

## Chapter 1

# THE CONTEXT OF ASIAN AMERICAN THEOLOGY

### **TWO DIMENSIONS OF THE ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE**

There was no particular problem with my life in the United States when I thought of myself as a foreign student from Korea. All I had to do was study hard and get good grades. But when I began teaching in a small town in the Midwest with the prospect of living my entire life there, something disturbing began to emerge in my consciousness. However long I stayed in this country, I seemed to remain a stranger, an alien. People kept asking me, “Where are you from?” After fifty-three years in this country, they still ask me, “Where are you from?” And “Princeton, New Jersey” is hardly ever the correct answer to those who ask the question. Several times each and every day, someone reminds me that I do not belong here.

In the late 1960s I heard a Korean American sociologist present a paper at a conference on the Korean immigrant experience in the United States. He said that “marginality” is the term and concept that sociologists use to describe the social predicament especially of nonwhite minority peoples in this country. “I am a ‘marginal’ person,” I said to myself. I felt rather discouraged by the word but at the

same time experienced a strange kind of exhilaration from finding out a definite name for my situation in American society.

From the first time I learned of the concept of “marginality,” however, I felt this concept, like my own experience of being a “stranger,” ambiguously combined two elements of nonwhite people’s experience in this country, one at least potentially positive, the other negative. In the preface I described the positive element of marginality as being a potentially creative condition and the negative element as being excluded by the dominant group. Everett V. Stonequist, who further developed sociologist Robert E. Park’s idea of “the marginal man [*sic*],” explains these two elements in more detail. A marginal person, according to Stonequist, “is poised in psychological uncertainty *between two (or more) social worlds*; reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds, one of which is often ‘*dominant over the other*.’”<sup>1</sup> Such a person “emulates and strives to be accepted by a group of which he is not yet, or *is only peripherally a member*.”<sup>2</sup> Stonequist states that marginality thus refers to the space “between two (or more) social worlds,” and the world in which a person is marginalized is “dominant” over that person’s original world.

Stonequist also noted the inherent creativity of a marginal situation as follows:

The marginal man [*sic*] is the key-personality in the contacts of cultures. It is in his mind that the cultures come together, conflict, and eventually work out some kind of mutual adjustment and interpenetration. He is the crucible of cultural fusion. . . . Thus the practical efforts of the marginal person to solve his own problem lead him consciously or unconsciously to change the situation itself. His interest may shift from himself to the objective social conditions and launch him upon the career of a nationalist, conciliator, interpreter, reformer, or teacher.<sup>3</sup>

H. F. Dickie-Clark, who has paid particular attention to the role of dominant groups in causing the marginalization of minority groups, clearly analyzes the negative nature of such exclusion. According to Dickie-Clark, marginality results from a hierarchical relationship of groups in which “a resistance is offered by members of the non-marginal and dominant group, to his [the marginal person’s] entry into the group and the enjoyment of its privileges.” Moreover, a “barrier [is] set up by that group, that an individual in a marginal situation who possesses characteristics (those gained through acculturation) which would ‘ordinarily’ give him [*sic*] a higher status, is not granted that status.” What makes a situation marginal, in other words, “lies in inconsistencies between rankings.” And such inconsistencies brought about by a higher and more powerful group deny “the enjoyment by an inferior one, of their powers, privileges and opportunities.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, Dickie-Clark’s discussion helps to bring out clearly the fact that marginality is a condition affected by both status and power issues. The minority groups do not simply find themselves at the edges of their society; they are marginalized to be there.

Marginality is a spatial metaphor. To this metaphor must be added the power dynamic of the dominant group’s act of marginalizing certain groups of people if one is to have an adequate picture of the predicament of Asian Americans as a people at the margins. Like other nonwhite minority groups in America, Asian Americans are not just in an “in-between” or peripheral predicament but are pushed to be there and forced to remain there by dominant power structures.

Vietnamese American theologian Peter C. Phan describes the spatial, political, and cultural dimensions of the negative aspects of being in-between as follows:

To be betwixt and between is to be neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that. Spatially, it is to dwell at the periphery or at the boundaries. Politically, it means not residing at the centers of power of the two intersecting worlds

but occupying the precarious and narrow margins where the two dominant groups meet and clash, and [being] denied the opportunity to wield powers in matters of a minority, a member of a marginal(ized) group. Culturally, it means not fully integrated into and accepted by either cultural system, being *mestizo*, a person of mixed race.

Lifting up the positive dimension of Asian Americans' predicament, Phan further writes:

Being neither this nor that allows one to be both this and that. Belonging to both worlds and cultures, marginal(ized) persons have the opportunity to fuse them together and, out of their respective resources, fashion a new, different world, so that persons at the margins stand not only between these worlds and cultures but also *beyond* them. Thus being betwixt and between can bring about personal and social transformation and enrichment.<sup>5</sup>

Besides Phan, a significant number of Asian American scholars and writers have described the Asian Americans' situation in the United States as one of "in-between-ness" or being at the "margin" or periphery and also of being pushed or marginalized into the space of margin or periphery.<sup>6</sup>

As noted above, I use in this book two different terms to refer to these two elements in marginality. Marginality as the result of *marginalization* is the powerless and demoralizing space into which Asian Americans are pushed into by racism in American society. I shall use anthropologist Victor Turner's term *liminality* (*limen* the Latin word for "threshold") to refer to the positive, creative nature of the in-betweenness in marginality.

A person can enter into a liminal or in-between space without being marginalized, while marginalization (being pushed into the periphery) inevitably places a person in a liminal, peripheral, and in-between place. Liminality does not have to be marginality. But marginality includes a

liminal aspect. When persons, like Asian Americans, are pushed to the liminal and peripheral places by two worlds (Asia and America), their liminality means their being in the space between two worlds and at the same time at the peripheries, edges, or margins of both worlds. Asian Americans find themselves not fully accepted by, or fully belonging to, either the American world or the Asian. White Americans who are marginalized to the periphery of American society are at the edge or margin of that society only, but not between two worlds.

By making a distinction between liminality and marginalization, we avoid the danger of romanticizing marginality. Marginalization is dehumanizing and oppressive. And the space of marginality as the space into which a minority group is marginalized is a space of dehumanization, and there is nothing good in it. The liminal space that also results from marginalization, however, has the potential of being used as a creative space of resistance and solidarity. Marginalizing space and liminal space overlap. bell hooks, an African American womanist theorist, explains, “I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as the site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility.”<sup>7</sup> I choose to call hooks’s second marginality “liminality.”

## LIMINALITY AND ITS CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES

Victor Turner developed Arnold van Gennep’s theory of the rites of passage into a general theory of social change. Like the rites of passage, according to Turner, social change involves three stages: (1) the first stage of *separation* (the departure from social structure, especially social status and social role); (2) the middle stage of *liminality* in which a person is neither one thing nor another but betwixt and between; and (3) the final state of *reaggregation* or *reincorporation* into structure with a new identity or with a new perspective on the existing structure.<sup>8</sup>

For Turner, liminality is a space where a person is freed up from the usual ways of thinking and acting and is therefore open to radically new ideas. Freed from structure, persons in liminality are also available to a genuine communion (*communitas*) with others. Liminal space is also where a person can become acutely aware of the problems of the existing structure. A person in a liminal space, therefore, often reenters social structure with alternative ideas of human relatedness and also with a desire to reform the existing social structure.

According to Turner, human beings cannot exist in liminality for an indefinite period. They have to enter some structure, at least for survival as human beings. Thus, social change involves a dialectic movement between liminality/*communitas* and structure. Without occasional immersion into liminality/*communitas*, society becomes static.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of the three phases of rites of passage, Asian Americans, or their parents or grandparents, left their original homeland and have been in the liminal or in-between phase, but have not been able to be “reincorporated” into the American structure. Cultural assimilation (being able to live and work) in this country is possible. But for Asian Americans, like other nonwhite minority groups, social or structural assimilation (becoming “one of us” with the members of the dominant group) does not occur.<sup>10</sup> So Asian Americans are still in the wilderness of in-between “limbo,” not being able to be reincorporated fully into a social structure.<sup>11</sup> To a limited degree, Asian Americans do enter American structure. They use the roads, shop at the supermarket, and conduct businesses. But their life in American structure involves only what sociologists call “secondary relationships,” not “primary relationships,” with the dominant white population.<sup>12</sup> There is still no meaningful social integration.

Asian Americans have only one foot in the heart of America. At best we are still dangling at the doorstep of their newly adopted country. Many Asian American individuals have important positions deep in the American structure, but only occupationally and not sociopolitically.

They, like other Asian Americans, are still in the wilderness of liminal in-betweenness, making regular visits to their workplaces, but without enjoying genuine human contact.

Those Asian Americans who were born in the United States have only this country as their home. But at some point in their early youth, they discover that white Americans do not consider them as “one of us.” They find themselves “strangers” in their own homeland. They find themselves socially located at the periphery of American society and also in the liminal space of betweenness—between their birth place, America, and the their place of “origin,” Asia. They are liminal or “out of structure,” both in the sense of not fully belonging to America and also in the sense of not belonging to their ancestral place back in Asia. They are at the edge of America, and also between America and Asia. They are liminal in more ways than one.

What, according to Victor Turner, are the creative potentialities of the liminal space? Turner does not make a list of these creative potentialities of liminality, but we can find the following three elements in his discussions of liminality:<sup>13</sup>

1. *Openness to the new.* The revitalization of a society, according to Turner, involves a dialectical movement between structure and antistructure. The antistructure is experienced as a transitional condition wherein certain individuals have left behind them the social structures (such as social roles, statutes, etc.) and entered a condition from which they can return to revitalize said structures. The condition of being freed from social structure, according to Turner, is the liminal situation of being in a “temporary antinomic liberation from behavioral norms and cognitive rules.” It is a kind of social limbo or the predicament of not being at a fixed place but, rather, “betwixt and between.”<sup>14</sup> And, for Turner, it is in this liminal experience that something new in a society can emerge. Liminality is the realm of possibility where the factors of culture may be put into “free

and ‘ludic’ recombination in any and every possible pattern.”<sup>15</sup> The old social category no longer holds, and the new one is not yet applicable. Being neither “this” nor “that,” those in a liminal condition are not obligated to perform the usual social duties expected of occupants of a particular status or social identity. Liminality is society’s “subjunctive mood, where suppositions, desires and hypotheses, possibilities and so forth, all become legitimate.”<sup>16</sup>

Liminality is an openness and potentiality for what is new and different. According to Turner, liminality creates a framework within which participants can experiment with the familiar elements of normative social life, reconfiguring them in novel ways and discovering new arrangements and possibilities. Persons in a liminal situation are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial.”<sup>17</sup>

Theorists of change process also talk about the discomfiting but necessary and creative stages in any transitional process. All changes have a departure, an in-between place of neutrality, and a reaggregation or new beginning. The neutral period of transition from the old to the new is a frightening period because the guidance and validation by the old situation have been left behind and the future is yet indeterminate. It is a chaotic period. But as William Bridges points out, this “chaos is not a mess, but rather is the primal state of pure energy to which the person returns for every true new beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

2. *The emergence of communitas.* According to Turner, liminality is not only an openness for society’s new possibilities but is also conducive to genuine human community. Turner uses the Latin term *communitas* to distinguish the spontaneous, egalitarian, and direct modality of human relationship from “an area of common living.”<sup>19</sup> It is when individuals have set aside social roles and status that they can experience a mode of



relationship in which people “confront one another not as role players but as ‘human totals,’ integral beings who recognizably share the same humanity.”<sup>20</sup> *Communitas* is “a generic bond underlying or transcending all particular cultural definitions and normative ordering of social ties.”<sup>21</sup> *Communitas* is “men [*sic*] in their wholeness wholly attending.”<sup>22</sup> Such a genuine human communion, in other words, cannot be programmed or manufactured through structure, but spontaneously emerges precisely when programs and structure are left behind and when individuals are freed to relate to one another completely on an egalitarian ground. So for Turner, “communitas breaks in through the interstices of structure, in liminality; and at the edges of structure, in marginality; and from beneath structure, in inferiority.”<sup>23</sup>

*Communitas*, according to Turner, cannot stand alone, however. “The immediacy of communitas gives way to the mediacy of structure” because structure is necessary “if the material and organizational needs of human beings are to be adequately met.”<sup>24</sup> But at the same time, structure without egalitarian values of *communitas* becomes inhospitable to human beings. Turner assumes here that *communitas* as a communion of human beings as equals is an essential human need, an “indispensable human social requirement.”<sup>25</sup> For a society to function properly, according to Turner, the experience of *communitas* must infuse structure with antistructural values and in so doing transform everyday social structures.<sup>26</sup>

3. *The creative space for prophetic knowledge and action.* Liminality is conducive to an openness to the new and also to *communitas*. Now we turn to what liminality is capable of vis-à-vis the structure and the center. To be in between and at the edge is to attain a distance from structure and the center. In liminality, there is not only a kind of freedom to be, think, and act in a way not quite “allowed” in the structure or the center but also

a freedom to be critical of the structure and the center both negatively and constructively. Liminality is the creative space where one has the freedom to break down the status quo and also the freedom to rebuild it in a different way.

On the “negative” side, liminality is the space where a critical knowledge of the existing structure is possible. For Turner, the openness for the new that is possible in liminality is inherently an openness to a knowledge of what is problematic with the status quo—that is, an openness to be critical of the way things are in the structure and at the center. Liminality is a space where persons can “‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them.” “Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, “liminality . . . raises basic problems for social structural man [*sic*]” because it “invites him [*sic*] to speculation and criticism.”<sup>28</sup> In short, from the point of view of social structure, liminality is “essentially ambiguous, unsettled . . . unsettling,” and consequently, “subversive.”<sup>29</sup> As Bobby Alexander paraphrases Turner, liminality’s “‘subjunctivity’ or ‘potentiality’ stands in conflict with social structure, then, since the alternatives it offers stand opposed to structure, which consists of social boundaries.”<sup>30</sup>

It is important to stress that for Turner liminality not only provides the capacity to be critical and subversive about what is wrong with the structure and the center but also generates a “positive” and transformative capacity. The antistructure of liminality generates new ideas and new models for society.<sup>31</sup> Turner writes:

These liminal areas of time and space—rituals, carnivals, dramas, and latterly films—are open to the play of thought, feeling, and will; in them are generated new models, often fantastic, some of which may have sufficient power and plausibility to replace eventually the force-backed political and jural models that control the centers of a society’s ongoing life.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, liminality's creative potential consists in its capacity (1) to be open to what is new, (2) to generate *communitas* as the alternative human relatedness, and (3) to challenge and transform the existing society by prophetic and subversive knowledge and criticism, envisioning and enacting new ideas and models.

As I noted earlier, the creativity of liminality does not exist in its pure form in the case of Asian Americans. Asian Americans' liminality exists within the condition of marginalization. Their liminal creativity is therefore suppressed, frustrated, and distorted. Under the condition of dehumanizing marginalization, Asian Americans' liminal creativity cannot be exercised. It may also be expressed in distorted ways. Asian Americans' excessive zeal to send their children to prestigious universities and colleges and their self-sacrificing pursuit after the materialistically interpreted "American Dream" may be examples of the distorted expressions of the creative energies inherent in their liminality. Marginalization therefore deprives Asian Americans of their particular vocation of exercising their liminal creativity for the betterment of American society.

How can Asian Americans attain the moral and spiritual power to withstand the destructive consequences of marginalization and become able to exercise their liminal creativity in authentic ways? What values should guide the exercise of their liminal creativity? I present a Christian theological outlook in this book that is intended to respond to these and other related questions.

Having discussed the liminal nature of the Asian American experience, I next turn to the Asian American experience of being marginalized.

## **THE MARGINALIZATION OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

People are dehumanized and oppressed in many different ways, and the determinative factors vary: for example, race, ethnicity, culture,

gender, age, education, economic class, job, and so forth. White American people with low income would be dehumanized economically with consequences in some other areas of their lives. White American women are dehumanized by sexism. But neither low-income white Americans nor white American women are alienated on the basis of their skin color, their race. For Asian Americans, race appears to be the all-important factor for their marginalization. However, the general impression in the mind of the American public at large and even in the minds of many Asian Americans is that white racism against Asian Americans does not exist. Especially after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many believe racism is a thing of the past or at least on the wane.

Anecdotal reports and scholarly studies, however, indicate that Asian Americans experience serious racist discrimination. Racism against Asian Americans is individual, institutional, and cultural. Racism is bigger than individuals. When I meet and converse with a white individual in a one-to-one situation, I usually have a fine time and I usually do not find the wall of racism blocking our interaction. But as soon as another white person who is known both to me and my white conversation partner enters our discourse, the white persons will start talking to each other as if totally oblivious to my presence. Every time this happens, white individuals appear to be under the demands of some power greater than they. Racism is a part of the American culture in which white individuals live. When two or more white individuals are together, the racist culture takes over, and white individuals ineluctably and thoughtlessly act according to the cues from that culture.

Racism is bigger than white individuals also in that racism is institutional and systematic. Racial profiling by police is a well-known fact. Institutions of higher learning recruit minority students with the presumed aim of making their campuses more diverse and inclusive. But the curricula of those schools never include an adequate number of courses that are designed to meet the needs of racial ethnic minority

students. Many institutions of higher learning also adopt and advertise “diversity” as their goal in faculty hiring. However, unless their image of “excellence” as a “Euro-American scholar well recognized by other Euro-American scholars and their guilds” is modified, the goal of diversity will end up only as a slogan and window dressing.

Institutional racism in the American justice system is well known. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a Washington, D.C.-based civil rights coalition, issued a report in 2000 entitled “Justice on Trial: Racial Disparities in the American Criminal Justice System.” Among the statistics included in the report is the fact that blacks who kill whites are sentenced to death twenty-two times more frequently than blacks who kill blacks and seven times more frequently than whites who kill blacks. The report also notes that a black youth is six times more likely to be locked up than a white youth, even when charged with a similar crime and when neither has a prior record.<sup>33</sup>

But individual acts of discrimination, though isolated and subtle, are not to be ignored. Scholars studying anti-Asian American racism recently have begun to pay particular attention to the isolated and subtle individual acts of discrimination against Asian Americans as having a most serious impact upon the psychological and physical health of the victims. The first large-scale study of the effects of racism on Asian Americans, entitled “A Nationwide Study of Discrimination and Chronic Health Conditions Among Asian Americans,” appeared in the July 2007 issue of *American Journal of Public Health*. This study of a nationally representative sample of Asian Americans found that “the accumulation of tolls related to discrimination on an everyday basis may contribute to allostatic load (the ‘wear and tear’ of body systems resulting from an accumulation of stressors over time), erode protective resources such as wealth and social support, and lead to chronic health conditions.”<sup>34</sup> More specifically, prolonged exposure to discrimination is a contributing factor to heart disease, pain, respiratory illnesses, and other chronic health conditions.

## The Reasons for the Invisibility of Anti-Asian American Racism

The impact of the subtle individual acts of discrimination upon Asian Americans has much to do with the reasons why anti-Asian American racism has thus far been so difficult to talk about. One reason has to do with the myth of Asian Americans as the so-called model minority. This myth, disseminated widely by the mass media, holds that the economic and educational successes of many Asian immigrants prove that they are not really discriminated against and that America is still a land of opportunity. The “model minority” idea has many problems. It draws people’s attention to those Asian American young people who have gone to Ivy League schools and to the success of some Asian immigrant small-business establishments. What it ignores, however, are such realities as the heavy involvement of multiple family members in these Asian immigrant small businesses (which often includes a punishing fourteen- to sixteen-hour workday), which makes their per capita income much lower than that of white laborers. The concept also ignores many Asian immigrant youth who experience severe psychological problems in coping with their deeply alienated predicament. It has been further pointed out that the concept of “model minority” only serves a racist political function. Sociologists Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim list the following practical functions of the “model minority” idea:

- (1) exclusion of Asian Americans from social programs supported by public and private agencies (benefit-denying/fund-saving function);
- (2) disguise of Asian Americans’ underemployment (institutional racism promoting function);
- (3) justification of the American open social system (system preserving function);
- (4) displacement of the system’s fault to less-achieving minorities (victim blaming function); and
- (5) anti-Asian sentiment and activities (resentment reinforcing function).<sup>35</sup>

In short, the myth of “model minority” only serves, as Wesley Woo has pointed out, to maintain the racist status quo and “mask the real issue—that Asians, like other people of color, are victims of institutional racism.”<sup>36</sup>

Another reason it is sometimes hard to talk about racism against Asian Americans is the present-day American situation of the white-black paradigm in the common discourse—a discourse in which the experiences of Asian Americans as a “middle minority,” a buffer people between the whites and the blacks, are often trivialized and dismissed. Gary Y. Okihiro explains:

That marginalization of Asians, in fact, within a black and white racial formation, “disciplines” both Asian Americans and Asians and constitutes the essential site of Asian American oppression. By seeing only black and white, the presence and absence of all color, whites render Asians, American Indians, and Latinos invisible, ignoring the gradations and complexities of the full spectrum between the racial poles.<sup>37</sup>

In this situation, you are either black or white. Asian Americans are often perceived, especially by blacks, as a people who want to be white. If Asian Americans cry racism, they are considered hypersensitive. This predicament has led Elaine H. Kim of the University of California, Berkeley, to call for the creation of a “third space”—the space where Asian Americans can have their experiences recognized for what they are without being dismissed via the white/black dichotomy.<sup>38</sup> In any case, it is necessary that Asian Americans assert both the validity of their own experiences as Asian Americans and their sense of solidarity with blacks and other minority groups.

The third reason for the invisibility of anti-Asian American racism sometimes stems from Asian Americans themselves. For one thing, the awareness of white racism requires that nonwhite people, at least

to some degree, adopt the white American society as their reference group—that is, the group which they, at least to some degree, would like to join. For Asian Americans who do not consider white America their world (as is the case for many recent arrivals) or who for whatever reason choose to confine their lives mostly to their ethnic enclaves, white people's attitudes are typically insignificant. These Asian Americans are still objectively marginal in American society, but they would not have the subjective or personal awareness of their marginality. They may be aware of racism in this county, but it is not much of a personal problem.<sup>39</sup>

There are also Asian Americans who take up an extreme assimilationist perspective and try to ignore the white racism they encounter. Some may even accept racism as a price they are willing to pay for access to the American Dream. For these and possibly other reasons, anti-Asian American white racism is often dismissed as the result of hypersensitivity or even as something amusing.

Still another reason why anti-Asian American racism is not taken seriously is that incidents of anti-Asian American discrimination are usually thought of as “isolated discrimination.” “Isolated discrimination” is defined as “harmful action taken intentionally by a member of a dominant group against members of a subordinate racial or ethnic group without being socially embedded in the larger organizational or community context.”<sup>40</sup> Isolated discrimination is then distinguished from such large-scale and organized acts of discrimination as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, and the internment of Japanese and Japanese American citizens in 1942. “Isolated discrimination,” then, is taken to be “isolated incidents” and therefore not really significant. But are the incidents of isolated discrimination really so isolated and thus not really significant? Personally, when I have encountered such isolated incidents of discrimination, I could not dismiss them as unimportant.

Here are some samples of isolated racist incidents.



- I go to a shopping center to buy perfume for my wife for Christmas. I patiently stand at the counter and wait for one of the salespersons to become available. Then a white woman walks up to the counter. The salesperson, who knows very well how long I have been standing there, ignores me and waits on the white lady first.
- One or two white friends and I walk into a store because I need to purchase something. I ask the person at the counter if the store has the item. The salesperson will usually look to my two white friends to give the answer and never look at me.
- I walk into a flower shop. Two white men sitting on the front steps greet me, “Hey, Boy!”
- At the airport, I stand in line to check in at the “Premier Members” counter. (For some years I used to fly a lot and had a “Premier Executive” membership with one of the airlines.) A white lady in line behind me taps on my shoulder and says, “Are you sure you are in the right line? This is for Premier Members only!”

I could go on and on, but I am beginning to feel “cheap” writing down these stories. My feeling cheap, however, is a symptom of the fact that I have for so long repressed and internalized these insults, telling myself that a “big person” (a minister and a professor) like me should not make a big deal out of these little things and instead take the “high road.” But those “little” incidents of insults occur sometimes more than once a day, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, decade after decade.

These isolated incidents are not isolated in their impact upon the victim. Writing about the isolated incidents of racism to which African Americans are subjected, sociologist Joe Feagin points out that when those acts “accumulate over months, years, and lifetimes, the impact on a black person is far more than the sum of the individual instances.” They add up, in other words, in terms of the amount of humiliation

and anger. History cannot be dismissed. Feagin observes: “Particular acts, even anti-locution that might seem minor to white observers, are freighted not only with one’s past experience of discrimination but also with centuries of racial discrimination directed at the entire group, vicarious oppression that still includes racially translated violence and denial of access to the American Dream.”<sup>41</sup>

### The Significance of the “Subtle Discrimination” against Asian Americans

Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the incidents of blatant, overt, and intentional incidents of racial discrimination have certainly decreased. Studies show, however, that racism still persists in this country. According to many scholars, racism has only “evolved into more subtle, ambiguous, and unintentional manifestations.” The “‘old fashioned’ type where racial hatred was overt, direct, and often intentional, has increasingly morphed into a contemporary form that is subtle, indirect, and often disguised.”<sup>42</sup> The subtle discrimination is not an incidental matter. And racism affects Asian Americans primarily in this subtle form of discrimination.

This “new” manifestation of racism is called by scholars “racial microaggressions,” and has been likened to carbon monoxide, “invisible, but potentially lethal.”<sup>43</sup> They are often overlooked and unacknowledged,” but prolonged subjection to them, as noted earlier, can lead to serious chronic health problems. Racial microaggressions have been defined as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights that potentially have harmful or unpleasant psychological impact on the target person or group.”<sup>44</sup> Derald Wing Sue points out that “this contemporary form of racism is many times over more problematic, damaging and injurious to persons of color than overt racist acts.”<sup>45</sup> Here are some themes that run through racist microaggressive acts.<sup>46</sup>

- *Theme 1: Alien in One's Own Land.* The typical examples are questions or remarks like, "Where are you from?" or "You speak English so well." The questioner or speaker might not have intended any harm at all, but what Asian Americans "hear" is that they do not belong and are not "real" Americans even though they might have been born here.
- *Theme 2: Ascription of Intelligence.* Many participants in this study describe their teachers and fellow students making statements such as "You are really good at math" and "You people always do well in school." The conscious intent of these statements might have been to compliment Asian Americans. But Asian Americans reported feeling pressured and trapped to conform to a stereotype they had nothing to do with.
- *Theme 3: Denial or Racial Reality.* Asian American participants reported some white persons saying to them, "Asians are the new whites." Statements such as this have the effect of denying Asian Americans' experiential reality of bias and discrimination.
- *Theme 4: Exoticization of Asian American Women.* One Chinese American woman participant in the study reported, "White men believe that Asian women are great girlfriends, wait hand and foot on men, and don't back-talk or give them shit and that Asian women have beautiful skin and are just sexy and have silky hair." Other Asian American women in the study reported similar experiences. Again, the white American men might have meant to praise Asian American women, but the women felt that they were "needed for the physical needs of white men and nothing more," and that they were considered only as "passive companions to white men."
- *Theme 5: Invalidation of Interethnic Differences.* Asian Americans often are asked, "Are you a Chinese?" Their new white acquaintances often make statements such as, "Oh, my

ex-girlfriend was a Chinese,” “My roommate in college was a Japanese,” and the like. The intent of those who make such remarks might have been to indicate that they are familiar with Asians, but the message received is that all Asians are either Chinese or Japanese, and that most Asians are familiar with each other.

- *Theme 6: Pathologizing Cultural Values/Communication Styles.* In academic classes, verbal participation is usually taken to mean a higher intelligence and ability. Some Asian American students are under the traditional Asian cultural tradition that values silence, and they are penalized for their cultural values.
- *Theme 7: Second-Class Citizenship.* A typical story involves a Korean American woman participant in the study, who spoke of dining with white friends. Although she frequently orders the wine, it is usually her friends who are asked to taste and approve the wine selection. She then feels snubbed and ignored. When Asian Americans enter a white-owned restaurant, they are often taken to a table at the back of the restaurant, even when there are many more “desirable” tables available. The message is that the restaurant is not pleased to have them as customers.
- *Theme 8: Invisibility.* Many participants reported that especially when racism is discussed, they are usually ignored. One Chinese American woman who participated in the study stated that “Some times I feel like there is a lot of talk about black and white, and there is a high Asian population here and where do we fit into that?” When racism is discussed Asian Americans are often thought of as whites, as having no experience of racism, or are simply ignored.

In addition to these themes of subtle racism identified in the study of Sue and his colleagues, social activist Gloria Yamato has instructively identified other kinds of racism experienced by Asian Americans.<sup>47</sup>

She categorizes white racism into four types: (1) aware/ blatant racism, (2) aware/covert racism, (3) unaware/unintentional racism, and (4) unaware/self-righteous racism.

1. *Aware/Blatant Racism.* Yamato reports that she heard it said that “the aware/blatant is preferable if one must suffer,” because one can try to get out of the way before getting hurt.
2. *Aware/Covert Racism.* Apartments are suddenly no longer vacant or rents suddenly go outrageously high when persons of color inquire about them. Job vacancies are suddenly filled and persons of color are fired for vague reasons.
3. *Unaware/Unintentional Racism.* When you say something to a white person with a clear voice and perfect pronunciation of the words, she or he will often respond, “What?” It is quite clear that the white person simply assumed that this nonwhite person could not speak English very well, and that with that presumption the person did not really listen or hear. When white people talk to nonwhite persons, they will often speak at a higher pitch than they normally speak, again assuming that the nonwhite person would not understand English very well.
4. *Unaware/Self-Righteous Racism.* White persons sometimes expect and demand that a Japanese be “more Japanese” than he or she is. Many years ago, my wife and I invited an acquaintance to a dinner. We wanted to give her the best dinner we could possibly prepare. So we served a beautiful piece of broiled steak with potato and everything else that goes with it. Although she seemed to enjoy every piece of the meat (including the fat along the edge), she was extremely unhappy, saying, “You should have prepared a Korean meal!” She appeared unhappy and disappointed throughout the visit. We felt she would not allow us to be “American.” We felt she was thoroughly offended by our trying to be “American.”

## THE DUAL LIMINALITY AND MARGINALIZATION OF ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Asian American women face a dual or double marginalization and also a dual liminality. Asian American women, just as Asian American men, experience the in-betweenness of not really belonging to either the American society in which they live or their original home in Asia that they left behind years ago. Asian American women are liminal in their social location.

The in-betweenness of Korean women's identity living in the United States is one of the themes of Teresa Hak Kyung Cha's highly creative and complex literary work, *Dictée*. Commenting on *Dictée*, literary critic Elaine Kim writes:

*Dictée* is in many ways a contradictory text, its paradoxes rooted in Cha's location in the interstitial outlaw spaces between Korea and America, north and south, inside and outside, and between the world of Western artist and the specific Korean nationalist impulses she inherited from her mother. But although she focuses on the "in-between"—the cracks, crevices, fissures, and seams that, when revealed, challenge hypnotic illusions of seamless reality—Cha insists on the specificity of her Korean American identity. For her, the in-between is a personal dwelling place that makes survival possible, and to ignore the importance of her Korean American identity is to deny that existence and self-hood. In this open space of liminality, Cha engages in the activity of retrieving from the past songs that were once forbidden and also registers resistance to the official accounts of the past written by the dominating powers as she strives to work out an authentic though indeterminate self.<sup>48</sup>

Many Asian American women experience liminality of another sort—the wilderness they enter when they reject the patriarchal sexism in which they lived according to the rules and roles that men had

determined. It has been reported that many Asian American women feel freed and liberated from the patriarchal family system back home when they come to the United States. This awareness that women could live a liberated life has tended to encourage some of them to reject the sexism in their family or in church life here in their newly adopted country. Women writers have described the vacuum or a world without fixed norms and rules that they face as they leave behind the male-dominated way of life. Speaking autobiographically about the process of her “becoming woman,” Penelope Washburn writes:

A young woman must reject her mother’s definition of female identity in order to allow herself the possibility of formulating a sense of personal identity. Until she rejects it, she will be unable to accept those aspects of her mother and her mother’s interpretation of sexuality that are part of herself and to integrate them into a new personal value system. . . . The young woman experiences ambiguity concerning leaving home, for leaving home implies loneliness, risk, and taking responsibility for oneself and one’s body. Separation from the secure worldview makes one vulnerable and confused about how to make choices, what to do, what paths to follow, and which relationships to pursue.<sup>49</sup>

For women to come out of this personal crisis “graciously,” according to Washburn, is to gain “a new faith, a new value structure, and a new sense of personal identity.” The time of ambiguity and vulnerability that Washburn speaks about is a time of liminality, an experience necessary for change.

Carol Christ finds in many women writers the theme of women’s spiritual quest involving an “experience of nothingness.” Christ writes,

Experiencing nothingness, women reject conventional solutions and question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of deeper sources of power and value. The experience of nothingness often precedes

an awakening, similar to a conversion experience, in which the powers of being are revealed. A woman's awakening to great powers grounds her in a new sense of self and a new orientation in the world. Through awakening to new powers, women overcome self-negation and self-hatred and refuse to be victims.<sup>50</sup>

Like liminality, the experience of nothingness that Christ speaks about is an experience of having left the way things have always been and of being open to radically new possibilities. Asian American women who reject the male-dominated world first enter such a world of nothingness in which the old ways of thinking dissipate and new ways of thinking have to be constructed.

Rita Nakashima Brock, speaking as an Asian American woman, prefers the term *interstices* to either liminality or marginality and describes with a great depth and breadth what she considers to be not only the Asian American women's experience but the experience of both Asian American women and men. Brock writes, "Asian Pacific Americans participate in a variety of worlds. . . . Interstitial refers to the places in between, which are real places, like the strong connective tissue between organs in the body that link the parts."<sup>51</sup> It is Brock's conviction that an authentic and constructive existence for Asian American women and men calls for what she calls "interstitial integrity." To be authentically Asian American, in other words, means to face with honesty and courage the reality of our interstitiality and live out the possibilities inherent in that predicament.

For Brock, interstitiality points to the Asian American experience, which not only includes a relationship to the hegemony of the dominant culture but is the whole of it. The term *interstitiality*, Brock points out, better describes "the complexities of spiritual journeys of APA [Asian Pacific American] women."<sup>52</sup> In her articulation of the "interstitiality" of the Asian American experience, Brock correctly points out the multifaceted, multilayered nature of that experience. The concept of



liminality, as Turner develops it, is very similar to the basic character of interstitiality that Brock speaks about. Liminality does not primarily relate to the hegemony of the dominant culture but, rather, refers to the “in-betweenness,” the “fluidity,” and the “unfixedness” of interstitiality. To be liminal is to be out of structure. Therefore, I submit that liminality and interstitiality have to do with a similar situation. Brock’s discussion of interstitiality, however, effectively points out the depth and breadth of the fluidity, complexity, and multifaceted nature of Asian Americans’ liminal predicament. I shall return to Brock when I discuss Asian Americans’ identity.

Thus, Asian American women’s liminality is dual. They are liminal in that they are in a situation between two or more cultural and social worlds and also in that at least some of them experience liminality as they reject their previous lives under patriarchy. Asian American women’s liminality is therefore more intense and more bewildering than that experienced by Asian American men. Christian educator Inn Sook Lee reports in her study of over fifty Asian American women that they are all, without exception, aware of their marginalization in American society.<sup>53</sup>

Thus far we have discussed only the duality or doubleness of Asian American women’s liminality. It must be noted that their marginalization is also dual or triple. Asian American women, like Asian American men, are marginalized by white racism in this country. Inn Sook Lee has pointed out that constant racial teasing (e.g., being called “Chinks,” “slant-eyes,” etc.) to which Asian American school girls are subjected in schools can result in low self-esteem, negative body images, and eating disorders.<sup>54</sup> Asian American women live with the white American orientalist stereotypes of them as subservient, obedient, passive, hard working, and exotic. Sociologist and feminist scholar Esther Ngan-Ling Chow observes that “Asian American women themselves become convinced that they should behave in accordance with these stereotyped expectations.” Chow adds: “But if they act accordingly, they are then criticized for doing so, becoming victims of the stereotypes imposed by others.”<sup>55</sup>

Asian American women are intensely devoted to their families and churches even though these two institutions also marginalize and exploit them. In a land where Asian Americans are “perpetual foreigners,” their families are the primary sources of comfort and encouragement, and the families’ well-being or survival attains utmost importance. Asian American women are usually totally dedicated to their families, especially to the education of their children.

But the patriarchal, sexist culture still prevails in many Asian American households. The unbalanced workload Asian American women assume at work and at home is one of the indications of their subordination to men. According to studies by sociologists Kwang Chung Kim and Won Moo Hurh, over one-third of Korean immigrants in the Chicago area are owners of small, family-run businesses. The majority of the wives of Korean small-business owners work at the store in order to save on labor costs. According to Kim and Hurh’s study, the owners work on average 58.1 hours a week, and their wives work 56.6 hours a week.<sup>56</sup> That represents a full day’s work for every day of the week. On top of their work at the shop, the study reports that wives regularly take care of four out of the six primary household tasks. Husbands take care of the disposal of the garbage and the management of the family budget, while wives do the grocery shopping, housekeeping, laundry, and dishwashing. Children sometimes help their mothers, but the burden mainly falls on the wives. Kim and Hurh conclude, “This means that in addition to their full-time business involvement, most of the working wives perform the four items predominantly when they come home from work.”<sup>57</sup>

Much of any amount of time that might be left for Korean immigrant women is spent in fulfilling their responsibilities at their ethnic churches. In Korean immigrant churches, men hold the offices and make the official decisions while women stay in the kitchen preparing meals. Women are sometimes elected to hold offices but they have a difficult time exercising their gifts of leadership.

One woman at a Korean immigrant church was appointed by the session as the chair of a committee. She tells the story, however, of how the members of the committee (all male) always met without letting her know and made all the decisions without the presence of the female chairperson. What is astounding is not only what the male committee members did but also the fact that such illegal behavior and decision making by the men were not questioned but accepted by the church as a whole. The woman chairperson eventually submitted her resignation.<sup>58</sup>

What makes the situation more serious is the fact that many Korean immigrant women have felt liberated from the traditional rule that women should stay at home and have developed their personal gifts through higher education in this country. They naturally look for opportunities to serve the church in leadership positions. One highly educated Korean woman worked very hard in the kitchen and elsewhere in the church as opportunities were given her with the hope that she might eventually be elected to the eldership. Eventually the church did recognize her ability and contributions. But the church did this by electing not her, but her husband, to eldership. Her husband was also a very capable person but had not really worked as hard as his wife did. Highly educated women in Korean immigrant churches therefore look for opportunities outside the church to make leadership contributions.<sup>59</sup>

This is not to say that all the women in Korean immigrant churches are unhappy and frustrated. Many women who accept the very privatized, spiritualized, and depoliticized piety that characterizes many Korean immigrant churches experience a deep contentment and happiness by finding great spiritual tranquility in the church's religious life and by faithfully fulfilling their self-sacrificial duties to the family and the church. Ai Ra Kim, a Korean American clergywoman and church leader, points out that some Korean immigrant women are simply so fatigued from running a business, taking care of the family

(including her husband), and then working at the church that they just go along with the traditional ways of Korean culture and find absolutely no energy to question the church's dominant structures.<sup>60</sup>

In recent years, many English-speaking Korean American Christian congregations have emerged, often completely independent from the first-generation immigrant churches. In these highly American-acculturated congregations patriarchal sexism also prevails. Men usually hold the highest leadership positions and conduct the Bible studies. Sermons are almost always delivered by men. The second-generation women are usually highly educated. So they are keenly discouraged when they find themselves playing only subordinate roles in the church leadership. Peter Cha and Grace May, writing in a recent book, *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, tell the story of Christy, who after an extensive experience as a leader of a college campus ministry came back to her home church with the hope of launching a second-generation young adult ministry. To her great disappointment, the church leaders and members told her what she could and could not do as a woman. She was discouraged from leading a coed Bible study group, serving as a member of the praise team, and even teaching a Sunday school class. The only ministry opportunities that were available for her were in the nursery and the children's program. After much agonizing, Christy left her home church. Cha and May note that recent studies show that the strong ethos of gender hierarchy in the English-speaking congregations are "particularly offensive to second-generation women who are well-educated and have professional careers." "Many, like Christy," according to Cha and May, "may decide to leave their Asian congregations to find a church where they can fully exercise their gifts."<sup>61</sup>

## **THE STRANGERS FROM A DIFFERENT SHORE**

So, white racism functions as the barrier that pushes Asian Americans out of the center of American society and keeps them at the edges

of that society. Other factors also marginalize Asian Americans. For some, economic or educational factors may also make them marginal. Asian American women suffer from a double marginalization because of the sexism that exists both in the white American society and also within their own Asian American communities. Without diminishing the significance of these other determinants of Asian Americans' marginalization, it is still true, I believe, to say that white racism is the most universal determinant—a factor that applies to all Asian Americans' marginalization.

The racism barrier keeps Asian Americans from achieving what sociologists call “structural assimilation.” Most Asian immigrants have no problem in the area of “cultural assimilation”—the adoption of many of white America's cultural values and mores, and the attainment of sufficient linguistic and social skills to function in white American society. Those Asian Americans who are born here, of course, have all the cultural traits of their white American peers.

But “structural assimilation” is quite another matter. This kind of assimilation means Asian Americans' becoming truly “one of us” in white American society and having the same privileges and “life chances” as white people. But this does not happen to Asian Americans who, in the eyes of the dominant group, are never “one of us.” Recent studies of Korean immigrants in the Chicago and Los Angeles areas show that regardless of the length of their stay in this country, their educational levels, or their professional and economic attainments, “structural assimilation” does not really happen to them, and they tend to gravitate around their ethnic enclaves.<sup>62</sup> Some first-generation Korean immigrants' continuing problems with English and also their inevitable human tendency to cling to the comforts of their ethnic communities may also function to prevent “structural assimilation.” But the primary factor for Asian Americans' exclusion from the center of white society is the barriers set up by the white dominant group. I have heard so many stories of American-born second- or third-generation Korean American students on college and university campuses running into

white students and sometimes faculty who ask them with surprise, “How come you speak English so well?” In other words, race “sticks” for us Asian Americans. Korean American sociologist Won Moo Hurh concludes:

Non-white immigrants may attain a high degree of cultural assimilation (adoption of American life-style), but structural assimilation (equal life-chances) is virtually impossible unless the immutable independent variable, “race,” becomes mutable through miscegenation or cognitive mutation of the WASP. Koreans are no exception to this *Lebensschicksal*.<sup>63</sup>

As the title of Ronald Takaki’s landmark history of Asian Americans has it, they are indeed “strangers from a different shore.” Speaking about the early Asian immigrants who came to America to make a fortune, Takaki writes: “And so they entered a new and alien world where they would become a racial minority, seen as different and inferior, and whereby they would become ‘strangers.’”<sup>64</sup> The white racist barriers that prevent “structural assimilation” for Asian Americans are precisely the reason why the straight-line theory of assimilation does not apply to Asian immigrants. According to that theory, an immigrant would arrive in this country and go through a period of cultural adaptation which would naturally lead to social adaptation—that is, a total acceptance by the white group as “one of us.” In fact, even if a white European immigrant does not totally adapt to the American style of life and maintains an attachment to his or her ethnic heritage, such an immigrant, however, would still be accepted by the white population in this country as “one of us” almost immediately. Think of an immigrant from Germany, who hardly speaks English. When that person walks down the main street in practically any town or city in this country, he or she will be seen as “an American.”

But straight-line assimilation does not happen to nonwhite immigrants such as Asian immigrants. An Asian American person may speak

English very well, adopt a name like Nancy, John, or Peter, and may have even been born in this country; but when this Asian American walks down that main street, she or he is an alien, a stranger. The idea of America as a “melting pot” in practice has always been a demand by the white dominant group for a “transmuting pot”—namely, the non-white person’s rejection of (or at least not asserting) his or her own cultural heritage. The message of the white dominant culture to non-white persons has always been, “Why can’t you be like us?” No person can remain whole when his or her cultural persona is fundamentally disrespected. My point here simply is that for nonwhite persons in this country, cultural adaptation does not lead to social acceptance by the dominant group.

### **LIMINALITY IN THE CONDITION OF MARGINALIZATION**

Having looked at each of the two dimensions of the particular marginality experience of Asian Americans, it is necessary to see how those two dimensions are mutually related. In short, Asian Americans’ liminality exists in a particular context—namely, in the context of the exclusion by the dominant group in America. Asian Americans do not experience liminal in-betweenness as a temporary condition or as a creative opportunity; they are pushed to liminality and are coercively made to stay there by the barriers set up by the racist center. Their liminality does not naturally lead to reaggregation or entrance or reentrance into structure, as would be the case in a normal change process.

I wrote earlier about the creative potentials of the liminal condition. Such potentials would still be in Asian Americans’ marginality; but those creative potentials are repressed, thwarted, and frustrated by the second aspect of their marginality experience. The dehumanizing effect of the second aspect of marginality often debilitates the first aspect of Asian Americans’ liminal creativity by taking away from

them the courage and self-respect needed to face up to the creative challenge of the liminal experience.

I noted above that the liminal condition can be an openness to the new. But when the new identity of Asian Americans as a synthesis of the Asian and American worlds is not celebrated but considered often as inferior by the larger American society, how can these Asian Americans feel encouraged to welcome their new identity? Self-hatred will often be the result.

I also noted that liminality is conducive to community. But the dominant group would not leave their structure and join the Asian American strangers in the wilderness of liminal in-betweenness. White racism makes Asian American strangers even more reluctant to venture out of their ethnic enclaves. Liminality is certainly promoted when self-consciously liminal Asian Americans gather together. But realities of American society today certainly do not encourage Asian Americans to embrace their liminal wilderness experience. They are more often tempted either to cling unrealistically to their ethnic roots or to be oblivious to their ethnic past and live in the illusion that they are "Americans." The possibility of using their liminality as an opportunity to venture outside of Asian American ethnic enclaves and of trying to forge *communitas* with people across racial and ethnic lines certainly does not receive much encouragement and usually remains unfulfilled.

The third creative potential of liminality is its conducive nature to the attainment of a critical and prophetic insight about the center. But white racist hegemony sometimes leads Asian Americans and others at the edge to internalize the racist views of themselves and thus remain incapable of seeing the problems at the center. Even when some brave ones at the edge gain critical and prophetic insights, they are often not welcomed by either the American center, which only wants to protect the status quo, or the Asian center, which does not want anybody to rock the boat. In short, my proposal for an understanding of Asian American theology's context is that Asian Americans are in the predicament



of “coerced liminality”—a potentially creative in-betweenness that is suppressed, frustrated, and unfulfilled by barriers that are not in one’s own control. The Asian American minority in America, in other words, are a liminal people who can exercise their liminal creativity precisely to struggle against marginalization. But the creative potentials of their liminality are made ineffective by the demoralizing consequences of marginalization, and are crying out to be freed.