

OiYan Poon: Strong communities. Safe communities. Healthy communities. Right? We have to remember that we share in those values, and if we move, and, in centering those values, then these messages to split apart, us apart are harder. They have a harder job to do.

Sam Fuqua: That's OiYan Poon, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with OiYan Poon about the racial politics of education. She is an education researcher, co-director of the *College Admissions Futures Collaborative*, and the author of *Asian American Is Not A Color: Conversations On Race, Affirmative Action and Family*. We spoke with OiYan Poon at the 2025 White Privilege Conference in Hartford, Connecticut.

I am Sam Fuqua, co-host of the program with Alexis Miles. Hi Alexis.

Alexis Miles: Hi Sam.

Sam Fuqua: And we're so pleased to be joined by OiYan Poon, who is here at the 2025 White Privilege Conference with us in Hartford, Connecticut.

OiYan Poon: Hello. Excited to be here.

Sam Fuqua: Well, welcome. Uh, Alexis and I heard you speak earlier today, and you said we're in a new era of segregation. Why do you say that?

OiYan Poon: Yeah, I think, you know, it's important to name things as they are, right? And so, I think oftentimes we think, oh, segregation ended with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, and with the Civil Rights Movement through the sixties, and we don't have segregated facilities anymore, but it's becoming very clear, even though they call it anti-DEI (anti-diversity, equity and inclusion), I always like to spell it all the way out, efforts that, what they're coming after is wanting to roll everything back to a hundred years ago when really only, uh, cis had, white men with wealth were able to have access to, um, resources and wealth in this country, right? And, they're not hiding it, right? One of the executive orders, it was to repeal an LBJ executive order, which was about prohibiting segregated facilities in the workplace and in public facilities. So, one of the Trump executive orders recently ended that. So, it's not like they're making it a hidden agenda anymore. They are really questioning everything that is around integration. Opening and expanding what we can learn in our schools, having our libraries, having public facilities and public, um, support systems, um, rolling all of it back so that the haves are few people and the have-nots are many more of us.

Alexis Miles: So, does it go too far to say that what they're implementing is a policy of white supremacy, without saying that?

OiYan Poon: Absolutely. Yeah. I think that's right. You know, the, the ideology is certainly white supremacy and patriarchy.

Alexis Miles: Which, they say, is premised on meritocracy. So, it's not their fault if the people with the most merit just happen to be white.

OiYan Poon: There is the underlying assumption that there is no talent among those of us who are not white. And so, you have to, for them to say that it's about meritocracy and oh, these inequalities are just simply from, you know, a lack of talent, there is a, a racial ideology there, right, because I, I, as an educator, I deeply believe, and as an, an education researcher, I deeply believe that there is talent and intelligence among everyone, cross-cultural, racial, ethnic lines, which are all socially constructed as we know, right? And so, we only hurt ourselves when we prevent people in our communities from pursuing learning together.

Sam Fuqua: You know, one of the places this plays out most prominently is, uh, who gets into college and university in this country. And in 2023, the Supreme Court ended, I don't know the exact phrase, but, uh...

OiYan Poon: Race conscious admissions.

Sam Fuqua: Race conscious admissions.

OiYan Poon: Yeah.

Sam Fuqua: Thank you. In, uh, in college and university. In addition to the meritocracy myth, if I may call it that, that Alexis just mentioned, what are some of the other misperceptions you think people maybe generally have about affirmative action...

OiYan Poon: Mm-hmm.

Sam Fuqua: ...and college and university admissions?

OiYan Poon: There's a lot of myths, actually. I think people presume that college admissions is so easily, that it's really about individual merit, when really we need to flip this around. College admissions is about the colleges and universities and what they want to achieve and accomplish. It's their needs, right? And so, they're looking for new members of their mission, right? So, that mission could include, so one of the areas I study is how college admissions works, right? And so, you're coming right into my alley, and I'm gonna go into the weeds for just a minute. But what I mean by we need to flip it around and stop thinking about admissions as whether or not Alexis as an individual deserves or is entitled to entry into college. It's actually, the way college admissions works is it's about the university or the college saying this is who we want and this is what we wanna accomplish. So, what are those things that they want to accomplish? We want a championship basketball team. We want a championship crew team, right? So, oftentimes when we think of athletics, we think about basketball and football, where black men and black women are often found in the athletic teams. But when really, those are just two teams out of dozens, right? And the other dozens include crew, lacrosse, golf, you, you see the theme here, right? These are all, equestrian, right?

Sam Fuqua: Fencing.

OiYan Poon: Squash, fencing, right? And, they're not all white sports anymore, but they are certainly predominantly white, um, sports. And that is a huge, what they call institutional priority. And so, athletics preferences are huge, right? Um, you have some of these selective colleges want all 50 states represented. We know race is tied to geography, right? And so, there's that. Uh, for these selective colleges and universities, men are less likely to apply these days or to have the academic records to compete against women. And so, there is certainly a thumb on the scale for men. Then there is, the biggest question I found out in my research was, uh, a question that colleges ask when they do admissions is, okay, great, we've read all these application files and these are the students we want, but can we afford this class? Because they are given only so much financial aid budget each year. And so, all of these things, the athletics, the financial aid budget, it tips the scale in favor of white applicants. They recruit specifically.

There's a lot of funding invested by each of these institutions to recruit in wider, wealthier communities so that they can bring in wealthier students to pay their bills, right? And so, none of this is about "merit," right? So, if you really wanna get into the weeds about this, that's what college admissions is about. So, recognizing that there are so many things that were thumbs on the scale towards white, wealthier male students, why not have a consideration of racial diversity? Whether or not this, you know, these different students are bringing in different perspectives, experiences, um, understanding their achievements within the context of the inequalities in K12 systems. But now, what the Supreme Court has said is, you can write about it and colleges can read about it, but they can't use that as part of their decision making.

Sam Fuqua: Now, there have been legal challenges to affirmative action, uh, since the seventies, but in terms of these 2023 Supreme Court rulings, is there data yet to show how that has impacted admissions? And if so, how has it?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So, we only have one year, and I always say as a social scientist, one year is not a trend, however, we can still see that there is a significant impact on black enrollments, generally. There's a negative impact on black enrollments. For LatinA, Indigenous, and Asian students, it's a very mixed bag. So, there's been increases in some places in some populations, and decreases for others. And for white students, while there are a handful of places, and when I say places, I'm talking about the most highly selective, or what I like to call the most highly rejective places that there have been a couple of declines or staying the same, status quo, but white students, there is a, a somewhat of an increase in the enrollments at these rejective institutions. And so, we'll have to wait and see, and I, I, I kind of laugh a little bit because in destroy, you know, seeking to destroy the Department of Education, one of the departments in the Department of Education was the Education Statistics Unit. So, will we actually know for certain what the impacts are? I worry that we won't have a clear picture because what we have right now is just what the colleges and universities want to report, and they're doing some funny number things with their numbers to make themselves look less terrible.

Sam Fuqua: How, how do you mean?

OiYan Poon: For instance, I can't remember which institutions, but some of them are, so the denominator, right? Like so, uh, what happened to black enrollment at Harvard, for example? Let's go with that. It looks like it stayed the same. But, when you look deeper into the numbers that Harvard was reporting publicly, the denominator was smaller. They took out, so, it's like what percentage of black students are in the incoming class? Well, let's take out the international students from the incoming class and make the number of students smaller, so then the black numbers look higher, right? And so, there, there are these

funny games that institutions are playing, and my colleague James Murphy does a really good job on his website, uh, through Ed Reform Now, which is an organization. So, check that out. He outlines exactly all the funny math going on. You know, before we were like, oh, well we'll just wait for the iPads data from the federal government to come out and we'll know for sure what's happening. We don't know if that's gonna happen.

Alexis Miles: So, one of the things you were talking about in your keynote, um, included justice versus just us. So, people who look out for themselves individually versus those people who look at systems and how systems impact people.

OiYan Poon: Right.

Alexis Miles: Um, can you say more about those two groups of people? Those two worldviews?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. I think in conflict, right? I mean, when we talk about things like an affirmative action debate, that's a conflict, right? Or any public policy. I think when you recognize there's a problem in the world, you can either decide, well, I can't change the rules of the game. The game is the game. The system is the system. And the way you overcome the inequalities in the system is just to work harder. To get me and mine to work harder and to get a fair shake and to move up in the system, right? And when we're talking about racial hierarchies, it's, hey, treat me like a white person, right? Why am I not being treated like a white person? But, is the goal really about let me be treated like a white person, or is the goal liberation, right? And if the goal is liberation, that's the agenda of fighting for transformative justice, right? And, in that agenda, it is recognizing that my experiences are not great. I'm marginalized. I feel marginalized. But, I am connected. I have linked fate, right? My experience is not just my experience, it's a reflection of a larger system. And so, let me examine how this system is affecting me. But not just me, others too. So, if I fight for something, uh, to change, I don't wanna just fight for myself. I wanna change the rules of the game, right?

So, I, I, I was actually an example, I'll use a disability justice example, actually. 'Cause I, I've been traveling and I have my roller bag at the airport and, um, there was a very high curb going into the airport, and I, and I just, I have a bum shoulder, so I was like, ah, I can, I can lift it with my other arm, but this is really a hassle. And then it's like, why aren't there more curb cuts? It's really frustrating when someone parks in front of a curb cut. And I found this especially true when I was, you know, a, a mom with a little child and a stroller too, to have to lift the whole stroller up. You know, curb cuts came out of disability justice movements, right? They weren't thinking about people with strollers necessarily, right? But that win for disability justice, we all win, right? That's a justice agenda. It's changing systems and the built environment around us, and we all benefit. It's an abundance mindset versus a scarcity mindset, which is just like, oh, well, how many disability, you know, people with physical disabilities are there? Like, why do we care? That's a lot of money to make a curb cut, right? Um, and having this very scarcity mindset happening, and that's just us only thinking about my gains and my benefits.

Sam Fuqua: Well, because this is a podcast that broadly defined, talks about conflict and conflict resolution, we often ask our guests to talk about a sideways moment in their lives picking up on the title, Well, That Went Sideways! and, uh, in your keynote, you had one that was pretty interesting to me about a question your daughter asked you and how you handled it. Now, you could talk about another sideways moment if

you like. But I, but I, I hope you would share that story about your daughter's, uh, innocent question of a child, smart question, but, uh, and then how you as mom handled it and what happened after that.

OiYan Poon: Yeah. So my, my book *Asian American Is Not a Color*, um, sometimes people look at me sideways when they're like, what kind of title is this, right? Because I think sometimes, and this especially comes from some Asian Americans, they're like, what are you saying? We're not a race? You know, there's not a racialized experience? Um, because I think that is, kind of, a, sometimes a common experience where people question whether Asian Americans are actually people of color. So, that is not the intent of the title. The book is all about the racialization and the histories and experiences of, um, Asian Americans. Um, but the title comes from, uh, when my daughter was three, and all of a sudden this toddler goes, "Mom, are we black or are we white?" And I was like, "Well, we're Asian American," you know? Done. Easy question. First race talk with child. Done. Good job, mom. Very wrong, because in the next breath she turns to me looking quizzically and she was like, "Hmm, mom, Asian American's not a color." Right. And I was like, "Oh, you are so, right." Right? And, and, here I am, someone who's been studying race and racism for decades, like 20 years at that point, and I was just totally thrown back. And, well, you're right, it's not a color, but there's so many, we contain multitudes, like, how do I explain this? There's centuries of history behind why we call ourselves Asian American. Why this, you know, different names mean different things. And yeah, so that's how the book starts, and then it just launches into, well, since it's gone sideways, I'm just gonna write this whole book for you child, and hopefully, you know, the storytelling from people I talk to, um, that represent, kind of, a "just us" mentality, a scarcity mindset versus a justice mentality, a, a transformative mindset, um, come through to offer her really, I wrote it for her, right? Um, just to be like, here's my answers to your wonderings. Um, and maybe someday you'll read it and if other people wanna read along, we would be so honored.

But yeah, it's, uh, it's about that conflict within our community too, and the different choices, I think, historically that Asian Americans have had to make either through a, a fear and scarcity mindset and choosing to hunker down and want to fight for whiteness, right, versus hey, this is unfair and not just for me, but for everyone so we're gonna fight for justice and transform the game. Um, and as I noted and I talked, today is the anniversary of the Supreme Court ruling and the Wong Kim Ark case, which established, uh, birthright citizenship for everyone regardless of race. And I said, I said in my talk, right, and in the book I talk about how Wong Kim Ark could have said, like, "Oh, hey, let, uh, white people, black people, and just Chinese people too have birthright citizenship." But he didn't. He fought and said the principle of it is anyone who's born here should have birthright citizenship. Now, we know in this 2025 era, Trump is wanting to reverse this 127-year precedent. Constitutional right.

Alexis Miles: And for those who might not know about the case that you're talking about, can you say a bit more?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. You know, there have been, uh, Asian migrants in what is now known as the United States since the 1500s. Um, the Filipinos were first. But, um, by the 1800s, around when abolition occurred and civil war occurred, the ending of slavery, you needed cheap, exploitable controlled labor to also pit against the now freed black people. And so, there were a lot of Chinese workers who were brought in for labor, and, um, then the Japanese and then the Koreans and Indians and so on and so forth. And, the sentiment, the anti-immigrant sentiment was very high. Not unlike now, in some ways. And then in 1875, Congress passed a law called the Page Act, which banned, um, Chinese women from immigrating to the United States because, uh, there was a presumption that Chinese women were prostitutes and would bring

disease. So, this public health connection, right, is also part of it, much like 2020 with COVID and public health. And then a few years after 1875, in 1882, uh, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. So, that effectively ended immigration from China. And, initially it was China, but then it expanded to other parts of Asia until the 1920s when something called the Asiatic Barred Zone was created. So, no one from Asia was allowed to immigrate to the United States.

Okay. Wong Kim Ark. So, 1882 Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act and Wong Kim Ark had been born in San Francisco to Chinese immigrant parents, much like me. I was born in Boston to Chinese immigrant parents a hundred years later. And, he went to China to visit family, and on his way back, before he left for China, the bill had not been signed yet. When, on his way back from China, Con, um, the president had signed the Chinese Exclusion Act into law. And so, he's at Angel Island, which is outside of San Francisco, the immigration station, and the immigration agent said, "You can't come in here. You're Chinese." And he was like, "I was born in the United States, and due to the 14th Amendment, I am an American citizen." And, the immigration agents, the government was saying, well, you know, that's really only for African descendants due to the Civil War and abolition and white people, because that goes back to 1790-something. Right, with the founding of the nation. Okay. So, he fought it, right? And the Mutual Aid Associations came together in San Francisco Chinatown and said, no, the 14th Amendment should apply to everyone, including Wong Kim Ark, who was born here in San Francisco. And it went all their way to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court actually tried to figure out a way to only allow white people birthright citizenship, but they realized they couldn't tie things up anymore and, and ruled in Wong Kim Ark, in our favor, right? The public's favor, which is, it doesn't matter what race or ethnicity you identify as. If you are born in the United States, you are a US citizen. So, that's why I'm a US citizen. My husband's a US citizen. His parents came from Thailand. It's, you know, really a foundational change in this country, or affirmation, really, of values right? And the Trump administration wants to overturn that.

Sam Fuqua: When you said in your keynote, "Few Asian Americans understand who we really are," was that, uh, history that you've just, uh, given us some of? Was that what you were talking about?

OiYan Poon: Yes, absolutely. I mean, just, um, even thinking about my growing up in Massachusetts, in the excellent public schools, I didn't get to learn anything about Asian American history. Um, I learned a very narrow understanding of African American history. I certainly didn't learn anything about Latino history. Um, and very, you know, again, a very narrow understanding of Native American history, right? Native Americans, genocide. African Americans, slavery. Right? That's pretty much all we learn in public school, right? And then, I got to college and took a sociology of race class, and that blew my mind. And then, because, I went to Boston College and it was one of the first years we had a diversity requirement in the 1990s, and I, because of that requirement, I was like, oh, what is this Asian American history class? Let me give it a go. And that just suddenly, I sound, I'm a very talkative person now, but back then I was a very quiet person. I don't think I had the language, right? I didn't have the language to really understand my experiences growing up here. Um, so then taking that class just opened up the whole world. I mean, if you remember the movie, The Matrix, it was that kind of morphous, neo, pill taking moment where I was just like, whoa. Wow. Okay. I see the world completely differently now.

Alexis Miles: Can you give an example of one of those 'wow' moments when you saw something just totally differently?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. I think growing up, because my grandparents, um, were in Boston Chinatown and we had to go to Boston Chinatown all the time as a kid, and I was always so bored, right? Um, and I found like the grocery, the Chinese grocery stores stinky, or, you know, I didn't, I didn't have an appreciation really for Chinatown. And, I think taking Asian American history class and understanding what ethnic enclaves, like Chinatown, like Little Tokyo, Manila town, um, Devon in Chicago, which is the Indian community, or Argyle, which is the Vietnamese community, I suddenly had, like the, oh my gosh, this is our community. The reason why these communities exist is not for tourism or for just grocery shopping. It's for survival and thriving and for joy and coming together to fight, um, oppression, right? And so, all of a sudden I started thinking about myself, my community, as fighters, right? We didn't just roll over and take violence or harassment or racism, it's, we have this long history of collective resistance.

Sam Fuqua: As a parent and an education researcher with a daughter in the public schools of Chicago, right, give us your perspective on the conflicts around equity and school choice.

OiYan Poon: Woo. That's a dicey conversation. When we moved into our neighborhood, we're on the northwest side, our house is right on, the alleyway is the divider. If you know Chicago, you know alleyways are really critical. Our alleyway is the divider between two public schools in the neighborhood. One is a little over half white. It was the more desirable public school for our neighbors. And the other one, which we are clearly zoned into is a Title I. So, low income, predominantly LatinA public school. And when we moved to that neighborhood, it was right around kindergarten. We were talking to the neighbors about, like, oh, we're probably just gonna send our kid to, you know, this school that we're zoned into 'cause why go through the hassle of all the paperwork and figuring out where to, I couldn't, I have a PhD in education. I could not figure out the school choice system in Chicago. Um, that says something, right, around the systems of inequality. And so, I'm like, okay. We'll just go to our, I've, I've visited the school, I met the principal, I met some of the teachers and the other parents. Seems fine, you know. Great. Um, but our neighbors were like, "Why wouldn't you send our child, your child to the neighboring school?" And I was like, "Why should I?" And they're the, this kind of veiled conversation, not conversation. I was like, "What's wrong with our school?" And they were like, "The demographics." Like, one person literally said, "The demographics." And I was like, "What? What do you mean?" And they're like, "You know. You know," like in that hushed tone. And I was like, "No, we're gonna send our child to, it seems fine." And the, they were all about, they, they were like, this is how you lie, steal, cheat your way into this other, slightly majority white school. And I was like, I don't need to, right?

But I feel like if I pushed it, there definitely would've been a conflict. And there's always, this is my question right now, is the closer she gets to high school, right, the high school there are selective magnet public high schools in Chicago and she, she and her friends are already talking about we have to go to those high schools. We have to go to Lane Tech. We have to go to Whitney Young. Michelle Obama went to Whitney Young. And I'm like, you want to have a two hour train ride at 6:00 AM and two hour train ride, like train and bus and transfers and all this stuff. And when, to me, I feel like there's a perfectly fine high school down the street, right? It's not famous like these other ones are, but I don't know. I, I have these conversations, and one of our neighbors who, um, the family is black and they send their child to a private Catholic school, and I was like, why don't you, it's fine. Our school is great. And, you know, and she was like, "No, I'm raising a, a black child, a black boy. He's going to become a black man. I need to give him all the privileges and benefits that I can provide to him to deal with anti-black racism." And I'm just like, I, I get that. And, and like, I don't know how to, there's these parental choices and they're so individual and split and they worry me, right, because then it's like we we're all split apart and easier to have schools really decimated, I guess.

Alexis Miles: Well, you mentioned being split apart. Well, we are all split apart. Do you think some of that is deliberate, like a divide and conquer strategy?

OiYan Poon: Yeah. I mean, that is at the end of the day, right, that's, there's, we're seeing it right now for sure with the Trump administration, but I would say that especially with school and education policies, that's been the case, right? We, as long as we're split apart, we've never had fully integrated schools. We've never had fully desegregated schools. And, the more we see each other as strangers, the more we can be suspicious of each other and be played with and, um, the people with power can maintain power and aggregate power, and to whose detriment, right?

Alexis Miles: Yeah. I see that a lot in, in two ways. Like, Asians as the model minority, so all other minorities are pitted against Asians. And then, I'm like, I'm African American and I see it between Asian Americans and African Americans, and how that's exploited.

OiYan Poon: Absolutely.

Alexis Miles: And you talk about the way news is reported, and I pay attention to that as well. And how, um, the voices of a few sometimes are elevated, so they sound like they, they're, the voices of the majority of Asians are, are African Americans, Asian Americans are African Americans. And it's not the case. And it's deliberately manipulated by the media. By mass media.

OiYan Poon: Absolutely. Absolutely. And, and you know, the perfect example is, as I shared this morning at the keynote is, um, you know, with the lawsuit against Harvard and UNC, people assumed that it was Asians that were suing Harvard, and when in fact there were no Asian plaintiffs. Um, the plaintiff was actually this species or, um, organization called, um, SFFA, Students For Fair Admissions, and it was founded by two white people. Um, Ed Blum and Abigail Fisher. And, Ed Blum has been on this lifelong campaign against all of the civil rights wins. His first big win was against the Voting Rights Act, right, and, and, uh, it gutted the Voting Rights Act in 2013, Shelby versus Holder was the case. And then after that he was like, oh, you know what, this admission stuff, people get real emotional and wrangled up of wanting to talk about education. Um, and he, he and Abigail Fisher sued UT Austin. They lost in 2016. And when he realized, when Ed Blum realized that he was gonna lose with Abigail Fisher, he realized he should use a racial strategy. Ironic, right, given that he was using a racial strategy to fight race conscious admissions, right? And so, he went around the country trying to find an Asian plaintiff, um, and no one stepped forward. But he went forward anyway. He sued Harvard and we know the end of that story in 2023. Ending race conscious admissions.

But opinion poll after opinion poll, the majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action. But, because of these stereotypes of the model minority myth, oh, Asians work so hard and they're a racially minoritized population, and you know, affirmative action hurts them, when it doesn't, right? But you lean into the stereotypes and the biases, and then all of a sudden you're in this thinking that, oh, it makes sense. Asians must have sued Harvard, when they never did. It's such gaslighting, ugh, drives me bonkers. What it's all about is to try to split a, a rainbow coalition, right? And the possibilities of a rainbow coalition, right? Um, I was sharing with somebody today, one of the reasons why I love Chicago is the history of Rainbow Coalition and Chairman Fred, Fred Hampton, and, you know, how he built coalitions with the Puerto Ricans and white working class, and that's when you knew he had to go, you know, according to the federal

government, right? And so, this is very similar. You keep people apart so that there can remain a white supremacist power structure.

Sam Fuqua: You're referring to Fred Hampton, chairman of the Black Panther Party in Chicago, uh, and then murdered in his bed by law enforcement.

OiYan Poon: That's right. That's right. By the FBI. CIA. Police. Yep. With his pregnant wi, um, girlfriend, partner.

Alexis Miles: If you were able to give a message to everybody in the United States, let's go even further, to everybody in the world, about how people can come together in the service of all of us, what do you, what message would that be? About how to come together?

OiYan Poon: We have to be clear about our values. Everyone wants strong communities, safe communities, healthy communities, right? We have to remember that we share in those values, and if we move in, in centering those values, then these messages to split apart, us apart are harder. They have a harder job to do. Does that make sense? So, I think part of it is a messaging and reminding people, these are our values, even in these really scary times that are pushing us towards scarcity, and just, like, I gotta just take care of myself, right? When really, the only way to take care of myself is to also be in community with others and take care of each other. So, I guess my message is one of a reminder of abundance that we can only win if we win together.

Sam Fuqua: OiYan Poon, thank you so much for speaking with us.

OiYan Poon: Thank you.

Sam Fuqua: OiYan Poon is an education researcher, co-director of the *College Admissions Futures Collaborative*, and the author of *Asian American is Not A Color: Conversations on Race, Affirmative Action and Family*. We spoke with OiYan Poon at the 2025 White Privilege Conference.

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