

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

IBRAM X. KENDI: HOW TO MAKE AMERICA ANTIRACIST?

LAURA FLANDERS: Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson faced tough questioning during the Senate Confirmation Hearing on her nomination to the Supreme Court. Everyone expected that. What came as a surprise was the sudden focus on a picture book.

TED CRUZ: "Antiracist Baby".

LAURA FLANDERS: "Antiracist Baby", written by today's guest, Dr. Ibram X. Kendi. Held aloft in accusation by Texas Republican, Ted Cruz, the gesture was supposed to be some kind of incrimination indicative of an election year assault on public education, especially antiracist education, and the mud-throwing that we're likely to see more of coming up. How to respond effectively, especially as journalists, especially as journalists serving communities of color who are affected most by all this? For that, I am happy to welcome back to The Laura Flanders Show for our monthly feature, Meet the BIPOC Press, my colleagues, Mitra Kalita and Sara Lomax-Reese, co-founders of URL Media, a network of Black and Brown-owned and operated media platforms, and Dr. Ibram X. Kendi. Dr. Kendi is professor in the humanities at Boston University where he just this year resurrected The Emancipator in collaboration with The Boston Globe. The original abolitionist paper was founded more than 200 years ago. He's also the author of five number one New York Times Best Sellers, including "Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You", which was number two on the American Library Association's list of most challenged books in 2020. His next two books coming out in June are "How to Raise an Antiracist" and the picture book, "Goodnight Racism". And did I mention he's a 2021 MacArthur Genius Award winner? Dr. Kendi, thank you for joining us. Mitra, Sara, thank you for joining us again, Season 3 on Public Television Stations and year two of our Meet the BIPOC Press Collaboration. Mitra, to you, wanna kick off our conversation today?

S. MITRA KALITA: Sure. I just wanna pick up on the thread of Ted Cruz holding up that book because it really felt this iconic moment from the confirmation hearings. I was just thinking about this because the last time I was so riveted by confirmation hearings, of course, was Brett Kavanaugh where we're getting into almost the record and the upbringing of the justice, right? And in this case, that moment with the book felt like we were all about the identity of the justice. We went immediately from Ted Cruz and that image to then people taking the screen grab of how the book was doing on Amazon because it just soared in sales, and people were, like, very supportive of the premise of the book. And so that, again, just on my social feeds felt like another place where this country's at, right? There's the "Can a baby be racist?" question and then let's buy the book so that our babies are not racist.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean, I had a question for you, Dr. Kendi. Where were you? I mean, were you glued to the screen, or did someone tip you off that this was happening?

IBRAM X. KENDI: So someone tipped me off and many people did. I was actually in a pretty important meeting that I couldn't even end. And so I actually don't think I saw it live until several hours later.

LAURA FLANDERS: What'd you make of it?

IBRAM X. KENDI: I mean, initially, I was just horrified to see the way in which my sort of books and other books were distorted and even weaponized because a Senator was trying to undermine someone who was nominated for the Court, and their record was untouchable. So he was trying to figure out other ways to affect her. And I think the fact that he would use my work and distort it, and then to see how difficult it was for her at that moment I think was very difficult for me to see.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I'm wondering, like, how do you, in a nation that has so many racist systems in place, at the forefront of these conversations, how do you get through to people like a Ted Cruz or to these school boards around the country that are banning your books and other books? What is the throughway to actually make change among the people that need to be changed most profoundly?

IBRAM X. KENDI: So I think when it comes to those school boards that are banning books, I think we have to change power. I mean, you know, there are many people who are organizing right now and who are thinking about ways for them to sort of sit on that school board so that they can defend all books by all people so that our kids will have access to everything. As it relates to people like Ted Cruz, I think it's a little bit different. I think Ted Cruz is gonna swim with the political wins. And so if we transform the political wins and it becomes obvious to him that he can no longer stoke up a sort of white fear in order to win elections, and he's not gonna do it anymore. That's the issue with people like him. He's a propagandist, and he doesn't really have a principle. And so we really need to change the conditions and really the mat in which he's working under.

S. MITRA KALITA: I find it interesting, though, that you've really leaned into the children's aspect and the power of individuals that you speak of often. Has that been intentional to just start antiracism earlier and earlier?

IBRAM X. KENDI: This certainly wasn't in the plans. And it didn't really come into the plans until I really became a father in 2016. Right around the time, my second book, "Stamped from

the Beginning" came out. But then also, when people in the summer of 2020, I had to engage quite a few people because I think many people were learning about antiracism. And at the beginning of the summer, many people were asking me how can they be antiracist. By the end of the summer, more and more people were, like, "How can I raise my child to be antiracist? How can I be a better educator for children?" And so I saw that that's what people were looking for, and I try to be responsive to what people are needing and looking for.

LAURA FLANDERS: How do you swing that, though? How do you balance that with your teachings that you've also leaned into about racism as something that we do rather than something that we are, or not only something that we are, about power structures as well as personal behavior? Can you talk about that?

IBRAM X. KENDI: We should understand the structural and the individual. So if we understand racism as a structure, and if we understand racist at an individual level, you have a single or individual racist policy, even idea, or even an individual who is being racist because they're reinforcing this larger structure. Just as to me, antiracist as an individual is to challenge that larger structure. So I'm really trying to allow individuals to see the role that they have to play in creating a new structure, new equitable structure.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: We have Black books and other books being banned. What does it say about empowerment across racial lines, particularly for Black Americans?

IBRAM X. KENDI: For the longest time, we, as Americans, have been debating freedom. Those who have been advocating freedom from oppression. And then there are those who've been pushing for freedom to oppress. And what's striking is that the slaveholder, of course, was demanding freedom to enslave people. And imagine that any restrictions on their ability to enslave and violate people was a restriction on their freedom. And one of the things that those slaveholders imagined would restrict their ability to enslave people was education, was educating enslaved people. was even educating poor non-slaveholding whites. And so even in "How to Be an Antiracist", I write about how someone at the time during the enslavement stated that these slaveholders legislate for ignorance in order to maintain slavery.

S. MITRA KALITA: This desire to enslave, I hadn't thought about that framing in this year. And yet when you think about book-banning and the eradication of knowledge and real history, that's exactly what it is. I mean, all four of us here are in the business of believing that narratives and media narratives are transformational for our people, they're uplifting for our people. And so there's something about book banning in this midterm election year as an issue that feels like it's eradicating identity. And that to me is so dangerous.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: I'm curious, Dr. Kendi, if you see a connection between the reduction and almost the elimination of Black bookstores and other independent bookstores, and this wave of book banning, is all of this interconnected?

IBRAM X. KENDI: It certainly is. Knowledge is power. But I think we should really even think about it at a whole other level, which is that knowledge is only power if it's put to the struggle for power. And you see bookstores in particular serving as places that allow people to transform that knowledge into power because you typically have spaces where organizers and people who are building power for the communities come together. And so they certainly have become sites for targets, just as certain books that are empowering people are becoming sort of sites of targets. And that's why I think people are resisting so strongly.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is that where The Emancipator comes in? And can you tell us a bit more about that project? What it's been like to work with The Boston Globe? And what your goals are for it?

IBRAM X. KENDI: Well, I mean, that's precisely. Just as people are trying to destroy, we simultaneously are trying to construct and construct anew, and obviously even construct new media organizations, or even sort of build on the historic brilliance of WURD. Of course, I went to Temple. And so it was a friendly companion to me. And The Emancipator in particular, specifically being able to work with our editors-in-chief, Amber Payne and and Deborah Douglas, just to really reimagine the anti-slavery newspaper that had this sort of North Star of creating a nation without slavery and really platformed those people who were thinking that and creating that for us to sort of do the same with The Emancipator of really bringing together those thinkers, and writers, and campaigns that are really trying to abolish racism and are focused on that is really exciting because it's a more solution-oriented form of journalism. And I think that's what we need.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you have a goal, I mean, an idea of what you would like to see; I don't know, for a lack of a better word, Big J journalism emancipated itself from?

IBRAM X. KENDI: I mean, if we could do with The Emancipator and other similar publications what anti-slavery newspapers did prior to the Civil War, I'd feel as if we accomplished something.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. So I'll take the tradition of Tom Paine. You take The Emancipator, maybe we could get somewhere. I would love to go back just for a second, though, to two things; one, the censorship attacks. You made the point, Mitra, that as soon as "Antiracist Baby" became a popular meme, sales went up, but so too attacks in libraries, in schools. None of that has stopped. And even though, Dr. Kendi, your book seems to have not been in the top 10

most challenged books of last year, you were number two in 2020 right up there with Harper Lee, and John Steinbeck, and Toni Morrison. What can be done and what is being done to confront censorship and book banning per se, Dr. Kendi?

IBRAM X. KENDI: So I do think there's a lot of organizing that is happening, particularly at the local level, whether that's people who are forming organizations to pressure school boards, or library officials to not ban books, or even people who are organizing book clubs, even students and young people who are organizing banned book clubs because you're not gonna take anything away from a kid and expect them not to try to grab it themselves. And so I think that's happening. I'd like to see more lawsuits. I'd like to see more preventative legislation. I'd like to see ways to address this at a federal level. But I think there are many things that are being done.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: If I could jump in because I'm so taken by the... There was a quote that a wonderful writer and speaker, her name's Ruth King. She says that racism is a heart disease. And so I'm wondering, how do you combat that heart disease when you have so many people who are benefiting from structural racism? And is it something that generationally, it will work self out? Are we seeing younger and younger people adopting different frameworks and ways of viewing race and racism? Or is it something that does have to be attacked and uprooted each generation?

IBRAM X. KENDI: That's a hard question because I think on the one hand, I believe for the election of Donald Trump, I believe in 2016, a majority of white youth voted for Donald Trump. But then there, of course, are a significant number of youth of color in the United States. And those youth of color combined with even some progressive youth are generally more likely than really any other age set to express even antiracist ideas. But then what's also the case is at least in 2020, one poll found, from my understanding, the highest recorded percent of Americans were saying racism exists and a huge problem, but by the end of the summer, it had dipped down double digits. And it's really hard to say what it is now. And so there is a governing majority of people, but the problem is we're not able to necessarily govern because of all sorts of gerrymandering and suppression.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: A lot of the framing around the critical race theory and all of that is around white fragility. And you can't tell my child that they should be ashamed of their whiteness and their heritage. And this whole contextualization around white people actually being victimized by critical race theory or the literature that you've written. And that's a powerful talking point. How do we combat that framing? Because it's really been, I think, incredibly successful in changing the narrative.

IBRAM X. KENDI: Well, I'd say in two ways. First that we talk about that is a talking point of white supremacists organizations that is now mainstream. So historically, white supremacist

organizations have went to white people and said, "You are the primary victims of racism, or you are being impacted by genocide, or you are being harmed by immigration. So therefore, you, the white race needs to come together and defend itself. And that's what we as a white supremacist organization are seeking to do." And now, that boogeyman that apparently is harming white people is CRT. And so this is the mantra of white supremacy. And I don't think many people are willing to acknowledge just how mainstream this white supremacist talking point is. I think the second thing is the fact that actually, antiracist education is actually helpful and protective for white children. So in other words, if you are a white child and you're constantly being bombarded with this idea that you are special because you're white, an antiracist education could say nobody's special or not special because of their skin color. Through an antiracist education, you can learn about white abolitionists who fought against slavery, white civil rights activists who fought against Jim Crow. You can then see yourself through them, and then fight today against racism.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think there are probably people watching, Dr. Kendi, who are curious about raising their kids, especially their white kids differently. It's not your job to tell us how to do that, but I'm sure there are questions that you can help people answer for themselves.

IBRAM X. KENDI: Man, where do we even begin? I think it's important for first, parents to realize that their non-verbal language says a lot to children. What that means is children see, for instance, who you're inviting to your home, who you're not inviting to the home. Children see when you clutch your purse when a Black man is walking by. One study shows that a white child's perspective about race correlate more to the number of friends of color that their mother has than what their mother actually says about race. So that's what I'm talking about in terms of non-verbal language. We are not even doing with your child or saying to your child is impacting how they see race. But I also think, I write about in "How to Raise an Antiracist", it's important to create, to childproof the environment, which means creating a diverse, antiracist environment for the child, from the school, to the neighborhood, to even what books you're reading to your child. You know, it's also important to engage the child about these topics because they're gonna have questions. And I'd rather you answer those questions than a white supremacist lurking online.

S. MITRA KALITA: I just wanna say one of the things that Dr. Kendi's work, especially with children represents is the place for white people in the conversation that it really feels like if this year is about white nationalists getting people together and saying, "We gotta get together. There's no place for us," that his work is a counter to that. I think that's very powerful because it's actually utilitarian as opposed to theoretical. And then just as a mother of two girls, and we at URL Media, we pride ourselves on being an organization that centers blackness. I'm obviously not Black, but the work that I think families have to do is so essential to the preservation of democracy right now. And the books that you read your children, where you send your kids to

school. And in our family, there are an equal number of Black dolls, and Brown dolls, to white dolls in our house. It's just how we operate. And to connect that to saving the Republic might feel very lofty, but I actually think those two things are absolutely related.

LAURA FLANDERS: I have to go back to Judge Jackson before we close. And I thought of her as I was reminded of something that you've written, Dr. Kendi, in "How to Be an Antiracist". You say, "I'm no longer policing my every action around an imagined white or black judge, trying to convince white people of my equal humanity, trying to convince black people I'm representing the race well." I thought of her in that context and how she had to do those things in front of all of us for so many days and did it so gracefully, but I wondered how you thought about that scene, and whether you imagine in your lifetime, in our lifetime, that we will be rid of it, rid of scenes like that.

IBRAM X. KENDI: I mean, that's the goal. And it is the goal for us to create a different type of scene. The next time a Black woman is nominated to the Supreme Court, that the questions are about her credentials, her judicial perspectives, her decisions. And she's not sort of asked questions, like, how do you define a woman? Or questions about baby books. You know, I think, that's what we're sort of striving to create. And she won't feel this weight on her shoulders that I suspect Judge Jackson may have felt. It's too much for any individual to have to hold. And so many women, particularly Black women, have had to hold this weight, this weight that we should be lifting off their shoulders.

LAURA FLANDERS: Final thoughts. What is at stake in this moment for you, Dr. Kendi? And what is it that fuels you to do what you do so beautifully?

IBRAM X. KENDI: I mean, to me, it's the same thing. What's at stake is joy. I mean, at the end of the day, one of the net effects of racism, aside from people literally losing their lives, is misery. And so the inverse to that is creating a joyful life. And to creating conditions where people can enjoy their lives, no matter their skin color.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, this has been another thoughtful episode of "Meet the BIPOC Press". I thank you all for your work and for partnering with The Laura Flanders Show in these conversations. Sara, Mitra, always wonderful to be with you. And Dr. Kendi, thank you for giving us some of your time today. We really appreciate it.

IBRAM X. KENDI: Yes. Thank you.

S. MITRA KALITA: Thank you, Laura.

SARA LOMAX-REESE: Thank you.

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