

Primary Sources

Ta-Nehisi Coates on Tony Judt

Eyal Press: From [Public Books](#) and [Type Media](#), this is Primary Sources, the show where writers and intellectuals talk about some of the greatest influences on their work. I'm Eyal Press.

My guest today is the author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates. Ta-Nehisi is best known for his writing about racism in America—in particular, his 2014 essay “The Case for Reparations,” which appeared in *The Atlantic*, and his 2015 book, *Between the World and Me*. Ta-Nehisi's readers know that the toll racism has inflicted on the bodies of Black people, and the enduring power of white supremacy, have long preoccupied him. On this show, however, he'll be talking about a subject—or rather an influence—that few people associate with his work.

That influence is the late Tony Judt, a British historian. In 2005, Judt published his magnum opus *Postwar*, a sweeping, 933-page history of modern Europe.

Ta-Nehisi never met Judt. He started reading his work after hearing about him from a friend who *was* fortunate enough to meet him. That friend was me. I've known Ta-Nehisi for nearly twenty years, since we were both freelance writers struggling to make it as journalists.

In our conversation, which was recorded last fall, Ta-Nehisi and I talk about why *Postwar* had such a profound impact on him. We explore the preface Ta-Nehisi wrote to *Ill Fares the Land*, another of Judt's books, which has just been reissued by Penguin. We also talk about the power of language to help us imagine a better world, whether Ta-Nehisi identifies as an Afro-pessimist, and what it's like to grow up in a nationalist household, which is another experience the two of us share.

A few other quick notes for context: Early on in our conversation, Ta-Nehisi mentions the Remarque Forum. This was a series of conferences that Tony Judt organized about ideas and issues that interested him, which I was lucky enough to attend a few times. Ta-Nehisi also mentions Jon Gruden, the former coach of the LA Raiders, who, you may recall, last fall, was revealed to have used racist and homophobic language to describe NFL players.

Eyal Press: Ta-Nehisi Coates, welcome to the show. Thank you so much for being here.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Oh, good to be here, Eyal.

Eyal Press: When did Tony Judt first start to matter to you?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It really was in conversations with you, if you remember? You used to go to these incredible, I mean, we were, you know, both young writers at the time coming up and, you used to talk about these remarkable... It was the Remarque Forum, right?

Eyal Press: Yup. Yup

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah. And you would talk about these incredible trips and how beautiful it was intellectually and how stimulating it was. You know, at that age, you're really trying to figure things out. So, I was aware of Tony through that and then, of course, I was aware of that piece he wrote—taking the quote unquote “liberal hawks” to task.

Eyal Press: I think I remember the title of that piece. Was it titled “Bush’s Useful Idiots”?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I think that was it. And maybe it was in the *London Review of Books*—do I have that right?

Eyal Press: Yes. Yes. And at the time, that still had a kind of shock value, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah. It did. It did. It did. It was still like, “what?” You know what I mean? I mean, it looked bad, but the years have only proven that piece more and more correct. I think about that piece now and it’s a reminder that... I think the pressure to not be stupid is intense. And when a bunch of people whose profile is intelligence, smartness—smartness, let me not say intelligence—and I think in certain quarters, you know, we have a cult of smartness; there’s this deep pressure to not be stupid. And then there was the haze of the sixties and not wanting to be what people deride as “the loony left.” Frankly, my roots are there. The pressure’s intense, you know what I mean?

These people really made a brand out of rigor, and Tony just showed a different kind of rigor, you know what I mean? I could see it in that piece, but I hadn’t really read anything of length until—God, this was after he passed—years later. I was at *The Atlantic*, and had always been interested in European history; that predated Tony. Going back to my time at Howard, when I took European history, so that was already there. I think I had started my studies in French by then, and of course that ultimately leads you to the culture and the history; I had this great job at *The Atlantic*, blogging and a large part of that was blogging about what I was reading and, honestly, one of the ways that I consume books—because there are so many of them—is by audiobook when I’m cooking or cleaning the house. And I believe I had already bought *Postwar*, so I think I had the volume. It’s this big, thick, volume, and for a lot of people, it just sits on their bookshelf.

Eyal Press: It’s a doorstopper.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It’s a doorstopper. It’s a doorstopper. And so I had it there, and I had always meant to read it. “I’m going to read *Postwar*. I’m going to read *Postwar*. I’m going to read *Postwar*.”

I stumbled upon this beautifully-read audio version of Tony’s book that beautifully captured it, and I had it on one day, and it just stopped me. I think my first recollection of it actually, is not even the book, but a quote. As I’m recalling it now, I was working on “The Case for Reparations,” and there was a section in there about Israel, and what the section was ultimately about was how the Holocaust was dealt with in Germany, and the fact that, even though we

remember Germany as going on this great path of redemption, what Tony was talking about is how, even at the time they paid out reparations, it was hugely debated within Germany. So much of the history that was in there as I read around it, looked really, really familiar within that book. I believe there's a part where he talks about public opinion polling around who should be held accountable for the Holocaust, and Germans say something that is very, very familiar to me as an African-American and that is, "only those who are directly responsible."

Eyal Press: Mmmm.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Which goes against the idea of a state itself. So, eventually, I got into the book and the book just had a profound impact on me.

Eyal Press: And so, it was before *Between the World and Me*?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Oh, yeah.

Eyal Press: One thing I just wanted to ask, just to clarify—you never met Tony. Is that right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No.

Eyal Press: Never met him?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Became great friends with his family after he passed, but never met Tony.

Eyal Press: I'm really struck by that because in your preface to *Ill Fares the Land*, you refer to him as "Tony," and I wondered as I read that, is that because he's someone you wish you'd known or maybe just through his family and through my talking about him, it's almost like there's a kinship there?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah. I definitely feel like I wish I had known him. I think we would've gotten to some great arguments and fights. And by great, I mean beneficial for me. Not the kind that serve as posturing and point scoring. But I would say Jenny is a huge part of that, his wife and a great historian in her own right. How I know him personally is by spending time with his family. The stories live with me because one of my big questions—having so much respect for *Postwar*—is how one disappears for the time that it takes, how one foregoes those fights—and this is a question for me, even to this very day—how one foregoes those fights that feel so immediate and feel like they need you, like you need to be speaking to them, because to do something that mammoth, you have to disappear. You have to disappear for long, long periods of time, and Jenny and I have had great discussions about him and also about her own work, which is of that sort of variety—these huge tomes that it takes forever to actually get done. How does one disappear to do that?

Eyal Press: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And I feel like this is important for any young writers who are listening to this right now. There is such intense pressure to be of the moment, on the moment. I got a friend who is working on a book who I was just texting with right now before I got on with you, and she said to me, “Fuck. All of my conclusions are going to be out there before my book is done.” There’s that pressure to feel like, “I’m going to be too late. I’m going to be too late. I’m going to be too late.”

Eyal Press: Totally.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: If you are on your project and you are worthy of your project—as Tony was—you can never be too late. It’s you, you know what I mean? It’s you who will bleed through the work if you do the work. You just have to believe that, but it takes great discipline to do it.

Eyal Press: Completely. And I’ve had that fear that your friend texted so many times, especially with magazine articles, but also with books.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yes.

Eyal Press: And if we think about *Postwar*—I mean, a history of Europe?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Eyal Press: I mean, what’s new here? There are libraries full of that subject already. I really identified with the fear that your friend texted, but also with this thing of “it’s you. It’s you doing it, and you sinking in and really having to sink in.”

You have said of *Postwar* that you never came across a book that was so “merciless.” That was the word that jumped out at me. And that this mattered to you, especially at a particular moment in your life, in relationship to what you describe as the burden of hope, that you felt you were supposed to provide for people. I wonder if you can say a little more about that, and how maybe it influenced *Between the World and Me* or other writing that you’ve done.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Not just the burden of hope—because I think hope is almost a euphemistic way of saying what people are often asking for. I’ve had some time to think about this now. In a world in which it feels like there’s a scandal coming out every other week about politicians. We live in a time of relentless information, and so what that means is people who were taken as unimpeachable—because information just wasn’t out there—are no longer anymore. Their legitimacy is subject to debate within the public square in a way that really wasn’t possible pre-internet. I would say this happened within our lifetimes. With legitimacy being questioned, I think there’s a natural instinct to look to various other figures. Especially when you’re somebody who writes about the force of race and racism, which is just so right down the spine of American history. There is, in its most benevolent form, a desire in people to feel like, “Okay, but the arc really does bend towards justice, right?”

Nobody wants to go home and think that they're actually the protagonists, the antagonists, the side character in a great tragedy. Nobody wants to feel that way. Nobody even wants to feel like they don't know whether it's a tragedy or not. And at the time I was blogging, I got a lot of that—"Why are you so dark? Why are the things you're writing so dark?" There was a kind of loneliness to that.

I think so many times when Black people command the public square, the role they play is one of inspiration. That was the role Barack Obama reveled in, for instance. That was what I think, rightly or not, people drew from Martin Luther King—inspiration. And somewhere in me I felt, "But all the writing I love and admire doesn't really do that." It might be inspiring, but that's not really what it's setting out to do. So Eyal, I'm steering us away from this idea of hope, because I don't want to say that *Postwar* was hopeless, it was just unconcerned with it.

Eyal Press: There's a couple of quotes in the book I wanted to read to you on this particular theme. Right at the end of the book, Tony says, "Unlike memory, which confirms and reinforces itself, history contributes to the disenchantment of the worst."

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's right.

Eyal Press: "Most of what it has to offer is discomfiting, even disruptive." And I wonder if that is part of why this book really spoke to you at a particular moment when you were maybe feeling this pressure to inspire people, to give them, you know, an inspiring message.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No, I think that's dead on, and I think that disenchantment part probably could be extended to art and literature too. Much of what we consider "great art" is ultimately disenchanting. Now, it's clarifying too, and it's enlightening, but does it make us feel like at the end of the day everything's going to be okay?

That book is so brutal, man. It's so, so brutal. After the Holocaust, I think that in the popular mind—and I don't know why I ever believed this—there was this idea that the Holocaust happened, the Jews who survived were made whole, everything was okay, and Europe had learned its lesson. And I think it's in Poland that Tony quotes the survivors coming back to, and the Poles look at the Jews who returned and they say, "Why have you come back?" And that was devastating. Boy, that fucked me up.

Eyal Press: This is not the good war. This is the opposite. And this is not the good postwar, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right right right.

Eyal Press: I think you and I talked about this, but he opens the book talking about how massive ethnic cleansing basically took place in Europe for 30 years—from World War I, all the way through 1945.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Eyal Press: Basically, people just created homogenous societies by kicking out ethnic groups that were different from them.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's right, that's right; he says the peace was actually made through ethnic cleansing, effectively. I mean, isn't that the argument?

Eyal Press: Yes, yes, yes. And he begins with that. And there's this quote, and I mention it because it's also in your preface to *Ill Fares the Land*. There's this observer that he quotes in the book. I think it's a *New York Times* correspondent who says, "There will be retribution for these crimes." And Tony very quickly says, dryly, "History offered no retribution for these crimes."

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right.

Eyal Press: It just goes right into a kind of anti-redemptive message. What I'm wondering is, do you think it took someone who's writing outside of your culture, outside of your country, to present a perspective like this? Can you imagine an Americanist writing about America having a similar effect on you?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know, the answer is yes, but not for the reasons one would think. I think a lot of it is because of how Europe exists in the imagination. When you're Black, Africa is the land of chaos, of disorder, of pathology. That's how the history is told. That's the feeling you get from the broader pop culture. And you, as an African-American, are a descendant of that. You are the embodiment of pathology, cannibalism, destructive, negative forces.

That extends to the memory of the Holocaust, because even though there is this massive, historic, unprecedented crime against humanity that happens right within the heart of civilization—Who is more civilized than the philosophers of Germany, you know, what I mean?—there's a kind of order that's automatically put on it. It's hard to explain, where you feel like, "Oh, this happened, but it was okay. You know, because of X, Y, and Z." Not that the crime was okay, but that there was a kind of "ABC" order to what happened, as compared to the mess of say, slavery and enslavement, and you just find that it's not true. So, in that sense, yes. I needed to read about the Citadel of civilization, of enlightenment, and the horrors that happened *within the 20th century, within the modern era*—not during the Hundred Years War, not during the "dark" ages—right now, within the lifetime of my parents, my grandparents.

One of the great things about *Postwar* is, literally as a work of history, how it uses history, and Tony's eye for quotes. He's talking about partisan resistance in Yugoslavia to the Nazis and you think, "Oh, okay, yeah. Nazis: bad, partisans: good." You know what I mean? And you're reading this, and there's almost a kind of psychic effect. You immediately start rooting for the partisans. And, instead, Tony gives you this mess of partisans fighting partisans, and he's quoting from Milovan Djilas, and he says "For hours, both armies clamored up Rocky ravines to escape annihilation, or to destroy a little group of their countrymen, often neighbors, on some

jutting peak 6,000 feet high in a starving bleeding, captive land. It came to mind that this is what had become of all our theories and visions of the workers' and peasants' struggle against the bourgeoisie. "I read that, and I said "Damn."

Eyal Press: I reread that passage last night, actually and I was thinking about it because it has that effect that he does a number of times in this book where these big ideas get stripped away, and what's left is, lies and mistakes and crime, right? There's no romance of Europe in this book.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So you can see how that would allow me to write about America in a different way, and about American history. If this guy can write about Europe like this, then I can be an interrogator in much the same way. I don't have to deliver a neat picture. I don't have to deliver the order of American Revolution, Emancipation, Civil Rights Movement, always getting better, always improving, always progress—this kind of neat model of it; I don't have to write out of that.

Eyal Press: So that's the part of it that was liberating? Because you use that word as well: "merciless," but you also say, "It might sound weird that such a grim book was liberating," but you say it was liberating. Is that the liberation going to American history and saying, "I don't have to soften the edges here, or I don't have to present a redemptive thread in this?"

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I think part of this is also historiographical in the sense that I am, if not directly, certainly indirectly, but probably also directly, influenced by a generation of historians, and the names that come to mind are James MacPherson and Gordon Wood. These are historians of American history who in some fundamental way were revolutionary, because they were very clear about America's slave-holding past and what America came out of, but, probably also at the same time, and I don't want to overstate this, felt that the American project was a good and revolutionary thing. You can debate that back and forth, right? I'm not even necessarily saying that they're wrong. I am saying that I was freed of the responsibility to write out of that. I had the freedom to write in a much more chaotic way. I don't have to say that, "Ultimately, this was a revolutionary good thing." Because, see the thing is, there's a way that African-Americans can feel very comfortable within that themselves. They can fit themselves in that story and say, "Well there was this dream. Yeah, we kind of came together in this chaotic way, but we as Black people are inspired by the words of Jefferson. We hope to live them out. We're improving things. We're improving America. We're improving..." and you get wrapped into the national project. It takes a lot of work to write outside of it. I don't even know that *Between the World and Me* is ultimately successful at that. But, certainly, Tony pointed the way.

Eyal Press: But, they are both un-consoling books. They couldn't be more different, right? His is a doorstopper. Yours is slender. His is steeped in footnotes. Yours is this beautiful essay. But something in the sensibility, it seems to me, they belong on a shelf real close to each other. And it sounds like—

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Can you see that yourself, as a reader?

Eyal Press: I mean, I've been rereading both books.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: When I say that, does that sound crazy to you?

Eyal Press: No, it actually makes sense, because I have to say, for myself, as someone who has family who perished in the Holocaust, and barely survived the Holocaust, it's devastating in a different way to read *Postwar*. But it's equally that thing of—you feel the rug is being pulled out from under you. As much as you would think that I would know that it took Europe 30, 40 years to start talking frankly about what happened in the Holocaust, it still comes as a shock to see it on the page, even if it isn't a surprise. And maybe it's the way that he writes, and his not really pretty-fying it in any way, right?

You said he taught you not to be a clergyman. I don't think anyone would confuse you for a clergyman in your work and your writing, but I wonder if, after *Between the World and Me*, as protests are happening, you are maybe finding yourself, asked to, if not play the role of a clergyman, play the role of, something other than the writer you are? Were there ever times where you thought, "I would do that if I weren't a writer, but I'm a writer"?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: All the time.

Eyal Press: All the time?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: All the time. There is the poisonous version of this, which is basically an attempt to erase and push any kind of narrative that questions the official "narrative" of America and the progress of events out of the public sphere—that's one thing. We saw that during the Iraq War, but actually, the more tempting and the more disquieting version I have trouble with is, when I go to West Baltimore, right? Literally, I went to West Baltimore for a launch of *Between the World and Me*, and people are looking for inspiration and they're looking for hope and they're looking to you, and to look at them and say, "I'm sorry, that's not my job. I can't do that. I would be lying to you if I did"—that's hard. That's really, really, really hard, because, basically, what's happening is there *should* be people to do that. But the people who were supposed to do that have fallen down. There are not enough of them, and people are asking you to fill that role.

Personally, there's something of it in my story, because I—I've said this before, and this comes out of a degree of material benefit and privilege— but for me, personally, what I remember being most vexing about growing up Black in America was just not understanding why. That's the thing about the official version: it doesn't quite make sense. There's a dark part of you, that's like, "Something is off in this picture and I can't identify what it is, but it just doesn't sound right. You know, it really, really, really doesn't sound right. And I can't put my finger on it." And, one day you wake up and you realize—and I think this a common experience for African-Americans, but maybe a common experience for anybody who was, in their own way, outside of the mainstream of America—you realize, I've been lied to. I've actually been lied to. And there's just a tremendous feeling of emptiness in that: of not knowing what's true, of not knowing...

You know, I saw Louis Riddick talking about the revelation of Jon Gruden's e-mails. Louis Riddick played for Jon Gruden, and he said, "You see this, and I don't know who to trust. I don't, I thought I knew this man. I believed in him, and then I find out *this* is who this guy was?"

Eyal Press: Man.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: "What am I supposed to listen to now?" That's the feeling of becoming conscious. If I go to the Jefferson Memorial, and this is in some profound way, a lie. If I go on the Mall and I walk to the Washington Monument, and I realize this guy was pursuing runaway slaves into Pennsylvania—what am I supposed to do with that?

Eyal Press: When I think about Tony's influence on you, I also have to think about what's missing from his work, and you don't sidestep that. You don't gloss over it in this preface to *Ill Fares the Land*, and that is European colonialism. I think you used the phrase "scant attention," but he was not just unenthusiastic about identity politics, but quite critical and dismissive of it. You note all of that, but you don't dismiss him for that. You don't say, "Okay, I'm not going to read this guy. He's not important to me." Why not?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I guess I feel like as an African-American, that's not a luxury that I ever had. I can remember being a teenager and my dad telling me that the *Wall Street Journal's* center column had some of the best journalism in the world. It's the *Wall Street Journal*, right? You gotta read it. Okay, I know the editorial page is racist as hell, but look, these guys do this really well, and for all of your feelings about things, you have to read it. If you're going to look at the history of this country, even if you seek to explore the history of slavery, it's very hard to not read people that you have deep ... What I mean, I'm talking deeper than Tony, like much, much, deeper than Tony, obviously.

Eyal Press: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know, I never ever read Tony and think, "Oh, this is some racist bullshit." It's not like that, but I'm talking about people where you're like, "This is terrible!" Not just that I don't agree with.

Eyal Press: With Tony, it's a matter of emphasis, but you're saying, with many others, it's a matter of flat-out offense and you have to look past the offense.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: There are plenty of people who, as I get later into my career—Hitchens! His *Letters to a Young Contrarian* had a big influence on me. Did I agree with everything in that book? Did I agree with who Hitchens was, even? No, No! I'll say this to the day I die. I obviously detest much of what Andrew Sullivan stands for. Did I learn from his blog? I did. That is not an endorsement of anything or of anybody, but that never would've occurred to me. That's just not how I work and how I process.

Eyal Press: If you screened out all of those influences that were flawed, you'd have no influences to draw upon. Basically, there are very few, right? I mean, that would be a small circle...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: There are people like Baldwin, who I probably 99% agree with. There are people like that: Toni Morrison, certainly. But if you read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, there's all sorts of straight-up misogyny in that book. That's just not how my brain works.

Eyal Press: There's a beautiful passage in, in the preface that is directly about this. You've just talked about the weakness that runs through, in your mind, Judt's work and through *Postwar*, which is the scant attention to colonialism and race, and then you say, "It would be a mistake to ignore this missing element in Tony's work, but it would also be a mistake to disqualify the whole of it on such a basis. An intellectual lineage, at its best, means the progeny pick up and improve upon the work of their ancestors. I count Tony as one of mine. He freed me from cant and sloganeering and reinforced the idea, budding in me, that the writer is not a clergyman." I'd love for you to elaborate on that because I think that's a really powerful formulation.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: There's a great Frederick Douglass biography by David Blight and in it, David Blight points to how Douglas would often denigrate Native Americans to argue for the citizenship rights of African Americans. It's terrible. It's very difficult to create—and I don't know that anybody actually does this. I don't know how you do it—a pure lineage.

I don't go to books—this goes back to the point about inspiration, right? I don't really go to books for inspiration. I don't go there to feel great. I think that's the starting point. The other part of that is, look, we are all human, and I don't want to make excuses for this, because I stand by what I said: I think there's a huge weakness in *Postwar*. I don't know how you write a history of post-war Europe, or of Europe period, or of modern Europe period, and don't talk about Algeria, for instance. There's very little about Algeria. I say all of that to say—I don't know how one writes about a period and does *not* have blind spots. I just don't know how that happens.

Eyal Press: And we all have them as well.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: We do, we do, we do. The day will come—the day has already come—when people look at my work and they say, "This is missing X, Y, and Z," and they're not wrong. The big one I think about again is Obama and the War on Terror. And it's funny, because even as I was writing at the time, I knew I was missing it. I knew I wasn't getting it the way I should. It's hard. It's really, really, really hard, and if somebody could capture the whole of it, we wouldn't need other writers. Should those errors and those blind spots be pointed out? Yes, they should. They should. I do think we have to make a distinction between what is a kind of malicious erasing, versus this is a serious flaw. Now, where that line is, I'm not sure, but I didn't feel that with Tony.

Eyal Press: Right.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: And frankly, I wish he had spent more time on colonialism, because I think it would've improved the book. I think it actually would have reinforced much of what he was saying.

Eyal Press: Yeah. Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Eyal, I just have to go back to this Algeria point.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I want to make clear that it's in there. I remember that moment, for instance, where de Gaulle becomes president and it comes out of Algeria. So I know that it's in there. I think I'm talking about degrees, just to be clear.

Eyal Press: I want to ask one other thing that is striking about his work, and is a thing in your work that some people have asked about: Tony's interpretations of history tend to emphasize contingency; there's this chapter on the Balkans, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's a great chapter.

Eyal Press: When the Balkans just fall apart—ethnic cleansing. It's incredible, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: What did he say? “The Balkans didn't fall, it was pushed?” “It didn't jump. It was pushed?” It ends with that line or something like that.

Eyal Press: Exactly. And his whole point is, he is starting with the people who said, “this was just ancient, ethnic hatreds that bubbled up...”

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's right.

Eyal Press: And he says, “No, that's wrong. This was human beings and politicians: Milosevic and others, acting and pursuing power that resulted in this. It didn't have to be this way.” I wonder if, in your own reading of American history, you see alternative paths that could play out if different human beings make decisions in different ways? Or, if you see such a deep strand of white supremacy and racism operating? I mean, there's that passage in *Between the World and Me* where you say to Samori, “what Calhoun said in 1776 was true when he spoke of the beneath. It was true in 1776 and it's true now.” There's a depressing continuity in this, and I wonder how you think about those issues. Can you see a different American history, or is it fated in some way?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No, I don't. To go to “fated” would be to go back to clericalism. You would just be on the other side. I think that chapter on the Balkans is really essential. It goes back to what I was trying to clarify about this notion of hope, because buried within it is, “this could have been different.” We have it within our power for something to be different. And I firmly believe the world is made by human beings, which means people did things. People made

choices. Structure is a very real thing, but even structures are created. When John Wilkes Booth, who was a white supremacist, shot Abraham Lincoln, and explicitly said why, that had effects. When Abraham Lincoln himself, in an attempt to play politics, picked Andrew Johnson as his vice president, that had a huge effect. It had a huge effect. That wasn't just, "Let's just throw up our hands and whatever..." It really mattered. I agree with that and it's often tough to get that nuance across to people.

Eyal Press: Do you feel people want to push you into that corner? There's the term "afropessimist," that came out of the conversation that was stirred by your book and others. Do you feel the label is a misapplication?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I think Afro-pessimism is a very real Black intellectual tradition. I understand where it comes from. It emphasizes structure and structure is very powerful. I don't think it describes me. At the time I wrote *Between the World and Me*, I had not read a single work by anybody who would be characterized as an Afro-pessimist, which does not mean it wasn't in the ether or that I wasn't indirectly influenced by it, but you know, I don't think it does apply to me.

Eyal Press: I have to say when I saw some of those pieces— it doesn't fit you. The person I know seems eclectic and sometimes very pessimistic and sometimes optimistic.

There's one other piece of Tony's biography that I want to get to, and we don't have that much more time, but when we first became friends, I think one of the things we always talked about was that we'd both grown up in nationalist households. I grew up in a Zionist household background where certain things weren't questioned and certain frameworks were given; you grew up in a Black nationalist household, and I remember those conversations we've had through the years. We still have them. Tony was someone who has said that he became this ardent Zionist in his late teens.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Right! Did he go work on a Kibbutz?

Eyal Press: He went to a kibbutz; I think he went to Israel before 1967. He talks about this in this great book *Thinking the Twentieth Century*, and then he has a moment of disillusionment, and he, of course, becomes a very outspoken critic of Israel's occupation. He writes this essay in the *New York Review of Books* saying the two-state solution is dead. "It didn't die a natural death, it was killed." That's how the piece begins, with this boom and he got hell for that piece. I wonder if that part of his trajectory—I know I identify with it a lot—I wonder what that piece of his life means to you. Does it interest you, does it resonate?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It does. Quite a bit. You were asking that question of someone writing outside of your experience. I was raised in a heretical Black nationalism; by which I mean, I had the kind of parents that didn't celebrate Kwanzaa. That's what I mean. It was like, "yeah, we kind of believe this, but this part over here is total bullshit." So I was set up at the very start to be questioning and skeptical. And, even to this very day, I struggle with it to some extent. Culturally, the Black tradition is very important to me. The skepticism of the position in which

Black people occupied, being “out of society” or out of the umbrella of “human rights.” Ultimately that sets you up to, in fact, be skeptical of the entire project. I identify with a lot of that. It’s the core of much of what I write. At the same time, when you start talking about it as a political ideology...

I was raised in a world where you actually did think about, well, “What if we had our own land? What if we had our own space?” Because there’s always this great “what if?” project. What you come to realize, or, what I’ve come to realize—and this is hard for any oppressed group of people—is that oppression is not ennobling. It does not mean that there aren’t certain people within a group that can take wisdom from their experience, can learn to think about the broader family of human struggle, but when you start talking about states and nations and tribes—and I mean that in the least derogatory way possible—that generally is not what happens. The skeptics’ point of view is not the one that generally carries the day.

Eyal Press: I wonder isn’t there also that thing where, well, because you’re a victim, you’re exempt from what happens to every other nation, right?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That’s right; that’s right.

Eyal Press: You are the special nation. You are the one that knows what it is to suffer. Certainly true in the case of the birth of Israel, but in the imaginary of any oppressed group, I would think.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah. When someone or some other group says, “you’re doing this to me,” how can that be true? How can that be true? I have suffered the greatest human rights catastrophe imaginable, be that the Holocaust, be that enslavement and Jim Crow. How could that possibly be true? This is one of the reasons why I identify with the intellectual tradition. One of the things I think about the Black experience here in America is that we are forced to have that argument over and over again, largely because we didn’t get a country of our own. It has happened with women and Black women and what Black feminism means over and over again. It has happened with class. There’s this constant churn and struggle back and forth about what is part of the nation? What does it mean? And I’m thankful for that. I’m thankful, because with power ultimately almost always comes the power to abuse. If there was some Black nation that was automatically established and I was a citizen of it, I would immediately be a dissident. I would have to be, you know what I mean? I would immediately become a dissident to that state. I would be outside of it, even as I identify with, as I said, the literary traditions, the historical, because I’m a writer.

Eyal Press: That’s what I was going to ask you. Do you think that’s the writer’s natural position?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yes.

Eyal Press: And I’m imagining you do.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yes.

Eyal Press: Well, since we have just a minute or two, I want to read you one last quote because you're talking about writers and this is a quote about language from *Ill Fares the Land*. It's a book about democratic socialism and how market values have dominated our lives.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: So appropriate for right now.

Eyal Press: "Truer today than ever" as you say in the preface. But it's also a book about how the market has stunted our imaginations and language. And he says very early on, "why do we experience so much difficulty even imagining a different sort of society? Our disability is discursive. We simply do not know how to talk about these things anymore."

I wonder if you agree with that, and if you think about the role of language in imagining a better world? We've talked a lot about not being naive about that, but just there, he's getting at something different, I think.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: He really is. Somebody says, "I'm going to make government run like a business," and because of preexisting ideas in the American imagination, you associate that with something good. Why? Why don't you think about the bailouts? Why don't you think about the banks circa 2008, 2007? Like why? That's because dialogue and the imagination have been constricted.

I especially feel that as an African-American writer. We are constantly fighting for space to have our ideas be considered and debated in the public square. The whole point of "A Case for Reparations" was to inject an idea into the public square, to make it serious, and to make people have to take it seriously. We're going through it right now with the abolish movement around the police. Put aside how you feel about it; put aside what you think of when you hear "defund the police." There are certain ideas about what police *are* that make people automatically say, "This is not even an idea worthy of consideration."

And let me push that even further, because I think the other thing that's happening is writers—and activists, I probably would include them in this—are being made to carry the weight of politicians. The idea is that you shouldn't talk about this because it might hurt Joe Biden. Apparently, your premier function here is to say things that help elect Democrats. Look, I get that right now, in this moment, everything seems at stake. I get the pressure to do that, but the danger of that is that the imagination is automatically constricted to things that can fit within the narrow constraints of electoral politics. That's how we got into Iraq. That right there, to bring the conversation full circle, that's exactly how we got into Iraq. Because what Susan Sontag was saying was so far out of what respectable and responsible liberals could bear. Can you imagine that? Think about 2001 and 2003 and Democrats having to carry the "burden" of Susan Sontag's critique.

Eyal Press: I mean, it was so outside of any mainstream discourse, right? It was an unthinkable...

Ta-Nehisi Coates: ...an unthinkable thought. And we, as writers, have to be on guard. We can't allow that to happen. What if it hadn't been unthinkable? What if it hadn't been, you know? And now here we are 20 years later and now it's polite and permissible to say, "Look, this was a war of revenge. Let's be clear about it. These were wars of revenge."

Eyal Press: I remember people on the far left talking about Afghanistan and saying, "This shouldn't be a war. This should be a police operation to round up the people responsible." And that was so far out there. I have to admit of myself, I just got swept into this current of, "Wait really? Really, a police operation?" And, you're right, that there's such a big gap between what is politically convenient and practical for, particularly the Democratic party, but for those who are concerned about the direction this country might otherwise go in, and the broader question of, "Is this right?" Those seem like two very different discourses.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Our job is to sit there. And I probably did not know it then, during that period, because I felt like you. I felt very much like you. And I think a lot of times, the writer has not yet arrived to make the positions legible and clear and articulate them in a way that people understand. But sometimes folks have the sentiment, the feeling that "This is correct. It's wrong to go drop bombs. Forget the arguments. It's wrong to go to countries, you know, miles away, and bomb them to hell. That's just wrong. That's just wrong and I don't need to hear your intellectual case for it. I reject that on principle." Sometimes it's good to have that, right?

Eyal Press: I have one particular friend who sort of anti-intellectual, but in a great way. And he often says that, he's like, "You know, these guys are just twisting themselves into justifications. It's just, what are you doing?"

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It's just wrong.

Eyal Press: Well, listen, it's been such a pleasure. I have to say when we first met at some bar on Hudson Street, I would not have thought at that time I would be inviting you into a podcast; the idea that we'd be having a conversation anyone would care about.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I know. It's crazy.

Eyal Press: You know what I mean?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I do, I do.

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