

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.

This episode features conversations with senior scholars. We want to acknowledge and dedicate this episode to a senior scholar who we sadly lost this year. In addition to being a renowned scholar, Dr. Caroline Turner served as chair of ASHE's Council for Ethnic Participation and as ASHE President. She was a mentor to many in the field and a friend to even more. While Dr. Turner is no longer with us, her legacy lives on through her students, friends, and colleagues. This episode is dedicated to her.

Felecia Commodore:

Three, two, one.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family, and welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast, season three. And this is our final episode of the season where we've been engaging in conversations throughout the season about what it means to be 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 I also direct the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates. 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 my friend, Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Hello family. I'm your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. We're excited to keep our conversation going as we discuss this year's theme. "I Am A Scholar", and so by this time we're really good friends. We've been in your house, in your car, and all of those things. And so hopefully you are as excited as we are for this final episode of this year's podcast series.

Royel Johnson:

So we started this season with ASHE President Dr. Jenny Hart, and we got to hear a little bit about her goals for this year's theme. We talked with early career scholars preparing to enter the field, as well as others who have taken on new and exciting roles both inside and outside of the academy. We've also wrestled with the complexities of scholarly identity. The tensions, the possibilities, and the need for more expansive understandings of what it means to be a scholar, and who gets included in that. But in this episode, we're going to close out the season with two very special people to us. Two people who are special to our field, whose presence, wisdom, and role modeling have shaped several generations, including our own. And we'll talk about the evolution of their scholarly identities over time, and how they sustain their passion for the work.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, we're really excited about these two guests. I almost don't want to share them with you all, but they've been really important to us as Royel said, but also very, very important to the field, and how many of us have thought about being scholars, how we move through the field, how we think about

ourselves. And so we're just really, really excited to have an opportunity to be in conversation with them today. So join us in welcoming our guest, Dr. Sharon Fries Britt, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Maryland College Park, and Dr. James Earl Davis, Professor and the Bernard C. Watson Endowed Chair in Urban Education at Temple University. Welcome.

Royel Johnson:

Welcome to the show.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Thank you.

James Earl Davis:

It's so good to be in virtual-

Sharon Fries Britt:

I'm so excited.

James Earl Davis:

... With you all.

Royel Johnson:

That's a lot of pressure.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I know. Right? No pressure at all.

Royel Johnson:

I mean, when we were conceptualizing this episode, it was a easy-

Felecia Commodore:

Easy.

Royel Johnson:

It was an easy choice for who we wanted to be in conversation with, to bring this thing, to land this plane. So we kick off all of our episodes with an icebreaker. Last season we did this or that. We're going to switch it up a little bit. So we have another fun activity that we're now calling questions that need answers.

Felecia Commodore:

Questions that need answers.

Royel Johnson:

So it's a quick way to get to know you. Felicia, you want to kick it off?

Felecia Commodore:

Sure. So Sharon, this is for you and I know you're going to appreciate this question. What flavor of tea represents you today?

Sharon Fries Britt:

I want Dr. Commodore. I love you. I've been so nervous about this or that. I feel so uncool, but thank you for that question. You know I like my tea and my coffee.

Felecia Commodore:

I do.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I'm looking out at this beautiful Maryland fall foliage and gorgeous day. And the flavor tea that actually represents me today is very classic. I like a nice smooth green tea because it sort of just runs through my body with nutrients, and just makes me feel organically healthy. So that's the flavor of tea that is representing me today, and I feel very much like what I see out the window. Bright. Cool. So it feels good.

Felecia Commodore:

I love it.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Thank you for starting me off with that. I love it.

Felecia Commodore:

I know. I said this-

Sharon Fries Britt:

I've been a nervous wreck on some to remember some star's name, kind of know how they connect to some other star.

Felecia Commodore:

I knew that question was for you when I thought it. So, yeah.

Royel Johnson:

So here's one for you, James. If you could travel time, would you travel to the past or to the future and why?

James Earl Davis:

Great question. I'm risk-adverse, so I'm not going to the future because I may see some things.

Royel Johnson:

I know.

James Earl Davis:

I'm going to go to the past. Not far past, but immediate past. The seventies. The seventies represented kind of an edginess and kind of a push forward ideologically, fashion-wise, music-wise, and the culture generally. So, because we sing; tone and tenor of the seventies now, particularly fashion, music. And I have, ugh. I was around. And I want to be a real adult in the seventies. And I see myself as a kind of poet at some jazz cafe.

Royel Johnson:

Oh wow.

Sharon Fries Britt:

My mom always told me if I was alive in the seventies, I wouldn't make it because I'm not risk averse.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, you know what, Dr. Davis, I love you to death. And I'm listening to your answer on that and thinking, I love the seventies because I get to still wear my afro when I was young. So it's very confusing because I'm like, I wore this in high school. Oh, I'm still in high... And they're like, no child, you're a little bit different. I'm with you on that. It's in style.

James Earl Davis:

In the context, the afro in the seventies was pushing, really pushing interest. So there's a more comfortableness now. The ability of going natural but it's cool. It's cool.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

I feel like I would travel to the past too. I mean, do you ever think about moments where you just feel like, I wish I would've sat in that moment a bit longer?

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

I wish I would've been more present in that moment. And then as time sort of fades, and you get older, you remember, you have memories, but you don't really experience the full range of that memory. And so there are parts of details that I miss. So I wish I could go back in time and re-experience.

Felecia Commodore:

I would only go to the past to tell myself to not eat chicken wings at three in the morning in college. It just didn't work out well in the long run. So just make a few different decisions than I did then. Yeah. So I have another question for you, Sharon. What's one recent thing or experience that exceeded your expectations?

Sharon Fries Britt:

Oh wow. That's an amazing question. You know what? It's actually an easy answer. What I've come to, it's a season set of experiences and they exceeded my expectation. And I shared this actually in a similar sort of event as I was working with colleagues who are doing the... I'm not going to get the title right, but Candace and Charles Davis.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, Imagining Futures.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Imagining Futures. And I had this sort of epiphany. We were in the office with Dean Griffin, Takiya Robinson, and myself. And what has exceeded my expectation was I never thought the decades of working with former students and colleagues would turn into this amazing kind of bidirectional ways in which I am inspired by them beyond my imagination of what they're doing, of how I'm mentored by them in ways. I feel this degree of, I'm going to use the word security, that if I need to know something, I got this network.

All of you all. It extends out to... That exceeded, you could have never convinced me because I wasn't doing it for that. I wasn't in these relations. But that's exceeded my expectation of the way I feel about the connections there. So with no need to feel like I got to ask for anything, there was a moment we shared that was just, they said to me something that we shared a lot of tears. It's totally unexpected. And we were talking about our different journeys in the academy, and I was sharing something. And Takiya said, "We got your back." And it was just the wording of, "We got your back."

And I never felt like... So there's a season at this time in my career that is exceeded my expectation of what the academy would feel like, be like. And actually, James, you and I were having a little bit of this conversation when we were working on our chapter. It's gotten even better since then. And it's a sense of feeling comfortable in that I belong. I certainly didn't feel that way when I started, and even certainly not in the connection to ASHE. So I hope that makes sense, but that's genuinely something that has exceeded my expectation, and as a professional connection to ASHE and the field.

Felecia Commodore:

That's awesome. And Sharon, we do have your back because you always have our back.

Royel Johnson:

Period.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yeah, I know, but you don't expect anyone to say, "We got your back." I don't know. I'm better at being the fighter for people. It's a receiving season. That's actually what I feel the spirit is leading me to say. I have a hard time receiving. I'm really good at, I'm out there, I'll take, but this exceeded my expectation of receiving just the love and the pouring and the support. Wow. It's amazing. I never thought I'd feel this good at this stage. And as it relates to my professional connection, it's beyond professional. It's very familial, very deep.

Royel Johnson:

That's interesting because I had a friend tell me, don't deny me the opportunity to support you the way that you support me.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Because oftentimes, as the strong friend, as the strong person who is used to battling and standing up, that we don't open ourselves up to be supported by others. And someone broke it down real simple, don't deny me that opportunity. It is not a burden. It is a responsibility.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. It's a joy is what somebody has said to me. And I understand that because I got that joy. That's what I feel like. So anyway, that's mine.

Felecia Commodore:

That's wonderful.

James Earl Davis:

But you made me think about the facts of our generation where the expectations of people giving and receiving is just different. So I think now we have, and we'll talk something more about this and how the profession has changed, but there was an expectation that people will be... There were differential expectations about people's generosity. So it represents a shift for me in how I receive the support of others. Because traditionally it wasn't expected. So you don't expect people to be helpful, you don't expect people to be generous. In this kind of work, how we came through. But it's a different season, and I'm appreciative and I love your kind of reflection about that, Sharon. You're right.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Can I just tag, I don't know if I said... You know how many times I say this. One of the threads for me is whenever you and I are together, James, you know how I feel. Because James was my light coming into my very first ASHE, truly. And what you just said makes me want to say this because this was at CEP events, different events at ASHE, with lots of folks who call lots of us, black folks in particular, and not everybody was behaving in the same way.

Felecia Commodore:

Ain't that the truth. Shame to that one.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I'm so sorry, but the spirit and the energy and the smile and the serious welcoming into the fold in a particular kind of way. You know there's a handful of people who did that consistently my first year. And I said it so many times, I had to get a James Davis hug. That was my annual thing. If ever I said, I'm like, where's James Davis? ASHE doesn't start until I get that. And he knows I've said that every year.

James Earl Davis:

And the thing is that so many people have that experience.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. So anyway, I'm sorry, I had to just... So that's the kind of spirit I feel now. Full closure at the end. It's just, it's a delightful.

Royel Johnson:

Okay, last question, James. If you could live in any fictional universe from books, movies, or TV, which one would you choose?

James Earl Davis:

A fictional universe? I'm thinking about Atlantis. Yes. Because Atlantis represents possibilities, and hidden possibilities. So the world of Atlantis existed beyond worlds or underneath worlds. You didn't know that. I think that invisibility provides incentive to be different, to be edgy, to be authentic, and to push all things that we think are traditional, conventional. Because that's why all the interesting excitement, particularly in scholarship, happens on the margins. Even though we are trained and develop, I know our generations that you have to be at the center. But you become famous and known at the margins. Your potential contribution to push and innovate our thoughts about our conceptions, and pushing empirically as well. So I think of Atlantis and I think of being kind of godly in some ways. I'm relatively small, so always have to-

Felecia Commodore:

I like to say svelte, James, you're svelte.

James Earl Davis:

So anytime I can think about being more muscular, aggressive, taller, always lean into that. Robin D. G. Kelley once wrote an essay that he dreamed of being kind of a menacing black man, so people would stay away from him. So maybe I think that Atlantis provides kind of an opportunity for me to be beyond myself. That doesn't mean that I'm not kind of comfortable with who I am, but I always think about being something else, other spaces, making other kinds of contributions, having other kinds of relationships, being in other companies. Atlantis, that too. And I think about water too.

Royel Johnson:

I immediately thought of Atlanta Isley Brothers voice.

Felecia Commodore:

So did I. Thought of the Isley Brothers.

Royel Johnson:

I got to play that right now.

James Earl Davis:

What you know about that?

Royel Johnson:

I'm an old head. I'm an old head.

Felecia Commodore:

I own the vinyl.

James Earl Davis:

Both of you have old souls.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. Yes, for sure.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, I think that was a really great way to get to know a little bit more about you both. And so we're going to move into our conversation for today. And we wanted to start off by if you could both tell us a little bit about who you are, what you do, and how your scholarly identity has evolved over time.

Sharon Fries Britt:

You want me to go first or you want to go first, James?

James Earl Davis:

Why don't you go.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Okay. So wow. So who I am, what my scholarship involves, and how it's evolved over the years. It's interesting because all three of you have heard this before, but being identified as a scholar was not how I started a scholarly journey. I came out of administration. I was extremely naive of what it meant to be on a tenure track. I mean, I had a general idea. My pathway into that was I want to also acknowledge was an incredible opportunity that was distinct and unique, to be able to do that at an institution I was already working at, which was part of the calculus for me.

I was not willing to go to anywhere and take this risk. And so I spent the time and had the opportunity, through the current faculty that I just finished my PhD with at the University of Maryland, to take on this opportunity to go on a tenure track. So I came into it really very naive with very much an administrative mindset. But on the one hand, that was a good thing because I felt like I had a sense of competency. So I knew how to navigate academic milieu, but not on this side.

Over time, because I had done my dissertation on the Meyerhoff Scholars, I was very interested in high achieving, this sort of positioning, black intellectual sense of understanding of students diversity, black students from the notion of not a deficit perspective, but high achieving. And so when I started on that path, again, not sure where it would take me, I knew I was committed to that line of thinking and doing the work. So my identity was a slow evolution because I think I focused more on the parts that were easier and I felt more comfortable with, which was my research. Sorry, my teaching and service. I was overly involved in service.

But what helped to pivot me eventually was actually having to deal with the reality of life. As you all, I think, probably know, I gave birth to my daughter going into my second, third year. And she needed a transplant, and I was the organ donor. And it kind of put my scholarship in a perspective of you can only do so much, so do what you can do and try to do it well, and make the case of a consistent line that you're trying to do. And so I often say to people, life itself made me think about the academy in very realistic ways. So I actually kind of missed the pressure of publish or perish because I was keep my

daughter alive or she'll perish. So that meant more to me. And so once I got through that and was able to make a case for why my publication schedule looked different, but I had done some depth, I did the depth versus the breadth.

And I began to come out of that feeling very connected to wanting to stay with a very clear, building out a clear line of work over time. I was not rushing. I was not trying to... I didn't feel the sense of urgency that a lot of people, because of the larger life kind of sense. So my identity did not come early. So even when I was tenured, I still didn't identify as a scholar. I would meet people at ASHE and they'd go, "Oh, Dr. Fries Britt, I read your article." I said, "Which one of the..." And I'd named the number. You didn't read a lot. I'm still trying to get some published. But I was okay with that because I was understanding my life. My identity didn't start to really get more solidified until well into my associate space.

It really took a while. And it took a while because I had to start to... I was in the STEM environment, really not as intentional as a lot of people have gone into it. It was because that was my opportunity to work with the National Association of Black Physicists when they reached out to me. Too long of a story to share here. But I did a 10-year stint with them. And it was in that decade. And that was well into my associate years that I started seeing the meaning of my work in a discipline and in other ways, and was getting feedback from the physicists, both the students and the faculty, particularly faculty of color. And that's when I started understanding. So it wasn't through ASHE in the traditional way initially. It happened in some of those ways, but it was really because I was outside of ASHE and saw meaning of me and my work.

And so that made all the difference and it built from there. And to this day, that's how I see how I have had a more meaningful, and I love what James, you said about the margins. I was on the margins. On the margins to the point where I never thought my stuff would actually be meaningful. It was like, okay, I'm tenured. I can hang out here for a long time, do my consulting. I don't care if they ever promote me. I wasn't even trying to become a full professor. When Dr. Cabrera, when Alberto said, "You need to go up." I said, "Why? So you can have more work for me? I'm keep it." I argued with him forever on that. He was like, "No, it's because they're treating you a full professor. They're using you like a full professor." So he started convincing me by saying, "You are doing things for the university and the system that full professors do, but you're not getting any credit." So anyway, so it took a while before my scholarly identity. I feel like a scholar for sure now, but for different reasons. So I'll stop there.

James Earl Davis:

I love this question too because interesting, in your introduction of me said, oh, this is James's title. And yeah, I understand that that means something. That's a long way from where this started. And I'm an oddity in some ways. So I went to graduate school with some questions, but my questions were about how? How do we know this? How can we determine that? What are ways of revealing and showing and discovery? Those are methods informed questions. I didn't have any what questions. And that was a kind of naivete, but I was developing some confidence in how we do research, the process of research, and I had questions connected to that. So in my graduate training, I focused on research methods, particularly applied methods. And my first academic appointment was in a program in measurement statistics and evaluation.

Royel Johnson:

Oof! I know the disdain.

James Earl Davis:

And those are my colleagues. It's about how people construct you. Right? I did a postdoc at ETS. You work with Michael Nettles.

Felecia Commodore:

Wow. With Michael Nettles?

James Earl Davis:

So you're that. And you can apply to these jobs, but you're that. I applied for a job at University of Maryland. I didn't get. (laughs)

Royel Johnson:

Oh gosh.

Sharon Fries Britt:

See? For we love each other anyway.

James Earl Davis:

But that meant my kind of community of colleagues, very different. I continue to ask how questions, but I was emerging into whats. And that often came from context. Even though I was doing applied work, most of the context of that were in black communities and black schools and black institutions of higher ed. Mike Nettles gave me some really good information. I mean a direction early on that set me up for that future segue into higher education. It's the data set I've used and developed for my dissertation, that involve students from historically black colleges.

So even though I developed kind of a technique to understand their progression to and through college, it helped me think about those institutions in the context of those institutions. Which then later become part of my developing the scholarly identity within the context of higher education. But that didn't come to fruition until I changed institutions and got an appointment in a policy and leadership department, in a program in higher education. But interesting, even during those early years at Temple, I started my career at University of Delaware. Those early years at Temple, it's, "Oh, James, you can teach methods, you can teach that." And what was I doing? I was teaching math. And then there was a kind of duality, doing sort of teaching in that work, but moving away from active research and scholarship around methodology.

Because I knew it was coming because I wrote a piece that got a lot of attention, got people thinking about measuring race as a critical barrier in an evaluation journal. I think more people read it outside of the evaluation and applied research, which just got people thinking about, we're doing race-based research, but then quantitatively how do we capture that? So I'm thinking about now, again, I'm loving this conversation about, in the back of my head, about scholarly identity. Help me with this. Do you know I never describe myself as a scholar. Me.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, really?

James Earl Davis:

Yeah.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Me neither.

Royel Johnson:

Me either actually.

Felecia Commodore:

I can't. I call myself a scholar even maybe if it's not applicable.

James Earl Davis:

I think other people, both of you, all of you in that way and myself included, but I think among a particular generation that meant something. And I probably was conditioned that I didn't have access to that.

Royel Johnson:

Oh, interesting.

James Earl Davis:

You have to grow yourself into that.

Felecia Commodore:

That's interesting.

James Earl Davis:

And then it's conceived as this almost unattainable status.

Royel Johnson:

That's preserved. That's for certain folks.

Felecia Commodore:

For certain folks.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. I totally identify with that. Absolutely. Yeah.

James Earl Davis:

Love this kind of conversation about troubling that and kind of sitting in it. And as a message for young people coming up. It's yours, capture it, hold it. Right. But then when you're holding it, you're going to be held to responsibility too. To maintain.

Felecia Commodore:

Right. Right.

Royel Johnson:

I mean, that's the part of what I loved about this theme this year, is that troubling the notion of who gets legitimized as a scholar by way of just what their identities are? Who isn't sort of invited into that conception? Who's at the margins? And I guess thinking about your career, your evolution of your sort of identity, what key lessons would you share with others who are navigating their journey as emerging scholars new to the ASHE community? What nuggets of wisdom would you share with them about the journey ahead for them?

James Earl Davis:

I want to start with a word that was thrown at me early in my career, and I wasn't completely understanding of it. It was about connections and integration of my work. And I was criticized early, given the directions I was going. I didn't have a cohesive program of research. You were doing things that you were interested in doing, and it was patchwork. So my objective early on was it made sense to me. I just needed it to make sense to other people.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh yeah, that's good. That's good.

James Earl Davis:

So I need to provide the connective tissue and the glue with the things. I think that's the onus, particularly on emerging scholars, to don't shy away from kind of who you are in your work, in your authenticity, but be in a position to communicate it and articulate it in a way that's meaningful to others beyond yourself. It may make full sense to you, but others will evaluate and appraise what you do. And as someone told me once, that as a researcher, as a scholar, you are also an educator for your peers.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

That's a good framing.

James Earl Davis:

Seniors. I know that's hard. That's kind of another piece of labor that we have to do. I just had a conversation with someone who was considering applying for full professor, and had this notion that the senior colleagues really don't understand him, his work, and what they're going to have to vote on for. And he's been suggested to do the coffee lunch thing.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, yes.

Royel Johnson:

Got to make rounds.

James Earl Davis:

Yes. And he wanted to know what did I think about it? So first I told him all of that was problematic. Come so far , to have to- to grovel in that way to get people to understand. And I ended with yes, do coffee lunch.

Felecia Commodore:

That's real.

James Earl Davis:

I become more pragmatic in my older age. Because I said, "Take it as an opportunity for you to sell yourself and tell people who you are empathetically. Don't let anyone else do that for you. If that means doing coffee and lunch, take that opportunity to tell your colleagues and eventually tell the world who you are."

Sharon Fries Britt:

Oh, James has always been so much more. The Lord has had both hands on you. I think he only had one on me. My advice might be very... Okay if I understand the question too, you're saying out of what we experienced or just in general our advice?

Royel Johnson:

In general for folks who are emerging scholars, new to the community.

Felecia Commodore:

Trying to figure this thing out, what it means to do this.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I guess I feel like the community, maybe it's not changed as much as I'm assuming it's changed. It feels like there's so much more that I see young scholars doing that they were way ahead of what I was thinking about doing. I don't feel like I am getting advice from them. I was at CEP last year soaking it all up because I just feel like, wow. In fact, I said to Walter, I know there are awards-

James Earl Davis:

Do I have to wear a tie? Right.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I was at the award ceremony. I look back at Walter when I was seeing all the awards. I said, "Lord, they are deserving" He said, "Look, it just means we have done our job now. It's okay." I was like, I am overwhelmed. So when it comes to what can I offer the new generation, it's in different areas than I think they might be interested in. But I will say this, I did not collaborate a lot early in my career at all because, coming out of administration, people were saying, she's not a scholar. I'm like James, I really don't describe myself as a scholar in that sense at all. I do own my professorial career at this point, but I don't say, oh, I don't lead with that. But I was more concerned that people would think I didn't write my stuff. Even when I was publishing with my students. Because I was coming out of administration, my sense of being the people thinking of me as a researcher and a scholar was not there, and I was developing it.

And so I did not collaborate with people for a very, very long time. And that was in part intentional because I was still trying to figure out what I was doing. So what could I offer a collaboration, in my mind in the early parts of my career, was so limited. By the time I started to do any collaborations, I was really way behind the eight-ball. I think it is important to figure out who does it make sense for you to collaborate with? And I know that can also be troubling because there's, I think, APT processes. I know on my campuses in the case have gotten better at acknowledging the teamwork and the things that people are doing. But you got to think about all that. And so you might be on a campus where that's not useful, that's not helpful. And also, you got to think about if you collaborate with people, that eliminates folks who can then write for you, oftentimes.

Felecia Commodore:

That's true.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I know that's not a... So I don't even know that that's necessarily good advice, but it's something that I learned, I wished I had done earlier. Because I felt like I was out of the loop on those connections in ways that would've catapulted my ability to get more research done. There's a lot of benefits in being a... By the time I did start collaborating, I did more. I did better because when you're working on a team. So I think about that, but I'm going to say something about this, going to lunch with people. This is where I said God had both hands on you and one perhaps on me. I struggle with this. Yes, I'm pragmatic, but I'm also I had a philosophy that 50% of... This is how I got through. I said, 50% of these people ain't going to like you. And I was okay with 50%.

Now 50% won't get you over the tenure line. What I meant philosophically in my mind was I'm not trying to be everybody's friend, because the ways in which I was experiencing the academy was too many battles. And I didn't want to lose myself on the other side of tenure. I didn't want to not know who I was by going to lunch with people or whatever. But I understand what you're saying, James. There might be a practical sense of I would go to those lunches if I feel like I can be in that coffee or that lunch and still be predominantly myself. But if I have to really kind of be performative, I say to people, don't do those. Don't do those lunch. You don't have to do that. They're going to vote no anyway. That one coffee and that one lunch is not going to change their mind.

And you're not going to feel good about it. You're going to find out that they said no and you went to coffee with them. You won't even go back to that coffee shop. You get so mad. So in my mind, and I know that's not very friendly and that's not very collegial, but it's real because there's a price. I think sometimes as I'm just going to say, as a black woman, I feel we pay all the time of having to be presentable and nice. Say that again?

Felecia Commodore:

Speak on it. Speak on it.

Sharon Fries Britt:

It's just the truth. It's just the truth. And there's a part of me that's like, I'm not doing all that. And so I have to honestly say... And I'm a nice person. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I didn't go to coffee with people, James, I did. I went to coffee with the people who I felt were open to hearing who I was and what my work was about. And I knew that they would speak on my behalf perhaps or not. So I just think we give up so much in these systems that I'm concerned about reserving the part of me that feels whole and healthy anyway. But I know you're so much more generous in the... You're going to be real

bad. I'm so glad I'm at the retirement season. It'll be like, don't ask her to do nothing. Okay. She's got problems. I don't. But you know what I'm saying?

Felecia Commodore:

That's so interesting because I had a situation where I'm trying not give up too much information.

Royel Johnson:

You're tenure now, let it go.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, that's true. And I don't work there anymore, but I was on a search committee as a junior faculty. Probably shouldn't have been on a search committee as the only junior faculty, and was currently in the process of going up for tenure. And we were searching for a dean. So all kinds of problematic situations here. And I guess I talk too much in the meeting, which is a problem of mine that I'm not interested in fixing. Right?

Sharon Fries Britt:

I hear you.

Felecia Commodore:

And so there was a senior faculty who was like, "Oh, I feel like I don't really know you." They weren't in my department or anything like that. And they wanted to go to lunch. And I was like, here we go with these lunches. Let's go to lunch. And so it's crazy because I had already decided that this person was not interested in actually getting to know me. They just wanted to know about me. And so I had made this decision that, oh, this is a fact-finding lunch, right? This is a, I need to get information on this person. And so I resolved myself not to talk about myself. I resolved myself to be like, let's learn about you. I don't know much about you. And it was just like, it's crazy that you have to go through all of these mind Olympics about these things.

And to your point, Sharon, knowing I have to go in there and protect myself. And you should be able to be open with colleagues and vulnerable, but you can't be, especially as a black woman. And in the first five minutes of our conversation, it was confirmed for me because they asked me about myself. I always tell things that you can Google. And so I had said, oh, where I went to school and I did my PhD at Penn. And they immediately said, "Oh, you mean Penn State?" As if I didn't know where I went to school. And I was like, "No, University of Pennsylvania."

Royel Johnson:

No shade to Penn State.

Felecia Commodore:

No, we are whatever. And so it was just that told me immediately what this person was about. And to your point, it's just like at some point, I do think it's important for us to decide, particularly as black women, how much of myself am I going to give away, and how much of myself am I going to hold on to. Because I have that right to not give the academy and people in the academy, all of me.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes, absolutely.

Felecia Commodore:

I did have a question for you all, because you all have seen the field, and ASHE in particular, go through many iterations and stages. I know James, I feel like you've been there since ASHE was a baby baby. So I'm curious, how have you seen the field and the academic landscape shift over time? And from your vantage point, how do you see scholars evolving, and where do you think they're heading to or have they evolved? Have they de-evolved? Just your perspective of having this ability to see the landscape over time?

James Earl Davis:

Yeah, I appreciate the question, and I think I've been around for a minute too. I remember when ASHE was in the spring. But I want to, in reflecting on changes and shifts in the field and in ASHE, I want to go back to a comment that Sharon said about collaboration. It's an important strategy for emerging scholars and junior faculty. Because this is a major shift I've seen in the field during career. Where we are now is the expectation of the volume that's expected.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

James Earl Davis:

I think we were coming into the field at a time, Sharon, where you could actually make your mark by going deep, right?

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes, exactly.

James Earl Davis:

Having a profound effect could be in a small area, in one or a couple of pieces. You could shift the conversation in a particular area and people say, "Oh, you've made outstanding contributions." But that may not reflect an enormous amount of productivity. But I think the expectations have changed so drastically, that you won't be able to meet those standards by yourself.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Exactly.

James Earl Davis:

Unless, particularly if you like history, for instance, where the expectation-

Royel Johnson:

Where is the book?

James Earl Davis:

But in other kinds of empirical work and other scholarship, even critical scholarship, and we'll come back to that, there's just an expectation of an increased volume of that. And you can do that if you're in the company and the community of others. And even though, as Sharon said, that comes with risk, but I think it's imperative. ASHE is a very different organization, not only in its composition, but in the work that people in the field produce. And also work that's published in the journals in the field, particularly one of the flagship journals that ASHE is responsible for.

When I witness the kind of critical scholarship that's being published in the review, then that's clear indication of where the field's gone in. And this is just not for the field of higher education. People are, over the last two decades, really consistently, people are asking questions, critical questions around power. And there's an expectation that faculty will know something, or be able to engage in those kind of critical conversations and discussions. And I think also methodologically, I've been around long enough. Would you believe in my first academic appointment in the College of Education where I resided, there was not one qualitative method for us?

Felecia Commodore:

Wow. You said not. Wow.

James Earl Davis:

I was Assistant Professor when they hired an adjunct teacher of qualitative methods.

Felecia Commodore:

Wow.

Royel Johnson:

This is at Delaware?

James Earl Davis:

Yes, this is Delaware.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Oh, wow. That's amazing. Yeah.

James Earl Davis:

We're not talking about the forties, fifties.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yeah. Wow.

James Earl Davis:

Which also reflects methodological training and shifts in methodological training that we are required... I consider myself a mixed methodology so I can do qualitative work, quantitative work, and there's growing pressure for us to be so conversant methodology.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. Yes, yes.

James Earl Davis:

Even the things of questions that are being asked, and questions that are driven by external agencies. This is my last point, that fund our work. And higher education, the shift toward STEM topics has been internally imposed because that's also a requirement. You have to generate funding.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Funding. Right. Right.

James Earl Davis:

I think eventually tenure track positions will only be for folks who can support themselves, and that's in the future. And we'll hire non-tenure people to do the teaching and advising.

Felecia Commodore:

That's insightful.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I mean, I think James, to me, James hit on a lot of the... First of all, he's been at ASHE definitely a lot longer. In the years I went, I mean, I was not a good ASHE participant. ASHE was a struggle for me for a while. I mean truly. And I was an administrator and I just saw so much game playing and jockeying, and I refused to... I just felt like everybody had to sort of, I won't name any names, but if you don't know so-and-so and they haven't blessed you. And I was like, I was all in my, I don't have time for this. It felt at some level like pledging and I'm sorry, academic pledging. And I wasn't really good at it in my mid-thirties coming in.

But I will say this, I will say this, what I love about what I see, and I totally co-sign on everything that James just said about it's gotten ridiculous in terms of the expectations. I feel the stress of that. And I can see it on young scholars who are just trying to do it all, and racing. And it's unfortunate, but here's what I'm excited about that I see. And that is the discourse and the critical frameworks and ways in which scholars are applying sort of multidisciplinary lenses to the work, that brings understanding and complexity around populations I care deeply about, minoritized communities. And I'm inspired by the work. Sometimes I feel like I'm reading pieces, and it's the way I wished I had had the terminology or the frameworks way back 20 something years ago to write about.

I can see myself in their work. It's explanatory and waiting to send. It liberates you in ways that I find very empowering. And so I'm very excited about what I see happening with the work of a lot of scholars. It just seems more complex and layered in ways that I wasn't trained to do, because I wasn't trained to think about becoming a professor. I thought faculty were just sort of strange beings.

Felecia Commodore:

We still are.

Sharon Fries Britt:

But I find myself inspired by it right now, and it's making me think about how even some work that I want to do, I feel like I'm in a study season as a result of that. So I am inspired by that. I will say that just in terms of just practically, I feel like ASHE has just, who's at ASHE seems different. I mean, it's just much

more diverse. And I think people feel, to me, I feel like a lot of the scholars coming in now embrace their scholarly sense of self a lot sooner than I felt like a lot of us did back in the day. So that's all I would add. I could have been a better ASHE participant over the years.

Royel Johnson:

There's something you said that made me think. I was telling Felecia the other day that Vincent Tinto emailed me that he read a chapter that I wrote for New Directions around belonging. And I was troubling his notion of academic and social integration. And he read it. He's actively engaged in work and he sent me the most thoughtful note saying that he wished he had read my piece before he had gone down that path and some of the work. He wanted to offer some clarifications too though to me.

Felecia Commodore:

Right

Royel Johnson:

About my critique. But I just thought that was the most generous thing. This idea that he could still be engaged in the work and receive a critique and sort of acknowledge that, wow, that's a very useful perspective. And I wish I had known what you're saying now before I had gone down the path of potential work.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. Royel, I have to share this because we share a Vincent Tinto moment. Because back to all the way the cycle of our scholarly identity, I had an opportunity years ago to be on a panel that it was a recording. I had the video, that eight track, that's how long it was. And I was invited to be on this. I can't remember the whole context. And so they were videotaping us for an hour and a half, whatever. And I got to know Vincent Tinto really well. And so they would take us off camera. He'd say, "You can handle that so well." He just was affirming my research, my scholarship, my ability to handle all of the questions, and the ways we were interacting.

And as a result of that interaction, he started to learn a lot more about me, ended up being one of my writers when I went up. Because I found out I had to have all these senior faculty. He also was surprised. He thought I was a quant person. He thought I did quantitative work because of my... It was hilarious. But it was a way that I got connected to him that sort of made me be able to relate and become more comfortable with these towering scholars. And so-

Royel Johnson:

I love that.

Sharon Fries Britt:

... It just matters like how we interact with people. But he ended up being very instrumental in learning about what some of my journey was about, but also affirming my scholarship.

Royel Johnson:

I love that.

Sharon Fries Britt:

So it's a full circle thing, so to hear he is still reading.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. This was last year.

Sharon Fries Britt:

And learning. That's amazing.

Royel Johnson:

So last question. I want you to think back to your first year as an Assistant Professor at Delaware, at Maryland. Knowing what you know now, what advice would you share with yourself?

Sharon Fries Britt:

What advice would I share with myself? Again, my journey was much more turbulent than I would've liked for it to have been, internally turbulent. I would've told myself to breathe more frequently, more deeply. That you're going to do well and you're going to do better than you think you're going to do. Because I wouldn't have believed it. I went into it saying, I don't have anything to lose. I know I can be a senior level administrator if this doesn't work out. So I wasn't fearful of the risk, but I would've told her to breathe because I definitely told her back then, you're building a life. You're not just doing a career change. Especially like I said, becoming a mother and all the balancing of the balls.

But I would've told myself, just breathe. You're going to be okay and you're going to be better than okay. You're going to do well and you're going to make a difference. I would not have believed that there would be an actual difference I would make, not just in the people that I felt like I was interacting with in lives, but in the literature in the field. To have been told that, I would've been like, nobody's going to pay attention to teaching black students anti-devistation? And it's what James said. I think our generation, we were able to go deeper over a longer, and do something in a way differently than I think people have time to do now. So I would've told myself, you're going to do well. It'll be okay.

Royel Johnson:

I love it.

James Earl Davis:

I really appreciate that, Sharon. I would tell myself that too. And also I would say, James, get out of your head. I was so obsessed with all the swirling messages around, in that it was almost as you have to be so exceptional. You have to be better than yourself.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. Wow.

James Earl Davis:

That causes you to think about not sort of always being less than. So get out of your head. And understanding and realizing your talents, your contributions. Because you have something to say. You just need to position yourself to say that. And speaking of talent, I would also say that. I would tell myself, don't get blindsided about what you think your strengths are.

Felecia Commodore:
We know what we do.

James Earl Davis:
Well, I've said this before. The academy has an odd and interesting way of turning your strengths into your weakness.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Preach. Isn't that the truth? Can we start from beginning?

Royel Johnson:
Yes.

Sharon Fries Britt:
I be serious. Go ahead. Go ahead. Preach.

James Earl Davis:
Can you imagine being told, these are actual experiences, being told that you're too productive, you're too publicly engaged.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Yes, yes.

James Earl Davis:
You teach too well.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Yes.

James Earl Davis:
The things you do well, you don't focus on. But those are the things that will potentially, well, in order to end the cap, we need to try to bring you down actually. And again, another lesson is importance of relationships.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Yes.

James Earl Davis:
We're told that it's about us. It's about our talents, our skills. But an editor decides if your article is published in that journal. An editor person. And you see across the room at ASHE.

Felecia Commodore:
Right, right.

James Earl Davis:
Introduce yourself.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Go to lunch. Go ahead and say go to lunch.

Royel Johnson:
Go to lunch.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Go to lunch and coffee.

James Earl Davis:
Yes. Relationships.

Sharon Fries Britt:
Yes, for sure.

James Earl Davis:
Are really important. I think young scholars, emerging scholars and junior faculty, are being taught to be strategic. And that's so important. So strategic about who you think will be your reviewers. That's true. So you can't publish with this person, but sometimes the strategy takes the passion from what we do. I know this work can be hard, it can be troublesome. It can make you feel often less than. We over evaluate. But we are here and I think we care purposely. And we have to say, and it's a blessing. I think we're from a generation where opportunities were limited. No one in my family, immediate family went to college. And I become an academic. I become a professor. And I'm given that opportunity to provide opportunities for others. And I never think early in my career that there will be a role, kind of a genitive role in responsibility for me. But it actually starts as assistant professor, that you are there to support. I know you got all your work, but you are there to support the people who are coming to you.

Royel Johnson:
Absolutely.

James Earl Davis:
To support your students in the next generation.

Felecia Commodore:
Yes.

James Earl Davis:
Thank you.

Felecia Commodore:

I just want to thank you all because the longer I live, the more I find it so important to give people flowers while they're here to smell them. And I'm going to try and do this without crying, but I just want to thank you both for being possibility models for so many of us. Not just as scholars, but as good people and as good community members, and showing us that you don't have to sacrifice being a good person to be a successful scholar.

And I don't know that we always get those messages. And so I'm thankful for both of you. And I often tell people I wouldn't be here for both of you, but especially you, Sharon. Having you as a master's student, you were the first professor I had that made me think I could be a faculty member. That saw being a professor and being a researcher as something I could do. And so I very literally wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you. And both of you have been really important pillars for me during times in the field for me that are really challenging, and at times traumatic. And it was helpful to have senior scholars who could hold you and help you hold yourself together.

And let's you know it was going to be all right and you were going to be all right. And that this field and the people in it don't have power over you. And so I just want to thank you for that. And also just say that I know you all are kind of in the more seasoned years of your career, but we still need you.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

And you're still important, and it helps all of us to see you and to know that you're still there. And I just want you to know that you still inspire all of us.

Royel Johnson:

All of us.

Felecia Commodore:

And that's why we have your back. Because none of us would be here without you.

Royel Johnson:

Period. Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

So I just wanted to thank you.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Thank you. I love you all so much.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I'm deeply honored just to be a participant and just to be in this moment with you all. Thank you. So much love and I'm sending it all back.

Royel Johnson:

We received it, and have received it over the years.

Felecia Commodore:

And now I'm a big cry baby.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I'm crying myself.

Royel Johnson:

Well, I think that's how we close the season. If you're going to do it, you need [inaudible 01:02:13].

Sharon Fries Britt:

Tears of love.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you so much for being on this journey, saying yes, for saying yes over the years, not just in this moment. We appreciate you. We love you, and we can't wait to see you.

Sharon Fries Britt:

Yes. Same here. You all are superstars.

Felecia Commodore:

I love you.

Sharon Fries Britt:

I love you too.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you to our guests, Dr. James Earl Davis and Sharon Fries Britt for joining us today and giving us hope for the future of higher education. I appreciate so much their words of wisdom, as I'm sure listeners will also.

Felecia Commodore:

So as we wrap up another season of the podcast, I must say these have been some amazing and inspiring conversations. However, before we say goodbye, I don't want to leave without asking you one final question for you all. We ask so many of our guests, and now I want to know, how do you see your scholarly identity at this time in your life and your career?

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, that's such a good question. I often think about my career in chapters. That in certain seasons and chapters, some things become more or less salient. In this particular chapter, post tenure and on the journey for full professor, I see the importance now, perhaps more than ever, to really do translational work. I'll often think about Estela Bensimon talking about arriving at the state of full professor, and

realizing that she wanted to make a pivot in her career and embrace the organizational change or racial equity work. I've been engaged in that work, but I'm thinking more, perhaps more than ever, how do I translate the good insights from my work into usable recommendations for policy and practice that really improve the material conditions of people? And that's, I guess, how I'm thinking about my identity at this point. How about you?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, it's interesting. I recently transitioned to a new institution and I have tenure, and I don't know that I ever thought about myself transitioning to a new institution halfway across the country, in a world I never lived in before. But I think it's been a really great opportunity for me to reflect on what I do want my career to look like at this point, and how I see myself as a scholar. And I think where I am now is really thinking about how to not just translate my work, but really get in the trenches on the ground, and work with people and leaders at institutions to translate what we know and what we've talked about into actual practices. And not just practices as just theory-informed practices.

Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Felecia Commodore:

But really also learning even more from the folks on the ground who are living this day to day, and doing more participatory action research in the governance space. Which is not normal, but something that I think is something we need to grow on. We aren't board members, but really working in partnership to help build the capacity and the infrastructure of these schools in ways that they can best serve students, best serve their communities, best serve the states for public institutions that they're in, and really contribute to the goals and ideals that we know the society can live up to. And so just really thinking about how to take the knowledge that I have, but also the privilege that I have, and really begin deeper partnerships with the communities that I engage and research with. And so just really getting my hands more dirty, for lack of a better word. I'm really excited that. And then taking ownership of being a, I don't even want to say it, like mid-career.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. We're a mid-career now.

Felecia Commodore:

Mid-career scholar and trying to be a responsible mid-career scholar in the community, and hopefully be the type of mentor and type of possibility model that so many were for me.

Royel Johnson:

That we needed, that we had.

Felecia Commodore:

Right. And so taking that responsibility and paying it forward.

Royel Johnson:

With that, I want to just say thank you to everyone who listened this season. We want to thank Jenny Hart for the invitation to come back and launch this podcast.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, Thank you Jenny.

Royel Johnson:

Again. We shout out to Joy Gaston Gayles, who's this idea was her original sort of conception. She saw us sitting at a bar having a cocktail and said, "I have the perfect job for you." So we are appreciative of the opportunity to keep coming back. Thank you to the ASHE office for all of their work.

Felecia Commodore:

All of your support.

Royel Johnson:

To bring this into fruition. With that, any final words, Felecia?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. So just one big final word. So you all know 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. And I could think of no better song to come to mind after the conversations we have had and the conversation for today than Light The Universe by Vivian Green, Algebra Blessett, Leah Smith, Laurin Talese, and Treena Ferebee. Because, as we learn from our seasoned senior scholars, this world of academia can make us question if we're scholars, if we've done enough, if we can have impact.

But it's important to stop, breathe, and remember that we bring value to these spaces. And the first person that has to know we are scholars is ourselves. We have to tell ourselves, I'm different. I have purpose. I am brilliant, and I can light the whole universe. Thank you to the seasoned and senior scholars like Dr. Sharon Fries Britt, Dr. James Earl Davis, who have not only shown us the way through their amazing scholarship and their commitment to the field, but cheer us on as we all figure out our own scholarly identities. If we light the whole universe, these senior scholars are the ones who were the lights to show us the way. And we are grateful.

Musical Interlude:

Thank you for coming into the Green Room. I hope you had a wonderful time listening. Got a special treat on this last one. Got my girlfriends to help me sing some positive words if we want to put some positive energy out into the universe. Is that all right you all? All right. Anything you want to do, you can do it. If you didn't know you need to hear this, I needed to hear it too. And now I want to share with you. It's so easy not to believe you are the next thing the world's going to see, but life is really what you make it. Look in the mirror. Say these affirmations. I'm special. I'm gorgeous. I'm chosen. Yes, I know it. Yes, I can light the whole universe. I'm different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. Yes, I feel it. And I, yes, I can light the whole universe.

Can you lose sight of your focus? Only you can make your dreams of hope come true for you. This is something only you can do. And when you're feeling down and you don't believe, because everybody's telling you, you won't succeed. Say I am all of that and a bit more than what you think. I am special. I am

gorgeous. I am chosen. Yes, I know it. And I can light the whole universe. I am different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. Yes I feel it. And I can light the whole universe. I am special. I am gorgeous. I am chosen. Yes I know it. And I can light the whole universe. I am different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. And I can light the whole universe.

You may not know about me but I got the power inside of me. To light it, to light it, to light it, to light it. Don't let my fears get ahold of me. Confident in my ability. To light it, to light it, to light it, to light it. And when it seems hard to conceive it, open your mouth and repeat it. To light it, to light it, to light it, to light it. Think only positive things and your life will begin to change. You'll see a whole new meaning, a whole new season but it can't happen if you don't believe it. I am special. I am gorgeous. I am chosen. Yes I know it. And I can light the whole universe.

Oh my God. I am different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. Yes I feel it. And I can light the whole universe. I am special, gorgeous, chosen. Yes I know it. And I can light the whole universe. I am different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. Yes I feel it. And I can light the whole universe. Special, gorgeous, chosen. I know it. I can light the whole universe. I am different. I have purpose. I am brilliant. I can feel it. And I can light the whole universe. [inaudible 01:13:20]. I can light the whole universe. I am, I am, I am. I know it. And I, yes I can light the whole universe. Believe me when I tell you now. I am, you are, we all can light it. We all can light it. We can light the universe.

I want to thank my producers FauxNotes, Adam Blackstone, Vidal Davis, Steve McKee, Jason Farmer. Thank you you guys so much for blessing this album. Brandon Henderson, thank you for all the blood, sweat, and tears you put into this record with me. Solomon and Jordan, thank you so much for blessing the album with your writing. Leah, Algebra, Laurin, Treena, thank you for singing on this album. Ray, thank you for naming this album, baby. E1 Music, so much love. Lisa Barberis and Kevin Patrick, I love you so much. This concludes this session in the Green Room. Until next time, peace and love. Light the universe, you all. Oh mommy, thanks for watching Jordan while I made the record. Bertie Green, you all. I'm her daughter.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, that is today's song for our Scholar Soundtrack, and it also wraps up our Scholar Soundtrack for this season. So please revisit our previous episodes and past seasons to hear all of the great Scholar Soundtrack selections. We hope they've brought you just a little bit more joy during your time with us.