Anderson on Multiculturalism and Blackness: A Du Boisian Response

CHIKE JEFFERS
Department of Philosophy
Dalhousie University
6135 University Avenue
PO Box 15000
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 4R2
chike.jeffers@dal.ca

Elizabeth Anderson's *The Imperative of Integration* is an exciting contribution to social and political philosophy. Brian Leiter summed up the reaction of many when he referred to it on his blog as a "*tour de force* of philosophical argumentation utilizing social science data."[1] Despite the resistance to her project I will express in what follows, I believe philosophers of race and specialists in Africana philosophy have good reason to celebrate the fact that this cutting-edge effort at empirically informed normative work is also an original and stimulating contribution to work on the ethics and politics of race, focusing particularly on the African American situation. In this comment, I will respond to Anderson's useful work by taking up some of the positions that she frames her project by criticizing and rejecting.

Anderson's claim that racial segregation in the contemporary US is intolerable is introduced in her book's first chapter through a contrast with permissive positions on segregation that she sees as having emerged in the wake of successive turns: first, by black organizers in the 1960s from Civil Rights to Black Power, and then by progressives in general in the following decades toward the celebration of diversity. As she puts it: "The hope of black nationalists and left multiculturalists is that racial equality can be achieved through, or at least notwithstanding, substantial racial segregation" (2). But these positions are not viable, Anderson claims, because "[t]his hope is an illusion" (ibid.). My response to Anderson may be considered a set of thoughts from a black nationalist and left multiculturalist perspective in defense of this illusion.

The perspective I wish to support can be called Du Boisian because it can be seen as a sort of descendant of the position on segregation toward which Du Bois evolved by the early-to-mid-1930s, a position that famously led him to resign from the board of the NAACP and from his role as editor of the organization's magazine, *The Crisis*. In 1934, in *The Crisis*, he published a controversial piece in which he argued that black people should avoid opposing "segregation pure and simple."[2] Discrimination, not separation, is what ought to be fought, and Du Bois felt by this point that some of the energy spent fighting segregation might be better spent on black self-organization. "Doubtless," wrote the cosmopolitan Du Bois, "in the long run, the greatest human development is going to take place under experiences of widest individual contact."[3] In the short term, though, he believed the time had come for black people to concentrate on achieving "economic emancipation through voluntary determined cooperative effort."[4]

It is important to distinguish between two reasons Du Bois had for encouraging some short term acceptance of *de jure* segregation. One

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[1] http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2010/10/new-philosophy-books-for-october.html

[2] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Segregation," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: A Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995), 557.
[3] Ibid., 558.
[4] Ibid.

involved the necessity of *meeting black people's material needs*. "There seems no hope," he wrote in 1933, "that America in our day will yield in its color or race hatred any substantial ground."[5] Thus it seemed most prudent to focus on securing well-being and advancement within segregated institutions. The other reason for reallocating energy in this way had to do with *having the right motivations for opposing segregation*. In the same 1933 essay, which bore the title "On Being Ashamed of Oneself: An Essay on Race Pride," Du Bois described an entry in his grandfather's journal in which his grandfather expressed indignation at the very idea of having been invited to a "Negro" picnic.[6] In Du Bois' estimation, something like this sense of shame in being associated with black people remained, overtly or not, a factor in the desire to be rid of segregation, among the black elite especially.

The importance of this second reason can be seen by looking forward from the 1930s to Du Bois' 1960 essay "Whither Now and Why." In this post-*Brown* period, Du Bois recognized that the time was swiftly approaching in which "the American Negro will become in law equal in citizenship."[7] The coming demise of legal segregation, however, only made more acute for him the question of whether a lack of pride in being black would attract people to the option of total assimilation. His opposition to this was firm: "What I have been fighting for and am still fighting for is the possibility of black folk *and their cultural patterns* existing in America without discrimination; and on terms of equality."[8] In support of this, he advocated increasing commitments to black-focused education, black communities, and black families.

Anderson opposes the segregation of African Americans, including their self-segregation. She believes that segregation perpetuates inequality by isolating African Americans from resources and reinforcing stigmatizing stereotypes. She also holds that it undermines democracy by dividing citizens rather than facilitating communication. Given the white supremacist origins of US segregation and the extent to which it is perpetuated today partly by continued racist attitudes and institutional racism, I cannot imagine someone who opposes anti-black racism disagreeing with Anderson at every single stage of her argument. Even some of what she has to say about black self-segregation is endorsable from an updated Du Boisian perspective. Anderson rightly criticizes conservative claims that, firstly, segregation today is morally innocent because it results from freely made choices by black people to stick together and, secondly, the disadvantages of segregated black life today are due to internal pathologies rather than any external unfairness. She persuasively argues that "observed levels of segregation cannot be explained without some discriminatory processes keeping blacks out," thus showing that black choices are currently unfairly restricted, and she mounts a strong attack on the conservative tendency to treat "dysfunctional, self-destructive norms" in segregated black communities as simply a problem of "bad values" rather than "the product of visibly constrained options" (73, 78-79).

Let us turn, though, to her criticism of multiculturalism, which she sees as the egalitarian version of the misguided fixation on culture by conservatives. In the book's final chapter, she discusses what she sees as the "Limits of Multiculturalism" (183-189), criticizing the views of Beverly Tatum, Iris Marion Young, and Amie MacDonald. Anderson complains that these thinkers unhelpfully prioritize racial identities and ethnocentric affiliation over the goal of an integrated national identity. Her strongest argument that this prioritization is problematic is her claim that these authors fail to ground their views in a "realistic appraisal of the material and social conditions for advancing racial equality" (186). I will return to this claim that multiculturalist defenses of black self-segregation are simply unrealistic in my closing paragraphs.

For now, I wish to address Anderson's claim that multiculturalist defenses of black self-segregation confuse race and culture. She directs this charge at MacDonald and Young, especially, criticizing the way they tend to "slide from a structural to a cultural account of race" (187). I will not attempt to defend MacDonald and Young against the claim that that they sometimes make *illegitimate* slides of this kind. What Anderson fails to acknowledge, though, is that it is imperative for discussing racial justice that we be able to link and

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[5] Du Bois, "On Being Ashamed of Oneself: An Essay on Race Pride," in *The Oxford W.E.B. Du Bois Reader*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 75.

[6] Ibid., 72.

[7] Du Bois, "Whither Now and Why," in *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960*, new edition, ed. Herbert Aptheker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 193.

[8] Ibid., 195. Emphasis mine.

move back and forth between race as a position in a social hierarchy and race as a determinant of cultural identity in *legitimate* ways as well. This failure leads Anderson to talk as if race and culture are easily disentangled. "Whites and Asians can, and do, play jazz," she writes, concluding that "only a spurious association of culture and ancestry can support the thought that racial self-segregation is needed to preserve or develop diverse cultural meanings and practices" (ibid.).

Let us consider two counterexamples. First, note that cultural expression related to the body can link culture and ancestry in important ways. Consider hairstyles. When pondering the relevance of hair to the politics of race, it would be missing the point to note that whites and Asians too can braid or lock their hair or even imitate Afros. The functioning of hairstyles of these types as forms of cultural resistance to anti-black racism is tied to the valuing of black African ancestry by those who have it through the valuing of physical characteristics associated with such ancestry. And while it is good and right that all people appreciate black hairstyles as a kind of cultural contribution, it is not at all implausible to claim that perpetuation of this form of cultural creativity is intimately connected to patterns of self-segregation (e.g., patronization of black barbershops, hair salons, and individual practitioners).

Consider now something non-physical: knowledge of history. It is imperative that all people overcome Eurocentric understandings of US and world history and achieve greater knowledge of the roles and contributions of people of African descent. This might be taken to show that transcending racism requires that we all change in similar ways, regardless of race. But note that it is also part of a people's cultural life to venerate certain parts of human history because those parts are viewed as distinctively theirs. People around the world ought to know about the American Revolution, but there is nothing strange in the fact that it is Americans who commemorate it on the Fourth of July. Thus, when being black is viewed not merely as a position of subordination but also as a cultural standpoint, we see nothing strange in the fact that there are people of African descent who celebrate black history as *their* history and encourage their children to cherish it as well. This is not a spurious association of culture and ancestry. It is a socially mediated connection between the two, which is both politically powerful as a response to past and

present anti-black racism and acceptable as part of a non-racist future. Self-segregation of the type that supports it (e.g., supplementary educational programming for black children) should not be seen as inappropriate.

The Du Boisian approach to segregation I am advocating holds that we should oppose racial division insofar as it expresses a white supremacist devaluation of black life but view efforts to preserve and cultivate a distinct black community as vitally important precisely for attacking such devaluation and as generally justifiable as well. Does this undermine democratic habits of communication? Anderson is right to raise this worry and we ought to recall Du Bois' suggestion that human development is best achieved when there are no barriers to interaction across group lines. What I take from this, though, is that we must balance the two vital and justifiable goals of black communal self-development and wide interracial contact, as these goals are not – *in principle* – incompatible.

Indeed, I would argue that Andrew Valls, in his recent essay, "A Liberal Defense of Black Nationalism," indirectly provides one vision of how we might balance these objectives. He argues that we should remove the disproportionate burden of personal and social transformation that integration places on African Americans and replace it with the freedom offered by policies that allow them a choice "between participating in well-funded, thriving white-dominated institutions, on the one hand, and participating in well-funded, thriving black-dominated institutions on the other."[9] While Valls intends the ultimate outcome of having such a choice to be a matter of no concern for his purposes, it is worth considering the optimistic thought that mutual respect and constant cultural interchange between thriving black and non-black communities might create the conditions hospitable to both relative black autonomy and effective national unity.

But perhaps this is a case of preferring principles to reality. Anderson claims that the problem with left multiculturalism is that it

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[9] Andrew Valls, "A Liberal Defense of Black Nationalism," *American Political Science Review* 104 (August 2010): 474.

neglects the impact on whites of prioritizing ethnoracial self-segregation. It reinforces whites' alienation from disadvantaged groups, and their own tendencies to self-segregation. Given that it is impossible and undesirable to abolish informal routes to human and social capital development, and that whites control most of these routes, such a stance is self-defeating (188).

Clearly Anderson is not treating redistribution of resources in a manner enabling the kind of choice Valls describes as a live option. Indeed, she is explicit about the fact that her commitment to non-ideal theorizing narrows options considerably, although things are made unclear by her claim that political philosophers need not accommodate "people's *unwillingness* to meet certain standards of justice" (190). Given Valls' argument that the disproportionate burden of integration on African Americans is an injustice, how do we know that the connection Anderson draws between black self-segregation and "white clubbishness" is not a matter of unwillingness to do justice rather than a matter of "the limitations of human psychology" (188, 190)?

In spite of this vagueness, I believe we should seriously consider the possibility that, given the demographics and socioeconomic structure of the US, Anderson is right that only integration can address the problems of limited access to resources and stigma-based discrimination that sustain black disadvantage. Recall that one of Du Bois' motivations in advocating some acceptance of segregation in the 1930s was the goal of meeting black people's needs, even at the expense of lofty ideals. If Anderson is right about what integration and integration alone can accomplish, then sharing that motivation means we should immediately drop all sentimental attachment to black self-segregation and work tirelessly toward integration. Without admitting that Anderson has resolved the matter once and for all, I am willing to acknowledge that this could very well be the case.

What I find unfortunate about *The Imperative of Integration*, though, is that it shows little to no recognition that the above conclusion is *tragic*. To accept the futility of the goal of an economically stable and broadly flourishing black community life in America – and, as a correlation, integration primarily on terms of relative equality rather than as capitulation to the fact that black people remain at a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage when their exposure to white people is limited – is to accept a huge blow to *black dignity*. Sheryll Cashin, whom Anderson appropriately cites as a fellow integrationist, calls it a "cruel truth" that her research suggests that "living in an integrated community is practically the only route black people have to escape concentrated black poverty."[10] She claims to have reached this conclusion "[p]ainfully," and it is indeed a painful conclusion as it has, among other things, the harmful effect of reinforcing stereotypes of black people as simply unable to succeed in the absence of whites.[11] Anderson's insensitivity to this harm and her resulting failure to address it helps make it the case that those of us with black nationalist and left multiculturalist leanings are unlikely to relinquish our lofty ideals in response to her work, despite the admittedly tough task of presenting a realistic alternative vision of the way forward.

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[10] Sheryll Cashin, *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class are Undermining the American Dream* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), 135.
[11] Ibid.