

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

IMANI PERRY: THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY DEPENDS ON THE SOUTH

LAURA FLANDERS: Searching for a place where the people who say it can't be done take a back seat to the people doing it? Look to the US South says today's guest, historian and author Imani Perry. Look to the South, to the suffering, theft and greed wrapped up in colonization, plantation slavery, and the model of addictive global capitalism that's brought us everything from cotton to Coca-Cola. Look at the guilt, repression and denial that US culture pretends is just a Southern thing. But look too, to the real, complex, intimate, rebellious, mixed up, intensely creative South that has led most of the revolutions in this divided nation and brought along a whole lot of the best food, drink, dance and music. In her latest book, "South to America, A Journey Below the Mason Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation" Perry takes us on a trip through the region to delve into the realities that exist beneath the stereotypes. Perry is the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African-American Studies at Princeton and the author of among other books, "Looking for Lorraine, The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry" — the author of "A Raisin in the Sun". "South to America" is just out from Echo Books. And I'm very glad to welcome Imani Perry to the show.

You are from the South. Talk a little bit about your own personal origins and why you went back there right now for this book.

IMANI PERRY: Yeah, thank you. So actually your introduction was just so beautiful and apt because the story of the South is more complex and more politically rich than what it's given credit for. I was born into on the one hand that kind of, traditional striving working class Black family, but also had parents who were radicals and involved in the late era of the Freedom Movement, prison organizing, organizing workers in steel mills and coal mines and the like. And so there is both a way in which I was organically rooted in what the South was historically and its people, and also in a submerged political tradition that made explicit connections to the globe. And so it was quite, I guess, sort of natural to turn to the South. In this moment people keep talking about how we're in the midst of culture wars of various sorts as though there's something new. And in point of fact, these are essential fundamental tensions that have existed since the beginning, since the European encounter with the South driven by desire, imagination, and greed, and a willingness to exploit and push people out and suck the lives out of people who were brought in. And so we're in this kind of cyclical relationship between land and the people and power. And I wanted to tell a story that I thought would illuminate how that is.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm from the south, but from the south of England, or at least the British side of my family come from the London area, the American side of my family, my grandmother,

my mother actually came from Iowa, but I've heard you interviewed by white hosts as this book has come out who have been quick to say they are from the South. And I just wondered whether you cringe a little at that because there are so many souths. So at the same time, there is this intimacy that you describe, a word that comes up a lot in your book.

IMANI PERRY: Yeah, I mean, part of it is, there's this incredible intimacy particularly across the color line that is distinct in U.S. history and also a very delicate detente, tension that exists. And that sort of dynamic is I think so frequently misunderstood because people over read what legal segregation was, it's about stratification, not actually about keeping people apart as a deep, intimate connections in the domestic sphere for example, even if public facilities were not. I don't cringe. I do, I mean I think what's interesting is to have the conversation and actually sit in what is, are moments of discomfort, which is part of what I try to do in the book. I have all of these encounters, I have an encounter with a white woman whose husband left her. She was a Lyft driver and she became a faith healer and she was sneaking into hospitals, an encounter with a man who was refilling the candy machine at the airport. And so these interactions with white Southerners and trying to make sense of them often we're speaking the same language, but I'm also trying to think about what does it mean? There's some things we can talk about and some things we can't and things that are very easy to do, like hold someone's hand and pray, but there's territory that is delicate. And that's part of the work of what the book is trying to get to.

LAURA FLANDERS: The territory is delicate and also has been invaluable to this country. You write, "Fill coffers, steal lives." You write that "American exceptionalism, that sense that we are somehow special and ordained as such is a myth sedimented on Southern prosperity: oil, coal, and cotton." And even if you choose to wrap all of that sort of history in a kind of romantic nostalgia, you say, "Integrity requires that the stories be halfway honest." Talk about that.

IMANI PERRY: Absolutely. Because, when I, for example, when I think about the history of mining, incredible history of protest, of organizing, of union organizing that co-existed with a white supremacist social order, such that groups of people who are both being subject to exploitation, who were both having literally their lives sucked out, air sucked out of their lungs are encouraged to dissociate from each other in the service of this myth. So some of these encounters are me trying, one of the things that I say is that I have more care and sensitivity to the quote unquote hillbillies than the one who wrote their elegy. To think about what it means with the deep sort of structure hierarchy in a society means, we can say, see it more recently with the way Joe Manchin disregards caring for his constituency. So these are the kinds of encounters that I want to disentangle in order to have us think, in a more honest way about the regimes of power that exist there, and also who served, who's dis-served by them.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean, I don't want to keep coming back to me, but in the UK, we have a kind of north, south divide too, and a similar relationship to the North as exists here in the

South in the sense that the sense of the very part of the country that has been the driver of economic conquest, success, if you want to call it that, wealth for sure is the part we choose to disdain and distance ourselves from, overlaid with race in this country in a unique and deadly way, how do we get out of that? And how can you help us think about that beyond just this kind of guilt and brushing it under the carpet?

IMANI PERRY: Well, for me, I mean, I don't, I'll admit, if I knew how we could get out of it, I would be doing a different kind of work probably. But I do think that there's a necessary move, which is to be honest about, reject the narrative. So the standard narrative is the evermore perfect union, the mythos of the nation. And then the South is this sort of embarrassing, backwards, different, strange kind of place, it is the repository for all of the nation's sins. You see it every time something bad happens politically, can't they just secede, can't we just get rid of them. When, of course, the ways of the South are precisely what allowed this nation to become a global power, it's prosperity. So it's not as though that is the shame of the South, that is the shame of the nation. So to the extent that, so a pre-condition for actually addressing these ways is to be honest about who benefits from them. They're not, the way people talk about the South, you wouldn't necessarily understand how incredibly powerful it has been in U.S. history. But the revolutionary war debt paid by the South, DC is where it is because of Southern power. Global wealth, because of mass, all of this unfree labor and the power of cotton, you can go on and on and on. So it's a powerful region and it's an influential region. And we live with this mythology so that we don't have to deal with all of what the nation is and why those ways can be powerful because it benefits them. So to me, the necessary, but insufficient step is to talk about that. And then of course, how many generations of people have said some version of this, but to understand, the structure of haves and have nots in a more sophisticated way and not to be manipulated, moved about by the political whims of the elites so easily, as of course, you know.

LAURA FLANDERS: And you write and of course it's true that a lot of people talk about backwardness in relation to the South. But when you talk to Southern organizers, they'll say, as goes the South, so goes the nation that the South is often the cutting edge of things, whether it's the plantation economics or extraction or civil rights.

IMANI PERRY: Yes I mean, oil, car culture, certainly it's at the front lines now with an impending environmental disaster. Being at the cutting edge of so much of the disasters, also why it is often at the cutting edge of social movement and organizing whether it's environmental justice issues now or whether it's prison issues. So one of the things that I talk about in the book is that my parents were involved in prison organizing in the 70s, it seems like an early timeline, but of course the South, what was happening was a harbinger of what was going to happen all over the country. So it was there first. Decades before people started describing mass incarceration it was very apparent that it was coming, if you were in the South. And the prison being on the very plantations where people were once enslaved is an indication of its heart.

LAURA FLANDERS: In Mississippi, you mentioned that your parents, I think knew or at least new of Chokwe Lumumba who went on for a bit to to be mayor of Jackson, his son now carrying forward his vision to some extent, a vision of a new kind of approach to economics, sort of the opposite of the plantation economy. Can you talk about that and what else you may have seen on your travels that gave you a sense of, oh, this could be the future coming out of the South.

IMANI PERRY: Right. Well, I mean, I do, there is this group and they range from sort of liberal to leftist, but of young Black mayors who are trying to re-imagine the economy of the South, I take one of the models for doing so to be Richard Arrington who's the first Black mayor in Birmingham, Alabama, who, part of the mobilization for his election was a police killing of a Black teenager in the 70s when I was a little girl. And so there, a teenage girl was killed. And so, again, so thinking about these issues with Black Lives Matter, but that was an impetus for really important political organizing of Black communities in Birmingham, in the 70s. And so it has a tradition, I think these new models, they're trying to imagine what does it mean to actually establish safety nets at the local level? What does it mean to actually resist at the local level? People talk about the South in terms of red states, which in and of itself is a kind of strange formulation because it depends on the electoral college formula when the whole country is actually purple. The red state blue state thing. So you actually don't get to see that kind of local work that's happening easily, unless you're in the South. And there's a tradition there, and I describe Chokwe Lumumba Jr., describe him as scion of sorts. I tell a story about being in Cuba with a woman who, a radical who was in exile who had been part of the New Afrikan People's Organization and how we talked about his election as a victory. And that's also important, that there is a tradition of radical politics that sees electoral politics as important, not to the exclusion of other kinds of organizing but integral to a larger project of imagining liberation.

LAURA FLANDERS: And sees that black belt with its huge density of Black voters and Black people as a rich, fertile soil for the kind of change that you're talking about.

IMANI PERRY: Yes, and I think it's important to keep in mind, notwithstanding Mississippi's poverty and it's deeply problematic executive that it has the most expensive Black political network anywhere in the country. And that comes directly out of the history of SNCC. And so there are still efforts to mobilize and there's still a great deal of possibility there. And a lot in terms of instructing other regions about how to think about politics on the hyper-local level, where it really does matter.

LAURA FLANDERS: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. We're talking with Imani Perry, author of "South to America, A Journey Below the Mason Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation". And throughout the book, you have this kind of zen like balance of the problematic, the troubling and the full of potential. And you mentioned

Birmingham and it's impossible not to think of Dr. King and particularly this time of year and his letter from Birmingham jail that talked about urgency and the urgency of now, and that change isn't inevitable. We like to think of that arc tilting towards justice, but in that letter, he says, there is such a thing as being too late. And the other thing that your storytelling does that's so beautiful is to remind us how history doesn't just go in one direction, progress doesn't just go in one direction. And we've seen very flourishing, healthy Black economies just destroyed by white reaction. How do you make sense of that? And is that anything to do with how you chose to tell the story, which was not in a kind of linear —?

IMANI PERRY: Yes, yeah, no, it's very, the non-linearity and also even the multiple meanings at the level of the sentence are really important to the story. The book begins by talking about set dances in Louisiana in the 19th century and the variation between different types of European set dances and the quadrille, which becomes a metaphor for various political parties, vying for control over the lives of unfree people. So, given that, I think that there is an essential tension, there's the mythos of the nation, imagination, aspiration, growth. And then that is always, in the history of this country, deeply connected to pushing people out, grinding them down, working them to death. Given that that has become a way of being that is so integral to the culture, the political culture, the economic culture of this nation. We necessarily wind up in a cyclical relationship to ideas of freedom or justice or inclusion, because those ways slip back in over and over again, they are seen as norms. So for example, when we talk about gentrification, that's an old way, that starts with the relationship to the Indigenous. When we talk about what it means to not make a living wage, that's an old way. When we talk about child removal, harkens all the way back to both slavery and the Indigenous boarding schools. When we think of stories of the movement, and Birmingham is really important to me because it was an industrial city. And so organizing was yes about segregation, but it was also about labor, it was about work. And so when I go now and talk about who's working in chicken fat plants now or catfish farms where historically it was Black people who were brought in because they were forced to work for a lower wage. And now it's people from Central America, but the relation is still the same, the sort of ideas that people who don't count can just be brought in and worked and worked and worked and vulnerable, politically vulnerable, vulnerable to policing and the like, these are habits, they're habits, they're assumptions about acceptable ways of dealing with human beings.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now that makes me think of something else that you write. You write that Black people in the South have a steeliness learnt of what they've been up against and have the realization that they have no option but to fight, that there's no other place that's gonna save us. And it reminds me of a conversation we had on this show, not so long ago about the border and the US mythology of always having somewhere else to go, go west young man, all the rest of it, having a frontier, you can go beyond. We're at our limits, geographically and environmentally, what's the lessons, what are the lessons of the South or a few that you want to lift up about the steeliness of staying where you are?

IMANI PERRY: Part of my thought about that steeliness is of course, because I don't come from a great migration family in a sense of people in my family moved to the urban South, but my family is not a family that moved to Chicago or Detroit or what have you, or Philadelphia. And so the sort of sense of the staying and fighting part feels almost sort of organic to me as a sensibility, but a certain register, it's like irrespective of where you are physically given the power of the United States globally. And part of what I write about in the book is the reach of the South into politics with the Middle East and politics with Central America and the rest. And that that is actually really significant to understand whether you're actually physically there or elsewhere. If we care about the human condition, one has to sit in that space at a certain level. And sit in what it means to, for example, completely destroy the earth in the service of industry. There's a couple of examples for me that were really potent is the way people talk about off the coast of North Carolina, the trees older than Jesus. And I love that because North Carolina is Bible belt, and people, there's almost a kind of tacit awareness. Something came before this ideology, or the Cypress trees in the Gulf Coast that are thousands of years old. There's something that came before. And if I think there's something meaningful about attending to the land that reminds you that something came before that is worthy of preserving before these ideas that are treated as literally gospel.

LAURA FLANDERS: The land has those ideas worthy of preserving, also the blood and sweat soaked into it that is our legacy.

IMANI PERRY: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: You say, history, what do you say is instructive, history as an instruction?

IMANI PERRY: Yeah. An instruction. I mean, I think, you know, I think of it as an instruction in contrast to myth, the romance and it's very easy to be particularly critical of the United States, but nationalisms period are often based in romances that evade the complexity of history and its ugliness, unless it's fitting into a master narrative. And so to me, when I attend and if I walk, I would walk through landscapes and just try to be attentive — architecture, land, sites of various kinds of events. And it's wild in many instances and I'm not disciplined in this, but it's a reminder. How we tell the story is always a choice. It's like, with map-making. So Bonini's paradox says, if you put everything on a map, a map isn't useful. So I think it's very similar about that with history, so you can't tell every detail, but the details you choose are reflective of values and priorities. And so for me, the question, so I want us to move through history with some humane values, with some decency and be taught by that. We pay attention, who counted, who didn't, who lived, who died, who worked to, who had leisure, all those kinds of questions tell us something that is useful for being honest, with respect to the values we proclaim.

LAURA FLANDERS: "South to America Journey Below the Mason Dixon to Understand the Soul of a Nation" it's out now from Echo Books, which is an imprint of Harper Collins. Thanks so much for joining us. It's really been a pleasure to have you.

I ended my conversation with Imani Perry by asking her the question I so often ask my guests about the experience that leads them to have confidence that the changes they seek are truly possible. She ended by saying, just look at the South, look at the history of this country. We may not have come as far as we want from chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and absolute denial of human rights, but we've come some distance. Looked through the lens of some imagined fantasy past, these may indeed be difficult times. But considered through the lens of accurate, complicated history for anyone who believes in equality, human rights, justice, democracy, the American experience, we have made progress. Imani also had great things to say about Elvis, Aretha, sex in the South and more. Luckily we've captured all of that in our uncut conversation. We'll post it at our website. You can find it there. Till the next time, I'm Laura Flanders. Stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining me.

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