

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Yes, our young people are not empty vessels. They have whole lives before they come sit in our classrooms. And in particular, as we think about, you know, neighborhoods and schools that are underfunded, under resourced, what's happening in those communities, what's happening in their homes, the roles that they have to play in their family, they are not empty vessels by any means. So, why does our education system still demand that we treat them as such?

**Sam Fuqua:** That's Shemariah Arki, and this is Well, That Went Sideways! A podcast that serves as a resource to help people have healthy, respectful communication. We present a diversity of ideas, tools, and techniques to help you transform conflict in relationships of all kinds. In this episode, we talk with Dr. Shemariah Arki about building community and promoting institutional equity in education. She is an educator, an activist, an organizer. She currently serves as an assistant professor in the Department of Africana Studies as well as the director of the Center for Pan African Culture, both at Kent State University in Ohio. Dr. Arki is also the founder and program director of the Ellipsis Institute for Women of Color in the Academy. We spoke with her at the 2023 White Privilege Conference in Mesa, Arizona.

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

**Alexis Miles:** Hi, Sam.

**Sam Fuqua:** Dr. Shemariah Arki, welcome to the podcast.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Thanks for having me.

**Sam Fuqua:** Thanks for your time. You know, we're here at the White Privilege Conference and Alexis and I were in a session this morning where you talked about the idea of motherwork. Can you explain what that is?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Sure. Motherwork is a framework, a theory, that is a part of a school of thought, black feminist thought, uh, most well known by Patricia Hill Collins as, you know, the Academy recognizes Patricia Hill Collins as, um, one of the most famous authors of motherwork and theorists. Uh, but what we know is that it's innate to us as, um, people who are, uh, indigenous to the motherland, the African continent. So, as we think about motherwork, it is, um, the set of core values and principles in how we build community. How we build community across lines of difference in pursuit of liberation. Thinking about the ways in which we care for one another. Thinking about the ways in which we, um, stand in solidarity. Thinking specifically about teaching and learning communities, uh, known as schools. So, motherwork becomes a tool, a framework for us to begin to engage with people based on a care economy, care, love, concern, everyone knowing their role and being able to work towards that common goal of liberation.

**Sam Fuqua:** So, it's different from like thinking of the mother and the role in the family, which we think of as a feminine role traditionally?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Right. So, you know, when we think about, uh, gender, gender identity expression, we must understand that gender is a social construct, um, just like we have come to colloquially speak about race as a social construct, as a function of colonialism and imperialism, we have to see gender the same

way as it's now being attached to biological sex, right? People who are born in this particular body have to perform life in these particular ways. Um, so if we understand that gender identity and expression is a

social construct and that that was something else that was brought to the indigenous people of Africa, then the way in which we perform this work of mother, motherwork, um, we have to understand that it's our role to ungender that process or to degender that process and understand that the love, the care, the concern, the mothering, the mind, the community activism, the motherhood as a symbol of power, anyone, anyone independent of what their gender identity expression is, what their biological sex is, what their socioeconomic status is, what their race is, what their, uh, religious or spiritual affiliation is, they have the opportunity to engage in motherwork specifically as pedagogy.

**Sam Fuqua:** Can you give our listeners a good example of motherwork, you know, happening now that you would point to as a way to bring that description to life?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Yes. You know, I'm an educator, so I'm going to give an education example. Uh, think about your school, your teaching and learning space. Think about where your students who identify as, uh, you know, part of marginalized groups or would be placed in those groups, maybe they're not that old to identify as such, um, where do those students feel the most safe? In the school building. Where do they feel the most comfortable? Places in the school building that are inhabited by people who have this care ethic. So, they're gonna go to the classroom that has the beanbag chair and hangout because the seating is centering the student. They're gonna make sure to stop in the nurse's office to pick up a granola bar if they're late and they miss breakfast. Right? So, those are just two really quick examples that we can think about how motherwork shows up in teaching and learning spaces, right?

Um, we can think of things we see virally. Some people may experience this in their school, but the way that, um, educators are greeting students in the hallway. You know, sometimes there's a chart, whether you want the high five or the hug, right, for the younger students. Some of those, uh, intermediate grades, they have a handshake that they'll do with their students. We see, uh, students doing, uh, TikTok dances and teachers and it going viral. So, being able to engage in a culture that may not be your own, but, uh, educators having that determination to reach my students by any means necessary. So, that means that I got to download this app and learn this dance so that I can spend 20 minutes figuring out with my students, what makes them comfortable so then we can talk about centrifugal force or whatever that is, right? So, those are some examples of what it could look like, sound like, or feel like in a classroom.

**Alexis Miles:** The things that you just named are fairly simple. They aren't big, complex things, and a person has to go away and study for ten years. So, that makes me think that these are things that people can start doing immediately. They don't need to wait until they learn something. They can do it now.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Absolutely. It starts with us doing our own work. So, those of us who have taken up the charge to be educators, to be teachers, to be the sage on the stage, the guide on the side, however one wants to identify their role, it starts with us doing our own work. Us realizing our own identities. How they intersect, uh, privileged identities, oppressed identities. And then, leading our young people through that work. Where do our young people have an opportunity to talk about themselves, to identify themselves for themselves, and not a file that's going to come with them. You know, the way that we do school, um, in the American education system is, you know, students are batched by how old they are, not how they

learn, not even necessarily where they're from, not what they have access to. It's kind of like, you know, they're on this assembly line with this date of manufacture and they're going through. So, I think it becomes so important that we have to take inventory of ourselves. We have to take inventory of the system that we're choosing to participate in. Our young people aren't choosing this.

If we, as parents, don't send our children to school, they're truant and we've broken the law. So, our young people are not choosing their school. Families are not choosing their school. Many schools are neighborhood-based, or, you know, when you think about your school choice, what options do we really have? You know, I'm from Ohio. We can keep going into that around how schools are funded, community neighborhood schools are funded. But it's, it's really up to the educator in the room, right? So, whether that's a certified teacher, a teacher's aid assistant, the entire school ecosystem. So, it's the bus driver. It's the folks who work in food service. It's the custodian. It's the parent engagement. It's the afterschool program. It's the administrators. All of us have to be conscious in order to do that work to create this place where our young people can be connected, respected, and valued.

**Alexis Miles:** You, you started this off saying people doing their own work.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Yes.

**Alexis Miles:** You have to do that first.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Yes.

**Alexis Miles:** Could you talk more about what that looks like for an individual? And if you're comfortable, maybe using yourself as an example of the work that you did as you entered into this arena.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Okay. Um, so thinking about three questions in my research, I talk about this for, uh, educators specifically, how I see myself. So, answering that question. How do I see the world? And then the last question that I think is important for us to ponder is, that we have no control over, is how does the world see me? And I think this is a journey, it's not like a destination, it's not like, okay, I'm gonna answer these questions and then I'm done. It's a continuous engagement with this, a continuous engagement with our identities, how they intersect, a negotiation. Uh, so yes, I identify as a black person. I identify as someone, um, who is a woman, right, in a female body. I identify as a mother. I identify as queer. I identify ethnically as Pan-African. So yeah, I'm identifying this way. This is how I see myself, and how I see myself affects how I see the world based on the information that I have. I also have to ponder along with those things how the world sees me. How's the world gonna see me as a black girl who shows up with a head wrap, big hoop earrings, and I'm Dr. Arki? So, I have to understand that. I have to understand that uh, these intersections are in a way maybe sometimes difficult for me to navigate showing up in the world. The world also has to navigate me. And, I have to be prepared for that and understand what are those stereotypes, what are those tropes that are going to be present in the room before I arrive. And, I have to be prepared to deal with that if this is how I'm choosing to show up in the world and I'm choosing to be in these spaces.

**Sam Fuqua:** In that session that we referred to earlier, there was discussion in the room about how teachers, you know, they have to be subject matter experts and have the ability to teach to whatever level

of students they're with, but we don't necessarily expect or train them in the motherwork, you know, to have the comfortable space, to know TikTok, those things you referred to earlier. How can we do that? How can we support teachers in that piece of, of being a good teacher and a good adult for these kids they're with for sometimes longer than their parents or guardians are with them?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** So, I think it's a couple of different things. So, even in that conversation, uh, you know, we wrapped up on this concept of the both/and. So, there are things that we can do at various levels to support, um, educators in this work. Uh, the first one is when we think about teacher preparation programs. We know the teacher preparation programs are full of, uh, you know, one particular demographic. And, we know that in many, many, the majority of the teacher preparation programs, uh, in higher education in the United States, they are not required to take any sort of cultural courses. Culturally relevant teaching, uh, urban education, you know, all those cold words that they throw in there, you know, that we find research right around teaching and learning. Those are the words that they use. Some education programs offer that, but the vast majority of them do not require it for one to get a teaching degree. So, I think that's a place to start. As we're training teachers, we gotta prepare them to go into these communities that we're positioning as so stark, right, and so, um, uh, deplorable with these conditions. We have to prepare them.

One other side of that, I think, is once teachers are on the ground in these spaces, there is a responsibility of the school, the school district, to provide a culturally relevant education for them, professional development. Um, you know, not just someone who's going to come in and run a simulation, but someone who's really able to mentor these teachers in this work, right? Because it's going to have to be this identity development work to start. They're going to have to understand who they are in addition to understanding who their students are. Um, another way that we can do this, I think, is through, uh, teacher mentoring programs. I know that those are, um, a thing that's on the rise now, uh, but really pairing, um, seasoned teachers and, you know, seasoned teachers, that's another term that's thrown around. Honey, just because somebody been teaching for 20 years doesn't mean that they're the right mentor. Uh, so really being intentional about how we're pairing teachers together and being specific about the things that we're requiring, um, to develop out of the relationship.

What is that, um, intergenerational mentoring look like, right? Because it may not always be the 20-year veteran, that's the mentor, right? So, understanding that those roles may reverse. Um, the other side of that is I think that teachers have, um, teachers in addition to all of these systemic interventions, teachers have a responsibility and particularly to make their classrooms, uh, look, sound and feel like this work that they want to do. Um, thinking about how your classroom is physically set up. Thinking about what's on the walls. Thinking about the language that you use in your classroom with your students. Uh, of course, thinking about curriculum. Of course, thinking about behavior, right? Those are the things that people want to put up first. But, there are things that are inside of a classroom teacher's control that they can shift immediately. And that's, what's on the wall. That's, how we're setting up our desks. Those are the rules of engagement. With my students, um, we don't have, like, classroom rules. We don't even have community agreements. We have a norming cipher. So, I talk to my students about what a cipher is. We talk about circle. You know, if they're a math teacher, you can draw it in that way, with geometry, right? But really thinking about the circle as this concept where everyone has a place. There's no one who's in charge. And so, as we think about this space and how we want to curate this space, this classroom, this space of

teaching and learning, what do we want inside of our cipher? And what do we want to keep out? Um, but bringing students in that way is an example, one way that a teacher can begin to connect their students.

**Alexis Miles:** I'm excited as I hear you talk about this, and I'm wondering what that kind of classroom feels like energetically. What's going on in that kind of a classroom?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Um, I think it could be a lot of different things. Um, I think we see students as activists, right? We see students who are in charge of their own learning. We see students who are able to, um, interrogate, uh, systems and authority in a, in a safe space where their voice is respected and heard. I think we see symbols, semblance of a democratic process. You have students who are having a debate over, this should be inside the cipher. No, because I mean this, this should be out. Um, so really having students give voice to their thoughts and ideas. You see passion. You see other students who are trying to diffuse the, the, the heated argument that they may get into. You may see this initial student withdraw, but then once, you know, students are in the conversation, you'll see other students pay attention because maybe this is the popular student. Maybe this is the student with access to different things that other students want.

And it's also an opportunity for teachers to learn their students. To see them in their natural habitat. To see how they engage with one another. Young people are so intelligent. They communicate, uh, with one another in ways that seem, um, so different to us who are not in their generation. And, it's easy for us to dismiss it and say, "Oh, young people, they don't know how to communicate." Actually, their communication is quite intricate. They communicate with photos and letters that are not words, right? BRB. LOL. They'll send an emoji that'll mean something. And so, I think we have to give young people more credit in our society than we do. This is their world. We're just kind of here. You know, they are the inheritors of the world that we have contributed to, and in so many ways, they are demonstrating to us that they are prepared to do something different if we just give them the space and the opportunity and scaffold them for success. And so, we have to get over ourselves as adults, and allow them to do that.

**Alexis Miles:** It sounds like a massive paradigm shift. So, you're not pouring knowledge and information and wisdom into young people. You're creating a space where it naturally emerges.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Yes, that's knowledge construction. Also from Patricia Hill Collins, yes, our young people are not empty vessels. They have whole lives before they come sit in our classrooms. And in particular, as we think about, you know, neighborhoods and schools that are underfunded, under resourced, what's happening in those communities, what's happening in their homes, the roles that they have to play in their family, they are not empty vessels by any means. So, why does our education system still demand that we treat them as such?

**Sam Fuqua:** Tell us about the Ellipsis Institute. What is the mission? Describe the work.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Sure. Um, the Ellipsis Institute is a research center that brings, uh, women of color in the academy together across lines of difference in pursuit of a common goal. Uh, so that common, common goal is liberation from oppression. Uh, liberation for all people of all gender identities, expressions, and our roles. Uh, so we provide, uh, trainings, uh, lunch and learn dialogues, conferences,

the one we're at now, which center, uh, the needs, uh, and the voices of women of color in the Academy. I started it as a graduate student, um, working on a campus, a predominantly white campus, and seeing the, the labor of so many women of color on that campus to transform the landscape there. Um, and even in supporting me and my research and my work in getting to this point. Um, so we continue that work. We serve in their legacy, uh, by helping folks on campus to produce advocacy actions. One of the groups that we worked with on the very first campus that we were located, uh, we did some policy work with them. They had a family leave policy. The way that the policy was written at this big R1 institution was for people who gave birth, physical birth, that were included on their family leave policy.

And so we did a little bit of digging and they said, "Well, you know what we mean?" And we said, "Well, change the words." So we, we support folks who want to do real work on their campus. And so, sometimes it's as simple as, you know, getting the right person in the right department who has the authority to change the language in the handbook. You know, I say that's simple, right? But that took time and resources, uh, from, you know, someone's position who that's not outlined in their position, and the time it took for them to educate themselves on that, and find the tools to support them and, uh, rally the folks around campus to get this thing done. Uh, so it took time and it took labor and that's really our work is to support folks on campus who are really serious about holding your institutions accountable, and making them show up in the way that they say they do when it centers issues around diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, what's another word that folks are using today?

**Sam Fuqua:** Accessibility is one.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Accessibility. All of those popular words that folks want to tag on and say this is what our institution is doing. You know, we support folks on campus to hold their institutions accountable.

**Alexis Miles:** So, it sounds like you put teeth into policy. So, instead of just having a great sounding policy, you make it mean something, have some kind of an impact. And, I'm guessing that's one of the things that you do. Make sure policy support humans.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Right, right. Um, and so that, and that arose out of, um, a session that we had at that university. We had a series of lunchtime dialogues and that was an issue that was brought to the table. Uh, and so we wanted to support those group of folks for that issue. So, we don't arrive at institutions with issues. So, the work of Ellipsis is really to curate the space. Is to curate the space so that folks feel connected, respected and valued. I mean, I've said that a lot, but we really mean that. They connected to one another, uh, respected by one another and valued, and in an attempt with this particular coalition, to hold the institution accountable for the things that they've already said that they were doing or will do. Um, so, so that's what we do is we curate space. We provide education in that space, right? We know that, um, an organizing pedagogy is educate, activate, mobilize. So, we start with education. That's our lunch and learn. We curate spaces like we have here at the WPC.

Yesterday, we had a full day session called *The Black Woman Think Tank* where, you know, we are allowing folks to come in and we don't have a heavy content agenda. Because what we know about black women is black women, girls, and fans, when we get together, the work is going to get done, right? But so often, we are only seen by institutions for our outputs, for our labor. So, we want to curate a space to say, we see you, right? We see you, so show up as your full self, and once you're here, and you're able to decompress,

and you're able to connect with one another, you're going to go back to your institution and show up and show out because you've been seen and you've been validated. Um, so we do lots of work around that, around really curating space and supporting folks. We do education, but we also do activism and mobilizing. You know, when the time is right. Uh, supporting the folks who are a part of the institute. Supporting the folks, you know, when they get to the place and they're ready to move forward, they call us and we show up.

**Alexis Miles:** Well, that also seems like a big paradigm shift. So, you don't go in with a, an agenda. They're going to do X, Y, Z. You're actually saying, in your words, connecting, respecting, and feeling valued are at the core of what you do. Can you give an example of how you do that? A brief example?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** So, uh, one way that we do that is, um, in 2019, I was installed as a queen mother. So, that's a spiritual leader in a village in, um, the Volta region in Ghana. Shout out to Akpafu-Todzi. So, one thing that I do is I like to build altars, uh, to honor ancestors, the folks who have come before us to do this work, uh, to bring their presence into the room. Uh, so even here at this conference, um, in our space, I, I built that altar, built a few things, um, to have in that space to remind us of who we are and whose we are. That's one thing that we do. We begin our programming with a libation, which is another indigenous African practice, uh, really calling in the ancestors, respecting the work that has been done, uh, literally calling out names and pouring libations, water. Uh, water is a conduit, right, uh, for spirituality, for memory. Uh, so beginning with those things. So, setting the space before people even walk into it, allowing people to participate in a libation ceremony.

And even yesterday, we did introductions, and it wasn't like, you know, sometimes you go to a workshop, you know, there's 50 people in a room, so introductions can't be more than three minutes. Uh, but in our sessions, we understand that we are multifaceted human beings. We are beautiful, brilliant. And we give people an opportunity. Tell us who you are. Like, don't run me through your list about what you do. Tell me who you are. Um, and so, that really allowed those three things combined at the beginning of a session really allowed people to tap in, right? Tap into the space, tap into themselves. And more importantly, uh, we want folks who are in session with us to understand that they do not have to have on their whiteness mask when they are in session with us. We want folks to leave that at the door. You don't have to come in on the defense. You don't have to put out the disclaimer before you say anything, right? We want to really shift a paradigm. So, we want to create this space that's for us and by us. That means the way that we engage with one another has to shift. And, the behaviors that we have in our traditional workplaces to keep us safe, we can't engage with one another like that when we are in spaces curated by us.

**Alexis Miles:** Everybody is not going to have the opportunity to work with you. So, if you were going to give some advice to people who probably won't get that opportunity, what would it be related to something they can start doing right now?

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Do your own work. Do your own work. Do your own identity development work. Those three questions: How do I see myself? How do I see the world? How does the world see me? Uh, one of my colleagues and favorite educational theorist, Dr. Bettina Love, tells the story about Brie Newsome and James Tyson. Uh, look it up if you don't know. And I encourage, um, all of us,



# PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

## S4E9: EQUITY IN EDUCATION WITH DR. SHEMARIAH ARKI

independent of our identities, 'cause we all have privileged identities, we all have oppressed identities, but I encourage all of us to see ourselves, not just as Brie Newsome, not just as that freedom fighter that's climbing the pole, see yourself as James Tyson. How can you be a co-conspirator? How can you put your hand on the pole to save someone? How can you put your hand on the pole to liberate our communities? Put your hand on the pole, people.

**Sam Fuqua:** Dr. Arki, thank you so much for your time.

**Alexis Miles:** Thank you.

**Dr. Shemariah Arki:** Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**Sam Fuqua:** Dr. Shemariah Arki is an educator, an activist, and an organizer. She's an assistant professor in the Department of Africana Studies and the director of the Center for Pan African Culture, both at Kent State University. Dr. Arki is also the founder and program director of the Ellipsis Institute for Women of Color in the Academy. We spoke with her at the 2023 White Privilege Conference in Mesa, Arizona. Her website is [shemariaharki.com](http://shemariaharki.com).

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