

# Ta-Nahisi Coates

Interview for *Democracy Now*

## Transcript

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**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** "Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage." Those are the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of an explosive new book about white supremacy and being black in America. Titled *Between the World and Me*, it is written as a letter to his 15-year-old son, Samori, and has been compared to "the talk" parents have with their children to prepare them for facing police harassment and brutality. The book is a combination of memoir, history and analysis.

Its release comes after the shooting of nine African-American churchgoers by an avowed white supremacist in Charleston and the horrifying death of Sandra Bland, a 28-year-old African-American woman in Texas who was pulled over for not signaling a lane change. In video of her arrest, an officer commands her to get out of her car or he would "light [her] up." Meanwhile, the nation is marking the first anniversary of the police killings of Eric Garner in Staten Island, Michael Brown in Ferguson, and in April, Baltimore erupted in protest over the death of Freddie Gray in police custody.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Today we spend the hour with Ta-Nehisi Coates. He grew up in Baltimore. And in *Between the World and Me*, he writes, quote, "To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear."

Ta-Nehisi Coates is a national correspondent at *The Atlantic*, where he writes about culture, politics and social issues. He received the George Polk Award for his *Atlantic* [cover story](#), "The Case for Reparations," which he [joined us to discuss last May](#). His book, *Between the World and Me*, is called "required reading" by Toni Morrison, who writes, quote, "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates."

Well, Ta-Nehisi Coates, welcome back to *Democracy Now!*

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Thanks for having me.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And congratulations on your book.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Thank you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** *Between the World and Me*.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Thank you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You write it as a letter to your son, Samori. Tell us why.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, I hate to disappoint you guys, but mostly as a literary technique, I began *Between the World and Me* after I finished the draft of "The Case for Reparations," and I was actually somewhat frustrated with that piece, because it's a very, very empirical piece, very, very much based in the tools of journalism, reportage, very, very evidence-based. But I thought, at the same time, it made what it meant to live under a system that made reparations essential in the first place abstract. There was a distancing effect about talking about people as numbers, you know, about talking about people across history.

And what I wanted to do with this book is to give the reader some sense of what it meant to live under a system of plunder as an individual, to express that, to take it out of the realm of numbers and to take it directly into, you know, individual people. How does it feel every day in your life to live under such a system? How do you cope with that? How is it warping? What is it perverse? What sort of effects does it ultimately have on you? And how do you, you know, as much as possible, make your peace with it?

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And you write also that the impact of the Ferguson decision, the grand jury's decision not to indict, had on your son, and the not distance it created, but your feeling that you couldn't really explain to him what had happened.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, yeah. I mean, it was—I think, in a lot of situations like this, there is an immediate urge, when our children have a reaction to something that has a racist component to it, to assure them somehow that everything will be OK, that there's some sort of justice that will win out in the end. And, you know, my study, my very elementary, pedestrian, autodidactic study of history, does not demonstrate that to be true. My own life does not necessarily demonstrate that to be true. My belief is in the chaos of the world and that you have to find your peace within the chaos and that you still have to find some sort of mission. You know, in the book, it's a dedication to the principle of struggle, even within the chaos, with no assurance that you will see any sort of victory within your lifetime.

**AMY GOODMAN:** "Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage."

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yeah, that just, as far as I'm concerned, is just a statement of fact, you know, throughout the history. I was sitting here watching the Sandra Bland video, which I have avoided, because I think, you know, all of us have our ways of coping, and sometimes it just becomes a little too much. But I was watching it here. And when you're in a situation—where she was stopped for not signaling, I believe it is—when the powers that be, when the person who is armed, with the ability, you know, on behalf of the state to dispense lethal violence, decides to threaten someone with that lethal violence, based on a turn signal, that's a statement on where we are. That's a statement on heritage. That's a statement on a whole set of beliefs that undergird that. Very, very disturbing. And unfortunately, those beliefs go back right to the founding of this country.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So, you wrote a letter to your son. James Baldwin wrote a letter to his nephew.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yes.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Toni Morrison said this is "required reading," and compares you to James

Baldwin. The significance of this? You said hers was the only blurb you wanted.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yeah, yeah. Well, you know, in publishing, they do this thing where they just load you down with blurbs, and it's like 10 different people, you know, who they try to find to festoon the book. And they managed to do that with Toni Morrison anyway, putting it on both sides.

And, you know, I guess, for me, the significance of that quote, that blurb, for me, is, Toni Morrison is somebody who has been such a figure in our community, within black literature, for so long. Our greatest living American writer—I think there's a strong, strong argument, you know, for that. I'm partial, in some ways, to E. L. Doctorow, who just left us last night, as it seems. But Toni Morrison just—I mean, when you think about a figure who just represents what literature is in this country, and for black people particularly, there was no one else. And this book is very much—I wrote it to be very much within the tradition of African-American literature, with quotes from Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, James Baldwin. That was how I situated the work. And so, I am very, very appreciative, just very, very honored by her endorsement.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're going to continue this conversation after break. Toni Morrison writes, "The language of *Between the World and Me*, like Coates's journey, is visceral, eloquent, and beautifully redemptive. And its examination of the hazards and hopes of black male life is as profound as it is revelatory." This is *Democracy Now!* We'll be back with Ta-Nehisi Coates in a minute.

[break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** Our guest for the hour is Ta-Nehisi Coates, the national correspondent at *The Atlantic*. His new book is called *Between the World and Me*. Juan?

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I wanted to ask you—in the book, you talk about the influences on your life, and specifically when you first began reading Malcolm X and the enormous influence he had on your life, and also the fact that your father was a member and a leader of the Black Panther Party, and the influence that those movements, of Malcolm and the Panthers, had on your consciousness in your upbringing.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, they had a tremendous influence. These are my first sources, you know, of skepticism, the notion that one should be skeptical of the narratives that one is presented with. That's the first place I learned it.

One of the things that's really, really present in *Between the World and Me* is, I am in some ways outside of the African-American tradition. The African-American tradition, in the main, is very, very church-based, very, very Christian. It accepts, you know, certain narratives about the world. I didn't really have that present in my house. As you said, my dad was in the Black Panther Party. The mainstream sort of presentation of the civil rights movement was not something that I directly inherited.

And beyond that, you know, I have to say, that just as a young man and as a boy going out and navigating the world, the ways in which the previous generation's struggle was presented to me did not particularly make sense. And so, notions of nonviolence, for instance, when I walked out into the

streets of West Baltimore, seemed to have very, very little applicability. Violence was essential to one's life there. It was everywhere. It was all around us. And then, when one looked out to the broader country, as I became more politically conscious, it was quite obvious that violence was essential to America—to its past, to its present and to its future. And so, there was some degree of distance for me between how—my politics and how I viewed the world at that time and what was presented as my political heritage.

And instead, I very much gravitated, you know, to my dad's sort of political activism with the Black Panther Party, and really to Malcolm X, who, you know, I would argue, influences this book, who had a very, very pragmatic, tactile view of America and of history. You know, I can remember in "Message to the Grass Roots" him saying, you know, "Don't"—you know, he's critiquing nonviolence, and so he says, "Don't give up your life. Preserve your life. It's the best thing you have going. And if you've got to give it up, make sure it's even-stein." And some hear that as braggadocio, but for me, it was a profound claim about the value of your body, that your body is the most essential thing you have, and it should not be sacrificed because these folks down in Mississippi or Alabama are out of their mind. Preserve your body. And that, to me, was just so beautiful and so real. It was not esoteric. It made perfect sense to me.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And you say he was the most honest leader.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** He was the most honest man. He's the first honest man I knew of, somewhat. You know, I knew other honest men, but, you know, in a bit of hyperbole, he was the first honest man—he was the first person I heard, and it matched what I saw when I walked outside. It matched what I saw when I opened up my history books about the country. It just seemed, you know, when he says—you know, when Malcolm says, if violence is wrong in America, then violence is wrong—that is such a, you know, essential critique, that should be levied, as far as I'm concerned, before any president that stands up on Martin Luther King Day. Either violence is wrong, or it's not. You know, one has to justify it. And so, that was just profound to me.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You talk about the fear, living in fear.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yeah, I mean, and this—you know, to tie this into the previous question, life in Baltimore was, is and will be for some time quite violent. I can remember, as I talk about in the book, being a young man coming out of my elementary school, seeing what should have been just an after-school yard fight and seeing one of these boys pull out a gun, and being very, very present at the age of, say, 11 years old that children were walking around with the ability to end the lives of other children, are going into middle school, and having an entire ritual totally devoted to making sure I was safe—you know, concerns about what I was wearing, concerns about who I was walking to school with, concerns about how many people I was walking to school with, concerns during lunchtime about where I was sitting, where I was spending my time—and at the same time being aware, dimly aware, that somewhere out in the world the majority of Americans did not have to carry that fear with them, you know, and then eventually understanding how that was connected to our politics.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Speaking of your childhood, I wanted to go to Marshall "Eddie" Conway, the

former Black Panther leader in Baltimore, Maryland, who was released from prison last year after serving 44 years for a murder he denies committing. For years, Eddie Conway's supporters campaigned for him to be pardoned. *Democracy Now!* [interviewed Eddie Conway](#) less than 24 hours after his release. I asked him about his experience writing a memoir in prison called *Marshall Law: The Life & Times of a Baltimore Black Panther*.

**MARSHALL "EDDIE" CONWAY:** I think at some point I realized I was getting older, and I realized that I had a lot of experiences and a lot of history of things that had happened, and they hadn't been recorded. And I think they would have been lost to history, and they would have been lessons that had been learned through organizing in prisons that other people could have used. So I think at some point I sat down, and I started writing, and I tried to capture what it was that we had tried to do during those turbulent years that George Jackson was organizing in California and Attica occurred in New York.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That was Eddie Conway, again, less than 24 hours after his release from prison, where he served 44 years. Can you, Ta-Nehisi Coates, talk about Eddie Conway's presence in your life, even behind bars?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, it's a little emotional for me, and I'll explain why. When people hear the term "political prisoner," especially on the left, it becomes a kind of abstraction. Folks are aware of injustice, and they're aware that there are folks in prison who are in prison, you know, largely because of their activism. Eddie Conway is central to my first memories. My parents used to take me to, when it was open, the Baltimore city penitentiary to see Eddie Conway—I was talking to my dad about this recently—from the time I might have been one or two years old. I mean, literally, my first memories are of black men in jail, specifically of Eddie Conway. That was a huge, huge, huge influence on me, I mean, when you talk about like this notion of—just going back to your question, Juan—of violence, knowing that that was present.

And, you know, I had this conversation with my dad recently. I asked him; I said, "Well, why did you take me into a prison? Why would you take a three-year-old, four-year-old child into a prison?" And my memories of this are mostly of being bored and seeing the gates and, you know, the kinds of things that children will remember. And he said, "I wanted you to see the face of the enemy. I wanted you to see what you were up against." You know? And so, in many ways, everything I've done as a journalist, up until and including this book, really begins like right back there. You know, it's very difficult for me to imagine myself here right now without those experiences.

And let me just say how happy I am that he got out. You know, at some point in my mind, I probably began to conceive a world in which he would die in prison, and I'm happy he didn't.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I wanted to ask you about another part of the book. I mean, the whole book is impressive, but to me, one of the most impressive aspects of it was your description of life at Howard University—

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Right, right.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** —and your description of the importance of Howard University in the

intellectual life of the African-American people in the United States. Could you elaborate on that, what Howard meant to you? And obviously, you say you didn't spend much time in class; you spent it all in the library devouring all kinds of works. But if you could sort of give us a sense of that, for those who are listening and watching, of what the Howard experience meant to you?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, one of the things that—you know, this theme of the book of living under a system of plunder and about surviving and how you deal with that and how you struggle against it, within that are the beautiful things that black people have forged, you know, even under really, really perilous conditions. For me, Howard University is one of the most loveliest, for me personally.

To try to explain this, Howard is one of several historically black colleges and universities, is, I think, rather unique in terms of its size and in terms of its scope. It is a beacon point, the Mecca, as I call it, as it calls itself, you know, in the book, for the entire black diaspora around the world. And so, to come to Howard University at the age of 17, as I did, and to see black people from Montreal, to see black people from Paris, to see black people from Ghana, to see black people from South Africa, to see black people from Mississippi, to see black people from Oakland, to see biracial black people, to see black people with parents from India, to see black people with Jewish parents—you know, things that I had not encountered in West Baltimore—to see black people who took semesters off to go to other countries and live, to see black people with deep interests in other languages, it was tremendous.

And really what it showed me is, even within what seems like a narrow band, which is to say, you know, black life, is in fact quite cosmopolitan, is in fact a beautiful, beautiful rainbow. And to see all of these people, you know, of all these different persuasions, and to have that heritage—you know, Toni Morrison went to Howard. Amiri Baraka went to Howard. Lucille Clifton went to Howard. Ossie Davis went to Howard. And I was aware of that when I was there. Charles Drew went to Howard. Thurgood Marshall went to the law school. Being aware of that and having all of that brought to bear, again, it's one of those things that I can't really separate from my career as a writer.

**AMY GOODMAN:** So talk, Ta-Nehisi Coates, about a friend you made there, about Prince Jones.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** So, one of the people I met, you know, whose life was very, very different from mine, whose background was very, very different from mine, was my friend Prince Jones. He was a child of Mabel Jones. Mabel Jones was born the child of sharecroppers in, you know, just deep, deep poverty in rural Louisiana. Through dint of her own intelligence, through dint of her own work, through dint of her own efforts, she raised herself up, became a doctor, went to LSU, served in the Navy, became a radiologist, you know, accumulated some amount of wealth, raised two beautiful children. One daughter went to UPenn. Her son, Prince, had the ability really to go to any Ivy League school, was tremendously, tremendously intelligent, chose Howard University, was attracted to this heritage, this legacy, went there.

And one evening—at this point, Prince was engaged to be married, had had a young daughter—one evening a police officer, who was dressed as an undercover officer, dressed as a—who was an undercover officer dressed as a criminal, was in pursuit of some other suspected criminal, somehow confused the two, followed my friend Prince Jones's Jeep from Prince George's County, Maryland, the

suburbs of Maryland, through Washington, D.C., out into the suburbs again, into Virginia, where he shot him. And his explanation for this was that Prince tried to ram his Jeep.

But see, again, you know, it's the people who are empowered by the state to kill who bear the responsibility, ultimately. And I have oftentimes tried to imagine myself in Prince's shoes, finding out that somebody is following me, who's literally dressed to be a criminal, you know, at 2:00 in the morning, across three different jurisdictions. How would I respond? Prince was shot, you know, mere yards from his fiancée's home. Nothing was done about this. The officer was never prosecuted. The officer was in fact put back out on the streets to continue applying his trade. I had to sit with that for 15 years. And again, that was one of the events, not—you know, to say nothing of what his mother's sitting with it—but that was, you know, another big, big element in wanting to write this book.

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're going to break again, but then I'd like to ask you to read from your book.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Sure.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You have a very powerful section on Prince and his mom, Mabel. We're spending the hour with Ta-Nehisi Coates. He's a national correspondent at *The Atlantic*. His book is called *Between the World and Me*. Stay with us.

[break]

**AMY GOODMAN:** We're spending the hour with Ta-Nehisi Coates, who is the award-winning national correspondent for *The Atlantic* magazine. His new book is called *Between the World and Me*. And, Ta-Nehisi Coates, if you would read a section of this book?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Sure. And this is towards the end of my interview with Mabel Jones, and she is trying to describe the impact of Prince's death on her life and just on how she sees the world. Prince had a sister, and so, you know, I asked her about this, and she went here.

"I now wondered about her daughter, who'd been recently married. There was a picture on display of this daughter and her new husband. Dr. Jones was not optimistic. She was intensely worried about her daughter bringing a son into America, because she could not save him, she could not secure his body from the ritual violence that had claimed her son. She compared America to Rome. She said she thought the glory days of this country had long passed, and even those glory days were sullied: They had been built on the bodies of others. 'And we can't get the message,' she said. 'We don't understand that we are embracing our deaths.'

"I asked Dr. Jones if her mother was still alive. She told her mother had passed away in 2002, at the age of eighty-nine. I asked Dr. Jones how her mother had taken Prince's death, and her voice retreated into an almost-whisper, and Dr. Jones said, 'I don't know that she did.'

"She alluded to *12 Years a Slave*. 'There he was,' she said, speaking of Solomon Northup. 'He had means. He had a family. He was living like a human being. And one racist act took him back. And the same is true of me. I spent years developing a career, acquiring assets, engaging responsibilities. And one racist act. It's all it takes.'"

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's Ta-Nehisi Coates reading from his book, *Between the World and Me*.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I wanted to ask you—you say in the book, when you were delving through all the scores of volumes in Howard University, that you came—you discovered that knowledge is not accumulated through consensus and through adding of—by one scholar to another to the trove of knowledge, but that there's constant conflict—

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yes.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** —and debate, and there are political sects and different analyses and perspectives on the same issue. So I wanted to ask you about the criticism, some of the criticism that's been raised of your book by another great intellectual here in this country, Cornel West, who wrote, "In Defense of James Baldwin—Why Toni Morrison (a literary genius) is Wrong about Ta-Nehisi Coates." And Cornel writes, "Baldwin was a great writer of profound courage who spoke truth to power. Coates is a clever wordsmith with journalistic talent who avoids any critique of the Black president in power." I'm wondering—of course, that spawned, in itself, an attack on—another attack on Cornel West by Michael Eric Dyson in defense of you. So you've now been—your book has now become part of the ongoing debate between African-American intellectuals in this country. Your response to Cornel West?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, I was really, really sorry to see that. You know, one of my memories at Howard University is seeing Cornel West come there, actually, with Henry Louis Gates, you know, and face Howard—they had come down from Harvard, and, you know, we at Howard kind of looked at Harvard a little askance—and really, you know, just take on the really, really challenging questions from the audience and from the students there. It was deeply, deeply inspirational. It was one of those experiences that I could only receive at Howard University.

I don't think Cornel West knows who I am. But—and I don't mean like I'm all that, and he doesn't know who I am. I mean I literally don't—I think he saw this James Baldwin quote from Toni Morrison, and I think he then went and wrote, you know, a couple of Facebook posts. I wrote a book. People can read my book—I hope they do—and they can read his Facebook posts, and they can decide whether—you know, which has more merit. People can read Cornel West's claim that I avoid any critique of the president, or they can go—and they can go to *The Atlantic* and see what I've actually written about the president, and then they can decide which is true. I have great, great admiration for Cornel West. I think he's made a weighty contribution to black literature and to black letters. I hope he continues to do that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ta-Nehisi, you actually met with President Obama twice.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** I did.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Can you talk about these meetings, how you prepared for them, what you said to him? When was it?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, one of them was—interesting that you ask that after that question. The first one was after I levied quite a bit of critique of his Morehouse speech, which I was not a fan of and am not a fan of now. I think that the president—I thought then, and I think now, that the president has a tendency, when it's convenient for him, to emphasize that he is the president of all America, and then,



when it comes to issues of morality, to deliver a message that the president of all America has no right to deliver. The president of all America, the bearer of the heritage of America, the bearer of policy of America, which has—you know, for the vast, vast majority of its history has been a policy of plunder towards black people, has no right to lecture black people on morality. That's my position. You know, I understand an African-American man wanting to have a conversation with young people. But as the president of America, as far as I'm concerned, you give up that right. You know, if there cannot be direct policy towards black people, then there should be no direct criticism towards black people either.

Having said that, I wrote the piece, and probably within a day, I got a call to come to the White House. I was not sure why. They didn't say, you know, what it was about. And I was there with a bunch of other reporters. And I asked him a question that was semi-related, and he sort of answered and then immediately launched into an attack on my piece. And I left that meeting quite disappointed, not disappointed in him—you know, he did what I expected him to do—but disappointed in myself. I felt that I had not been particularly challenging. You know, I have to tell you, you sit in a room, it really—it's the president of the United States. You know, it's the guy with the launch codes. And he's, you know, just an extremely intelligent person. I had watched him joust and answer all of these questions. And it takes some amount of courage. I mean, those are the facts. The second time, I probably was a little bit more challenging.

**AMY GOODMAN:** What did your wife tell you on the way to your second trip?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** My wife said, "What would James Baldwin do?" And she was recounting—actually, she was not just—you know, she was recounting the encounter he had had with John F. Kennedy. That's what she was thinking about. It wasn't just a sort of blithe "What would James Baldwin"—she was recounting how James Baldwin had gave Kennedy hell. You know, she said, "What would he do?" And I arrived to this meeting. All the other journalists were in suits. I was not in a suit; I was in jeans. I was late, and I had been rained on. It was not, you know, propitious circumstances.

But, you know, even in that meeting, I was deeply concerned about the liberal and the progressive notion that one should pursue policy based on class and not really deal with race. And I was concerned that as the ACA was playing out, as Obamacare, as they call it, was playing out, in fact, there were whole swaths of people in the Southern states who were being left out, and, you know, a majority of those people were black people. And this is a tradition with class-based policy that goes all the way back to the New Deal. So I thought it was very, very important to try to directly challenge as much as possible. You're not going to beat the president. You're just, I mean, in that situation, just not, but as much as possible to raise questions about it.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** And your reaction in recent weeks of the president's finally addressing issues like mass incarceration in a real way in this country?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, I think it's good. You know, I think it's a good thing. I do, you know, bear some amount of sympathy towards the president from this perspective. The president of the United States is not a king. You know? Barack Obama was elected by the American people. And, in fact, the basis for my sympathy is the basis of my criticism, you know, in fact, that if you're president, you have

no right to do certain things, and at the same time, you're limited in terms of what you can do, because you basically serve at their pleasure. I think it's good. You know, I think that one should not—you know, and this is beyond the president—but I think one should not be lured into a false sense of the ease with which one will dismantle the carceral state. Our current population, you know, in our jails and prisons, is roughly 10 times what it was in 1970. The sociologist Devah Pager estimates that every year enough people are released from our jails and prisons to fill every fast-food job in this country something like 10 times over. We have a huge, huge job ahead of us, you know, and I think any sort of presidential rhetoric in that direction and action is good. But this is going to take a long time.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I want to ask you about another of the responses to your book. It's *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, who—

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** A kinder, gentler conservative.

**AMY GOODMAN:** —who wrote in a letter addressed to you, quote, "I think you distort American history. This country, like each person in it, is a mixture of glory and shame. There's a Lincoln for every Jefferson Davis and a Harlem Children's Zone for every K.K.K.—and usually vastly more than one. Violence is embedded in America, but it is not close to the totality of America." Those are the words of David Brooks of *The New York Times*.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, I would just challenge that on the facts. There was not an Abraham Lincoln for every Jefferson Davis. As the great historian Ed Baptist responded: Wrong, every president up to Abraham Lincoln was Jefferson Davis. It simply is—that's not—I mean, that's just like factual. You know, Abraham Lincoln is singular. Abraham Lincoln, before he was killed, stood up and, you know, for the first time from any sitting president, stood for the right for suffrage for African-American men who had served in the Civil War. And that's a limited suffrage, but it was quite radical at the time. It is rumored that John Wilkes Booth was there, heard that, said, "By God, that means nigger equality! I'll run him through!" and then shot Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln was killed by the forces of white supremacy. He stands out as unique. There's no other president like that.

What Jefferson Davis did, the idea that somehow holding people in slavery was an essential part of America is a very, very old belief. I mean, he's a white supremacist. White supremacy is a very, very popular and trenchant belief in this country's history and heritage. So those two things are just not equivalent. The Ku Klux Klan is not the opposite of the Harlem Children's Zone. The Ku Klux Klan is the most profligate domestic terrorist organization in this country's history. The Harlem Children's Zone is an organization just based in Harlem, that is doing good work, but that there is not enough of across this country. The Ku Klux Klan was a national terrorist organization. It is not an answer—you know, one is not the answer for the other.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** I wanted to ask you about your critique of the education system in America. You're very, very strong in your book—

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Right.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** —on the failures of classroom teaching, and, basically, that you got most of your

knowledge, yourself, in a library.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yes.

**JUAN GONZÁLEZ:** Could you talk about that?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Well, and this is like one area, like, when you think about like further research, like I would like to—you know, I was talking how the case for reparations was empiricism first, and this is personal. This is personal, and then I want to go out and hopefully test, test the empiricism.

What I can talk about is my direct experience. It just—I had no idea why I was in school. And what I use all the time is I think about like the French language, and I think about how in seventh grade I was in a French class. And essentially what I was given was a list of words to memorize each day, that that meant—and this determined how successful you were in your French class. But I had no notion of how one would actually utilize French. I understood that France was some other place on the other side of the world, but it was effectively an abstraction. No one I knew spoke French. French was not useful to me. I just—I had no notion. And so, you know, with no investment, with nothing at stake, as far as I could see, directly, I cut up and acted a fool in that class. You know, lo and behold, here I am some 25 years later, and you can see that the world is quite big, that in fact language is actually—any language is actually really, really important, that it allows you to see more, that it allows you to bear witness.

I have a young son, you know, who I wrote to, my only son, who I wrote this to, who is very, very passionate about the French language, at the same age I was completely dispassionate, you know, totally anti. Well, he's been raised in a world where he can see a language can actually take you places. He knows people who actually speak French. He's seen other things. And so, for him, it's very, very tangible. It's not an abstraction for him. And so, much of the things I was angled towards in school, they were abstract. I could not figure out how they actually would improve me or do anything for me, and so that was a source of great, great frustration for me.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You're moving to Paris.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** I am, yeah, in three weeks.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You, your wife and your son.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** Yes, yes, in three weeks, and he's going to go to school over there.

**AMY GOODMAN:** James Baldwin lived in France. He died in France.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** He did, yes. And, you know, it's one of—that—no one will believe me on this, but that portion is actually purely coincidental. Or maybe not. Or maybe not. I mean, maybe there's something about the country that attracts African Americans of a particular creative persuasion. What I can say you is, I had never perceived myself as walking in his footsteps in that aspect. You know, certainly, he's probably the biggest influence on me from a literary perspective. But that, you know, really comes from my wife, who had all of this—she had this long romance with Paris from the time she was a child.

**AMY GOODMAN:** You met at Howard?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** We did meet at Howard, yes. We met at Howard, went for her 30th birthday, fell in love, told me that I must go and I would fall in love. The same thing happened, and, you know, here we are.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to go to this issue of race and class and what's happened just over the weekend in presidential politics. This weekend, members of the Black Lives Matter movement staged a protest inside Netroots Nation conference in Phoenix by repeatedly interrupting Democratic presidential candidates, Senator Bernie Sanders and former Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley. Members of the Black Lives Matter movement interrupted O'Malley's portion of the event and took to the stage.

**PATRISSE CULLORS:** Let me be clear: Every single day folks are dying, not being able to take another breath. We are in a state of emergency. We are in a state of emergency! And if you don't feel that emergency, you are not human.

**AMY GOODMAN:** After the interruption, Governor Martin O'Malley responded by saying, "Black lives matter. White lives matter. All lives matter." He later apologized for the comment. Senator Sanders threatened to leave the stage after protesters repeatedly interrupted his remarks. If you could respond to both? And, of course, Martin O'Malley is—you know, is from where you're from, right? He was the mayor of Baltimore. He was the governor of Maryland.

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** It's very, very hard for me to respond to the protest, because—and this is the God's honest truth—I have been absorbed with like trying to keep up with this book. So that's actually my first time seeing the protest. I saw something a little bit about it on Twitter, but I actually don't have like the full knowledge of what the intent of the protest was or what people were trying to accomplish.

I will say that, you know, part of protest is making people uncomfortable. You know, part of protest is being annoying. And I'll also say that I'm quite familiar with Martin O'Malley's record in terms of criminal justice, just going back to this question of incarceration. And I think, even beyond protest, there are some very, very direct questions, especially in this era that we find ourselves in right now, that should be posed to him, you know, particularly about what happened in terms of parole and probation in Maryland during the course of time in which he was governor. He had a very, very active role in that. It's hard for me to respond to the protest, just because I don't have enough information right now.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Let's turn to the man you have been compared to, James Baldwin. Let's turn to his book, *The Fire Next Time*, dealing with issues of black identity and the state of racial struggle. In this speech, he speaks in '63 in Oakland, California's Castlemont High School.

**JAMES BALDWIN:** I think the other reason, and perhaps the most important reason, that I am throwing these suggestions out to you tonight is that in this country, every black man born in this country, until this present moment, is born into a country which assures him, in as many ways as it can find, that he is not worth the dirt he walks on. Every Negro boy and every Negro girl born in this country until this present moment undergoes the agony of trying to find in the body politic, in the body social, outside himself/herself, some image of himself or herself which is not demeaning. Now, many, indeed, have survived, and at an incalculable cost, and many more have perished and are perishing every day. If you tell a

child and do your best to prove to the child that he is not worth life, it is entirely possible that sooner or later the child begins to believe it.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's James Baldwin speaking in June of 1963, that audio from the Pacifica Radio Archives. In this last minute we have with you, Ta-Nehisi Coates, where have we come in more than half a century?

**TA-NEHISI COATES:** I think there's been some progress. I think if people like me appear impatient, it is with the fact that, you know, we are talking about a system that has basically been in place since 1619. Progress is good. But until we live in a country in which white supremacy has been banished; until we live in a country where one can look at prisons, if we are to have them, and not see an eight-to-one ratio; until we can look at a country and not see black men comprising roughly 8 percent of the world's imprisoned population; until we can have a situation in which I can turn on the news or come on this show and be able to discuss other things besides Sandra Bland being threatened with being—to "light [her] up," as he said, over a turn signal; until we have a situation in which a Tamir Rice, you know, who's out playing, is not effectively committing a lethal crime or a crime that threatens his life; until we have a situation where Kajieme Powell, for the mere fact of being mentally ill, is not shot down in the street; until we have a situation in which a John Crawford, who was shopping in Wal-Mart, is not shot down and executed in a store—progress is nice, but it's to be noted, and the struggle continues after that.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ta-Nehisi Coates, we thank you so much for being with us, national correspondent for *The Atlantic*. His book is called *Between the World and Me*.