

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

MARIAME KABA: ROOTING OUT OUR CULTURE OF HARM

LAURA FLANDERS: Everything worthwhile is done with other people, writes Mariame Kaba, today's guest. Kaba is an abolitionist, organizer and educator, founder director of Project NIA, which seeks to end the incarceration of children and young adults. And the author of the New York Times bestselling book, "We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice". The collective, not the individual self is at the heart of Kaba's vision for freedom. Abolition of the prison industrial complex is essential, but she says, freedom also takes getting to know your neighbors, thinking about how we can help each other, and building an entire society where harm is addressed, people's needs are met, and accountability doesn't require punishment. Here at The Laura Flanders Show, we too believe in the power of the collective, and so all season we've been expanding ours. I'm teaming up with brilliant colleagues who enrich what we do here. Today for our Juneteenth conversation on abolition, I'm joined by my friend, Reverend Dr. Jacqui Lewis, from Middle Collegiate Church, in Manhattan's East Village, a multiracial, multicultural, multi everything congregation. Dedicated to collective liberation and love, period. Jacqui, welcome to the show. So glad to have you for this conversation, happy Juneteenth.

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Happy Juneteenth to you too Laura, I'm so glad to be here with you, freedom fighter.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's bring ourselves to the conversation, with Mariame Kaba. Mariame, welcome so much to the program. We're really, couldn't be happier to have you with us. And I guess I want to ask you and Jacqui to begin, something about, where you think we are. This Juneteenth we're celebrating, I think it is 155 years of so-called liberation, the end of legal slavery. But we still have a long way to go to the kind of freedom that you write about and that we all think about, and work for. How do you think we're doing Mariame? Let's start with you. Where are we on that long path?

MARIAME KABA: I think the best answer is, I have no idea where we are. And I think to me, I don't think anybody else really does either. And I think that's actually part of the work, which is always unfinished. I'm lucky because I grew up with parents and people, mentors, and touchstones, who always reminded me of how vast the world is and how small we are within that. And that our work is to figure out what is within our control to actually influence, and to spend all our time doing that. And I think that's probably held me in really good stead. And it's probably why I've been trying to do liberation work for 35 years or more now.

LAURA FLANDERS: You are the child of immigrants. You're the child of people who helped decolonize, to liberate, their countries, Guinea, your father. Can you just trace that connection? Do you trace the connection from Guinea to abolition in the US?

MARIAME KABA: Oh, of course. My dad, I learned a lot from him, but I think the most, one of the two most important things that I learned from him was a deep profound pragmatism, and then the second thing he really taught me was that, you don't need everyone. In order to transform the world, you need a committed group of folks, who you can work with and build together. And those are important abolitionists ideas. In the sense that, the collective matters, but we don't need to worry about having every single person on board before we can take action. And that it is really, really important for us to remain grounded in ideas and matter. But that's not what people are fighting for. People are fighting for material needs to be met, and for ways to be able to survive in the world. And we can't ever forget those things.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about you, Jacqui? What about you with this sense of where are we on the path?

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: There's an old Negro spiritual that says, "We're not what we ought to be, but we're not where we used to be". And there is a sense of between the now and the not yet, that I'm noticing. Our body, the human family, not only in America, not only in the United States, but around the globe, has had a crisis. It's an ongoing crisis to Mariame's point, we're a little blip on the screen, the universe is huge. Maybe this is a crisis, actually, a millennia long, but in this moment, I feel like we're in the crisis, that is still about chattel slavery, is about reconstruction, it is about white-ness, white supremacy in a death throe I think.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming back to you Mariame, you talked about yourself as a tiny piece of a big struggle. A tiny very hard working piece of a big struggle. Does that explain why you choose to keep your own image out of the public eye? Why we're, for example, not seeing your face right now, as we talk?

MARIAME KABA: I think for me, I was taught how to organize by people who used to always say that, it was always organizers in the back, and leaders up front. As someone who was taught by those folks, I was always much more comfortable doing work in the background, and felt like that was really where I ought to be. And it wasn't really until a few years ago, honestly, maybe a decade ago, because of social media, that I was pushed to be more public about how I worked, and what kind of work I was doing. And I was asked to speak more about that work. People are feeling like they are owed, your very image, your very being, and I just don't agree with that. And I never have. And also I'm not that important in the scheme of the larger goals that we're trying to push. And I hope people keep their eyes on that, and keep thinking about focusing on the larger goals that we're trying to achieve.

LAURA FLANDERS: Focus and clarity. In the spirit of that, I'm going to ask you just to define your terms. When you say abolition, what do you mean?

MARIAME KABA: A person that just passed away recently, Thomas Mathiesen, used to say that abolition is an alternative in the making. And I've always appreciated that conceptualization, even though I hate the word alternative. But I've appreciated that kind of his conception of abolition as an unfinished work, and as an unfinished process. So over time I came to look at prison industrial complex abolition. I really think it's important for me to put that upfront, because that's the abolitionist work that I do, and I'm part of, and kind of the political ground that is, lays underneath me. But that's a vision for me of a restructured society and the world. It's a world where, you mentioned earlier, we have everything that we need, and more.

LAURA FLANDERS: And restorative versus transformative, or the other way around.

MARIAME KABA: The vision of restorative justice that most people are familiar with, is a Western based system and framework, that emerged in part through the work of a man named Howard Zehr here in the US, in the 1960s and 70's. Who saw the beginnings of the rise of what he saw as mass, hyper and mass incarceration. And thought, this is not the way to go. And Howard and others in that tradition, started to say, we need to know that when harm happens, when a crime, quote unquote, occurs, that that crime is a rupture in relationship. And that what is needed then, is to get people together. The person who was harmed, the person caused harm and the broader community. To think about three sets of questions, what happened? What is needed to repair this harm? And whose obligation is it to do that? But what I found limiting in that, was the larger conversation around the conditions that needed to be transformed, in order for that harm to not occur again. And that began for me, a search with others about a concept that became known as Community Accountability and Transformative Justice. That was really about, how do we do all the conversations we need to do amongst people, while we're also doing the organizing work that actually transforms the condition that gave rise to these things in the first place?

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: When you think about the work that you're called to do, and the work that you're doing in your community, how does the media, how does education, how does particularly what's happening now in cinema, how did these stories help change the story?

MARIAME KABA: I would say that I have a fraught relationship with, kind of, art and media in general. Laura mentioned June Jordan, a poet and writer and artist, that I have just so much respect for, who was also an activist, and much more than all those things. And I never got to meet June Jordan, but her words have been guides for me. On the one hand there's that. So there's the edifying, useful, propelling, kind of stuff around that. And then we have things like

copaganda, which is this, kind of the ways that the media has worked, to not just uplift, but actually reinforce and entrench particular ideas, that make it really hard for us to actually get to liberation. When was the first time Jacqui that you ever thought of police and policing?

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Honestly, probably Officer Friendly, like in kindergarten, really

MARIAME KABA: Yes. Officer Friendly in kindergarten, if you grew up in a house maybe, that you know, we have a gendered society, you may have grown up in a space, if you have brothers or cousins, where they were playing cops and robbers, there was like a whole system in place, before you could even be conscious of yourself as a human being. And whether you could actually be conscious of what police and policing was. That had already infused you, by the time you were in kindergarten. And that's been sustained by media, that's been sustained by TV shows, that's been sustained by the toys young people get, and that they play with. And it's so dangerous.

LAURA FLANDERS: Let's go to a clip, from a piece put out by Project NIA, that looks at the origins of the relationship between police and communities of color.

NARRATOR: People have a lot of opinions about policing. And our ideas about policing are shaped by our race, our genders, our class, and our parents. For example, most white people have very little interaction with police. In a recent study, 77% of white people had no contact with police in the previous year. Of those who did, at least half were traffic stops. And in many cases, white people initiated contact, by calling the police. Since they have little unwanted contact, many white people's opinions about policing are not based on personal experience. Dominant culture, especially mass media, sells us the image of Officer Friendly, but whose experience is that actually based on? The same study found that black people experience excessive force, at the hands of police, at more than twice the rate of white people. Did we have a just and equitable police force and something went wrong? No. Policing in the south emerged from the slave patrols in the 17 and 1800's that caught and returned runaway enslaved people. In the west, police departments were formed to keep native people out of cities built by white settlers, and in the north, the first municipal police departments in the mid 1800's, helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. And policed public spaces, to conform to middle-class white morality around gender and sexuality, and exclude poor unhoused or disabled people. Policing in the US began as a system of economic, social, racial, patriarchal and ableist control. And that is what it still is today. The truth is police don't do what most people think they do. Police spend more than half of their time responding to non-criminal calls, and traffic issues. And only one to 3% of their time responding to violent crime calls. Police don't stop violence. They respond to violence that has already occurred, and they respond with their own threat of violence. And that

response is not equitable. When people of color are involved, police often engage violently. Yet we spent an astronomical amount of money on the police. Over one hundred billion dollars a year. Let that sink in.

LAURA FLANDERS: I want you to talk though about what we don't see in the media. Because a lot of us would say, well, this is just part of the background, this is what we have. How do we ever get out of this, particularly in the transformative way that you talk and write about? But you also write about examples where change is happening. Where that transformation is at least beginning. And you talk about the work of Project NIA and the work of the, the project, the Chicago Torture Victims Memorial Project, that brought about some of the only reparations we've ever seen, for police torture victims.

MARIAME KABA: I got involved with that in 2010, as an advisory member of the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials. It was a great example of how you can marry art, with social justice, and organizing, to actually allow us to do something that was very hard for most people. Which was for years, I mean, decades. 30 years in Chicago, people had been fighting to expose Jon Burge, who was a police commander, in Area 2 and Area 3 of Chicago, who with, quote, his Midnight Crew, which were all men, all white, had spent decades torturing black people in Chicago, and some brown folks as well. And literal torture, not like euphemistic torture, right? And by the time I moved to Chicago in 1995, Burge had been fired for two years, and community was still demanding, quote, what they saw as justice. And justice for them meant, incarceration basically. It meant prosecute them, incarcerate them, punish them for what they had done. I was kind of not interested in the fight for prosecution, I'm an abolitionist, that's not where I sit. I didn't think it was going to be very successful anyway. I thought people were going to be left feeling very empty if a prosecution happened, and that's exactly what happened. The federal prosecution happened. He got, quote, four years for lying about torture. All the people who'd been harmed were still harmed, but now they had unsatisfactory, what they saw as end to a years long, decades long struggle. And so to force us to think differently, the Chicago Torture Justice Memorials organized these art charrettes around the whole entire city, and asked people to envision what justice could really look like, if we didn't just live in these very constrained models, of supposedly getting accountability, right? Or punishment or whatever. And out of that came a reparation idea. We need to get material things for people's lives to be improved. And we need an apology, you need an acknowledgement, that this actually took place. In the current system, it's adversarial. It's in no one's interest to admit they did anything wrong. And so that was the model through which we were able to kind of use art and ideas to lift the ceiling off our imagination, to push for something different.

LAURA FLANDERS: I just interviewed a whole lot of people in Minneapolis, who were holding two complicated thoughts in their minds, at one in the same time. One, they're believers in transformation and abolition, two, they are glad as heck that Derek Chauvin got convicted on

all counts. And they were in the streets celebrating that night. Were we wrong to celebrate, in the context of so much impunity?

MARIAME KABA: This is a really difficult question on multiple levels. I think for me, the main thing is I don't chastise anybody, again, as I mentioned, if somebody causes great harm, it's natural to feel a sense of relief, or maybe even joy when they are punished. I just don't want us to lie about what it is that's happening. And that is that people were saying things like, this is accountability, not justice. And I guess that's supposed to mean, that we've progressed. Because in the past people would have said, this is justice. And so we're supposed to be happy, that now they're using a different word to actually mean the same thing? No. Why wasn't everybody just saying this is punishment, not justice? I did not feel any sort of relief or joy, and I'll tell you why. And it's because three people are going to die at police hands today. That hasn't changed. And during the time when Chauvin was on trial, dozens of people were killed all over the country, by cops. And that isn't going to change because Chauvin is locked up, and I know that that doesn't feel exciting to people, and it doesn't make them feel happy to hear that. And I'm probably not going to get invited to any parties, and it's okay. But like I'm telling the truth.

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I'm a faith leader, but I think we also recycle, Mariame, old tropes. We just recycle old tropes of vengeance, of retribution. I mean, we do, sadly. And so I'm curious about what you would want to say to people who are watching, who are raising children, how do we re-imagine?

MARIAME KABA: So I would say to parents, that teaching your children, that when they do wrong things that you're going to punish them, will encourage them to lie to you. And to pretend that they didn't do the harmful thing, and to evade responsibility. And you are raising a bunch of kids then, who are going to be unable to take accountability for harm. So I would say to people, always ask questions of your kids. What happened? If you tell me what really happened, then we'll kind of work through an answer, and we'll figure out how to make it better together. And I want you to make sure that you don't do this again. And if you do do it again, cause you're a human being, and you make mistakes, we're going to go through this whole entire process again. We created a toolkit, my friend Jenny Viets created this. She's an excellent Restorative Justice Practitioner in Chicago. She created a toolkit called Restorative Justice at Home. We need different ways to talk with each other, we need new models, we need new language, we need new ways of thinking. And we are doing that, we're offering those tools.

LAURA FLANDERS: We tend to end this show, or I tend to end the show by asking people, I'm trying to get from the idea that change is possible, or another world is possible, to the idea that at certain moments in our lives, another world is actually palpable. That we can, we can feel it. We have felt it. Maybe just in snatches, just maybe for a moment, maybe in a dream, but

ideally not. Is there a moment like that for you, that that led you to believe, oh, yes we can do this?

DR. JACQUI LEWIS: My multi, all the things church, was a white Dutch Church, Mariame, this is the Dutch Church. That was the first church in New York. And I'm going to go back in time to say the first time I felt the kingdom of God breaking in, Trayvon Martin was killed. It was a Thursday or Friday. We were all just wondering what to do. And we just started making phone calls, and we were like, we're going to be in solidarity with Trayvon through this time. There was a sense knowing that our congregation changed from multi-ethnic, multi-racial, to really anti-racist. Really looking for reparations, and on my watch, oh my God, it just makes me teary, the people who come together around this issue, of revolutionary love, and anti-racism. Blows my heart wide open.

MARIAME KABA: For me, I'm constantly reminded that that world, that's the 'not yet', is also the current movement in particular with times, in fragments, in experiments. And I think for me that last year and change of this global pandemic that we've been part of, has revealed so much of what's beautiful, and incredible about human beings, and also all the things that are, that are our flaws and that we need to work on. And one of the things that I remembered very clearly was, early on when we were trying to figure out what to do in our apartment building around kind of the COVID response, just how our neighbors really just came together, and was like, who are the older people in the area in the building, who are going to need support? Who can do runs to the grocery store? Who's healthy? It was like just people figuring stuff out in the moment when they knew there was a need for it to happen and not letting other people just die. And that to me, it's so, it's just so indicative of what's possible with us, but also what we do. What we do, what we do, all the time every single day, we save each other. And I choose to focus on that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, the book is fantastic, people should check it out. We Do This 'Til We Free Us. Jacqui Lewis, Mariame Kaba, thanks for joining me. Jacqui we'll be back in the weeks ahead, so stay tuned for that. I'll be back in just a second, with a few closing thoughts.

Just because it's difficult to change policing, doesn't mean that it's impossible. Just look at Newark, New Jersey. We were there just over a year ago for this program, reporting on the Newark Community Street Team. An experiment in de-escalating violence in the streets, and building relationships between the police, and the people they policed. Well, today, Anthony Ambrose, Director of Public Safety, whom we interviewed for that episode, says that 2020 was the hardest year in his 34 year career on the force. Why? Because of a pandemic. COVID-19 killed six of his officers. There was an uprising against police violence, and a reckoning with white supremacy on the force. At one point in the summer of 2020, 1700 protesters attempted to take over a precinct building. But you know what? While over a thousand police fired their guns across the United States last year, and roughly three people were killed each day, none of that

happened in Newark, New Jersey. The police fired not one shot. Not one time, for any reason. And Ambrose credits the de-escalation program. Are things in Newark perfect? Absolutely not. But there's a process in place that's making a difference. And it could be a model. So check out our show, spread the word, and congratulations to the Newark Police Department and the Community Street Team. That's it for this time, I'm Laura Flanders. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

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