

Allison: To put it succinctly, no. You know, I think that this is typical Trump, where he is so cynically ... I mean, this is such a ploy to get African-American voters. I think given the kinds of recent concerns about his base not being sufficient for him to win re-election, there is this attempt, shall we say, to court, a more sort of diverse, coalition of voters.

Allison: I think that the fact that he can claim this kind of success, speaks to not only the narrowness of how he understands justice reform, right? But, I mean, that this is happening at the same time that, you know, families are separated and caged at the border, right?

Allison: Uh I was just speaking to one of your colleagues, at the Discovery Institute about, you know, the ways in which after Charlottesville, he said "There are many fine people on both sides," right? So he sort of incites, and retweets, and is clearly part of this very white supremacist, kind of rise, while at the same time saying, "Well, African-American unemployment is the lowest its been," and da da da, you know, all of these, I think very clearly just, ploys to try to speak to a broader, you know, base of voters.

Allison: But, in general, I mean, I think that the prison industrial complex in the US, that the fact that mass incarceration ... So it's been 10 years now since Michelle Alexander wrote the book "The New Jim Crow," and so there's a kind of reckoning again. Like, what has happened in that ten year period, and what do we still need to do? And also, you know, how is Trump, of course, a barrier to this, even as he's saying. It feels like these shocking contradictions that, unfortunately, we're living with on a day to day basis in the US now. So ...

Liam: Absolutely. You used a phrase there that I'm sure many of listeners are familiar with, but many won't be, and that's Jim Crow. It's a phrase that's used to usually refer to a series of laws that prohibited, black voting and black enfranchisement and, even damaged black social cohesion in the southern states, particularly in the border states, from the 1860s through to really the 1960s. Almost 100 years.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: But it was also something that was a way of, allowing race to trump class time and again, I think.

Allison: Yes. Yes.

Liam: Wasn't that the case?

Allison: Yes.

Liam: President Lyndon Johnson said, "With these laws in place, it means that we always can pick the pocket of the white man because he thinks he's better than the black man."

Liam: Didn't we get rid of all of that in the 1960s?

Allison: The trumping.. Gosh, I shouldn't even say "trumping." It's that it's been ruined..

Liam: You can't help making that reference.

Allison: So that's part of what, my work, that I think I try to address in my work, these questions of the ways in which I think cultural studies as, you know, an area of inquiry has often succumbed to this, relegating race below class, right? And so when we think about capital and capitalism, to think about, well, you know, first, it's always about class, and then sort of we'll add race on.

Allison: And so I'm really in conversation with scholars who are having this understanding of racial capitalism, right? That there's no disentangling, and in particular, this idea that you referenced, right, of using what scholars like David Roediger have said, have termed "The wages of whiteness," right? As a kind of divide and conquer strategy.

Allison: I mean, this has a really long history, and I think we're certainly seeing this play out today in terms of Trump's voters, where the base of his support. I want to be careful to note that he also has support from very wealthy folks, too, right? That there's, kind of pockets of support for him that actually shock people. Like, the narrative is so much like, "Well, the white working class, the white working class," right? That this is kind of an un-problematized term. It's just sort of taken for a given that we know what that means, right?

Allison: I think certainly there are really intense class dynamics with his base of support, particularly in the Midwest in the US in terms of these cities that have been really de-industrialized, that have been so affected by trade agreements like NAFTA, that Trump, I think, is very effective at rhetorically saying, you know, "I hear this. I'm doing work to kind of undo ..." And of course, right, we know that he's ultimately bull-steering this billionaire class.

Allison: [06:34](#) But, I he's very effective at sort of playing on this, this racial resentment that he stirs.. I mean, some ways very explicitly, but often through the lens of class.

Liam: [06:49](#) Yeah. That relationship is really complex, isn't it?

Allison: [06:52](#) Yes.

Liam: [06:52](#) And it has been at the heart of so much of what we refer to as American culture for a very, very long time.

Allison: [06:57](#) Yes.

Liam: [06:57](#) And I think one of things your writing is doing is really beginning to sort of pull it apart, and show us some of the ways in which that works and some of the mechanisms of it. In listening to you talk a little bit about Trump, and how his base can be understood as a white base, one of the things that struck me and listening, you know, and looking across the Atlantic at the United States in recent years, and maybe this is related to Trump's, sort of advent as President, is that whiteness seems to have become more visible somehow.

Allison: Yes. Yes.

Liam: What's going on there?

Allison: So part of what I'm really curious about in my own work is racial formation, and how specifically the racial formations of whiteness and blackness both intersect, whiteness in particular, relying on this imagined blackness to constitute itself. But that how this shift over time, and how this is part of that media culture is part of constituting these formations.

Allison: But this also, I think, is happening at this really kind of critical moment where, as sort of a backlash to Obama certainly in part, but also I think so much of the rhetoric during the Obama years was about, you know, we're in this post-race moment. We're sort of beyond race. This kind of fantasy of color-blindness. Of course, there were people contesting that narrative, but I think what you're saying is absolutely right, that Trump has made it impossible in many ways to hold onto that narrative, and at the same time, has also drawn attention to whiteness in a way that it often, for so long, had gone unmarked or you know, commented upon as a racial category, right?

Liam: Yeah.

Allison: And that, I think, in this era where there's so much, fear that he sort of fuels about, you know, the demise of white identity, right?

Allison: That, I think one thing I've been sort of tracking is, all of these white supremacist movements, right? But that they're rebranding themselves to be about specifically to say, like, "Well, no, this is just about the preservation of white identity, white culture," and so there is this interesting way that whiteness is being named there, but of course not in a critical capacity, right? That this is about a fear and loss and sort of this nostalgia for this imagined past.

Allison: So I think that's happening in tandem with things like Black Lives Matter, and the Movement for Black Lives, and where there is this attempt to build sort of anti-racist common sense in the face of really overt racism now from things, you know, like Charlottesville, right, that ... And, of course, this has always existed, but I think you're so right that, Trump has really sort of pulled the cover off of this.

Liam: Yeah. That's an interesting way to think about it. The black intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates, wrote a piece in The Atlantic, which had a very telling title. It was quite simply, "The First White President". It seems to go to the heart of what you're saying.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: That, of course, all but one of those presidents was white, but this is the one who's explicitly white.

Allison: Yes. Yes.

Liam: And speaks for a name of whiteness.

Allison: Yes. Yes.

Liam: And that's part of what's changed, and that's part of the unveiling, isn't it?

Allison: Yes.

Liam: That's partly what has happened. He's sort of ripped back the veil here.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: And we're seeing some real things that are quite uncomfortable, yeah?

Allison: Yes, and authorized. You know, I think, there's a scholar I love, Ruth Wilson Gilmore. The state, you know, teaches people how to behave, right? And I think this is so clear. I remember in the days after Trump won.. Oh my gosh. So I was teaching at Hampshire College at the time, which is, a very small liberal arts college in western Massachusetts. It has a very... How do I put this? A unique pedagogical approach. There's no grades. Students essentially do ... Its like mini-grad school, and they work on a creative or scholarly project for their final year instead of taking classes, it has a very kind of leftist reputation.

Allison: And so I was in this environment when Trump won, and just the idea that ... I mean, my students were so afraid because of the ways that ... So in western Massachusetts, there's also a lot of kind of conservative pockets, and folks, you know, feeling comfortable flying confederate flags now, right? Or shouting things at gender non-normative students who were, you know, walking around town, right? That, at this very small level, this felt like a microcosm of what was happening in the kind of immediate aftermath of November 2016, that I, frankly, do really worry about 2020. I mean, I think everyone I'm in a kind of community with is worried.

Liam: Well let's think a bit about 2020. We're in the midst here of the primaries.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: The Democrats are trying to figure out who might get a shot at running against President Trump.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: Just to sort of link back to what you began talking about, this really important area of criminal justice. If you look at the Democratic candidates, do you feel any of them have a really strong position on that subject?

Allison: Oh, gosh. It's so interesting because I think part of the reason why Kamala Harris actually didn't end up doing well is because of her history, you know, as a prosecutor, and this critique that folks had that, you know, you're kind of touting your leftist accolades now, but meanwhile, when you were, you know, in California ... Like, this- you were essentially strengthening the carceral state.

Allison: I think it's hard, in terms of there's so much of the discourse, I think, right now- I- I feel trapped between, um, choosing a candidate based on what I think about in terms of electability, but also, voting for someone who I'd actually want, right?

Liam: Okay.

Allison: Um, I guess Bernie Sanders probably would come closest, I think, to putting forward a vision or at least thinking through this related ... I think he kind of succumbs to this problem of class over race, right? And he's- I think since he ran, in the intervening years between 2016 and now, he has been more educated about this, and tries to center racial politics a bit more. But I would say given his longstanding critique of capital, that he would have sort of the best vision for this. But, yeah.

Liam: Yeah. He certainly has put a lot of messaging out there around that.

Allison: Yes, yes.

Liam: Probably more than others.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: Including, reading back, prison sentences, ending cash bail, boosting public defenders, legalizing marijuana, banning private for-profit prisons. It's quite, it's quite a list.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: But on the other hand-

Allison: That's Bernie.

Liam: ... we're told that Joe Biden is the candidate who has African-American support.

Allison: Yeah, I was just listening to something actually on NPR about this. So I mean I think Biden is now, given what happened with Iowa ... So actually I'm from Iowa originally, so I feel like Iowa just failed.

Liam: Can you fix that?

Allison: Yeah, exactly. This was like the pride moment for Iowa, our little claim to fame, and ... Yeah, I mean, I know that he had been looking ahead to South Carolina, like "Just get through Iowa and New Hampshire-"

Liam: Right.

Allison: "... South Carolina is where I have this base of support." And, NPR, this story, they had been interviewing black voters in South Carolina who said, well, if he's good enough for Obama, he's good enough for me. I think given his fourth-place finish in Iowa, it really remains to be seen whether, if he's going to be able, I mean, depending on how it goes in New Hampshire if he'll be able to even continue. I think that had been so interesting, that he had been considered really, like, the locked-down candidate, and now it feels up for grabs in a way. So ...

Liam: Absolutely. And in looking upon the race to come, I mean, no pun intended, but how does race figure into it?

Allison: Yes.

Liam: Is it through criminal justice issues, or is it being figured in other ways that you think could actually be important when the vote comes in November?

Allison: Yeah. You know, I think it feels so hard- ... There's a sense right now, or at least that I think I'm feeling, or that I'm sort of noticing as the within the world I inhabit that there's just, it's almost like desperation, right? Like, anybody who can beat Trump. Anyone.

Allison: I mean, I think that when Michael Bloomberg entered, it brought back this conversation. Like, wait, we need to be careful. Bloomberg hadn't at that point apologized for "stop and frisk," right? Had done so much damage in New York. His policies in terms of policing and, the politics of incarceration, right, were horrific.

Allison: And so I think that there will be ... Once the nominee is pinned down essentially, I think it'll be interesting to see what happens. Then what kinds of conversations, what sort of issues are going to be central. I think right now, it almost just feels like so much fear. Like, "Oh my gosh, he's going to win again." Impeachment didn't work out, right, the way that ... I think most people knew that, of course, the Senate was going to acquit him, but that the fact that this is now happening, you know, at this particular juncture is just really ...

Liam: Okay, look, I want to pick up some other aspects of your work, which, I mean, again, are still, I think, closely related to some of the things we're talking about around race and capitalism. But you've written on something you call the prison industrial complex.

Liam: Could you unpack that a little bit?

Allison: Sure.

Liam: Just tell us a little bit about that.

Allison: Yeah. So this is Mike Davis's term from the 90s that really was looking at essential- And then, of course, Angela Davis took this up and really popularized this, but that the ways that, the prison system in the US is so dependent, that the economy is really dependent on incarceration, right? And when we look at, in particular local economies, right, and towns that are sort of centered on the prison, right? That this institution offers jobs, right? That these folks are, you know, this is like the big kind of source of employment in a town.

Allison: And so the fact that, I think, by naming the system as such, that this is this complex that ... You know, akin to the military industrial complex, right? That there's literally an investment in incarcerating people, and in that that money is being made off of this, right? And that it's also sustaining these places that don't have other sources of employment, right? That then it's this awful kind of trap.

Allison: I mean, I think one example of that that we see, was what SB1070 in Arizona. But when that passed, that basically enabled people to, the police in Arizona to sort of stop and question anyone suspected of being an undocumented immigrant. That was in part written ... This bill was written by a private prison company, right? So they have this investment in putting bodies into these spaces that they're building, right?

Liam: Right.

Allison: That they need to, you know, to fill.

Allison: So, I think a lot of anti-prison and prison abolitionists work has really focused on preventing the construction of new prisons, right? That, there's a sense that if we can stop at that level, right? That that's, that's part of the- a sort of non-reformist reform, right? That that's not strengthening this overall apparatus, even as it's, of course, not ending incarceration. Just simply stop the building of a prison, right? But that it's, um, it's at least not fueling this machine further.

Liam: Yeah. Right. So but you're rating the prisons very much as a commercialized space, as a capital space.

Allison: Yes. Yes. Yes.



Liam: And is the reform movement against that having traction?

Allison: You know, I think ... So I referenced Michelle Alexander's book. I think that she did such a service- ... And there were critiques of that book, I think, especially by people who were kind of further left, that it wasn't sort of like a prison abolitionist's project. I think she has now said, like, she has come to see that that ... You know, ending the prison overall is really the kind of only way.

Allison: But I think that book did such important work in bringing attention to, and the same with Ava DuVernay's film, Thirteenth, right? That bringing attention to the fact that, again, the carceral structure so much of life in the US, and that this is worse- that it is, of course, about race. Right? That the number of black men in particular is exceeding that during, the Antebellum era, right? Who are incarcerated.

Allison: And I think, there was a general sort of sense of shock in kind of a mainstream way, right?

Allison: Like that I think of people who potentially don't follow these kinds of issues that carefully, but who have a sense now, like, "Oh, yeah, this is ... We do incarcerate people at this astronomical rate, right?" And even the idea of mass incarceration, right, sort of presumes that there's an adequate amount, or that there's, like, an okay level of incarceration- right? So I think that, um, prison abolitionists are really challenging that idea in general, that this is not a system that is doing anything to, you know, not only to end violence, right, which it ostensibly claims, but that is, of course, reproducing, you know, intense, intense levels of violence.

Liam: And I get the sense, too, that when you're, writing about prison cultures, you're writing about this as in a sense an extension of neoliberalism.

Allison: Yes. Yes.

Liam: In other words, what we're seeing here are market values being extended into every corner of American life.

Allison: Yes.

Liam: But again, we like to unpack terms as we go along, so just in your usage of neoliberalism, you're referring to ...

Allison: I talk about this all the time with my students. I give them kind of a- or a succinct definition that really as both an economic,

philosophy, but also one that has impacts in terms of citizenship, right? So I try to underscore the fact that it is this imposition of market logic into every facet of life. Even things that we presumed were sort of outside of capital, like family relationship, or love, right?

Allison: I think part of what this .. My students are very able to see privatization as part of neoliberalism's project, right? This sort of gutting of public resources. For instance, in Chicago, they sold all of their parking spots ... Like, the city sold all of their parking spots to a private company, as a way to kind of make up or to address the budget crisis, but of course, it's really shortsighted, right?

Allison: Because then this private company is running everything. And so this influx of cash that they're getting is, again, it's part of this ongoing sort of trimming away of public goods. I think in terms of incarceration, in this piece that I wrote with my former advisor, Laurie Ouellette, we were looking in particular at how both ... Neoliberalism was operating on a lot of levels in this show 60 Days In that we look at, and in part, this looks like this imperative to self-brand, or to kind of, always be sort of remaking one's self over into this subject who could be appealing for a job, right? That in this age of precarity and scarcity, you have to be sort of scrappy, and do whatever it takes. And so the contestants on this show, where they go and they, uh, are undercover prisoners in a facility for 60 days, and the cameras roll, right? And you sort of see what happens, a lot of them were looking for jobs in criminal justice. So this was like, okay, if I get this, if I do this experience, this is going to really help me to get this job. So that's just one level that it's operating on, I would say, in the show.

Allison: But, yeah.

Liam: You got to something that I also wanted to ask you about, and maybe one of the last things we can discuss a little bit, and that is how all these interests, which are complexly linked, and very significant today, of course, in political terms, how does this work into the study of media? Because much of what you do comes back to looking at particular media productions, like TV shows and so on. Is that right?

Allison: Yes. Yeah.

Liam: Yeah.

Allison: So, I- it's funny. I kind of fell into media studies in a way. Um, I majored in piano performance in undergrad, so I- I really took a

different turn, but my activist work in undergrad really informed what I ended up doing in graduate school. And I think in terms of part of why I love media studies is that it is this really, I think productive way to get folks into having conversations that I really want them to be have- You know, about race, for instance. So for my students in particular, they can take, we can take something that they're really familiar with that they use all the time, like their phones, or, social media, or any kind of media form, and use that as the starting point to have this conversation about things like the politics of representation, or how race is produced through, you know, predictive policing platforms, or these algorithms that are used now to sort of ostensibly predict crime.

Allison:

So I think that's it's a really nice point of entry. I've been interested in both how media culture represents race, for example, but also how it's used to kind of teach people about race, to construct race in a way sort of beyond the politics of representation. That it's.. media in this sense can be, used to sort of manage population. So from a governmentality perspective rather than just thinking about, which I think is really important, right? The politics of representation is, of course, crucial. But how it's also working bio-politically as well.