

## THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

### BIPOC MEDIA ON CLAUDINE GAY, ANTI-ZIONISM & DIVERSITY IN EDUCATION

LAURA FLANDERS: The resignation of Claudine Gay, a widely esteemed scholar, and the first Black president of Harvard, in the University's 387 years, reveals much. Both about how America is failing at its highest ideals, and about how anti-Black backlash campaigns work in this country. In this case, a politically motivated grilling in Congress was followed by an organized campaign to attack Gay's credibility and intellect, that fed an ongoing assault on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts, or DEI in education. And all of that was coupled with the especially toxic accusation in these times, that diversity was increasing antisemitism. Much of all of this was familiar of course. We've seen years of trumped up campaigns against truthful education and critical race theory. In just last year, the Right scored a huge victory, one they'd been pursuing for decades when the Supreme Court struck down affirmative action. In some ways, what was different this time, was the support that Gay had, and the pushback that was seen, especially from people of color in the media, and in the academy. Today we're going to look at some of that pushback, and consider why the failure to understand racism and sexism, and how they intersect in our culture is so important. Not only for Black women and all women of color, but for anyone's dream of a multiracial democracy in America. Joining our monthly "Meet the BIPOC Press" discussion, this time around are Zaire Dinzey-Flores, a professor and chair of Latino and Caribbean studies at Rutgers University. And Jaimee Swift, the founder and executive director of Black Women Radicals. I'm also happy to welcome as co-host this time Amir Khafagy. He's a labor reporter for "Documented," which is a member of the URL Media Network, URL being a network of independent media owned and operated by people of color. Amir, I'm so glad to have you with me for this important conversation. Welcome.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Thanks for having me. I've been thinking about this for a long time, and I'm excited to be here. With the recent controversy around Dr. Gay, and the repression of anti-zionist speech, on college campuses and in the media, this entire trend, you know, worries me a lot. People of color are not strongly represented in the media and on college campuses. It seems that in these white dominated institutions, they pretend to value our voices. It seems to me that if we express our unique perspectives on different issues, we can be punished or we can be demonized. Turning to you, Zaire you wrote a recent piece about Dr. Gay in Grio, and I was wondering if you could speak more about what the controversy means to people of color in academia and in the media.

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: When I learned of Dr. Gay's resignation, I thought it was important to voice what many, I think Black women, academics in particular were feeling. And that is constant scrutiny, questioning of our motives and capacity, and also whether we are competent to

be teachers. And for those of us who dare explore academic leadership, whether we can hold those positions. So it was a reminder of how difficult and treacherous the road in academia is for those of us who don't represent the majority.

LAURA FLANDERS: Jaimee, coming to you, I'd love to hear your reaction as you watch this play out. And especially, I don't know about you, but I began to feel shades of McCarthyism, but maybe of a new sort playing out in front of us.

JAIMEE SWIFT: Yes. What we experienced, or saw with Dr. Gay is definitely a form of McCarthyism in a different era. And we've been seeing these right-wing attacks happen throughout the last few years, particularly against Black feminist theory, such as intersectionality and critical race theory. We've seen how Kimberlé Crenshaw has been attacked for her theoretical frameworks. We've also seen push-backs against anything dealing with queer and trans studies or gender studies. And so this is a continuum of what we've seen throughout the past few years. But also a larger history where these institutions, the ivory towers never wanted Black people and people of color. We, but as Black people, we were not even allowed to have access to education, which is why Historically Black Colleges and Universities were created. And we even see attacks against HBCUs as well.

LAURA FLANDERS: HBCU being Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The other chilling aspect though, and where I see the McCarthyism was, Dr. Gay had pretty early last fall, disavowed anti-semitism, spoken up against rising anti-semitism on campus. But then we saw this kind of effort, particularly I'm thinking of the congressional hearings, but also in what happened, to require her to say it over and over again, in more and different ways. And I'd love to hear from you, Jaimee, about that aspect. How do you see that adding to what you've described as a fairly familiar scenario?

JAIMEE SWIFT: I see it in multiple ways, and I believe that multiple truths can exist. I believe that there was a witch hunt against Dr. Gay because she's a Black woman. I do think that they, people were forcing her over and over again to prove her leadership, her presidency as a Black woman. And three, we also see where, and this is where the multiple truths can exist, where even though Dr. Gay experienced this misogynistic witch hunt, she also, according to students, failed to protect Palestinian, Black, and other allied students, faculty and staff who support the pro-Palestinian cause. This is the precarity of Black leadership in academia, but in other places, where she had some sort of way had to choose between disavowing anti-semitism, which is very real. We're not going to deny that. But also to disavow other marginalized communities, such as Palestinian, Black, and other allied students with the pro-Palestinian cause. So where does she fit into this place? And this shows that DEI is not working. DEI is not a liberatory politic. Because if DEI was a liberatory politic, Dr. Claudine Gay would be able to speak truth to power to both anti-semitic, and also anti-Islamophobic, and anti-Palestinian attitudes, forces, beliefs, at Harvard or anywhere else she lays her her feet or steps.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Now I went to Queens College in CUNY in New York City, and it was a very diverse school. Previous to that, I went to LaGuardia Community College. And that was also very diverse. It had a high representation of Black and Latino students. I felt very comfortable in that institution. So Zaire you had previously mentioned that you had attended Harvard for your undergrad. And I was wondering, did you feel like you faced more scrutiny, or you were held to an unrealistic higher standard than the white student body?

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: I went to college in the nineties, where affirmative action was experiencing challenges then. And questioning about whether, you know, we got in for those reasons, or whether, you know, we're intelligent enough to be there. What are the markers? How do we get there? Those have always been true. I mean, we see it still in debates around standardized testing, we see it in debates around what kinds of racial information, race information is going to be included in applications, how class figures in all of this. So yes, I think that's a standard experience for any professional student in predominantly white institutions. And I would argue even, even if and when they're diverse, I don't think that, you know, places like LaGuardia, you know, or Queens College are exempt from this.

AMIR KHAFAGY: It makes me think of something that Jaimee had said previously, that universities have never truly loved Black academics structurally. And that historically, Black people were never really allowed into those spaces.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, to follow up on that, Jaimee, we've introduced you and talked about how you were co-founder of Black Women Radicals. You also teach at an institution. What's this experience been like for you, and do you think it is possible to actually be a Black woman radical in an institution? And if so, why?

JAIMEE SWIFT: I think my experience has been very interesting. So I come out of the tradition of Howard University. I got my PhD in political science at Howard University, a Historically Black University. And so for me, having the experience like Amir talking about LaGuardia and Queens College, obviously, it's diverse. Just because there are these white institutions that have historically subordinated Black people, does not mean that these things don't happen at Black institutions. Because Black people are not monolithic, we're heterogeneous. And we have different experiences. But coming out of teaching, or being at a HBCU to a PWI-

LAURA FLANDERS: PWI being predominantly white institutions.

JAIMEE SWIFT: It's very interesting given that I'm one of the very few Black women in my department, Black people in my department. So there's this expectation of me to come in and undo the legacies of not teaching about Black people. I study powers, so I study Black politics.

So it's me coming and having to teach these students who do not know anything about Ralph Bunche, or Jewel Limar Prestage, or all these prolific Black academics. I think about many other Black women in academia who were also activists, Like Toni Cade Bambara, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde. So I do think that I can be a Black woman radical in academia because of this lineage of Black women in academia. But I also recognize that I cannot put all my life and politics into this place that does not want me to be there.

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: You know, I think what is tough, is when you are doing scholarship in the context of Empire and Colony, and teaching about it, to the point that Jaimee was making about how difficult it is to be a scholar in navigate institutions. And so protecting your health, but also your livelihood, and your capacity to, you know, exist. And we are hypervisible, and we are often drawn in to talk about, you know, the things that stab at the heart, that address our own particular survival. So, I think that's what's hard in this case, in dealing with a very sort of, a minefield of an issue. And I saw it in the way in which Claudine Gay navigated that. And I see it every day, and I experience it every day in navigating these topics that become the target of ideologues and political fervor.

LAURA FLANDERS: At the very top, Zaire, I mentioned that I thought there was something different in this particular scenario, because we've seen a growth in independent media, owned and operated by people of color. You wrote your piece for "The Grio." There are many more part of the URL network and beyond. Am I right in thinking that maybe at least in that respect, we're seeing some change? Or is this a rosy tinted glass being applied to what's going on, Zaire?

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: I'll tell you what I think was missing. I think there was quite a bit missing. There was no reporting on Black academics in general. A greater breadth. There was no, there was little reporting on what academia is like. So even when the conversation turned to plagiarism, there was little kind of discussion of the processes for academic review and how that happens, and what it's like for Black academics and academics of color to face those processes. And there was also, I think, a lot missing on Black alums of these elite institutions. And we saw, and I was, you know, part of, you know, Black alums that were getting together and talking, and sort of, you know, noting what was happening institutionally. And I think that got very little attention. And so the, you know, the most of the attention went to these wealthy white men that are Harvard alums, and it reproduced the very same inequities that exist with respect to institutions.

AMIR KHAFAGY: So as an Arab American who works in the media, I find the conversation around Palestinian liberation and the current war in Gaza very frustrating. It doesn't seem that the mainstream media is getting it right. And it seems the same thing is happening around this conversation about Dr. Gay, and universities response to what's going on now with the Palestinian, the attack on Gaza, and with the Palestinian Liberation Movement. I was wondering

if you, Jaimee, could talk a little bit about what do you think the media's getting right about the controversy, and what is it getting wrong, and what do you wish could be added to that conversation?

JAIMEE SWIFT: What media, particularly Black, and people of color operated media is getting correct, is that it was a witch hunt. This is an attack against Dr. Claudine Gay because she's Black and she's a woman, she's a Black woman. And those intersections are so critical. But what is also missing to me, and this is where the multiple truths perspective comes in, that she did not want to protect Palestinian, Black and other marginalized students who are pro-Palestinian. Because what we're seeing is, is that across the universities and many other sectors, if you say 'Ceasefire Now', "We want to end the genocide", "From the River to the Sea," These are being equated to being anti-semitic statements and they're not. As president, and also other faculty, administration and staff we're supposed to be right in the interest of all of our students. And not just a few, or not just some.

LAURA FLANDERS: The other piece of this picture, it seems to me that reporting missed, was the nature of the support on the campus for Claudine Gay. And also the concern that students who identify as Jewish, actually have about anti-semitism coming from the Right, coming from conservatives who have long been, you know, bound up their racism with anti-semitism. And we've seen examples of that recently.

PROTESTERS: Jews will not replace us.

LAURA FLANDERS: I don't know about you, but I would've liked to see more reporting on that. And I'm wondering Zaire if that's something that I just missed in the coverage.

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: Yeah, I mean, I agree with that. I think that there, you know, this became a one person focused topic, rather than one that really emphasized the kinds of fault lines that were being put at play. So the people that are, that were being positioned against the other, and I think we've seen this. I think this is a colonial logic at play, where let's make sure that we cannot find the, the ways in which these two groups or different groups come together and coalesce. And we've seen it before. We saw it with affirmative action, with the knockdown of affirmative action, the way in which Asian communities were put against Latinx, and Black communities, in having a position in education in higher ed. And we see it here too, I think with Jewish communities. I mean, to be clear, racism is an issue, classism, sexism. And, as are anti-semitism, as are anti Palestinian rhetoric. All of these are true and co-exist. And so I think that the win of white supremacists to suggest that, that they don't live together, and it was strategic use of that rhetoric, to put us against each other. And I think that we're all concerned for all of those things. And how do we sort of subvert this trend to suggest that we are indeed against each other when in fact we are all looking for representation. I mean, Harvard, not now, always

has been a place where, you know, anti-semitism could have thrived and thrived. Jewish people were not allowed, as Black people were not allowed in these institutions.

AMIR KHAFAGY: It feels to me that there's like this new witch hunt, this new age of McCarthyism taking place, not only in academic spaces, but also media spaces. We're seeing reporters losing their jobs, or being forced to resign if they had a pro-Palestinian stance. We're seeing, we're seeing in academia, we're seeing students for justice for Palestinian groups on campuses being repressed, and new laws on campuses, or regulations on campuses that say that you have to support Israel. And almost like in the McCarthy era, where you had to denounce communism in order to get a job. So we're seeing these things grow now, and take hold in these spaces. And I was wondering if either one of you can talk about how we can fight this new kind of witch hunt, this new age of McCarthyism taking place in the media and in academia.

JAIMEE SWIFT: This witch hunt we are seeing is a current manifestation of what has happened in the past. And for me, my responsibility is to speak truth to power. June Jordan, very well-known Black feminist poet, said Palestine is a litmus test. It's our litmus test. I liken this to a young, non-binary Black radical by the name of Ryna Workman, who is at NYU Law, and spoke out against what was happening in Palestine, and they lost a well-paying job, and they were no longer serving as president of the club that they were at NYU. And so of course we're going to be the first ones attacked in our livelihoods, and our, you know, economic safety nets attacked. And I get that, but also I think about if I'm supposed to be a Black feminist, a Black woman radical, the same thing happened to June Jordan. She was ousted for writing poetry in support of Palestine. And so for me, I think we really need to continue to push into, like I said, speak out about what's going on, because these institutions have never really wanted us anyway. You don't accept my humanity. You don't accept who I, who I am as a person. You just want me as a Black face in this place. And that's not who I am. And that's not me.

LAURA FLANDERS: June Jordan taught at many universities, but if you look at the archives of the New York Times, she goes from being a pretty regular commentator to the op-ed page to disappearing from that page after the, the comments that you mentioned around the Israeli bombardment of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in '82. Amir?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Zaire, you've written previously about Puerto Rico and the gated communities that exist there. And I was wondering if you can speak about some of the parallels between, I guess what, you know, the Palestinian Liberation movement, and the Puerto Rican experience.

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: I've written about gated communities in Puerto Rico, and the way that the built environment is utilized to sort of like control, and reproduce racial and class distinction in Puerto Rico. Puerto Rico being, you know, one of the oldest colonies in the world,

and in the ways in which colonial policies are established. Obviously there are parallels there with Palestine.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm left with this sort of, my usual question. Is the blatant pushback because the forces of progress are gaining some ground?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Well, I like to think that maybe these, these strong attacks that we are facing is because maybe the movement is getting stronger, and there's a vulnerability that the Right feels, and that's why they're attacking even stronger, and they're being even more dangerous than they ever have been.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, thank you all. It's been a great conversation, and wonderful to have you with me, Amir, for it.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it. It was a pleasure.

ZAIRE DINZEY-FLORES: Happy to be here to talk about this important topic, and thanks for having me.

JAIMEE SWIFT: It's been a really generative conversation. Thank you.

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