

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

CLIMATE CHANGE JOURNALISM: MOVING FRONTLINE COMMUNITIES FROM THE SIDELINE TO THE CENTER

LAURA FLANDERS: Welcome back, it is that time where The Laura Flanders Show is passed into the very able hands of our colleagues at URL Media. URL Media is a network of Black and Brown owned media outlets co-founded by our co-hosts, Mitra Kalita and Sara Lomax-Reese. Sara, I understand that you at WURD Radio in Philly held one of your annual ecojustice summits recently.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yes, on Indigenous Peoples' Day, we hosted our third annual ecoWURD, environmental justice summit. And we focused in on the climate crisis, but more specifically how it is converging with the violence crisis in Philadelphia, and what we can do tangibly to address violence through nature and the environment.

LAURA FLANDERS: So I can't wait to hear the conversation. Take it away, I look forward to checking in with you at the end.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thanks, Laura. It's great to be here for another "Meet the BIPOC Press" with URL Media. What has always been true is that vulnerable communities are disproportionately impacted by climate change and environmental racism, whether it's factories spewing toxic chemicals that are located near Black neighborhoods or lead in old public school buildings inhabited by Black and Brown children, or the pesticides farm workers are ingesting. BIPOC communities are on the frontlines of this growing environmental disaster. Restructuring today's conversation as a roundtable on how BIPOC media organizations have been covering these issues, and what we will continue to tackle. We're joined by Charles Ellison, who is a host on WURD Radio and the Managing Editor for ecoWURD; and Ko Bragg, who was the Race & Place Editor for Scalawag; and Gary Pierre-Pierre, who is the publisher of The Haitian Times. And so I wanted to just jump off the conversation by really asking each of you to speak to how we as BIPOC media organizations approach the climate crisis conversation when we know that Black and Brown communities are facing so many challenges, whether it's around poverty or health concerns or migration issues. How do we center and amplify this issue around climate crisis in BIPOC communities? And maybe I'll start with you, Ko.

KO BRAGG: Sure, it's a really good question. And I think it's one of those things that I've been thinking through a lot, especially because I moved to New Orleans about a year and a half ago. And I think now we've shifted into a place where our climate crisis is not just something that is only debated in like academia or amongst people who study it, like scientists and things like that. We are at a point where it is so obvious how at risk we are for further destruction. And also it's a

touchpoint because so many Black and Indigenous communities have been sounding the alarm about the dangers of pollution and just disregard for our planet because we are the ones who live the reality of that neglect. And so I think the great thing about this is that, yes, it's one of those issues where Black and Brown people absolutely should be leading. This is a delayed conversation, in part because of the way we failed to listen to Black and Brown communities.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah. So Charles, I wanna see if you can pick up on that because we launched our ecoWURD, environmental justice initiative in 2018. And one of the things that we've really been focused on is connecting the dots and making our community, our Black Philadelphia community understand that environmental justice is absolutely critical to us, and to make it relevant.

CHARLES ELLISON: We are trying to basically reform the conversation and show that it's not about climate crisis over here, it's not about another segregated conversation on environmental racism. No, this is the top priority challenge that we as all BIPOC people: Black, Indigenous, Latino people, other people of color have been dealing with for generations and centuries now. This actually aggravates and it correlates with every other issue that we're dealing with right now. Even the environmental racism, climate crisis, it aggravates, it instigates issues like police violence. It's creating issues as far as our health, our collective health, or the pandemic. There are even correlations, there is interconnectivity with voting rights issues or with issues regarding homelessness or with the housing, affordable housing crisis. All those big challenges that we focus on, or we report on daily and regularly have something to do with the environment where this battle, or this war for space that we've been going through for so long.

MITRA KALITA: I think for so many Black and Brown people in America, the journey actually began with climate change. So if we look at our own membership of the URL Media network, Bangladesh, for example, is a country that is one of the, almost like the, literally the perfect storm of weather conditions, kind of a low-lying environment, rising sea levels. And just a population that's being displaced every year. And if you look at migration patterns here in Queens where I am, people can trace their search for space to US shores. I confess that we've tended to cover climate change as something over there until recently, in the aftermath of Hurricane Ida on September 1st when New York as many of you saw the images was literally underwater. Gary, I don't know if you're gonna take my bait on migration and climate change, but your island nation has been through a lot over the last few months. And I just wonder if there is a climate change angle on everything we've been seeing.

GARY PIERRE-PIERRE: Oh my God, I mean, climate change, the environment in Haiti is as big as existential threat. Before we get to Haiti though, I wanna say something about migration and environment and all issue not being at the forefront. All of a sudden this is a big problem. It's an emergency, government... When I was a child growing up in New Jersey sucking up fumes

from Exxon which was not too far away off I-95. I think what has happened, as cities across the world have become gentrified, the new residents have realized the level, the extent of the pollution that we were living with. So all of a sudden it has gotten the first rung. I know, which is good, but I just wanna make sure that people know we've been dealing with this for quite, quite some time. And the urgency that's surrounding it should have been there a hundred years ago. Going back to Haiti, everything that we were saying, at the root cause has everything to do with the climate in Haiti. For the last 50 years or so, there's been a deforestation because people still use wood for fuel to cook. And so the government has done very little to stop that, that system. And so therefore the rain from the hurricane will do catastrophic damage. The earthquakes, the same thing. So Haiti, I think you were talking about Bangladesh, I think the biggest story to me out of Haiti is the degradation of the environment.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I wanted to throw it to Ko. New Orleans is absolutely kind of the poster child for climate crisis as an American city. And I wanna see if you can talk about how you and Scalawag are covering these issues, particularly the piece that you did for Scalawag about Ida, and kind of the insensitivity that people express around when these kinds of climate catastrophes happen, but more so the capitalist urgings and drivers that are contributing to the climate crisis.

KO BRAGG: The reality is, a lot of Southern communities, Black and Indigenous communities have already been dealing with the realities that our climates are changing because they always are, whether it's politically, whether it's environmentally, whether it's racial violence being done to us, we're always on the pivot, and I hate the word 'resilience', right, but we're resisting always. And so from that perspective, it was just, I know that like we brought up, I mean, Ida traveled north, and I think it was just one of those moments where I would never wanna say, I never really, I don't think that I told you so, and like shaming model works, right? But there was just something that you didn't even have to say because there were so many northerners being like, well, why do you all even bother with Louisiana? And then Ida, not even as a hurricane. As a tropical depression or some downgraded storm killed people. It was devastating. And I think that for me solidified two things, like one, the South people got to really put their biases about the South and like really, and their ignorance is about the South aside because we are the region, especially the deep South, especially the Gulf South that is gonna lead and is already leading on how to deal with the realities of climate change. Nobody is coming to save us. No one, the people that saved each other, people who were stranded on roofs in LaPlace, people who were drowning, community infrastructure saved those lives. Literally, that's it, period. FEMA, people in the southwestern part of the state are still waiting for FEMA aid, from hurricanes that happened August 2020.

MITRA KALITA: Well, Ko, I don't mind you saying, I told you so because I feel like you absolutely have the right. I don't know if you're gonna quote yourself, so I'm going to quote from

your piece because it was that good. This is Ko Bragg's piece, she says, "Climate change makes it clearer, every waking day that it's coming for every single one of us, even those who act like Gmail will survive the rapture." And I just think that framing of, we're really in this together, and while we're so busy doing other things that this is something off to the side was just like a massive takeaway for me, and also just how I will run my media company. So I thank you for that. Sara, I wonder if I could put you and Charles on the spot about launching ecoWURD because you are one of those rare examples of cities in the north that was taking this seriously a few years ago. I don't know how many years ago you launched, but I just wonder kind of how you thought of this, and also with your recent summit, if you wanna kinda bring us back around to some of the lessons there.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Yeah, absolutely. Thanks, Mitra. To answer your question, in 2018 we wanted to take this issue of environmental justice, environmental racism and make it relevant and connect the dots for our community. And that's what we've been doing. And the ecoWURD Environmental Justice Summit is an opportunity to do that in an expanded way, and this year we focused on community violence.

CHARLES ELLISON: And as great as ecoWURD is right now, we had a very successful summit, very grassroots. In fact I was told that by a couple of people who have been in that environmental justice advocacy space for a long time, it was the first time they've seen an environmental justice conference or summit or a convening run by Black people where basically Black issues were being and Black conversation was centered in it. But unfortunately we're still like, I mean, I've checked. We're the only like full-time, fully operating Black owned media outlet that is covering environmental justice on a regular dedicated basis. I'd like more Black media outlets to do that.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Charles wrote this fascinating article for one of our local outlets and mapped out how environment and nature could actually reduce violence by 93% in Philadelphia, if collectively we put all these pieces together. So, Charles, you talk about that a little bit.

CHARLES ELLISON: Yeah, violence is a big conversation, for example, in Philadelphia, right now. As of this conversation, we've got 453 people murdered in just this year alone. If you just pick up trash in the neighborhood, you reduce violent crime in that neighborhood by 9%. If you plant 10% more trees, you reduce that violent crime by 12%. If you eliminate vacant lots in a neighborhood, you just reduce violence by nearly 30%. If you just upgrade and repair dilapidated old homes in low-income Philadelphia neighborhoods, you reduce crimes in that neighborhood by 25%. So once I gathered that altogether, I'm like, wow, this sample neighborhood here just reduced the violence by 93%. And on top of that, and this is another big question that we have to start answering, particularly when we're talking to Black communities, and really all distressed low-income BIPOC communities. Hey, am I gonna get a job out of this? How does this improve

my quality of life? Absolutely you'll get a job out of this, by planting more trees, greening, creating more green infrastructure, you can create hundreds to thousands of new jobs. Most people who are going through environmental racism every day in all sorts of forms or who are also being devastated by the impacts of the climate crisis, they don't have degrees in environmental science. So you have to talk about, here's the benefits for you, for your household, for your neighborhood, for your kids, in terms of jobs gained, in terms of neighborhoods cleaned, improvement in quality of life, improved schools, everything, just it's totally saving that space or protecting that space because we got to stop being episodic about the way we talk about climate crisis. We wait till the next disaster comes up, then suddenly, oh, we're talking about climate crisis. We have got to make this like a pop culture conversation, especially as it relates to, I can speak more specifically about the Black community. I mean, if they're not talking about these issues back on the block, if it's not like daily on their radio stations, if pop culture, icons and celebrities aren't talking about it, it's not, that conversation at the kitchen table or in the living room, they're not thinking about it, and they're not gonna mobilize or act on it.

MITRA KALITA: Gary, a lot of the Indian subcontinent feels like the West, you all had air conditioning for decades and decades, right? Globalization is much more recent in some of these markets. And so there is this dynamic of the US dictating to the rest of the world to clean up its act for its own original sins. I just wonder if you have any thoughts on that from the Haitian perspective or your very global perspective?

GARY PIERRE-PIERRE: At the end of the day, at the bottom of the road, it's capitalism because a lot of these decisions are being made purely for revenue, for growth where... When you look at lower Manhattan, right, we know, we've known this for over 100 years that this place should not be inhabited. We should not build all these buildings and malls and all what have you. Well, it's part hubris, but it's also greed because I think what we see happening worldwide, I was looking the other day online doing some research, and when Italy opened its high speed rail, that was the end of Alitalia because Italians no longer had to fly, because then Italy is better off for it. And so can you imagine if we invested more money into Amtrak and we don't have to fly all over this big country, that there are a lot of things. But the money that's being made in the airline industry, they'll find it until they go out of business. They've had to go out of business and let the government invest in Amtrak and other clean energy. And so now, they're even more cynical because now we hear everyday about space travel, all these billionaires who, they make the money, they messed up the earth for us, and then now they're gonna live in space, leave it up to us to clean up.

MITRA KALITA: That's so profound, Gary. We are just about out of time, but I wanted to just ask each of you, and I'll start with you, Ko. What is the climate story that you are following in your region?

KO BRAGG: Sure, I think that this surfaced during Ida, but I think that the way that certain, well, I'll say like Indigenous tribes who are not federally recognized cannot get certain federal funds is going to continue to be an issue and a story. And something that I hope, I saw some stories about this like right after Ida, but it's something that is gonna continue, that has long been an issue. And that also I want to have more Indigenous storytellers tackle because it's one of those things where people swoop in, get the story and leave. And especially because Indigenous people are gonna be, or have led and will continue to lead us towards sustainability and care for our climate. That like, those stories are really important to me, especially in Louisiana.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Excellent. Charles, what's the story you are pursuing?

CHARLES ELLISON: I still wanna further explore this correlation between violence and the environment. It's not just Philadelphia, every major city, every major urban city where there's a very significant concentration of Black people is experiencing spikes in violent crime. And that's accelerated, that's exacerbated during pandemic and we're really underestimating the power of what they call place-based interventions and place-based strategies in helping mitigate or close to totally eliminate that violence. And it could actually create a whole new angle or a ripple effect in that police accountability conversation, just by using place-based strategies. You don't need police all the time to achieve optimal public safety in our communities. So I think that that's still an under-reported conversation. Definitely we're having more of it in Philadelphia, but I'd like to see that, that conversation take place nationwide.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Excellent. And Gary, how about you? What's a climate story that you are interested in?

GARY PIERRE-PIERRE: Well, it's not just a story, it's a beat that we wanna develop because I think the issue is too important. I think that it's the biggest challenge that Haiti faces. And we wanna tell the story about what's happening, there are some positive things going on. And so we're always looking for positive stories out of Haiti, and there are some to be told around the climate issue in Haiti.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Excellent. Well, I wanna thank all of the participants in our URL roundtable today. Ko Bragg from Scalawag; Gary Pierre-Pierre from Haitian Times; and Charles Ellison from WURD and ecoWURD. Thank you all so much for this conversation, there's much, much more to cover, and we'll continue the dialogue, thanks.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that was a great conversation, you two. Thank you so much for bringing it here to the program. I learned a lot from these "Meet the BIPOC Press" weeks. And on this occasion, I was so taken, well, with two things. One what Ko reported about the so-called mainstream, we call it just the money media is focused on New Orleans as, well, it didn't flood,

let's move right on. If people want to hear more about what happened after Ida that wasn't reported, Scalawag's been doing great. And we had Colette Pichon Battle on the show, right after the hurricane. She had a lot to say about the kind of, the actual fatalities and the toll that was felt that Ko talked about. That's a few weeks back on this program. The other thing I thought about as you made that connection between violence and the climate was some colleagues of ours in Amsterdam at the Transnational Institute did a study and looked at the spending of the world's biggest greenhouse gas emitters, on climate finance, helping countries adapt to climate change and help people who would otherwise migrate. How much they spend on that versus how much they spend on militarizing the border? And no big surprise, the top seven emitters spend something like twice as much cumulatively on the border than they do on climate finance. And some countries like Canada, I just looked at the numbers, spent 15 times as much on policing than on helping people and nations respond to climate change.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: We know that there is money that is being misplaced and misdirected to kind of militarize the police, continue to double down on kind of criminal justice and a focus on punitive measures, when we could really look at it from a very different vantage point. And that's what we're trying to explore in this conversation and just beyond really trying to say, how do we take an integrated holistic approach that centers nature and the environment and honors it and allows that to be the place that we start from as opposed to it again exists over there. And we think about it separate and apart from everything else that we're trying to address.

LAURA FLANDERS: This is something you write about a lot at Epicenter, right, Mitra?

MITRA KALITA: Absolutely. This is the classic dilemma in migration that we are choosing not only to not be open to literally the world's refugees, but we're also to your point militarizing our borders. We are not effectively creating, we're actually supporting the conditions in other countries that lead to migration.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ko's point was so strong, this has been a conversation delayed by racism. And what you were all doing is speeding up the clock on us getting smarter and wiser. So I want to thank you absolutely for bringing us these amazing stories every month and look forward to the next "Meet the BIPOC Press" in the month ahead.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content and to tune into our podcast, visit our website at LauraFlanders.org and follow us on social media @TheLFshow.