

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

IS EARTH DAY STILL RELEVANT? BREAKING SILOS WITH MEET THE BIPOC PRESS

LAURA FLANDERS: Is Earth Day still relevant? In the 54 years since its founding the day has gone from an opportunity to highlight grassroots environmental struggles to a chance for corporations to engage in greenwashing. But the ideas behind Earth Day are more urgent than ever. One problem may be that the whole subject of the environment has been siloed in media. This Earth Day, let's resolve to unsilo it and make Earth Day intersectional. Is Gaza, for example, an environmental issue? What about the bridge disaster in Baltimore? Certainly the 2024 elections are at least in part about our future on this planet. Today our guests, Olúfẹmi O. Táíwò, Francesca Fiorentini and Maximillian Alvarez will help us look at the ideas behind the headlines. All three work in the media, but also in other fields. Femi as an author and professor. Francesca as a comedian and writer, and not so long ago, Max was a warehouse temp worker. Together, their perspectives will help us understand the world we are not only living in, but trying to save and sometimes reporting on. Welcome everybody to Meet the BIPOC Press, a monthly feature of "Laura Flanders and Friends," you are my friends. Where should we start? I don't know. There's so much to talk about. I think I'm just going to ask each of you, is Earth Day relevant to you? Let's start with you Max.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: You know, the concept behind Earth Day, of course it's still relevant. I mean, we still need Earth. It is the one home we are ever going to have, and we have been watching over the course of our respective lifetimes humanity forget that lesson. Particularly the corporations and you know, corporate serving politicians, you know, who are at their beck and call, they have forgotten it. And we are the ones who are all dealing with the effects of that. And I see that every week in the coverage that we do at the Real News Network.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Francesca, beyond just a convenient scheduling, you know, premise, is Earth Day still important? Have any resonance for you?

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI: Every single day has to be Earth Day and we have to actually have some kind of teeth to the ways that we're talking about the environment. And when it comes to, if corporations really want to help out, you know, don't just do like a beach pickup one day, how are your policies not systematically, you know, polluting our environment? Here's the problem. I think that what corporations have done, and you see this in other aspects, not just when it comes to the environment, which I think should be more aptly called, you know, Climate Change and the Coming Apocalypse. You see it in places like DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion. You see it in, you know, supporting and uplifting Black voices. Whenever something becomes trendy, they, you know, corporations latch onto it. Then there's a backlash, in this case, a right wing backlash

against DEI programs, against any kind of inclusion against diversity generally. And there's a backlash, obviously, to the environmental movement as well. And then corporations are like, "Ooh, this no longer is something we can do to just sort of pat ourselves on the back."

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's come to you with this then, Femi, I just saw you described in Grist Magazine as I think they called you 'the most vocal philosopher working on issues related to climate change.' Whoa. You've tied together the conversation about climate change with reparations and colonialism. Can you do that for us here?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: Well, how much time you got?

LAURA FLANDERS: Briefly.

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: Well, I mean, getting started doesn't take much, right? You know, there's a number of corporations, there's number of asset managers that combine institutional investors and huge funds. You know, there's a few financial interests that are really profiting off everything that's destroying the planet, everything that's polluting the air, everything that's depleting the groundwater. And some of those are, like I said, corporations and asset managers. Some of those are state owned companies in the rich part of the world and the poor part of the world. But the thing that cuts across all of these is that there are a few people who are going to have life jackets when the sea level rises. And there are a few people that are going to be able to, they think, they imagine, escape the worst of the destruction that all of this pollution is causing to the planet. And then there's the rest of us. And that's the reality of it. You know, we can remember that on Earth Day, we can remember that on a Tuesday, but ultimately we live here. We only have the one planet, you know, and unless we get our politics in order, we're not going to have even the one planet.

LAURA FLANDERS: Do you have a sense of what reparations would look like at such a massive scale?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: Well, I think it would look like the rich countries of the world, the rich corporations of the world, and the polluters, the people who have done the most emitting of greenhouse gases kicking in the most for the joint thing that we all have to do together, which is make sure that life on this planet in something approaching just circumstances can continue.

LAURA FLANDERS: That would require the media that is mostly underwritten by exactly those corporations actually covering the movement for that kind of change. Coming to you, Francesca, I don't mean to make light about this, are there any examples that come to mind of media doing right on this story?

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI: Obviously, I mean, I think Grist has done an incredible job, and here's what Grist does and other outlets that insist on covering climate is they don't do what I think a lot of folks do in the year 2024, which is follow clickbait, right? We've seen what happens when you report on climate stories. People don't click it. Why? because it's a bummer. And as a comedian, we have to un-bummer this topic in any way we can. I mean, I think there's a lot of gallows humor to be had here and there's a lot of humor about making fun of these billionaires who are trying to leave Earth, even though they're so far from it. And my God, if they can get there, please go. Just go. This is not just Earth Day, this is tax season. And billionaires are getting away with not paying their fair share, not actually assuming any of the costs for all of the destruction that they've gotten rich off of. So it all kind of coalesces. I do think there needs to be a reclamation and a radicalization of something like an Earth Day.

LAURA FLANDERS: You Max, you went for the Real News to revisit that town which had faced such a disaster a year ago, a disaster forgotten by most. And then you came back to find your own city of Baltimore in a total life-changing crisis. What do you think the media have been missing in that story and what's this been like for you?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: You're right, Laura. Like I got back from filming in East Palestine, Ohio where the Norfolk Southern bomb train derailed on February 3rd, 2023, followed three days later by the disastrous, unnecessary decision to vent and burn five cars worth of toxic vinyl chloride, sending that massive black death plume full of dioxins into the air, spewing that all over the surrounding area for miles and miles around, even though Norfolk Southern basically drew a one mile radius around the crash site and said, "We're only going to help people in that radius." But we all saw how far those chemicals went. And I've been interviewing people in Pennsylvania, Ohio for the past year over and over again. I refuse to give up on these people because again, that's where the media fails is they do a one and done sort of story about how sad this is how beleaguered these people are. And then they leave and they don't help them get the justice that they actually need.

LAURA FLANDERS: Norfolk Southern, I think if I read it correctly, recently agreed to pay, was it \$600 million in a class action lawsuit settlement to the people of East Palestine? What do you make of that Max?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: What I make of it is that good also, there's so much more that they should be on the hook for because what they stole from that community cannot be quantified in dollar amounts. That community will never be the same. Norfolk Southern is trying to get off Scot-free with a one-time lump sum. But these people are going to be living with the effects of that and this community for the rest of their lives. And that's something that people here in Baltimore have been worried about. There's a CSX rail terminal here in Baltimore, in Curtis Bay, where a majority Black community has been screaming for like years that they are getting coal

dust from these trains that are passing without covers on them in their lungs, on their houses, in their eyes. And the city and state only recognized it as a problem like last year. To say nothing of Flint, to say nothing of Jackson, to say nothing of Navajo Nation, to say nothing of Puerto Rico, to say nothing of Red Hill in Hawaii. Like this is something that is happening across our country. After 40 years of deregulation, disinvestment, corporate consolidation, Wall Street takeover of every vital industry. Like that is the thing I see connecting all the different stories we report on. And the people in those communities need help, but they need to be able to see each other. They need to be able to be, they want to be talked to like human beings, not as pitiful subjects.

LAURA FLANDERS: And that goes back Femi to you in the sense of how does policy change happen if we separate our discussion about policy from the actual people whose voices Max is talking about and who Francesca's talking about. I see that kind of break constantly in our coverage. So we'll have what's just been described, the sort of the oi poor things, coverage of the victims, and then this continuing conversation about, well, you can't have government intervention in the economy. That would be communist. Given the media's capacity to, as Francesca put it in a co-opts just about everything, you've written about how framing like wokeness has been co-opted in our media in a way that diffuses this possibility it seems of making change. Can you talk a little bit more about that and talk perhaps about how that's playing out in this election?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: Well, I think the way that Max put it is pretty important, right? You know, we can try to make, we can try to reduce people to these labels that we use to make sense of things like national electoral politics and we can try to make environmental issues or diversity issues, issues of wokeness or whatever. But at the end of the day, it's people trying to live their lives, right? And people need clean air and water to do that. And I don't think it is a special interest, you know, to want a safe, healthy world for yourself and your kids. And if that's not the basis for getting together and, you know, being able to agree on some things politically much as we might disagree about other things, I don't know what would be, right? And one of the things that I find instructive about one of the cases that Max mentioned is if you look at Flint, people got together and to a great degree, did it themselves, right? It wasn't the state of Michigan that was blaring the alarm bells about the water. It was the people who lived in Flint. It was the scientists that they recruited to their cause. It was the lawyers they recruited to their cause to hold the state accountable. And it's going to be that kind of ground up people power that is going to be the stuff of solutions if we're going to find them at all.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that requires some people power media. One of the stories, of course, that we're all so affected by on a daily basis is a good example actually of people power media. I'm thinking of coverage of Gaza right now under the Israeli onslaught following the attacks of October 7th. You've been following this story and talking about Palestine, well, all of you, but let me come to you, Francesca, specifically the coverage of the targeting of the World

Kitchen aid worker convoy, three different attacks on three different vehicles. Ever since I see a kind of hangup in the media to talk about how many more trucks have been allowed in without talking about the actual meaning of whether people are getting fed and why people are on the, well, they can't any longer be on the verge of famine, they're in famine conditions now, in Gaza. Can you talk about this challenge and what you are seeing in this coverage?

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI: I mean, yeah, it's the same sort of like, for lack of a better term, tragedy porn, right? Which is just kind of like grabbing headlines. We're not saying, what about the aid trucks that were turned back that we're working with the World Central Kitchen? What about the aid trucks that are waiting at the border? What about the food that they have? Has that food gone bad at this point? And there hasn't been that follow up coverage. I mean, if you want a sob story, there's a sob story outta Gaza every single day of the week. But who is the face of that sob story? And that is going to be an Arab Muslim, that's going to be a Palestinian, that's not necessarily, of course, again, who pulls on the heartstrings of Americans or who is seen as sort of credible for having that sob story. I do think a lot of this is coming to a head in November, you know, as disgusting as I find Joe Biden's green lighting and funding of this genocide, when we talk about things like the environment, it is interesting to note, although he is, does not have an A plus rating from anyone. But you see, the way that the Trump administration and every lackey that works for him is like, and the Republicans, whenever there are federal programs that Biden put into place to help specifically Black and Brown communities in this country when it comes to environmental racism, when it comes to toxins and pollutants in their water, air, or soil, those programs are the first ones on the chopping block. Why? Because they're seen as in their minds, racist, truly anti-white racism. So again, this kind of bleeds into the broader like culture war, racist, white supremacist underpinnings of the MAGA movement that we are fighting on every, you know, in every single point in turn, which makes I think November incredibly important despite Biden being such a disappointment, not just a disappointment, a handmaid of this atrocity. Max, you wanted in on this?

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: Well, I just want to jump in on two points there just to build on those excellent points, right? It's like when it comes to Gaza, right, I think one thing that we really need to underline when we're talking about the fault of the media here over decades, right? A human atrocity of this scale can only happen when enough people believe that the ones who are dying are not as human as they are. That takes time to convince people over and over again through relentless propaganda, racist coverage, cherry picking the context that you provide for people, the dehumanization of Brown people living in occupied Palestine, the same way that the dehumanization of Brown and Black people living in this country so that the rest of the country can actually convince themselves that what's happening to their fellow countrymen, be it they be they're being poisoned by lead filled water in Flint. They don't have access to clean water in Jackson, Mississippi. They're living in Cancer Alley, Louisiana. Like you convince yourself before that story ever enters your mind that the people who live there don't matter as much as

you do. That is a conditioning problem that we all have work to do to uncondition ourselves from that. But this is the result of that dehumanizing coverage and that is why it's incumbent on all of us in the media to rehumanize people and to really remind people of what the human stakes of all of this are. But like things have gotten so bad from Gaza, from Palestine to East Palestine.

LAURA FLANDERS: Schools and universities have been a place of that kind of education, at least talking to people about how this world came to be the way that it is, they are now, in addition to our media, ground zero for a huge fight around what kind of truths can be even discussed, let alone taught. Are you seeing that play out?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: Definitely seeing that play out. A number of my colleagues are facing, you know, pressure from the administration around academic conversations in general around anything that has to do with race and around what we've been talking about just now, the war in Gaza, the genocide happening in Palestine. And I think one of the things that is important to note, even as we're rightly critical of, you know, ways that the media over the past generation or so has not been as positive a role as it could have been. The truth about the media is also something that you pointed out earlier. There are particular interests that own a lot of the media corporations and they exert a lot of influence. And even aside from the ownership structure of who owns which publications is violence, and that's something we're seeing on display in a massive way in Gaza. More than three quarters of the journalists who were killed anywhere in the world in 2023 were killed in Gaza, right? According to the Committee To Protect Journalists, many of whom were Palestinian journalists who have been doing, you know, God's work, trying to get the word out about what's actually happening over there and are a big part of the reason why we know to what extent we do, the scale of what's happening over there.

LAURA FLANDERS: One of the things we've kind of done is now insert the conversation about Gaza into our discussion of the environment. And I think that's good.

MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ: Just to kind of keep that rolling really quick. Is this a climate issue? You bet it's a climate issue, right? The war industry, the US military is one of the biggest polluters on the face of the planet to say nothing of the devastation that our military equipment is wrecking upon the bodies and communities of people around the world, right? I mean, and also all the tax money that is getting sucked out of us and going to fund those wars. And that's not going back into our communities to give us drinkable water, breathable air, like a wage that we can live on. Like all of this is connected to a class war that devalues and diminishes life itself.

LAURA FLANDERS: Isn't mass military onslaught an environmental issue this Earth Day? Will any media out there be talking about that, Femi?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: I think it's a good question and one of the things that we're going to be asking in the upcoming years and decades is what is the response of our political systems going to be to the climate impacts that are happening now, that are accelerating and that we are going to see new versions of. We're likely going to see some level of climate based displacement. How much depends on how serious we get on cutting emissions. We're probably going to see some levels of upticks in social breakdown as temperatures rise, as resources get constricted. And the response that we're seeing is a total continuation of the capture of our political systems by the corporations of war, right? No matter what shocking news we get out of Gaza, Biden doesn't seem to be able to stop selling bombs, right? Whatever the political apparatus is behind the manufacturer of death behind national security as a primary way of responding to social problems, you know, that has so far won the day. And if we want a response to tomorrow's problems that goes by way of something like solidarity rather than national security, rather than the tools and organizations of war, we're going to need a different politic.

LAURA FLANDERS: Different politics within view, Francesca?

FRANCESCA FIORENTINI: Yeah, I would just want to bring it full circle and also remember that there's money in war and there are people profiteering off of this genocide and they can't wait for more 2000 pound bombs to fall on a apartment building full of families. And so back to where we started, right? Which I think Max and Femi have articulated so perfectly about the corporate accountability, about reining them in when it comes to disasters, manmade disasters like East Palestine, like Flint, Michigan. And that's how we begin again to get our foot in there, in the door and actually bring these corporations, you know, and say, "F your Earth Day man. Like you need to do a whole lot more." And yes, paying more taxes is also part of that.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, people who have been at the front line of exactly that struggle for generations, of course, are our First Nations and Indigenous Native American people in this continent. They have been out front both on this in North Hemisphere and the South saying that one solution might be to accord rights to nature, rights to water, rights to soil and land and air. We saw some victories by some people in Europe this month after the European Court of Human Rights' decision that in fact the Swiss government had been not doing what it could to save the lungs of its residents. Is this the kind of thing that you think holds promise Femi? These are kind of legal strategies around the environment?

OLÚFÉMI O. TÁÍWÒ: It's interesting. 10 years if you had asked my colleagues in philosophy, in political science, the people who study the kind of institutions that have rights in the systems around them, and you told them we should give rights to Mother Earth, I think you would've encountered a lot of skepticism. In the last few years, we found out we've extracted so much groundwater that we've affected the tilt of the earth on its axis, that rainwater across the entire planet is unsafe to drink because of the plastic pollution levels Max was just talking about. And

everything Max just said about us living in a corporate crime scene is literally true. And I think against that backdrop, if that's what the world is like, I don't think that there's anything about respecting the environment, about rallying how we relate to the Earth and pollution and production that should be off the table. So I think, yeah, there may well be something about giving rights to soil, waterways, thinking about political rights in different ways that we should take up and take seriously.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, well I think we're going to leave it there on at least a glimmer perhaps of hope. I really appreciate all of you being here on the program and appreciate all the work that you do. Big props to all of you, Max, Femi, Francesca, thank you so much. And a quick note to our viewers, we are excited to say that our colleagues at URL Media Uplift, Respect and Love have since last season spun off their own podcast. Yay. So you can find Mitra Kalita and Sara Lomax on their YouTube channel. We're going to be back next month with more Meet the BIPOC Press, a monthly feature of "Laura Flanders and Friends," and you're going to see these voices and others, new hosts. Point to audience, if you have a local journalist you are particularly excited about, write to us. You can write to me [laura\(at\)lauraflanders.org](mailto:laura@lauraflanders.org) and we'll check them out. So thank you everybody, this has been a great conversation.

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