

Scene on Radio

BONUS EPISODE: The ELECTION (Season 4, Episode 12.5)

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/bonus-episode-election-2020/>

John Biewen: Hey Chenj.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hey john. ...

John Biewen: You know, I'm not sure exactly where to start, but how about with this: That it's a good thing it wasn't just people who look like me out here voting.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Laughs) Well, uh, yeah. Like, not *just*. But I'm glad you voted though. And I'm also glad a whole bunch of Black and brown folks went out and voted, sometimes standing in very long lines, in Detroit, Atlanta, Milwaukee. Latino and Native folks in Arizona. And of course, here in the greatest city in the world, where great things happen, Philadelphia.

John Biewen: So, we're recording this conversation in the back half of November. At least on the day we're recording this, we still have a president who's publicly refusing to accept the result of an election he lost, though reportedly behind the scenes he's making plans for his post-presidency. Trump and his people have made a pathetic and deeply shameful attempt at a coup, that probably won't succeed, but it has been a spectacle to behold.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Whew. But, you know, it's not really a surprise, right? No one who has watched Trump all this time thought he would ever admit to having lost fair and square. And even before the election you could see all the signs. He said it would only be legitimate if he won. But I think the real problem is that most elected members of his party, and many millions of other people, have now joined Trump in this alternate reality and are actually still trying to work to make it come true.

John Biewen: This won't go down as a high point for what Americans like to call the world's greatest democracy.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Nah. But we'll always have the Four Seasons Total Landscaping press conference, though.

John Biewen: Yes. To look back on fondly. Of course, [there's] a lot of post-election analysis going on, but what we want to do is look at the 2020 election through a particular frame, the frame of our latest season, *The Land That Never Has Been Yet*, in which we told the story of what passes for democracy in the United States. So folks, go listen to Season 4 if you haven't. This conversation will have deeper meaning if you do, though hopefully we'll make some sense regardless.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, and I mean, what we showed in Season 4, step-by-step, is that these problems with democracy just didn't start yesterday. We showed that antidemocratic forces have actually been active and very powerful throughout the history of this country. And as a result,

you know, democracy in America has been fragile, to say the least, and in some ways actually farcical.

John Biewen: Really starting with the colonial settler “Founding Fathers” themselves, through the 19th and the 20th centuries, right up to the present. And you know, Chenj, I’m imagining someone out there who may have listened to our series earlier in 2020 and come away unconvinced.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. I’m sure there’s people who were like, “Yeah, I mean, despite all the evidence that you’ve brought, I just don’t buy this hateful, critical take on America. You’re wrong, John. A commitment to democracy courses through the veins of this great nation. It’s what makes this nation great, not to mention exceptional.” You know, I want to believe that anybody who thought that before the 2020 election has been freed from that kind of delusion. But I know that’s probably still not true.

John Biewen: So for us here the question is, what does the 2020 election tell us, or remind us, about American democracy? The last four years have placed, I think, a powerful mirror before U.S. society, for anyone willing to look in that mirror. But what about this election itself? When we look at the way it has played out, should we be proud and reassured about the strength of democracy in America, or horrified?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And what really are the essential lessons we have to take from the election, and from the Trump years, that can guide us going forward, and help us to push for a radically more just and democratic society in 2021 and beyond?

[MUSIC: Algiers]

John Biewen: I'm John Biewen, host and producer of *Scene on Radio*.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I'm Chenjerai Kumanyika, assistant professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, organizer, artist, podcaster, and co-host and collaborator with John for Season 4.

John Biewen: So, to that question about whether we should be reassured or just freshly alarmed. Some people are saying, look, the election came off in a pandemic! The people spoke, the levers and the checks and balances functioned as they're supposed to, more or less, and then one court after another rejected Trump's evidence-free claims of election fraud. So all this just shows the strength of America's democratic systems.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. I get that. And you'll be shocked to learn I don't see it that way. I mean, yes, we avoided some of the worst disasters that people worried about, around the election process. That's true.

John Biewen: People worried about mass voter intimidation and violence at polling places. Would the mail system completely fail? Would the Russians or someone else hack into voting systems and create chaos so that we had no idea, [no way] of knowing who won? These were things people worried about.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, and to be fair, those things didn't happen. And that's definitely good. But I think a really important takeaway from this election, and from Season 4 of Scene on Radio, is that the biggest threats to democracy in America have always been internal. We talk about "enemies foreign and domestic," but it's been the domestic oppressors that have done the most harm to people in this country.

John Biewen: All throughout the Trump years, and certainly around the election, there's been a lot of talk about "norms," and restoring what's normal. But really, you know, what are "norms" in these conversations?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: For real, man. It's like, I would argue the discussion of norms has always been an elite kind of discourse. Norms are the rules that the people who run things agree to, to keep everything orderly and civil on the surface. And of course a lot of those rules make sense. But that way of talking about norms really helps to obscure the fact that the "normal" state of affairs in America is oppressive to a massive number of people. So as long as we have certain structures in place, like "peaceful transitions of power," and things like that, we can ignore the kind of racial, patriarchal, class hierarchy that actually oppresses most people and serves empire. Because for me, those are actually the most consistent and important norms. And by the way, I've been really also thinking about this idea of a "peaceful transition of power," right? We've been talking about that. And it's like, I get why we use that phrase. This has to do with how we evaluate a constitutional democracy. Right? But thinking about all the forms of systemic violence that have persisted despite the changing

administrations in American history, I just feel like the “peaceful transition of power” doesn’t quite capture that. You know what I mean?

John Biewen: (Laughs) So you think, is there a more accurate phrase for that thing that we’re talking about?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: As it turns out, I have been working on an alternative phrase.

John Biewen: Ah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I’ll try it out here. This is an exclusive.

John Biewen: Wow.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So here it is. Instead of saying “peaceful transition of power,” maybe we could say: “The more-or-less consensual transition from one system of organized violence to another.”

John Biewen: It has a certain kind of ring to it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Laughs)

John Biewen: So I think it’s pretty likely that on this Inauguration day we’ll be hearing that on the cable networks.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right, yeah. They can feel free to use that. I know that sounds really depressing for me to talk about moving from one system of organized violence to another, like I'm just killing all the hope we have. But it's not that. It's really that as we go forward, I think we have to pay attention, to think about, how there's going to be certain kinds of continuities that we want to resist. Right? And [if] we're not paying attention to those, we're not being serious.

John Biewen: So from that perspective, this point that you've made about, you know, these kind of relatively superficial norms, on the one hand, and these much deeper, oppressive norms that have characterized U.S. history and society, from that perspective it's interesting to think about what it means to say that Donald Trump has violated "norms." He ran as, really, a populist demagogue who would do things like talking disrespectfully about a war hero in his own party. He would go ahead and say the racist and sexist parts out loud. And he'd do other things that presidents just aren't supposed to do, in quotes, like fire government officials who are investigating him, right up to using the powers of his office to try to overturn the results of his own election.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And so, what we're really talking about is not really deep, sacred, historical norms, but actually just procedures which in some cases were established fairly recently. And yes, Trump has run through those. But I would argue that, when you look at the values that have guided what he's changed, those values are very consistent with American tradition. He's trying to hold onto power for himself, and keep

America in alignment with its real norms, which are racist, sexist, imperialist hierarchies.

John Biewen: And the Trump era has made all of this easier to see, right? So what's different about Trump, and now most of his party that have joined him in all this, is how *openly* they've attacked democracy and people's voting rights and so on. Not the mere fact that they've supported antidemocratic structures. That is not new.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. I don't think anyone would accuse me of being, like, really romantic about American democracy before the Trump Administration, but this whole administration and these elections have really taught me something interesting. I mean, in the dominant conversation, when we talk about voting rights and we talk about voter suppression and voter disenfranchisement, we often treat it like it is an aberration. It's an aberration that has historical precedent, but still a deviation from the norm. Whereas what I feel like I've learned during this period is that forms of voter suppression are basically core features of American government. I mean, voter suppression has been a constant throughout U.S. history. As we talked about in Season 4, it wasn't until 1965 that you even had a pretense of a fully multiracial democracy in which all adults could vote. But even after women suffrage and the Indian Citizenship Act and the Voting Rights Act, the counter-majoritarian structures that were baked in from the founding of the country stayed in force. I mean we're still talking about the Electoral College, which gave us Trump. We're still talking about the antidemocratic Senate. We're still having to deal with gerrymandering, and taking away the voting rights of

most people convicted of felonies. And so all of those things are kind of consistent with that core feature.

John Biewen: So sure, it's an outrage that Trump and much of the Republican party launched a systematic effort to disenfranchise voters in 2020. Especially Black voters. They fought against mail-in voting, drive-through voting, the use of dropboxes, all of which were efforts to make it easier for people to vote during a pandemic. They tried to damage the function of the U.S. Mail itself. They filed a flurry of lawsuits to shrink the period in which votes could be cast and counted. And then after the election, they tried to use the courts to get legally-cast votes thrown out -- millions of them if they'd had their way, concentrating mostly on the nation's blackest cities in the states that decided the election. That's all unusually shameless and out in the open, by recent standards, but the point you're making:

Chenjerai Kumanyika: It's very much in keeping with deeper patterns in American democracy.

John Biewen: So, "Make America Great Again," in a way, right?

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[BREAK]

John Biewen: So Chenjerai, American voters did accomplish one crucial thing in the 2020 election: We voted out Donald Trump.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yes. And I want to be absolutely clear. This was far and away the top priority if we were gonna preserve any kind of semblance of democratic institutions that we could build on, or re-envision.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: But you know, the thing about it is, democracy is not just about institutions. Any society is also only as democratic as its people are.

John Biewen: Mmm. In other words, to the extent that we do have power that we can wield, with our votes and in other ways, we can use that power to preserve and enhance democracy, or we can use that power to undermine democracy because we actually care more about other things.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And the disturbing news for democracy in America is that 74 million Americans, 47% of people who voted, said yes to four more years of Donald Trump. Ten million *more* votes than he got last time, after we all had four years to watch the man. A climate destroying, openly racist, misogynistic, deep-in-debt, incompetent, so-corrupt-he-got-impeached, veteran-shaming, super-spreading, failed president. I left out some stuff.

John Biewen: Yeah. The hugging of dictators. The tearing of children from their parents' arms. The profiting from his office. The daily stream of lies and demagoguery. But yeah, for our purposes, let's concentrate on Trump the authoritarian. This is a president who made it clear that he wanted complete control of all levers of power in the U.S. government – the intelligence agencies, the justice department, the courts, including the Supreme Court. And that if he could, he would use that power to serve his personal interests – to punish his opponents and lock them up, to help him win re-election, including by applying pressure on foreign leaders, and to hold onto power as long as he wanted it.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And so in a country that supposedly cherishes democracy, 47-percent of voters said, yes, four more years of *that* dude. And there's something else I have to say, John. You know, there were so many people before this election who just were like hitting me up, "Oh my god, what are Black people gonna do, what are Black people gonna do?" Like Black folks were the real liability here. So I just want to be clear: There was only one racial or ethnic group in which Trump won a majority, and that was white people.

John Biewen: Right. White men, especially. Though it seems that roughly half of white women, too, voted for Trump; the voter surveys are still kind of shaking out as we record this. So what is up with this? What's going on? People who've listened to the last three seasons of this show will have a pretty good idea about some of the values that have very often overwhelmed democracy in the U.S.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Values like White supremacy, white folks fearing the loss of their dominant position and voting for the guy who voices their resentment and reassures them that their way of looking at the world is the right way. And not just poor white people. That “multi-class coalition of white people” that we heard about in *Seeing White*, which has held together in this country since the 1600s -- folks voting their whiteness. Also patriarchy. Because Trump may be “a weak man’s idea of a strong man,” but he wears his sexism and his dismissiveness toward women on his sleeve, and 74 million people said yes to that.

John Biewen: I was struck by a quote in the New York Times right after election day, in which the leader of a conservative Christian group, Concerned Women for America, said, quote: “We didn’t vote for him to be our pastor or our husband. We voted for him to be our bodyguard.”

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Hmmm!

John Biewen: I thought ooh, that’s deep. So you know, it smacks of patriarchy, the strong man who’s gonna protect us. But also, it gets you thinking about who this bodyguard is gonna protect us *from*. Right?

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. And as we’ve seen time and time again in American history, the threat to security is always presented as the Other. Black and brown folks. Those with anti-American, anti-Christian ideas. Like, heaven forbid, greater equality and economic security for all.

John Biewen: Yes. Which brings us to another factor that seems to have been at play in this election. And we saw it and -- there's a lot of fear wrapped up in all of this, and there was a lot of right-wing fear-mongering around "socialism," which supposedly was gonna be ushered in by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, of all people.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: (Laughs.) Right. Socialism, from two of the most centrist, corporate-friendly candidates that ran for the Democratic nomination in 2020. But it's a very old strategy that goes all the way back to the New Deal and actually well before that: Anytime the government might possibly do things for people, that has to be called socialism. Which of course it's not. But also, I think it's worth talking about what we talk about when we talk about socialism. Because the whole idea of the Enlightenment is that we can be free thinkers and we can sort of evaluate ideas critically, right? But most people I know who fear socialism don't actually know very much about where this idea comes from. And so, the trick that powerful folks play is to get you to think about dictators in a foreign country, or bread lines or something like that, instead of talking about having healthcare, or protections at work, or decent pay, or less militarism. And by playing that trick they get you to automatically reject any other option as un-American, un-Christian, and just unthinkable. And oh, by the way, socialism is also presented as undemocratic, even when the policies being discussed are what people want. It's somehow the opposite of freedom.

John Biewen: So in order to fend off this shadowy idea of "socialism," that would allegedly take away our democratic freedoms, folks voted for a

would-be autocrat with *no* regard for democracy, our own wannabe Mussolini. We just really need to sit with the fact that 47% of Americans who voted, and the majority of white voters, made that choice. To your point about a country only being as democratic as its people are.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And it's also another reminder that people yell about [the] external threat of socialism when the real dangers are already here at home. But there's also another really important reason that some people say they voted for Trump. People said they voted their faith. Exit polls found 75 to 80 percent of white evangelical voters went for Trump. And a lot of those folks say abortion, and appointing anti-abortion judges, is a top issue for them. And this is what gets called a "pro-life" vote.

John Biewen: I have a feeling I know what you're gonna say.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. OK, so there's a lot of concern about the lives of the unborn. But not so much for a lot of us *after* we're born. Including young children separated from their parents, or the millions of poor people in this country, or the quarter million people who've died so far, most of them unnecessarily, from Covid. Or the people who get sent off to war.

John Biewen: So yeah, maybe it's not really all about "life," although a lot of these same folks do like to say that "all lives matter." But staying on the subject of the American people and whether we're actually any good at democracy as a people: In Season 4 we devoted a couple of episodes to us, the people, and how prepared we are to be good citizens, particularly in

terms of the information we get. So we looked at our education system and the news media and the role that they play in American democracy.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So just looking at how this election played out, I think the results really reinforce the point that so many of us, too many of us, are just not well informed. I mean, folks' understanding of how the world works, who actually holds power, who should they be mad at for the things they're frustrated about. Besides the confusions we've already talked about, around "socialism" and other things, we had all these wild conspiracy theories that millions of people bought into. Q-anon. Theories about Covid-19, that it was sent by communist China to destroy America, or that it was just a hoax, despite the quarter million Americans who've died from it.

John Biewen: Yes. And now millions of Americans are buying into Trump's lies about the election. That Democrats somehow rigged the whole thing to steal the election from Trump, but they did it in such a subtle, kind of genius way that they chose to let Republicans do better than expected in the Senate, the House, and state legislatures.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: So looking at that, it's just like at the most basic level, it does seem hard to imagine a way forward in this country when we can't even agree on basic facts and when we don't have sources of information that Americans agree we can trust. It's hard to know how we can put that toothpaste back in the tube. But I think we also have to be careful about some of these narratives that we've sort of fallen from a much more educated era. It's not really clear to me that there's ever been a

strong factual consensus driving this country. So, there's a tendency to think about this as simply matters of education, or that these people have simply been subject to disinformation. Like if we could just get these people off Facebook and reading the New York Times, all of this would be better. Right?

John Biewen: Uh-hmm.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: And I think it's true that less-educated folks are more vulnerable to certain kinds of disinformation. But when you look at a lot of the historical revelations about how power really works in America that we've explored in this series, this is stuff that highly-educated people consistently tell us they never heard. So what I think that means is that there are certain kinds of myths that get institutionalized in this country, and then they don't get called disinformation.

John Biewen: So there's a deeper kind of education that has to happen about, really, the story of this country, beyond just, you know, getting our facts straight about issues in the news this week.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: That's right.

[Music]

John Biewen: We devoted our last episode of Season 4 to steps we need to take as a country to get more democratic. Things like, get rid of the Electoral College, transform the Senate, make it easy to vote, reform the

courts, deal with gerrymandering. All things that would strengthen the power of the majority of the people, in contrast to what we have now, where a plutocratic minority has way more than its share of power and always has. But let's wrap up this episode by going back to the big picture: the future of democracy in the U.S. And I think -- you know, I don't know if we even want to talk about silver linings with the Trump years. But I think one thing that's happened, it seems to me, is that more and more people out there understand that we've been living under minority rule for a long time, and that if anything that fact is intensifying.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Right. And on top of all that, I think more people can see that the Trump era has unleashed some truly scary antidemocratic tendencies that have always been present in this country. I'm talking about an attraction to outright fascism and authoritarianism, mostly among white people. And that attraction is wrapped up with those long standing hierarchies -- white supremacy, patriarchy, nationalism, and imperialism. So fortunately, we got Trump the man out. But there are many ways in which Trump's value and his legacy are still with us. That could feel like a really depressing take, I get it. (Laughs.) But I want people to be crystal clear, I'm actually hopeful. But my hope doesn't come from the fact that I think Joe Biden and Kamala Harris are gonna move us into a glorious new era of antiracist social justice or something like that.

John Biewen: Now, they did wind up running on a platform that in many ways is more progressive than previous Democratic candidates. But their long-standing instincts, both of them, they're quite centrist, as we've said. And some of their early moves in the transition, even, have raised alarm

bells for progressives, for example, naming a guy with ties to the chemical industry to help lead Biden's transition team on the environment.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah. So any hopefulness that I feel is not actually about them. History has shown that positive change doesn't come about because of the values and instincts of the president or vice president. It comes from the people and movements creating the conditions that force leaders to embrace radical change. You know, I was just listening to Adolph Reed and he gave a very interesting example of this. In many ways, Richard Nixon, of all people, was forced to embrace policies that were more progressive than anything that got achieved by later Democratic presidents like Clinton and Obama. I'm talking about things like the National Environmental Policy Act. He signed the Social Security amendments of 1972, which extended Medicare to people under 65 who were disabled. And also the Nixon Family Assistance Plan, which would have paid a minimum income to poor families. That plan never made it out of committee in the Senate, but the fact that he sort of initiated that -- I don't bring up these policies to celebrate Nixon at all. Sort of the opposite, right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: I don't think those policies are because Nixon had those inclinations. But he was forced to do that because movements on the ground were strong at the time.

John Biewen: And that echoes themes that we hit on throughout Season 4. If you look at Lincoln eventually adopting emancipation, if you look at a

lot of the pressure that was applied to FDR. It was movements, not individual leaders, that brought about our deepest change. You know, history's gonna look back at the Trump years as a crisis, for sure, and maybe a turning point. But I think it remains to be seen what kind of turning point. Will the last four years be seen as a huge step on the road to the real death of democracy in America, or as a crisis that sparked a New Reconstruction, as some have called it? A Third Reconstruction -- after the first one in the 1860s and 70s, and the second, in the 1960s, both of which pushed the country forward as a multiracial democracy.

Chenjerai Kumanyika: Yeah, man. I think as we move forward into this next period, it's really important to be clear about where the source of our hope and where our energy should be. The reason why I voted for Biden and Harris -- I'm speaking for myself -- is because I wanted to choose the person I was gonna fight. You know, building something closer to a true democracy, and to a society that's radically more just and fair for everyone, that's gonna take commitment and actual work by millions of us. We should be looking for where we can join with people who are doing the organizing, doing the work, and really putting our shoulders to the wheel. We have the power to make a different kind of world. We just have to keep getting together and keep using that power.

[Music]

John Biewen: Thank you, Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika. And thanks for listening, everybody. Do go back to our Season 4 if you haven't listened yet. We think it explains a lot about the state U.S. democracy is in and how

we got here. How about Season 5? I know some of you will ask. It's a ways off, probably well into 2021. Thank you for your patience. Looking forward to having more new stuff for you all to listen to.

Our editor is Loretta Williams. Our theme song for Season 4 is The Underside of Power by Algiers. Other music on this episode by Eric Neveux and Lucas Biewen. Music consulting and production help by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. The website is sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, @sceneonradio. Chenjerai, on Twitter, is @catchatweetdown. *Scene on Radio* comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.