

**BEGIN FROM DISAPPOINTMENT:
BLACK EXISTENTIALISM AND POLITICAL SOLIDARITY**

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Through analysis and discussion of the work of Bill Lawson and Tommie Shelby, with reference to the work of Frantz Fanon, this paper discusses the link between black political solidarity and black existentialism. This paper identifies disappointment as a crucial and transformative experience to provide commonality for united action within a diverse community. Critical to the piece is the recognition that political and social forces have contributed to alienation and disappointment, and also that this apparent universality of experience does nothing to undermine the truth of black diversity. In this paper, I attempt to reconcile black existentialism with black political philosophy through examining the elements of existentialism present in the process of politicization and the development of political philosophy and solidarity.

In the work of Tommie Shelby and Bill Lawson, maintaining the integrity and diversity of the black community in the United States is an important theme. In *We Who Are Dark*, Shelby focuses on what the diversity of the black community means for black emancipation, taking a stance that opposes subscribing to a "black identity." Bill Lawson likewise maintains the importance of personal autonomy and individuality for blacks, but in "Social Disappointment and the Black Sense of Self" he approaches the issue from a different direction. Although Lawson and Shelby write with different goals, both deal with topics such as systems of oppression, black identity, and the variety of black experience. Ultimately, the concept of – and the experience of – disappointment has value for both writers. Both Lawson and Shelby recognize the unique vulnerability to oppression, in the form of anti-black racism, that affects blacks. The political implications of this vulnerability factor most strongly into Shelby's work, although they are also relevant to Lawson's article. This paper argues that social disappointment can be a motivating force, often an essential one, for solidarity and resistance to oppression, and that political philosophy and black existentialism are complementary, not oppositional, philosophies. Disappointment incorporates both existential questioning and the concerns of social and political philosophy, and therefore it serves as a space for creating black political solidarity.

Bill Lawson spends the majority of his article stressing the variety of the black response to social disappointment caused by anti-black racism. However, his investigation into social disappointment politicizes the experience. Rather than discussing "the day-to-day experiences of disappointment," Lawson focuses on "the experience of disappointment that comes from the failure of the government to satisfy the expectations of the majority of blacks" (150). Lawson acknowledges the relationship between his theory and black political action, and argues: "I am not claiming that there cannot be a collective response by blacks. . . . I think that the experience of

disappointment can be an impetus for collective action" (155). Among other features, this makes Lawson's analysis a good companion piece for Tommie Shelby's work.

Essential to understanding Lawson's position, and therefore its relationship to Shelby's book, is the idea of disappointment. For Lawson, "disappointment presupposes some expectations" and he notes, "responses to experiences of disappointment will vary according to the social context in which the person finds himself or herself and to the level of expectation" (149-50). Expectations depend very much upon social circumstances, and because of the variety of social contexts in which blacks interact with the government, black expectations will vary as much as the black experience: if one's only experience of the educational system is that it is poorly funded and carelessly managed, while contrasting this with the knowledge that education is an important factor in quality of life, then the social disappointment will probably be greater than that of a person growing up in a healthy and vigorous school district. Lawson holds "that given the social realities of the black experience, any definitive claims about the impact of the experience of social disappointment on the black collective view of self should be viewed as suspect" (151). Although the fact of social disappointment may be universal, or as close to universal as possible in a population as large and varied as the black population in the United States, due to the variation of black society it is impossible to make definitive and categorical judgments about what social disappointment means to blacks themselves. Although oppression of blacks is "continuous" and therefore "warrants us in claiming a group [blacks] is oppressed," it is not pure: it manifests in many different ways (152). This complicates attempts at existential analysis, which in asking (and answering) questions like "What does it mean to say that I am black?" often relies upon categories and definitions. However, the experience of black Americans is too broad to fall within any category except *the black experience* – the same applies, I would add, to any marginalized group: indigenous peoples, women, disabled people, or gender non-conforming individuals, among others. When looking at group oppression, we must remember the individuals in those groups, and avoid treating them as members of a monolithic hive-mind. In analyzing racial dynamics in the United States, we may rely upon the fact of oppression, but the reactions of the oppressed group to this experience are not equally reliable. Likewise, systems of oppression are protean and difficult to analyze, let alone overcome. They affect many facets of experience and identity.

Oppression is difficult to conquer because of that lack of purity. Rather than using one mechanism to continue systems of white supremacy,

the oppression of blacks was not just the lack of material well-being or being psychologically indoctrinated or racially discriminated; it was a combination of discriminatory and socially stratifying actions supported by the government. When we view oppression in this manner, we can see why the cessation of one act in question . . . would not be that [act] end oppression. (Lawson 153)

Oppression occurs to individuals, but it is much more harmful when it has been incorporated into the fabric of society. Reactions to oppression, including social disappointment, may be consistent within small groups but they first occur on an individual level. The individuality of responses to social disappointment has been

encouraged by the variety of methods through which oppression has occurred. This fact makes claims about the black psyche difficult and suspect.

As Tommie Shelby notes, the variety of individual identity is true in other areas, and makes solidarity and definitions of "blackness" equally tricky. His *We Who Are Dark* attempts to balance the tensions between the desire for black political solidarity and the desire for an encompassing, but specific, definition of black identity. Shelby identifies his "defense" of black solidarity as "forthrightly anti-essentialist" (3). His work aims "to identify a basis for black political unity that does not deny, downplay, or disparage individual or group differentiations within the black population" and Shelby admits to many different ways to be authentically black (3). He is, however, skeptical of identity as a ground for political solidarity. Like Lawson, Shelby's focus is on concepts and their relation to experience, but Shelby's focus goes one step further by investigating how to translate those concepts into political action.

Just as Lawson focuses on disappointment, Shelby focuses on the problems conceptions of blackness pose to black solidarity. He identifies both *thin* definitions of blackness – which hinge mostly upon physical appearance – and *thick* definitions of blackness – which vary greatly, but "usually include a thin component" and because these definitions "require something more, or something other, than a common African ancestry," they ultimately result in the exclusion of those who do not adhere to the thick definitions (Shelby 209). One instance of a thick definition of blackness is "the *ethnic* conception of blackness, which treats black identity as a matter of shared ancestry and common cultural history" (Shelby 209, emphasis original). The ethnic definition is a fairly common construction of racial identity, but problematic for, among other reasons, "one does not have a black ethnic identity . . . unless one has the relevant lineage and embraces, to some significant degree, the corresponding cultural traits" (Shelby 210). Thick methods of identification makes solidarity difficult, if not impossible, because exclusion of blacks from the process of their own political empowerment counteracts the goals of the empowerment movement, and "no matter where one sets the boundaries of thick blackness, if it is meaningful enough to have normative, and not merely descriptive force, some blacks will be left out or forced into submission" (Shelby 233). Furthermore, thick conceptions contain falsely universal normative claims about blackness and the thin definition of blackness is simply not sufficient to a sense of community or group identification.¹ Shelby identifies the key to black political solidarity as vulnerability to anti-black racism, either real or threatened. He notes, "I see no reason to object to blacks identifying with what they regard as their ethnocultural heritage. What I resist is the tendency to think that blacks must *share* a distinctive black identity if they are to be a unified force against racial injustice" (237, emphasis original). The rest of this paper will discuss the link between Shelby's identification of the threat of anti-black racism and Lawson's analysis of black social disappointment. The two ideas are linked and can be channeled into political action.

Black existentialism might at first seem antithetical to black political solidarity, but actually the two streams of thought can synthesize very well. This is especially true of the work of Shelby and Lawson, because both thinkers stress the diversity of

¹ I do not take group identification to be the same thing as identity, but rather a recognition of similar interests and experiences, where they exist, by members of the group.

"blackness," recognizing that different experiences of black identity do not disqualify one from claiming that identity. In Lawson's conception, one may react to anti-black racism with nihilism, or denial, or any number of other responses, but disappointment is the key component of this reaction. In my reading of Lawson, I argue that the threat of disappointment serves to qualify one for participation in or identification with the black experience. This idea functions in Lawson's philosophy in the same way that Shelby's assertions about vulnerability to anti-black racism function in his work. This is not to say that anyone, regardless of their other experiences, who has been disappointed by society can claim black identity – and therefore become a part of black solidarity – but that black disappointment is enough, and we do not need to rely upon alienating definitions of identity to drive solidarity. We can treat Lawson's black disappointment as roughly the equivalent of Shelby's vulnerability to the experience and/or threat of anti-black racism, as far as establishing who "counts" as black. These concepts, however, relate to each other and hinge upon each other for the establishment of political action.

The concept of disappointment as expressed by Lawson relates to Frantz Fanon's "The Lived Experience of the Black," where Fanon notes a profound difference between the black experience when among other blacks, and the black experience when the white gaze intrudes. For Fanon, this intrusion includes the definition of one's body: "in the white world, the man of color faces difficulties in the elaboration of his bodily schema" because the man of color (Fanon's work does not explicitly include women) relies on knowledge of his body that he gains through the white gaze (185). However, defining the body is a comparatively simple process compared with "the historico-racial [schema]" constructed with "elements . . . provided to me [Fanon] . . . by the other, the White, who has woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories" (Fanon 185). Blacks become trapped into a narrow identity by white definitions, until this racial definition becomes the only factor that matters. It is here that we may see how Shelby and Lawson can unite their philosophies in collaborative action to achieve, or at least to work towards, black emancipation.

In the writings of both Fanon and Shelby we find concerns about black identity. Shelby argues that using black identity as a basis for emancipation and solidarity would do more harm than good because "the imperative to conform to black culture would require individual blacks to possess the capacity to identify . . . which elements are components of their culture and which are not" (224).² As Fanon shows, this is problematic because of the way in which whites construct blackness, and (a premise which Shelby agrees with) after all "the Negro experience is ambiguous, for there is not *one* Negro, but *several* Negroes" (Fanon 198, emphasis original). Furthermore, a political project such as Shelby's (or, in a more specific example, the Civil Rights Movement) is impossible without some contact with the white gaze. It is not that black political, social, or philosophical movements are only possible with the assistance of nice white people – such an assertion is clearly false, as well as condescending and racist; black social movements are possible and successful without white assistance – but rather, "there will always be a – white – world . . . It is impossible for the other to wipe out the past once

² Charles Mills' article "But What Are You Really? The Metaphysics of Race" discusses the difficulty of this process. A secondary concern is the assertion that one must conform or assimilate into a rigid definition of identity in order to count as black.

and for all" (Fanon 190). The white gaze entrenched itself in social and political structures such as governments as well as in intangible structures such as privilege and the zeitgeist. Furthermore, whiteness is seen as normal and desirable, as something to which other groups must conform.

There is no pure black identity, because the history of power and racial dynamics has allowed whites to define blackness. This realization has moved philosophers such as Naomi Zack to reject a black identification completely, seeing such an identity as inherently corrupt and false. Likewise, it has prompted Laurence Thomas to argue that black autonomy requires a (functionally impossible) narrative identity (Thomas 288ff). Shelby and Lawson disagree with these assertions, and their position seems more socially valuable and intellectually honest. Shelby's objection to the idea "that blacks must *share* a distinctive black identity if they are to be a unified force against racial injustice" shares a conceptual background with Fanon's conception of the ambiguity of blackness and Lawson's assertion of the multiplicity of black reactions to social disappointment (Shelby 236, emphasis original). Both Lawson and Shelby base their arguments in concepts present in Fanon's article, which identifies the remarkable vulnerability of blacks to abuse through the white paradigm. This realization is essential to political solidarity.

The movement toward political solidarity, and therefore political power and significance is a process – for any group, not only for blacks. It first requires an existential examination of the self, although an existential vocabulary is not required, nor even an especially existential viewpoint or conclusion; what is essential is an analysis of the lived experience. Such an analysis, whatever personal or political conclusions result from it, is an inherently existential act. Of additional import is the move beyond the self. Lawson articulates the effects of this move on the black sense of self. As his work argues, disappointment presupposes the existence of expectations – and history can show us that society has never met black expectations with the same regularity as it has met white expectations. Disappointment also requires an articulation (internal or external) of these expectations, and, equally as important, an articulation of the failure of expectations. In failing a community's expectations, society fails a community and undermines the worthy ideals upon which its members depend. While repeated disappointments may discourage a community from political involvement – and I strongly agree with Lawson on the impossibility and disingenuousness of identifying one reaction to disappointment and labeling it *the black reaction* – the experience of it is also essential to black political solidarity. Disappointment may either motivate black political involvement or deter involvement, but political action depends upon the process of analysis and disappointment.

Activism requires a starting point, a safe space to identify commonalities, rather than propagate the differences created by systems of oppression. For blacks, disappointment functions as that space. It is not, as we can see from the history of black political action, always an ideal space: one's own disappointments can blind one to the disappointments of others, so that black men see only racism and not sexism, classism, or homophobia – although obviously this is not true for all black men. Nevertheless, disappointment is a point of commonality broad enough to draw many different people (both types of people and individuals) with a wide array of reactions to and experiences of black disappointment. Disappointment contains both existential truths – although, as we have seen, universal claims are problematic – and truths about social-political

philosophies, in ways *specific* to the black experience. Sartre's ideas of radical choice will seem less thrilling to someone aware of how their position in a racialized society hampers their own ability to choose. Other oppressed groups share the existence of disappointment, which is what makes inter-group alliance possible, but even when these disappointments intersect they are not the *same* experiences. Contained within the immediate experience of disappointment are normative claims and expectations. Blacks have a set of normative claims comparable but, for social-historical reasons, *not* identical to the normative claims embodied in the dominant system. In the present day, this dominant society is a white society. White society makes two claims, which contradict each other and frequently contribute to black disappointment: first, that all people are equal legally and factually; secondly, that whites are the most equal. White becomes a normative claim, something to aspire to, and the default, something to conform to. Whiteness is difficult even for people with the correct skin color(s), but it is impossible where skin color combines with other disqualifying factors (education, wealth, gender, sexual orientation, class, and so on). Attempts to conform to whiteness are useless; as Fanon notes: "every hand I played was a losing hand" (195). This arrangement makes a positive identity of white or black impossible, so that to be "typically Negro . . . was no longer possible" and "to be white . . . was laughable" (Fanon 195).

These contradictory values create an impossible environment for blacks. They must navigate the idealized expectations of society – for example, that the law functions justly – and the true manifestations of these tenets of the oppressive dominant paradigm – i.e., that anti-black racism often prevents the law from creating social justice, creating an unjust state for blacks (as well as for whites). Regardless of actual, individual experiences of disappointment, racism makes blacks particularly vulnerable to it. This history of disappointment has created a need for political solidarity and political action. However, a people's disappointment can become a spur to their emancipation. Discussion and analysis of that disappointment can raise awareness and concern. In order for blacks to reach the awareness of anti-black racism and its actual or potential harm to their lives, disappointment must be publicized, rather than ignored or shamed into silence (*making poor choices*). Disappointment is a valid concern, and the existence of disappointment – especially in such a significant portion of the population as we find in the United States and similar societies – undermines the greater goals of the society. It is in society's best interest for its members to be happy and productive, rather than alienated and resentful. Those who resent society are more likely to oppose it or fail to contribute to it, either actively or passively, which harms society more than it helps. That some benefit from racism is undeniable, but it is a false benefit. The system harms many more people than it helps.

Shelby's work speaks to the difficulty of using ideas to motivate disenfranchised groups. Ideals, such as justice and a non-racist society, are often too flimsy to successfully persuade a disillusioned population to action (Shelby 243). However, disappointment is useful for precisely this reason: it is an emotional reaction, with visceral and highly personal effects. We are intimately aware of our feelings, but it is the discovery of the causes behind them – perhaps the causes two or three steps removed from the immediate cause of our disappointment – that brings disappointment into the realm of social-political philosophy and analysis. Black disappointment embodies the experience of an impossible society for those who do not exist in the privileged class, who find their

existence ignored and sidelined, and must live with the perpetual promise of respect and justice without seeing evidence of it. Political solidarity builds from an awareness of mutual disappointment, providing an outlet for its expression and a method to establish a better social contract. The multifaceted expressions of disappointment coincide with the multifaceted systems of oppression, so that the pre-existing dynamic is preserved through many levels. Through encouraging the interaction of existential investigations and political ideals, disappointment turns into a political tool, as well as a tool for discovering the self on an individual level.

Black social disappointment, and the forces that encourage it, has caused concern since Frantz Fanon's intellectual ancestors queried their role in society, and society's role in their lives. It continues to be an important element of the black experience today, philosophically relevant because of the existential questions the experience of disappointment raises and because it plays a key role in the process of building black political solidarity. Through examining the work of Bill Lawson and Tommie Shelby, two philosophers whose affiliations might seem to place them in mutual opposition on questions of black identity, we can articulate the role of disappointment in mobilizing blacks to challenge the limitations placed upon them by societal pressures. This process must consider who can involve themselves in black solidarity and while preserving individual autonomy. Disappointment and vulnerability vary with each individual, but they are common enough to prick on existential questioning and analysis, and to provide a common cornerstone for political involvement or action.

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