

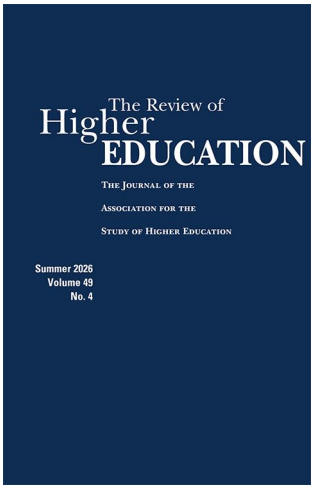
# Not Just the Arc, but the Architects: Justice, Scholarship, and the Power to Reimagine Higher Education

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**2025 ASHE Presidential Address**

# Not Just the Arc, but the Architects: Justice, Scholarship, and the Power to Reimagine Higher Education

*Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher*

**Abstract:** In this presidential address commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), I contend that the moral arc of higher education does not bend toward justice without intentional, collective action. Drawing on personal narrative, historical analysis, and cultural metaphor, the address situates contemporary assaults on higher education including anti-intellectualism, anti-DEI legislation, constraints on academic freedom, and technological inequities within longer histories of anti-literacy laws and the politicization of knowledge. Also noted is how Artificial Intelligence is quickly changing higher education, bringing new innovations as well as challenges in equity, access, and ethics. Framed through

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the tradition of the griot, I advance scholarly creative expression as both a methodological and ethical intervention, positioning storytelling, art, and narrative as vital forms of knowledge production and resistance. Inspired by the principles of critical hope, the address calls on scholars and leaders to engage in truth-telling, mentorship, advocacy, and imaginative praxis. In a moment of profound retrenchment and possibility, I invite the field to move beyond documenting inequity toward co-creating more just, humane, and liberatory futures in higher education.

*Keywords:* higher education policy, anti-intellectualism, DEI, scholarly-creative activity, leadership

## Framing Section: Introductory Note

Providing context and background on the inspiration behind the 50th anniversary conference of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) is essential. My ASHE presidency between November 2024 to November 2025, was during a period that marked political transition and heightened polarization that placed higher education at the center of national debate. Following the 2024 presidential election, federal policy proposals and oversight efforts increasingly focused on universities, particularly regarding campus protests, civil rights compliance, diversity initiatives, and the use of federal research funding. These developments intensified long-standing tensions on campuses across the country raising complex questions about free expression, campus climate, and institutional responsibility. Sparks continued as colleges and universities navigated demonstrations related to civil rights, global conflicts and domestic political divisions amid structural pressures such as enrollment declines, reduced public trust, and affordability concerns. Together, these political, social, and economic dynamics culminated in heightened scrutiny and uncertainty in U.S. higher education.

The contestation spanning several areas of academe and society at large prompted renewed debate about the place of government in higher education. This was especially in terms of the politics of pedagogy, identity, knowledge creation and ideological bias. The theme was "The Bend in the Arc: Activist Praxis and Justice Through Scholarly Creative Expression." Drawing upon Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1968) perspective on the moral arc of the universe, the conference highlighted both historical and current policies that have constrained access and reinforced structural inequities. While acknowledging progress made to date, my remarks sought to also emphasize the considerable role higher education can play in fostering an equitable educational environment, particularly through our scholarly-creative efforts.

In transitioning, better yet attempting to transform my presidential address into an academic journal article that can serve as introduction to the speech turned article Presidential addresses occupy an unusual position in academic life. Delivered to a professional community at a particular historical moment, they are designed as performative scholarly acts simultaneously reflective, personal, and agenda-setting for a field. Transforming such an address into a journal article therefore involves navigating several tensions between oral address and written scholarship.

As I endeavored to adapt my presidential address into a scholarly journal article that presents the speech in its new form, I realized that addresses of this kind hold a distinct place within academic discussions. I mulled over how best to incorporate acknowledgments and reference shared experiences with colleagues. My keynote was shaped by the immediacy of the audience and occasion. While preparing my presidential address, I aimed to balance intellectual depth, a meaningful narrative, audience engagement, and a tone that inspired both reflection and action, all while ensuring my remarks matched the conference theme.

In full transparency, when asked by the *Review of Higher Education* (*RHE)* Editors to convert my address into an article, I lamented on whether to substantively revise into the traditional academic journal format. Would it be better if I made it more general and less personal? I felt a notable tension in trying to adapt this speech for publication. More specifically, I felt if I pivoted to tailor the article to readers who weren't in attendance the ASHE@50 Conference, then I'd negate the context in which it was delivered. The nuance of reflection and synthesis in my presidential address would be limited if not lost to traditional framing and expectations around dissemination of scholarly activities.

My presidential address highlighted the creative nature of our work and urged greater agency in pursuing expressive scholarship. Rather than conforming to standard formats, I aimed to preserve the speech's original spirit and context. The autobiographical moments shared are intended to support analysis, helping illuminate broader trends in our field by drawing from my personal and professional experiences. Ultimately, I hope my address whether presented live, recorded, or written—points toward a collective, creative, and optimistic future.

## 2025 Presidential Address Opening Remarks

I am Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, I use she/her/hers pronouns, I am a petite, brown skinned woman, wearing black glasses and a black pin-striped suit with a gold top. I come to you from the University of Pittsburgh which occupies the ancestral land of the Seneca, Adena culture, Hopewell culture,

and Monongahela peoples, who were later joined by refugees of other tribes including the Delaware, Shawnee, Mingo, and Haudenosaunee. I also want to acknowledge that this ASHE convening gathers on the ancestral homelands of the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Ute Nations, among at least 48 tribal nations historically tied to this region and community long before the establishment of the city now known as Denver. We honor the original stewards of this land and recognize the enduring presence, contributions, and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples in Colorado.

In addition, we recognize the labor of enslaved Africans and their descendants, whose forced labor built much of the infrastructure and wealth of this country. Their contributions, made under conditions of unimaginable suffering, continue to be erased or undervalued. We also acknowledge the labor of exploited immigrant communities whose work has sustained and shaped Denver's economy and culture. This acknowledgment is not a substitute for action. It is a call to engage in truth-telling, reparative justice, and community-centered change. We commit to honoring these histories through ongoing education, advocacy, and equity-driven practices.

It is my honor to welcome you to Denver in celebration of our organization's 50th anniversary. Each year, ASHE presidents' set the theme, vision, and cadence for activities spanning a calendar year which culminates in the annual conference. It required a lot of hands on deck to bring everything to fruition. I'd like to begin with heartfelt thanks. Our 50th anniversary convening was made possible with the support of many individuals. My sincere thanks to everyone involved.

Special acknowledgment is given to the ASHE conference proposal reviewers and volunteers, the ASHE governing board, ASHE Council leadership, members of standing committees and entities. Past ASHE presidents, the ASHE@50 Campaign Committee, and my academic home institution the University of Pittsburgh, are recognized for their support during my presidency. Appreciative thanks to our conference sponsors, the Sheraton staff, and my program officers at Gates Foundation. Also, I would like to note the welcomed support of my academic peers, colleagues, collaborators, and mentors—particularly community college researchers and practitioners; hugs to my scholar squad (you know who you are), former and current students, my BFFs[1], sorority sisters, family members and those that are like family for their support.

Finally, a special shout out to the three most important people in my life. James, you are my rock and a constant. Thanks for being my certainty in uncertain times. Husband, thank you for being "The Love of My Life—you are my friend . . . on you I can depend, yeah" (in my best Erykah Badu voice).

[1]Best Friends Forever.

And to my daughters . . . our wonder twins, I marvel at you, I thank God for you. Always know there'll never be any gift greater than you.

I hope it's apparent that my attitude is one of gratitude. If I have forgotten anybody, please charge it to my head and not my heart. And my heart is so full at this moment. They say there's no testimony without a test. And the past few years for me definitely reflect being tried and tested.

It's a joy and a privilege to be with you at this pivotal crossroads where higher education is both under siege and ripe with transformative possibility; we are compelled to engage with its unfolding narrative: a story arc defined by enduring tensions between progress and peril, mirroring the broader societal currents that shape our collective future.

## Every Story Has an Arc

In novels, movies, or life, there's a story at the center. And every story arc that unfolds starts introducing a central character, one that over time faces an important moment, a crisis. We see them trying to navigate increasing tension either by seeing their storyline progress with them mastering or succumbing to challenge at their peril.

### The Bending Arc

This year's theme references a statement by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." However, arcs don't bend on their own. They are pulled, stretched, and shaped by those who refuse to let them snap backward. Today, I want to share a story about that bend.

Over the years, I have been told I am a good storyteller. I actually consider myself to be something of a griot, even edited a few issues of The Griot Newsletter as a graduate student at the University of Illinois. But the thing about a griot is they're far more than a storyteller. In West African traditions, they are revered as oral historians, cultural archivists, and societal commentators. Through spoken word, music, and performance, griots preserve genealogies, recount historical narratives, and transmit communal values across generations. As custodians of memory and conscience, they embody the living archive of their people—bridging past and present. So, what I'm about to share is part personal, part historical, and part creative perspectives relative to today's arc, addressing the nature of being a scholar and leader during these times. Though, before I dive in, I'd like to provide my backstory and parallel arcs.

## My Origin Story: Planting of the Seed

Before I was a scholar, before I was a dean, before I carried titles, I was a child of two people who deeply loved me and greatly believed in education, even without degrees. The saying "mothers are the carriers of culture" rooted in both anthropological thought and feminist scholarship, reflects a widely held understanding across disciplines that mothers play a central role in transmitting cultural values, beliefs, language, and traditions to the next generation. Patricia Hill Collins' (1997) chapter "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships" in editors Mary Gergen and Sara Davis text *Toward a New Psychology of Gender* as well Rachel Epp Buller and Kerry Fastdit's 2013 book *Mothering Mennonite*, describe mothers as "transmitters of culture". My mother/first teacher was a carrier of culture. She taught me to be inquisitive, observant, to be a lover of words, to know my worth, and to speak truth to power. My Ma was one the most resourceful people on the planet; she could turn something out of nothing and was the epitome of grace under pressure. Her steering my learning was an act of love.

My father, a man of tremendous work ethic, modeled perseverance. The apple didn't fall far from the tree as it is his work ethic that is the engine beneath my surface. A veteran who served in the army airborne unit during Vietnam and retired Chicago police officer, from him I learned servant leadership.

At its core, servant leadership is a commitment to uplift, to place the needs of people and communities above personal ambition. I'm also cut from the cloth where helping others is not ancillary but essential, and improving conditions is not a goal but a guiding principle. My grandparents, my parents, my aunts, uncles, cousins, our family's tapestry is rooted in serving and by building environments where equity, growth, and collective well-being can flourish. Like many, my parents both had some college, but no degree. Yet there was a college-going culture in my home in terms of expectancy, and they invested in me.







*Figure 1. Author with parents Mary Ella and Richard House (family photos)*








*Figure 2. Author with parents Mary Ella and Richard House (family photos)*

## My Origin Story: Antecedents and Ancestors

My maternal great-great grandmother Rose had no formal education, her daughter Polly my great-grandmother had early childhood education, and my grandmother Johnnie Mae reached 6th grade but didn't finish because at 12 years old she had to work on a plantation sharecropping. My family, like many Black families in Mississippi and across the South, were deeply affected by sharecropping well into the mid-1960s. So many assume that our time on plantations was ions ago and don't understand its impact in terms of trapping families in cycles of poverty. Children in sharecropping families were often pulled from school to work in the fields, especially during planting and harvest seasons. This disrupted education and limited long-term opportunities for social mobility. Sharecropping was a family-based labor system. Everyone—men, women, and children worked long hours under harsh conditions. This created physical and emotional strain and often blurred the lines between childhood and adulthood.

This was the case with my grandmother Johnnie Mae. She became pregnant with my mother, her one and only child at age 15. Here's the earliest photo we have of my mother in a cotton field on the planation where my grandmother's family sharecropped. My mother was named after the plantation owner's wife. Grandma thought Ms. Mary Ella was nice to her during her pregnancy as she'd let her have an extra break and additional water while in the field.

My mother never appreciated being named after that woman. But given the lack of autonomy, little to no agency, the oppressive nature of sharecropping reinforcing racial and economic hierarchies in Mississippi, my Grandmother a single teenage mother, migrated to Chicago, Illinois seeking a better opportunity. To give her baby girl a different reality. This move reshaped our family's trajectory. From Grandma, the first lesson at her lap was one of cultural resilience. Several of her siblings followed her up north. She was the glue and modeled for us despite hardships, strong family ties, being rooted in faith, and seeking to be a blessing to others is our brand. I stand on the shoulders of a loving family and extended kinship network that's laid the groundwork for me to stand before you today. I carry their legacy and those before them. *I am because they were*.



*Figure 3. Great-Great Grandmother Rose and Great Grandmother Polly*



*Figure 4. Mother Mary Ella as a toddler, Grandmother Johnnie Mae and Mother Mary Ella as a young adult*

## My Origin Story: Becoming a Scholar-Leader

Maya Angelou (1978) wrote, "I am the dream and the hope of the slave" (p. 42). Like Maya, again, at my core, I'm a storyteller, yep, a griot. And stories shape the arc of history. My story is shaped by working class parents with a value orientation for educational access and supporting my success. When I first stepped onto a college campus, I was carrying a mixture of hope, curiosity, and . . . honestly, a little fear. I was aware of the doors that had been opened for me thanks to generations before me who fought for access, for equity, for a chance at learning that once been denied. I was aware, too, of the ceilings that still lingered. I came to higher education carrying the dreams of my parents and others who paved the way before me. I entered the collegiate context thinking education could be emancipatory, be a panacea. But I sensed the contradiction; higher education empowers and excludes at the same time.

Over the years, I moved from student to scholar to leader. I've had the privilege of mentoring students, conducting research, building programs, and advocating for policies that center just educational experiences and equitable student outcomes. In traversing the academy, I found my voice not only through traditional scholarship but through *creative expression*. Storytelling, writing poetry, immersing myself in music and other artforms spoke to my soul. I learned that research can be rigorous *and* relatable, epistemological *and* equitable, empirical *and* expressive, critical *and* compassionate.

As this seed sprouted and as I blossomed through various seasons of my career, what I know for sure is that the most transformative forms of scholarship are not confined to pages or podiums, but pulse through the arts, through narrative, through the collective of community. There is an art and science to what we do. And that's where I located my purpose as someone committed to justice and equity through the artistry of scholarship.

## Looking Back to Look Forward: Anti-Literacy Laws

From the early 18th to mid-19th centuries, Southern states enacted laws to prevent enslaved African Americans from learning to read and write, particularly after major rebellions like Stono in 1739 and Nat Turner's in 1831 (Anderson, 1988; Mitchell, 2008; Williams, 2009). These laws imposed harsh penalties on both learners and teachers and were strictly enforced. The resulting literacy gap between whites and Blacks extended beyond emancipation through post-slavery policies such as Black Codes and Jim Crow laws continued to restrict educational opportunities for Black Americans through segregation and underfunding of schools (Black, 2025; Woodson, 2023).

Literacy in the U.S. has functioned both as a tool of oppression and resistance (McLaren & Tadeu da Silva, 1993; Mitchell, 2008), especially concerning antiblackness. Despite anti-literacy laws and segregation designed to suppress

Black voices, Black communities have pursued literacy for empowerment. Pursuit of literacy has been crucial for self-determination from slavery onward (Sandles, 2023; Williams, 2009). A contemporary case in point, of the ongoing politicization of education is Florida's Stop W.O.K.E. Act which endeavors to restrict teaching on race, which has led to misrepresentation in curricula, limited academic freedom, and reinforced racial inequality (Bissell, 2023; Conyers & Wright Fields, 2025; Russell-Brown, 2023). This is not just about censorship, it's about control. About who gets to define truth. Who gets to speak. And who gets to be seen as fully human in the narrative of knowledge production, dissemination, and acquisition. Judicial actions have partially blocked enforcement in higher education (Blake, 2025) due to First Amendment concerns, however, there are broader shifts toward colorblind legal doctrines continuing to erode civil rights protections. Stronger federal safeguards for public P-20 education, especially in the current climate are dubious as regressive legislative acts are trending.

## Looking Back to Look Forward: The Return of Anti-Intellectualism

Anti-literacy and the current attack on higher learning we're witnessing is not new. Anti-intellectualism in America dates back to the 18th century. Today, we face a 21st-century sequel to anti-literacy and a return to anti-intellectualism. Richard Hofstadter asserted in his seminal book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* in 1963 that American identity reflects a tension between intellect and practicality with intellectuals being scapegoated during complex and turbulent times. He argued that anti-intellectualism recurs in cycles during periods of anxiety or rapid change—especially if the dominant culture sees the general public as wanting to reclaim democracy for "the people" as a perceived threat. Anti-intellectualism framed education as a political topic, where reasoned inquiry and critical reflection arose as rebellious acts of defiance. Education became political terrain where academics were branded as elitist, suspect, and dangerous.

Sound familiar? In recent years there has been political backlash against expertise, in particular distrust of academics and institutions. We've seen anti-science movements, attacks on theory and critical inquiry both inside and outside of the academy as social media doesn't readily respect analytical depth but rewards reactive immediacy mirroring anti-intellectual tendencies.

From slashing funding to MSIs[2], anti-DEI[3] policies dismantling offices that promote inclusion, the rollback of civil rights to the attacks on academic free-

[2]Minority Serving Institutions.

[3]Anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion.

dom and gag orders on teaching; anti-CRT[4] rhetoric, banning land acknowledgments and discussions of systemic racism, heterosexism, and transphobia to active erasure of BIPOC[5] and LGBTQ[6] folx from curricula, history, and culture. There's been massive cuts in federal research funding, particularly targeting what have been deemed as studies that are too woke. What we're seeing is not merely policy, it's a return to a mindset—a suspicion of critical thought, of complexity, of justice itself. The thing is this is not a new normal for sexism and xenophobia to be cloaked in neutrality, to witness whitewashing of truth, and replacing complexity with comfort. It's intergenerational. Our elders fought it at lunch counters and marches. We fight it in classrooms and policy meetings. Our students and children will fight it in digital spaces and social movements yet to come. Intergenerational work matters. It is in recognizing what those before us fought for and achieved that we can help future generations continue the vital work necessary for moving forward. In short, this historical rerun calls for us to write a different ending.

## The Upside Down, The Sunken Place, Gilead, and Lessons from Sinners

As anti-intellectualism resurfaces in our society, often manifesting as suspicion toward critical thinking and the erasure of complex truths. Popular culture provides powerful metaphors that not only reflect present challenges but also connect us to larger realities of intergenerational struggle against the erasure of truth and the suppression of critical thought. *Stranger Things* (Duffer et al., 2016–2025) depicts the Upside Down as a distorted version of reality, similar to how some campuses invert truth and ban certain words. In *Get Out* (Peele, 2017), the Sunken Place represents being silenced and powerless, an experience familiar to many scholars and students whose voices and work are marginalized or dismissed. In *The Handmaid's Tale* (Miller et al., 2017–present), Gilead emerges not through chaos but through quiet normalization . . . through laws disguised as order, through words redefined, through silence. We see versions of that now when anti-DEI laws are justified as "neutral" or when whitewashed curriculum is framed as "balanced" (Bissell, 2023). The film Sinners (Coogler, 2025) takes us into a world of contradictions where moral conviction meets institutional corruption. The story asks, how do good people operate within broken systems? In *Sinners*, Ryan Coogler's story holds up a mirror, our profession is full of good people struggling inside unjust systems. Because even in a world of sinners, redemption begins with those who refuse to stop seeing humanity.

[4]Anti-Critical Race Theory.

[5]Black and Indigenous People of Color.

[6]Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning.

I point to TV shows and films as cultural metaphors that reveal the stakes. They are all stories about erasure and the fight to resist it. As academics we are creators and scholars who can *write back*. Instead of being suspended in the Upside Down, the power of scholarly creative expression is one way of turning things right-side up again.

**STORIED: Now for a Commercial Break**

You know, it's hard to escape commercials. When I'm watching standard networks or streaming services such as Hulu or Peacock, I have to sit through commercials, notably pharmaceutical ads. Analysis of data by *StudyFinds Analysis* (2025) shows just how significant this presence has become. Drug companies invested $3.73 billion in national TV advertising from January through August 2025, representing 14% of all television advertising spending during this period. Lately, I have lamented on how higher education is plagued with so many ailments. So much so that we need an antidote, an elixir for our various ills to cure what ails us. If only there were a treatment plan for what has been making us so sick . . . [7]

**Harsh Realities**

My faux prescription medicine ad "Realatin" illuminates how higher education is undergoing seismic shifts driven by generative AI[8]'s disruptive potential and intensified by political retrenchment on DEI and federal oversight. These forces are reshaping the academic landscape, often in conflicting directions. The landscape is changing at a rapid pace. Even as someone who isn't an early adopter of AI, I see how it can enhance the freedom to scale creativity activities. I utilized OpenAI's latest generative video and audio model Sora2 to create the commercial I just showed. Essentially, we have to evolve or evaporate as technological shifts, policy changes, and the real issues we're facing are very tangible.

AI has the potential to be both beneficial and detrimental. On the upside, when well-integrated into a structured learning path, AI can enhance access, understanding, and learning outcomes especially for visual and auditory learners. However, the downside is that many AI models contain cultural and language biases, disadvantaging non-English speakers and underrepresented communities (Dempere et al., 2023; Ifelebuegu et al., 2023).

While its presence is inevitable, AI access largely depends on reliable internet, modern devices, and being technically proficient which only will deepen the digital divide for marginalized groups. This could further exacerbate education and employment gaps as AI reshapes industries, those without access

[7]Insert video link to faux commercial "Realatin" (2025a): https://drive.google.com/file/d/1z6_Q2nnFA3O33_W4We6zPb_y14RwCL0X/view?usp=drivesdk

[8]Artificial Intelligence.

to training or tools risk being excluded from new opportunities. Although generative AI provides benefits to education, its autonomy often results in a focus on commercial objectives rather than educational purposes.

## The Pendulum of Progress: Lessons from History

The rise of artificial intelligence poses new challenges and opportunities for academic freedom, influencing research, mentorship, and classroom dynamics. More commonly classrooms and campuses are battlegrounds for ideological debates. Faculty and students experience influence from political, social, and community factors. The academy, once a space to wrestle with ideas, reflects broader societal divisions.

History teaches us that progress is rarely linear. The pendulum swings sometimes forward, sometimes back, but the arc bends toward justice, even if it does so unevenly. The civil rights movement, expanding access to higher education, the establishment of DEI initiatives are not just policies or programs; they are the product of relentless advocacy, courage, and hope. Each advance has faced pushback. But if you wonder about the impact of our scholarship, know that it offers a foundation and framework for strategic action in moments of retrenchment that leads to meaningful triumphs over adversities.

### The Artistry and Character Arcs of Scholars

I have touched on historical antecedents, the contemporary context of our field, and acknowledged the importance of scholarly creative expression. Wholeheartedly that is one of our superpowers. Scholarly creative expression can aid in your resolve, resilience, and offer respite in spite of the jokers that try to jack your joy. Yes, the joker character frequents story time. Every story has characters who change and characters who refuse to. We must decide who we are in this story. What's the narrative? Is it a counternarrative or just counterintuitive? Are we bystanders or protagonists? Are we archivists of injustice, or architects of possibility? Because each time progress is made, please know the forces of fear regroup. But every time the arc bends backward, well they can just catch these hands—the hands of students, scholars, and communities pulling it forward again.

## Toward Critical Hope and Optimism

So where so we go from here and where does hope come in? Not the naive, passive kind but critical hope. It doesn't deny the pain. It works through it. Hope grounded in action, in strategy, armed in facts and not skirting truth. Critical hope acknowledges challenges but remains steadfast in overcoming them. We can advocate for policies that protect academic freedom. We can

mentor students and junior faculty. We can create spaces for dialogue amid polarized divides. Access, equity, and justice can advance despite setbacks. My good friend, Soror and past ASHE president Joy Gaston Gayles (2023) ascribes to counting it all joy (pun intended) even when it gets so hard to. She reminded us to keep hope afloat in her 2022 ASHE presidential address.

Freire's (2014) concept of critical hope calls for the conscious choice of seeing possibilities even when past and present circumstances point out challenges. Freire argued that despair serves oppression, and it paralyzes the capacity for change. But it is the courage to act that turns despair into determination. And it is the understanding that our actions now will impact generations later.

## Coming Full Circle

Now allow me to come full circle, returning to where I began. Like Kendrick Lamar (2017) said: "I got, I got, I got, I got loyalty, got royalty inside my DNA." That track for me signifies that my story, heritage, and sense of purpose reside within me. I am the legacy of the ancestors whose dreams I walk in, I am my parents' daughter appreciative of the bridges they built but never crossed so that I could stand here today. I am a descendant of laborers, builders, storytellers. Their voices echo in my leadership, my writing, my teaching. Their DNA runs through my work, my words, my will.

Our lives are like the stories we study, follow arcs too. As scholars we carry lineages of thinkers, artists, and activists in our intellectual DNA. And through each of us, the arc keeps bending. That's why I believe in the artistry of scholarship as a valuable form of creative expression. Scholarship isn't just analysis, it's creation. It's imagination. It's resistance. Through our work we make the invisible visible. Because data without story is hollow. We unveil multiple truths. And truth, to be felt, must also be heard.

The hope I carried as a student was not just personal, it was intergenerational. It was the result of countless struggles, victories, and lessons from those who came before me. And it is the responsibility of those of us in this room to ensure that the next generation inherits opportunity, not fear; sees possibility, feels promise and not punctured or on the precipice of peril. Right here, right now, we are watching history repeat, not as memory, but as policy. Remember the bend in the arc doesn't happen automatically. It happens through courage and creativity. But as scholars, leaders, and advocates, we have the tools and an imperative, to bend the arc even when it feels like it might snap.

To teach, to write, to create in this moment is a radical act of optimism. And we are affirming that being an educator isn't just a job—it's a calling and a covenant. So, I invite you to do so through scholarship that doesn't just interpret the world but transforms it. *Through leadership that listens deeply and acts justly. Mentor boldly, teach courageously, advocate fiercely*.

## Bend in the Arc: Who Are the Architects?

As a child, I loved watching cartoons. As an adult I appreciate animation like The Boondocks (McGruder et al., 2005–2014), South Park (Parker et al., 1997–present), and Spider-Verse with Miles Morales (Persichetti et al., 2018). These shows explore social themes of identity, belonging, critique race, class, politics, and media. Being the self-proclaimed griot that I am, I can appreciate the social commentary and visual storytelling of the genre. It aligns with my own conventions. Therefore, if I were to pitch a new adult animated series, I would want a distinctive tone and style that blends social commentary, satire, with optimism. I can't emphasize enough that institutions alone don't transform but activist scholars and practitioners co-create change, our students are co-creators of knowledge, and the communities partnering with our campuses co-author the creative solutions artists and storytellers.[9]

**Imagine Otherwise. Create Bravely.**

As I close, on this 50th anniversary of ASHE, having taken stock of where we are: the Department of Education being stripped down to the studs, graduate plus loans getting gutted, ongoing federal disinvestment, rising tuition costs, the fueling anti-immigrant sentiment and presence of ICE[10] on campuses, latest pressure tactics of the Higher Ed Compact or the litany of other disruptions and distractions happening leaving many to feel the uneasiness of no safety net (Yam, 2025).

As a field, this is a rare moment. Nonetheless, please know that we bend the arc not only through research and resistance, but through our artistry, through every classroom, every conference, every act of truth-telling. If the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, then scholars are its blacksmiths. We can choose to lean into the bend, even when it's hard, even when it hurts.

**Give Rise to Optimism**

As we celebrate the association's golden anniversary, we have to remind ourselves to try living our lives like their golden. Being in a field that seeks to advance the public good and we have to actually be good to ourselves and to one another. And for those of us that may feel recent events and this current time have knocked off our feet. Let me revisit the sage words of Maya Angelou (1978) who said, "*Still, I rise.*" And rise, we must, with critical hope in our hearts, creativity in our scholarship, and justice in our DNA. I will close by sharing lyrics from a Sounds of Blackness (1991) song, "You can win, as long as you keep your head to the sky." All told, as for me and mine, we will remain optimistic. Thank you and God bless![11]

[9]Insert video link to "In These Academic Streets" (2025b): https://drive.google.com/file/d/1K6bolzNHVh3f9JGVQH-Rfh_pU7jgkfv8/view?usp=drivesdk

[10]Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

[11]The video recording for this ASHE (2026) Presidential Address is available on the ASHE YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PyK8gHzsdik

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