

Growing Democracy PODCAST

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Ashley Nickels: Hi, I'm Ashley Nickels.

Casey Boyd-Swan: And I'm Casey Boyd-Swan.

Ashley Nickels: We're podcasting from Northeast Ohio. This is the Growing Democracy podcast, a space for citizens, experts, and advocates to create community together. Each week, we invite a guest to talk about civic engagement, governance, and how to grow our democracy.

This episode is part of our series, Race and Democracy in Northeast Ohio, a collaboration with the School of Peace and Conflict Studies in the Center for Pan-African Culture. The series will include 10 episodes of our podcast focused specifically on the intersections of race and democracy in Northeast Ohio. We're also planning community workshops on the topic of race and democracy and developing online curricular material, such as activities, toolkits and concept pages. This series is made possible with funding from Mark Lewine and the John Gray Paynther Program. Check out our website to learn more about upcoming events and stay up to date on new content. You can find us at www.growingdemocracyOH.org

Casey Boyd-Swan: You sure can. Ashley, this is so exciting. We've talked about this from the beginning that we didn't just want us to be the hosts and it's finally come to fruition. So introduce...

Ashley Nickels: Yeah more hosts!

Casey Boyd-Swan: Woohoo! You can hear more voices than just us. So joining us today are Anuj and Shemariah and if Shemariah sounds familiar to you, that's because she was a guest on the podcast before, so yay. I'm going to start- I would love for both of you to introduce yourselves. So Shemariah do you want to lead us off?

Shemariah : Sure. I'll get started. So Hey to everyone out there. I'm, Shemariah J. Arki. My pronouns are she and they. I get to be the director of the Center for Pan-African Culture and an assistant professor in the Department of Africana Studies here at Kent State University. Really excited to be a part of this amazing work. Yes, I was a guest on the podcast last season. That was the first opportunity I had to meet Casey and Ashley and the rest is history. Looking forward to all of the things this season.

Casey Boyd-Swan: That's fantastic. Anuj, do you want to introduce yourself?

Anuj: Hi everyone. My name is Anuj Gurung. So, I am currently a postdoctoral fellow at School of Peace and Conflict Studies at Kent State University. I also work as a development associate in Akron. I do a lot of development work in community that represents immigrants as well as your native born Americans and so on. Right. So I have heard of this great initiative by Dr. Nickels and Dr. Boyd-Swan in the past. And the fact that we're talking about identities in general, whether it's race or ethnic or Asian identities, Black representation, whatever it is, right. I've always been interested in exploring, investigating issues in relation to identities. Right. And we have come to a point in American history where I think there is room, even though there's contention, there is a lot of room being carved out in having these conversations in relation to identities. So I am looking forward to learning a lot, right. Hopefully I can contribute to the conversation, but personally, I'm looking forward to learning a lot from this series this year.

Ashley Nickels: Oh, I appreciate that so much. Honestly, I think, Casey and I have talked about this a lot. We've I think learned more and benefited more from the podcast than probably anybody else. You know, it's what got us through the pandemic, it's what has helped us foster a sense of community in a place that was really hard to build community during a year and a half, and ongoing. So I appreciate that idea that coming to this space to learn- it resonates with me. Okay. I have a question for Casey, what is this new series? Right. I kind of gave a little plug at the beginning and I think Anuj just talked about it a little bit, but what is the new series about, and what can our listeners look forward to?

Casey Boyd-Swan: So the new series, I mean, to the title of it is Race and Democracy. And this has been a recurring thread, I think intentionally, but maybe not spoken, through all of our podcasts and that we really are interested in how marginalized or- I'm not going to say minority because in many places, are not minority groups- but definitely historically marginalized groups, experience democracy differently. And also, right, fight for their democracy and their voices in democracy differently. And so this is a series that really kind of allows us to kind of dig deep on some of those issues that we frankly just couldn't do it before and to have hosts that actually have a better voice about it, than we do and, and conceptualize things differently than we do because, right, we're all four different people. We all have much different academic and personal backgrounds. And so our two new hosts, I think bring to it a lot of perspective that frankly we don't have, and really for me, it's a breath of fresh air to kind of look at some of these issues.

So our first example for our episode is going to be the power of storytelling, right. Which we have talked about a bit before, but this is in a much different kind of perspective of how we're going to be tackling it, also digging into things of, right, socially constructing the other or asking questions like, why is the fight for racial justice partisan? Why does that have to be something that's partisan? And to kind figure out some of these ideas that are really important when thinking about the topic of race and democracy. So I have a question though

before we move on, cause I think maybe others might have a different perspective on what this series is about, or at least means to them. Anuj, why were you interested in collaborating with us on this project?

Anuj: Well, thank you. Apart from the opportunity to work with awesome scholars and individuals, I think I brushed it a little bit earlier. It has to do with identities, right? So my research primarily is on integration of refugees in the American society. So that has a lot of connotations, political connotations, economic connotations. But for me, one subtle aspect is this question of identities, right? Something I've learned, identity is such an interesting, sort of topic. Like a lot of times identity is what we try to make for ourselves. But it's also something that is at least, people try to define it for you. Right. So it sort of falls in that negotiation, like what do you want for yourself, how you want to represent yourself, but also how the society views you, right.

And I didn't mention earlier, I also have sort of a personal connection. I am an Asian immigrant in the American society, right. So in the past few months, the idea of being an immigrant, being the other, or even just being an Asian immigrant, it has become such an important topic for conversation. Right. I don't know where it's going to go. But when we talk about race, when you talk about identity, when we talk about democracy, I think that conversation is necessary, especially in the context of Northeast Ohio. Partly because I do not know what we are going to find out, right. I do have my perspectives as an immigrant, as a researcher, as a professional, I have some perspective. However, I also want to know what people think.

And I think when you talk about Asian experience, especially, in the context of Ohio or Northeast Ohio, we don't know a whole lot. Right. I mean, yes, we have some perspectives that we speak broadly when it comes to the American context, but I would like to know what is out there in Northeast Ohio, right. And like I said before, it'd be fascinating to learn.

Casey Boyd-Swan: So now Shemariah, I'm curious about what had you willing to join the project, especially given that you ran the gamut of being a guest before, so.

Shemariah : I know I'm just all over the place, right? Trying to get in where I fit in. I honestly am excited to be a part of this work and this research. I want to step back to, you opened us up Casey, talking about language, right. Being really intentional about not wanting to use the word minority. And so language is the key transmitter to dialogue. So that's really, really important. And Dr. Sean Harper out of USC gives us the term minoritized populations. So to talk about those populations, folks of color, folks who don't identify as a part of the dominant structure, right? Whatever that is, all of the identities. To understand that we have been minoritized by the dominant structure, understanding that if we use the term, people of the global majority, the people of color are the majority of the people who are on the globe. So really I think that language is important and that's one of the hooks that got me here.

So being a part of a podcast where you have two hosts who identify as white, who identify as white women to really be intentional about language and to talk about the intersection of race and democracy. Even on our first episode, we had this conversation around democracy and that was so well received by this leadership team. It really made me come down a little bit and really lean into the interview.

And I think that interview was really important for the work that we are doing here on campus, particularly. Thinking about the work at Kent State university, we have a new president, we have new administrators, and so it is definitely time for us to begin to work interdisciplinary, yes, but also intersectionally. And that's where my research comes in. So I identify as an identity scholar and thinking about Anuj, also, your research, I think there is an intersection between mine and yours.

So I ask three questions in my research with thinking about high school students and teachers. The first question is how I see myself. The second question is how I see the world. And then the third question is how the world sees me. So understanding that we have this perspective of ourselves that we're pushing out into the world, but there are stereotypes and tropes and so many things that have been laid upon us before we even enter the room. So as we talk about identity, we can talk about the self-identification, but we also have to talk about the historical and the sociopolitical context and how that affects how our identities show up in places, institutions, and in community.

Ashley Nickels:

And now listeners, you know exactly why the four of us are in this space together. Like I love this conversation. We came into this knowing that we had a handful of things we wanted to make sure we talked about, and then we're like, but let's just see how it goes. Let's see who comes up with what they're going to say, and this is where we're at. I'm really looking forward to this series because I think the conversations with community members throughout Northeast Ohio and among us are just so powerful. And I don't know, the last three minute, five minutes, however long it's been, since both the two of you responded to that, I was like, "yes. Okay. Let's keep going." So I actually have another question or kind of thing to talk about if y'all are open, is that we have an event coming up. Do any of you want to kind of take the lead on what this event is going to be, when it is? Casey you're unmuted, do you wanna-

Casey Boyd-Swan:

I know, I'm unmuted. I'll jump in. Yeah, September 21st. I'm so excited. Folks that are local in Northeast Ohio, but actually across Ohio may know that our redistricting committee has been meeting and trying to come up with, right, new maps for our districts. And in Ohio and really points across the country, it's really been a difficult time for folks to really have what I'm going to describe as accurate representation in that districts are pretty heavily gerrymandered. So in Ohio there has been a push to say, "yeah, we're not going to do this anymore." And so we are holding an event on the 21st to coincide with the day that the

redistricting committee is actually going to be in Columbus testifying to the state legislators there. So I'm really excited about what we are going to be doing on that day. And I don't know if Anuj or Shemariah wants to go more into what our events are going to be.

Shemariah : Sure. I'll jump in for a quick second, really looking forward to expanding this conversation. So bringing in more of our Kent State university family, but even as you said, Casey, from Northeast Ohio. So really looking at this from- trying to get this micro perspective, by talking to the folks here, who we are in community with, live, work and play with on a regular basis. But then also looking at these adjacent and neighboring communities in Northeast Ohio. We know that together is the only way that we will win, right. Not necessarily the election, but we want to win overall for all of our people and really defining that together and creating this end goal and shared vision. This event, it's the first event that's a part of the series that we're doing that'll help us get there.

Casey Boyd-Swan: Now, Shemariah you had mentioned when we were kind of spit balling about what kind of community events that we could be doing. You had mentioned that our 2:00 PM event, which is going to be really teaching people about how districts are kind of formed and what that process looks like. You had said, listen, we should make it early because we want students to be involved in this because I'm assuming, this is my assumption, that students probably don't know what this is, right? And probably should.

Shemariah : Right. They may not know what it is and they may not be able to connect the dots between why they're actually here and the work that we're doing and why it matters. Particularly for incoming first year students or even transfer students that are new to this area in the department here in Pan-African Studies, we have a really rich history of student voice and student activism. But one of my goals with this project is to really begin to connect these students to the history and the legacy and what they're doing today. I want it to be crystal clear for them of how the folks who have come before them have opened the pathway for them to be here. And I want them to understand what their duty is to contribute to this. And having this conversation at the intersection of race and democracy is really important, particularly because of all of the redistricting that is happening.

Ashley Nickels: Yeah. And if I can jump in and add too, so the event, we're calling it Race Place and Political Boundaries, is on September 21st and kind of linking those political boundaries really salient right now is redistricting, but connecting it to other forms of political boundaries too. And what does that look like and how do we shape what people's lives are like, through kind of these political policy mechanisms? Whether it's redistricting or even things like redlining that have historical legacies with very real present day implications. And so thinking about those and connecting them broadly. So we'll have an event in the afternoon followed by Dr. Arki, giving us a tour of Oscar Richie and then a map making workshop with Dr. Jen Mapes out of geography in the evening. So come to as much, or as little as you want to. And at the end of the episode, we'll give you

the website again, to make sure that you can find out more information as we have it.

Anuj: Yeah. If I can jump in, I was going to say, I'm really looking forward to the program, especially the map making one, because I think it's not simple, but it is so brilliant in its articulation, right. It's a participatory community driven project, right. What I like to call bottom up democracy, I'm sure I've heard it somewhere. It's not my term, but the fact that people can actually participate, visualize what it can look like, right. So I think a lot of times, based on my experience facilitating community driven programs, I think just allowing people to have that space and be part of the conversation and what it could look like. I think that's the way to go moving forward as we contemplating conversation on race, identity and democracy.

Casey Boyd-Swan: Yeah, I absolutely agree Anuj. I think a lot of times people don't know when and where they can get involved in their own democracy and maybe even feel a little kind of like, oh, well, I don't know enough about it to do it. And so this is a really low stakes opportunity to learn more about this event, but also as Ashley said, these kind of historical political actions that do shape our lives. So hopefully it'll be well attended and we'll get to see students and people from the community.

Ashley Nickels: Absolutely. So I have one final question because I am constantly full of questions. So I say one final, but that's probably a lie. I probably have more. So what do you all hope to it to see as the year unfolds? Like what would be your "this was a success" moment. Anuj, do you want to go first? Sorry. Putting people on the spot with a...

Anuj: Sure. It might be a very low hanging fruit kind of an answer, but I just want to see a rich conversation, right. So I remember when there was a lot of anti-Asian violence, right, and also to an extent when there was a lot of demonstrations representing Black American lives, Black Lives Matter movement and so on. Right. So I remember thinking, yes, it's a lot of chaos. A lot of people might find it very troubling, but at least it is the reality, right? Forget about all the things that textbooks tell you, right. Forget about the whole Asian minority myth or model minority myth and so on. But this gives us a platform to have a conversation. Yes, some conversations might be difficult, it might make you uncomfortable, but this is what we add. And this is what we do, all of us to an extent, right. Based on our expertise, based on the kind of research we do, we are trying to find what truths are there. Even if people might have subjective truths, their subjective experiences they want to share, right. I think that's what I want to learn. And I think this is also an attempt at reaching past the polarized sort of lenses, right. Where we are trying to see, what does it mean to have a conversation on race, identity and democracy in the context of Ohio, right. That's what I'm looking forward to.

Shemariah : I agree. I'm looking forward to that. And I agree that there's not this hard tangible outcome that I want to have at this point, but I want to continue to see

people build relationships across lines of difference in pursuit of that common goal. And that's a lot— building relationships, building trust, defining that common goal, making sure that you're aligning yourselves with this other person, or the other people that are on your team, but I'd really like to see that. And particularly I'd like to see it with students. And I think that as we talk about grassroots and grass tops, I think on a campus, our students are kind of like that grassroots. So I really want to be able to use this as an opportunity to scaffold them as a continued scaffolding for their success, to be able to matriculate in today's global economy.

Casey Boyd-Swan: My goal is pretty simple and it's probably the same goal I always have, which is I can't wait to find out how much I don't know. It's so exciting honestly, to go well, oh my God, that never occurred to me. Right. And to just broaden the landscape of things that I at least can have some sort of like peak behind the curtain of, okay, another thing I don't know. Awesome. Now I can kind of dig deep and add this to my repertoire of things. I can at least point to somebody else and say they know this really well. I at least know this is a thing.

Ashley Nickels: Yeah. I mean, for me, well, I have the privilege of going last as you all gave really excellent responses. So I think for me, it's simply being able to be in community with people and to continue that legacy of what we started and then to be incredibly intentional, we've always said that the podcast and the project, one of the core values was social justice and racial justice, but that we can be intentional in taking a race conscious evaluation of what democracy looks like in Northeast Ohio, and do that in collaboration, in community with people like Shemariah and Anuj and Casey. So I'm really excited just to be in community with you all. And then record it. So our listeners can hear.

Casey Boyd-Swan: I love it. Yes. Recorded community. Well, thank you so much, everyone. Today is our episode zero of series six. Exciting launch.

Shemariah : Very exciting.

Anuj: Yeah. Looking forward to it guys.

Casey Boyd-Swan: All right. So the next episode is going to be, we're going to switch off hosts, right? And it's not going to be just me and Ashley anymore. So I look forward to episode one of series six, and you will be hearing from us all then.

Shemariah : Bye.

Ashley Nickels: Bye.

Casey Boyd-Swan: Thanks for listening to the growing democracy podcast. I'm Casey Boyd-Swan. And with me as always is my co-host Ashley Nickels. Our podcast is edited by Jeremy Demery at Golden Lock Studio right here in Cleveland, Ohio. This series is supported by the Northeast Ohio Chapter of Scholar Strategy Network. If you

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