

Voices for Justice featuring Ta-Nehisi Coates, May 25th, 2021
Clean Verbatim Transcript

Maria McCauley:

I am Maria McCauley, director of libraries for the City of Cambridge. It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the last program in our Voices for Justice series, featuring Ta-Nehisi Coates in conversation with Callie Crossley. Voices for Justice is a collaboration between the library and the Cambridge Public Library foundation. The foundation initiated this series to promote equity, inclusion, and anti-racism work at the library and in the Cambridge community through public discourse, acquisition of books reflecting diverse perspectives, and professional development for library staff. Thanks to the generous contributions of individuals and corporate sponsors, I am pleased to announce that we have raised \$115,000 to support this critical work. We are deeply grateful to all our donors and series sponsors. Please consider joining me in supporting the Cambridge Public Library Foundation, which funds important initiatives like the Voices for Justice at our library. We acknowledge that today marks the one-year anniversary of the killing of George Floyd. George Floyd's death spawned justifiable outrage over what was captured in a bystander's video and his dying words, "I can't breathe." This atrocity galvanized the growing Black Lives Matter movement and ignited solidarity protests in more than fifty countries. It coalesced into a renewed social awakening for many white and other Americans on the perniciousness of systemic racial injustice. The Cambridge Public Library has long been a bastion of democracy in our community. We are committed to racial and social justice and will continue to bring important community conversations like the one we are having tonight to Cambridge. Please submit your questions for tonight's esteemed guest, Ta-Nehisi Coates, using the Q&A at the bottom of your screen. Without further ado, I have the great honor of introducing the host for our Voices for Justice series, Callie Crossley. She is the host of "Under the Radar with Callie Crossley," which airs on GBH 89.7 FM on Sundays from 6-7 PM. She also hosts GBH's TV program "Basic Black" and is a multiple award-winning journalist and documentary filmmaker. Callie is also a great friend to our library, and we are honored to have her join us, as the host of our Voices for Justice series. Please join me in welcoming Callie Crossley.

Callie Crossley: Thank you, Maria, and welcome, everyone. I am delighted to introduce Ta-Nehisi Coates, the award-winning author and journalist. He's the author of the bestselling books "The Beautiful Struggle," "We Were Eight Years in Power," "The Water Dancer," and "Between the World and Me," which won the National Book Award in 2015. He was a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship that same year. As a journalist with a career spanning over two decades, he has written for numerous publications, including *The Washington City Paper*, *The Village Voice*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times*. As a national correspondent for *The Atlantic* between 2008 and 2018, he penned numerous articles and essays, including the National Magazine Award-Winning 2012 essay "Fear of a Black President" and the influential June 2014 essay "The Case for Reparations." Ta-Nehisi will soon be able to add "screenwriter" to his list of credentials. He is currently writing the screenplays for the upcoming films "Wrong Answer, Superman" and the film adaptation of his first fiction novel, "The Water Dancer." While his successful run writing Marvel's "Black Panther" came to an end in April 2021, he continues to write Marvel's "Captain America." He is currently in his fourth year as a distinguished writer-in-residence at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute. Welcome, Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Thank you, I'm not sure what's going on with the video, it says I'm unable to start the video.

Callie Crossley: Oh, dear. Well, maybe we can get a little technical help with that. Because we can hear you! But we'd like to see you.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Okay, [unintelligible audio] the host has stopped it. There we go, start my video.

Callie Crossley: There we go! Welcome.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Thank you. And I just want to be absolutely clear I am... the reason why this is starting late is totally because of me. So, Beverly Meyer, I see you out there, don't blame Cambridge Library, blame me. I had some snafus, I'm at a hotel. I just had to

get the internet settings and everything correct but I'm here, I'm happy to be here and I'm sorry we're starting the whole thing late.

Callie Crossley:

Well, we're very happy to have you here, even though we are speaking today at a really particularly sad, I think, and poignant moment in our history. This is the one-year anniversary of George Floyd's murder, one year after the nation proclaimed a racial reckoning, and in the wake of his murder, there were corporations donating generously to black and brown organizations, there were people reading many books to try to understand better, including some of yours, there were folks in the streets as we've heard, around the world, and today, as we mark the anniversary of that one year, George Floyd's family is in the White House with President Biden for a private meeting, and the Justice and Policing Act, which is named after him, is making its way through Congress, though stalled in the Senate. So, a lot going on, it's a big moment, and you're the person to ask: how do you assess both his murder and the one year reckoning, how do you assess the meaning of that, in this moment?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Well, the murder's pretty hard, it's pretty easy to assess. An astonishing act of brutality and inhumanity. Clearly committed by somebody who had been conditioned to not regard George Floyd as a human being. You can't torture a man to death for almost nine minutes and maintain a regard for their humanity. You can't see the person who you're doing that to... as an actual person, it's not possible. And in that way, as James Baldwin often pointed out, when you commit inhumanity against other people, you are reduced. You become a monster yourself. Because people view you and they say, "what kind of person does that? What kind of person could actually have any sort of feeling for the human community and torture somebody to death? In the daylight, in front of people, cameras running and everything." As shocking and astonishing as that all essentially seems, the fact of the matter is that that's our history. George Floyd's murder does not differ much from a pattern that we've seen between black folks in the larger country since we arrived here in 1619. There is remarkable consistency. That really is the sad thing, and I know that folks want to feel like this time it'll be different. I hope that this time it'll be different. I don't think the historical evidence argues for that. The

historical evidence argues for momentary shock, you know, because you're talking about a community of human beings, and then it argues for powerful forces within the society doing whatever they can to maintain the system that made George Floyd's killing possible in the first place. I started off talking about a lack of regard for humanity, and that obviously is tied to race and to black people. We are conditioned in this society to regard black people as less than human. We have the weight of history, which has generally regarded black people as less than human, the weight of pop culture. We tolerate the largest carceral system ever erected in American history. We tolerate the fact that that carceral system is disproportionately populated by black people, by black men in particular. We tolerate the daily indignities and the tortures and the deprivations that happen there. You can't say it's crime. Societies throughout history have had to deal with crime. Only America has erected this system designed to strip people of freedom and dehumanize folks. I go there to recognize the small -- not small, forgive me -- the invisible things that we tolerate. The invisible acts of inhumanity that we tolerate. If you're willing to do that, if you're okay with that, if you're building upon a history of dehumanizing black people -- 250 years of enslavement, 100 years of Jim Crow, enforced by racial terrorism, by lynch law, by murder, by torture. And then that following by, as I said, the erection of the largest carceral state in world history. There's nothing like it. Nothing like it exists right now, anywhere else in the world. What must we, then, conclude this country thinks of black people? And if you follow the answer to that question, it's not too hard to understand how George Floyd ended up dying the way he did. I saw... I lose track of who it is, but I saw a tape just a week ago, the brother was begging, talking about "we're brothers," you know? So, we're talking about, within a year, it keeps happening. Why? Why? So at some point, you have to talk about something within the culture and the heritage of the country that says "this is okay. It's fine." So I think that's where we are, which is where we always have been.

Callie Crossley:

So, some would point to the conviction of Derek Chauvin, some police reform, though not widespread, the discussion, as I said, of the Justice and Policing Act that is moving slowly, and the fact that there are more people that have an understanding of what systemic

racism is, as opposed to what many people used to think racism is, which is, you know “I don’t like you,” and that’s what it is. Does that... do any of those things, when taken together, mean something in terms of change?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

They certainly mean something. And I hope they mean something in terms of change. But I will point out that, to get to that conviction, you had to have a tape of someone torturing somebody to death for nine minutes. That’s a pretty high bar. That’s a pretty pretty high bar. I will grant that I would say for the past couple years we certainly have seen more officers convicted, but what that means long term... I am of the school of thought of “wait and see.” And I think history argues for some degree of skepticism. Doesn’t mean things won’t change, I won’t say that, I could be wrong. I would happily be wrong, I would love to come back and talk to this audience a year from now, five years from now, and say “hey, I was wrong, and I was way too skeptical,” but at the moment I just don’t see much that argues for grand change, I mean as I think you mentioned, right, like the George Floyd... police act is stuck in the Senate right now. I don’t know what allows it to proceed. I just don’t see much evidence of that. You have an opposition party that is very very clearly, at least since the time of Obama, identified its interests with as much as possible opposing everything. Not allowing the President to pass anything. And then on top of that, making sure that elections in states wherein they control the legislature are written in such a way that the other party never has any shot at gaining power. So I don’t know, I hope I’m wrong. I really hope I’m wrong.

Callie Crossley:

So I’d like to ask, then, where do you see his murder, and the year of reckoning, and this anniversary, where is that on the spectrum of civil rights struggle for African Americans in this country?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Well, are you asking about...?

Callie Crossley:

Long term. I mean, how would we... how do we... where do we put that?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Right, right. So, what I would say is the response to it was tremendous. I think the response was tremendous, and I think the

response certainly equaled anything that we've seen in our history in terms of people getting out on the streets and the way people protest. Not just George Floyd, but you know, Breonna and Ahmad, you know what I mean? All of that taken together. I think the response was tremendous, the problem is, you are living in a country where there is a critical mass of people who simply don't believe in democracy. They simply don't. The Senate is an anti-Democratic institution. The legislators have been engineered to be anti-Democratic institutions. The electoral college is already anti-Democratic. And now you have a situation where folks are basically pledging to not certify elections. Laws being passed throughout the country to restrict the vote. Laws being passed to criminalize protest. To make it legal to run a protestor over with a car. I don't know. I don't know.

Callie Crossley:

Let's move on to something else. You wrote, as we've said, the influential piece about reparations, and since that time, a lot of discussion, a lot of public discussion, you've testified before Congress yourself, so now we have a situation where there is a community in Evanston, Illinois that actually has put in place an actual reparations system, and we just listened to last living survivors of the Tulsa massacre in this 100th anniversary of the massacre talk very clearly about what they witnessed and what they know they are owed as people who survived that and were made to... and lost their family and their community and all of that. So I wonder, as a person who, really, in a big way, kicked off a national conversation about reparations, how you view both of those.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I'm happy to see it, you know. I think one thing that's happened is increasingly in the Democratic Party, you see black voices, in particular black voices more empowered, and so there's an ability to have more conversations that was not there before. I don't know how much that actually has to do with me, I was happy to write the article, it was an honor to write the article, you know, I'm the author of the article, I took credit for it. But I do think that what really changed was the structures underneath. I just think you had more people with power versus actually... called hearings and allow people to testify in such a way. I'm not as familiar... I know about the program in Evanston. I'm not as familiar with how it...

with the ins and outs of it, so I'm not... I don't know how it's going, but I do think there have been some structural changes. I think, just in terms of sheer numbers, you have certainly the makings of an anti-racist majority, by which I mean white people, people of color who believe that the track that we've been going down is not the correct track. The problem is, in the era of reconstruction and redemption you also have an anti-racist majority throughout the South, and it just didn't save us, because you had another group of people who didn't believe in democracy at all, and willing to kill to affect that belief, and that's really the scary part. You see people charging the Capitol, and our instinct, because we fed ourselves on this notion that we're the oldest democracy in the world, we're this, we're that, Jeffersonian democracy, et cetera, all that won't happen again, that doesn't really mean anything. That's not a big deal. But we forget, that wasn't the only thing. We had people shut down the Michigan State Legislature this year. People with guns. We're in a very very difficult spot right now. I think a lot of us, 2008, saw the election of the first black President, saw him as a symbol, a majority of Americans to vote, and it looked like something had changed but we made the mistake of thinking that the opposition was going to play by the rules and just come out and compete on the marketplace, the fact of the matter is that has just never been true. It's never been true. There's always been an anti-Democratic element to white supremacy, and that continues to this very day.

Callie Crossley:

What did the COVID crisis do, of course, in highlighting very distinct disparities among communities, and we saw communities of color, African Americans, and Latinos, on the short end of resources, and on the high end of getting most of the infected... the infections. So what did that do -- we're talking about the context of democracy and we're trying to figure out where we are and it's a year after George Floyd -- I mean, how do you pull it all together and walk away with... where do you think we're going?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Yeah, I think what it did was highlight what was already true... look, the world is simple, America is quite simple. It is a country that's built on the labor, the extracted stolen labor of black people, and on the stolen land of Native Americans. That's the baseline that it... that you're starting from and everything kind of follows

from that, and it wasn't able to rid itself of those black people when they were emancipated. And so, all of the beliefs that enabled that 250 years of bondage to take place, the necessary belief that this group of people were inferior, those beliefs continued afterwards. And so, again, when you believe people to be less than human, you are willing to put them in circumstances wherein, a plague arrives in your country and they disproportionately bear the weight. It is remarkably, remarkably simple, it's sad that it's that simple. We go through all sorts of tricks, and invasive maneuvers, to avoid the truth of who we are. I was on TV this morning, and I was talking about this guy, Nathan Bedford-Forrest....

Callie Crossley:

Mm-hmm.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

A slave trader.

Callie Crossley:

Yeah, I'm from Memphis, Tennessee, so... yeah!

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Oh, so I'm speaking, I'm speaking your language. My wife is from Memphis too, I'm speaking your language.

Callie Crossley:

Mm-hmm.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

This kind of guy was a Klansman. And there are more statues of Nathan Bedford-Forrest in Tennessee than there are of all three Presidents from Tennessee put together.

Callie Crossley:

Yep.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I mean, that tells you something about the country you're living in. And this is not... I'm not picking on Tennessee, I'm just using it as an example, I mean, you have the state of Texas at this very moment, that is moving to basically ban any intelligent... you know, I don't want to say correct, but certainly informed teaching of the history of enslavement in a state that basically came out of slavery, but don't exist because of slavery. We're in a bad space, laws are being passed in Iowa to ban the 1619 project. I'm not avoiding your question, what I'm saying is when those things are true. We had a President at the time that says he doesn't really care

about COVID because he foolishly, foolishly, thinks it's only in areas where our people are not. What's going to happen? You know what's interesting? What's interesting is the number of sheer white people that paid the price for that thinking. You know, Sturgis, you know what I mean, like the motorcycle rally they had. The sheer number of white people who died strictly because a critical mass of mostly white people were willing to empower a dude who said it's okay as long as disproportionately more of them die. Sick. Sick.

Callie Crossley:

Does it mean anything that, because of COVID, and the disparities that became quite public and obvious, and, after George Floyd's death, lots of people said "I really just did not know. I mean I knew it was bad, but I really did not know?"

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I don't want to be clear, I just want to be clear. We don't have a majority problem. I don't think the problem is that there aren't enough people. I think there are enough people. I think there is a critical mass of other people who are pledged to the notion of anti-democracy. That's the problem. If this was just an up or down vote, I think we would live in a very different country. But it isn't. It isn't. So I'm holding two ideas, and I think we've done a very very successful job of educating people and letting people understand it's not that, it's not that we don't... that there aren't... good-hearted, intelligent white folks out there. That's not what it is. It is that the heart of white supremacy... it is anti-Democratic. These folks are not willing to compete in the marketplace of ideas, that's not enough for them. They need to disempower the opposition as any sort of Democratic force. So yes, it does mean something. Because I think you didn't have those numbers before, I think you certainly get more people, now, like that. I think that's definitely true. But I also think you have to recognize the asymmetry of what's going on here. One group here was fighting not just for a reckoning with history but for Democracy itself, and another group is fighting against it.

Callie Crossley:

When you wrote "Between the World and Me," you wanted to write the letter to your son, but you also wanted to take him -- and did -- out of the country to be out of this kind of oppressiveness.

And I wonder now, given everything that we've just been talking about, would your letter to him be quite different?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No, no, the thing is, it isn't so much that I wanted to take him out of the oppressiveness, because that's everywhere, it's in France, it's in France right now, France is very likely about to elect a far-right fascist, so they're following the Trump model, so it's not that I thought we could escape it. I actually just wanted him to learn a different language.

Callie Crossley: Okay.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Because I believe language is one of the great keys for opening up the aspects of life and other places in the world and seeing things that you don't have access to without. So I don't know, it's hard to... it's always hard with a work like that because it comes out... for me it comes out of a moment where... that I was in. I guess it would be different now, but I don't know how.

Callie Crossley: I want to give you an opportunity to talk about the commentary you did last week in response to UNC not offering... or rescinding tenure to Nikole Hannah-Jones, who is the creator of the 1619 project. You said then that white power can only retain its privilege in our political system if it can tell itself a story.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, it's not enough to just do something to somebody, you got to act like you didn't do it. There's a piece in the *New York Times*, a very, very good piece, that tries to reconstruct exactly what was taken during the program that was launched in Tulsa with the 300 black folks who were massacred down there. And one of the things that's been clear in the reporting is immediately, immediately after they killed those people and destroyed their home and destroyed their property, they set about destroying the evidence that they had ever done anything. Tell yourself a story. This didn't happen. You can't stand up and just be the villain, you have to construct yourself as some sort of knight. I think about this and... I can come back to Nikole very specifically, but just in terms of this specific point about telling yourself a story, look. It's hard to hear. People love Thomas Jefferson. Statesman, author of the Declaration of Independence, brilliant genius, did all these things, lived in France,

one of the forefathers of our country. He was a slaveholder, though. And I would argue, in fact, that him being a slaveholder was the most important part of his life. Slaveholder was his career. That's what he did. Slavery was the source of his wealth, all of that other stuff that everybody loves about him... none of that exists unless he can pay his bills, and how did he pay his bills? By extracting labor from people. By stealing, violently stealing, labor from people. That was his... look, I make my living as a writer and a journalist. There are a lot of other things I love. I like to cook, I really really enjoy cooking, right. I have a Peloton, I really enjoy my Peloton. How do I buy those groceries, that nice Le Creuset I have in my kitchen? How did I get that Peloton? I'm a writer, that's my career, right? Thomas Jefferson's career was slaveholding. George Washington's career was slaveholding. All that other stuff... but that's not the story, you see, you can't tell yourself that story about your country. You can't say we were founded... you know, 2 out of 3 of our first three Presidents... their profession, trade, was slaveholding. They stole from other people. They were pirates. We don't want to hear that. So we say they were patriots. And we talk about all that other good... look, I'm not saying that all that other doesn't matter, it does. It does, but what were you at the end of the day? How did you make all that... you stole from people, bro, that's what you did. It's not the conversation we want to have. It's not enough that he held slaves, that's not enough. It's not enough that Thomas Jefferson held slaves, and was so in debt by the time he died, that those people had to be sold on the lawn of Montacello. Go to Montacello, they'll tell you. It's not me talking, you know, I've been to Montacello, this is what they'll tell you.

Callie Crossley:

Mm-hmm.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

You know, I'm not making this up, but that's not enough, so we have to tell ourselves a story... that says something different. And getting to your point about Nikole, that's Nikole's problem. That's Nikole's problem, Nikole won't tell their story. Nikole is looking at the evidence of what actually happened. And that's the problem. That's what you've got state legislators... I've never seen anything like this. State legislators trying to pass laws to ban a work of journalism. We should be outraged. Former President of the United

States directing an executive order at a journalist... what happened to freedom of the press? States like Texas directly... you know, one of the biggest states in the U.S., directly targeting journalistic work. What is she saying to make that so? What is she saying that 22 Senators, the Attorney Generals of multiple states, are attempting to direct policy, strictly... What is she saying that's so dangerous? But she won't tell the story. That's what it is.

Callie Crossley: Would you say that cancellation is public policy?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That's what I said, yeah. And that's dangerous. That's dangerous. Look, I think everybody should be more nice in real life. If you're saying mean things, I think that's bad. If you're in the state legislature of Iowa trying to ban journalism, if you're the President of the United States, the most powerful figure in the world, launching an assault against... I think that's significantly worse.

Callie Crossley: And that's in addition to 43 states or more trying to block voting rights.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, it is, and they're connected. Those two things are connected. Those two things are connected. The vote allows you to exert power, but to know what kind of world you want to live in, to create that world, to know what you're trying to use that power for, you need knowledge. You need knowledge. And so they're going the actual both ways. They're trying to constrict your understanding of the world and then they're trying to constrict your ability to act within that understanding. They're connected.

Callie Crossley: Well, I want to ask some specific questions about your writing because we're at the library, we're celebrating all the writing you're doing.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I love libraries. I love libraries.

Callie Crossley: Oh, I do too. You're doing so many different projects based on writing that it reminded me of another work of art, the song "Nonstop" from *Hamilton*. Has anybody ever told you this, that you remind them of the lyrics?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Nah.

Callie Crossley: Let me give you a few lyrics. “Why do you always say what you believe / Why do you always say what you believe / Every proclamation guarantees / free ammunition for your enemies / Why do you write like it’s going out of style? / Write day and night like it’s going out of style / Every day you fight like it’s going out of style.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates: That’s great!

Callie Crossley: I figured that’s you, and the writing, so many different things. So how are you immersed in all of these various projects, the film adaptations, the new books, and of course we’re gonna get to the comic books because otherwise, I will not be able to walk the streets. But first, let me just ask, how is it that you’re doing all this and that you decided, after years of nonfiction, to try fiction, for example?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I’ll tell you when I’m done. I’ll tell you when I’m done because I don’t know, I try not to think about it too much. You’d go crazy if you think about it. I don’t know, when I finished my first... the truth of it is, there’s a public face as an author and a private face as a writer, by which I mean that there are things that you’re doing that may not be immediately seen for publication, and that’s clearly the case with fiction, the fact of the matter is, my first novel, “The Water Dancer,” in terms of my work on it, it’s older than basically everything. It’s older than “Between the World and Me.” It’s older than “The Case for Reparations.” It’s older than almost everything in “We Were Eight Years in Power.” I started that book after, immediately after I published my first memoir, it’s just that I wasn’t good enough to actually execute it in a way that it could be published until 10 years later.

Callie Crossley: What did writing fiction give you that nonfiction didn’t?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Oh, that’s such a great question. With nonfiction, it’s like “these are the facts, this is what’s going on.” I’m trying to organize them in some sort of coherent way. With nonfiction, it’s like you establish that this is the world, and then you try to carve some sort

of coherent narrative within the world that you established. Weirdly enough, I'd say they both are obsessed with truth. It's true that you make things up in fiction, but having made them up, the story has to be loyal to it. It has to be true. You know, the guy can't be one thing in this place and then another thing in the other place. So it's actually very, very, very, very interesting. I kind of want to say that fiction is more, like, play, but I don't know that that's true. I really enjoyed nonfiction. When I had to write that piece for MSNBC last week, it was really difficult because it was on a timeline, but trying to figure out exactly what I thought and what I meant is deeply enjoyable to me, it's like I'm trying to clarify my own thinking. I have some sort of vague notion in the back of my head but I'm not sure what it means. So I enjoy that too.

Callie Crossley: So let me just ask this question before I get to the comic books.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Mm-hmm.

Callie Crossley: You're doing all this different stuff, the base of it is writing, would you then think of yourself as having moved into production as now a content creator?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No, no, I'm a writer.

Callie Crossley: I'm going to get you on the record for that. Alright now, we gotta talk about your... the new *Superman* movie. Because Twitter just blew up. Is he gonna be black? Let's answer that question. Is he black? Come on now. Give me some information. I know you try not to say....

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You're breaking up. I can't hear you.

Callie Crossley: I'm not breaking up, you can hear me!

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You're asking about comic books? I can't hear.

Callie Crossley: No, because people....

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I would love to answer.

Callie Crossley: People have some real strong feelings about it, both ways, I just would like to point out, but....

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I wish I could help them.

Callie Crossley: Alright, I tried, people. I tried to find out. How is it that you're moving from Marvel to DC? That seems to be an interesting... I can ask that question.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You're breaking up! You're breaking up, I can't hear anything.

Callie Crossley: Dang. Alright, well let me just upset a whole bunch of writers on this line. In 2018, when I did an interview with me, you told me you do not get writer's block, and I tried to fall out of the chair. Is that still true?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah.

Callie Crossley: Wow.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: You know what happens there, as I said, what I told you back then was that there are multiple moments when... you know, when I think about writer's block, there are moments when there's a notion that you want to express, and it's just not coming out. And we call that writer's block. But actually, what you need to do is write whatever's coming out. Writing is not... the term writing is, in fact, an illusion because writing is not really writing, it's revision. What you need to do is you have to write what's coming out, and then go back and revise and revise and revise until you get to that notion that you have in your head. Sometimes we find that what comes out isn't useful and we can't actually revise it so we gotta start again, but I have almost never sat down to write, and just spit out... and literally written what I wanted to say. That almost never... I usually start frustrated. And I think that there are a number of people who have the raw talent to be writers, but they can't get past that phase where you have to write down whatever really horrible, awful iteration is in your head of what you actually want to say. Because it just feels terrible. You're out with your friends and you're all having beers, and you're like "I got this great idea, I'm going to do this, do that," and they say "yeah man, you

should write that!” You go down, and you’re in front of the blank white page, and you start... and it don’t sound nowhere near as good as when you were telling your friends. What happened? What happened?

Callie Crossley:

I know that.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

And so you say, you know, “I’m done with this, man, I’m gonna go out and have another beer with my friends.” But the fact of it is, writing is writing that awful thing down. Going to bed, waking up the next morning, going at it, going at it again and again. That’s the writing.

Callie Crossley:

Alright, well, we’re going to switch to questions from the audience. I have a few here to start of the same theme, so I thought I would put them together so you can maybe try to tackle them. “What is the best way that white people can contribute or be part of the justice movement” is the theme, here is a very specific question. I’m gonna read it just like he sent it to me. “Mistakes white liberals make when hoping to be non racist, please allow him to develop his argument. If he has a moment, can he tell us white folks how we can be good allies beyond the usual ‘contribute to political campaigns, support Stacey Abrams, and other efforts to retain, if not expand, voting rights of African Americans and other BIPOC folks.’ Thanks.”

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I mean, I think don’t be white. Don’t be white. Don’t act white. And let me be very specific about that. I’ve said this before, don’t send your kids to segregated schools. I get it, your child is the most precious thing you have. I understand it. I understand it. But if you are sending your kid to a school, not just where it’s 99% white, but where there’s only a smattering of color to soothe your conscience, you’re being white. You’re being white. If you move into a neighborhood in transition, where there are old black families who have been there, and you and your other white friends decide you want to start a listserv, for “new people ” in the neighborhood, you’re being white. You’re being white. Maybe you should join the local block association. You don’t have to lead it, just join, just be a part of it. And so, I think the main thing is just interrogate the kind of... you know, that’s two examples, but segregation is all

around us. Interrogate the segregation that's in your life. You just don't have to live that way. That's the main thing. I think that too much psychic energy is spent on trying to figure out how not to feel bad. You're gonna feel bad. We feel bad. There's no... it's a bad situation. And once you understand it, you really really feel terrible about it. Because you are enrolled in... I get it, it's a trap. You've been enrolled into something that you did not make a choice to be enrolled in. I get it. You didn't choose to be white. You didn't choose to live with this, you didn't choose to live in a white... that's not a choice you made. But the flip side of that is, this isn't a choice I made either. I didn't choose to be racialized either. And so, we live under that burden. So, we've gotta try to find ways to act and be supportive of spaces that are not reinforcing segregation, that are not reinforcing whiteness. I hope that that makes sense, and I hope that that helps.

Callie Crossley:

So, another part under this same theme is this, that a lot of conversation about the difference between not being racist and anti-racist, as you know, as Ibram Kendi has made clear, there is a difference, so this questioner says, "would you discuss the anti-racism movement specifically as this movement continues, does it continue to maintain and perpetuate white supremacy culture, does he agree or disagree, I would like Mr. Coates to speak about liberal racism. Does he believe liberal racism maintains whiteness?"

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Wow, I'm not really sure how to tackle that, that was a pretty broad question, I'll leave Ibram's work to him, I have a lot of respect for Ibram, there's no disrespect there, but I'll leave it to him. Certainly, it's true that you may be the kind of person who feels like you would like a better America, would like a different kind of America. What we find is that very few people want to put skin in the game. I saw that, that guy, I think 75 years old in Buffalo. And he put his body in front of that line of cops, and got his head busted open. That's an ally right there. That's an ally. I'm not saying you should go out and get your heads busted in, I'm just saying that that's an example of somebody who is willing to sacrifice something. The question I would ask you is what are you giving up? What are you giving up? Or are you just sitting in your privilege, lamenting that you have it? What are you willing to give

up? What are you willing to sacrifice? I think that's the core question.

Callie Crossley:

So here's another one. We've now moved off of that theme. Understanding that ours is a white supremacist country, could you talk about some of the things that keep you committed to contributing to this country rather than taking your talents elsewhere, somewhere else? I am mostly asking your personal, internal discussion rather than a general discussion. This will help my thinking as another talented black man in America.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Well, home is home. Home is home. Where will I go? This is my home. You know, I always laugh when I hear this thing from a certain kind of white person: "go back to Africa." And I think, black people are one of the oldest populations in this country. And oftentimes, a person telling you "go back to Africa" ain't been here as long as you've been here. Donald Trump, his family arrived in the early 20th century. Gonna tell you about "making America great again." Just got here! Just got here. The fact that there are burglars and robbers in your home doesn't mean you should leave. Maybe if I had my individual choices, I would leave somewhere else, but I'm part of a line of ancestors that, again, as Nikole said, stretches back to 1619, who have been fighting this war. I'm not an individual. I don't have the right to just up and leave like that. I'm part of a community, part of a group, part of a heritage. So I mean, and frankly, anywhere else you're gonna go, you're going to find a fight. Because anywhere else in this world, you're going to find powerful people looking to exploit and take things from people that are weaker than them. So wherever I would go, I would just find another war. America is not particular in this. There is oppression everywhere. The scope and the type are certainly different, but wherever I would go, if I was living on my morality, I would immediately find that group of people who were being oppressed. So this is as good a place as any.

Callie Crossley:

What is your soulful guidance for young people today who are going through it and bearing the weight of all these issues that we're talking about, yet want to be a part of the change?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I don't know. That's above my pay grade. I know when I was a young person, it was really important to educate myself. It was really important to have what folks in my generation used to call knowledge itself. That is, to read as much as I possibly could, to try to understand the world around me. But that's a big question. I don't know.

Callie Crossley: You've talked mostly about what is happening at the national level, if in Cambridge we try to consider ourselves a little more progressive, what are the things that can happen at the local level to meaningfully address these problems?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I'm not in Cambridge, so I'm really really not clear. I strongly, strongly suspect that there are black organizations in Cambridge that could directly address that. And I think that's generally true no matter where you are. Don't ask the quote unquote big, well-known, famous black person who's on a call with you on a Zoom with you, doing an event with you what you should be doing in your community. Ask people that are there. They know.

Callie Crossley: The vote has been the way that most of all of our progress has been made as the Republicans make it even harder to vote, what else can be done to fight for change?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I have something very disappointing to say. It's not actually true. We didn't vote our way to freedom. There was a war. I'm not endorsing war, I'm not saying that's a good thing, but when you think about the greatest change that happened in African American lives, since we've been here, the transition from slavery into freedom, it was a war. It was a war. We didn't vote our way into the Civil Rights Movement either. Frankly, there was another war, World War II, which made certain things that we had here intolerable. There was a Cold War, and that made certain things intolerable, and then a lot of us put our bodies in the street. Put our bodies on the line, and then you got the vote. You got the vote that way, actually. And I think that's actually a great lesson in that. I'm not saying voting isn't important, it is. It's extremely, extremely important. But things have to be happening outside of that. Voting isn't synonymous with politics, it's a part of politics. But our

history in this country has actually been that when we've made our most progress, oftentimes we've had to do things outside of voting.

Callie Crossley:

So here's a followup to that, is a 21st century Civil War inevitable, and if not, why?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I don't know. I don't know. I will say that, when you have... you see, a ballot is an act of nonviolence, okay? It's a way of settling differences in a society without folks going up and beating on each other or shooting each other. When you have large swaths of this country that are effectively being engineered by a minority, by a minority of the voters to rob people of nonviolent means to address disputes, I think that's a huge problem. I think that's a huge problem, and I think it narrows the possibility for nonviolent problem solving. I don't think that means you're going to have left wing militias or black militias, you know, that's not what I'm leading to, but when you constrict folks in that way, what I would ask is what do you expect to happen? That's the thing that we should understand about this, like when folks are robbing people of the right of their vote, they're robbing them of the most powerful nonviolent weapon they have. And I think that has really, really deep consequences.

Callie Crossley:

What are your thoughts on how school systems are either perpetuating institutional racism or making opportunities to face institutional racism?

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I'd refer back to my argument about segregation. I think that's a huge, huge problem. I think the biggest way is that we tolerate public school systems in which resources are not equitably distributed, in which people choose certain schools because of the resources, and they have no problem doing that, even as other people's kids are denied it, strictly because of their color.

Callie Crossley:

What's your perspective on the enmeshment of racism and capitalism? Can one ever be addressed without the other? I am starting to feel a bit hopeless that capitalism will forever pave the path for white supremacy to continue to live on.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

You probably can have racism without American capitalism. There's a long history before they did the slave trade... you go out and go back and look at the history of feudalism, for instance. There was a borderline racialized way that people talked about servants. I don't know if it goes the other way. I think it's pretty clear that the hierarchy... that's embedded in capitalism. And that's tolerated. And it only functions in America with racism as a component. Okay, what do I mean by that? The idea in capitalism is that people compete, right? They compete for resources, and you will have winners and you will have losers. What racism ensures for white people is that there is a class of losers that they call, excuse my language, [n-word], that they can never be. So what that means is that there is a level that you will never sink to. We see this in the socio-economic data, for instance. By and large, black people's experience in this country is qualitatively different, by which I mean there are experiences that they have that virtually no white person has. If you take... for instance Chicago. I don't know Cambridge or Boston that well, but I bet the same is true. If you look at the city of Chicago and look at the incarceration rates, you would find that the majority black neighborhood with the lowest incarceration rate does not overlap with the majority white neighborhood with the highest incarceration rate. I've looked at this. It means you're having a wholly different experience. Two wholly different experiences. And so the implication is, for that, for white people, is that they never really had to compete, in a certain way. I'm of the mind that, maybe there's a better way to structure society that isn't premised on competition, but that we have that here, that we say there are gonna be winners and losers, I'm pretty sure that the extent to which white people, or a critical mass of white people tolerate that, is linked to the fact that they can never truly be the biggest loser. I think those things are tied.

Callie Crossley:

I'm just trying to find this... here. As a person of color, how do you resolve the anger that you feel, that I feel, trying to do antiracist work, deal with microaggressions, or speak out against civil injustices amongst white circles? Working in a homogeneous environment, trying to seek out better resources, and raising kids in homogeneous schools.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, I'm a bad person to ask that. Because I never lived like that. And I never worked like that. And it was kind of intentional, and I didn't really raise my kid that way. I'm not throwing shade on that, I understand that some are in that circumstance, but I just kinda avoided it. I don't like being assaulted, I don't like people doubting my intellect. So I've pretty consciously avoided that.

Callie Crossley: As I'm asking you all of these questions, I'm reminded that there was a time when you were really not comfortable with being called "our James Baldwin" but the horse kinda left the barn, how do you feel about it now, are you more comfortable with that?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: No, people give you a name. It's not always up to you.

Callie Crossley: Okay, alright. I just was asking about your comfort level with it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, that's what I mean though, that's what I'm saying. I feel how I feel, I would rather other things be said, but that's not the worst thing someone could say about you.

Callie Crossley: I don't think so, yeah. What are the most critical structural changes we need to prioritize to move racial justice forward?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Probably the wealth gap. Probably the wealth gap. You know, when I was working on "Case for Reparations," you got a 20 to 1 wealth gap. By which I mean, for every nickel of wealth black people have, white folks had a dollar. White families had a dollar. Nothing will change. That to me is the purest expression of inequality. The ultimate effects of racism. Nothing will change unless that's addressed.

Callie Crossley: So, what are your thoughts on Biden, on President Biden becoming President, and if and how things have changed?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I'm glad he won. I'm glad he won. It's shocking how much quieter the world is, not having your President tweet out hateful things every day, five, ten times a day. I think, at least to some extent so far, there is a sense that you're gonna have to move fast, that you can't wait, but I don't know. We're hanging on by a very very thin thread. One vote majority in the Senate. Seven or eight votes in the

house, something like that? And I think those who oppose him make it very very clear that their goal is to completely invalidate him and delegitimize him and not work with him. So unless he has a government that he can actually work with, I think it's a tough place.

Callie Crossley: Are there any lessons we can -- should -- take away from the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa for dismantling, if we can, structural racism here?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I don't know, I don't know because I haven't studied apartheid. I'd imagine so, but I just wouldn't know.

Callie Crossley: Alright, George Floyd was in jail for five years due to a violent house invasion. I don't know that that's true, but this is the question. During those five years, the system failed to help George be successful when he left prison, how do we reform this system?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: I don't know because I think the most important thing about, you know, George Floyd, at least from the perspective of the movement is that I don't care what you did, you don't deserve to be tortured to death for nine minutes. Start by not doing that. Start by not legitimizing brutality against people because of some notion of who you think they are. In terms of integrating people once they get out of prison, more effectively, we shouldn't have so many prisons. This is a recent development. We started this in 1970. You can't convince me that there's something more morally wrong with people today that we had to erect this larger prison system. So while I do think that obviously there should be certain causes to help people once they get out of jail, how about not jailing them in the first place? We just... we send way too many people to jail. And it was not always this way. It's a recent thing that happened within the lifetime of a lot of people who are on this call right now.

Callie Crossley: Well, there's a movement among quote unquote progressive prosecutors and DAs, and we have one here in Boston, in Suffolk County, who have elected not to send people to jail for certain non-offensive, nonviolent minor offenses, and a lot of people are not happy with that. So. Can you share your thoughts on the model minority stereotypes ascribed to certain immigrant groups in

America and how those feed the marginalization of black and Native Americans?

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Well I think... are we talking model minority in terms of Asians?

Callie Crossley: They did not say, but I would assume.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Okay, I think those two things depend on each other. When you have one group or two groups basically locked out of society, it's nice to construct another group to say "see, the problem is clearly you." I'm not saying that -- I just want to be absolutely clear about this -- I'm not saying that that's an effort made by Asian Americans, anymore than I would say that it's an effort made by black people to exist where we exist. But in terms of the rhetoric and the positioning, clearly, one is related to the other.

Callie Crossley: What do you make of the fact that we're in a situation now where there are violent anti-Asian incidents going on? We've had... some have estimated as many as 900 black people killed at the hands of police since George Floyd, and most recently, there's been some anti-Semitic attacks, an uptick in that in several places in the country. It feels like... I mean, I know the country has a history of violence, but it feels like we're in a season of violence.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Yeah, we are, we are. And the first thing I would say in reference to the anti-Asian thing is we have a really, really old history of anti-Asian violence and anti-Asian policies. What have... the things that I based a lot of my research on when I was doing "The Case for Reparations" was the internment period of Japanese Americans during the quote unquote Good War. Think about that. You know, based on race you're going to jail someone. I think echo through and I think they have effects, you know. And while I'm horrified by the uptick, I'm not necessarily surprised by that. I think it matches our history. In terms of the broader violence that we've seen in the country, I think we will find, eventually, when we go back and do the research, that COVID was very, very disruptive. The lines of society were very, very much disrupted. Public health is a real thing. And so, when you're in a community and there are people that patrol the community and [unintelligible audio] those that are in the community, adults in the community,

people that are respected when they're laid low by COVID, that has effects.

Callie Crossley:

We've come to the end of our program, it's been a delight talking to you, I had one last question to ask, just because you have to these days, because all of you Howard-related people have become obnoxious, so I just wanted to give you an opportunity to be obnoxious, if you needed to be, have a little space to do that. Since you got the Vice President, you got Kendi, you got everybody... everybody's at the Mecca, as you called Howard University.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

I don't know, I love home. It's interesting when I was at Howard in the 90s, obviously Howard has an illustrious... but it wasn't like this. This wasn't the sense, in fact it was, in that generation, the sense was if you were smart, because we were post Civil Rights kids, you went to a white school. You didn't go somewhere like Howard. So it's just been fascinating to see the evolution. I would say that, more than Howard, I'm proud of historically black colleges and universities and I think they all are extremely, extremely important and we all need places where we can go home. Be that FAM, be that Moorehouse, be that Spellman, be that Hampton, be it North Carolina A&T, be it Tougaloo, Tuskegee, wherever you are, Cheyney, you know what I mean, University of Maryland Eastern Shore, you need to feel like you can go home. So, you know, I get it.

Callie Crossley:

My parents met at Southern University.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Alright, that's what I'm talking about.

Callie Crossley:

So, thank you again for joining us for the Voices of Justice series, Ta-Nehisi Coates, we are looking forward to, ahem, the *Superman* details as they come forward, whatever your next writing project will be, the adaptation of "The Water Dancer," and on and on and on. Thank you so much for sharing your time and your talents with us, and I want to thank everyone who joined us tonight for joining this series, and to look for more from the Cambridge Public Library. Goodnight.

Ta-Nehisi Coates:

Thanks, sorry I was late. Goodnight.