

Royel Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash, and all indigenous nations, tribes, and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Felecia Commodore:

Three, two, one.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family, and welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast, where this year our theme is "I Am A Scholar". I'm your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, associate professor of higher education and social work at the University of Southern California and director of the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates of USC Race and Equity Center. It's a mouthful, and shout out to the Rossier School of Education and my dean Pedro Noguera for being a sponsor this year.

I have the privilege of working with a friend, a colleague, a person who I've known a really, really long time at this point, Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Hi, friends, family, and folks. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, associate professor of higher education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. We are excited to embark on another great conversation with some great emerging higher education scholars to discuss their perspectives on the current state of the field and how they envision what it means to be a higher education scholar today and moving forward.

At the risk of sounding old, grab your pens and pencils and notebooks, and let's get to learning about the next generation of higher education scholars.

Royel Johnson:

Join us in welcoming our special guest. First up, we have Gaurav Harshe, who is a third year AACTE home scholar at the University of South Carolina, where he is pursuing a PhD-

Felecia Commodore:

Go Gamecock!

Royel Johnson:

... in higher education administration. Next up-

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes, make some noise.

Next up, we have Nadeeka Karunaratne, who a postdoctoral researcher in the University of Utah's McCluskey Center for Violence Prevention.

And last but certainly not least, we have April N. Horne, who is a PhD candidate at the University of Arizona and is a member of the Dine tribe.

Felecia Commodore:

Welcome guests.

As you might know if you've listened to the podcast, and for you new folks, we usually do a segment called This or That, but this year we decided to switch it up a little bit. And so we're going to do a segment that we call QTNA.

Royel Johnson:

Questions that need answers.

Felecia Commodore:

Questions that need answers.

Royel Johnson:

All right, y'all ready?

Felecia Commodore:

So we're going to learn a little bit more about our guests.

Gaurav, we're going to start with you. Your question is, are you a lemon or a lime, and why?

Gaurav Harshe:

Wow, so actually in my grandmother's grandparents' house, we actually had a tree that had both lime and lemon grafted. Lime is the one that's the smaller one, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Gaurav Harshe:

I think I'm a lemon person because we used to make in summertime lemonade. We take the lemons out, make the juice, put a condensed situation, boil the sugar, put it squared away for the whole year. And then I used to take those back to Mumbai when I used to come back for my summer holidays and then use that all over the year, and so it was a cherished memory of, oh yeah, lemonade. But not how it's in the US, but lemonade but how it's in India.

Royel Johnson:

Listen, he said, "You give me lemons, I'm going to make lemonade."

Felecia Commodore:

I love it.

Gaurav Harshe:

Make some concentrate, then keep for a whole year and use it all year, resourcefulness. Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Quite elementary, yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Okay, Nadeeka, what movie scene is Oscar worthy?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Oh. Oh, this feels harder than lemon or lime.

April Horne:

I know. I know. We know it's tough.

Felecia Commodore:

We know you can do it. We know you've got-

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

I know.

Felecia Commodore:

Wonderful.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

I mean, a lot of my friends would laugh at this, but my favorite movie franchise is The Fast and the Furious. I think it's-

Felecia Commodore:

Oho, you're Fast and Furious family here.

Royel Johnson:

Which episode? Which version? It's like 10 of them.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

I mean, honestly, I think any scene at the end of the movie where, you know, "family" is the theme of all of those movies, the series, when they come together, some sort of barbecue picnic. Vin Diesel makes some dramatic speech.

I think I would say honestly you could pick any scene from any of those 10, 11, 12 movies.

Royel Johnson:

For me, it is a scene when they're playing the Wiz Khalifa song. The set. Oh, my god. Rest in peace.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Oh, God. Yeah, yeah, driving away.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I'm impressed by both of your dedication to the Fast and Furious franchise.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

One time my friend had a PowerPoint party during the pandemic, and I won third place for why Fast and Furious is the best.

Royel Johnson:

Oh, okay.

Felecia Commodore:

I love this. See, scholarship.

Royel Johnson:

Range.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Exactly.

Royel Johnson:

That's what we're talking about, range.

Felecia Commodore:

Teaching the people, education.

April, we would like to know, would you rather be able to control time or fly?

April Horne:

That's a great question. I think hands-down fly. When I first started my higher ed journey, I actually went into aerospace engineering. I just love flight. I just love it so much, and so I think that would be amazing.

Felecia Commodore:

Did not know that, so that wasn't a setup.

Royel Johnson:

So an aerospace engineer?

Felecia Commodore:

That's fascinating.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

So much about people on this podcast.

Royel Johnson:

Look, we're so excited to have you all today. We wanted to dive in in this conversation about what it means to enter the field of higher education at a time when it's facing very serious challenges, especially with all the scrutiny and attacks coming from state legislators around DEI. And so let's jump right on in, Felecia.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay, so could each of you just tell us a little bit about who you are and what you're currently studying?

Gaurav Harshe:

I can go first.

Okay, so I'm a third year PhD student. Again, higher education administration, University of South Carolina. All that is in the bio. You can read that. Currently studying and researching international higher education in the US context pretty much, and within that international students of color, or I like to say racialized international students, whether that's people of color or racialized as white or Black or brown or whatever you want to label people as.

Yeah, so I think, and then within that I'm an Indian international student myself, and so I'm really keen on looking at South Asian but also in Indian international students. They're the second largest now, the first largest group of international students in the US, so we don't really have a lot of scholarship on the students. On the students, but also with the students, which are the different problem altogether.

Yeah, Indian students have so many issues, but also so much that they bring to the US. Not necessarily all the good things because there's race attached to it, there's caste attached to it, there's socioeconomic status attached to it. But also we are not really doing a good job in higher ed to support Indian students in the way that they need support, and that's not unique to just Indian international students.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, thank you for sharing.

Others?

April Horne:

Sure, okay.

It's funny, and I have to take a moment to pause this because my state is so anti-critical race theory, and that's what I study. I study indigenous feminisms, I study critical race. I look at student access. I look at STEM access. I think the way that I've come into this journey has actually been very personal. I started in engineering. I felt like it wasn't a space for me. I did the internships, I went to a great school, but at the end of the day, there wasn't enough people like me for any space I was in to feel like home. And so in

my journey to find what home meant for my heart and for my soul, I came into the education, and I really love it.

I really love enabling access for students. I work with students all the time. It gives me so much life. It doesn't pay as well, but I think it's important work, and I really appreciate the department that I'm in right now. I think it's such a wonderful nest of higher ed, just intersectional thought. I think it's a really great launching pad for me at this stage of pulling these different frameworks together, pulling these different world views together.

That's me.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, thanks for sharing.

Last but not least?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Yeah, I'd say my work is largely around issues of sexual violence within higher education, and particularly looking with really coming into that with a radical healing framework. Looking at, again, a really intersectional lens on sexual violence and looking at the experiences of minoritized students and mostly the ways in which our institutions fail survivors of violence, and particularly minoritized students of color and queer, trans survivors.

I come to this work from my own practitioner background, the student affairs practitioner, especially particularly doing violence prevention work and cultural center work, and seeing a lot of the, again, ways that I and we were failing students. Both failing survivors and also failing students at large by not preventing these forms of violence in the first place on our college campuses. I'd say that's largely what my current research, dissertation research, and research agenda also is around.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, that's a good segue. We have concerted attacks on DEI right now, which is really limiting the way in which we support students, students who have experienced violence, racial minoritized students who experience racial violence on campus and harm.

How are you thinking about your role and responsibility as emerging scholars who are entering the field at a time in which there are heightened aggression on the work that we do?

April Horne:

I can jump right in.

I think at first, I just want to acknowledge that we're students. The things that we're studying and advocating for things that we personally experience and need someone to advocate for us, and oftentimes, at least where I'm at, it doesn't happen. That in and of itself is very exhausting.

I think in terms of how I envision my research contributing to that is that I know that we operate in organizations and institutions that are in a lot of times impenetrable to change. It's so difficult to be not white in these spaces, and so I think it matters when associations or when a collective lifts you up, when they spotlight your work, when they acknowledge and validate that your work matters.

I think in a lot of ways I acknowledge that it's I suppose academic capitalism in a way, but at the same time, that's the world that we were brought up in. And so it's nice to have that external validation. Even

though we know that this work is important personally, it's important to also have that outside perspective and support.

Royel Johnson:

Others?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Yeah, I want to build off, thank April for sharing that.

I think I have found a lot of that kind of outside support and external validation in amongst peers and in research spaces themselves. I think that's something that I've, especially within the postdoc that I'm currently in, having had opportunities to bring together to create a couple of research teams and bring together practitioners, grad students, researchers from across the country and create something together, found that I think one of my...

I'm learning that one of the things that I hope that I can contribute to the field at large and to higher education scholarship is also thinking about the process and the ways in which we engage in research. Really thinking about not just what we're studying and the questions and topics we're exploring, but the how in how we do things.

I think for me, I talk a lot about research methodologies in particular that can be healing and transformative, both for folks like students who might be participating or engaging, but also for researchers themselves. And so when April was sharing, I was thinking around how the fellow researchers, the folks that I'm working with, have really helped to create spaces for myself as well that are validating, that are encouraging, that inspire me to continue in this work.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, I love that you said that.

One of the things that I like about this year's theme I am a scholar is it pushes us to broaden the aperture in a way to include folks who are not always deemed a scholar. People who are delegitimized by way of they do their work, by way of their identities, and other experiences, and so I want us to be thoughtful about that. I'm looking forward to the conference and seeing what is represented in the sessions.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, and listening to you all talk about the work that each of you are doing really important work that touches a lot of different parts of higher education as a system, but also as an institution, which means we're dealing with policies and practices and politics and all of those things.

Given what some of what we've seen policy-wise and just political rhetoric around academic freedom and restrictions on that, restrictions on DEI narratives, and you all being early in your research careers, I know some of you've had practitioner careers. We don't want to discount that either, so just thinking about as researchers. How are you navigating those challenges of doing work that some people might consider controversial? How are you navigating those challenges while staying true to your scholarly and personal values and also producing impactful work?

Gaurav Harshe:

I think that I wrote down something about there's no option. The world is burning and you can't just be that the dog GIF that's sitting and having their thing in the burning thingy.

Felecia Commodore:  
That's my favorite GIF.

Gaurav Harshe:

I mean, yes, you can sit and have your coffee and tea and do whatever, but you might as well get out and get a hose, get a fire-

Felecia Commodore:  
Be helpful.

Gaurav Harshe:

... do something, not just sit down there. I mean, you're going to burn with it if you don't do anything. I'm trying to not use curse words because my language is a lot with that, and we do all this academic work with all of this academic freedom in how we language in this space.

But I think there's no option but to engage this. I mean, this is not the only time that these restrictions and things have had been put on us or the socio-economic, socio-political, what have you environment. I came to the US in the fall of 2016, and that's when the elections was going on with Trump, and so that was a height of everything. I was like, "This is amazing. This is America. Wonderful. We are having all this voting things and everything." I've never seen a different America when people say all a different US it's been since fall of 2016. When we say, "Oh, current rhetoric," I think current is questionable. Where do you start? Where do you end? What do you call current in the sense of what is mattering to you versus what has mattered to other people and has always not been brought up?

Yeah, I think there's no option but to stay true. I mean, I was talking in class the other day about academia. We are trying to sever our people from our communities, right? We talk about the ivory tower and become the ivory tower. We don't really know when we become those people, and we sever ourselves from our communities. And then who are we then? What are our values? Where do we lose them all along the way?

Royel Johnson:

I mean, to the last point, so much of higher education has been predicated on this idea that in order to even be successful in higher ed that you have to integrate academically and socially into this environment, irrespective of your cultural context and severing ties...

I'm actually just talking about this. I ain't going to tell you who emailed me because of this critique.

Felecia Commodore:  
Don't get us in trouble.

Royel Johnson:

But there are ways of doing in higher education that are fundamentally different from our cultural orientations and values.

I'm wondering. This year's conference team is "I Am A Scholar" and is having us think about our scholarly identities. How are you all thinking about and conceptualizing what it means to be a scholar in this particular moment? What does it mean to be a scholar for you?



Gaurav Harshe:

I can quickly go.

Just trying to finish my buttress, like buttress my last point, I think just "I Am A Scholar", talks about who you are as a person, but also as a community. As an I, but also we are a scholar or we are scholars and trying to push that boundary a little bit of individualism in the US versus communal spaces and community.

We talk about community all day, but then...

Royel Johnson:

Love it.

Gaurav Harshe:

And then scholar even we started this space with talking about who is considered a scholar. But if we don't consider everybody's scholars or consider everybody's scholars, then we just take meaning away from that word. We don't give it so much of a pedestal to begin with.

Royel Johnson:

Love that.

Others? What is a scholar to you? How are you defining that?

April Horne:

I'm trying to calm my face to like, oh, I have so many thoughts on this, but...

Felecia Commodore:

We want to hear all the thoughts.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

April Horne:

Where do I start?

No, honestly, when I saw the theme, I really appreciated it. I think that at this point in time it's a very appropriate. But the way that I frame it in my head is I am a scholar already. I think that's really helpful for students-

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

April Horne:

Yes because we don't feel like that. That's how the system is designed to make us feel like we don't know anything until we get the PhD, but the reality is a lot of us are... We have so many lived experiences. We have so many generations of experiences that have been passed down. My people were indigenous. We have thousands and thousands of years of knowledge and research already, right?

I think especially in the STEM field, this is what drew me particularly into engineering is that it is a space that we do this the most, where we gaslight people into thinking that they don't know these things. That if you're not a rocket scientist, you're not really smart. That's so false, right? And so I just think that just drawing from that, drawing that essence out I think is really important in what I'm doing.

But to go back to the early question of how do we navigate this because in some spaces, for example, my department, they are so supportive. Everything and anything that I envision or want to study, they're super supportive of. But I acknowledge that that's not how it is everywhere and in every discipline. And so I think one of the best things that we can do at this point is to build. To engage in coalition building, to engage those conversations, those knowledges that we wouldn't otherwise seek that support, and just the friendships, the relationships that exist outside of... When we think of Western education, it's just one limited field of education. I think of an indigeneity, this wholism, you can both be an engineer and an educator and what have you, right? You're all of those things all the time, every day, and so how do we acknowledge those kind of knowledges that exist in these different spaces that we don't normally build into?

I think that's maybe one of the worst things that could happen in an oppressive culture is that they lead us to believe that we're just an educator or we're just a scientist or we're just an engineer. But it's like, no, that's false. We're everything all at once, right?

Royel Johnson:

April, I love, love, love, love what you share. I am a scholar already.

I'm teaching our pro seminar class to our first year doctoral students this year, and we've been talking a lot about doctoral socialization and professional identity development. The process by which one acquires the knowledge skills, dispositions to be a scholar, right? And so many faculty who work with students treat students as if they come to us as empty vessels. Not acknowledging the indigenous knowledges, orientations, experience, lived experiences, practitioner experiences, all of which they bring to bear in how they show up, how they conceptualize what they're interested in.

If you are a professor listening to this and you work with your students in that way, stop it. Acknowledge the experiences and lived experiences, practitioner experiences, all the things that people bring with them. They're not empty.

Nadeeka, how about you? What is a scholar? How are you going-

Felecia Commodore:

I was going to add-

Royel Johnson:

Oh, go ahead. Go ahead, go ahead.

Felecia Commodore:

I think that also, and I'm probably going to get in trouble for this-

Royel Johnson:

Let's do it. We're tenured.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, we're tenured.

They're also not your mini me, right? There's this weird imperialistic nature that happens I think in higher-

Royel Johnson:

The want to reproduce themselves?

Felecia Commodore:

Right, like? It's like I must own you as a human and make you in my image.

Royel Johnson:

Well, let me tell you, there's only one Felecia.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. I'm not trying to make any more. I don't know if the world can handle it, personally.

But also, it doesn't allow... we don't allow people to be the scholar that they are supposed to be, and we need all those unique perspectives and unique identity markers and cultural markers to make our work richer, right?

Royel Johnson:

But folks also project their limitations. So, I can't even imagine, embrace the kind of scholar you want to be because I can't see beyond the scholar that I am.

Felecia Commodore:

Stop that. Go talk to the lady, get on the couch.

Royel Johnson:

Stop being problematic, y'all.

Felecia Commodore:

Or the man, or the they, whoever who has a degree that's a scholar themselves, and can help you work through that so that we're not projecting things onto people and we are saying you're a scholar already. What my job here is to do is help facilitate the gifts that are already inside of you.

Royel Johnson:

That's it. Facilitating, cultivate.

Nadeeka, how are you thinking about what it means to be a scholar?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Yeah, so many thoughts from what folks were saying. I think that last part you were saying around gifts that my friend and colleague, Nia Graham, who at faculty at Morgan State, she talks about really finding our specific spheres of influence or change and cultivating our unique gifts. We need dreamers and healers and all of that, and I think that was one of the things buzzing around.

I think for me, interesting. I know this wasn't exactly the question, but I think it's relevant, I think. I'm job searching. I feel like at this point where I'm like-

Royel Johnson:

Hire her.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. That's right.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

... what is next? What is my future as a scholar? I think for me, one of the biggest things that I learned, I think pandemic, through many different things, is I am not just a scholar or that importance of-

Felecia Commodore:

Coming with it.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Yeah, beyond that. I feel lucky that I get to get paid. Not always a lot, but paid to do the work that also aligns with what feels like my purpose work or what...

But this isn't the only place to do that, and there are actually lots of other ways outside of work and the labor market to get to do that work. Yeah, I think recognizing I think it can be hard, especially in early career for early career folks. There's so many messages about you got to be doing everything all the time.

That just this academy I think in particular I think this spring and seeing the really punitive, carceral ways our institutions broadly responded to students. I think I definitely had a moment of, what am I doing here in this field? And so just recognizing the academy isn't everything, and this is just one piece.

Wasn't exactly the question of how am I thinking about being a scholar, but that feels really prominent right now in my life.

Felecia Commodore:

Nadeeka, I'm really glad you brought that up because I think something that we don't talk about a lot in the field, at least out loud, is the anxiety of the market, the anxiety of looking for a job, of being on the market. Even as hard as you can try when you're not getting interviews or you're not getting hits how it can really start to mess with your scholarly identity and your self-esteem. Really, make you start to question if you're valuable and if the field sees you're valuable.

I remember my time on the market and I had a really-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, we supported each other.

Felecia Commodore:

... rough first go on the market. It was really weird because I felt like when I went on, everyone was like, "Oh, you'll be fine. You don't have to worry about anything." And then I was like, "Oh, no."

Royel Johnson:

I'm worried.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm real worried. I got bills and I ain't got no job. The importance of community then, and I'm glad I had a real great community and we're all being one of those people, but if I didn't have that community... That no one told you you needed to invest in, right? It was all about you need to do this and that and that to make yourself competitive.

But I'm really glad I invested in the community because it was the community that kept me sane when the market was trying to make me lose my wits about myself and really have an impact on it. Fun fact, only ASHE I missed is Denver because I didn't have a job and I was scared to go and interact with people because I was like, "I don't want to have to talk about-"

Royel Johnson:

To answer the questions that they have for you.

Felecia Commodore:

I say that to say I'm glad you said it out loud about those anxieties because I think that the field can sometimes make us feel like we have to perform in a way that that whole job thing is not scary and we don't feel affected, but it does affect all of us.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, and I've heard someone say that you have to try to come into this field as whole as possible because otherwise there's so much about this process and experience that invites that's designed to sow seeds of doubt, insecurity, to make you question yourself. Am I good enough?

There's so many idiosyncrasies as part of the hiring process that have nothing to do with you. There are the conversations before the conversations. There are all those things that get in the way of you getting that particular opportunity, and so you have to be fully aware of that and be sure of yourself too as you're entering this field.

I guess one question I have is what does support look like for you all at this particular stage in your career as you're entering the sort of academic market transitioning out of PhD programs soon? What does support look like, whether community, mentorship, institutional, and how can we as a field be attentive and responsive to the kind of support that you need?

Gaurav Harshe:

I can go quickly.

I think coming back from what previously we've been talking about, we've been talking a lot about market and job and investing. All of these words are very transactional in the way that, okay, I give you something, you give something, and then we keep moving. It's like give and take a bargain, a trading system, which not necessarily is the good way to go. We're talking about people's lives here.

Again, we're coming from this whole labor market system, which is true. You need a paycheck to get going and in this whatever system, neoliberal space that we're living in, and can we disassociate a little bit or take away or chime out, take a bite out of it a little bit. I think support for me looks like that. Okay,

we are in this labor market. Give me the real deal. Let's not BS each other on certain things that are basics.

There's a lot of this flashy, okay, if you do this, that will happen. And then you talked about, oh, making the mini me, seeing myself in somebody else, the scholarly identity. I mean, we all talk about identity as a singularity, but then also want to bring our full self, so that is a dichotomy in itself. That's the binarization that we're trying to create, and so even that's scholarly identity of like, oh, you have to be everything in this one thing. And then it's almost like an endless horizon. We're not going to get there. Why are we trying to put people into this space and trying to get people, oh, this rat race we call in India, this phrase. It's an endless rat race that we perpetuating and how much ever we talk about like, oh, we should tear down the system and dismantle and all these big words.

We're not really practicing what we preach sometimes. Yeah, I think support looks like decluttering the system, keeping it real. We can understand that we can't be everybody's friends, so we are not everybody's friends. Sometimes we don't like some people and it's fine. You can look the other way. I can look the other way. We can not be in the same eye together, and that's fine. To talk about authenticity and what is authentic and yeah, it's fine. We don't need to break bread together and we don't need to do anything.

I think keeping it real for real, and then also the labor market and not messing around with that and trying to give expectation, settings the right way. Things can change and there's power dynamics, politics, all of that involved. But I think especially if there's a dynamic of seniority and junior, keeping it all real, that will really support me and people like me.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I like that.

Royel Johnson:

Others, what does support look like for you?

Felecia Commodore:

Or supports that you feel are critical for you and your peers at this time?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

I mean, I feel like I have been so fortunate to have incredible mentors honestly at every stage of my professional career. I'm here in this role because of folks who early in my practitioner career was like, "Have you thought about research?"

I think having mentors who do also know me holistically and know my values and know in this overarching way about what's important to me in life and who are able to have real conversations about the implications of choices or... Like Gaurav was saying to be real of... I mean, you don't have to do this, Nadeeka, but this is what this X, Y, Z might mean if you make this choice.

Jessica Harris, my PhD advisor a couple years ago was like, "It doesn't sound like you want this job." I was like, "Oh my gosh. Yeah, you're right." I feel like having mentors who have always looked out for me as me and not like we were talking about right as mini mes or furthering their own agendas or anything else, and who really have seen me deeply for all that I am has been one of the most powerful things and how that has sustained me.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, I love that.

April Horne:

I think for me, so I have a family. I have a husband. He's amazing. He is a stay-at-home-dad. Could not do this without him, for sure.

Felecia Commodore:

Shout out husband! Yes!

April Horne:

Yeah, we have an eight-year-old and a five-year-old. I'm going to cry, but-

Felecia Commodore:

It's okay. You can cry here.

April Horne:

I know. I don't know if I love crying, but I'm totally okay with crying. I totally embrace it. If someone's crying, I'm going to cry with them.

But I think you need to be able to... I don't know that it's necessarily support, but prioritize, right? Prioritize what's more important. At the end of the day, a hug from my five-year-old is way more important than the rejection I just got, right? Being able to understand the world at large in that perspective is really hard to do when you're focused so much on being relevant and pushing your research and things like that. But so my family is a huge part of that support.

But when I'm in these academic spaces by myself and my family's not with me, I think going back to the comment I said before, that exhaustion that I feel already at this point... Sorry, I'm going to do this in a very native way, but tell a story, but not really. But when I was younger and I was having a bad day, and my mom used to... We wouldn't talk, but she would know that I was mad and she would just put a baked potato in the oven for me and just leave it. When I was done with my fit or rage or whatever, I would come out and I always knew that there was going to be a baked potato in the oven for me. I didn't have to ask for it.

I think about that in academia. There are so many questions that need answers. There's so many lessons that need to be learned. There's so many things that we need to learn. Minoritized upon minoritized identities, right? It would be tremendously helpful and super supportive if somebody could just put a baked potato in the oven for me so when I'm ready, I can find it and I can access it. I think along the ways I've had a number of mentors, but I think I don't know many that are like me specifically. And so it's hard to sometimes find those people at certain points when I need them.

And so I think as we continue to grow, as we continue to grow indigenous scholars and STEM access scholars and all these awesome fields that are so important, I think that this will become more readily available and readily accessible. But that's what I think about: baked potatoes in the oven.

Felecia Commodore:

I really love that, April.

Royel Johnson:

I love that, yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

And I think it's so important I think what you point out, and all of you have said this in different ways, that it's one thing to have mentorship, but sometimes people stumble upon that and sometimes people just don't. And so I think what I hear from you already is challenging us in the field to get out of the habit of waiting for junior scholars or graduate students or emerging scholars to tell us they need something, right?

Remember when we were going through those spaces? Just provide the resources and support and not make it some weird game for you to try and find it.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, I was talking to a student the other day who was advocating for themselves around a particular issue. I just said, "My goal as program chair is to create a space where you don't have to advocate for yourself, that we can anticipate the needs and we just do it because it's the right thing to do."

April, I want to highlight another point that you shared. Life does not stop when you are in a graduate program, when you're on the tenure track, when you're tenured. Life continues to happen. And so many times we operate... My friend Lawanda Ward always says that we are not first responders, though it may feel... The urgency may feel like, "Oh, I can't do this. I got to meet this," we're not first responders.

I respect those who do that work, but that is not our occupation. Sometimes we have to lean into the moment, be fully present with our family and our community in ways that it doesn't always feel like we can because the risk seem so high that if I miss this opportunity is going to lead to this, and I won't be able to do that. I just want folks to just take a deep breath. As someone who had a significant loss, and we both did, over the past couple years, it put things in perspective for me in a way that I could not imagine.

I took an entire year away from my work. I didn't write, I didn't do anything. That was part of my self-care, just removing myself from this space, and in part because I had not had healthy balance or healthy sort of habits that allowed me to feel like I could lean fully into and check out. For folks who are listening, the world does not stop. Lean into your family, your loved ones, and the moment right now because we don't get those moments back.

And so I love that you said getting a hug from your kid is so much more important than sitting with that rejection that you got from a journal. You can turn it around in a few weeks.

Felecia Commodore:

I want to say and not to sound like a prickly pear, but I'm also okay with being a prickly pear, it's a very wonderful drink, to Gaurav's point is everybody's not going to get that. It's okay for you not to be in community in that way or an intimate community with people who don't understand that a hug from your kid is going to be really, really important to you. Or investing time in your family is more important than getting some grant opportunity.

Because everyone has different perspectives and priorities in this field, and that's their prerogative. But I think sometimes we can create an atmosphere we feel like instead of embracing, that for people are encouraging people to be around like-minded folks and build community there, they got to understand and be in community with everybody. And everybody ain't your people, and that's okay.

Royel Johnson:



Please know that.

Felecia Commodore:

We can-

Royel Johnson:

Say it again, Felecia.

Felecia Commodore:

Everybody. Ain't yo people! We can be respectful. We should be respectful as colleagues, but it's okay to say that's your thing. That ain't my thing, and my thing is family and community. I'm going to find people who are about the thing that I'm about because those are the people that are going to help remind me of that when I lose my way.

I think that's been so important. I think even we talk about having significant-

Royel Johnson:

To quote Beyonce, "Find your way back."

Felecia Commodore:

"Find your way back." That's my jam.

When I did have significant loss and I was about to go up for tenure, it was having people that stopped me and said, "It's okay for you to stop. It's okay for you to feel this. It is okay for you not to want to write. It is okay," and to remind me what was important. If I hadn't been around my people, that might've not been the experience. But that was what I needed.

And so just encouraging people it's all right to find your people. It's all right to say you not my people, and I respect you as a colleague, but we don't have to be an intimate relationship with each other. That's not the kind of support that I need.

Royel Johnson:

Last question: what gives you hope in this moment, and how are you finding and/or creating joy?

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

I think for me, I find hope in examples of the transformative community and radical love, I think. That those examples show up in all kinds of spaces, again, in these research team spaces and the way in which this group of people who maybe 15 months ago didn't even know each other, but who are showing up for each other. Who came together for this research purpose, but who now are show up for each other as these four humans.

Yeah, is the word that comes to mind as I felt I think this spring in watching the ways in which our institutions responded to student activists. Also, I think seeing those really beautiful transformative examples of community, of students in solidarity encampments of interfaith faces and creating spaces of healing and true learning and sharing religious practices and those beautiful examples of transformative community and I think healing for me give me help. I think finding joy in others, in communities both in and outside of higher ed that I have.

And so the answer to all of that is really just in others, in people is where feel like find hope and joy.

Royel Johnson:

Love that.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Gaurav Harshe:

I can go quickly.

I'm not as joyous or hopeful as a lot of my colleagues may be, but I think I'm very cautiously optimistic in that way, that I'm not expecting too much from anybody, anyone, institution, people as a society overall. But I think I'm finding grounding in time, just the passage of time and the endless passage of time.

Also, going back to our earlier question about the social political climate and the legislature and all of this, I think this particular time that we are in whatever how much ever you want to bound that or not is making people take sides. That's a good thing. I think you have to have a stance in the sense of you cannot sit on the fence. I think this is the time that people are really thinking, which is nice, or trying to think about things. People are canceling people, which is also good. I mean, they're engaging in something. They're not just sitting on the bylines or sidelines and just consumers and taking everything in, but they're questioning. Think that is giving me hope in many ways.

Also, the Sikh community that has been really, really, really... I think it's almost like a renaissance of what's happening in some ways. It's not necessarily that I have seen particularly in the Indian community, in the South Asian community, the way that they just meet up for langar or are doing anti-caste movements in California with SB-403 even with the veto now. But there are people that are doing things on the ground. Despite all the different issues, they're still doing their things and they're coming together, or sometimes having issues and trying to work through them. Having that renaissance of a moment and working through that. Not having community, but also creating community from the people that have rejected them. Being in the peripheral, creating a periphery that is the center then. Yeah, that's giving me hope.

Felecia Commodore:

How about you, April?

April Horne:

Thank you for sharing this.

I think drawing from my indigenous teachings, I acknowledge my role as a future matriarch of my family. Part of that role is to teach, is remember those lessons that were passed down through these generations and to add to that, to build to that. I think of that scene in Moana when they add that rock and you just lift your whole community a little bit higher thing. I think about that.

In that way, I know that the blood that runs through my veins has already gone through a lot of things and has survived. I look at my kids and I see the same thing. They're going to be stronger than me. They're going to be smarter than me. Everything that our ancestors have known, they're going to know that and more, right? And so it's the same sentiment I look at my students with, and that's the reason why I do this work is to make their student experience better than mine. I see just how amazing and

equipped they come into these spaces with already and just how much they already know to be able to combat all these awful monsters in these spaces.

And so I think it gives me a lot of hope to be able to see the next generation. Even if they're just a little bit older than me or a couple years younger than me, they are literally the next generation. I put my full faith in them, and I see so much hope in what the future of this world could be.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, I love that.

I will say one of the things that I tell students when I began advising them, particularly Black women but all students, is that I want you to finish, but I you to finish whole. That it does none of us any benefit for you to leave here with a PhD in pieces, and so what brings me hope is seeing scholars like yourselves really taking that to heart and really thinking about how to bring your whole self in this field and not losing your whole self in this process.

And so I just want to thank you all for being inspiration to those who've gone before you that this is possible and that maybe some of the experiences we had, you all will not have, or you will change the field so those behind you won't have them. And so I thank you for that.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, and thank you so much for agreeing to go on this journey in this episode with us. We appreciate so much the opportunity to be in community with you all. I hope that you see us as part of your extended community of resources as you continue to traverse this journey, whether it's finishing the degree and entering the market and identifying the right sort of job and fit for you. We want to be a part of that journey with you.

Definitely we look forward to connecting with you at ASHE.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely because you're a scholar already. I love that.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes, yes. Thank you so much.

Felecia Commodore:

All right, thank you guys.

Nadeeka Karunaratne:

Thank you.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you to our guests for joining us today and engaging in such rich dialogue and offer really poignant reflections about their evolving scholarly identities, particularly in this contested social political context.

Felecia Commodore:

Those of you who have been along for the ride with us so far know that at the end of each conversation, we like to engage in a segment called Scholar Soundtrack as we reflect on what musical selections rang in our minds as we think about the day's conversation.

Today, the song that came to mind was "Already Won" by ShowTime featuring Major Smith. Because though being a higher education graduate student or recent postdoc can feel like there's still so much to prove, it's important to remember that you have already accomplished so much. Though you may be still coming into an understanding of your scholarly identity and how you see yourself within this larger higher education landscape, you are already a scholar. Those of us who have gone before you have a responsibility in supporting you and creating an environment for that scholarly identity to grow and flourish.

It is through this type of community that we create a field that does work that has impact and can make sure that all of us, not just some of us, win.

MUSIC:

Already won.

You still playin' but I already won.

Can you see it?

Can't be defeated 'cause I already won.

Already won.

You think I'm cheating but I already won. God-damn man.

Oh.

Yeah, yeah, man.

Already won.

You still playin' but I already won.

Can you see it?

Can't be defeated 'cause I already won.

Already won.

You think I'm cheating but I already won.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, that was today's song for our Scholars Soundtrack. We've had some great conversations, and there are more to come.

Royel Johnson:

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next time as we continue our discussion of this year's conference theme "I Am A Scholar" with Doctors Wayne Black, Marjorie Dorime-Williams, and Daniel Corral. Until next time, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel Johnson:

And remember-

Felecia Commodore:

You are a scholar.