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# Review of “We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity”

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## Book Review

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*We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity*, Tommie Shelby. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi + 320 (including bibliography and index); ISBN: 0-674-02571-4; \$16.95 (paperback).

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Is black political solidarity a live option for black Americans living in the post-civil rights era? *We Who Are Dark* is Tommie Shelby's nuanced and persuasive answer to that question. In the introduction, he announces that there is "a theoretically coherent and practically feasible black political solidarity" that can serve as an emancipatory tool for blacks in the post-civil rights era (p. 4). It is emancipatory because it no longer seeks to base black political solidarity on a discredited conception of blackness (i.e., an essentialist conception of blackness that all black persons are supposed to affirm and embody). Rather, it "would concern itself with what blacks themselves, as a racialized subordinate group in America, might do to eliminate or lessen this burden, although the burden should not be theirs alone to remove" (p. 4). To reconceptualize black political solidarity in nonessentialist terms, however, Shelby thinks, and rightly so, that he has to provide a detailed philosophical critique of classical black nationalism, for it is classical black nationalism that has had the most influence with regards to how people conceptualize black political solidarity (pp. 4-9). His philosophical critique involves rejecting these central doctrines of the American black nationalist tradition:

1. Shelby rejects "classical black nationalism" (p. 10).
2. He critiques the Black Power movement and its conception of group solidarity. He thinks its conception of group solidarity is too monolithic and static to be pragmatically implemented in the post-civil rights era (p. 10).
3. He rejects black solidarity based on a collective black identity, at least in the sense of it requiring that all blacks ought to embrace a monolithic group identity (p. 11).

Shelby's alternative to black solidarity based on a collective black identity is a pragmatic black solidarity "based strictly on the shared experience of racial oppression and a joint commitment to resist it" (pp. 11-12). One could even think of pragmatic black nationalism as compatible with what John Rawls calls *political liberalism* in that it, like political liberalism, upholds

... the core values of liberalism – values such as equal citizenship for all persons; respect for individual autonomy; democratic constitutional government under the rule of law; the basic right to freedom of conscience, expression, and association; tolerance for different conceptions of the good; equal opportunity in education and employment; and a guaranteed minimum standard of living (p. 6).

In Chapter 1 Shelby introduces the reader to pragmatic black nationalism by tracing its origins back to Martin R. Delany's social and political philosophy. This is significant because if one can trace pragmatic black nationalism back to Delany's thought, then one can claim that it is not alien to the black nationalist tradition. Indeed, if one can trace pragmatic black nationalism back to Delany's thought, then one can make the stronger claim that it is actually a constitutive element in the formation of black nationalism. Shelby does this by explaining the distinction in Delany's thought between the doctrine of strong black nationalism and the doctrine of weak black nationalism. As described by Shelby, Delany's doctrine of strong black nationalism contends that "[t]he political program of black solidarity and voluntary separation under conditions of equality and self-determination is a worthwhile end in itself, a constitutive and enduring component of the collective self-realization of blacks as a people" (p. 27). On the other hand, Delany's doctrine of weak black nationalism contends that "[t]he political program of black solidarity and group self-organization functions as a means to create greater freedom and social equality for blacks" (p. 27). Shelby calls the strong black nationalist position classical black nationalism and the weak black nationalist position pragmatic black nationalism. He contends that these two doctrines are not necessarily mutually exclusive; indeed, many black nationalists, including Delany, advanced both of these doctrines simultaneously (p. 29). Yet, he thinks that pragmatic black nationalism is a more substantive doctrine than classical black nationalism and that it "is the more firmly held position among black nationalists" (p. 29). He devotes the remainder of this chapter to substantiating this contention.

One can read Chapter 1 as a Rortyesque interpretation of Delany's thought in the sense that Shelby pits the "good" liberal, pragmatic black nationalist Delany against the "bad" classical black nationalist Delany to substantiate his contention that pragmatic black nationalism is the more substantive doctrine in the black nationalist tradition.<sup>1</sup> One can also read this chapter as an example of recent efforts in African American studies to demythologize Delany's thought and unearth the liberal and even humanist elements of Delany's thought. Indeed, this chapter should be read as being compatible with Tunde Adeleke's heterodox reading of Delany's thought in his book, *Without Regard to Race: The Other Martin Robison Delany* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004).<sup>2</sup>

In Chapter 2 Shelby interprets W. E. B. DuBois' social and political philosophy in such a way as to provide some resources for constructing a conception of black solidarity that transcends the class stratification in black communities. Of special significance in this chapter is Shelby's description of the "five core normative requirements that are jointly sufficient for a robust form of solidarity" (p. 68). Robust group solidarity, then, would exist "whenever a set of individuals identify with each other as members of a group, show special concern toward one another, are jointly committed to certain values or goals, are loyal to the group and its ideals, and trust each other" (p. 70). In the case of black solidarity, it "would be robust if blacks, as a group, were to exhibit each of these five characteristics" (p. 71). DuBois' social and political philosophy can be interpreted as a means of establishing and maintaining robust group solidarity among blacks of different socioeconomic and educational statuses. This is so despite the fact that DuBois could not foresee, at least relatively late in his life, that the black elite (i.e., those blacks who are affluent, college educated, and/or in political leadership positions) oftentimes fail to act in the best interests of blacks occupying the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder (pp. 88-95).

In Chapter 3 he critically engages black nationalism and its conception of black political solidarity, as articulated initially by El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) and later by adherents of the Black Power movement (e.g., Kwame Ture [Stokely Carmichael] and Charles Hamilton). He criticizes its conception of black solidarity for unrealistic commitment to the autonomy of black institutions, its simplistic blaming of “white supremacy” for all the contemporary socioeconomic and educational disadvantages many contemporary blacks experience, its conception of the black population as a sort of extended family, and “its tendency to exclude, marginalize, and sometimes alienate needed nonblack allies” (p. 22).

In Chapter 4 Shelby acknowledges the beneficial elements of the black nationalist tradition and thinks that pragmatic black nationalism can converse those beneficial elements while update it so that its conception of black solidarity is viable in a multiracial, multiethnic America. He discusses at least two consequences of reconceptualizing black nationalism along pragmatist lines. One consequence of reconceptualizing black nationalism along pragmatist lines is that contemporary American blacks need to recognize that not all the socioeconomic and educational disadvantages faced by some black Americas are due to antiblack racism, even though it is difficult to determine which ones are actually due to institutional racism (pp. 141-149). A second consequence of reconceptualizing black solidarity along pragmatic lines is that black solidarity, in order to be a viable political agenda, cannot be embodied and centralized in a few black-led organizations. Rather, pragmatic black solidarity can exist only in a decentralized network of black organizations and even multiracial organizations that share a commitment to racial justice, as represented in political and social actions aimed at lessening the detrimental effects of present-day racial discrimination and oppression along with redressing the accrued effects of previous racial discrimination on contemporary blacks (pp. 155-160).

In Chapter 5 Shelby critically evaluates black cultural nationalism. He identifies eight general tenets of black cultural nationalism, or more specifically the ideal of black cultural self-determination. First tenet: There is a distinctive black culture (pp. 163-164). Second tenet: Blacks should rediscover and collectively reclaim their culture (p. 164). Third tenet: Blacks should conserve, identifying with, take pride in, and creatively develop their culture (pp. 164-165). Fourth tenet: Unlike white culture, black culture provides a relatively stable foundation for the cultivation of healthy black individual identities (p. 165). Fifth tenet: Black culture is an emancipatory tool for struggle against white hegemony for the sake of cultural self-determination (pp. 165-166). Sixth tenet: Black culture, as a minority culture “threatened by white cultural imperialism,” should be protected by the United States government and, in certain circumstances, even support the black cultural infrastructure so that nonblacks can access black culture and recognize it as a valuable contribution to American society (p. 166). Seventh tenet: Blacks, as the main producers of this culture, should have commercial rights to their own cultural artifacts (p. 166). Eighth tenet: Blacks should be the foremost interpreters of the meaning of their cultural artifacts (pp. 166-167). After listing these eight general tenets of black cultural nationalism, Shelby argues why each one of these tenets is erroneous conceptually and normatively and why black cultural nationalism itself is an ineffective way to conceive of black solidarity in the current sociopolitical milieu.

In Chapter 6 Shelby outlines a viable conception of black political solidarity for a post-civil rights era – namely, one that can motivate people identified as thinly black to engage in joint political action against antiblack racist policies and against the social conditions that perpetuate racial

oppression. Accordingly, he founds his conception of black political solidarity upon the conception of thin blackness. For Shelby “thin blackness” describes the racial identity of either “(1) those persons who have certain easily identifiable, inherited physical traits (such as dark skin, tightly curled or ‘kinky’ hair, a broad flat nose, and thick lips) and who are descendants of peoples from sub-Saharan Africa [or] (2) those persons who, while not meeting or only ambiguously satisfying the somatic criteria [in (1)] are descendents of Africans who are widely presumed to have had these physical characteristics” (p. 208).

Of course, this means that black political solidarity should no longer be associated with thick, cultural conceptions of blackness, or “thick blackness” for short. One could interpret Shelby’s conception of thick blackness to be very similar to, if not identical with, what Victor Anderson calls “ontological blackness” in his book, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum, 1995). Like Anderson’s “ontological blackness,” thick blackness is an essentialist conception of blackness in which one’s cultural identity is determined, and necessarily so, by one’s racial identity. So, if one is racially black, then one ought to be culturally black as well (p. 251). Unlike Anderson, Shelby thinks that thick blackness comes in five familiar modes. These modes of thick blackness are (1) the *racialist* mode, (2) the *ethnic* mode, (3) blackness as *nationality*, (4) the *cultural* mode, and (5) the *kinship* mode (pp. 209-211). The second mode of thick blackness itself can be separated into two conceptions of ethnicity. The first conception of ethnicity depicts blacks as possessing certain cultural traits which are traceable to the culture of their sub-Saharan African ancestors (p. 210). The second conception of ethnicity depicts blacks as those who share a similar experience of racial oppression in the Americas and the Caribbean “and the rich culture they have created in the context of that oppression since being forcibly removed from Africa” (p. 210). Actually, if we take Shelby at his word, there are only three genuine modes of thick blackness, given that the nationality conception of blackness can be interpreted “as a variant of the ethnic conception” (p. 210) and that the kinship mode can be interpreted as an awkward and problematic variant of the cultural mode (p. 212).

After describing the different modes of thick blackness and the impracticality of establishing a viable conception of black political solidarity on them, Shelby explains why people should reconceptualize black solidarity in terms of thin blackness. He thinks that by doing this the pursuit of racial justice by blacks would not be hampered by such unproductive and long-standing debates as the one concerning who is authentically black. Such a reconstructed idea of black solidarity would foster more democratic coalitions between black institutions with vastly different concerns and interests and it would include those people who are, for whatever reason, identified as racially black into the struggle against antiblack racism. This reconstructed idea of black solidarity, moreover, would enable first-generation Caribbean people of African descent, Latin Americans of African descent, sub-Saharan Africans, and Europeans of sub-Saharan African descent who do not identify as culturally black to participate in political efforts to struggle against antiblack policies. In fact, he thinks that a conception of black solidarity built on the conception of thin blackness would be sufficiently inclusive to allow all people who are racially black to fully participate in the struggle for racial justice (see, for example, pp. 230-236).

The chapter ends with Shelby’s replies to the following objections to his pragmatic black solidarity: (1) That conceiving of black solidarity in terms of a common experience of racial oppression and a shared desire for racial justice is too thin to motivate blacks to engage in political activism to

redress racialized urban poverty, educational disadvantages disproportionately affected black Americans, and other social ills disproportionately affecting black Americans (see pp. 236-240); and (2) that pragmatic black solidarity might undermine multiracial political coalitions (see pp. 240-242).

Shelby concludes his book with a brief discussion of the ideal of black self-determination, as envisioned by pragmatic black nationalism. Any plausible interpretation of black self-determination, according to a pragmatic nationalist, would necessarily include the demand for negative liberty in the economic realm, political realm, cultural realm, and interpersonal relationships (p. 249). It would also include the belief that black self-determination is a necessary condition “for members of the group to flourish in the modern world” (p. 249). In addition, it would have to be defended in a nonessentialist manner. That is to say, black self-determination cannot be based on ontological blackness with its reification of black identities or “on romantic racialist narratives about the primordial origins of the African race” (p. 250). Furthermore, it cannot be utopian in its formulation; it has to be viable in a post-civil rights era (p. 250).

The “self” of the ideal of black self-determination, then, would be conceived of in terms of Rawls’ conception of the moral person (pp. 250-251). The conception of “blackness” of this ideal would be thin blackness (p. 251). “Determination,” in this context, would mean that “blacks reserve the right to act independently and to define their own political agenda in order to defend themselves against unjust treatment and to help them bring about a racially just society” (p. 253). And the “ideal” of black self-determination would be strategic in nature; that is, it would be an ideal that “simply functions as a means to ameliorate the unfair disadvantages of blacks” (p. 254). In other words, the ideal of black self-determination is an ideal in the Deweyan sense. Like other Deweyan ideals, it is an ideal that has been posited and adopted by people to resolve a particular problematic situation. In this case, the ideal of black self-determination is one that has been posited by black political thinkers and political activists for centuries to struggle against the detrimental sociopolitical, cultural, and economic effects of antiblack racism on blacks in the United States and to pursue racial justice.

All and all, Shelby’s *We Who Are Dark* makes a significant contribution to contemporary political philosophy in general and to African American political philosophy in particular. With its ambitious attempt to reconceptualize black political solidarity for a post-civil rights era, this book will most likely become one of those texts that determine the direction of research in African American political philosophy for the foreseeable future. Shelby’s book also makes a significant contribution to African and African American studies because it demonstrates how analytic African American philosophy can contribute to the study of contemporary post-civil rights era black politics.

With that stated, a book this ambitious is bound to have several notable weaknesses and problems. Since other reviews of Shelby’s book have identified some of these weaknesses and problems of this book (e.g., Shelby’s complicity with the very liberalism that unwittingly perpetuates the racial injustices he seeks to combat), this review will end with a discussion of one of those weaknesses. In the reviewer’s eyes, this weakness goes to the heart of his attempt to reconceptualize black nationalism.

Throughout his book, Shelby contends that pragmatic black solidarity is a sufficient foundation for

black political solidarity. This is, at best, a questionable contention. Perhaps Shelby is right that this is the most realistic way of conceiving of black solidarity in today's sociopolitical milieu, in which the many state governments are enacting and implementing procedurally colorblind policies; however, this is a thin conception of black solidarity indeed. It only reacts to the detrimental effects of antiblack racism on those identified as racially black; it is defensive with regards to preserving affirmative action policies in (public) postsecondary educational institutions and other institutions in the public sector. Yet, this does not seem to be sufficient to maintain a robust sense of political solidarity between blacks. What it does is remove any sense of a group-affirming identity from the conception of black political solidarity and conceive of it in terms of a coalition of groups and institutions, many of which are probably not black-led, with different interests, commitments, and goals that combat antiracist policies. Once black political solidarity is separated from a sense of collective black identity, however advantageous such a conceptual move might be for the pursuit of racial justice by blacks in the current political scene, the term "black solidarity" just does not seem to be the appropriate term to describe what Shelby advances.

What Shelby is left advancing is a coalition of blacks (and nonblacks) from different socioeconomic statuses, ages, sexual orientations, genders, religions, nationalities, educational levels, political affiliations, etc. that act in a decentralized manner to combat antiblack policies in politics, education, and employment and redress the disadvantages resulting from racialized urban poverty and other forms of racial oppression. This is "solidarity," just not in the sense of any recognizable version of black political solidarity. The black nationalist tradition does not even seem relevant to Shelby's reconceptualization of black political solidarity apart from the fact that it is the tradition from which the conception of black solidarity was birthed. Perhaps he should have left the term *pragmatic black nationalism* for the sort of black nationalism held by black nationalists – such as Delany's mentor, Lewis Woodson – that calls for blacks to pragmatically struggle against racial oppression and yet affirm the significance of black collective identity for their own psychological, moral, and spiritual health. That seems to be a more appropriate use of the term *pragmatic black nationalism*.<sup>3</sup>

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### Notes

1. The paradigmatic example of this interpretative strategy, as performed by Richard Rorty himself on John Dewey's philosophy, is "Dewey's Metaphysics," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 72-89.
2. For more on this recent trend in interpreting Delany as an liberal and humanist political thinker, see Tommy J. Curry, "Who K(new): The Nation-ist Contour of Racial Identity in the Thought of Martin R. Delany and John E. Bruce" *Journal of Pan-African Studies* 1.10 (November 2007): 41-61, esp. pp. 44-45.
3. For a description of Lewis Woodson's pragmatic black nationalism, see Gayle T. Tate, "Prophecy and Transformation: The Contours of Lewis Woodson's Nationalism," *Journal of Black Studies* 29.2 (November 1998): 209-233 and Tommy J. Curry, "We Who Must Fight in the Shade: The Philosophy of Racial Realism," unpublished manuscript.

