

Episode 14 Niral Shah Redo

[00:00:00]

Teddy: Hello, go dga. How are you? It's good to be here with you again. This is the second to last episode, or maybe third to last episode, depending on what we want to do of season four of the TODOS podcast. visibility and hyper visibility, Asian American identity and math education. And I'm so excited. Shari, this is gonna be an awesome episode.

Teddy: I say this every episode, I'm always excited, but I'm really excited for this one. Also, just as excited as the other ones. this is my amazing co-host. Shari, you wanna go introduce yourself?

Shari: Hi. Hello everyone. You're in for a treat. Teddy and I can't believe that it's been about a year, right Teddy? So thanks

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Shari: for listening. We've met some of you, thank you.

Teddy: Yeah. Shout out to all of our amazing listeners who've been reaching out to us and talking to us. this has been a fun journey. today, we're gonna talk to one of my great friends. Dr. Niral Shah is an associate professor of learning sciences and human development at UW Seattle.

Teddy: I get to meet Niral right when he was fresh outta this postdoc and PhD at uc, Berkeley, doing awesome, awesome work. anti-racism work, out [00:01:00] there. A lot of us know him for his racism and anti-racism work. A lot of us know him as a STEM educator. More recently, I've been catching up with him and hearing about some amazing work he's doing, with artificial intelligence particularly, being critical of how AI is being used heavily within education with very little research behind it.

Teddy: I'm also a huge fan of Niral's work. Using Equip, co-developing this amazing tool that supports, understanding implicit bias, And identifying ways that, students are othered, when we do, classroom observations. Niral is a dear friend and someone I look to as really forward thinking and moving the field forward.

Teddy: So, Niral, is there anything you wanna add to that introduction?

Niral: Teddy, thank you for the lovely introduction. Shari, it's good to be here with both of you. Teddy, I have to say, just because you and I have talked for years about parenting, that I'm also a parent of two kids, elementary age, and I get a lot of insight and wisdom and preview of what's coming up for me

Teddy: We're all parents [00:02:00] here, right?

Shari: and you said you have a upcoming middle schooler too, so you're transition, you're all transitioning.

Niral: That's right on the horizon.

Teddy: Parenting, man, that's a hard job.

Teddy: let's talk a little bit about, you in connection to this podcast, this podcast is about hyper visibility and visibility, when Shari and I were coming up with the ideas for this podcast, I took directly from some of your work.

Teddy: let's talk about how you think about your origin story and how you got to where you are in terms of connections to a a and HP Iness.

Niral: So there's so many different starting points for someone's story. I'm gonna start at the very beginning because that might be the simplest place. the only reason I'm in the United States, I grew up in Chicago, is because my parents immigrated from India in the 1970s.

Niral: that was made possible through changes in US immigration law for many Asians, but not all Asians. That's a big part of our story and how we came to [00:03:00] be in the US specifically. my parents are, you know, they're, they're able to come to the country on professional visas. both of them were doctors and there's a selection there, right?

Niral: And so we settled in Chicago. I've got a little bit of family there already. So that was sort of the logical place for them to settle. my dad had a choice of whether to, take a residency in Chicago, a medical residency, but he had two other options, which would've been a very different life course for me.

Niral: One was in Houston.

Teddy: Oh wow. Where I grew up.

Niral: That's right. I thought you might find that interesting. or he could have, we could have been in San Francisco, which I ended up in later as an adult. but instead they chose the snow. And so I spent my childhood shoveling snow as a South Asian kid.

Teddy: yeah,

Niral: As a South Asian kid, growing up in very white suburbs in Chicago.

Teddy: Wow.

Niral: And [00:04:00] so, from a very early age, I experienced all kinds of racism as many, first generation Asian kids growing up in this country, in the eighties, nineties. That continues today. that's a big part of my story and it's connected to math education.

Niral: A lot of that racism wasn't just general anti-Asian racism for me, it was also linked to being good at math. And so, from age 9, 10, 11, this Asians are good at math. Narrative is in my face. and I think for, people of our generation who have kids now, raising Asian kids, it's interesting to be on the other end of it because when I was going through that racism

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Niral: In a very white Chicago suburb. My parents didn't know how to help me.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: And it's a very confusing and lonely time, and it went on for years. And so I think that's personal to me and informs my research that came later. at the same time, I'm getting, immersed in [00:05:00] Indian culture,

Niral: my parents are very religious, very Hindu people. And so I'm getting immersed in Hinduism in Indian culture writ large. So most of my weekends as a kid spent going to the temple. or, you know, participating in Indian dances and, Diwali parties, I'm learning all these things and it's also confusing because when I go to school, that's a source of hatred, I'm experiencing,

Shari: can I ask you a question though? Did you have any teachers at, elementary school that looked like you?

Niral: no, yeah. I think you know the answer

Teddy: I just, I, because this is the podcast, I just wanna note that you laughing pretty hard.

Shari: Well, you

Niral: Yeah. Well, it's, it's interesting because the, when I, you know, I just outta curiosity, a couple years ago I went back and looked at the racial demographics of the town I grew up in. And it's very different now. But when I grew up there, it was almost entirely white, [00:06:00] 80, 90% white.

Niral: You know, we were one of a couple, you know, families of color. Certainly there were no black families like Latinx families. It was maybe a couple Asian families. That was it. At, at the elementary school. There was no one, you know, and then, and then my family moved and it was a few more Asian families, but still pretty isolating. And you know, I think the teachers did about as best they could, frankly. I mean, I think they were also, this is in the eighties and early nineties, and they, they also I think, didn't know what to do for different reasons than my parents, than what, how they didn't know what to do and, you know, but they allowed me to kind of sit in the library lunch if I felt the bull, the bullying got outta hand and I was very grateful for that, you know. again, it was, it was a situation where I think this is one way things have gotten a lot better, where I think there is a lot more awareness. And now I live in Seattle and my kids' experiences and my kids, it's strange because one thing I like to say is that [00:07:00] racism is entirely unoriginal

Shari: Yeah.

Niral: because it doesn't have to be, some of the same racism that me and my partner experienced, 30, 40 years ago. Identical to what my kids have experienced, almost exactly the same age points in a completely different geography, and obviously a completely different, time in American history. And yet they experience the same things, but the reaction from the teachers and school leaders is completely different.

Niral: And that's also tied to geography. Seattle is considered one of the bluest places, in the country. But I think sometimes people, especially on the west coast, liberals tend to give themselves a little too much credit for their progressivism, and they forget that these are also of racism because.

Teddy: Mm-hmm. Wow. I really appreciate that, and I appreciate you sharing your story, right? I mean, you, you, you talked about a little bit in your, Asians are not good at [00:08:00] math, article in Harvard Ed Review from 2019, knowing you over the years, I didn't realize how painful this bullying you experienced as a kid was,

Teddy: sitting alone, being protected by teachers, that sounds extremely painful I think sometimes as adults, it's easy for me to not gloss to, to not remember those things because there's such, such painful memories. Right? But the fact that it's, you've, you've latched onto those things and, and, and ways to fuel your work, right?

Teddy: And also to be sort of retrospective right. in your understanding of how race works in the United States is pretty amazing.

Niral: One of the best parts of being a parent of Asian kids who are experiencing these things is mainly, frankly, because of my work. If I hadn't made race, which was not my life plan,

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Niral: it was not my life plan to make, race, in education, the center point of my professional work. But if I just had my personal experiences, I don't know if I would've been able to guide my children [00:09:00] around racist experiences they've had over the years.

Niral: one of the best parts is seeing my kids handle it so much better because they have the support, they're in a different, spatial, political and temporal context. the resources are different, but watching them stand up for themselves

Shari: Mm-hmm.

Teddy: Wow. That's powerful,

Shari: do they recognize it how are they aware in that way, that you wish you had that same tools they had?

Niral: Well, my son just went through this a couple weeks

Shari: Uh,

Niral: He had a situation where he was on the playground, and this might sound familiar to you or some of your

Shari: mm-hmm.

Niral: where for the entire year, he's in second grade, he's been playing with friends on the playground and they had this idea some months ago to put together some kind of Harry Potter play that they were all interested in.

Niral: during recess they would plan it. [00:10:00] A few weeks ago it came up that the question of who was gonna play Harry Potter

Niral: and he is like, well I'll play Harry Potter because my son is not shy. My son will raise his

Teddy: yeah, yeah,

Niral: He is ready to go. Get me in there. Coach. he'll advocate for himself.

Niral: And a white kid, a friend of his said, well, you can't be Harry Potter because you're not white.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: Okay. what was very interesting was what happened next, he was upset in the moment. but, an East Asian friend of his was there in the vicinity.

Niral: the two of them were supporting each other, which was interesting because as far as I know, and my, my son will tell us, I mean, that race is not something he's talked a lot about with his friends. Even though at home we talk about it quite a bit, even more than ethnicity, and the school immediately intervened

Teddy: wow.

Shari: Wow.

Niral: I thought they handled it actually quite well.

Niral: there were meetings that were held, and they try to practice versions of, what some might [00:11:00] call restorative justice. They're really trying to, support the kids to work it out with each other.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: what was so impressive to me, and I got emotional about it when I heard that, one of the teachers told us afterwards that in the meeting with him, and the other boy that was involved, my son said to his friends, what you did was white supremacy.

Shari: Oh wow.

Teddy: Wow.

Niral: And it's just, first of all, I didn't have the vocabulary for something like that until I was in my mid to late twenties.

Teddy: For many of us grad school, right?

Niral: That's right. and, but to hear my 7-year-old.

Teddy: Wow.

Niral: that learning from years of being at home and, you know, my kids see the, the, all the kinds of books that I bring home from my work that are just lying around the house and they ask about them, and we've never been shy about talking to the kids about it. To watch him take some of those ideas and apply them appropriately [00:12:00] to situations that he's going through in real time and to do it with empathy

Shari: Yes.

Niral: because he's not trying to cancel his friends.

Teddy: Yeah,

Niral: And I've talked to him about what has happened since that incident. do you still talk to that boy during recess?

Niral: Are you friends with him? And he says things like, well, yeah, I stay away a little bit, but he's still my friend. he made a mistake, but, you know, but what I interpreted as he learns something. It doesn't mean you cancel people

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: and that level of maturity, I mean that I can be a little fatalistic when it comes to race and racism,

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: but stuff like that gives me hope with what kids are learning now.

Shari: When you shared that I sort of had a little chill, right. Like chill for pride. Right. In terms of Wow. and then when I realized he's [00:13:00] seven. it didn't make it a big deal, you know, just using your, words and your knowledge I'm sure that adults in the room probably were floored.

Teddy: Amazing.

Shari: Congratulations.

Teddy: I love it. Yeah, I have a very similar incident as a parent, but I think that. To me, what I'm taking away is we just all need to have Niral as a dad. and then we'll be able to solve this problem of racism in our country. Right.

Niral: simple as that. parenting is so difficult, but every now and then you get a win, you know?

Teddy: That's amazing.

Shari: I see another book in your works or another paper in terms of you're going the parenting route. There was a food thing. We'll talk about that later. But I think the other part is, what you just shared.

Teddy: Yeah. Well, do you wanna, continue on, your journey particularly, in understanding connections to math and Asian Americanness?

Niral: So when I went to college for undergrad. I had no connection to education [00:14:00] whatsoever, or equity. this was not on my radar. I grew up very wealthy. I was insulated from various forms of inequity, certainly

educational inequity, educational injustice. I was in business school. I was also getting a degree in computer science.

Niral: And what I was trying to do is to one day run a tech company. That's, that's what I was after. But after a couple of years of being in school, I realized that, the raw pursuit of profit was just not what I was interested in. that was the pivot for me in education. I went to school in Philadelphia and, had a chance to, do different projects, get connected to what was happening in West Philly schools.

Niral: it was eye-opening, for me. My personal experiences are rooted in anti-Asian racism but most of my work in education can be characterized as becoming more aware of, and then trying to invest myself in fighting against anti-blackness.

Niral: And part of that is, you know, it's [00:15:00] connected to place, which is being in Philly, a very black dominant city. And then when I became a teacher, I moved to the Bay Area. I was a high school math teacher. the school where I taught the black population used to be a lot bigger But it was Latinx dominant in Richmond, California. suddenly I'm in a context where. growing up I had no interaction with black people, Latinx people, and a very narrow slice of the Asian community that's represented in, in this country. But at the school where I'm teaching, suddenly I'm every day.

Niral: You know, I probably taught maybe five white kids in the five years that I taught, but most of the kids I'm teaching Spanish is their dominant language. I've got black students in my class. I have Vietnamese Laotian Mein students in my class and completely eye-opening. And not to mention moving to the Bay Area from suburban Chicago, the Midwest, [00:16:00] where in Chicago, my friends were South Asian, they were, Korean Americans, Chinese Americans.

Niral: But suddenly I moved to the Bay Area and now I learned for the first time that There are Chinese Americans I'm friends with who have their families, have been there for three, four generations. it blew my mind because everyone I grew up with just got to America, between my personal life and professional life, it's very eye-opening with regards to race, ethnicity, and the diversity of Asian experiences and the experiences of communities of color. when I'm teaching, my main focus is on, working on questions of inequity, which is why I became a teacher, my focus is entirely about how do I broaden access to advanced math classes. that's what I was invested in, you know, during that time, detracking becoming department chairs so I could change policies to detrack the school, and we had all kinds of successes.

Niral: We got, big numbers of kids taking AP calculus for the first time attending. Uc, Berkeley, Stanford. that was sort of a mindset [00:17:00] on how do you work on inequity in education. And when I moved to academia, I, then become a grad student. suddenly I'm in grad school. I don't know anything about research.

Niral: I'm learning all that from scratch. I just got outta the classroom and my thought was never to focus on race for the sake of trying to, remedy my experiences of anti-Asian racism. But what I learned about being a teacher was that when we think about the relationship between race and mathematics learning, part of that is understanding what's happening with Asians in relation to math, learning and also STEM education.

Niral: But it's the connectedness between Asian positionality and what's happening with non-Asians of color black children, Latinx children. And then how does that relationality serve the interest of white supremacy? that's one way of framing all of the work I've done on race [00:18:00] in STEM education over the years.

Niral: And I have to give a shout out to one of my mentors, Zeus. Leonardo,

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: who was on my dissertation committee, remains a mentor today. it was as a first year grad student taking his critical race theory course many years ago where one of the books on the syllabus was Vijay Prashad, the Karma of Brown Folk.

Teddy: Mm.

Niral: And the title of that book, the Karma Brown Folk, is a play on Du Bois's, the Souls of Black Folk.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: And in that book, du Bois asked the question, how does it feel to be a problem? And he asked that question to black communities. And Prashad turns that on its head and asks Asian communities how does it feel to be a solution? And it was really, that was the turning point for me

Teddy: Wow.

Niral: in my research because that's when I decided, okay, I'm gonna go deep on trying to understand racial discourse in the context of math [00:19:00] education. Because, you know, and I would say for many years I actually avoided researching, you know, making a focus of my research, what's happening with Asians in math, because my investments were to fight anti-blackness specifically.

Niral: you can see that in some of the mentors I've had in my career, some of the people I've had the honor of collaborating with Na'ilah Nasir, Danny Martin.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: I didn't wanna make my work all about, trying to make the point that, there's all this research on black children in math education.

Niral: Or Latinx children and their mathematics learning experiences. But what about Asian learners? We also experience racism, and that is true. Asians do experience racism in the world and in math education. my interests were like, how does one serve the other?

Niral: How does the racism that Asian people experience, relate to anti-blackness? that's how I got into that research and how I've come out the work.

Teddy: Thanks, man. that turn of du Bois's [00:20:00] question, right? What does it mean to be a solution? to hear that was such an instrumental point In your journey, is fascinating. I never heard that version of your story before, but also, I think that the way you articulate it, your focus has always been on understanding anti-blackness in education, right?

Teddy: and really being an advocate scholar for it, to me is. Fascinating because, it is a choice that many of us have to make. how do we want work to go as a teacher, as an advocat, as researcher, as, as a policy person, but also, you know, it's, it's, it's a way to connect to a larger narrative, right?

Teddy: within the discourse of education and educational policy in our country, there is so much injustice happening, and most of it happens along the guises of anti-blackness, right? anti brownness. How do we collectively fight for that? one of the traps we can fall into, particularly as Asian American, math educators is focusing only on this one particular, racial demarcation,

Teddy: And ignoring the way that it's deeply connected in a racial project Of oppression and dehumanization of [00:21:00] everybody, I like the way you articulated that

Shari: So Niral as you're looking at that as well. You know, sometimes I would think of myself as gray. You know, I'm not white, I'm not black, I'm kind of gray. So what does it mean to be gray? Right? But when you talked about it earlier, it sounded like, we're not part of the Black, but it supports white supremacy, right?

Shari: So to not address the Asian kids in the room as well. You're kind of supporting the white supremacy part of it too. as you thought about it, Supporting anti-blackness came out in your work? what were some of your initial findings, thoughts, as you stepped into this new arena?

Niral: I knew that when I was experiencing this anti-Asian racism connected to my mathematical ability and also perceptions of my mathematical ability. I remember I didn't have the words for it, but I did feel like it was dehumanizing is [00:22:00] how I would explain it now.

Shari: Uhhuh.

Niral: through the research, that's what's been clarifying for me, which is trying to understand, for example, black children's experiences in math classrooms compared with Asian children's experiences in math classrooms.

Niral: It was a lot easier for me and when I was a teacher, to see how black children were dehumanized in math classrooms and all the different practices and technologies that get deployed, whether, explicitly or implicitly to dehumanize black children.

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Niral: one of the key findings that came out of my work, and you see this in that 2019 Harvard ed article that Teddy mentioned, is, how these two dehumanization processes get connected when you specify in the, case of, Asian math learners, but also just Asians in the world, how math and STEM success get weaponized to dehumanize Asian people, the specifics of how that happens, [00:23:00] you can see how they become two sides of the same coin and one, the one metaphor that was definitely an insight for me.

Niral: The metaphor that I found useful is that of a bubble level that you might use to hang a picture in your house. it's got a rectangle with the little bubble in the water in the middle,

Shari: The old school.

Niral: The old school.

Teddy: Before the phone, right?

Niral: in the app.

Niral: Yeah. So, one of the things I found is that, black children are seen as intellectually deficient, these are the discourses of anti-blackness that position black children, Black kids are not smart. and therefore, if they're not smart, they can't do well at math.

Niral: the connective tissue between discourses of intelligence and discourses of mathematical ability. On the other side, you see Asian children being seen as hyper smart, And because of that, they are seen as being really good at math. the two sides of the coin now in the middle is [00:24:00] whiteness,

Niral: It is white children and white whiteness is not the same as white people or white children. But in this case we can talk about their overlap. Where white people always tend to be right in the middle, the sweet spot of being not too smart, but not so dumb, right? So not so, so good at math, but not so, so bad at math either.

Niral: They're always sort of all of this sort of cultural traits, right? Whether it's math or otherwise, they seem to be kind of right in that sweet spot. Whereas communities of color, Asian, non-Asians of color seem to be sort of on either end of the extreme and, that's the, those are the ends at which they become dehumanized.

Niral: Whereas if you get to live in that sweet spot where, whiteness positions white people, that's a spot where white people become full human beings. before the research, I had this visceral experience and I started to understand, okay, the model minority, gets weaponized against, non-Asians of color.

Niral: I kind of got all that, but it wasn't [00:25:00] until I really started to talk to students. Through observations to understand how race is operating in classrooms and then to dig more deeply into the discourses that position Asian

learners. That's when the bigger picture of how race works in and through education started.

Shari: So as I thought about being gray, actually it would be the sweet spot. That's a gray, right? That's between the, in a way, right? We call it white. Ours would be, I guess, yellow. But I like how you gave a visual to what you're talking about. You put it as on a graph, you know?

Shari: In terms of the dehumanizing zones, which, I think of as a graphic, the outlier parts,

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: right?

Teddy: And Shari, I love the way you bring that up. you and I, have talked a lot about, our teachers who are trying really hard to be anti-racist in the classroom. Some of them Might have Asian American students and they are still wrapping their [00:26:00] head around how the model minority stereotype, how this positioning of their students being, you know, quote unquote good at math, is a form of racism, a form of white supremacy, right?

Teddy: and often, in conversations we've had with teachers at, conferences or other places, they say, I understand that we don't wanna stereotype our students. But I'm still, like, I'm spending a lot of my energy supporting my students who have been racialized to be told that they're bad at math, that they don't have anything to contribute to the math conversation.

Teddy: I feel this tension of trying to also connect with my Asian American students and help them be fully human. And I think that in, you know, from my own work with elementary classrooms in which teachers teach multiple subjects, they're able to connect to the full humanity of their students.

Teddy: And be able to see that these students are not just good at math, they're good at everything. Or that we need to support them in multiple subjects. But particularly when I'm talking to middle school and high school teachers, some of them recognize that there's a problem, but they feel powerless because they're not really sure how [00:27:00] to, connect the dots.

Teddy: This connective tissue that you're talking about, Niral of the model minority stereotype and anti-blackness and dehumanization all being connected. Right. So I guess that's a long way to get to my question. if you're a teacher

listening to this podcast, And you've had a chance to read Niral's article, or you've been thinking deeply about this, what are things that we can think about, right.

Teddy: In terms of understanding this complexity of supporting our Asian American, Pacific Islander students, but also understanding how this connects with anti-blackness and anti brownness.

Niral: I, you know, having come from the classroom, you know, I taught everything from pre-algebra to AP calculus BC, and every subject in between before I was a researcher. as I've done my research, it's been very important for me to think about how would this have, how would these research insights have shaped how I taught high school, for example.

Niral: and so this particular issue we're. the positioning of Asian [00:28:00] learners in math or even STEM classrooms more broadly. One, one concrete example that came to mind for me as I was thinking through what the students were telling me and how I was kind of theorizing it. sometimes in, in math classrooms, there's this, there's this idea of Asians as the human calculator

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: Asians are very good at the technical parts of doing mathematics.

Niral: They can, do the math in their head, perform the calculations, the procedures, but maybe they're not creative or they're seen as, technically proficient, but not very creative. other children might be seen as more verbal, more outgoing.

Niral: Asian kids are more quiet they just like to put their head down and do the math, but they don't wanna share their thinking and these kinds of things. So if we know that's the discourse and based on my research that is still very much the discourse, [00:29:00] what does that mean for how we teach?

Niral: And so I think a couple examples. if I were in the classroom again as a high school teacher, one thing I would watch out for in teaching my Asian students is to make sure, are they having an opportunity to show to their classmates, to show publicly their creativity

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Niral: in the classroom am I giving all of my students, but in particular my Asian students, a chance to get in front of the class and present their thinking?

Niral: this relates to the way we teach math in the US and not just in the US but certainly this country. I think we're still in. We're still stuck in really rote ways of doing math education. when we focus just on calculations and procedures and getting right answers, and we don't give kids a chance to, work on tasks that get them a, give them an opportunity to show their creativity, explain their thinking, all of these things that has a racialized dimension [00:30:00] to it potentially.

Niral: And it can reinforce these narratives that, Asian kids in particular are human calculators because we don't give 'em a chance to do anything else. So I think there are subtle ways that, teachers can inadvertently reinforce these kinds of racist narratives about Asian learners.

Niral: even if you're in a classroom that does a lot of group work that doesn't, has a lot of creative open-ended tasks if you're not attended to these things. and really making sure Asian kids in your class have an opportunity to show they are full human beings. You can let the discourse propagate if you're not careful.

Shari: what you just said, might be thought of in terms of how people see Asians as we're all lumped in the same But, in your podcast, it was talking a little bit about how you come to the country changes the narrative too, as an Asian.

Shari: can you share a little bit about that journey and how agents were not all from the same cloth [00:31:00] and

Niral: This

Shari: that helps this narrative too, right?

Niral: yeah, this is a really important issue, so I'm glad you're raising it. is true as a teacher if you're teaching Asian children, but no matter who you're teaching frankly, it's an issue of seeing your students as, you know, human beings are, are historical. We have histories that have all kinds of kind of unique winding pads.

Niral: And so with Asian people, and this was certainly my, learning process when I moved to California to be a teacher, I had never even heard of some of the ethnic groups that were strongly represented at my school. many of the students I taught were Mien.

Niral: And so I had to learn from the students and it took several years and from teachers in the community, what does it mean to be Mien?

Niral: what is the origin story of this group and how does it connect to. US imperialism in Vietnam I [00:32:00] had no idea and I just had a very narrow understanding of the Asian experience in the US and just how different it was from my own frankly, even within the South Asian community.

Niral: I was teaching Punjabi children, for the first time. growing up I had very limited interaction with Punjabi communities in Chicago.

Teddy: Wow.

Niral: And so this was very different, and, it intersects with not just immigration status, but also with class. oftentimes these go together.

Niral: I was growing up as a rich South Asian person. and suddenly I'm teaching, Asian communities that are quite poor

Shari: Oh

Niral: financially. So these were all aspects of learning on my part. I remember I had South Asian students in my class who, I could tell in their faces and how they talked to me, they desperately wanted to connect with

Teddy: yeah, yeah.

Niral: on, on, on this plane.

Niral: And in some ways we could, and in other [00:33:00] ways we couldn't because I was coming from a really different place. it was an interesting learning experience and it just got me thinking that if I'm going through these things, as a South Asian teacher and you know, with teaching South Asian trend, you know, both of us were born in the United States, but we cannot connect in a lot of ways.

Niral: I can't imagine what it must be like for, teachers who don't share a racial background, an ethnic background in immigration history. And so I think that, you know, this has been documented. Danny Martin's, earliest research, was his dissertation in the Bay Area, in, classrooms with a lot of black children and a black teacher.

Niral: I remember him documenting that, the black teacher, partly because they were coming from a different class strata,

Shari: mm

Niral: couldn't necessarily connect with his black students. And so I think sometimes in racial analyses we can get reductive and say, well, the solution for improving the experiences of children of color is to kind of [00:34:00] do this racial matching with teachers of color.

Niral: And that is important. So I don't wanna minimize that. But at the same time, there's all these intersectional nuances that we don't often acknowledge that, makes that solution by itself insufficient.

Teddy: I wanna connect to what you're saying here. This is so important, right? because Niral, you're talking about your own background. And as someone about the same age as you, I have an immigration story, very similar, My parents,

Teddy: Came post, you know, 1965, right? So there was a lot of criteria over what it meant to be able to immigrate to the United States then, but I also have a lot of family that came to the United States, pre 65, right? So they came during, you know, when the Chinese exclusion Act was still operating. And so, you know, there's, there's all these different ways that many of us find our family histories connect to the United States.

Teddy: And at the heart of it, is sometimes race, sometimes ethnicity, but also class, right? And so class plays a big part into the installation that many of us feel [00:35:00] and. What I hear in your story is you grew up not hearing stories of other Asian Americans, for many of our listeners to understand the term Asian American right came from the Third World.

Teddy: Liberation Movement is a solidarity, marker of understanding the ways that our complex histories have, have often been demarcated by colonialism, by us, imperialism, by mil, US military conquest. But here in the United States, because we're seen, as connected, we also understand that our struggles are connected.

Teddy: But it's within class, like within the way that I grew up. often, middle, upper class. Many of the stories of the people that I work with, that I teach, that I connect with, I've never heard. And I think it's important for all of our stories

to come out so that they're part of the mainstream narrative so that teachers, people working with students and communities, understand the complexity.

Teddy: You mentioned Mien and students, right? When I was teaching in New York, I worked with a lot of Cambodian students and I had no idea, just how much they were othered. even now, I often interact with [00:36:00] Cambodian, students who ethnically identify as Chinese,

Shari: Yeah.

Teddy: when you understand and unpack their histories, right?

Teddy: They, it's, it's, it's there, Chinese, Cambodian, and it's a different narrative, right? And in, in terms of race, in terms of their histories of us militarism, right? And so these stories need to come out more, right? And we need to, we need to share these stories. They need to be talked about more. And I think that our teachers need to understand the complexity of who we are as Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islanders, right?

Niral: Absolutely. I think that's extremely well said. when I did my dissertation research, the school where I did the research had a large Polynesian population. I was learning a lot about a community that I had no interaction

Teddy: Yeah, yeah,

Niral: this was a school that wasn't far from where I was a teacher.

Teddy: yeah,

Niral: And so, you know, and suddenly, you know, I'm talking with Tongan students, Samoan [00:37:00] students, and I write about them in my research trying to represent the ways they experience race and the racial narratives that position them vis-a-vis mathematical ability, the complexity of racial discourse that we're dealing with in the United States because of these tangled histories.

Niral: as a math teacher in the US trying to understand how race affects our students and then how do we enact anti-racist teaching? This is an incredibly complicated, endeavor for teachers. And so I wanna, I just wanna high elevate some sympathy and empathy for what teachers are dealing with.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: Because this is not simple work.

Niral: even though, we have a lot of teachers invested in equity, justice and anti-racism, I think we have to be very patient with teachers who are trying to do this work because there isn't a handbook out there. and there never will be because this stuff continues to evolve.

Niral: [00:38:00] It's nuanced. I appreciate teachers who are trying, and we have to do our best. those of us who have worked a long time in teacher education to be patient with teachers trying to enact anti-racism in the classroom.

Teddy: Yeah. And, and, and I, I, I, I completely feel that, right? It, I, I think there's so many wonderful teachers who are trying so hard one thing that I think is important is for teachers to understand the complexity of Asian American stories, right? for me,

Teddy: because my parents are from Hong Kong, I grew up in a world in which British colonialism. Deeply impacted our family narrative, everything was surrounded by the proximity to whiteness and British coloniality. That was the only ways that you could gain power in Hong Kong of the, you know, the, the sixties and seventies that my family talked about often.

Teddy: And at the same time, because there was this, Idea of the handover of Hong Kong from the UK back [00:39:00] to China in 1997. it created this massive movement within my own family where everyone left Hong Kong because they were terrified of the communist government coming many of them had also escaped China, a generation before because of the cultural revolution.

Teddy: And so you have these disparaging histories, right, that are, are very varied that I have experienced within my own history. And then coming to the United States, being lumped into what is generally known as Chinese America or Asian America, And then understanding the complexity of Taiwan and Japan,

Teddy: and Korea. And those histories are all. So beautiful and also fraught, but our stories are very, very different. Right. And then classism plays into it. one of the reasons why I really loved having you on this podcast, is I've shared a lot about my own understandings of East Asian history, right?

Teddy: And particularly Shari and I have talked a lot about, you know, our, our stories are very different, right? Shari, you have many, many generations and also this connection to being Hawaiian American, right? A Japanese, Hawaiian

American that I think play into our own stories, right? So like you're talking [00:40:00] about this thing that I.

Teddy: I've only pieced together. Now, you said that you grew up in Chicago Understanding the way class operates within South Asian communities, That you had never connected with Punjabi students until you became a teacher, which to me, Like hearing about like, you know, your, your school in a very white dominance, a space, but also your weekends hanging out with other South Asians.

Teddy: can you unpack that a little bit about the ways that you are isolated, in terms of class or socioeconomic status, even in the ways that our Asian American communities are formed?

Niral: your story, Teddy, about the British colonial roots of Hong Kong and how that affected your family and the storytelling and the socialization around race. that reminds me of the story of India because the story of India is also a story. The modern story of India is a story of British colonialism as well.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: my parents were born in forty seven, forty eight.

Teddy: [00:41:00] Wow.

Niral: India got its independence on August 15th, 1947. when they immigrate to the United States and raised me and my sisters, the other part of that story is connected to British colonialism and global white supremacy, which is many south Asians of my generation, were raised and immersed in anti-blackness. I'll connect this, to the Punjabi students I taught when I was a high school teacher, what was so interesting is when I see them at lunch or just after school, hanging out with friends, other kids in my class, kids at the school. They have these multiracial friends groups where you have, south Asian kids hanging out with, Filipino kids, black kids, Latinx kids, et cetera.

Niral: they are connected in a [00:42:00] way that I couldn't imagine growing up.

Teddy: Mm-hmm.

Niral: And I think class has a lot to do with it because they're all living in the same community. Richmond is not a wealthy community. there's a kind of like,

you know, class cultural, um, knowledge, right? It's a shared knowledge because that's the life they're living.

Niral: for me, growing up in the class position that I was born into. it's not like anti-blackness is reserved to wealthier Asian communities, It cuts across and we know that it cuts across class, but it struck me watching my students and how they interacted with each other they were much more connected to each other, possibly through class in a way that I wasn't because of that class difference.

Niral: And so the way I come at blackness and the way they come at blackness is different.

Teddy: Yeah.

Niral: And so for me it was another 10 years of learning and professional experience and personal experience for me to [00:43:00] change my relationship to anti-blackness. A much more concerted kind of learning process. I think mainly mediated through class for.

Teddy: I mean, one takeaway that I'm getting from this, is, for a lot of our teachers out there who are trying really hard is, you know, humanizing our students, recognizing that many of them, even though they might come from the same background, might have very similar immigration stories.

Teddy: They might even to you look like they're, have a shared culture and a shared language. We have no idea, right? That the, the deeper stories that are, are going on in their, in their histories and how sometimes, right, like anti-black blackness or even like, you know, in, interracial tensions, right?

Teddy: Interethnic tensions are deeply a part of the way they're raised, right? And so recognizing that all of our students have very particular stories, and I think in the world that we live in now, this, generic term of Asian American Sometimes is wonderful, but sometimes can erase the very, very subtle and beautiful stories,

Teddy: that our students are bringing with them into the classroom.

Niral: That's right. we have to [00:44:00] find a way to hold both, right? Which is the single group label that binds us together, For purposes of justice, solidarity, maybe other reasons. But then also hold on to all of the uniqueness, both at the community level between different Asian groups, but also within those groups and at the level of an individual.

Niral: And I think that's one of the tricky parts of navigating modern life, which is how do we coordinate all the way down from the individual to the top level group identity.

Teddy: Thanks.

Shari: I kind of reflect on the initial question that I asked you about. Did any of the teachers look like you? So as this podcast, you shared your journey, you could have looked people on the outside looked at it as you look like your students, so therefore, that's fine.

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: we're checking that box. But as you shared, you understood yourself, and [00:45:00] them coming from different backgrounds too.

Shari: and the power you had was, I need to understand this.

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: just because we put a student that looks like the teacher in the same room does not mean there's a connectiveness. we have to go deeper and understand where we're coming from.

Shari: Right. In terms of class plays a big deal in countries outside of the United States. it does in the United States as well, in some places, You are really othered right to the point of like you would say, bullied and really pressured and you stay within your class sometimes just to the fear of not wanting to be, you know, bullied and other in a way that's so traumatic.

Niral: Sometimes we, you know, as, as a race scholar, someone who identifies as doing research within race studies, we can be a little reticent to engage [00:46:00] class. in my own work to date, I have not engaged it directly, which I think is fine. depending on the kind of work you're doing and your goals, I think it's fine to focus on one social marker or a particular racial or ethnic group.

Niral: I think that's perfectly legitimate. but sometimes there can be some reticence in race studies to not engage class so directly, because historically and also still today, you see, efforts, you know, even on the left, on the political left to use class as a way of evading race. and so that reticence to not get into class because you're worried about people using that as a diversion tactic.

Shari: Yeah.

Niral: Questions of race and racism. I'm sympathetic to that. And at the same time, when we tell these stories class is a big part of what we experience, in capitalist societies the question for me is if you're a teacher, a researcher, no matter what phenomenon you're looking at or what problem you're trying to work on, what is relevant to consider [00:47:00] in that situation that you're trying to make a little bit better.

Niral: if it's race, if it's class, if it's gender, if it's disability, you can't avoid those when you're trying to analyze and then trying to, you know, come up with some kind of solution to make life a.

Teddy: That's amazing. I think that's a nice sort of ending thought before we move into, your, is there a particular, call for action or things that you wanna shout out?

Niral: I might go back to what, my son did with his friends, and actually my daughter has done this too, at earlier time points in trying to respond to issues of racism that she's experienced. But I would say my big, takeaway is to stand up for what's right. You fight inequity, fight injustice.

Niral: But I think there are ways of doing this that are not binary.

Teddy: [00:48:00] Yeah.

Niral: And I would say that if we can find a way to live in the gray, to live in the nuance, even when we're fighting for equity and justice, I think that's very important. when you see someone do something that is racist, that is deeply harmful, you have to also understand what happened and what that person did as itself.

Niral: An effective history. There's a history there that, you don't necessarily understand and what they did was wrong, but it doesn't mean that person is irredeemable. And to find a gray there and look, it's difficult. Especially for people of color. Who do anti-racist work to constantly deal with racism and to find some kind of patience and empathy.

Niral: And actually, I don't think we necessarily need to find that every time because that's not realistic and it, is destructive to our own mental health. But where we can find some grace [00:49:00] and space to give people, to me, that

is the Education Project, if we're gonna be anti-racism educators and identify as such.

Niral: I think unfortunately it does require a certain level of grace and patience to allow people a chance to learn these things over time. this stuff doesn't get learned overnight. It takes years, it takes decades. And I know that because I've had to go through those same learning journeys. I try to remember that when I'm on the other side of things and trying to educate people around anti-racism, I try to remember my own journey.

Shari: So you mentioned gray a couple times, gray is not a bad place to be in,

Teddy: Yeah.

Shari: the gray space.

Teddy: Not black

Niral: sometimes it's the easiest to get into a black and white view of the world where there's racist and there's anti-racist. In my experience, both the research and my personal life, people are, people are participating in racism and [00:50:00] anti-racism, usually at the same time in different contexts, and they don't do so in an intentional way usually.

Niral: I try to reject the polarized binary framings of racism and anti-racism and, find that gray where I can.

Teddy: So let's end with, my favorite question and, and you know, you and I have talked a lot about food over the years, but what's hot on your mind? What's, uh, what's your current food fixation or things that you're thinking about in terms of food lately?

Niral: My current food fixation is my historical food fixation, which is pizza.

Shari: Oh, say more. Say more.

Niral: I think. I think it's very hard to grow up in Chicago and not care a lot about pizza, especially, deep dish and stuff. Pizza. But pizza in general. So pizza is my favorite food. I'm not a pizzas. you [00:51:00] know, \$4 frozen pizza at the grocery store to really high-end pizza.

Niral: my partner, has written a healthy food blog for a very long time. so I don't eat the same level of frozen pizza I used to, but so full disclosure there, but nothing, nothing will get me off, my lifelong love of pizza. I try to do my research and find the absolute best

Shari: Uh,

Teddy: Where, where, where. So I, I'm gonna, I'm gonna give a shout out. Years ago when we were in Michigan together, you, told me to check out buddies in Detroit I took my kids there and it was hands down, one of the greatest experiences of our life. We went to the original buddies in Detroit.

Teddy: amazing. They, for me, right? I, I, you know, I'm vegan. They had, Detroit style, right? The, the, the, the two pans. Pizza vegan. And it blew my mind, right? And my kids still talk about how great that pizza was at buddies Detroit style pizza, right? So oftentimes people talk about east and west coast, but they forget

Teddy: In the Midwest, Chicago, Detroit, there's a lot of good pizza coming outta there [00:52:00] too.

Niral: I don't get into the New York pie versus the Chicago style pizza. I don't get into that because I just love it all. gimme all of it.

Teddy: So what are any specific spots that our listeners should hear about or know about that you love to shout out?

Niral: Well, I don't know if I wanna get into this publicly, but I will say that some of the best stuffed pizza I've ever had is in the.

Teddy: Oh, dude, These are fighting words, man.

Shari: You.

Niral: I don't know their exact history, but I'm gonna shout out Zachary's Pizza in Oakland and Berkeley. I'm assuming the owners have Chicago roots. I don't know if it's Bay Area homegrown, but Zachary's Chicago style pizza, is some of the best in the world.

Niral: some of the best tomatoes.

Shari: It's the west coast tomato, the farming. Right. Uh,

Teddy: I love it. I love it. Okay. Well, thank you very much. This has been an amazing episode. I [00:53:00] thank you again, Niral. any additional shout outs you wanna give out?

Niral: no, thank you both so much for having me. I appreciate.

Shari: thank you Niral, appreciate your taking us through your journey and um, I learned a lot, I learned a lot in all these podcasts, making connection to myself is the selfish reason of why I'm doing this. I think. So. I appreciate you being on my journey, our journey.

Teddy: thank you Niral, and thank you to all our listeners have a wonderful summer peace.