

Dr. Vanessa Weaver, host of *Workin' It Out*, interviews Lissa Jones, host of *Black Market Reads*

(Transcript lightly edited for length and context)

[00:00:00] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Welcome. I'm Dr. Vanessa Weaver, your host at *Workin' It Out*. For the past 200 years Black authors from Frederick Douglass to Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou have told their stories in creative and dynamic ways. These stories address racism and sexism in this country, and how it impacts our consciousness and the conversation about racial reckoning.

On this episode of *Workin' It Out*, I'm joined by someone I just met, but I feel like I've known for a lifetime. Her name is Lissa Jones, and she works with current Black authors as they have their say on what's happening in our society as it relates to not just art and literature but the racial experience many of us are going through.

So let me tell you about Lissa Jones. I consider her to be a modern-day Renaissance woman. I'm not going to insult her by calling her a workaholic because she's just multitalented and she has so many gifts to share with us.

So first – she started her own consulting firm. *Lissa L Jones* is a boutique consulting firm that specializes in coaching and training for equity and inclusion. And that's no easy lift.

She is the creator and host of *Urban Agenda*. It is the longest running show on K M O J radio out of Minneapolis, Minnesota at 89.9 FM. And not only the longest running show but K M O J radio is the oldest African American radio station in the country. And then on top of being the principal consultant at *Lissa L Jones* and being the host of *Urban Agenda*, she also hosts this phenomenal show called [*Black Market Reads*](#), a podcast funded by the Givens Foundation for African American Literature.

And that's going to be our focus today. We wanted to explore with Lissa, what is *Black Market Reads* and the value or role that Black art and literature plays in this whole discourse on racial reckoning in America.

So just let me say welcome Lissa.

[00:02:24] **Lissa Jones:** Oh, thank you, Dr. Weaver. I am gratified and delighted to be here.

[00:02:28] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Oh, you put a smile on my face. Thank you. Well, before we get into this, I wanted to ask you about Amanda Gorman. As we talk about the role of art and literature in helping to expand the discourse on racial reckoning in our country, and in the world, here we had this young, Black, Harvard trained woman, what is she? 22? And she read her poem, *The Hill We Climb*, during the inauguration of Joseph Biden and vice-president Harris and everybody is talking about her. More about her than the rest of the inauguration.

What did you think about her?

[00:03:15] **Lissa Jones:** You know, a 22-year-old Black woman who can say "*A nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished, there is always light. If only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it.*" , I think that she is the embodiment of what Black women have been throughout history, despite all the stereotypes we've had to bust continuously and still do. Amanda Gorman showed Black brilliance in poise, grace, and dignity. What they nowadays call Black woman magic.

[00:03:46] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Yeah, she was phenomenal. I had the opportunity to personally know Maya Angelou. And I thought, Maya is looking down, smiling at Amanda with all kinds of pride and joy at her talent. But you know what was interesting? And this ties into the show that you're doing. I was listening that evening to Don Lemon on CNN and he was praising Amanda Gorman and talking about just how phenomenal she was, but he had this caution to the listeners of his show and he said there are a lot of Amanda Gormans out there and what we need are opportunities for this kind of brilliance for all the other Amanda Gormans, both male and female to have an audience, to have a channel so people can hear and experience them. And that's why when I heard about your show, *Black Market Reads*, I got so excited because that seems like what you're doing.

[00:04:48] **Lissa Jones:** That is absolutely right, Dr. Weaver. What we're saying is that Black people are brilliant in all kinds of ways, across all kinds of disciplines, and that we exist, that we are best equipped to tell our own story. We don't need someone to observe us and give us our story back. We need to be able to tell our story ourselves and literature allows us to document our experience in the world.

And that's what we're trying to tell people. There's more than one author. There is more than one Baldwin, more than one Langston Hughes, more than one Morrison, more than one Maya, but we in the Black community always seem to get pigeonholed to the one example that fits America's idea of the ideal Black person.

[00:05:31] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** So, tell me, what made you start *Black Market Reads*? I mean, how did such a phenomenal concept for a podcast get initiated?

[00:05:43] **Lissa Jones:** You know, I wish I could take credit for its genesis, but really it was an idea birthed out of the *Givens Foundation for African American Literature*.

They realized that in their endeavor to promote Black literature and Black authors, that there was a new way to use technology to put that out to a broader audience in the world. Instead of only teaching it landlocked at schools or in certain special programs, you could teach people things through the author's voice. And because our podcasts are basically evergreen, they can last forever. So, we very much wanted to protect it.

So, one day I was giving a presentation about the man who invented the snowmobile, Frederick McKinley Jones who actually happened to be Black. Unbeknownst to me, the *Black Market Reads* producers were in the audience, and they came to me and said, you have such a love of Black people and Black culture in your voice.

[00:06:49] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** So that's how you got the connect?

[00:06:51] **Lissa Jones:** That's how I got the connect. Edie French, who is now my friend, Edie French, and her dear partner, Paul Auguston, who make *Black Market Reads* shine as the producers for the podcast.

[00:07:03] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** And is it based out of Minneapolis?

[00:07:06] **Lissa Jones:** It is. And we have had some exciting experiences. Just before COVID hit we were going to take *Black Market Reads* on the road. We had a few things lined up across the country, with different Black-led organizations that center on Black literature. And so, my hope is that after the pandemic, when we can travel again, that we will be able to amplify not only authors individually, but the organizations that are really working hard to protect, produce and promote our Black authors.

[00:07:40] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** I'm gonna become one of those, I don't want to say groupies, but ardent fans. Tell our listening audience here, what to expect when they turn on *Black Market Reads*. What kind of experience can they look forward to having?

[00:07:59] **Lissa Jones:** When you hear *Black Market Reads* it's like opening a treat every time because it will start out sometimes with a reading by the author. Sometimes it will start out with me giving context. Sometimes it will start out in ways that we didn't necessarily imagine.

We get into deep conversation with authors like Claudia Rankin who was our first author for Season Six. And what is incredible about the experience is that there is something in our DNA that binds us as Black people. It's cultural. It's not the myth of race that we're boxed into. It's the reality of our cultural experience that lets me sit with an author. And somehow it feels, Dr. Weaver, like we've been together for a really long time, but we just met. I think it's just because I have a love of Black people and a reverence for Black culture. And a very curious mind.

[00:09:10] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** As I was listening to you, it made me think of the Black oral tradition. I was thinking about when I had the opportunity to live and do some research in the Congo in Africa. In the villages and at night we would have the storytellers, the griots tell stories, and it was all oral.

You follow what I'm saying? That they could go back hundreds of years and tell these stories. And so, when you talked about the experience that we're going to all have because we are going to listen to *Black Market Reads* it really continues to build on that oral tradition.

[00:09:46] **Lissa Jones:** Dr. Weaver, you and I are mind melded. This is not surprising to me. We are absolutely ancestrally connected. I had in my notes, *signifying and testifying*. These are the experiences we signify and testify. Sometimes our griots talk it out in our spoken word. Artists speak it out, and our dancers, dance it out. You dig. And our jazz players play it out.

And that's how we live. That culture of Blackness. We document our experience. We expand the narrative. And I think that is an exciting exercise to ask, where were you, where were we and what were we doing?

[00:10:26] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** And such an interesting way to continue building our own understanding and intellect, right?

It's not just going to school and learning, but it's a way of sitting down and having the experience and enjoying every aspect of it. I'm excited about your show. I'm excited about you and excited about the Givens Foundation that they would make this investment and support it.

As one of your roles as a Renaissance woman, how has this experience of ***Black Market Reads*** impacted how you think about and approach diversity and inclusion.

[00:11:06] **Lissa Jones:** You know, that's an excellent question. I think about it through the lens of the Christian scripture Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, “*which you used to see in part soon, you will see fully and even then face to face*”, that over time, America must reckon with its idea of race, with the construct it created to fund capitalism.

It didn't fund a soul. It didn't fund a morality. It didn't fund anything except this idea of white supremacy for the purpose of subjugation and free labor. When I used to say that many years ago, in my practice, people would look at me, like - “you must be crazy. I mean -white supremacy?! What is that”?

And now the authors and the griots and the poets have given me different words. Different parts of language to touch people's hearts differently. To expand my capacity. To say, please look at the fact that there are at least two Americas- one white and one Black. And we have been shouting and telling you and testifying and signifying for 400 years and you won't listen.

And the failure to listen and to reckon with what you have created as your responsibility means that we're all stuck. And so, I think that they have contributed to a more expansive way of my understanding and looking at the world that I'm able to bring to the work I do in my consulting practice.

[00:12:24] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** And it sounds like that by doing that, it equips you to support people in hearing the message and being less defensive or being able to make certain connections that they might not have made before.

[00:12:39] **Lissa Jones:** Yes. Especially since the murder of George Floyd, when he called for his mother, I think that people really didn't know about our tradition of walking our people home to our ancestors. You know, when Tupac was killed, Sonia Sanchez called Nikki Giovanni and said, “*I walked him home*”.

[00:12:59] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** You are right there in Minneapolis, which was the epicenter of this whole racial reckoning explosion that we were blessed to have to go through this past summer. What was that like for you? And how did that show up in your show?

[00:13:18] **Lissa Jones:** Oh, we are right in the heart in the thick of it.

Before we even talk about the murder of George Floyd, there was the murder of Jamar Clark. There was the murder of Philando Castile. These are people we hear about in the news, but I know Valerie Castille. And I have sons who drive down Larpenteur Avenue.

I just recorded a podcast with two poets, Mary Moore Easter and Bernard James who were part of a nine-poet series who went to the site of the murder of George Floyd and recorded poetry. And they created a Chap Book called [*Can't Stop Won't Stop: Black Minnesota Poets In Response to the Murder of George Floyd.*](#)

“We can't stop resisting. We won't stop resisting until we who believe in freedom can't rest until the killing of Black mothers' sons is as important as the killing of white mothers' sons” an Ella Baker song, but they call it *Can't Stop Won't Stop*.

When you go to the site of the killing of George Floyd, know that we used to ride our bikes through that neighborhood. We used to shop at that store, and to see that someone has created a cemetery with more than a hundred gravestones with the names and pictures of people here who've been killed by the police.

So, we can't stop, and we won't stop.

[00:15:55] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Well, what a gift to us. I want you to elaborate a little bit more. At each show we ask our guests, what is your “why”? What is it that motivates you to promote the Black voices on your show? Whether it's *Urban Agenda* or *Black Market Reads*. I mean, what's your “why”?

[00:16:20] **Lissa Jones:** I would say two people come to mind that helped to describe my “why”. One is Ida B. Wells. She said, *“Somebody must show that the Afro-American race is more sinned against than sinning. And it seems to have fallen upon me to do so”*.

See, I love Black people. I don't believe that we're defective. I believe that things have happened to us, that we have not been able to have the opportunity to acknowledge because this society is still so ill, that it is a wonder that we survive. Ida B. Wells knew that she, somebody had to testify to the wonder of Black people in our culture.

Somebody had to testify to the myths of race and the reality of racism. And in the words of James Baldwin, as he's debating William Buckley who became the father of the conservative movement. They're debating the question of whether America is America at the expense of the American Negro. And essentially, he's asked his "why". And Baldwin said, " *I fancy myself some kind of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet*". He says that basically he's compelled by his ancestors to do it.

That if he wouldn't have been, if he could have chosen, he probably wouldn't have chosen it. But now that they've gotten hold of him, there's absolutely nothing he can do.

[00:17:29] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Oh, I'm speechless. As you were talking about the Ida B. Wells quote, it made me think of my mentor of almost 30 years, Dr. Dorothy Height who was the only woman in the Civil Rights Six and really should have been Civil Rights Seven. They didn't count her, but you know, they were the architects of the Civil Rights movement. And she would often say "*Black people are not a problem people; they are people that are dealing with problems.*"

And that sounds similar to the message in the Ida B. Wells quote.

[00:18:06] **Lissa Jones:** I could only imagine Dr. Weaver having been mentored by Dorothy Height.

[00:18:10] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** It was a life-changing experience for me and one that I will be ever grateful for. In fact, my husband and I produced a musical called "*If This Hat Could Talk*".

And in that musical, we told the stories of Black women and other women of color who supported the Civil Rights Movement because you know, the Civil Rights Movement began on the backs of Black women and it endured and grew because of the work that Black women contributed in major ways as strategists, as well as tacticians, as well as boots on the ground.

And so we produced that musical and we told the story through the eyes of Dr. Height and her book *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*. She talked about Ida B. Wells in that book.

[00:19:29] **Bump:** *Thank you for listening to Workin' It Out, brought to you by Alignment Strategies, a diversity equity and inclusion consulting firm.*

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[00:19:49] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Welcome back. I'm Dr. Vanessa Weaver, your host, of *Workin' It Out*, and we are so fortunate to have Lissa Jones as our guest. And we've been talking about *Black Market Reads* for which Lissa is the host and co-producer, and it's just been phenomenal in terms of the types of literature that her guests have been sharing that really helps shape the conversation and shape our lens about the racial reckoning movement that we're into in the society.

And I just wanted to ask, given that you're in Minneapolis. I think sometimes people think, are there any Black people in Minneapolis? I would love to hear about the impact of *Black Market Reads* in Minneapolis particularly, since you were the epicenter of the unfortunate murder of George Floyd and others.

How has it shaped the conversation? And is this just limited to Minneapolis or Minnesota.

[00:21:08] **Lissa Jones:** Excellent questions, Dr. Weaver. Thank you, and thanks to the internet it is not. It is a worldwide podcast, and we get statistics. And they tell us how many people are listening or have downloaded it. So far, we're in 25 countries.

You know, I think people are very curious about Black people, even though we're stereotyped. And, I agree with Isabel Wilkerson's position that we are caste. I think people are still curious about what happens in Black life.

[00:21:40] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** You know, the literary critics told Toni Morrison that she would never win an award because she didn't center on white people. She centered on Black life and Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize. So clearly, she had the right formula. But I think it's the idea that most people who are not Black, don't have relationships with Black people.

The WhitenessProject.org in 2018 interviewed white people about what they felt about being white in the world. And they reported that 83% of the people they polled that year, who were white, reported only having relationships with other white people. That means that they have very little experience in how we live, other than the stereotypes that they're fed to support white supremacy.

[00:22:21] **Lissa Jones:** Free labor.

[00:22:22] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** I just really want to shout out how much, what you just shared really mirrors the work that we're doing and, really having meaningful conversations about race and unconscious bias in corporate America. It is astounding when we're talking about race inside the corporate walls, how many of our white colleagues talk about not having any experience outside of what they see on television with Black people or other people of color. And so, it's supported by the data that shows the limited experience like 75 or 80% of white people only their close friends are white. Their social network is predominantly white, or when they looked at the social network of Blacks and other people of color, it's 40, 50% mix.

We live in a different world. We come from different lenses in this work. So, when you said that, I thought bingo, that's consistent with what I experience working with Alignment Strategy.

[00:23:31] **Lissa Jones:** Well, bless you. And thank you for your work, because that is not an easy lift either.

[00:23:44] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Yeah, once you get inside the corporation, we're closing our doors to all those other things that are happening in the outside world, but that's not what's true anymore.

The outside world is inside corporate America. And so, there's a lot of discourse. A lot of attempts to build more understanding. And when you think about it, to the extent that individuals and teams can have this conversation, they become more connected with each other. They become more engaged with each other.

They have more effective teams. So, it's a real payout to having these meaningful conversations about race and clearly *Black Market Reads* is in the forefront of really making that happen on a societal basis. So, let's hear more about, you. Twenty-five countries?!

[00:24:30] **Lissa Jones:** Yes. We're in 25 countries and we're in Season Six! I mean, my mind is blown. We kicked it off with Claudia Rankin who produced her book, *Just Us*, she quotes Richard Prior "I went to the courthouse to seek Justice. And that's what I saw. Just us.

[00:24:49] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Just us. Phenomenal.

[00:24:52] **Lissa Jones:** She was a phenomenal interview. She tells a story about going to the doctor who was white and male, and she said, "something is wrong with me". And he said, "no, everything's fine". And sent her home. So, she went home, and three months later she got a Black woman doctor and found out she had breast cancer. And so, I think to myself, how important it will be for Claudia Rankin's voice to be living in perpetuity, to tell some woman who's listening, "if you think something's wrong with you, something might be wrong with you".

[00:25:22] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** Yeah, it's amazing. We just picked up a new client, the SHARE group and they're out of New York, a not-for-profit organization. And their mission is to provide service to underserved Black, brown, and Asian women who have had female types of cancer, uterine cancer, breast cancer, vaginal cancer, cancers that are unique to women.

And they talk in their research about the preponderance of Black women who are misdiagnosed, not diagnosed at all and who get disparate treatment in the medical community. So, their mission is to provide services to these women, these underserved women of color. And so again, thank you for making that other connect.

What's astounding in this conversation with you is how relevant Black literature has been to really be showcasing or uplifting the issues that are impacting communities of color.

[00:26:24] **Lissa Jones:** Absolutely. They are central to the experience of our tradition of signifying and testifying, of documenting that we were here and how we showed up in the world.

Many people don't know, for example, James Baldwin wrote one children's book. It's called *Little Man, Little Man*. And he's wrestling with the conundrum we all wrestle with. How early is too early to tell your baby, how early is too early to show them his skin is currency and yours is not.

And it's a very serious question for Black people. And if we don't have places like **Black Market Reads** to have dialogue like that, if we don't have safe spaces to listen to other Black perspectives, to inform our narrative, to expand our understanding of who we are in the world, then we can't do what Mary McLeod Bethune asked us to do in her last will and Testament, she said, "*I leave you love. And I leave you confidence in one another*", because she thought that white supremacy would steal that very necessary community building blind. That is confidence in one another. And I think that's what **Black Market Reads** does.

[00:27:31] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** I'm excited for you to have **Black Market Reads**. For you to be six years as its host. What a testimony to your own personal commitment.

[00:27:54] **Lissa Jones:** Lucille Clifton is one of my favorite poets. She writes about Black women. The fact that we really have no role models in the world, we have to come in here and try to survive lies and try to carve out some kind of life. And the fact that we come home every day alive is a testimony to the fact that we won. In this case, her poem is titled *Why Some People Be Mad at Me Sometimes*. "*They ask me to remember, but they want me to remember their memories and I keep on remembering mine*". The goal of writing down a misinformed history, of creating a pseudoscience, of creating alternative facts is to get people to believe what you need them to believe in order to play their role.

They recognize that if they fill your head with all kinds of nonsense, that supports supremacy and inferiority, you will have no room for your own memory. When Black people fully remember where we've been and where we came from, because enslavement was only a disruption, not the start at the end, when we remember we will get better. And so will the world.

[00:29:24] **Dr. Vanessa Weaver:** You know, as you were citing that verse, which was just so powerful, it made me think of a quote by Dr. Height that you and I talked about a little bit earlier in the show. And she said that Black women seldom do what we want to do, but always do what we have to do.

And I thank you. Lissa Jones. For the vision, the commitment, and the passion you bring as the host and co-producer of **Black Market Reads**. We are going to be continued to be blessed in the seventh year and the 20th year and the 50th year of you hosting that show. So, thank you very much for your time as a guest on *Workin' It Out*.

This is Dr. Vanessa Weaver. I'm your host of *Workin' It Out*, And remember *Workin' It Out* is the place where we put inclusion and diversity to work. Have a safe and productive week..