Self-Contempt and Color-Blind Liberalism in *The Accidental Asian*
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Relations between the dominant and subordinate members of a society clearly admit of some variety. Not all in the dominant class are obviously privileged or actively involved in oppression, and members of the subordinate class are not always homogeneously suppressed. This variability might be generated by a number of factors: imperfections in the system of inequality; the influence of local context on the impact of inequality; and the intersection of other hierarchical social arrangements, like those pertaining to gender, race, class, sexuality, and so on.

In the case of U.S. race relations, complexities of this kind that existed before the 20th century have become more obvious in the post-Civil Rights era. For example, there is currently an economic and social elite of most non-white groups. And one racialized group, Asian Americans, has been touted by dominant members of the U.S. as a "model minority" and sometimes reluctantly included in the category of "people of color" by many who fall under that designation. With the elimination of most legal barriers to equality, it seems inevitable that non-whites will increasingly fill the ranks of the mainstream elite. Consider, for example, the distinctive efforts of the current Bush administration to produce a conservative, multicultural elite: Colin Powell, Condoleeza Rice, Norman Mineta, Roderick Paige, Alphonso Jackson, Elaine Chow, Alberto Gonzalez, etc.[1] As non-whites emerge in elite settings, we can expect many to write their life stories. What will their autobiographies highlight? Perhaps they will be uncannily similar to earlier more radical memoirs? More likely, they will predictably highlight entry into the upward moving channels of a "land of opportunity."

I examine here one such life story, the memoir of Eric Liu, who was a Chinese American speechwriter for former President Bill Clinton and a political commentator at large. I aim specifically to evaluate some of the subtle emotive aspects of his self-professed assimilation to the mainstream elite. In the end, I offer an alternative to Liu's own interpretation of his life story. The first section of the essay offers some general thoughts about stigma and assimilation, with special consideration of intra-psychic affiliation with whiteness, a strategy of assimilation which may co-exist with more ostensibly anti-racist behavior. The second section considers emotions of self-assessment, in particular self-contempt. It turns out that self-contempt is a natural, even if not exclusive, companion to the intra-psychic assimilative strategy discussed in the first section of the essay. These considerations of assimilation and self-evaluative emotion are then brought to bear on the details of Eric Liu's memoir.

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[1] In the order they were listed in the text above, here are the formal titles held by these former or current Bush Jr. administration cabinet-level leaders: U.S. Secretary of State, 2000-2004; National Security Advisor, 2000-2004, and U.S. Secretary of State, 2004-2008; U.S. Secretary of Transportation, 2000-2008; U.S. Secretary of Education, 2000-2004; U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, 2004-2008; U.S. Secretary of Labor, 2000-2008; U.S. Attorney General, 2004-2008. Most likely, this presidential administration has generated the most multicultural cabinet in U.S. history. But I do not think this is in and of itself a reason for praising this president or his advisors.

Liu characterizes his life in terms of a certain colorblind liberal individualism, celebrating his cultural hybridity and his transcendence of race. As I shall argue, however, some of his inmost passions belie this self-characterization and reveal instead the subtle entrenchment of a regressive racial affiliation that amounts to a form of racialized self-contempt. Beyond the particularities of Liu's case, these reflections connect to a more general issue, namely the case against colorblind liberalism. A detailed portrait of the racially conflicted self-deception of a non-white elite helps clarify a more skeptical conception of the actual psychic life of colorblind liberalism generally and of its elite multicultural proponents in particular. As well, these reflections offer some perspective on the heterogeneous character of present-day hierarchical relations.[2]

Racial Stigma and the Demands of Assimilation

The problem of assimilation seems generally more complex for the racially stigmatized than for those who are only nationalistically and culturally different, say the white Swedish immigrant to America. Before examining specific strategies by which the racially stigmatized deal with their derogated identities, it is useful to distinguish between two of their aspects. One concerns how to handle the derogating evaluation embedded in the stigma – whether to accept or reject it – and the other how to handle the causal effects of the stigma as a resilient cultural representation. These need to be distinguished because efforts to show the falsity of inferiority judgments may do little to budge sedimented public opinion, and at the end of the day, the protesting individual or group must still contend with the structures that sustain and flow from the stigma.[3] And the stigmatized themselves can agree to the evaluative bankruptcy of stigma without necessarily agreeing about how to handle the persistence and impact of the stigma as a cultural form that helps organize the polity.

There seem to be at least four classic ways of dealing with stigma as a politico-cultural structure, and certain of them may be strategically compatible. One involves normalizing the stigma by complying, at least publicly, with its surrounding hierarchy-preserving norms. One becomes a "good citizen" of the second-class, and for this to have the right impact, many of the stigmatized must follow suit. With the derogated subgroup being normalized this way, the stigma itself is normalized: the subordinate members can appear "safe" to the dominant of the polity and can thereby have some of the edge taken off of the stigma.[4] Note that this type of response to stigma need not entail an endorsement of the devaluation. One might endure such a life to prevent death, torture, rape, disenfranchisement, or these things befalling one's kin.

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[2] To maintain some degree of seamlessness, most of my analysis will be couched in the same liberal terms as the memoir but put to different ends. I think that much of what I have to say can be reconstructed in the language of, say, Gramscian hegemony or Foucauldian power. But, again, I want here only to discuss and challenge liberal accounts like Liu's on their own grounds.

[3] The handling of stigma as a politico-cultural causal structure is more interesting for my purposes than the question of whether to deem the attendant judgments true or false. Let me simply note, however, that the basic ideas that comprise racial stigmas seem to me clearly false, both the essentialist presuppositions and the negative evaluations based upon them.

[4] A classic and helpful text for thinking through this idea and the concept of stigma more generally is of course Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1963). His account, however, is mostly devoid of explicit reference to affectivity.

Another reaction is to work to undermine the bases of the stigma, which may or may not involve some measure of compliance with the status quo norms that grow up around polity-supporting stigmatization. Justice Thurgood Marshall, for example, surely endured many indignities in the arenas where he had to enter and dwell in his attempts to eliminate the legal supports of anti-black stigma. In a very different and non-accommodating way, the Black Panther Party also attacked the beams that held up this stigma.

A third response is related to the second: the revaluation of the stigma as a positive symbol. A good example might be the "Black is beautiful" movement of the 1960s in which the expression "black" was reclaimed from its history of disparagement. Perhaps this third type of tactic is a special instance of the second because it does undermine the negative underpinnings of stigma. But since its aim is to reclaim, revalue, or reconstruct, rather than eliminate or altogether banish, it might merit its own category from a tactical standpoint.

Normalizing, undermining, and revaluing – each of these three responses to stigma and their interrelations can be discussed at length. In each of these approaches, the agent tries to thrive in spite of stigma or in the hopes of changing it. But, in a fourth strategy, the agent tries to thrive on the very basis of the stigma and, therefore, needs it to remain relatively intact. Specifically, this strategy involves an inward reconfiguration of the relevant normative coordinates: the subordinate individual assumes intra-psychically the *position* of the dominant identity and thereby disaffiliates with the given stigmatized identity. Perhaps this is most commonly expressed in the insistence that one is an "exception to the rule" or a "credit to the race." Note that such individuals do not literally claim the dominant identity since the racialized agent, we can imagine for our purposes, has visual markers of non-white identity.[5] Something more abstract than the dominant identity per se is salient here, namely the sociopolitical position occupied by it. So the racial minority member in question can be understood as seeking to co-occupy that dominant position in his psyche as a kind of affiliate of the dominant identity that takes up the center of that position. In the case of race in the United States, this identity repositioning takes the form, typically, of white self-positioning and is often referenced in terms of being "white-identified."

Aside from such intra-psychic normative maneuvering, the individual will likely strive for such positional co-occupation in outwardly social ways. For example, he may try to enter an elite white country club and threaten to sue if he is denied entry. If he is rejected, he might think to himself or out loud, "Who do they think they are? They're no better than I am!" For the purposes of this essay, let us assume that he is not voicing democratic self-respect but a hierarchically configured worry or sense of insult that his racially exceptional nature has gone unrecognized by those he regards to be his true peers, namely whites or an elite subset of them and possibly other non-whites like himself. In fact, his sense of positional equality with the whites at the country club may be such that he feels a sense of superiority over those particular white elites themselves on the grounds that they do not fully comprehend or play by the rules of

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[5] When visual markers of non-whiteness are absent and presumably those of whiteness are present, then the agent in question can engage in racial passing. In such a case, an actual claim on the dominant identity might be made and the general public may accept it. My focus here, however, is on the positionality of identity. And the distinction between those who pass or refuse to do so cross-cuts, rather than maps onto, the distinction between those who engage in this fourth response to stigma, this internal repositioning, as opposed to those who refuse to do so. Thus, there might be people who cannot racially pass but who do engage in this form of internal repositioning, and there might be people who can and do racially pass but who do not engage in internal repositioning and perhaps think it is abhorrent that they must engage in this charade in order to "get by" or do well.

a refined racial hierarchy, one that culls the exceptional from the lower ranks and appropriately accommodates them.

One expression of identity repositioning is agreeing with the evaluative content of the stigma and denouncing one's stigmatized group for that reason, but all this on the condition of being an exception to that derogatory evaluation and perhaps even a "credit to the race." As a result of this, some members of the stigmatized group might view the agent as a traitor, while other members might join sympathetic dominant members in praising the agent as a "credit to the race." The conduct of the applicant to the elite country club instantiates, but by no means exhausts, this type of identity repositioning. Interestingly, one might instead desire to eliminate racial inequality and the stigma that assists it, but do so while maintaining the identity repositioning just described. Since identity repositioning relies on the valuational hierarchy of stigma, attacking stigma while safeguarding white self-positioning seems contradictory. And perhaps, in fact, this is odd. But, surely, it is no more so than many other kinds of internally conflicted conditions.

The non-white individual – both actively anti-racist and psychically self-positioned with whites – would have to integrate the conflicting dispositions into a complex whole. The resulting structure may never have its elements completely reconciled, and its stability, if ever achieved, will likely falter. One route to the kind of psychic compromise needed for such a structure might exploit foreground/background dynamics common to moral attention. Specifically, the ethical aim of anti-racism would occupy center stage in consciousness, buttressed perhaps by its public recognition, while the white self-positioning resides largely hidden in the background. But because the latter is a pervading orientation, its expressions are likely to emerge into the foreground or be forcefully foregrounded by others who extrapolate such a condition from an observed pattern of status quo-preserving actions and inactions. Often, such extrapolations are based not so much on action and inaction as on the manner, style, or tone of one's conduct and bearing. Perhaps the agent in question gives off mixed signals that betray his conflicted condition. For example, many of his racial community may sense a barely perceptible condescension regarding his accomplishments or perhaps his claims to race leadership, which moves against the grain of what seems like his genuine community-respecting service. In some cases, they might be sensing merely an ordinary sort of intra-group condescension. In other cases, however, they might be tracking the kind of hierarchical affectivity that is configured by white self-positioning. The agent himself might wonder about – or, with some burgeoning self-knowledge, be haunted by – his motives: "why does I sometimes feel that subtle sensation of superiority over my people, something which I detest when I sense it in whites?" Such self-doubt and internal struggle may last a lifetime.[6]

So much of stigma involves threats to the self and various kinds of coping or transformative projects. Thus the following section focuses on emotions of self-assessment, especially self-contempt.

Self-Contempt and Self-Evaluative Emotions

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[6] Where the positionality of white identity is powerfully attractive, few non-whites will likely be left untouched. In fact, many who have not succumbed to such identity repositioning might still have psyches linked to it somehow. Specifically, they might have psychologies configured in part by a defense against succumbing to the inducements of identity repositioning, or even the mere *appearance* of succumbing. Such fears of being misread can lead over time to habits that aim to clarify the appearance of solidarity with the racial community in question, which may or may not be coupled with habits that actually develop solidarity.

In accord with much current work in emotion theory, this essay presupposes the view that emotion, and affectivity generally, permeates human living, including the "life of reason".[7] Although emotion is not the only crucial element of the psyche, it seems clear that it is nearly ubiquitous in the life of the mind and thoroughly intermingled with the operations of desire, belief, intention, imagination, and other basic forms of mental function. Since agent assimilation is a project of the self, and a meaning-laden one, emotion will certainly be involved. The self-evaluative emotions play a particularly large role. In recent literature, shame and guilt – and, by implication, pride – have received the most attention. But the class of self-evaluative feelings is clearly much larger because many of our paradigmatically other-directed feelings can be turned back upon the self. People can experience self-respect, self-love, self-hate, self-disgust, self-contempt, and self-directed forms of adoration, disappointment, anger, rage, and so on. In the discussion to follow, I focus briefly on shame and primarily on self-contempt.

Self-contempt is commonly understood to be sometimes a response to contempt, sometimes a cause of shame, and at least a cousin of shame and guilt. The following discussion aims to understand this emotion as one mechanism underwriting identity repositioning. I do not offer anything close to a full account of it, but I hope to clarify some of its general characteristics so that we can better understand the possible roles of affectivity in assimilation and the specific case of agent assimilation to be discussed in the next section of the essay.

The paradigm case of contempt is other-directed.[8] One feels negative affect, perhaps some sense of offense, at somebody's or some thing's perceived inferior nature or qualities. More than this, however, one's feeling is phenomenologically hierarchical: one feels in the affective backdrop one's own superior status relative to the target whose perceived inferiority occasioned the negative feelings. Also, in typical cases, there is a desiderative element wherein the agent seeks intra-psychically and sometimes more outwardly some sort of detachment from the target. Given the phenomenology and normative content noted, this element will likely involve a vertically-moving sense of separation from the demeaned target. Moreover, the desiderative structure seems to indicate the basic psychological function of the emotion: status-conservation. Contempt may have this function within a psychic esteem economy, which is why contemptuous agents often feel some sense of pleasure or pride. Given the highly interpersonal character of contempt, the primary (though not exclusive) role of contempt in the wider social ecology would seem to be the preservation of existing social hierarchies or their replacement by new ones. Finally, this emotion, like most, will show the contours of the agent's personal history and personality.

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[7] For a sample of such work, see the texts listed in footnote 13. An excellent and relatively comprehensive discussion of the state of emotion theory in philosophy can be found in Michael Stocker with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

[8] The brief characterization of other-directed contempt in this essay draws from some of what I still take to be plausible in an earlier account of mine: "Contempt and Ordinary Inequality," in Susan Babbitt and Sue Campbell, eds., *Racism and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999). For a recent and developed philosophical account of other-directed contempt, one that differs in some important respects from the one I give, see Michele Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," *Ethics* 113:2 (2003), p.234-72.

With this general characterization of contempt, how might we understand its self-directed variant?[9] To begin, we can take some of the features of other-contempt just noted and render them in some rough reflexive form. So self-contempt will be characterized by negative affect, maybe involving a sense of offense, felt toward one's own perceived inferior qualities along with a sense, perhaps tinged with pleasure, of vertical detachment from one's own self. Depending on one's situation, history, and personality structures, this could be felt in a cool or hot way, experienced episodically or pervasively, mingled with pity or with anger, followed by shame or by defensive other-contempt, accompanied by chiding of oneself or violence toward oneself, and so on.

Regarding function, however, matters seem more ambiguous. Given the status-conserving function of contempt, self-contempt might be seen as a potential mode of status-improvement. One thinks, "I can't stand how pathetic I was when I …," and this in turn serves as a goad to prevent future pathetic behavior. Self-correction can occur this way.[10] But not all cases of status diminution – and arguably fewer than ordinarily conceived – involve agent choice in any direct or significant sense. For example, derogatory racialization is not chosen by the oppressed, and it can endure without agents being able to modify it substantially during their lifetimes. So if a devalued and relatively unmodifiable status condition is imposed on an agent, then self-contempt will not only fail to improve the agent's status but will surely create a sense of frustration or helplessness. If self-contempt continues, the agent might need a coping mechanism for this inner condition as well. It is unclear, then, whether we can maintain a general thesis that self-contempt plays a status-improving function in the psychic economy.[11] So, even if self-contempt (as a kind of contempt) is configured by the concern over status-preservation, its overall structure of causal relations in the psychic economy may often work against this concern. The psychic function of the emotion thus remains unclear. It is also unclear if we can separate the psychic from the social ecological function of this particular emotion since so much of the discussion of the former adverts to elements of the latter. In fact, the psychic function of self-contempt might be seen as serving the same hierarchy-maintaining ends as that of other-contempt since the self-contempt of the subordinated can causally reinforce the structures sustaining their subordination while self-contempt of the dominant members can lead to status-conservation that also causally reinforces that hierarchy. Clearly, there are some real ambiguities

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[9] For reasons of space, I avoid here discussion of the idea that self-contempt is impossible in that contempt seems to require interpersonal comparison while the self-directed nature of self-contempt logically prohibits it. In ordinary discussion, virtually no one denies the possibility of self-contempt. Doubts about it seem to arise in the kind of scrutiny that theoretical analysis brings to it. My own take is that there are a few ways in which interpersonal comparison can constitute contempt and that interpersonal comparison in the *explicit* content of the emotion is but one instance of the sort of comparison needed for contempt to be what it is.

[10] Of course, it is not obvious that that form of self-improvement will ultimately be helpful since it presupposes and perhaps strengthens a potentially unhealthy hierarchical outlook.

[11] It is worth considering that self-contempt has no "original function" in the psyche, unlike other-contempt, fear, sadness, and many other kinds of feeling. It may instead be a mere byproduct of the capacity for other-contempt possessed by self-reflective creatures. If, however, we assume for argument's sake that it had some sort of originary purpose, it seems to have subsequently developed a life of its own. And so it may have one or many contingent and acquired functions. Put another way, locating its function may have to be ultimately a sociological, not (strictly) biological, study.

about the self-directed version of contempt.[12] I will try to illuminate what might be some less controversial features of self-contempt by comparing it with shame.

Though difficult to define, shame, like contempt and self-contempt, admits of general characterization.[13] Let me begin this streamlined account with the commonplace that shame involves a painful apprehension of the self or its attributes as diminished or lowered somehow, attended often by a hiding impulse. This lowered regard can result from noting that one has failed to live up to certain cherished ideals. But this cannot be the whole story of the onset of shame, for at least two reasons. First, as is common, one can undergo shame against one's considered judgment. One can feel shame, for example, in spite of the belief that one has fared well morally. This suggests that the intra-psychic authority behind the condemning force in shame can ignore features of reality, like the fact that one has *not* failed to live up to one's ideals.[14] As psychoanalytic accounts of shame clarify, the internal authority is often an imago, an internalization of, typically, one's parents, which is often modified into a demanding psychic structure, sometimes of a very severe kind.[15] Second, the sense of diminution need not even concern failure in a voluntary or accountable sense.[16] It might be a result of coming into a world in which one is in some sense a failed or diminished subject well before arriving in it, precisely like the situation potentially faced by the racially stigmatized. When this is the case, the lowered view of the self is not the result of flawed agency but the inward resonance of a suppressive social order.

There are important differences between shame and self-contempt. Self-contempt is phenomenologically active in a way that shame is not. In shame, one realizes, concedes, acknowledges, bows before, or otherwise passively accepts the painful conception of the self constitutive of the emotion. Of course, we are often divided against ourselves in shame, which

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[12] For more reflections on self-contempt, see Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), ch. 3; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), ch.6. The account offered here differs in some important respects from those of Miller's and Tomkin's. A fuller discussion, which adequately draws Miller and Tomkins into the conversation, will have to wait for another occasion.

[13] On the topic of shame and self-evaluative emotions, I have learned from many. See Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis* (New York: International Universities Press, 1971); Gabrielle Taylor, *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Andrew Morrison, *Shame: The Underside of Narcissism* (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1989); Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination* (New York: Routledge, 1990), ch.6; Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank, eds., *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), ch.6; John Deigh, *The Sources of Moral Agency: Essays in Moral Psychology and Freudian Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch.11; Richard Wollheim, *On the Emotions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), ch.3; Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Shame and Disgust in the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Daniel Haggerty, "White Shame," ms; and especially, Michael Stocker with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), chs.8-9.

[14] For a particularly deep account of this and related matters of shame, see Michael Stocker with Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions*, p.217-229.

[15] Helen Block Lewis, *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*.

[16] For very helpful discussion here, see Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, ch.6; John Deigh, *The Sources of Moral Agency*, ch.11; and Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, chs.4-7.

can obscure the passive phenomenology. For example, it might be a source of confusion or consternation that one feels shame and that one simultaneously disagrees with the view of the self embodied in that shame. But when one internally protests the claims of shame, what is one challenging but the passive concessions within the experience of the shame itself? So a divided self, at least of this type, is not only compatible with but presupposes the phenomenological passivity of the kind noted. To the extent that one can feel shame, then, one cannot but yield in this way because this simply is a part of what it is to experience shame. By contrast, in self-contempt, one judges, belittles, mocks, sneers, or otherwise actively asserts a disparaging conception of the self against the self. In earlier parlance, this sense of activity was captured in the use of the verb, "contemn." The phenomenologically active nature of other-contempt, then, is preserved in its redirection to the self. If shame centrally involves realizing, self-contempt centrally involves judging or contemning.

The two emotions also differ in terms of intra-psychic identification and proximity. In shame one is intimately connected, indeed fully identified, with one's own self, which is why the ashamed agent can receive the condemnation in a deeply personal manner. But in self-contempt, one looks down upon one's disparaged self and, hence, is distinctly detached from one's own self. In the process of detaching from the object-self (the contemned self), the agent-self (the contemning self) disaffiliates from the main self, as it were, because that object-self is the self with whom one ordinarily self-identifies. Therefore, who is the agent- or contemning self that is looking down upon her own self, that is the main self, in contempt? Part of the unclarity here results from the fact that the contemning self, though real in agency, is in some sense illusory from the standpoint of its identification structure. The contemning self takes on the perspective, and intra-psychically assumes the position, of the superior in the respects in which the main self is deemed inferior. But since, in actuality, the contemned self is the main self, the contemning self is fabricated from the materials of *an other's identity*, specific or general, accurate or distorted. The materials for this fabrication of the contemning self are gathered and framed by a process of imaginative identification or affiliation. And the imaginative affiliation is, of course, directed upon those perceived to be superior to the disparagingly perceived main self. To be clear, this attachment to, and alignment with, perceived superiority is a precondition for the production of self-contempt. Since the preconditional attachment and alignment can remain mostly in the phenomenological backdrop, and sometimes receive support from the social order, the source of self-contempt can remain largely hidden and the production of self-contempt relatively easy.

The felt sense of psychic distance in self-contempt, as opposed to shame, is a result of this internal identity differentiation.[17] Since we are talking about contempt, this detachment is hierarchical in its shape. Moreover, since emotion has an important desiderative element, self-contempt centrally involves the impulse toward status-preservation. This holds even if its overall

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[17] One might say here that in self-contempt, one is other to oneself. In some sense, this is right. But there are many cases of self-contempt in which such a characterization can be misleading. For many kinds of identificatory affiliation are or rapidly become familiar and make inroads into the main self in a way that other such kinds of affiliation do not and perhaps cannot. The reason for this goes back to my earlier brief remarks on the importance of personal history and the larger personality. One's history and personality can make the difference between an imaginative identification being somehow one's own or being alien. This can be put more generally: Self-contempt is *self*-contempt and not merely other-contempt that is directed, as it happens, upon one's self. For more on the importance of history and character, see Michael Stocker, *Valuing Emotions* and Richard Wollheim, *On the Emotions*.

structure in certain agents is shaped to maintain *somebody else's status-preservation*, which is to say a hierarchy in which the self-contemptuous agent is derogated yet intra-psychically affiliated with those privileged in that hierarchy.

Self-contempt, then, can be characterized as affectively hierarchical, focused on status-conservation, phenomenologically active, and (possibly) functionally supportive of extra-psychological hierarchies. A precondition of its occurrence is the imaginative identification of the self with a hierarchically elevated identity. With such affiliation and alignment secured, that constructed self contemns the main self. Returning to the earlier discussion, we can see that the hierarchical movement in identity repositioning involves a psychological niche that is aptly, though not exclusively, filled by self-contempt. Whereas the former is centrally about the hierarchical handling of stigma and, by implication, status, the latter is by its nature a hierarchically status-oriented experience. In fact, what is the affiliative construction of the contemning self in self-contempt if not a kind of self-repositioning? In self-contempt, then, the elevated arrangement and vertical movement is built into the architecture of the emotion, and in identity repositioning, the elevated arrangement and vertical movement help comprise a regulative ideal of the self. Seen this way, self-contempt can be a potential cause, sustainer, or effect of identity repositioning.

In the final section of this essay, I apply some of these thoughts on identity repositioning and self-contempt to an Asian American memoir. Using these ideas, I consider the author's assimilation and give a rival interpretation to the one offered by the author himself.

Two Readings of *The Accidental Asian*

In a memoir entitled *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*, Eric Liu has written one of the first Asian American race autobiographies. Part of its interest is simply the rare experiences of the author. Liu was a young speechwriter for former President Bill Clinton, making him perhaps the first Asian American to play such a role and one of the first to actually move beyond the outer trappings of the White House. He has also served as a political commentator in various public venues and media.

Apart from the author's experiences, the memoir itself has some distinctive qualities that warrant attention – and criticism. In keeping with the limited aim of this essay, I ignore much of what I think is his seriously flawed normative case for a certain kind of colorblind liberal individualism. Instead, I focus primarily on some of the affective dynamics of his assimilation. Specifically, two readings of his life story are considered. One reading, of course, is his own. The other is based on the foregoing account of white self-positioning and self-contempt. Both revolve around Liu's acknowledgement that he has largely assimilated to the elite liberal mainstream of U.S. society while resisting what he deems to be the misguided demands of racial assimilation in Asian American identity. In his own interpretation, he has rightly rejected the strictures of racial assimilation, and has thus been configured by the kind of hybridity and transcendence of race that represents the great possibilities made available by a distinctively American culture and politics.[18] The descriptive counterpart he adds to these normatively-loaded

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[18] Interesting, here, is a comparison of Liu's project with that of W.E.B. Du Bois' *Dusk of Dawn: Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, which attempts to use autobiography to confirm the need for a race-based anti-racism and interracial coalition-building. Thus, Liu's challenge to racial identities and racialized anti-racism seems to imply a rejection of the Du Boisian project.

claims is that his rejection of racial assimilation discourse is the end result of a long and bumpy path of inner struggle, self-doubt, and ultimately critical reflection about (the vagaries of) identity politics generally and (the questionable bases of) Asian American identity in particular.

A rival interpretation is that his assimilated life involves all the elements he describes – e.g. inner struggle, self-doubt, and even critical reflection – but is configured ultimately not by critical reflection so much as white self-positioning (a questionable and, for Liu, potentially ironic identity practice). I am not certain if my reading is right given the constraints imposed by the selective self-representation of a memoir. But if it has as much plausibility as his own interpretation, then the certitude with which Liu characterizes his life will have diminished considerably. In the end, my aim is not so much to challenge his self-interpretation as it is to bring to light some of the hidden political dynamics of the psyche in a racialized polity like the U.S. Before turning to the theme of affect and assimilation, I will discuss some stylistic and structural features of his account. And here I do touch upon the normative aspects of his account.

Liu's memoir has a compelling expressive style. It speaks with a certain intimacy, with the earmarks of searing honesty. And it maintains a narrative integrity whereby the telling of the life story is consistently placed within the framework of a certain kind of colorblind liberal individualism.[19] The memoir also has a number of peculiarities worth mentioning. Mostly, they concern its moral argument or, better, its style of argumentation.

One lies in the potentially ironic overall structure of his account. He portrays his whole life up to the point of the memoir in the terms of what he deems an accusatory and bankrupt discourse of racial assimilation. He does this in order to demonstrate its defective nature from the inside out, as it were. So his book may be read as one long *reductio ad absurdum* against the language of Asian American identity politics and assimilation.[20] From certain standpoints, such a project is respectable given the popularity of colorblind liberal individualism and the vagaries of certain kinds of identity politics. The means, however, are peculiar, and perhaps self-defeating. Is it really an expression of freedom, even from Liu's own viewpoint, to write a whole book on one's own life simply to debunk assimilation discourse? Perhaps a few chapters could have been interestingly configured to this end. Instead, his whole story is organized and arguably confined by this singularity of purpose. His hope, presumably, is that by using his life materials to mount a case against assimilation discourse, he lets fly a life of interest beyond the confines of race. But such a singularly dedicated project raises the worry that Liu has nevertheless ensnared himself, ironically, in the very trap (or so he would view it) he aims to reject in his memoir.

Another peculiarity has to do with moral argumentation. Specifically, many of the targets of his criticisms are unduly exaggerated, outright mischaracterized, or in some other way,

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[19] Technically, he is not an absolutist in his colorblind liberalism. He calls himself an "identity libertarian," which allows for the possibility of legitimate racial identification so long as it allows freedom of entry and exit and allows presumably also that there is nothing anti-liberal about the racial identification in question. See p.65, 81, and 128. I classify his position as a kind of colorblind liberal individualism because it relegates race to a relatively shallow aspect of the polity. On his view, racial identification is mostly a matter of taste or inclination, and the transcendence of race should be a regulative ideal.

[20] In case one's geometry (or logic) lessons have become buried in memory, a *reductio ad absurdum* is a form of argument in which one first provisionally assumes the very opposite of one's desired conclusion, and then goes on to generate a contradiction from that provisional assumption combined with other premises. Since a contradiction is generated, one is deductively entitled to reject the provisional assumption (assuming the other premises are fine) and thereby endorse its logical opposite, which was the desired conclusion all along. As the latin suggest, this form of argument involves reducing a claim to absurdity.

rendered "straw men," and much of this is obscured by the mystique of an intimate autobiographical narration. Here are some examples of unreasonable argumentation. Liu contends, for instance, that Asian American identity is built on threat alone rather than a positive sensibility, like a cultural connection.[21] This is a strong claim, but he gives little consideration to potential complexities. One is that the coalescing of individuals in defense against a common threat can in time generate a group solidarity that is more than just a strategic clumping together of individuals. This transmutation is likely when the perception of threat and the incipient solidarity is configured by a common vision of justice, and it is likely to endure when the moralized sense of solidarity is later interlaced with a corresponding group narrative.[22] Given his praise of American greatness, the formation of moral community is something I think Liu would value. Yet it receives no consideration in the context of Asian American identity and, interestingly, generates attention only in the context of the general American polity. This omission is quite serious since the Orientalism of the general American polity formed the seedbed of Asian American identity's vision, solidarity, and narrative.[23]

A second and related example of uncharitable argumentation is Liu's insistence that the positive sensibility that might be claimed on behalf of Asian American identity, namely cultural unity, is unfounded. Here too, Liu ignores some basic complicating points. As just noted, cultural unity is but one positive sensibility, and not the only one capable of forging a community. And even if we were to grant Liu's presupposition that cultural unity is the only positive group-making sensibility, his account ignores the fact that culture has to have a beginning and such origins rarely if ever follow a rationally-conceived premeditated course. In this light, the culture-making efforts of various self-avowed Asian Americans seem in no way peculiar. Moreover, there *is* a nascent Asian American culture that has developed on aesthetic and political fronts since the 1960's. The fact that not all Asian Americans affiliate with this culture weighs not at all against its existence. If only 10% of African Americans enjoy the Blues, does this negate the fact that this musical form is part of the black aesthetic tradition?

Third, Liu seems to regard racial identity as being configured necessarily by a form of narrow nationalism. Of course, some have held their identities in this way. But certainly others have not and have sought instead to maintain a racial identity compatible with larger connections and coalitions. Liu grossly oversimplifies this issue, mistaking a problematic species for the whole genus.

Fourth, more than any particular claim he makes, Liu consistently depicts his targets in an exaggerated or trivializing manner. For example, he likens those who self-identify racially as comparable to those who blindly embrace religious faith, and he chides himself, jokingly, for not having more faith than he does. And with what looks like self-deprecating sarcasm, he describes

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[21] Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker* (New York: Random House, 1998), p.70.

[22] On the significance of group narratives, I have learned much from Laurence Thomas, *Vessels of Evil: American Slavery and the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

[23] There are many texts on this topic. For just a sampling, see Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994); Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000); and Steve Louie and Glen Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001).

his own partial openness to Asian American identity politics as a journey stuck at the midway point of a 12-step program, like that of Alcoholics Anonymous.

In making these four points, my main concern is not so much with the falsity of Liu's position but the unusually shallow and dismissive style of his argumentation. The searing honesty of the narrative therefore seems to be more apparent than real. Yet, there still seems to be some sort of genuine revelation of the self, reinforced by his effective use of a certain communicative intimacy. Perhaps, then, what I gradually sensed as I read Liu's story is the divergence of elements typically united, namely intimacy and honesty. Whatever we make of the peculiarities noted, the ironic self-entrapment and the shifty style of argument, Liu's memoir reveals much about the psychological dynamics of identity and assimilation. This will be my primary focus in this essay, but I raise the general points above because I think they offer an important context for what follows.

Liu begins his attack on the discourse of assimilation with a confession of sorts:

Here are some of the ways you could say I am "white": I listen to National Public Radio. I wear khaki Dockers. I own brown suede bucks. I eat gourmet greens. I have few close friends "of color." I married a white woman. I am a child of the suburbs. I furnish my condo a la Crate & Barrel. I vacation in charming bed-and-breakfasts. I have never once been the victim of blatant discrimination. I am a member of several exclusive institutions. I have been in the inner sanctums of political power. I have been there as something other than an attendant. I have the ambition to return. I am a producer of the culture. I expect my voice to be heard. I speak flawless, unaccented English. I subscribe to *Foreign Affairs*. I do not mind how white television casts are. I am not too ethnic. I am wary of minority militants. I consider myself neither in exile nor in opposition. I am considered "a credit to my race."[24]

Some of these are listed to humor his interlocutors. Others, however, generate substantive controversy. Now, one might object that many of these confessional items are cases of assimilation not so much to whiteness as to stereotypes of whiteness. Perhaps the very idea of white styles or proclivities (e.g. wearing bucks or shopping at Crate & Barrel) is suspect. But I think that what really rouses controversy are the references to situational conditions or politicized perspectives that are racialized as white – e.g. having few close non-white friends, expecting one's voice to be heard, etc. It seems clear that Liu means here only to use conventional correlates of whiteness to *establish his assimilated condition* so that he can later internally undermine that conventional discourse of assimilation altogether. As I said earlier, he is developing a *reductio*. In accord with this aim, Liu quickly presents and then casts doubt on the presuppositions that lie behind his litany of conforming behavior, and he places these remarks in an interesting historical and emotional context.

Times have changed, and I suppose you could call it progress that a Chinaman, too, may now aspire to whiteness. But precisely because the times have changed, that aspiration – and the *imputation* of the aspiration – now seems astonishingly outmoded. The meaning of "American" has undergone a revolution in the twenty-nine years I have been alive, a revolution of color, class, and culture. Yet the vocabulary of "assimilation" has remained fixed all this time: fixed in whiteness, which is still our metonym for power; and fixed in shame, which is what the colored are expected to feel for embracing the power.

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[24] Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian*, p.33-34.

I have assimilated. I am of the mainstream. In many ways I fit the psychological profile of the so-called banana: imitative, impressionable, rootless, eager to please. As I will admit in this essay, I have at times gone to great lengths to downplay my difference, the better to penetrate the "establishment" of the moment. Yet I'm not sure that what I did was so cut-and-dried as "becoming white." I plead guilty to the charges above: achieving, learning the ways of the upper middle-class, distancing myself from radicals of any hue. But having confessed, I still do not know my crime.[25]

In this passage, Liu makes clear that he understands much of the development of his life as a process of assimilation to the mainstream elite. There is nothing evident, from his standpoint, about the wrongness he thinks many ascribe to this conversion. In fact, he suggests that the accusation – and thus the very notion that he is confessing – is misguided. America's transformation into a genuine democracy means that non-whites no longer have reason to maintain racial seclusion and experience shame about refusing the confinements of racial identity. And so the charge that he has become white, with all its blaming connotations, and indeed the very language forming the backdrop of this charge, stems from an outdated conception of the polity.

One of his interesting claims here is that the language of assimilation gravitates around the issue of power, specifically in terms of whiteness as a metonym for power and the shame felt by non-whites in seeking it. Moreover, he contends that ultimately he assimilated to power, not whiteness, and that the connection between power and whiteness generates in many minds the conflation of the two.[26] I think Liu has misunderstood this cluster of issues. Non-white shame is not typically felt over the pursuit or possession of power, but the manner in which it is sought or used. Specifically, a non-white person who seeks or uses mainstream power in a way that compromises a commitment to a subordinated community would have the basis for the experience of shame. Liu's remark, however, makes it seem as if power itself is shaming to people of color. But this is implausible. In addition, he forgets that the language of group empowerment – recall Black Power, for instance – is central to the recent history of racial identities. The upshot is that he ought to have made a pairing like the following: whiteness as a metonym for power and non-white shame in power that leaves subordinated communities disempowered.

This highlights the fact that the acquisition of mainstream power by people of color may be difficult without the sorts of compromises that allow this sort of shame to be a real possibility. *This* is where we should locate non-white shame as it pertains to assimilation. These considerations also reveal that many of those for whom this shame is a possibility simply do not share Liu's presupposition that a revolution has transpired. They might see, rather, a society still in need of a revolution (or of a revolution that attains completion). Thus, the reason why the emotive structure, shame, is disconnected from the alleged historical event, revolution, is that many of those experiencing the emotion simply do not acknowledge the event has transpired or at least developed sufficiently. And this contrary conception is conveyed in the emotion itself: one might feel ashamed that one has done little for, or actually worked against, the uplift of one's community. In fact, there seems to be an acknowledgement by Liu himself of some of these points. When he relates the common conflation of whiteness and power to the fact that most

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[25] ibid, p.35-36.

[26] ibid, p.55.

Americans with real power are white, this seems like a confession of another and more fruitful kind: a revealing awareness of a lingering entrenched racialization of power, of which this conflation is surely only one symptom. But somehow Liu does not carry through his reasoning. He does not note the tension between his recognition of whiteness as a metonym for power and his claim that a democratic revolution has transpired. Upon this failure, he imputes a bizarre kind of shame to non-whites and fails to see that a fairly common form of non-white shame presupposes a quite different, a more skeptical, conception of the U.S. polity.

Liu's focus on non-white shame draws attention to the emotive character of assimilation. As just noted, he thinks many non-whites are caught up in a misguided kind of shame. The counterpart to the sort of shame I have noted (and Liu has misconceived) is shame in not being white or not being accepted by the white elite. Often, this shame is depicted as an expression of self-hate. Although self-hate can be the source of shame in certain individuals, the potential set of negative attitudes toward the self has nearly as much variety as negative attitudes themselves. Other kinds of shame might express a condition less drastic than self-hate, like self-contempt or perhaps self-pity. As well, shame might stem from a white-configured self-esteem or -validation structure that does not necessarily involve self-hate, self-contempt, or self-pity. Lastly, as indicated earlier in this essay, shame need not be our sole or central focus. Depending on the agent in question, self-contempt or other self-regarding emotions might play a role.

In discussing his young adult life and his entry into elite formal politics, Liu considers the psychic and specifically affective dynamics of his assimilation.

> I didn't avoid making Asian friends in college or working with Asian classmates; I simply never went out of my way to do so. This distinction seemed important – it marked, to my mind, the difference between self-hate and self-respect. That the two should have been so proximate in the first place never struck me as odd or telling. Nor did it ever occur to me that the reasons I gave myself for dissociating from Asians as a group – that I didn't want to be part of a clique, that I didn't want to get absorbed and lose my individuality – were the very developments that marked my own assimilation. I simply hewed to my ideology of race neutrality and self-reliance. I didn't need that crutch, I told myself nervously, that crutch of racial affinity. What's more, I was vaguely insulted by the presumption that I might. … I resented the faintly sneering way that some whites regarded Asians as an undifferentiated mass. But whose sneer, really, did I resent more than my own? … stereotypes of Asian otherness and inferiority were like immense blocks of ice sitting before me, challenging me to chip away at them. And I did, tirelessly. All the while, though, I was oblivious to rumors of my *own* otherness and inferiority, rumors that rose off those blocks like a fog, wafting into my consciousness and chilling my sense of self.
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> As I had done in high school, I combated the stereotypes in part by trying to disprove them. If Asians were reputed to be math and science geeks, I would be a student of history and politics. If Asians were supposed to be feeble subalterns, I'd lift weights and go to Marine officer candidate school. If Asians were alien, I'd be ardently patriotic … I was often aware, sometimes even hopeful, that others might think me "exceptional" for my race. I derived satisfaction from being the "atypical" Asian, the only Chinese face at OCS or in this club or that. The irony is that in working so duteously to defy stereotype, I became a slave to it. For to act self-consciously against Asian "tendencies"

is not to break loose from the cage of myth and legend; it is to turn the very key that locks you inside.[27]

This passage is both revealing and misleading – like the book as a whole. As Liu notes, he neither actively sought nor intentionally avoided Asian individuals as prospective friends or workmates. But he did actively avoid Asians as a group. Elsewhere, he says that he avoided Asians as a group or pro-Asian Asians out of fear of being pigeon-holed as an Asian and, thus, presumably of being shortchanged in his opportunities.[28] In the passage above, he notes an additional motivational structure, specifically a more symbolic or ideological aversion, which unlike the previous motive is not fundamentally configured by a means-end calculus.

The nature of this aversion to Asians as such is revealed in the passage and some surrounding text. First, it gravitates around some classic anti-Asian stigmata, like the ideas that Asians lack individuality, are prone to being technical nerds, are feeble or passive, and finally are alien. Of these, the alleged traits of feebleness and passivity, and of lacking individuality seem to cause Liu the most anxiety. Second, Liu attributes to and condemns in pro-Asian Asians those very traits that caused him anxiety. As he notes, he avoided Asians as a group partly because he believed they clumped together out of weakness (needing the "crutch of racial affinity") and because he did not want that weakness to sully his own character. Presumably, he befriended only Asians who like himself were strong, active, and secure in their individuality, as he understood these attributes.

It might seem that Liu did not really buy into the anti-Asian stereotypes since he was critical only of pro-Asian Asians and was able to befriend or work comfortably with other kinds of Asians. But – and this is a third point –his remarks reveal a deeper prejudice than he explicitly acknowledges. For example, he notes that he was "hopeful" that others, presumably whites, would recognize him as an "exceptional" Asian. And he states that he felt "satisfaction" in being an "atypical" Asian. Clearly, those unflattering traits Liu described as characteristic of pro-Asian Asians he also regarded as more general attributes of Asians, which is of course how he could bask in a distinctly race-based limelight. This does not mean that he always endorsed these stereotypes or that he did so explicitly. It means, rather, that he was internally conflicted: he explicitly resisted stereotypes, and yet the more hidden pleasures of social validation required an outlook that yielded to the same stereotypes.

Fourth, Liu seems not to give due weight to the serious presence of this aversion in his psyche. As he confesses, it was not only some whites, but he himself, who sneered at pro-Asian Asians as an "undifferentiated mass." Liu, however, could detach himself sufficiently from such contempt to feel resentment not only toward sneering whites but toward himself for the same act and attitude.[29] He was clearly divided within himself: he shared with whites an anti-Asian contempt, and he maintained an anti-racist resentment of such contempt. Liu's own sense of how he came to this conflicted state is left unarticulated. One possible explanation is offered shortly after Liu's confession in the passage cited above, and it may also be an explanation of his desire

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[27] ibid, p.49-51.

[28] ibid, p.49.

[29] It might be thought that all this has been left in the past. But as I noted earlier in this essay, Liu seems to criticize Asian American identity in a rather dismissive, and sometimes sarcastic and mocking, manner. This might be evidence that the negative attitudes of his formative years in high school and college have persisted into his adulthood.

to be seen as an exceptional Asian. After pointing out that he strove to challenge anti-Asian stereotypes, he notes without elaboration, "I was oblivious to rumors of my *own* otherness and inferiority, rumors that rose off those blocks like a fog, wafting into my consciousness and chilling my sense of self."[30] Liu seems to be saying that subconsciously the anti-Asian stigmata were undermining his sense of self, even as he consciously attacked them publicly. If so, his aversion to pro-Asian Asians and Asian groups could be a result of his having externalized his own diminished self-regard. This would account for the conflicting tendencies he notes, not simply the non-conflicted ones he emphasizes. In any case, it seems to be a significant strand in his life story, yet it receives almost no elaboration.

As Liu narrates the above passage, all these considerations lead up to a significant irony: his efforts to liberate himself from stereotype became in the end a prison of sorts. By the time he relays this, of course, he has presumably broken free of this subtle trap. And he has done so, I take it, by releasing his obsession with stereotype defiance and by no longer letting stereotypes or stigmata become the central motifs of his life. This escape is of a piece with his general emergence out of the strictures of assimilation and identity discourse. But I read the passage differently. I do not deny the ironic presence of the trap he notes. But it is not obvious to me that this is the heart of the matter. More central to the unfolding narrative, I think, is the blended weave of a dominant thread in which Liu overzealously defies stereotypes and a more subtle thread in which he surreptitiously relies upon anti-Asian stereotype and experiences anti-Asian contempt. Liu locks onto the former in spite of some hints of the latter and moves forward on the basis of the more innocuous self-interpretation. I think, however, that the latter, less flattering self-characterization is also a part of the main dynamic of the story, a dynamic characterized by internal contradiction.

In the preceding sections, I characterized identity repositioning, specifically white self-positioning, as an assimilation strategy, and self-contempt as an important self-evaluative emotion. In addition, I noted various links between white self-positioning and racialized self-contempt. Arguably, many aspects of both phenomena are evident in Liu's memoir, and much of the foregoing discussion illuminates this. One of the important shared structures of both phenomena is a certain hierarchical identificatory fixation. In white self-positioning, the non-white powerfully attaches to the elevated position of whiteness. And in racial self-contempt, the agent establishes an affiliative link to white superiority from which the condescending emotion can issue. In the foregoing, we see that Liu wants to be validated as an exceptional Asian. And his sneering at Asians suggests the presence of contempt. That desire and that emotion indicate that some portion of his psyche is affiliated with what it conceives to be an elevated position relative to which Asians as such occupy a lower status. Liu seems to supply for his readers what this elevated position is. He states that he identified with the powerful, to be sure, but not with whites *as such*. But we now have reason to doubt this.

As discussed earlier, his explicit self-characterization is that he ironically trapped himself in a "duteous" defiance of stereotype and sometimes slipped into hypocrisy as he too sneered at Asians. But I have contended that such slippage is more serious than Liu acknowledges, and it recruits some deep mechanisms in his psyche. Quite possibly, his anti-Asian contempt and his desire to be a "credit to the race" are the effects of either a damaged self-concept (recall the "chilled" sense of self he confesses) or his fending off such damage. In either case, his orientation against Asians as such seems to require as a counterpart something that can be

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[30] ibid, p.50.

conceptually and emotively paired with Asians. The natural candidate is whiteness. For if the powerful generally are the target of his affiliation, then it should be the weak generally that are the target of his contempt. But, as he himself tells his story, his contempt has a definite racialized specificity. It is anti-Asian. So his desire for validation as a "credit to the race" and his contempt for Asians must have as a precondition an alignment or affiliation with whites, powerful whites, or whites and the powerful. Contrary to his own claims, his identificatory tendencies are indeed racialized. And this is compatible with the idea that race is not the only factor involved.

But if some portion of Liu's conflicted psyche affiliates deeply with whites or elite whites and involves a demeaning outlook upon Asians, then how does he deal with the fact that he himself is racialized as Asian by both the culture at large and his own project of being exceptional? His contempt for Asians as such would seem by implication to invite self-contempt. But this receives no comment by Liu. He seems, however, to come close to discussing it when he intimates how "rumors of his own inferiority" made some inroads into his psyche. Could the chilled sense of self he mentions be an effect, in part, of self-contempt that follows upon his anti-Asian contempt? Quite possibly his "duteous" defiance of stereotype and his efforts to be seen as an atypical Asian may have been driven, even if only in part, by an attempt to stave off self-contempt. Perhaps his many notable successes in the world at large reveal that he has also successfully evaded a self-contempt that is always in the offing. Confirmation of this alternative reading of his life story is not possible since he does not elaborate upon some important intimations about the inner recesses of his psyche. But if it seems, now, at least as plausible as the one Liu gives, then the viability of his own reading diminishes.

Ultimately, my aim in offering this alternative reading of white self-positioning and white-identified self-contempt is not to discredit Liu but rather to point to a larger issue. Many colorblind liberals, including elite nonwhites, maintain their position in ways that are betrayed by their deeper passions. This is to say that colorblind liberalism is often coupled, in perhaps an ironic but certainly a contradictory way, with a color-coded consciousness. Liu offers a complex case in point. In the end, says Liu, we ought to have the liberty to become anything we can truthfully be. His own life in his own words shows how difficult that can actually be.[31]

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