

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 6: Imara Jones
Imara Jones: Masculinity Can Be A Fragile Thing
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ABIGAIL DISNEY: Is Imara here?

IMARA JONES: I am!

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm so happy!

IMARA JONES: Hi, how is everyone?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Everyone's great, how are you?

IMARA JONES: I'm good. I'm off camera because I'm sitting in my closet and so I'm in the dark.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, I'm in my closet too. It's just, uh—

IMARA JONES: It's lit, it's lit though.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, it's lit. It's not air conditioned and slowly but surely I will melt, but I'm going to take myself off camera so I don't kill my battery. And I'm going to put this over here and Alexis, shall we go through the making sure we're okay part?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hi all. Well, I've got a great guest for you this week. Her name is Imara Jones, and I enjoyed talking to her so much that I'm shaking things up and dividing the interview into two separate episodes. Part one is this week, and then we'll run part two next week.

I'll get more into why in a bit, but first let me tell you about Imara. She is a trans activist and journalist who has led many lives, each one more interesting and amazing than the last. She started out working in the nineties, in the Clinton White House, in international trade policy. Next, she went to work at the media giant Viacom, where she headed up a wildly successful national messaging campaign that sought to remove the stigma of living with HIV and AIDS. After Viacom, Imara leaned into activist journalism, launching her own daily news show on YouTube in 2015. She has since launched Translash media, a journalism and storytelling platform that tells stories about trans people, their friends, their families, and the issues that matter to them. So in my conversation with Imara in this episode, we talk about her background in communications, her family in Georgia, and about Translash and her work. But we also got deep into a conversation about how the trans community is dealing with the Dave Chappelle controversy. I honestly wasn't planning to spend so much time on talking about it, but Imara's ability to articulate both her personal experience, as well as the larger cultural meaning was so insightful that I wanted to devote the majority of the episode to that.

So, to recap the Chappelle-Netflix controversy, let me put it this way: If you want to see a very rich man spend an hour feeling sorry for himself I could recommend a couple of things. You could flip back through Donald Trump's last six months of press releases. You could Google Mel Gibson, or you can settle in for comedian Dave Chappelle's new special, *The Closer*. Trust me, it's quite a pity party. And what exactly does he have to complain about? *The Closer* is the final installment of a whopping \$60 million deal Chappelle signed with Netflix in 2016. The coverage has been not so good. Opinion writer Roxane Gay said in the *New York Times*, "The set is a 72 minute display of the comedians own brittleness." Hannah Gadsby, who you probably remember from her hit Netflix special 'Nanette' took to social media to condemn both Netflix and Chappelle. Her language was very choice. And IndieWire said, "Chappelle is cementing himself into a strange strain of martyrdom quadrupling down on a manufactured panic of his own making."

For all the negative press Chappelle has received for 'The Closer', it still falls under that famous Hollywood adage, "There's no such thing as bad publicity." People will watch it.

But the great irony is this: in 'The Closer' Chappelle all but begs for his audience to choose decency and to see others, including trans folks as human. So what's the problem? Well, in practically the same breath, he makes a different choice. One of cruelty, mockery, and denigration. His lack of self-awareness is pretty stark. Well, Imara Jones is the person in this situation, choosing decency.

As a journalist, she is taking on a role that most large media platforms are abdicating. She is centering people in trans stories that humanize them instead of relegating them to tabloid headlines, punchlines, and bit parts. So this week we'll hear from Imara about some of her work and background, and also break down the Chappelle news.

Next week, we'll talk to Imara about her amazing, reported podcast series, *The Anti-Trans Hate Machine*, which digs into the power and money behind the effort to place trans folks in the cross hairs of the culture wars. Enjoy the episode, and drop me an email to tell me what you think.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Thanks for joining me Imara.

IMARA JONES: Thank you so much. I'm so glad to be talking with you today.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm so happy. I've really been looking forward to it. I met you at the New York women's foundation, right?

IMARA JONES: Yes, we met once right after the 'Celebrate Women' dinner... I think it was two years ago in 2019?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, that's the best thing in New York. Don't you think?

IMARA JONES: Yeah. It's super fun. It's super fun. Although it's never fun when I'm getting up to go to it, cause it's so early.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs* Everyone else in the room is in the same place about that, you know, we're all like, "Oh my God," and then like five minutes in, "Oh, glory. Hallelujah. I'm so glad I'm here." It's hard to explain. Okay. Okay. Okay. So, Imara Jones your life is not very ordinary. It's full of big jobs and big dreams. And I want to know more about your background but then again, I'm cognizant of the fact that trans people always get probed first for their trans story. And I guess I'm wondering how you feel about the way interviews like this usually go.

IMARA JONES: Yeah, the transition is always fascinating for people and before and after, and the fact that you are trans, like you're an object. And I think that that's one of the reasons why I'm so intent in everything that Translash does, our podcast, the documentaries that we do, everything, to always center people's humanity, to start with the fact that everybody is human. And so let's talk about that. And in the course of talking about that, of course, we will come up on these other issues, but to try to frame humanity at the center of everything,

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, problems aren't that hard to figure out if you start with "Everybody's a human and deserves kindness." So I am going to ask you a little about your story. Only because you have written in a really moving way about you meeting your family in Georgia after you transitioned. Can you tell us a little about that?

IMARA JONES: Yeah. I mean, I wanted to engage them in a conversation really about what it was like to have a member of your family who's trans, like we don't often focus on that. I mean, what is it like for the people who are around you? What is it like for the people who've known you? And I don't mean in one that centers conflict or rejection, but really what is kind of the internal conversation that they're engaged in within themselves. And so I was really curious. So, you know, I grew up in Atlanta, my entire life. That's kind of the world that I knew. So I went to go visit my family who lives in Southwest Georgia, which is also something that's not done that we think about, you know, people in small towns or in small cities and in rural areas, engage in a conversation about trans. And so I literally took a camera and we just went to record conversations with them and experiences of us looking at where my mother grew up and the house that she got married in and all these other things and it was really moving and really healing for me in a way that I didn't expect.

Translash Episode 3:

Ce'Aroh: Hi, I'm Ce'Aroh Roberts.

Courtney: Hi, I'm Courtney Roberts and I'm 14.

Imara: And both of you are my cousins.

Courtney: Right.

Imara: How are you?

Both: Great!.

Imara: So earlier today we were having a conversation in the kitchen. And when the topic of me being a woman came up, both of y'all said that you weren't surprised.

Courtney: I always had the vibe that you were. I accepted it from the jump. You are who you are.

Ce'Aroh: And at the end of the day, you're still the same person we met when we were like super little, it didn't change anything for us. We're glad that we got to see you become who you are.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You talk about Mama Rose a little bit.

IMARA JONES: Yeah, well, Mama Rose passed last year during the middle of COVID, and she lived a really long life. She was in her mid nineties when she passed and she is my great aunt. And so one of the things that's so fascinating about her is that we constantly think of people that are older and churchgoing—I don't think that she ever missed a Sunday until she got ill in the last year of her life, to be honest of going to church—and we don't often think of those people as those who can be supportive of trans people or trans friendly or trans loving. And she was all of those things. You know, and we capture that conversation where she's like, "I don't judge people. That's not what I do." She's like, being trans is just a fact. It's a fact of life. You are who you are. And just to have that as a conversation, I think it was mind blowing for me and hopefully it's mind blowing for the audience because if a 95 year old woman who is church going in Southwest Georgia can be pro-trans and trans accepting then what's everyone else's excuse?

Translash Episode 3:

Imara: One of the things about you is how you, you don't, you don't do a lot of judging as a person.

Mama Rose: No, I don't do that. I mean, everybody have to be what they want to be.

Imara: Right.

Mama Rose: In their own soul and spirit, so I accept you.

Imara: Thank you. Yes you do. Always have. No matter what.

Mama Rose: That's right.

Imara: Everybody in your family, you just—

Mama Rose: Mhm, you know I love you.

Imara: I love you too.

IMARA JONES: And I think that it pushes us all to reconsider our stereotypes.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, and everybody's a surprise and that's the best thing about life.

IMARA JONES: That's right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So you constructed an HIV/AIDS campaign for Viacom that was incredibly successful. And there are so many parallels here with the work you're doing now around life in the trans community. You must have learned or gained some experience that's been useful to you now, as you thought through how you construct a campaign around that.

IMARA JONES: Absolutely. I mean, I think I drew so many lessons from that. I think the first thing that I drew was just the power of media and the power of messaging.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mhm.

IMARA JONES: People underestimate it all the time just the sheer power and reach that storytelling at a massive scale in a way that's relevant to people can have on a population. It just is—it's really powerful. And in the course of doing that campaign and running it for Viacom, that broke through to me. I also think what really broke through to me as well is we have to communicate to people in ways that they understand, not in ways that make us comfortable. And I think the other thing is just the power of story through humanity. And I don't mean sentimentality and I don't mean unrelenting positivity. I mean the ability to really be able to speak to people's experience of what it's like to be here and then to have people understand that others who they may not associate with or may feel uncomfortable around also are experiencing the same things. And when you are able to do that, it's magic, you literally are able to change people's behavior.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And that was really ultimately, once the epidemic moved along and became sort of a fact, there was a very extraordinary kind of humanizing process that occurred. Because gay people with HIV and AIDS in the early days were dehumanized, they were scapegoated. Do you think that that was connected to ultimately people being able to see them as human in watching them suffer?

IMARA JONES: I mean, that's a good question. I think that within what happened in HIV/AIDS, I think gay people asserted their humanity. Right. I think it was, again, I think that it was a force of will, you know, there was so much creativity around that period. 'Angels In America', 'And The Band Played On', I think the role of media in humanizing gay people over time is really important. And then just being contrast against the out and out callousness and disregard of the first Bush administration. And of course the Reagan administration.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. So you make a very compelling case for why black trans women need to be front and center when we talk about social justice and I'd love to hear you explain why that is.

IMARA JONES: Yeah, it's kinda like I wrote in Time magazine last year and I keep coming back to that because it sort of expresses my fundamental thought on this, which is that black trans women are the most marginalized of the marginalized. And by centering people who are marginalized, if we were to build a world where black women could thrive, imagine the world that would exist for everyone. Because in order to do that, you have to restructure the world in a way so that you create more openness, more opportunity, more humanity, more compassion for everyone. And that's a really compelling space to think about. And I think that the leadership of black trans women is so essential right now because when you live in a world where everything fails you, then you are conversely in a position to imagine, and to begin to work on a world that works for everyone, you're able to re-imagine criminal justice systems, you're able to re-imagine

media, you're able to re-imagine housing, you're able to re-imagine employment and what that looks like and all of the areas that I've just listed right now, there are black trans women across the country who are leading organizations and local efforts that are doing that to a really impactful degree. And I think that if you were then to take that leadership and take that vision and put it forth as a guiding light for everyone, that's an amazing idea and an amazing world that we could live in.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you ever get discouraged by just how much media doesn't understand this very crucial point you just made?

IMARA JONES: Yes. And I think it's really interesting cause I've really been thinking about it in the context of Netflix.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mhm, yeah.

IMARA JONES: And I've been thinking about it because I feel like I spent all this time personally and with my team putting out these stories that center our humanity, that get people to think about us differently. And then I collide against this multi-billion dollar behemoth and it's one of the highest rated things on Netflix. And it is a tsunami that washes away, you know, the little hut that we were—that we'd been building, or at least in some way, that's the way that I feel.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, can you just sort of go back and fill us in on what happened with Netflix?

IMARA JONES: Alright. I will try to recount this with poise and equanimity. Cause it's easy for me to get rageful. So essentially, Netflix had contracted with Dave Chappelle for specials on their network. One was a couple of years ago called 'Sticks and Stones' in which Dave Chappelle did have a portion of that that was transphobic and that was downright offensive, that went beyond humor.

Dave Chappelle on Sticks & Stones: *This idea that a person can be born in the wrong body [...] that's a fucking hilarious predicament. *laughter* [...] What if I was Chinese? But, but born in this --- body? That's not funny.*

IMARA JONES: There was a bit of an outrage at the time, a trans woman that he spoke about in that special whom he said he befriended committed suicide. There is a dispute about whether or not that played a role in her suicide, but nonetheless, it was not a good look. But it was a hit. And so fast forward a couple of years later, this is the last of those specials. And it was released recently, and it's called 'The Closer.' And in 'The Closer' Dave Chappelle goes after trans people, goes after gay people, goes after lesbians in what I believe is a hate speech filled special that's masked as comedy. And he says in part that he's 'team TERF.'

Dave Chappelle on The Closer: *I'm team TERF.*

IMARA JONES: So that means he's allied with J.K. Rowling and—

Dave Chappelle on The Closer: *She said in an interview, and this is not exactly what she said, but effectually she said, gender was a fact. And then the trans community got mad as shit. They started calling her a TERF.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, what's a TERF?

IMARA JONES: Yes. A TERF is a trans exclusionary radical feminist, and it's essentially cis women, assigned female at birth, who say that they are feminist, but that trans women aren't women and should be excluded from any idea of womanhood and participation in the women's movement. J.K. Rowling has expressed that same point of view. And so in this he says "I'm a TERF."

It's led to an incredible outpour, as you would imagine. And it has extended to employees at Netflix who spoke out and then were suspended. And reinstated, employees are planning a walkout soon of Netflix, and then the Chief—Co-Chief Executive of Netflix, content officer, Ted Sarandos, who we mentioned before, has come out twice now and said that essentially he's sorry that the feelings of his employees are hurt, but that they're standing by him. And then he came out and basically said again, "I'm sorry that people are hurt but honestly, I don't think that people hearing violent or abusive language is in any way impactful in terms of the way that people think and feel about others and that people can be exposed to all types of harmful content and it not lead to any result or impact." He said, "What we put out in the world has no impact on the world."

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh my God. Well that's—okay. So maybe you can articulate why it's hurtful, actively hurtful, not painful, but actively does damage.

IMARA JONES: One of the things that I think people should understand is that these comments don't come out of nowhere. And I think that the reason why that's important is because for the past two years, we have had trans murders be at historic highs.

And at the heart of those murders are the murders of black trans women. And what strikes me about those murders when you dig into them is the degree to which the people who commit them don't believe they've done anything wrong. They will sometimes call the cops themselves and say that they murdered someone, one calmly waited for the police and said, yeah, I did it. And that means that at the heart of this is a belief that trans people are not human.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

IMARA JONES: And everything Dave Chappelle did in his show reinforced that, everything reinforced that. And therefore contributes to an environment that fuels trans violence. It's like someone doing jokes about the murders of Jewish people after the massacre that occurred in Pittsburgh a couple of years ago and saying that it's just words.

It occurs within a context. And then I think about this relationship with power, because one of the things that places like Netflix and all these companies do, they're not the only one, we could—we could name them off the top of our heads. You know, they have power and reach and who doesn't want to have power and reach. And I know that I personally can sometimes daydream, oh, what would it be like to partner with fill in the blank on X idea. And we'd reach so many people and it would be great and it would be really impactful. And so it's not uncommon to think about how do we make that happen and how do we do that with integrity and all the rest of it. But then today I thought about how actually this moment clarifies and reminds me of why I'm doing the work that I'm doing and why I'm doing it the way that I'm doing. Because I have learned throughout my entire career that ultimately this is a place where corporate media will always return and that, in some way, it's always going to fail you. And so therefore building new institutions and ideas and putting out new product and a different way of doing things, that is essential work, it is difficult work, but it is so necessary. So it is both extremely depressing to me and also inspirational and as a reminder of why I'm doing what I'm doing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, it's Audre Lorde's thing, right? About you can't take the master's house apart with the master's tools.

IMARA JONES: That's right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So have you seen a difference between the white LGBTQ community and the black LGBT community in terms of reacting to the controversy involving Dave Chappelle?

IMARA JONES: Yes. I think that one of the things that has been the case is that specifically black gay people, but black trans people have been pretty united in our denunciation of this special and how harmful and risky it is because it's inflammatory hate speech disguised as entertainment. I think that there is some reticence to criticize Dave Chappelle in other communities, because of one he's black. And so there can appear to be a racial dynamic if white people attack him. And then secondly, amongst other people within our movement who are white and gay because there's a discomfort with trans people.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yes!

IMARA JONES: Like those two things working in concert, right, can lead there to be not the similar amount of denunciation. I have been surprised, quite frankly, that both GLAAD and HRC, two very mainstream organizations that are very reticent to criticize powerful institutions—let's just be honest—have come out against Netflix, which shocked me. Which underscores the depth of what he did and what he said, but there's not been a uniform, denunciation across the board from mainstream institutions or from white gays and from black gays either. I think it's really been black trans women who've been leading this fight and in Netflix it's been trans people who've been willing to stand up to their CEO. I mean, you know, people who have very, you know, not senior jobs who are willing to tell him that he and the company that he runs and that pays their bills is wrong. And they'd been standing up to him at great risk to themselves.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you think the fight that you're fighting has any chance of ever becoming a mainstream fight? I mean that people who are not trans will see how much this matters, nevertheless, and become part of the struggle.

IMARA JONES: I do. I do because the longer the bell rings the more people pay attention to it. You know what I mean? It's like a fire alarm. If a fire alarm goes off in your building and it turns off in a minute, you don't think about it, right? Like you're like, oh, whatever, it was a drill or a false alarm.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right, right.

IMARA JONES: But it goes on for thirty minutes or an hour, there begins to be a reaction. And I think that the longer that this goes on, I think that we've seen it since the release of *The Closer*—I keep wanting to say closure, but the release of *The Closer*, cause I want it to be done—but since the release of *The Closer*, I think that the longer this has gone on the more mainstream news organizations have picked up on it, the more mainstream organizations pick up on it, the more it does enter into kind of the public sphere and realm. I mean, I've even had people who don't pay attention to these things saying, 'Oh, I heard about this Dave Chappelle thing, I want to talk to you about it.' And that opens up the possibility for it to expand and for us to win. We'll see.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right. Right. Do you know, I was just thinking, as you were saying that, that that explains how demented the right wing is, because they are always ringing the bell. The bell is never not ringing on the right wing.

IMARA JONES: 1000% and they all believe it. Right. So that's, I mean, the other thing about progressive politics is that it's coalitional and so coalitions hang together on interest, right? Not on a common belief. I mean, we say that we have common beliefs, but you know, really. So I think that that's also one of the issues is that it's coalition politics versus unitary belief politics. And that's another reason why there's this big mismatch.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What do you think explains Dave Chappelle's weird focus on the issue? Because he's kind of made a name for himself being a bit of a social critic. Doesn't he have bigger fish to fry? Or-- why so focused on trans people?

IMARA JONES: You know, masculinity can be a fragile thing

ABIGAIL DISNEY: *laughs* Okay. Understatement of the century.

IMARA JONES: And it often times rests firmly on your ability to believe that you can dominate women and or that women are there to serve you in every way. And I think that if there is an idea that you might have of trans women, because trans women are women and face all of the things and have all the complexities in relationship to men that all other women do, who are cis and heteronormative, that laid to the side. If you have an idea that there are women who are

outside of your control, that somehow threaten your manhood, I think it can be a very enraging thing for someone who has a fragile sense of their own masculinity despite being incredibly wealthy. And I think that that's what fuels it for him. I think there's something about trans women and the idea of trans women that makes him feel so small that it's enraging and he can't help himself.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, and it goes back to what you were talking about earlier, when I asked you why trans women are so important. I mean, if there were a map of the hierarchy in patriarchy and the white cis male is at the very top of it, then a black, transgender woman has to be the person at the bottom.

IMARA JONES: Mhm.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right? And if you want to change patriarchy, then there's something very important to be listened to about the experience of being that bottom part of the patriarchy. There's a positional wisdom that cannot be denied.

IMARA JONES: That's exactly right. Because we know the strength of societies by how well it works for people who are farthest away from power.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

IMARA JONES: And I also think that it's just very strange, this obsession, again, with control, where, like is this a female body? Is this a woman's body that I can control? And what does my ability to control it say about me?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Well, and also, you know, it's a female body and therefore I should have it.

IMARA JONES: That's right. That's exactly right. And I think, Abby, the thing about patriarchy is that, you know, it sounds like an esoteric word, but like at the core of patriarchal systems is the fact that we've created systems of exploitation, which mean that only a certain group of people benefit. That's what we've done in patriarchy. And that's why it fails.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Well, the corollary to what you're describing there, that you create these systems of exploitation, you know, where only some people benefit, the corollary to that is many people suffer. And in order to enjoy the benefits you're required to either look away from, or in some cases enjoy the witnessing of that suffering to believe that in order for me to do well, you have to do badly. That is the core of a hierarchical system. And I believe that this country starting on the basis of chattel slavery, that was how we started.

IMARA JONES: Absolutely. And that core founding approach is one that we even see with COVID. How there are people who became the richest people on the planet in part because they were willing to let their employees die, to enrich themselves.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah.

IMARA JONES: Who did not disclose, for instance—let's just be honest—at Amazon, the fact that workers were getting sick and dying. They were not disclosing that to other workers at Amazon because they were afraid that people wouldn't show up for work and they couldn't get packages the next day.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, and all while you were calling them essential workers and nothing about the pay structure changed, nothing about the expectations changed it's—I actually was one of those naïve people very early in the pandemic that thought, maybe this is the point at which we see it's laid bare just the level of cruelty required for someone to get a package from Amazon. And it is extraordinary that it's not just that it was laid bare, but we just moved on.

IMARA JONES: That's right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, so we saw it, all of us and then we did nothing.

IMARA JONES: That's right.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, yeah. Imara you're magnificent. I really loved talking to you.

IMARA JONES: Thank you so much, it was wonderful beyond belief.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Thanks for listening to part one of this special two-part interview with Imara Jones. Do yourself a favor and go find Imara's fantastic Translash podcast wherever you get your podcasts, and learn more about her work at [Translash.org](https://www.translash.org)

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show is produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Veronica Rodriguez. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production, Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website [forkfilms.com](https://www.forkfilms.com) And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.