African Americans in their understanding of their own racial identity. Suppose further that black people were to take as a social-political conception of blackness simply this racial understanding, plus the willingness of racially-black individuals publicly to self-identify as such. Then their social-political understanding of themselves would be just that they were a (self-identified) community of common blood, and that they acted for common interests as such. It would be acknowledged commonality of blood that defined the scope of black nationalist projects; and the social-political understanding black people had of themselves would *a fortiori* be distorted by the trope of blood pollution, with all of its ugly and powerful history.

A more finely-tuned version of McPherson and Shelby’s second thought experiment will help to make the point (190-2). Suppose we imagine a community that holds two essentialist views about their own blackness. The first is embodied in the rule of hypodescent, expressing the familiar and historically-salient thought that the essence of blackness is carried in the blood. The second is the companion belief, equally a historically-salient one, that phenotype and character typically (if not always) provide some indication of one’s black blood. (“Blood will out,” they say.)³ Now any community of individuals who self-identify by the rule of

hypodescent would not be obsessed with blood quanta, precisely because they will not matter. Any amount of “black blood” will suffice to establish racial identity; and out-marriage would never be an issue, since some quantum of “black blood” would always remain.⁴ Moreover, given these two essentialist views, such a community would probably embrace a great variety of people who self-declare as members of the race, working always to reinterpret appearance and behavior in each case so that it falls within the range of the expected essentialist parameters. I suggest that here we have a description of what are perhaps not unfamiliar tendencies in many historical and contemporary black communities in the United States. If this is so, then, *pace* McPherson and Shelby (188, 190), certain essentialist understandings of racial identity may be fairly widespread among African Americans.

But granting that—at least when coupled with its companion belief that blood will out—the rule of hypodescent commits people to essentialist notions of blood, how does the trope of blood pollution shape the self-understanding of a community with such views? Isn’t it rather a romanticization of the idea of blood that is being enacted in the community I describe, where acknowledgment of blood is seen as the recognition of a deep connection rather than as the discovery of impurity or disease? Yes and no. First, living in constant awareness of and struggle with an Anglo community pervaded by ideas of blood pollution, black people in my imagined community may well have developed what one might call *counterpoises* to this idea. A counterpoise is a way of thinking about identity that enables the community directly to embrace those who are stigmatized or marginalized by the identity-defining practices of the dominant culture. I suggest that such a counterpoise will probably be embodied in the epistemological and moral practices of the black community we have imagined above. They may believe, for example, that that social-political solidarity “comes naturally” to people who share black blood. They may embrace the epistemology of instant and authoritative recognition (“You can just tell”). They may believe that “people just naturally take care of their own.” All of these practices could function to create and sustain

community solidarity; yet they all would do so by romanticizing the essentialist understanding of black people as set apart, different “in kind” from others (and from white people in particular), and distinctively identifiable simply in virtue of their “blood.” It is this *romanticizing essentialism* that underpins the faith that, at least potentially, virtually anyone with black ancestry can own the qualities that are the “gifts” of that ancestry, and acknowledge their presence in others. Nonetheless, as a counterpoise the romanticization of black blood does its work only by reconceiving blackness against a dominant culture that sees the essential nature of blackness as polluting and therefore to be set apart in some way. It reaffirms the notion of being set apart in virtue of blood; and it reaffirms the notions of divergence in epistemic authority and practice as somehow carried in the blood. Thus, to the extent that this romanticizing essentialism is sustained in our imagined community as a response to the essentialist trope of blackness as pollution, the community’s social-political identity continues to be distorted by the latter.

Second, it is very probable that in our imagined community the collective experience of oppression and marginalization will also get conceptualized as being “in the blood,” so that those who do not have the blood cannot share them, or perhaps even understand them. In this way important and determining features of black culture may get essentialized, so that what is carried in the blood is seen as determining one’s ability or inability to become a part of the group, or to share the group’s understanding of its own experience. If this happens, then in our imagined community, only racially black people can be part of the community of solidarity based on a common experience of oppression; and it may well be that only racially black people will be regarded as capable of understanding the oppression of black people. And this will be, not because it is supposed that, given the history of American racial formation, only racially black people will have been the actual or potential objects of anti-black, racist injustice and oppression; but instead because it is believed that only they carry the ability “in the blood” to experience, or perhaps to understand this history of injustice and oppression. Here again, the idea that the capacity for experiencing anti-black oppression is carried

in the blood, or indeed the idea that blood carries with it a certain epistemic authority regarding the understanding of that experience, and that the boundaries of the community should be drawn accordingly, are distortions in the social-political domain sustained by the underlying essentialist ways of thinking that the imagined community embraces.

I don't think McPherson and Shelby would have any particular problem with this critique of social-political identities grounded on a racial identity of hypodescent. They clearly are not enamored of the rule of hypodescent as a criterion for racial identity, and indeed they seem to propose an alternative to it which I will discuss below. What is important to draw from the preceding discussion, however, is just how intimate the relations are between racial identity and social-political identity given the self-identification account of the latter suggested by McPherson and Shelby. Although adding a condition of self-identification on social-political identity removes the threat of self-defeatingness, if what I have said about the course of events in our imagined community is plausible, it may well not suffice to remove the concern that essentialist misconceptions of racial identity, as partially expressed in a rule of hypodescent, will distort the social-political project of black nationalism.⁵ I conclude that it is desirable to free the social-political conception of black identity from the distortions encouraged by underlying essentialist notions of black racial identity like hypodescent.

3. I think McPherson and Shelby attempt to do precisely this in their remarks about what we might call the working conception of racial identity held by most African Americans:

African Americans do not seem to care much in social practice about the scientific standing of the concept of race. They may have false views about the cogency of the biological notion, but they nonetheless have a sufficiently clear idea of who counts as black *for social and political purposes*. Typically, this will be any person with relatively recent, sub-Saharan African ancestry who manifests the physical features associated with persons of that region

of the world or who, while not "looking black" herself, is known to have ancestors who fit the relevant somatic profile; for it is the satisfaction of this criterion that suffices to render her susceptible to racial stigma and discrimination (187, italics added).

If my version of their second thought experiment is right, there is more revisionism in this account of what black people actually think than McPherson and Shelby might wish to admit. More importantly, further clarification is required about the extent to which this working conception can truly be liberated from essentialist thinking.

The notion of hypodescent is of course absent in the proposed account of racial identity. Nonetheless, although (as McPherson and Shelby suggest) this conception of racial identity may pick out features that take on significance only because of the history of social and political discrimination against blacks, it does not itself identify the set of black people in terms of susceptibility to social discrimination.⁶ Instead it picks out that set by using biological and geographical features: geographic origin, ancestry, phenotype, and, in its first iteration, a relation of (sufficiently-near) descent to those with the above features.

For this reason McPherson and Shelby's proposed account, while not strictly speaking an essentialist one, is logically compatible with such, and indeed might be entirely palatable to those essentialists who see descent as the means of transmission for "blackness," or some other essential quality, positive or negative, on which blackness supervenes.⁷ Given the history and prevalence of essentialist notions of racial identity both in the dominant culture and in African American communities, how can this conception avoid reinscribing familiar essentialist ideas about blackness as something carried in the blood? This is a large topic, and one on which I have written elsewhere.⁸ Here I will say only a little about what the revisionist approach McPherson and Shelby are proposing would require in order to avoid giving aid and comfort to essentialist thinking.

First, we will need a clear, de-mystified understanding of what makes someone black, on which descent functions, not as a conduit along which something like "blackness" is

passed, but rather as a chain that links us to other people, perhaps through nothing more mysterious than our family trees and our familial origins.⁹ Clearly, as McPherson and Shelby's talk of "relatively recent sub-Saharan ancestry" suggests, such an approach does take a roughly-defined subset of the biologically-defined extended family as normative, at least for purposes of defining racial identity. Recall, however, that their approach does so only because it is the members of this subset of biologically-extended families, so identified, who have been picked out by the history of social and political discrimination against blacks. On the McPherson and Shelby approach, the commitment to the normativity of familial relations of descent in the account of racial identity is a function of the history of racism and racial identification, not something to be just "read off" the biological facts about descent as such.

Second, the relation of McPherson and Shelby's underlying racial identity conception to the social-political identity conception must be made more complex. Here Appiah's insights about the importance of a critical rethinking of blackness and black identity are important, even if we do not agree that it is the government who should be the agent of soul-change. Given the seductive power of essentialism, I would suggest that any adequate social-political conception must include among its priorities the *self-directed* project of critical reflection on the underlying racial understanding that black people have of themselves. This is the project of understanding precisely that history of racialization and social discrimination that constructed the biological features brought together in McPherson and Shelby's proposed conception of racial identity as salient—understanding, in short, the social construction of the underlying racial-identity conception, and, for that matter, of the metaphysically prior notions of blackness and a black race. In the absence of commitment to such a self-directed, critically reflective project, McPherson and Shelby's emphasis on biological characteristics may well result, albeit mistakenly, only in strengthening essentialist ideas about the nature of black racial identity. On the other hand, I believe that this kind of approach, augmented with a commitment to this critical project, may well enable us to replace blood-based

nationalist identities with a non-essentialist—indeed an anti-essentialist—foundation for black-nationalist identity.

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¹ Appiah calls this undermining "incoherence": literally, a failure of the projects of black nationalists to cohere with one another, that is, to fit together in such a way that they do not conflict with one another in practice.

² At least, the state should do this where the carrying out of such projects is integral to the prospects of that group's living an ethically successful life.

³ I call these beliefs "essentialist" because they embody the view that (a) there is some inner quality that all and only black people possess; (b) that this quality is transmitted by heredity; and (c) that this quality is typically (if not always) outwardly manifested in some way (for example, by skin color, moral character, or personality).

⁴ I have been told that one of the Maori elders once encouraged her grandchildren to miscegenate with *pakiha* (white people) on the grounds that, since any amount of Maori blood would suffice to make their offspring Maori,

over time this strategy would turn all the inhabitants of New Zealand back into Maoris.

⁵ Of course, my description of the imagined community does not constitute an argument to show that, necessarily, essentialism distorts the social-political project; but I hope that, at the very least, it suggests how naturally a community might draw on its essentialist thinking to sustain suspect and exclusionary practices in the social-political arena.

⁶ *Pace* 183, 189. The proposed conception can in this respect be contrasted with those accounts of the criteria for black identity that hold, with DuBois, that “the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia.”

⁷ Here it is important to remember that the racial conception under discussion claims to give only a criterion of identity (or what, more loosely, I sometimes call an “account” of racial identity), and not an analysis of what it is to be black.

⁸ My own version of McPherson and Shelby’s approach is presented in my “Radical Race.”

⁹ If we keep the focus on descent in our account of racial identity, we will perhaps also need a clearer understanding of the relation between being black and being of African descent which, while giving a central place to the experience of people who are socially identified as black, does not separate them racially from members of the larger group of people of African descent. Here are the seeds of another sort of response to Appiah’s original argument, on which the facts about the prevalence of passing in American history, though they do indeed require redrawing our ideas about racial identity, need not necessarily undermine the black nationalist project, conceived as focused not on the larger racial group of people of African descent, but rather on the narrower group contained within it of people who are socially identified as black.