Royel Johnson:

Greetings ASHE family, and welcome back to another episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast, where this year our theme is The Bend in the Arc. Shout out to our sponsors this year, Gates Foundation and Leaders Up. I'm Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of High Education and Social Work at the University of Southern California, and I'm joined with my friend and colleague, Dr. Felicia Commodore.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Hi everyone. I'm Dr. Felicia Commodore. I'm associate professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. We are back in your ears and in your cars to talk about-

Royel Johnson:

And on your screens this year.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

On your screens this year. For the ASHE Presidential Podcast, this year we'll be talking about the theme, as Royel mentioned, The Bend in the Arc.

Today we're onto episode three. Hopefully you've caught episode one and two, and we're just going to keep the conversation going. Today we're going to be talking about the art in scholarship, and we're going to be talking to three amazing scholars who are innovative and creative. Really, talking to them about what it means to put the creativity into creating new knowledge. And so we're going to talk about that and what is the role in creativity and scholarship in our higher education ecosystem, particularly in the current context that we are in right now in higher education.

Royel, let the people know who's here to join us.

Royel Johnson:

Sure, so join us in welcoming our special guest, Dr. Jameson Lopez, who is Assistant Professor of Higher Education at the University of Arizona. Welcome. We also have Dr. Roshaunda Breeden, Assistant Professor of Higher Education at North Carolina State University. Last but not least, Dr. Wilson Okello, who is newly minted tenured associate professor of higher education at Penn State University. Welcome.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Thank you.

Royel Johnson:

It's so wonderful to have you all on the show this year.

We start off every episode with an icebreaker, right? Sometimes we do this or that, or we do questions that need answers. All right, so we're going to jump into it. Each of you have a question. You want to kick it off?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Sure. I'll just let you all figure out who wants to answer it. If you could rewrite one ending of a movie, book, or historical event, what would it be?

Royel Johnson:
Oh, that's a good one.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
I'm torn between two.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
Okay, so this is going to be your class.

Royel Johnson:
This is your question.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
The first movie I would rewrite is probably the ending of Selena.

Royel Johnson:
Yes.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
Good answer.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
I wonder what the world would be like if Selena was still there.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
Good answer.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
Oh, that's the first one.
And the other one would be, it's like they're very close as "La Bamba". I grew up on "La Bamba" too, Ritchie Valens. Not my Ritchie.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
Both really good.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
I know, but I think if I had to choose-

Royel Johnson:
Yes, Selena.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:
Sorry, Richie, but Selena's coming back.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I saw someone on Threads was like, "I'm showing my son Selena for like..." I guess they didn't know the story. We couldn't see the screen, but we all knew it was the end. The poor her son was like falling apart, and we were all like, "Why'd you put us through this trauma again?"

Royel Johnson:

Oh, my gosh. You know what I would rewrite? The results of the presidential election.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Oh, bad parts.

Royel Johnson:

Is it too soon?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's too soon. I'm still grieving a little bit on the inside.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Several endings. Several new endings.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I could go next. I would rewrite the ending of Insecure, Issa Rae's show, because I do not think Issa should have ended up with Lawrence.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

With Lawrence, yeah. For folks who watch. I mean, I'm not mad at it, but-

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And then I think the whole last season was rushed.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

It felt very rushed.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I think we had to wrap up these characters.

Royel Johnson:

It was too fast, yeah.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It was too fast, and we had really grown to love these characters. And so I just don't think they should have been together. I'm not sure if each character's end story really felt authentic.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

RIP to your social media because you know the girls felt some kind of way about us who did not want Issa with Lawrence.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I did not want Issa with Lawrence.

I think about the show Harlem, too. Meagan Good's character, I did not want to end up with the guy.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That last season was awful.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I can't even remember his name at this point.

But I think these shows, we fall in love with these characters and then they try to wrap it up with these nice little endings. But life isn't like that.

Royel Johnson:

At all.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I would redo those.

Royel Johnson:

Okay.

You have an answer for this one?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

You want another question? You don't have to answer.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Another, please. Another question, please.

Royel Johnson:

So next question, what song would play during your personal montage scene in a movie? What song would play in your personal montage scene in a movie?

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Probably D Smoke's "Black Habits".

Royel Johnson:

Lovely D Smoke.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yes.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:
That fits you.

Dr. Wilson Okello:
Is that working?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:
Yes.

Dr. Wilson Okello:
Does that work? Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Royel Johnson:
Love De Smoke.

Dr. Wilson Okello:
Oh, yeah. I'll probably do that.

Royel Johnson:
I run into him a lot in LA.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:
Do you? Oh, that man is-

Royel Johnson:
Royel lives the life in LA.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:
Tell him I said hello.

Royel Johnson:
I will be sure-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
He's with-

Royel Johnson:
... to send your regards.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:
... the movers and the shakers.

Royel Johnson:

I do be seeing him. I mean, I don't know him like that, but I do-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Give him a few months, he'll know him like that.

Royel Johnson:

I see him in some spaces.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Just give him a couple months.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Let him know we're listening. We're listening and we appreciate it.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Mine would be "International Players Anthem" by UGK.

Royel Johnson:

Of course.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love that.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Because when that mic drops, something just changes in me. I feel the need to dance, but I also show out. It's just a perfect song for any occasion.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I would love to know what the montage part-

Royel Johnson:

Is about, right?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

... with this song play.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It could just be about my life's journey.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love it.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I'm the overcomer. I've gone through a lot, but I've come out on top. You know that mic drop is just like...

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love it.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Wait, look at her.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, I love that. Love that.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Okay, so another question. What's your most random area of expertise?

Dr. Wilson Okello:

So no lie, I am a flawless parallel parker.

Royel Johnson:

That's a good one.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Help me.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

I do this. I do this, okay. Tight spaces. I mean-

Royel Johnson:

Me too, actually. From Chicago, you have to know how to park.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Okay, because I'm terrible at it.

Royel Johnson:

Just give me the keys. Get out.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

My dad taught me how to parallel park on gravel with his Lincoln Mark V. By the time I went and took my test, I was rolling because it was like asphalt smooth so it was no problem. Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Anyone else? Random area of expertise?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

The Black shows we grew up on, like Different Worlds, Living Single. I just am an expert and I'll randomly shout out parts of a show. And then my partner, I'm like, "What show is that?" He's like, "I have no idea." I'm like, "Give me your Black card." Because I really like shows, but also movies that we had growing up. I think about Crooklyn and that dog and that couch.

Things like that just bring me joy. I love movies and TV. I grew up with the TV watching me, so I can do a deep dive.

Royel Johnson:

Very nice.

I'm a mechanic by training.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

What?

Royel Johnson:

I grew up in an auto shop. My dad had a shop for over 30 years, and every day after school and the summer breaks I didn't go to camp. I worked at the shop. How I made money throughout high school, grade school was changing breaks, doing starters, doing alternators. It's a random skill that no one would expect that I know how to do.

And I have an asbestos abatement license. My stepfather is an environmental consultant.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I didn't see that one coming.

Royel Johnson:

When I was in college over the summer breaks, I used to supervise lead and asbestos abatement removal projects and made like $30 an hour supervising people who were twice my age. It was just a good experience.

Yeah, just random trades that I picked up over the years.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I love that. I need a trade.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Do you still work on your cars, too?

Royel Johnson:

Not as much. Not as much.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

That's so cool.

Royel Johnson:

But I want to buy an old-school hot rod, and it'd be like my fixer-up project in the garage and I... It's never quite done, so you're working on it for 20 years. Yeah, that's my goal.

What about you, Felicia?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I don't know if we would call this expertise, but I over the years have embraced it. If you know me, you know that Grammy season is my season. I feel like I have a really great expertise in predicting Grammy winners. I think the lowest percentage I've had has been 88 and the highest has been 98, and that is across every category.

I didn't do it last couple years because I've been busy, but I usually take the nomination list and I listen to everything on the nomination list. I have a spreadsheet, and then I pick who I think will win based off of one what I listen to. And then I have a political formula around-

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

[inaudible 00:10:30]

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

... because there's some... Like how many times does this person won before? How many times does this person win when they're in this category? What is the relationship between the label and the Grammys? Who are they connected to musically and politically in the... And so then I do my predictions.

I just want to say that I did already read this year's nominations. This is a very good year, very hard.

Royel Johnson:

I'm very upset that Chance the Rapper was not-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I'm very upset that Chance the Rapper was not nominated, but not completely shocked.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Based on the formula?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Based on the context-

Royel Johnson:

Her algorithm.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Now I'm about to get deep in my bag, but they changed how nominations come now because it used to just be like the academy picks the nominee, but now you... You always submit it, but now people who are independent can submit as opposed to just their record labels submitting. And so that's changed. And then there's more open campaigning, like please for your consideration, for your consideration. There's social media campaigns, and that's changed over the last four or five years.

Now that they've increased the diversity of who's in the academy, who's getting nominated has totally changed. But Chance's album was great, but it was not talked about critically enough. Usually you can tell who's going to get nods by who-

Royel Johnson:

The conversation.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

... who's talking about those albums. And so if you don't hear about it On Music Considered on NPR, it's a good chance you're not going to hear about it get nominated when it's an independent album like that.

Royel Johnson:

Spoken like a true expert, right?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

And the content of this album, I'm not shocked it didn't get nominated. But it's a great album.

Royel Johnson:

Amazing.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

It's probably one of the best rap albums of the year-

Royel Johnson:

Amazing.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

... so I do suggest you go listen to it.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

We're going to jump in to the conversation. One, we're really lucky to have you all, so thank you for agreeing to participate in this conversation. First, when you hear the phrase scholarship as an art form, what does that stir up for you? How do you see your own work as artistic, if at all?

Anyone can jump.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Jump on in.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I guess I could start.

For me, when I hear that question, I think the first thing I think about is accessibility, even somewhat to the masses, just getting your information scholarship out there. The best example I could have is I was going to my tribe to get permission for institutional review board. I went to my tribal council, and it was so funny. They were excited, and they were like... I go by Jameson or JD, but they were like, "Jameson, we like you. We're going to approve this research project you have on collecting data."

But they're like, "Who the hell cares," their response to me. I was like, "Oh." I'm lucky that I have the tribe to keep me grounded in reality and like, "Hey, who from our tribe is going to actually read this? Who are the people that are going to consume it?" It really triggered my thought like, "Oh, maybe we..." I try to do something else. I was trying to develop survey items, and so I was interviewing veterans. Long story short, I was like, "Well, maybe if I got a little film crew, I could interview and we could film it. We could do a little bit of B-roll." We had a nice little 10 minute documentary that had thousands of views, but the little papers that came out, there's like 10 people that read it, maybe like 20 downloads.

Yeah, so I think the first thing I think about that is scholarship is accessibility, too.

Royel Johnson:

Love that, love that.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Anybody else?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I could take it away.

I agree with it being accessible, but also when I heard this question, I thought about impact. Like you were saying, I think about a lot of our work sometimes lands behind these paywalls and it's not always impactful. And so for me, I'm thinking about who are the people that I say I care about, and are they truly impacted by the work?

I say this all the time, can my grandmother read this work and take something away and feel what I'm saying? Can the communities that I'm working with take this work and feel what I'm saying? A lot of folks are familiar with my work. The stage play that I wrote for my dissertation work with Black communities and their relationship to historically white institutions, it was the community that wanted the work to be impactful. They didn't care about my dissertation either, but they were the ones that pushed us to make impactful work. And then they then put on the stage play for the community.

And now it is not just a stage play, but it's also a musical. We've had a street renaming on [inaudible 00:15:38] campus. We've received some funding to make some actual change. I'm always asking people if our work's not impactful, what are we doing, and why and for who?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

For who?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And so I think about impact when I think about creative and artful scholarship.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yeah, no disagreements with what's been said. I think it's beautiful.

First thing I think about is like that idea of genre comes to mind. And so-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

They're a tricky little thing.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Genres.

Royel Johnson:

Shout out to Beyoncé.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

But I really am trying to think about for those who are going to engage the work in the academy, I absolutely believe that we ought to be thinking about community. But for those who do engage within the academy, how does it feel for them?

I'm thinking about the rhythm, I'm thinking about the texture, the words, I'm thinking about what the sentences do beyond just them laying there on a page, right? Do they evoke anything? Do they stir something up in you? If we can push our scholarship such that it has like a sensory modality to it, that it has a particular rhythm to it, I think that aesthetic... Or thinking about the aesthetics is just as important as the product that can actually move on us to do this type of perhaps communal work that you all are talking about, right? It can move us beyond the walls of the university.

Really I am thinking about, yeah, what's the affective component of our work? How does this release itself from the genre of academic writing so that it can move on us in a different type of way and hopefully move on others in a different type of way as well?

Royel Johnson:

It's interesting that you say that having, I know you just wrote a book, I wrote a book. Writing a book was such a liberating experience creativity in terms of creativity. That when we write, when I've written academic writing for lots of articles and so forth, there's such a rigid structure. I found myself leaning into creative forms of writing that I was suppressed, and it was so fun.

And so scholarship is a form for exploring a medium for exploring our imagination in the ways that I think art is also. And so I've been able to lean into creative writing as a strategy for embracing my sort of creative interest in ways that I have not always felt enable or supported in doing through just structured writing.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And writing is art.

Royel Johnson:

It is art, yeah.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's vulnerable, it takes you to a place. If I know I have to write something and it's really going to be moving, I have to put myself there mentally, physically, emotionally.

The Black playwright August Wilson says that art is supposed to transform, it's supposed to change hearts and minds. But so many times when we give our students articles to read, folks aren't changed, they're not transformed.

But when we give them scholarship that is creative or is rooted in art, you'll hear conversations shift in classrooms in beautiful ways. When students really feel that shit, they want to rally. They want to change things, they want to transform the world. And so I want more scholarship like ours to be in front of students so that they can feel compelled.

A lot of my students are also trying to write academically these dry papers, and I'm like, "Whose voice is it?"

Royel Johnson:

Whose voice?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And so I also want our students to see our work so they can know possibility.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, so much of what you do is emulate before you develop and grow into your own voice. If your role models aren't engaging in that sort of artistic forms of expression, you start role modeling what you see as the standard until you eventually find your own sort of voice later in.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Well, this leads us very well into our next question. And so much of academic culture rewards predictability, right? Clear methods, tidy conclusions, we have a formula, implications, all this, right? But how do you make space for the ambiguity in your work, for emotion and for imagination?

Go ahead and exhale. Let it out.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yeah, to any reviewer who's ever reviewed my work, I'm talking to you.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I'm talking to you.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

But one of the things that I think about is the unknowability that we have to be striving for instead of predictability. You're absolutely right. There's a template for how we produce scholarship, right? Oftentimes the scholarship doesn't even have to do anything. It don't got to move on any people. It just has to look a particular type of way. It has to align with the ways we think an academic paper ought to align, and we might see that thing published, right?

I'm trying to figure out how do we lean into the essence of communities, which is to say that you can never really know all that there is. For us to get up and start to put forth outcomes, for example, that suggests that we do know, I think it imposes a sense of expertise that ought not to be there.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's a lie.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

It's a lie. Call it what it is. And so I'm trying to think about how we can lean into methods that allow for more flexibility as it relates to what an outcome ought to be.

Can we leave open possibilities beyond do this with the community or do this with this set of students? I think that sort of leaving space for that is a form. I think it's an aesthetic decision, right? It's a decision about what we want our work to... How we want it to take shape. I think there's power there.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Agreed. I love this question so much because I'm finding a lot of my students want their work to fit in these neat little boxes. They want it to be predictable. I keep saying this type of work is messy.

And so what I like to do is just before I take on any project, it has to be one that I'm totally obsessed with, that I'm moved emotionally, that I'm compelled, that I'm researching. That when I'm telling stranger on the street about this, that they want to know more and they don't even know me. I find projects that keep me up at night.

But also in my work, I try to put the messiness on the paper. When I'm talking about the methods, methodologies, if I run into any hiccups, if anything changed in my brain, like if there was a molecule shifting moment, I like to put it on the paper. Sometimes we try to wrap up the methods. I did this, I did this, the end. But if I struggled, if I failed at something, if something didn't quite go right, then that is what I like to put in the paper or come to ASHE and talk about.

A lot of times we like to stand up and say, "Yes, this was a successful project." But sometimes I had to say, "No, it was a fail. This is why, but this is what I learned moving forward, this is what I get to do." I think we also just need to be honest about what our work look like.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

A novel concept, honesty.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Honesty. That's why I said it's a lie for us to think that we're not... This work is messy. It's supposed to be. To me, that's what makes it fun.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

I was thinking yesterday I was meeting with a student who wanted to chat quickly about conceptual versus theoretical frameworks, how many frameworks are too many in the dissertation. She was really getting flustered by like, "Is this a framework? Is this a conceptual framework? Is it theoretical framework? What are they doing in this study?" I was like, "You get to make the case. There are no rigid formulas." People will tell you, "Okay, yes, well, the reason why we don't want a lot of frameworks because students don't end up harnessing them fully in ways that show up over various aspects or there's a through line in the study."

But use as many as you need. What is relevant to the phenomenon that you're exploring and make the case for why these pieces are in conversation, versus I can only position this in this aspect of the work. I

just think about the rigid structure that we're socialized to believe that our work should fit in versus the messiness and reflecting it on the paper.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I love that.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

What I will say too, just to jump in and answer your question, I think having a supportive department has been really instrumental to being able to do a lot of the innovative creative work that I've seen, yeah, the art of scholarship in itself.

I shout out to Dr. Leslie Gonzalez and our incoming-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

ASHE president elect.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, President Elect.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Not that I want a raise or anything.

Royel Johnson:

But he does.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

But I deserve a merit race.

Royel Johnson:

He said, I just got one, actually.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

But she's phenomenal.

Yeah, I will say she's been very supportive in all the endeavors that I've wanted to do. And then previous to that, we had our interim dean who's there right now, Dr. Regina Deil-Amen, who's been phenomenal, too. She was the one that hired me, was my chair for a long time. It's just been like, "JD, you come here. Go do your thing, and just let me know how you could support you." That was the attitude since me going to U of A, and I really appreciate that. And so I haven't known anything other than that, and so I really appreciate having supportive department.

But then also in that, I think there was... I remember reading, it was similar to the conversation you all were saying, reading scholarship and being like, "This doesn't sound like Native people to me." The way it was written, I'm like, "This sounds like a white person and I don't know." Nothing that it's wrong with that, but it just didn't sound like us. I remember thinking that, and that was one of the first things I wrote in grad school was I wrote a piece about why we needed to use Native humor in scholarship. And so I used that because I knew it was going to be a stepping stone for future scholarship.

I was doing a validity scale for a survey instrument, and I was putting jokes in there throughout the piece. And then one of the reviewer, reviewer two or whoever, was like, "Take that out. It's unprofessional," kind of deal. I was like, "Well, according to Lopez 2015."

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I know that's right. I'll cite myself.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I think that's where it goes is like you build that foundation for yourself at some point. If there's any early scholars, I would say that start setting that foundation. Don't think of it like we're going to jump to utopian real quick, but you have to be iterative and strategic in your process.

I think for me, that was something I was happy I did in 2015 because I still use that article now 10 years later, which is crazy for me to think about. Because I remember when I wrote it in the mindset I was in, and I was just wanting to tell jokes on paper.

Royel Johnson:

But it's like you legitimize your own work versus relying on the canon to legitimize it, which is beautiful.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

In relation to what everyone has shared, this is something I've been wrestling with, particularly in higher education scholarship, and it might sound strange that I'm saying it because I do case study method and that's probably the most boring formulaic method, but I think our field tends to be an applied field, right? And so we are very concerned with and understandably so how do we take what we've learned and research and apply it, right? How do we turn this into practice?

I think that's great, but I think what has happened a bit with that becoming such a dominant way we do work is it has created some constrictions around our thinking, right? I often wrestle with, are we actually engaging in the art of scholarship and the idea of thinking and pondering about things and exploring concepts and constructs and wrestling with them and theories and all of these things as opposed to I need to get to a finding that I can apply with some implications.

I often wonder how much of our body of knowledge has been stifled. Because whereas in a philosophy or a sociology, you're able to think and wrestle with ideas and just use different methods and ways of wrestling with concepts as opposed to just having this desired practice, practical applied end.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

I love that. And what I'm hearing to actually read and study honestly, right? And so part of the issue I hear with multiple frameworks is that we don't give ourselves an opportunity to learn one exact, to learn one well, let alone invite ourselves to think about what multiple frameworks would actually do or could do for a project. And so oftentimes when I'm asking students to think about, one, it's because I need you to study this.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Read the text.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

To wrestle with-

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

The primary-

Royel Johnson:

The primary.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

And then if you're going to tell me you're willing to do that across the, okay, but can we grapple with the genealogy, right? What does your study practice look like as a [inaudible 00:29:54]

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

What can you imagine in that framework, right? Not just knowing it to regurgitate it, but to say there's a space here that I think something's missing. Or that we could pull this or extract this and be creative with it in how we think of how it applies in our work.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I also think we recycle theoretical frameworks.

Royel Johnson:

For lack of exposure to.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

For lack of exposure to other disciplines. This is supposed to be an interdisciplinary field.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Talking my language now.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

When I encourage students to go look at other disciplines, sometimes they look at me as if I have two heads. Because they're like, "We're studying higher education," but I'm like, "No, this is a sociology issue. Black scholars have talked about this for generations. We need to go to the primary text."

Royel Johnson:

I literally just complained about this in our faculty meeting because all of our students default when race comes up is CRT. And then for Black students who want to study Black issues, the default now is Black crit. They're not interrogating anything, the epistemological foundations, Afro-pessimism, any of that.

Does this align with how you see and experience the world, how you think knowledge is constructed? It's because they haven't dug deep into a catalog of frameworks that are most relevant to the work that they're examining.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Or just thought, right? I get back to this, right? I talk, I'll probably talk about it again this week at some point on something I'm on, about how life changing taking an African American philosophy course was for me as a doctoral student. Because in education research, I don't know that we read a lot of thought, right? That class forced me to read people thinking and just talking about concepts and constructs and not a, this is the implication, right? But more so of, I think about...

I think it's George Yancy and Black Bodies, White Gaze and the early work of Cornel West around race and Anita Allen's work around privacy and race. These are just we're just thinking through things, right? What do these things mean? When you say Afro pessimism, right? I want to encourage students to engage with that as an ideology as opposed to just trying to find a framework. I don't know that we have created a space in our field for some freedom there to just like, let's sit around and pontificate a little bit.

I think some of our earlier in its infancy higher ed some scholars were doing that-

Royel Johnson:

Well, we don't have a lot of philosophy of higher education roles either. Go across the school of education. When I was in grad school, we had a philosophy of education professor-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

University of Illinois.

Royel Johnson:

Right? Oh yeah, in Illinois as well. But I don't even see those kind of roles exist anymore.

I mean, this is a tangent, but Wilson, there was something that you were saying about like the aesthetics of research. What do you feel? How are you moved as a result of reading this work? Oftentimes people equate rigor with lack of emotion. I don't see that as mutually exclusive, right? Rigor is around your accountability to the complexity of the phenomenon, and not necessarily... How are we communicating our findings and its significance? That's the aesthetics. I don't know that people see those in conversation with one another.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

You're talking the talk. You're talking that talk.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

See, now I'm in my bag. What does it mean when we are continuously reading and regurgitating work that makes us feel nothing? What does that mean for our field and our scholarship and our body of knowledge if we continue to put out work that makes people feel nothing?

It's like bad pop music.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's an album I won't name. I can see it in my head.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Right? I think we're struggling with that as a larger society of empty work, right? Empty things that have no nutritional benefit to us spiritually or otherwise. How does that fit into the world of academia?

Royel Johnson:

I'll have to sit with that.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

This is what I do all day so I can't get nothing done. I just be sitting around thinking.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

You're going to have me thinking about that 2:00 AM in the morning.

Royel Johnson:

I got it.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Rob everybody of their sleep.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Right.

Royel Johnson:

So it's no surprise we're in a moment where the work that many of you do is contested. It is being defunded. It is being attacked. How do you hold on to your purpose, your commitment to doing your work and the way that you want to do it, but also in this moment that is devaluing it, discrediting it, dismissing it? How do you navigate that tension in this moment?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Well, first-

Royel Johnson:

Or are you navigating it?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I am navigating it every day.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Yeah, and people ask me the question all the time about, is my work rigorous?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Such a loaded, coded question.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It is a loaded word. But when I really think about community-based work and art space work, it's probably the most rigorous work you could ever do because community work takes forever. Communities get to pivot and say what they want to do.

Royel Johnson:

Prolonged engagement in the field.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Yes. They want to do it with you forever and always, but it is extremely rigorous because you are at their whim to do what they want to do.

Same with art space work. You can't just say you want to do art space work and just engage in it. You have to learn it. You have to just sit with it. It changes. People feel it differently in different areas. It's some of the most rigorous work you could even do. So when people ask me, is it rigorous? I say, "Try it. Do one project."

Royel Johnson:

Try it.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And then come back and tell me.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I know that's right.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

And so I really do trouble that.

But to answer your question, in sitting in the times that we're in, I'm rest assured that the people that I'm doing this work for and with that they feel it. That's it. I know these institutions aren't going to fill me. They never have. I'm not asking them what they think about my work. I don't care. I can go somewhere else and make this little amount of money if I really wanted to. Let's be real, okay?

So for me, it's about the people, my audience. If they feel my work, then it's good. If I feel my work is good, then it's good. That's it. And so I feel rooted in that. If I'm doing good work, that keeps me in the game, if students feel my work, if the community feels my work. But this institution? Because what they think is good changes with the season.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Now you're talking good.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Right? So I can't... They're fickle. What I know is who I am and whose I am and the work that I'm doing and why. The end, period. And when I can no longer do that work, that's when I have to move on.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yeah, I think there's a clarity in this moment perhaps that didn't exist before. Where several years ago, if somebody didn't like your work, they might have to write around it to offer some type of affirming remark about it. But now there's a particular license folks have to just say, "We don't like it," all together, or perhaps we never have, right? There's no put the artifice away, take off the mask, and here's how we've always felt about it.

But I think to Ro's point, I think there's something... There's also a sense of clarity I think that we as artists have about our work as not directing the work toward academia as our primary audience. It's always been about the communities. It's always been about the feeling that we're after. It's always been about our commitments to the equity or justice or the traditions, the craft that we're coming out of, right?

To your point around rigor, the particularities of closeness that an arts-based aesthetic require is more time than anybody really has. It's more time than most folks want to give to their work, right? It requires something of you. It requires a time, a commitment that folks will oftentimes just write off as, well, that's not artwork, or that's too simple, or whatever that might be.

I think it's a clarity around our audience, what our work is designed to do, our various commitments, and staying clear about that in the face of this sort of license that academia and the public now has about what our work is and what it should be.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Amen.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I think for me, I've just always wanted freedom to do what I want to do. This is apart from academia, but I think that you need some type of financial freedom, like the eff you money. Walk away.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yes, that's real.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I don't know if we're allowed to cuss on this podcast, so-

Royel Johnson:

We can.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

But you do need that.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yeah, how you feeling?

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I feel like you do need some aspect of it, and I've been fortunate and I will say that's... I mean, I don't want to say that's been the whole part, but that's been part of what's given me more freedom myself.

I was lucky when I was a young man in '07 or maybe it was like '08, I was in the military. I was like, "I'm going to buy a house even though I'm not going to live in it," because I knew it was a recession. It was a good time to buy. I happened to have a little bit of money. And so I lived with four roommates, and I bought a house back home. I think that for me set me up to this point now and have Airbnbs, little other side hustles that I want to go into.

But I've just always been that kind of person. I remember the first scholarship I got was five grand, and it was from this Native scholarship organization called AISES and I went around and I bought season tickets to the Phoenix Suns and then I started scalping tickets.

Royel Johnson:

Selling them?

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I was like-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, hustling.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

"See, I'm Native. I got a scalp." That was back in the day-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That's the Native humor.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

That was back in the day, though. Yeah, this was a while ago, so I was hustling on the side a little bit. It was when you had to meet people on Craigslist and McDonald's. Now you can just sell them on Ticketmaster and stuff.

But I mean, I think like always having that mentality I have other jobs I could do or like I'm not bounded by this paycheck, and that's why I agree with what you said is I've always had financial freedom to be like, "If I want to quit today, I'm good, my family's good."

And so I think that's given me a lot of leeway to be like, "I don't care what your definition of rigor is. I feel like I'm going to do what I want to do and to the best of my ability still being accountable to the community that I love."

Royel Johnson:

I mean, you also shared though about how important it is to have leadership support. That is unfortunately is the exception not the rule that there's so many amazing scholars who are in spaces and places that don't value the really important work that they do. And are in the context right now where it's even more important to have some institutional buffer because now the federal government doesn't value what you're doing.

I do worry about so many early career scholars. I'm at USC, and we were meeting with the vice chancellor or someone for research. They were offering a recommendation for how they can help screen our CVs when we're submitting federal applications that would pull out language that would be

triggering to the federal government. I said, "Well, there are people like me who it's race everywhere, right? It's equity everywhere." And so removing those aspects out of my CV in order to be competitive for federal grant is really like intellectual malpractice, right? You're asking me to erase-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

It's lying.

Royel Johnson:

It's lying. There's so many early career-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Call it what it is.

Royel Johnson:

... scholars who won't get access to these things that we have designated as soon... I think about all the folks who are in psychology who getting the NIH grants, or they're the big grants in their field that you have to get this to get tenure. Who won't even be competitive for these kinds of things and who don't have the institutional support, the Leslie Gonzalez who can say, "Go and do whatever the work that you... We're going to support you and back you."

Yeah, just worry about what those folks will do in this moment.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Two things that you just made me think about, but to give another side of that from institutional, one of the things I found when I got to University of Illinois that really impressed me was they have a tenure track specifically for folks who do public engagement work, right?

Royel Johnson:

Love it.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

And so you from the gate say like, "I don't do traditional stuff, right?" But I do scholarship, right? And so there's a different kind of way in which you're evaluated and metric. And so I know some folks who are working with museums on like curating historical exhibits around the curriculum and certain things, or they do a lot of like policy kind of community organizing engagement work that doesn't translate clearly into peer review journal articles, right?

I thought that was so dope because from the beginning you get that kind of pressure off of you like that you have to conform your work. But when I listened to some of the things that the provost shared and some of the leaders on campus, what I realized is, and this could be good or bad depending on how you look at it, but they supported that not just because we have a really robust shared governance model, but because they saw how that work also brings prestige to the institution.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Impact.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Right? I think it takes a certain kind of mindset from an institutional perspective to say, "Yes, you getting publications and grants and having stuff in journals with high impact factors makes us look good. But also saying that someone affiliated with our institution you know curated some huge museum, we get to also claim that too." And so rethinking what is prestige and what is valuable.

Some can argue that's a very capitalistic way of looking at scholarship, but I think-

Royel Johnson:

It's a means to an end.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Right. The reality is it is a way in which they can make the case for this.

Royel Johnson:

It's a framing.

I think about last season we met with, was it last season or season before, we had Robin Hughes, Dean of SIUE, and Candace Hall together an episode to talk about how she was creating the infrastructure to support Candace and her work and Candace doing documentaries. How prior to her leadership at the school, there was no mechanism for evaluating that kind of scholarship and her role and advocacy as a dean to create the structure in ways that would legitimize that work and value it the same way in which we would value other forms of scholarship. That was really cool.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Right.

I'm at a land grant institution, and part of our role is outreach.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yes, that's what they say.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

That's what they say.

Royel Johnson:

Who said it?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Who said that?

Royel Johnson:

Who is they?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

But because of that, I've used that to leverage my dossier to say pieces of my work is public scholarship, which is then outreach. And so I've also had to be clear in my writeup around what I'm doing.

Royel Johnson:

For folks who are listening, there are nuggets and strategies embedded in what you're sharing. How you frame, how you talk about your work and its connection to the mission of the organization is really key.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Yes, yes, and I learned that sort of thing from the Candace Halls of the groups who are doing things outside of the box, but then can say, "This is the number of people that I've impacted." This is the number of clicks that we've had on this website. This is the number of folks who say they've been transformed by this work.

And so I just want to give her a shout-out for that.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, I love that.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

One of the things I hear coming across when the three of you have spoken about your work and navigating this question of rigor is saying authentic to who are committed to the work in the communities that you're doing work for and with.

It made me think of, when we think about particularly musicians or the music industry and the difference between an artist and a performer or entertainer, right? both can be really good at what they do, but I think some would argue that there is a authentic connection and deep respect for the craft and the creativity and the cultivating of a work that an artist sees themselves as a vessel in which your work comes through. That is not confined by things like tricky little things like genres and whatever the standard is or metrics, right?

Whereas a performer/entertainer can also really be committed to the exercise of the craft, but may not be as deeply committed to this authentic kind of commitment to the culture. They're more so they get something, they receive something. Erykah Badu says singers have to sing the beats that are brought to them, right? They get something and they perform it. They entertain and they do their job and they hit the metric and they hit the mark, and they go.

And so when I think about this in terms of academia, I think there is a difference between a researcher and a scholar, right? I think that the scholar has a different deep commitment to thinking and work and creativity. A researcher knows how to do research and how to do it well and how to produce to the metric and to the standard. But there's a line between researcher and scholar.

So with that in mind-

Royel Johnson:

On to it.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Preach, okay?

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Segue.

Royel Johnson:

Let me segue.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Being an artist or being a scholar, particularly a scholar who may do things unconventionally, can be risky, right? What risk have you taken formally or stylistically in your work that allowed it to better reflect your values or community?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I think real risks that I've taken is just the refusal to pivot even when folks have asked.

I've been on a campus, not my current one, but I've been on a campus when I've asked-

Royel Johnson:

Just to clarify.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Just to confirm.

Royel Johnson:

Just so we're clear.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Be clear.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I've been on a campus where I've been asked to take certain words out of my grant applications. I'm talking about Black, I'm talking about women, and to shift those for other words, like first gen, for example, even though those two things-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I was about to say they don't even-

Royel Johnson:

They're mutually exclusive.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

That's another story for another day.

But I refuse to pivot when I've been asked to pivot in those ways. I refuse to water my work down for folks. When I hear from a journal that they won't publish photography or they won't publish a stage

play, instead of being really defeated by that, I reach out to journals that will. A journal will say, "We've never done that."

Royel Johnson:

Ain't that something?

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

We've never done that, but we can try. From there, then my piece is maybe the first piece they've had with photos and we figured that thing out together, right?

Those are all risks that I've taken, but also there's a real risk of not earning tenure.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yeah, and that's real.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's real. But also I have community around me. I have folks that are going to pour into me if that happens. I'm going to fight like hell if it happens to get it overturned. There are some real material risks that I have in this game, but I'm not going to change the work that I'm doing. I'm just going to find a way to that-

Royel Johnson:

You're willing to assume the risk.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Exactly. I'm going to find ways to make it work for me, yeah.

Royel Johnson:

I love it.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

They agree.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I think for me, one, I really like book chapters because you could do a lot of storytelling in book chapters too for that reason. There's a lot of flexibility. Any opportunity I get to be in a book chapter, I usually say yes. I just try to fit one of the things I'm already doing into it. I'm like, "All right, yeah, we could do that."

Royel Johnson:

You can cite it later.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Yeah, so I can cite it later and then I'll put it in a journal article.

But that's also something I do in journal articles. I put little Easter eggs in all my journal articles that are like Native jokes that only Natives would understand.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love that.

Royel Johnson:

I love that as well.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

And so it's very like hidden code, and so unless you know... There was a paper I wrote that was the scale of Native Americans giving back, which is SNAG for short. And so everyone's like, SNAG, okay, it's a cute word, but snagging in the Native community means that's who you're hooking up with. Everyone's like, "Oh my gosh, you can't put SNAG in there." I was like, "No one knows. Editors didn't know." I wasn't going to tell them either, so I was like, "This is hilarious."

And then I think a risk I've been taking lately, it's just been the last year now, is they do standup comedy. That's has been a whole nother adventure, but it's similar to like... I like what you said about researcher scholarship, but it's like Native community is so invisible that I'm trying to create visibility in a lot of ways to the masses. But everything I say, it sounds like a joke, but it's actually rooted in like... I teach stats, so it's something related to Native stats.

Even I start off with like, "Hi, my name's Jameson. I'm from the Quechan tribe. My parents wanted to give me a traditional native name, so they named me after a whiskey."

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

This is me.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I don't know if I should laugh and I know it, but... Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I'm laughing because it's Jameson.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Yeah, so y'all probably don't drink Jameson.

Royel Johnson:

I do.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Don't assume, Jameson.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

No, but I say that joke because people will laugh, or they'll not know whether to laugh. But that at the same time I'm like, "I'm just kidding." There was a study that came out in '26.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love this. Oh my goodness, this is so good.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

... that white people drink more than Native people. Native people are more likely to abstain. Native people, they're less likely to drink, and I'll go on. I was like, "But did we really need a study for that? We just got to go to a baseball game on a Saturday night." And so it gives me a segue to talk about some type of stats.

But also for a broader community, if I'm in a comedy club, that's something I'll do quick. In a stats or academic community I could extrapolate or whatever, go a little bit longer into how statistics can help break stereotypes within Native community. Because I think we could laugh at that joke because we've heard that stereotype that Natives are alcoholics without really having any basis for that information, not knowing that all came from the 1800s land grab and people wanting to take Native land, people show that we're in net somehow.

It all stems from that. And so I like it because, and it's a risk that I know I take. It's hard sometimes like those coffee clubs are shady. It's rugged, like sticky.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Literally and figuratively.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

You're just like, "This place is like really sketchy," but you're dealing with like drunks and hecklers and randos.

Royel Johnson:

Your feet sticking to the floor. Oh, anyways. I love that.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

What risks have you taken?

Royel Johnson:

He said we'll talk offline.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

I will say that if this matters to you, which is to say if you care about other people affirming you in academia in a particular way, there's a risk-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That's real.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

... that you won't be taken seriously. Again, trying to hold what it means to build a career in this place, understanding that our work is never over, right? But if you decide to be here, what does it mean that

you're still in community with these folks, you're still... I mean, the reviewers, the editors, where your work is going, all those folks are coming across your work, but they're dismissing it.

I mean, you're looking these people in the eyes.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yeah, no, that's real. That's real.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

I don't rock with you. And so trying to hold the complexity of that I think is something I would encourage folks who are watching this to think about it.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

And you know, Roshaunda, and I think these two marry well or partner well, we don't want to put marriage on a throne, but I think this goes back to this concept of scholar that I've been wrestling with. In that because of the reward systems and academia, we do get so concerned with acceptance and affirmation from those in our field when sometimes our work is beyond our field, right? How do we begin to think of ourselves beyond just our field?

You gave the example, Roshaunda, about, "I took the work somewhere it would be published." I had a similar experience with a philosophical paper that I wrote that none of the education journals would publish. They just wouldn't publish it most because they have implications and findings and all these things. One person, "This actually isn't empirical." I was like, "Well, I'd said that at the top of the paper."

I was just like, "Why am I trying to force this in this space," right? But there is this thing in the back of your head, like especially if you're on the tenure track, like I need these journals. I need the field to say so we're good. I took that work outside and sent it to a philosophy journal, and it got picked up right away in a top journal in that field, right? It was like I was questioning my own work because it was in the wrong space because we've been socialized to need this affirmation from our scholars in our field for the peer review system. Both in a capital way, but also in a very sociological way.

And so I think that is true. That's a risk that if you're going to do this creative work, however you see that, that pushes the bounds of what we know to be what we do in this field, are you prepared for having to possibly build a new community?

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, absolutely.

I mean, post tenure, I was moving from Penn State to USC. I took a year off from writing. I did not engage in academic scholarship beyond finishing up R&Rs and so forth, but I didn't do anything new. I felt called to do more public-facing things, and I was really struggling with how I would be perceived and how folks would make meaning of me engaging in ways that they're not used to me engaging or how most academics engage.

It was Chris Emdin, a friend, now he was at USC at the time, he's back at TC, who was like, "Fuck 'em. They're going to talk..." That's what he said. "They're going to talk either way. You know why you're engaged in this work. You know what communities you're serving. If you're clear about that, why does it matter?" But I was so, to your point, this idea of being affirmed, that the way I'm doing it aligns.

It's a reward system if you stay on that path. Am I willing to assume the risk of not being rewarded in the ways in which that a certain formula works for? Can I be okay with that? And I am, right? But it took lots

of reflection, and Chris is a great friend and mentor, for him role modeling too for me what it looks like to be engaged in different forms of scholarship, to be engaged publicly, but also to still be a serious scholar.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Something you said just stirred up my spirit. But I think there are more people who will affirm you that you don't know are there. Higher ed particularly I joke that we're like the cool kids in high school, if we're looking at academia at the whole.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Are we the cool kids?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

We are, we are. Cool kids as in the jocks.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Have you seen the college of engineering?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I'm saying this, right?

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

We're definitely the cool ones.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Technically we're the people that went to college and never wanted to leave. We were the RAs and the... I think somewhat in academia we're seen like that. Y'all just like to party. Not saying that's who we are, just saying there's a perception.

But my point is, I think that because of that element within our culture, sometimes we're seeking affirmation from people we think we need affirmation from because of how they've been heralded or platformed or put on a pedestal in the field. Sometimes those aren't our people, right? But we've been socialized and think we need them to be our people.

If we would just actually step back and zoom out, we might actually find who our people really are. That they may be quieter, they have just as much influence, and can champion your work and get in rooms and talk about you in ways and lift you up that you need. But they're not always the loudest people in the room. They're not always the face on the flyer.

That is something I have learned over the years that there's going to be a Chris there to say, "Eff 'em," right? Or there's going to be someone to say, "Child, don't worry about them people. " Or, "Send me your work. I'll help you. I'll help you get a Robin Hughes. I'm going to help build the infrastructure to help support your work because I think it's that important."

Royel Johnson:

Actually, come put it in my special issue, right?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That's what I'm saying, right? I think I would encourage us to remember that. Sometimes those people we're looking for affirmation for we're never going to get it from because those aren't our people. We're trying to force ourselves to get a pet on the back from someone who doesn't have the capacity to do it when there are people there for us.

I always also try to remember, because some of us may not be called to this space, but if this is the space you feel called to try and stay with it because there's someone behind you who needs to see you.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Which is why I do it. I'm not here to get a pat on the back from an echo chamber. I'm here to open the doors so that my students can do their work that they're called to and it be lifted up.

I do the work for community, and what I love about them is that they're going to keep it honest with you. If it's bad, they're going to tell you.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That's real, that's real.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

If you need to do something different or change something, it's clear. They're going to be super honest with you, and I think some of us don't want that kind of honesty about our work.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Now you're talking good.

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yeah, I appreciate that.

I'm really trying to be careful with this idea of affirmation. I think it's a really fickle emotion. I think it's really fickle. It's a feeling that we're after that would suggest that what we did is good. That for me is a Western construct of being this need for someone to say that that is good. Which means that it meets a particular standard, which means that I can identify it in a particular way.

But what you're talking about, what you're talking about, honesty is something very different. Somebody who respects your work, who respects you, who can speak to the honesty, the integrity of your work, the deeper sort of renderings that you're after, that's what you want. Particularly as an artist, you don't want folks who are because if you're standing up at a comedy show or over mic...

I was telling some folks the other day that sometimes when you offer a piece, folks have blank. I'm like, "Did it land right? Am I not out here giving everything?" But one of the things I've... Again, working out of this way of needing to be affirmed is like, did I do the peace with integrity, right? Was I grounded when I delivered it?

Royel Johnson:

How does it make me feel?

Dr. Wilson Okello:

How does it make me feel? If I could stay true to those things, then...

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Sometimes you walking in as scary and risky as it can be, you walking in that honesty and integrity can sometimes free other people to walk in their own honesty and integrity.

I'm not just talking about folks coming behind you. I'm talking about folks who are ahead of you.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Beside you.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Beside you because it sometimes takes that to see that you can survive being honest, to be like, "Man, what did I give up with all that deception I was walking around in?" Which I feel needs we need honest work.

To your point, I think the community, they have so much tied to this work and its impact they don't have a choice, but to be honest-

Royel Johnson:

And they're not concerned about your ego.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yeah, if they're not honest, they suffer.

Royel Johnson:

Lighter question, who inspires your scholarship? What inspires your scholarship? Who and/or what?

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

And/or what?

Dr. Wilson Okello:

I'm going to shout out this visual artist out of Pittsburgh, Mikhael Owunna, whose art I've been following for several years now. But his work is actually on the cover of my book. Yeah, yeah. Yeah, and so brilliant visual artist, photographer, engineer, and created this way of taking photos. He turns off the lights, paints Black models in this fluorescent paint. When you snap down on the shutter, they appear in this cosmic orientation.

Taking in that particular project, the Infinite Essence Project, really gave birth to the book. It allowed me to think and it freed me up to write through a different heuristic. I didn't feel as tied to what the template of academic scholarship. That's my shout-out, Mikhael, the work that he's done and the way he's just opening up ways for us to think differently about Blackness.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. I love the book cover.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Love that.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

In higher ed, I'm inspired by Candace Hall, Charles Davis, TJ Stewart. This whole Imagine Futures documentary, LP, because it's not an album, it's an LP. LP, I'm inspired by it.

Because this year has been really dark and difficult, but seeing the way their project has come together, the songs associated with it are bringing me joy, it's lifting me up. It's showing me what scholarship can really do. And so I'm so grateful for that.

But outside of higher ed, I'm inspired by Beyoncé and just the way she continues to reinvent herself. The Gift I return to often, Lemonade I return to often, plus the visuals for both of those albums just-

Royel Johnson:

The gift is so slept on.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

The Gift.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Hiver over there. He's just going to be all over.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

We're going to listen to it later because it's so good.

Royel Johnson:

It's so amazing.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

But I'm also inspired by Brandy because we're talking about-

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I'm inspired by Brandy.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Me too, and as an artist, her work is so timely. And so we're listening to some songs that she wrote 20 and 30 years ago and we are still being changed.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

She's usually ahead of where music... We're just catching up to where Brandy was musically 15 years ago, right? Full Moon was ahead of his time and we're just catching up to how good it was and how Human was so good. At the time, I don't know that we valued.

Royel Johnson:

Human was slept on. I love that album.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Her ears.

Royel Johnson:

Shout out to the Brandy fans.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

It's impeccable, and so I'm inspired by her.

But I'm also inspired by folks like Zora Neale Hurston, who was doing research with community way before we called it community-engaged research, right? I'm inspired by people like Ava DuVernay and Robert Townsend, folks who do timeless work about Black folks that can live on the Five Heartbeats.

Royel Johnson:

Five heartbeats.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Or Meteor Man. It's just good work that was a moment for Black people. That's how I want my work to feel. Time people can go back to it, people can still resonate with the imagery, the song still hit. That's what I want for my work, so I'm inspired by all those folks.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I think for me, I get inspired by my colleagues too similarly. I love Dr. Heather Shotton, who's given me a lot of opportunities in life, Dr. Bryan Brayboy. My good friend [inaudible 01:11:25] and I, we have a ton of projects right now that's working with a lot of different types of artists, which has been incredible.

Beyond that, there's another gentleman named Vine Deloria that wrote Custer Died for Your Sins. He was the first one I really saw Native scholar implementing Native humor into the scholarship, so I really appreciate that.

And then beyond that, obviously I love a lot of comedians. I won't shout them out because I know most of them are inappropriate. Yeah, there might be some varying opinions on them, but I think that just the way that the storytelling is incredible.

But beyond that, I grew up in church and I grew up a lot of preachers.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Grew up in church kids.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

My dad was a preacher, and he had the deep voice and Pentecostal. The same Jesus. The same Jesus that turned modern to wine. That same Jesus is in you [inaudible 01:12:22] it's funny, I grew up in... I mean, I'm guessing some of y'all grew up like that too, but you grew up in Pentecostal church and you'd see all that.

My dad was a preacher, so he'd make us get up as kids and go testify. "Come up, JD. Tell us what's on your mind." I'm like, "Oh, Jesus, thank you." I have a gentle voice, but I'm pretty calm, gentle person, and so I never knew how to do it. But the first joke I told was in church and I said, "Oh, thank God for coming to my life because if not, the only throne I would see is the toilet." The whole audience started laughing, and then I got hooked.

But then I knew a lot of Native preachers, they would tell jokes during the sermons and I would love that. And so to this day, I went to a camp meeting maybe last month in the beginning of October, and I saw some of my favorite preachers back to back. They do the three-day services and-

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

Revival.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Revival. It's actually like revival, so you know how it is. I won't get into that, but I think I get inspired by those folks just a little bit in the way they deliver. It's a different message that they're preaching obviously than what we're preaching in academia, but the way that to deliver it still hits my soul and my spirit. I'm like, I want that to be similarly how I'm delivering the messages that I have that God gave me.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

That's beautiful.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

I love that, it's real.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

That's beautiful.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

That's good. Okay, so I'm resonating on this idea of being able to move the spirit, right? That's a gift, so that's good stuff right there.

Looking ahead, right? So we're looking ahead to whatever the future is, if you believe in constructs of time, but what's one intention you're holding about the kind of scholar and artist you want to become or are becoming?

Dr. Wilson Okello:

Yeah, so my hope is that when folks think about what I did that they will say that he was as serious about the craft as he was about the product. That he wasn't interested in staging Black people, Black artists, Black ideas simply for production's sake, but that he took seriously the tradition, took seriously what it meant to invest in learning the work and putting the work forward in a very sort of serious way.

That there was no distinction between who he saw himself as a scholar, artist, I think that he worked to really... I was going to say marry, but to work to make these seamless concepts, right? That he moved between academia and public spaces with the same type of honesty.

Royel Johnson:

I love that.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

I don't even know. I hope people say he tried his best. He did his best.

Royel Johnson:

[inaudible 01:16:08]

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Best with what he has.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

He did what it could. Right, right.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

Unless it's hard.

Royel Johnson:

That's a good man.

Dr. Jameson Lopez:

That poor thing.

Royel Johnson:

This is a good man, Savannah.

Dr. Roshaunda Breeden:

I'm on did her best, but I also just hope that Black folks especially see and understand the radical love and care that I have for us. I hope they're able to see the scholar, the human, the daughter, the wife, the person from the hood. We're all the same person, right? The PhD, but also the ratchet. We're all the same. I want my work to be loved and felt, but also for people to see themselves reflected back through my work in honest ways, so I like what you said.

Royel Johnson:

It has been a privilege to be in community with you all. I mean, this conversation from start to end has been life affirming. I hope that folks who are watching experience the spirit that is present in this room when they watch it as well.

Yeah, thank you all for agreeing to participate in this experience.

Dr. Felicia Commodore:

Yeah, and thank you all for being who you have been called and fashioned to be and not trying to be someone other than that. I think the unique contribution that each of you have brought not only to scholarship, but to our community as a higher education community has been invaluable.

As I said before, I think you have given us inspiration, to be honest, to be committed to community and work and to imagine, shout out to Charles and Candace. But to imagine and reimagine and continuing to reimagine what it means to do scholarship because I think it's important for us to not feel as though or begin to operate as though what we do is all that can ever be done.

And to somewhat pull from what Jameson said, I think I always think about that the spirit is still speaking, right? I think you all and the creativity that you put into your work reminds us that the spirit is still speaking.

Royel Johnson:

That's a wrap.