

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### IMARA JONES: COUNTERING THE ANTI-TRANS HATE MACHINE

**LAURA FLANDERS:** As extremists crank up the volume on hate targeting LGBTQ people in the U.S. and globally, trans people, especially trans women of color, are facing an onslaught of bands, threats and violence. How did we get here and what does this have to do with the attack on democracy generally? Well, in 2021, Imara Jones kicked off a podcast miniseries looking into exactly that. It was called *The Anti-trans Hate Machine: A Plot against Equality*. And in it, she and her reporters dug deep into the radical right's history and present to reveal the links between the anti-trans and anti-abortion movements. In some cases, they found these movements sprang from the very same people and organizations with often the very same cynical partizan motives. I talked with Imara Jones soon after that series, which is ongoing, started an animated series has followed as the issues are still smoking hot and the trans slash research is still so important. We are re-airing that conversation today. Jones is the creator of Transmedia with Productions, which you can find on the Web. Time magazine named her one of 2023 most influential people prior to creating trans. Jones held economic policy posts in the Clinton White House, making connections and breaking down silos. I believe her work gets to the very heart of the intersecting assaults that so many of us face. And I share some thoughts about how all of this relates to our assumptions about our well-being, our bodily autonomy, integrity and love at the end of this episode. But first, it is my great pleasure to welcome Imara Jones.

Just to kick things off, who or what is on your mind right now as we're talking?

**IMARA JONES:** I think who is top of my mind are the components of the anti-trans hate machine, are the people that have been working for the past decade and more to get us to this moment where trans people are in the target and a central target of the right wing. This is part of a plan. This plan has been, as I said, years in the making, there have been hundreds of millions of dollars that have flowed into the components of the anti-trans hate machine. There's an understanding by the people, the politicians, the organizations, and the billionaires, that trans people will be the next fight in the gender wars after what they anticipate and have anticipated for over a year to be their victory on abortion rights. And so I think that what people have to understand is that the conversation around trans people is not marginal, it's central to the agenda and the plan for the right. And I think that for people who are progressives or who want to have a society in which we are able to have equality for everyone, need to understand that trans rights and the conversation over trans people and gender overall is not marginal, it's central. And people, if they wanna have a different country should start acting like it.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** You talk about the anti-trans hate machine being a plot against equality. Can you lay that out for us? And can you name some names, who is really responsible?

**IMARA JONES:** For a long time, people on the right have understood that control over bodies is central to the ability to implement the country that they want us all to live in. And therefore, the people that exercise body autonomy are central to their plans. And the organizations that are driving this anti-trans hate machine are very familiar names. Organizations like The Heritage Foundation, the Alliance Defending Freedom, the Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council, who all come together to start a brand new anti-trans initiative called Promise to America's Children. And all of this is being funded by a network of billionaires who understand what is happening here. And those names include Betsy DeVos and her family, the DeVos/Prince clan. They include other families like, the Wilkes of California, lots of billionaire families that people may not have heard about. And one of the largest foundations in the country, which is the National Christian Foundation, which gives out a billion and a half dollars nearly each year to causes, making them the single largest funder of anti-LGBTQ hate in the country. And all of their views and what they're doing have been poll tested and focus grouped. And so this is the result of a lot of effort, and there's an entire part of the Heritage Foundation called the DeVos Center, named after Betsy DeVos's father-in-law, who was a font and has been a font of anti-trans legislation and governing. And the people who ran that were moved into the Trump administration, which was really the beginning of institutionalizing and then thinking about how to turn the government against trans people. So we have money, we have non-profit organizations, we have government and institutional capture, we have focus groups and the ability to be able to think about messaging, and all of those things have been brought together to bring us to this moment. It's a very, very intricate, well-thought-out overlapping enterprise.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Our country is rooted in genocidal violence against Native Americans, in slavery, control of bodies, enforced motherhood. So it's in some ways, not surprising that we're still dealing with these things, but why do the folks that you've mentioned care so much and why is this such a cutting edge for them right now?

**IMARA JONES:** Because they built an entire operation that is mobilized around the issue of gender for abortion rights. And there's an understanding on them that in order to continue to have people mobilized with respect to money and voters, and grassroots energy and organization, that they're going to have to give them something new to do. And that's something new to do is to focus on trans people. For example, we're already seeing doctors that treat trans people being targeted, just like abortion doctors. That's a new thing that just happened, just started this year. And they are seeing how that plays out, the impact of that. And if that works in certain places, then it's going to be expanded. It's not going to be limited. And so I think that that's one thing. And the second thing is that they have a very clear view of the type of country that they're building and it is built upon control. And a fundamental part of control is the control of people's bodies. If you're going to institute a certain vision for them, that means control over people's bodies. And so trans people are a fundamental threat to that view of the world, which is why they're so focused on it, which is why they care about it so much. And it is a deeply held belief. I think that people need to understand that, that the motivation to target impartially may be cynical

and smart, but these are deeply held beliefs that people are willing to fight for. And that they have put hundreds of millions of dollars behind and countless hours and energy thinking about.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** You're speaking to a theme that has run through so much of our programming already this year. Early in the year, we spoke with Suzanne Pharr and Beth Richie, then the right wing researcher, Lisa Graves, and just a few weeks ago, Congressman Jamie Raskin, they all talked about this sort of extremist push for control and against democracy. Do you agree that there are also links to the insurrection of January 6th and the effort to strike back voting rights?

**IMARA JONES:** One of the fastest growing areas of hate that people are not focused on, but which is of ever growing concern is this intersection between white nationalist groups and their growing obsession over gender and gender identity. They see it as central to the white nationalist enterprise, again, rooted in body autonomy. And there are already some intersections between the Proud Boys, for example, and those who are focused on trans people and gender identity, and even more links as you delve deeper into the dark corners of the internet. So this is a growing problem. And I have an unfortunate feeling in my gut that we will, at some point, see this turn violent. We know, for example, in the most recent shooting in Texas, that within hours of the shooter being identified that their photograph was doctored to make them appear as if they were a person who was trans therefore linking to the obsession on the right with trans people somehow being involved in harming children. And that lie was repeated the very next day after that shooting by a GOP congressman. And those photographs first appeared on 4chan, which we know was instrumental to the Buffalo shooter's radicalization and the plans that they executed. So I think that there are clearly darker clouds on the horizon with these links between people who are obsessed with the violent overthrow of our government to implement white nationalist ideology and their focus on trans people and trans communities.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I hate to do it so bluntly, but what grade would you give our sort of movement resistance so far? And I don't just mean the LGBTQ+ movement, but all those who claim to be defenders of democracy and supporters of rights in this country.

**IMARA JONES:** An F. An F, it's not even a question. The failure to grasp these links, the failure to understand the components of what is happening on the right, the failure to understand the energy, the focus, the money, the coordination, the drive. And as I tell people all the time, if you're just now beginning to focus on the intersection of trans people and growing far right ideology and its impact on the rest of us, then you are already 10 years and hundreds of millions of dollars behind the right. So if you're just starting to think about it, you're already at a tremendous deficit. So I think it's an F.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** So what do we do? I mean, I know that your project, TransLash Media is a part of what do we do. There's a culture piece and there's the political piece. And we often say

that culture precedes policy change, but it seems like they are going in divergent directions. How do you see your platform functioning in this moment?

**IMARA JONES:** I think that what we need to realize is that, you know, there's a tremendous battle. And I think that you're right. I think organizationally, we work on sort of hard-edged, investigative political reporting, and then we have a part that's focused on culture change. And so as an organization, that's what we focus on at TransLash and all that we do, kind of both of those things, understanding as you say, how they interlock and work together.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Let's take a look at some of what TransLash Media is putting out. In the TransLash Guide to Trans Bodies, Trans Choices series, "My Abortion Saved My Life," Cazembe Murphy Jackson's story demonstrates the life saving urgency of abortion access.

**CAZEMBE MURPHY:** So a lot of times when I talk about my abortion, I say my abortion saved my life. Efforts to limit abortion access are coming from everywhere. I think it's important to include trans and queer and non-binary folks in the conversations about abortion access. One, because inside of the trans community, there's not a lot of talk about abortions or uteruses. Especially once people have gone through like a medical transition, they don't want to talk about the past. And I feel like, because there are other people other than women that get abortions, there needs to be people telling their stories, because stories have power.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Here's a clip from "The Future of Trans." In this documentary, Imara shares her childhood and interviews trans activists, introducing audiences to gender non-conforming communities and people all across the country and highlighting national leaders too.

**IMARA JONES:** I grew up in Atlanta as a boy, even though I always knew that I was a girl. This total split between who I was inside and how I was allowed to present in the world, made it impossible for me to see myself accurately. Made it impossible for me to see my future. I did imagine a future, it was a future of "Star Trek." It was a future of "Star Wars." Who I actually was, however, was nowhere to be found. Now, as an adult, I want to give myself the gift of imagining a future with me in it.

What do you see as our future?

**DOMINIQUE JACKSON:** It looks like us being human beings. Like us walking into places and not having to say, "Hi, I'm trans." But, "Hi, I'm a doctor." "Hi, I'm an educator." "Hi, I'm a lawyer." "Hi, I clean the streets." But it shouldn't be, "Hi, I'm trans."

**PATRICIO MANUEL:** When we limit people's imagination that ultimately kills any sort of liberation. And I refuse to allow anyone to stifle my creativity and my imagination. To

me, that is something as a child, was very important to me. And I think that's my ancestors whispering in my ear and saying, "They can't get your mind." Like no matter what, no one can get my mind.

**IMARA JONES:** We can't overestimate the cultural progress that's been made for trans people, because we also know that there's a growing backlash. So we know that for example, people with tremendous reach like Bill Maher and Dave Chappelle, who are getting, and in Dave Chappelle's case, someone who received support from the highest levels of Netflix to engage in anti-trans conversation and rhetoric that puts people at risk because of the precarious nature of everything that we've been speaking about. Those people are gaining traction along with Ricky Gervais, and you know, a growing reticence on some places to talk about trans people and engage in trans people while at the same time growing trans visibility. You know, it just was announced that Laverne Cox, a Black trans actress is going to have a Barbie. So I think that we have to understand that the cultural space is contentious and contended. So I don't think that there is, it's not like we're making progress on culture and it's getting better there and politics are getting worse. I think that the cultural space is much more contested and fraught, which underscores what's happening in the politics. So we don't know how this is going to turn out.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** It should also be mentioned that Mattel, in addition to issuing this new doll, did say that they were going to make a contribution to the non-profit TransFamily SOS, which takes us to the question of money. You were an economist originally by training. You worked as an economist in the Clinton White House. What's the connection?

**IMARA JONES:** I think that what we have to understand about the anti-trans movement is that it is funded by billionaires. It is funded by people who have more money than you could spend in thousands of years at a normal rate. And if a collection of them are coming together to fund this, then it makes sense that we've gone from, for example, basically a half dozen anti-trans bills in 2019 to 300 this year. That's how you get that type of step up function increase because of the impact of money in organization. So money is a really important part of this. And trans organizations across the board are vastly underfunded. And also, more to the point, other places that are a part of supposedly progressive networks and communities are also vastly outgunned and not focused on trans issues. A lot of places, for example, don't have trans people on staff, so can't even make basic decisions. So I think that there are some fundamental weaknesses in the infrastructure, money being a key one that is driving kind of this moment. And until the structural things get fixed and addressed, then the momentum is going to be with the right. It's just fundamental.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** And what can you tell us about trans resistance at this point? Mutual aid, you know, fighting back. There is that side of the picture too.

**IMARA JONES:** I think that that goes to the heart of what the hope here is. For me, when you were saying, what can we do? I think that this is a part of it is to find the local people that are

fighting this. So for example, TENT in Texas is a very small group. I think there are four full time people for a trans organization that's supposed to be helping to stem the tide statewide that needs help and that's replicated across the board. So there are trans organizations, as you say, fighting back, there are mutual aid societies that are figuring out ways to get medication and support for trans people who need gender affirming care. And in places where that's becoming harder, helping those people travel to places where they can get that care. There is a growing understanding on trans legal organizations to begin to lean more into this fight and battle. I also want to say that, also a part of the hope are trans youth. As I tell people all the time, sometimes the only thing that's standing between our community and total disaster are trans youth and their families who decide that they're going to speak up and speak out. And I'm talking about people who are as young as 12, 13, 14, 17, who get together with their families and go to hearings and decide that they're going to speak out, or they decide to organize rallies. And it's their voices that in some cases have been able to halt this legislation. So I think the seeds of hope are there. They need to be watered and they need to be helped.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** How do you advise people that feel exasperated, frustrated, or just plain old depressed in this moment at this state of play?

**IMARA JONES:** We live in a consumer transactional culture where if things don't happen immediately or in a short period of time, it's somehow seen as a failure or we get frustrated or we get distracted. And we have to understand that one of the things that the right is doing, and I'm just referring to it as the political movement right now is they understand that these fights are long, that there are going to be some victories and losses, but the most important thing is to keep going and to learn from their mistakes. And so I think that there has to be an attitude adjustment in part amongst people who are concerned about social justice, about how to approach these and how long it's going to take and just beginning to think about sustainability. I think the second thing is we haven't implemented none of what you said. You know, there's not been an inversion of leadership, there's not been an inversion of resources, there's not been a fundamental thinking and reworking about how to make these fundamental changes.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** We talk about the number of bills. We talk about the number of attacks. Are there stories you've gathered in TransLash in the narrative side that have surprised you, moved you, that you might want to share?

**IMARA JONES:** I think about the story of Phin, who is one of the people that we profile in our series, who is now 17 years old, was 16 last year.

**PHINEAS FLEMING-SMITH:** It's weird and scary. I'm not supposed to be the spokesperson representative of, you know, trans people of my age group. I'm just trying to be a kid and it's not working.

**TRACE FLEMING-TRICE:** But why did we decide that you should do it?

**PHINEAS FLEMING-SMITH:** Because no one else is gonna — Not here at least. I am the token trans person.

**IMARA JONES:** Phin is one of these people who has decided to speak out in Alabama against these bills at a tremendous cost to him and his family. Mainly, the fact that he doesn't get to be a teenager. He doesn't get to be a teenage boy. And I think about Phin's mother, Trace, who stays up late at night, thinking about whether or not their family should move out of Alabama, where they would move, how they would make ends meet, how she's going to make sure that her kid gets the care that he needs in order to survive.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** Well, I want to encourage everyone to check out TransLash. There's more on that media platform than we've even been able to touch on here, but I urge you to check it all out. And Imara, I'm just going to end by asking you the question we often ask people on this program as we close, which is, what do you think will be the story the future tells of this moment?

**IMARA JONES:** First off, this is the moment that people begin to understand that if they want a society in which everyone can thrive, including trans people, that there has to be a growing engagement and focus on the type of trans people and trans rights. I think, secondly, the thing that I hope is the case is that all of the ideation that trans people are now focused on in terms of thinking about our futures and thinking about a future and a world that works for everyone, that all of that energy, envisioning and work comes into full realization. If those two things are able to be fully realized, then it's going to be a bright future for everyone.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** I love to think of that bright future and our bodies will be a part of it. Don't forget, we can't have a bright future without our bodies, people.

**IMARA JONES:** Bodies are the first sight of liberation. bodies are the first sight of liberation.

**LAURA FLANDERS:** What does it really mean to say that our bodies are the first sight of liberation? Well, I don't know about you, but it's been a while since I really spent a moment to hear what my body had to say. So this LGBTQ+ Pride Month, I wish you and me time to sit under a tree, by a beach, to feel that connection and to hear the body's needs and wants and desires. What would we change about how we live if we were really to pay attention? What would we change perhaps about society? The Buddhists would call it reconnecting with our Buddha selves. Marx would say it's breaking out of alienation. Whether you call it liberation or connection, I wish you pride. And you can find my full uncut conversation with Imara Jones, through the links at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura, thanks for joining me.

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