

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 7: Imara Jones Pt. 2
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IMARA JONES: Caesar with chicken.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yum.

IMARA JONES: It was quite good.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That sounds good.

IMARA JONES: It was quite good.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. I always want to say “Kale Caesar!” Like hail Caesar, but—

IMARA JONES: Um, that works, actually.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, it does.

[music]

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Hey, y'all thanks for joining me for the second part of my two episode interview with Imara Jones. Imara is a trans activist and journalist who has leaned into storytelling as a means of communicating the too often overlooked humanity of trans folks. She runs TransLash media, a journalism and storytelling platform that features trans people, their families, and their friends talking about issues that matter to them all.

Last week, we talked about Imara's personal and professional background and about the controversy surrounding Dave Chappelle's comedy specials on Netflix, including his most recent one that came out in October. If you haven't had a chance to listen, I hope you do. I split the episodes because I also wanted to talk about Imara's podcast on TransLash media, specifically about the series she did called the Anti-Trans Hate Machine.

Imara Jones on The Anti-Trans Hate Machine: *Hi, there I'm Imara Jones. Welcome to the anti-trans hate machine, a plot against equality.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The Anti-Trans Hate Machine series is a really amazing investigative work. It details the coordinated effort by a few wealthy Christian ultra-conservatives to compel state legislatures to take up anti-trans issues.

Imara Jones on The Anti-Trans Hate Machine: *Churning out anti trans laws and spreading hate across the country...*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I think you're really gonna like this interview, so thanks for listening and let's get to Imara.

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: So can you give me an overview of the podcast and just organizing principles?

IMARA JONES: So the organizing principle for the Anti-Trans Hate Machine, A Plot Against Equality is to look at the people, the places, the money, the politicians, the organizations, the non-profit institutions on the right that are working together and have been working together for decades in order to bring us to this moment on trans rights, to the point where we have 127 bills that were introduced in nearly 40 state legislatures in the last year.

State Senator Valoree Swanson: *Thank you, Mr. Speaker, members, I'm excited that we have the opportunity today to stand up for our daughters, our granddaughters, and all our Texas girls. The bill I'm bringing before you today protects girls' safety and their right to equal access to athletic opportunities.*

State Senator Charles Perry: *Senate bill 1646 would prohibit children from receiving puberty suppressant, prescription drugs, cross-sex hormones, or medical procedures or surgeries for the purpose of transitioning genders or gender reassignment. Committee substitute senate bill 1646 recognizes that giving children powerful puberty suppressant drugs, cross-sex hormones and allowing them to undergo life altering surgeries is problematic.*

IMARA JONES: There is more to this than cultural angst. This is a planned and coordinated movement. And what we wanted to do was to tell that story in a way which actually centered the trans people and specifically the trans youth who had decided to stand up against what we have labeled and through our reporting actually found out is the anti-trans hate machine.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The first three episodes get into the stories about who and what the anti-trans hate machine is targeting, but it's the fourth episode that explores the machine itself and the wealthy people, specifically the white, wealthy, Christian folks pulling the levers. Imara has given us permission to share clips for this interview. I recommend you listen to the entire series, but right now I'm just going to play you the first three minutes of the fourth episode of the series so you can hear how Imara sets things up. Take a listen.

The Anti-Trans Hate Machine, Episode 4:

[music]

Josh Kwan: *Thank you for coming to Dallas, I want to welcome you to our 2019 conference. For the rest of the week, we're going to hear from people who've demonstrated valor in different circumstances.*

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *This is a man named Josh Kwan. He leads a conference called The Gathering. I found it while trying to understand the people and money behind the anti-trans hate machine. Now, I know that "The Gathering" sounds like something out of a Stephen King novel, but it's actually an annual convening where there are panels and fancy dinners. But unlike other conferences, to be here you need to be someone who gives a couple of hundred thousand dollars a year to Christian causes. But that's not a surprise, that's because the gathering is the Davos of the Christian Right. A coming together of billionaires and millionaires with an extreme religious ideology.*

Speaker: *Wealth is not new, obviously. Charity is not new, but the idea of using private wealth imaginatively, constructively, and systematically to attack fundamental problems of mankind is new. And that's what I would call impact investing at this point.*

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *As I was watching videos on their website, it struck me that everyone at The Gathering looks like they can be at any wealthy country club in America. But at this club, religious extremism is on the menu.*

Speaker: *The Gathering is a concentrated group of high capacity kingdom driven individuals. Uh, that, um, The Gathering enables me to connect with those folks, um, to share best practices and ideas, uh, and to, and to be there as friends and to build real authentic relationships.*

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *Kingdom driven. That's a phrase that keeps coming up at The Gathering and more broadly in my research on the far Christian right. It's everywhere. Kingdom driven basically means rich people trying to infuse Christian fundamentalist values through every aspect of our society. And the people at this conference have the kind of wealth needed to bring about this religious world in which we would all be forced to live. The Gathering attracts some of the biggest and most influential people in America. One particular person from one particular family stands out, however. A family with an especially long history as backers of the anti-trans hate machine.*

Speaker: *We are so glad to have Dick and Betsy DeVos with us tonight.*

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *Yes, that's Betsy, as in Trump's former education secretary and her husband, they were there in 2001. The presenter gives them the stage.*

Speaker: *They're already wired up and mic'd and they're going to sit here and then we're going to move the podium back and we're going to have a conversation.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So as you could see, one of the central players in this holy roller narrative is Betsy DeVos. Remember her? Prim and proper, low key, and yet one of the most effective conservative leaders in the Trump administration, who worked quietly to impose not just conservative principles but also evangelical ones. She had never put a child through public school and had never attended a public school herself, but she didn't appear out of nowhere. And she came from a family dynasty of conservative power brokers.

IMARA JONES: What's fascinating about the DeVos family—and we really need to think of it as two billionaire families that came together in one union. So we're talking about the DeVos' and the Princes. Betsy DeVos is actually Betsy Prince from an auto billionaire family. The DeVos' are essentially the Amway family. They're both from the same part of Michigan and Betsy Prince married Richard DeVos. And they created this giant clan. And they, together, those families are behind almost every single Christian right organization you can think of. The Heritage Foundation, the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, on and on and on from the 1980's. And Betsy DeVos, actually, what's fascinating about her is that she comes across as a proper school teacher. I mean, sometimes that's the way she read to me. But when you get her in her element of thinking strategically, and talking about that strategy, she and her mother, Elsa Prince, who was in her eighties, are warriors. Like, they believe—they see themselves as out on the barricades, mobilizing other people and families to get

involved. And I think that we need to realize that this group of people over the past 40 years, put in hundreds of millions and collectively billions of dollars into a far-right vision in the country that is paying off in a Supreme Court, that is paying off in state legislatures and the capture of state legislatures, the majority that they've always wanted, the manifestation of Donald Trump, whom they got behind. And so they've been wildly successful, pouring in a lot of money patiently over a really long time.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah, you know, a few years ago I made a film called 'The Armor of Light,' where I spent some time with some far-right wing Christians. And so I kind of got a sense of how they think and what motivates them. But it occurred to me that actually that was a quaint version of Christian, political activism compared with the dominionism that you talk about in the podcast. So can-can you describe to me what dominionism is exactly? Because it's fascinating to me.

IMARA JONES: Yes. So, dominionism is a strain of Pentecostalism. And it's important for people to know that Pentecostalism is the fastest growing part of the evangelical movement. And then within Pentecostalism, there is this fast growing approach called dominionism, which lays out essentially a Christian caste system, in which I think there are apostles at the top. And then it ranks people flowing down from that. And dominionism is the belief that this Christian caste system is a way that you prepare the world for the return of Jesus Christ. That the reason why Christ hasn't come back is because the world is-is too sinful and not structured for him and that once you do that, God will come back. And I know all of this sounds crazy, but just hang in there with me, cause we're about to go to crazytown a little bit. So dominionism is this belief that the people who have received the most from society—so billionaires—and everyone will see the attraction of millionaires and billionaires to this idea, which is one, that if you are that, then you've been ordained by God, one, within this caste system and two that you have a unique responsibility to seize or get dominion over the seven mountains of society. And I'm not going to remember all of them. But they are finance, media, education, et cetera. And that through your wealth, you will get dominion over those seven mountains. Once you have those seven mountains, we can reestablish this Christian caste system and God will come back.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Can you describe to me how and where the DeVos family fits in this?

IMARA JONES: So, the DeVos's as a family have gravitated towards dominionism, and dominionist ideology. In addition to that, Betsy DeVos herself has expressed dominionist ideology at something called The Gathering, which is an annual gathering, convening of millionaires and billionaires, where they decide where they're gonna give their money to

each year. And at The Gathering DeVos was recorded once, exhorting billionaires to get involved in this fight and specifically, Abby, to get involved in the cultural fight.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The Gathering isn't your ordinary church group social. It's an annual conference of far-right Christian organizations, and high net-worth individuals. These are the fire and brimstone folks. And the Anti-Trans Hate Machine has audio, originally published by Politico, of Betsy DeVos talking a little elliptically about the tenets of dominionism. She talks about Schefela, which was land, an actual battleground in ancient Israel, that existed between where the Israelites and the pagans lived. In other words, funding causes that advance Christian policy goals in government is the same as Christian warriors doing battle with pagans.

Betsy DeVos: *That has been something that has been really impactful for both Dick and me, is to continue to think about where we can be the most effective or make the most impact in the culture in which we live today. And so, you know, our desire is to be in that Schefela and to confront the culture in which we all live today in ways which will continue to help advance God's kingdom.*

Interviewer: *Some people, maybe even in this room, would say, "Why waste your dollars on non-Christian things? Just support Christian things. Why get involved in politics?"*

Betsy DeVos: *I think it goes back to what I just mentioned, the concept of really being active in the Schefela of our culture, to impact our culture in ways that are not the traditional, funding the Christian organization route, but that really may have greater kingdom gain in the long run, by changing the way we approach things.*

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *By changing the way we approach things. The Betsy we're hearing here isn't the buttoned up, guarded education secretary, but it's the person behind that. The religious warrior who exhorts fellow billionaires and millionaires to join the fight.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: This is a new ideology, right? Was there an event or a meeting or...

IMARA JONES: So, it's been kind of this union between the old school evangelical movement with wealthy people, and this dominionist movement with wealthy people, coming together and realizing that they have common interest and then working together to accelerate the spread of Christian ideology institutions.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mhm, I was listening to the podcast again last night, and as a person who spent a lot of time in philanthropy, there was all kinds of language that I recognized about strategic philanthropy. They are using precisely the same language, and I think of Betsy DeVos and her family as incredibly, wildly able and successful philanthropists.

IMARA JONES: I think that that's right. I think that they are the Royal family of the Christian-right. They are the pace setters for every other wealthy family in that world.

Imara Jones on The ATHM: *From 2015 to 2017, just over the course of two years, the National Christian Foundation gave more than \$55 million to anti-trans hate groups. As my team and I looked deeper at this dark money group, I was astounded that I hadn't heard of the National Christian Foundation before. Somehow one of the ten largest charities in the country that's been funding an incredible amount of hate has been able to fly under the radar. The National Christian Foundation spends more than a billion dollars each year. To put it in perspective, that's twice as much as the Ford foundation, which is one of the biggest traditional foundations.*

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The 20th century, 21st century evolution of evangelical Christianity is like a steady march toward a kind of fascism. And one of the things that strikes me when I'm among the very, very, you know, radical right-wing Christians is their certainty. Just because they're certain, there's really no level to which they won't drop and still see themselves as the moral high-ground.

IMARA JONES: It's why they're willing to put trans kids at risk and not blink an eye. You know, supposedly be pro-family, pro-children, and regardless of what-how they perceive trans kids. If you really are that way, why would you put children at risk? It's because of their certainty allows them to be cruel.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Exactly. You did some great reporting in this podcast, I was really blown away by it. So, you said that on Trump's inauguration day in 2017, the administration scrubbed all mention of LGBTQ people from the websites of the White House, and then in February withdrew guidance from the DOJ about how schools have to protect transgender students. So it's clear that this was top priority for them. Why?

IMARA JONES: I mean, I think they care about it for two reasons. I think one, it's an easy way to show their base that they did something once they were into office. I think secondly, at the core of Christian far-right ideology is that, you know, they really believe that America is a white Christian nation. And they have a fundamental belief that the combination of abortion, gay people and now trans people is lowering white birth rates to the point of endangering white Christianity and thus Christianity overall. And so this is

where this ideology intersected with Trump's larger nationalism. And I think that we need to understand that they don't look at these issues as fringe issues. You know, on the left, constantly, if you talk about trans issues, like I'm sure this has happened to you Abby, you've been in spaces with people talking about movements and gender. And if you say trans everyone kind of groans and rolls their eyes.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right.

IMARA JONES: But for the right, that doesn't happen, people perk up. For them, it's a central issue. And one of the reasons why it's coming under assault is because for the left, it's a fringe issue, for the right it's a central issue, and they've been willing to put a lot of money behind it. And an example of that is what I learned in this series, which is that every single person that I spoke to that follows gender and the far-right, said that as far as the far-right is concerned, they knew that once Amy Coney Barrett was on the court, that they were going to win on abortion and that Roe v. Wade was going to be overturned and to supplant that, they're really planning this assault on trans rights and trans issues, it's going to be the new abortion for them.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mhm. I think you're probably right about that.

IMARA JONES: And I think that for them, I mean, if you believe in white Christian patriarchy, any idea that gender is not ordained by God is a mortal threat to your belief system and to your identity, which is why they treat it as such. If you are not from that worldview, it doesn't seem important.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Yeah, well, I mean, that's why the evolution of the evangelical thought is really interesting because each step it takes in its evolution, it grows closer to absolutism, or somehow it gets past absolutism.

IMARA JONES: Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, I think in researching this project they were really stunned by their loss on gay marriage. They were really, they were really, really, devastated and confused by the fact that most Americans didn't oppose gay marriage. And that gay marriage became the law of the land and thus a broad acceptance of gay people. And it really frightened them. And that's why kind of at that moment, you can see it very—within months they began to search. They were like, well, the next fight clearly is on trans issues. And so that's why months after the ruling on marriage, you start to see the bathroom bills. Conversation began to flow because The Alliance Defending Freedom, which is their kind of legal arm, began to look for places to test and to make this issue in the forefront.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Mhm.

IMARA JONES: Also one of the things, Abby, and this brings us back to kind of one of the themes that we've hit on and where we started, which is that one of the reasons why they think they lost is because of the media. Right? They—one of the things that did happen—and like, I mean, the funny thing is that the left knows how to do this, but they don't know how to sustain it like the right—is that, you know, there was a marriage equality organization that was created that was led by Evan Wolfson that actually did have a media strategy. They were like, we need to get storylines into shows, we need to tell real stories of gay people and families through documentaries and through local news. And we need to get people to come out. And it was a strategy. It was a national strategy. And, you know, they raised an inordinate amount of money. Like I read a report that was done by a foundation that 90% of all of the money that has been raised for gay causes from 1970 until 2015, 90% of it went into marriage. And that all that money was raised in a five-year period. Right. Like, it was an incredible amount of money. And so one of the things that they are doing in the right is they look—they're like we lost the media and the culture war. We lost. That's why we lost on gay marriage. And so that's why on trans issues and with this alternative kind of media landscape they've been able to create through these online networks like OAN and through YouTube and Facebook, how they've been able to hijack those platforms. That in combination with an attack on education, which is—they also see as part of it, that's why they're really focused on the cultural landscape when it comes to trans issues, because they are like, that's where we lost and we can't lose there again.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: How would you characterize the political climate now since Biden took office? Has there been a significant change in one direction or the other, are we better off? What do you think?

IMARA JONES: We're six months in or roughly or nine months in or something. I think on the one hand, his, like, sort of grandfatherly approach. And I don't mean elderly. So this isn't ageist, I mean literally like, you know how grandparents, like, kids are wild and things are happening and parents are freaked out about stuff and they're just like, they just stay calm and they're like, okay, well, whatever, you know. And I think that his approach to that on some level did bring down the temperature, the political temperature, like, you know, it did, it actually made things feel calmer for a while. Particularly by the time we got to the summer, his kind of like, "You know, folks, we're just going to do these things and we're going to keep putting one foot in front of the other and it's going to be okay." That did, it, did feel that—Delta ruined all that. It started to feel out of control again. And I think that that feeling out of control, being led by and fed by far voices on the right, using the same tools that we've been talking about that

can promote good to fuel disinformation I think that what happened is that Delta and the fight over schools in particular and masks, that's really given them new energy and those are flashpoints. And then that not being met with a strong response or, or in some ways, with a more forceful voice and then posture from the federal government. I think it's starting to feel out of control again. And I don't know where we go unless the posture changes. And you can imagine it not taking much, right? Like a couple of coordinated assassinations or viol—or gun violence at school board meetings. And we could very easily be in a very different place very quickly.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. Yeah. Knife's edge. Right. Imara, you're magnificent. I really loved talking to you

IMARA JONES: Thank you so much.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Thanks so much for listening to this two-part episode with Imara Jones. Make sure you find both of her amazing podcasts, The Anti-Trans Hate Machine, and the TransLash podcast. You can find them wherever you get your podcasts. And Imara is on Twitter @imarajones.