THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question is there a common good in our common home?

I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're looking at the ways in which racial and ethnic justice intersect with the question of the common good. Today, we enter the conversation through the issue of immigration. Exploring the movements of assimilation and difference within the production of national identity and the pursuit of a common good.

SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER: They are targeting minority groups. Muslims primarily but also black people, Jewish people, gay people, Latino people. It has really been something.

HSIN-I CHENG: It is not new that assimilation is expected of minorities and immigrants. But what does it mean when people are to assimilate to the American life? And to which American life exactly should they emulate anyway?

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these questions, we're joined today by Hsin-I Cheng, associate professor in the Communication Department at Santa Clara University and Bannan Institute Scholar in the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education. Her book, "Culturing Interface: Identity, Communication, and Chinese Transnationalism" investigated the experiences of a Chinese and Taiwanese community on the US-Mexico border. Welcome, Hsin-I.

HSIN-I CHENG: Thanks Theresa! It's a privilege to be here.

I came to the United States from Taiwan more than 15 years ago. I am an immigrant. In 2014, I decided to return to Taiwan, my native country, to learn more about immigrants' experiences there. Since the 1980s, many newcomers have arrived in Taiwan and more than 85% came from Southeast Asian nations such as Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia. Through a non-profit organization I met Joan from Thailand. Fifteen years ago, she came to Taiwan when she was 30 years old. She met her tourist guide husband when she was working in Japan at a travel agency. People at the organization encouraged me to speak with her because she is well respected by all members. On a cold rainy day, I met her in northern part of Taiwan. Her bright eyes and infectious smile reminded me why she was suggested to this interview. She shared her immigrant story with me.

SHIRLEY for JOAN (audio clip): In the first 5 years after coming to Taiwan, I mostly stayed at home. I did not know anybody, did not know how to speak. I was afraid to open up my mouth because I was afraid that my pronunciation was bad. Now when I go to the market, I'd say, "well I am not Taiwanese, please give me a break." (laugh). I would even ask for a cheaper price in the market by buttering the vendors up. They would give me that price and say, "you are very cute, very good at bargaining". Now, I can open my mouth. Before I did not dare to go out to buy

groceries. I was afraid the vendors would say, “this one came through marriage!” Now I say, “I am not Taiwanese, so please excuse me that I do not pronounce things perfectly.” Now people would say, “Ok. Ok. I’ll give you this price.” [laugh]

HSIN-I: From hiding her “difference” to embracing it, Joan told me she also taught her son Thai and English so that he can be multilingual like his mother. She laughed and said that her son would switch between Thai, Mandarin, and English just to confuse people when he encountered questions that challenged his legitimacy both in Taiwan and Thailand. Like the late Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldua, Joan and her son perform their differences with sameness, like multi-tongued “*mestiza*” living in between different worlds.

The next morning, I met Joy, a petite, soft-spoken woman in her late twenties. In our interview she said,

NANCY for JOY (audio clip): I came from Vietnam about ten years ago in 2006. I came from the countryside of Ho-Chi-Minh city. I was 18 years old, had just started the 2nd year in my senior high school. In the middle of it, someone asked me if I wanted to marry to a Taiwanese. I thought if it would work I’d be married. If not, I’d return to my study. It had just happened that fate was there; we liked each other and so I married and moved to Taiwan.

HSIN-I CHENG: Two years into her marriage, her husband was killed in a car accident. With the help from the organization she finally obtained Taiwanese ID card. She said,

NANCY for JOY (audio clip): Now when people hear my accent, they would ask me where I am from. I'd respond “I’m a Taiwanese.” They would say “No you are lying” and I’d say, “I’ll show you my ID card” (laugh). People said to me “your face does not look like a foreigner but you sure sound like one.” (laugh) so I rarely speak to people that I don’t know. When they asked me “Are you Taiwanese?” I really do not like to hear this sentence.

Because I think “Aren’t we all the same?” They just think that I am a foreign bride and I don’t like that. I’ve already married to Taiwan. I live here, and also now have an ID card. Why question me if I am a foreign bride and where I come from?!”
Some people told me as long as you don’t speak, people would not ask. But once I start talking… [laugh]

So I started responding that I came from the U.S. and they’d say “you’re lying.” So us immigrant sisters would say “we’re from the U.S.” so that many middle-aged men who asked us that question don’t know how to respond. We acted like that to get rid of those people. I don’t like that question.

HSIN-I CHENG: The Vietnamese filmmaker and literary professor Trinh Minh-Ha in her book "Women Native Other" wrote that as an Asian American woman "you can keep saying and asserting yourself but in the end, *you are still said."*

The fact that Joy's Taiwanese ID card fails to justify her authenticity as a Taiwanese because of her "different accent" reminds me of Trinh's lament. Joy stopped talking to others in order to hide her difference even though she questioned what her difference was compared against. She had to repeat her resistance by finally resorting to a lie about being from the United States, one of the most powerful nations, as an aid to her difference that marked her as an Other, who had not assimilated enough.

A week later I met another woman: Li-Chuan, an Indonesian of Chinese descent. She came to Taiwan 15 years ago. After getting her college degree in accounting, she worked in a bank. It was during the anti-Chinese movement in Indonesia. Li-Chuan's parents worried for her safety, and decided to play the matchmakers for her. After having phone conversations with her husband for more than a year, she decided to marry to a Taiwanese man. She said,

WENDY for LI-CHUAN (audio clip): In Taiwan, there's discrimination against us "outsiders." They can tell that we're not locales once they hear our accent. But I feel I am just the same as a Taiwanese as long as I don't make a sound, that I don't speak, they'd never know that I am someone from outside the island. As long as I don't walk I am fine. Once I do then they would know and they would ask "Well where do you come from? Vietnam? Indonesia? How much did you cost your husband? Does your husband give you money every month? Do you send money home often?"

They probably heard these comments from neighbors who have immigrant brides in their home. Maybe the taxi driver's wife is also a foreigner who sends money home and that the mother in law complains about her sending money home. So they may say something like "I purchased her" or "I spend this amount on her."

HSIN-I CHENG: I was curious about her reactions to these questions. She laughed and said,

WENDY for LI-CHUAN (audio clip): I just don't care what people say anymore. [laugh]. Before I felt like being discriminated against. Yes I am from outside of the island, so what? Are you not welcoming me here? Are you looking down on me? Now I am used to it after being asked so often. So now I say "well whatever." [laugh] I never responded to their questions besides just saying "Yes I am from Indonesia. There is no use to say more since it is not helpful. They will not change. My further response will probably be used as their gossip material. Right? [laugh] I don't take taxi now so it doesn't happen often. [laugh] Now I ride my own scooter.

The new immigrants started to come to my home to study Mandarin together when my son was one-year-old, so now it's been 11 years. I've been hanging out with these sisters all this time [laugh]. So we can support and encourage each other.

HSIN-I CHENG: Recognizing that her difference could not be hidden, Li-Chuan chose to ignore people who mark her difference and redirect her energy to form friendship and build support with other immigrants. After learning how these immigrant women dealt with moments, when their "differences" made them feel less than other members in the society, I started to reflect on what kind of reactions "differences" could draw in the United States.

In May 2016 The Huffington Post had an article about how, just three days after the then president candidate Donald Trump called for a ban on Muslims during his campaign a North Carolina man ripped off a Muslim woman's hijab and screamed "Take it off! This is America!" on his flight from Chicago to Albuquerque, New Mexico. A similar incident happened just down the road from me at a university in San Jose, CA.

"Take it off! This is America!" makes a hijab a symbol mutually exclusive to America. It translates a body wearing a hijab as un-American. It evokes a feeling and an idea that there is something as American attire. It implies that those with different cultural traditions need to lose them in order to fit in. It is not new that assimilation is expected of minorities and immigrants. But what does it mean when people are to assimilate to the American life? And to which American life exactly should they emulate anyway?

When Sociologist Robert Park and his colleague proposed the concept of "assimilation" in the 1920s, they defined it as

ROBERT PARK QUOTE: “A process of interpenetration and fusion in which persons and groups acquire the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of other persons and groups and by sharing their experience and history, are incorporated with them in a common cultural life.”

HSIN-I CHENG: Park later explained assimilation as the “processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity, sufficient at least to sustain a national existence”.

HSIN-I CHENG: This notion of cultural solidarity was later developed into an ethnocentric assimilation of accepting a racial and cultural hierarchy. This classic American assimilation put English-speaking Protestants on the top and people of color at the bottom. It was even supported by government programs to erase minority cultures.

In the 1960s, sociologist Milton Gordon promoted for minorities to assimilate to the cultural patterns of the host society. These adaptations include language, dresses, communication styles, and emotional expressions. In this process, minorities gave up their intrinsic value systems such as religions and music tastes. Gordon’s “identificational assimilation” expected “Anglo-Conformity, the melting pot,” as a cultural standard for minority groups to acculturated into the “middle-class cultural patterns of largely white protestant, Anglo-Saxon origins”. This process erases family and cultural memories of societal members who are different from members who expect them to assimilate. What if these differences cannot be hidden like those of the Taiwanese immigrant women who shared their stories with me? What if some members refuse to hide their differences like wearing her hijab while being an American citizen? A modern globalized society can no longer ignore the reality that our world IS diverse with peoples, customs, values, and ideas. The question left us is “how might WE engage in differences after recognizing them?”

I once saw the poignant illustrations by Alexandra Dal, a cartoonist based in San Antonio, Texas. Her panel of illustrations shows how people of color encounter daily conversations triggered by their difference. A simple question of “Do you have kids?” may be asked of a white woman while for a brown or black woman she may get a question like “how many kids do you have?

After the 2016 presidential election there was a surge of attack on people that are different. The F.B.I. recorded that 59 percent of the hate crimes were based on the victim's minority identity, such as race, ethnicity, or ancestry. (NY Times, 2016, 11/15).

SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER: Mark Protoc is a senior fellow with the Southern Poverty Law Center. The SPLC has been tracking this increase in hate crimes and he says they are targeting minority groups. MARK PROTOC (audio clip): "Muslims, primarily, but also black people, Jewish people, gay people, Latino people. It has really been something."

HSIN-I CHENG: Refusing to see that people of color live in a different reality in the U.S. society is no longer an option. So is asking people to erase parts of their identity by melting into the Anglo-Saxon pot. It is time for us to practice compassionate curiosity so that we recognize that being different is both a universal and unique experience. In seeing one another's differences and similarities, we can then coexist and rely on each other in the common territory. Next time when we notice difference in others whether it is their race, ethnicity, accent, or cultural traditions, let's think of our assumptions first and begin a conversation to learn how they experience the SAME world that WE live in.

Who knows, it may turn out that we share more similarities. And even if we are very different from each other, we'll get to learn experiences that we had not have. The 19th century English writer Charles Colton reminded us, "We hate some persons because we do not know them, and then we will not know them because we hate them." While difference may not invoke hate in us, it may generate fear in many. That fear may lead to questions that result in others' silence like the Taiwanese immigrant women spoke about.

How might we build solidarity when certain members in the society feel silenced? How might our society achieve "a cultural solidarity, sufficient at least to sustain a national existence" as Robert Park had envisioned, without demanding differences to be erased? Whose responsibility is it to build such sufficient solidarity? Perhaps the first step is to reach out to those who are different from us by asking thoughtful questions. Instead of "Where are you from?" may be we ask "Where is home?" to allow for conversations to deepen so that we do not suspend the possibility for our coexistence. With us learning answers to compassionate questions, we may be able to truly understand differences in another human being, and discover that there is a common good

in our common home.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Professor Hsin-I Cheng for her contribution today.

Coming up next week is Tony Hazard, assistant professor in the Ethnic Studies department at Santa Clara, who will explore the construction of race and the ways in which racism and anti-racism have defined national identity from World War II through the Obama and Trump presidencies.

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Sources:

- Robert Park's quotes were read by Todd Hicks
- Excerpt from Joan's interview was read by Shirley Okumua
- Excerpt from Joy's interview was read by Nancy Barr
- Excerpt from Li-Chuan's interview was read by Wendy Mathias
- AlabamaNews.net, SPLC: Increase in Hate Crimes Post-Election (2016), available at: http://www.alabamanews.net/2016/11/15/splc-increase-hate-crimes-post-election/