

## The Coates

### A Father and Son Discuss the Road to Manhood

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**I'm Marc Steiner and welcome to another podcast from the Center for Emerging Media. Today we have a father and son with us. The book is called The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. His father, who is a huge part of this book, is Paul Coates. I'll make a disclaimer, I have known him for decades now. When I first ran across the name Ta-Nehisi Coates in an article in The Atlantic, I believe, and then in another article that was in The Nation about Obama, I read these two things and I said, hmm, this guy is a really interesting, new, young writer who I've never heard of before. Who is this? I want to know who he is. Well, Coates turns out to be the son of Paul Coates. And it turns out to be the book he wrote about had to do with being the son of Paul Coates and growing up it Paul Coates here in Baltimore. That lead to a number of conversations and meetings about this and we've heard from Ta-Nehisi on our podcast before, because of his work in The Nation. Both Ta-Nehisi Coates and his father, Paul Coates join us now in our studios here, at Clean Cuts Music and Sound to talk about the beautiful struggle. Welcome, it's good to have both of you with us.**

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Well thanks, Marc.

Paul Coates: Marc, thank you for having us here, it's quite an honor.

**Well it's an honor to have you both in the studio. And Tanahasse this is a very interesting book. I want to just start off to give our listeners a sense of something here, with something that I've underlined. If you would start off with this paragraph here, the final paragraph. Even the final two, if you would like to, on page 30. Is this the place I want to start with? Yeah, I think this is a good place to begin with.**

T.C. I just have to make one correction, it's Ta-Nehisi.

**What did I say?**

T.C. Ta-Nehisi.

**I'm sorry, Ta-Nehisi.**

T.C. It's alright, it's a minor thing. I've screwed up so many minor names in my life. Haha.

**Haha.**

T.C. In Dad's days, we walked close in his circle, but a circle surrounded by dire wolves. All we had to hold up was the next man. But as time went on we forgot ourselves and went cannibal. The next brother became a meal to fed our rep. At night, Action News unfurled the daily squall, and always amid the rescued dogs, the lost toddlers, the scandalous bankers, there was us; buckled by the pop-pop of a '22, laid out on a side stain of blood. I didn't fully get it then, but this wasn't in glorious turn. The world was filled with great causes: Mandela, Nicaragua, and the battle against Regan. But we died for sneakers stitched by serfs, coaches that gave props to teams that we didn't own, hats embroidered with the names of confederate states. I could feel the falling all around. The flood of guns wrecked the natural order. Kids whose minds should have been on Teddy Ruckspin, now held in their

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hands the power to dissolve your world into white. But Dad pledged to sire us through. With the aid of many mothers we were pushed through science camp, music lessons, thick books were hurled at us from across the room.

**There was a lot in that. To me, that was a great introductory paragraph, even though it comes like 30 pages into your book. The one thing I'd like to grab first is the sense of danger of where the streets were in the West side of Baltimore where you were growing up. And that one line that really hit me –we died, blah, blah, blah Dad pledged to sire us through. Now that was- that's a pretty heavy statement, when you think of the state of the world today, the state of the inner city world today, the state of the world on Tangle Park where you were growing up as a young man. You are now 33.**

T.C. Uh hum.

**I want to get that straight so that we can understand the time zone you're talking about. Let's talk a little bit about that. Paul, your sense of that- that is very conscious on your part, Dad pledged to sire us through.**

P.C. Marc, I think Ta-Nehisi hits that. Because, you know, that is the way I always saw my relationship to my children and especially the male children. As Ta-Nehisi points out in the book, I have seven children, five of those are boys and two of those are girls. I always had a caring, nurturing, and fatherly relationship with the girls, but for the boys it was this special- and much harder and much firmer one with the boys. But I always saw it as my job to get them through. And to get them through to me meant- particularly for the boys- it mean getting them through what I feel to be some of the most critical and the roughest areas for black boys; and that's particularly for those dangerous years between 12 and 18, when so many of our youth go over the side and don't come back. So for me- it was a matter of steering and navigating them through that time period. Everything before 12 was preparation for 12, you see? And everything in between that was preparation for after 18. But the ages of 12 to 18, as Ta-Nehisi points out in the book, are critical ages. And I think they are critical ages for children and for boys, and especially they are critical ages for black boys.

**All of which we are going to explore. Ta-Nehisi?**

T.C. Uh-

**-Just your thoughts on that particular part of your book and what you are setting up for us, there.**

T.C. It is fascinating, listening to him talk about it, because one of the things I really wanted to do in the book was reflect. I spent quite a bit of time interviewing my Dad and interviewing my older brother for the book, and I just wanted to make sure that I could reflect that sense. As a child- it's not so much that my father didn't share that with me, it's just that you don't get it that way. What you get is- your father is being hard on you, haha. But you have no clue as to why. And the interesting thing was especially when I was coming up, so many boys did not have fathers. And so many boys were allowed to do basically anything they wanted. And I could remember thinking to myself, huh, how come I don't get to go out? But I didn't understand- I vaguely understood that it was a blessing to have a father. I didn't completely get it though. Because from my perspective it just meant more rules. It meant having to deal with a very

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physical, intimidating presence when I went the wrong way. But of course, as you get older you begin to see things differently. You understand how critical it is, how crucial it is. If there was one thing that I would change for black folks in general, it would be the presence of fathers, because I think that leads to some much that's wrong with us now.

**And as we'll learn here, Paul, you made a lot of decisions in your life; and you make decisions and stick to them- you're not a man who walks away from them. And when you say something, it is the way it is. It's the way you walk your path and you're very hard to divert from that path once you've taken it.**

P.C. Hmm.

**But there's one other piece I want to set up here. It's on page 16. I'm gonna bring a couple things up and then we're gonna launch in.**

P.C. Sure.

**Ta-Nehisi, you write on page 16- it starts off with here's the cast of my last name. Would you read that paragraph for us?**

T.C. Most certainly. I'm sorry where is it?

**Right here.**

T.C. Here's the cast of my last name. My father has seven kids born to four women. Some of us were born to best friends. Some of us were born in the same year. My eldest come first in chronology: Kelly, Chris, William, Junior, all born of my father's first marriage to Linda. John was born to Patsy, Maleek born to Saligh, to then me and Menile born to my mother, Cheryl. This is all a mess on paper, but it was love to me and formed my earliest and still enduring definition of family.

**Now this is- I'm really fascinated where this is set up in the beginning, because we have a world, now, where a lot of families, black and white, wealthy and poor are divided up into all kinds of- fathers divorcing mothers going here, somebody having kids all over the place, you know? And that's what we've come to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But particularly in the case of working class black neighborhoods, fathers can have three, or four, or five kids from two or three different mothers and not be there. This is different. You wrote in that piece about- our father pledged to stay and sire us- and stay with us. Even though we read they could have broken up a long time ago, they decided to stay together to raise these three boys. And so many fathers in the city can have the same structure you have, Paul, but wander off and disappear. But you stayed with all those kids all that time.**

P.C. Uh hum.

**There's a lesson here, in this whole thing- that you started arguing about a month ago, when I first met you, Ta-Nehisi, and we were talking with your dad about your Bill Cosby article.**

T.C. Uh huh, uh huh.

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**And you said you thought your son got it wrong about Bill Cosby and how that relates to what we're talking about here.**

P.C. Uh hum, yeah. Marc, you know, Ta-Nehisi- this is an interesting point in the book, and something just became clear to me while you were talking. Ta-Nehisi talks about his childhood and fathers not being in the house, he was one of the few. And statistics bear him out, statistics bear him out. But it was surprising to me as I read the book and as the book was developing- how these statistics stood out in his mind. And it was surprising to me to see how these statistics didn't stand out in my mind.

**Hm.**

P.C. So I was listening to what you were saying-

T.C. Are you saying at the time it didn't stick out?

P.C. At the time, it didn't stick out. No, it didn't stick out. And even when I read your book, I didn't question that you were writing that so many of your friends didn't have fathers and what not.

T.C. Uh hm.

P.C. I was questioning why it didn't stand out to me. And why it wasn't obvious to me. And when you set that question up, Marc, finally it began to come clear to me why it didn't stand out. I grew up in a culturally conscious community. In that community there were many fathers. You see there were many, many, many fathers. And those fathers would have had different family arrangements. But those fathers would have always had a commitment to the children. In those families- did those fathers come? Yes the came. Did they go? Yes they went. But by and large, in the community that I fraternized in, my friends would have been males. You see-

T.C. -We're not talking about your childhood though, we're talking about mine-

P.C. -No, no, no. I'm talking about when you were a child-

T.C. -Yeah so, oh, got ya.

P.C. -See that community was distinct from your community-

T.C. -Right, right my neighborhood and stuff like that-

**-You're talking about your politically conscious community and how it came out of the movements happening around-**

T.C. Yes. Yes, yes, yes.

**-And how you knew about the world that had the same structure, but related to it differently?**

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P.C. Yes. Those would have been my friends. So I would have run into males dealing with their children all the time. Ta-Nehisi's experience is a little bit different. He would have seen those males, also, but he would have been exposed to his friends and his peers. And in that larger black community the incident of fathers being absent was much more apparent to him. I didn't get that till we were just discussing it. Hahaha. So I know that's not directly related, but-

**-Oh no, it is.**

P.C. But I know that it is significant to me- that within our culturally conscious community there were fathers. And they were probably in larger numbers than the general community.

T.C. Most certainly.

P.C. So that's why for me, it just didn't show up like that.

T.C. Most certainly. Yeah, I would completely agree. Among the peers in my group, I can't think of kids having fathers. I mean even people who did have them, people would say, God no, that guy was not a great father. I can think of people not knowing who their fathers are, though.

**In that community?**

T.C. In that community I can't. In the broad, I certainly can.

**Yes. Now you've both set up an interesting piece here, because to me part of the core of your book, Ta-Nehisi, is what I'm about to lay out here. Now you can disagree with this, but let me lay it out here for a minuet. Paul Coates, your dad, just set up coming out of a politically and culturally conscious minority within the world- period, but within the black world. In your book you write about a very strict home- which we'll come to later, but a home that didn't serve meat, that was full of books- with this black classic press beginning in the basement of the house, uncovering all these incredible books by all these African-American authors who have been long dead, that no body ever knew about before- or we forgot about, I should say; how that was part of your upbringing and that world, that powerful, intellectual, cultural world was your home in the middle of what we come to call, a West side ghetto. And you went to Lemmel Junior High School which is one of the tougher high schools in the West side of Baltimore.**

T.C. Yes, but it had great teachers. I had great teachers and a great principal. I had teachers that really, really cared.

**Well let's talk about that for a minuet. One of the things that I said to Paul about your book was that the book- the way you describe having to step up and come in a group- it was the story of a sensitive, not violent, not throw your fist up, young, African American boy, from the West side of Baltimore who had to learn to look tough, act tough, run with a group to survive. So there were a couple of lessons here, like the way that home played in your survival, but also what you had to learn how to do to survive on the streets by yourself. It also talks about the thousands of sensitive, young, black, male children in poor communities, who are you, without your father.**

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T.C. Uh, hum. I fear for that, I can't even imagine that. I don't know what would have happened to me.

#### **I was thinking about that. What would have happened to you if he wasn't there?**

T.C. I perish the thought. I am shuddering even considering that, and I have considered that many times over. There's a place in the book where there's a huge fight that I get into and I'm-

#### **-The one in Lemmel where the kid walks across the gym, that one?**

T.C. No, no. There's one when I'm in high school, we were in the cafeteria.

#### **Oh, where you got your head busted open?**

T.C. Yes, I did get my head busted open. One of the things I say before that is that people look at black boys and- you know, so much of this violence is over respect and the sort of instinct that says, you guys are completely wrong, how are you killing somebody who disrespected you? But these folks have other things to build themselves up, you know to base themselves on. I think for so many young brothers is that that really is all you have- you don't have anything else, so what is the difference between you and an animal? At least I can make you, you know, talk to me right. At the very least I can make it so that you will not invade my physical space, you know? I don't have a lot of money, I don't have many prospects for the future, but at the very least I have that. And without that, who am I? How do I define myself any more as any sort of human being? And I think that is so much the source of what goes on. Brothers don't have that. We just don't have too many ways of defining ourselves, you know? God, I never considered myself that, you know? I knew I was fairly intelligent, wasn't going to jail. It was always on the line for me. Even though there was some scary stuff that happened I think the line was especially pretty obvious for me. I know what I wasn't going to do and that result of having so many expectations put upon me by my parents and by the larger community of the folks that my parents put me around- and I think if anything, we're lacking in that. I think that young people across the country are lacking in that. But I think in communities that are not particularly wealthy, it becomes so much more crucial to have that- it's a much more important component, because you don't have anything to substitute with that.

#### **And Paul, for all your inner physical, intellectual strength, and your decision to be a father and stay, and take care of these children, and your wife, too- I mean all of you- she's just as much a part of this book as you are though you are part of the book, you're both in there in terms of raising these children-**

P.C. -Yes

#### **And your mother-**

T.C. -My mother, yes.

#### **Talk a little about what is in the book. What about your fears? What were you going through watching him and Bill Jr. grow up?**

P.C. Mark, you know, I guess I should include something that actually is in the book- and that is a shout out to my father, you see? Because really, my father, and Ta-Nehisi finds it incredible that the last time I

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saw my father alive was when I was 9 years old, okay? I went to live with my father when I was about 4 ½ or 5 years old, so I only knew my father for a period of about 5 years. But inside of the space of that time he had stamped me in such a way that the lessons he stamped me with would be the lessons that I would impart in a large measure to Ta-Nehisi and the children. He made very clear that- first of all, my father had many more children than I had and there were many, many more women than I had in my life in his life. My father always made clear that there were no halves, that I didn't have half brothers and sisters. And Marc, that is a fundamental lesson to learn and a fundamental shift to make in order to understand family. If you remove the half, then all your left with is a brother and a sister. And in that sense, there's the space to love. If you've got a half in between it then there's the space for half love, and that is some reason not to love the person, some reason not to embrace the person all the way. But there's also- for the father and the mother, a reason to distinguish among the children, because they're half. So the healing in the family begins- I believe my father had many, many faults, but one of the things he was very clear on was that he never raised us as half of anything. And I would say to folks who are in similar situations to consider that. So he gave me that fundamental lesson. He also gave me the lesson that- with my father, I had about 14 brothers and sisters that I knew of, from various mother. But my father would drive from one end of town picking up various children. And he got great joy out of having us all together and got great joy out of intellectually challenging us, you know around different things, just as how Ta-Nehisi talks about in the book how I challenge them. So my father was a great father. He fit the stereotype of being gone. Like I said, I saw him when I was 9 years old, last and then I wouldn't see him alive again, for the rest of my life. I saw him when I was about 21, I believe, when I saw him at his funeral. So he was missing in my life, missing in action, but he did the fundamental types of things like teaching. So he was critical and he was a large part of giving me the lessons and the commitment to bringing my family through. I wanted to be present, he wasn't. He was always present, he's present with me, today. He's the most significant male in my world.

**But, Ta-Nehisi, and your older brother that you write about were in those streets in the West side of Baltimore in Tioga and Lemmel, and the dream that you had to get into Poly, which you did for a while-**

T.C. -Hah, for a while.

**But I'm curious, Paul despite all the stuff you have and the power that you have exuded most of your existence in the time that I have known you, what about your fears for him growing up? I mean you set these boundaries, you were a stern, stern disciplinarian from what Ta-Nehisi has written in the book-**

T.C. I don't know if, actually, I don't know how stern he was.

P.C. That's a reflection in hindsight.

**Haha!**

T.C. No, no. Haha. Dad was just different, he was just really, really different. Even if you compared him to other kids across the board- I mean there were kids who were getting smacked up by their parents for no reason at all.

**Right.**

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T.C. You know? For just know reason at all. And the difference was, I think Dad was Really serious about raising kids who were going to be about something. But, I had great fun as a child. I went outside, played basketball, collected my comic books-

**-I'm not trying to say that you had a bad childhood, that's good, that's important-**

T.C. No, no. I know you weren't. But there was room for childhood in there. He was good for that, too. He was.

P.C. Let me respond to your sternness, because that's something that I probably embrace. I'll respond to the sternness first and then the fears. I always- and even today I talk to my grandchildren this way. I love them to death. I love them to death, but I don't exist to be your friend.

T.C. That's right.

P.C. That's not why I'm here. I'm here to get you through. Let your mother be your friend. So I would be stern, but Marc, that's the way I look at it. You know? You will listen to me, you will do what I tell you to do. That's why I'm here. I'm here to help you get through. So I'm stern in those ways and other than that, I'm on it. I'm on it to a point. You know, if we say we're gonna do this, if I say I'm gonna do this, if you say we're gonna do this then you're committed to do that. Those types of disciplinary things come out of my experience from my father. In terms of fear, I don't see how- particularly for black men- and for black women, too, but particularly for black men, I don't see how you can live in a society and not be fearful of the child you bring into the world if that child is a male. I mean if you look at women you might not have the same fear but if you look at the prison population, if you look at the drug population, if you look who's going to the military, you should be afraid. So my great fears, again was that these kids would end up in jail. That was the largest fear I had and the largest fear- I worry more about that than I do about kids on the street killing each other. And I know that that's a concern, and that was a fear, also, but that one goes behind it. Because there are so many- I don't know, Marc, luck may be on of the major factors that keeps kids out of jail. That was certainly- in my case coming up on the street, I did enough things that you know-

T.C. – But that's not, I mean that kid who fired that gun in front of Howard-

**You mean your brother?**

T.C. Yes, I mean who knows how that could have gone? That could have gone so many- you know there's that thing up on Wabash, shooting. I mean who knows? And I say that in the book. That could have gone another way and I could be telling you a completely different story.

P.C. So I think that on the one hand, luck is a factor, but how you carry yourself in the streets, how you comport yourself, how you look danger in the face, how you walk away from danger, those types of things are factors. But Marc, I don't know, you could be walking right, you could be doing things right and you still go to jail.

**Right.**

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P.C. And that's the other thing, you could still go to jail. So these were factors and I think they are particularly concerned in between that, again, that 12-18 age.

**And that's a very critical period. You write, Ta-Nehisi, about kids being struck by some of the way you describe things. I think you're a wonderful writer and the way that you put things**

T.C. Thank you. You are very kind.

**No, you are. I think people who are of an older generation would have to think twice to get the understanding from the hip-hop culture-**

T.C. -You mean people over 50? Hahaha!

P.C. Haha!

**Hey, nobody really likes you, Ta-Nehisi, you can leave now. Hahaha!**

P.C. You're being stern, Marc! Hahaha!

T.C. Please come to my blog if you need any explanations. I will gladly explain anything.

**Read the blog. Hahaha.**

T.C. Go ahead, Marc, I'm sorry. Hahaha.

**For those of us over 50, who do know what he is talking about- with all these hip-hop heroes who come through the book, other than that- Haha! Okay, but when you talk about- you had to learn coming off your porch into middle school at Lemmel, not to smile. And I was thinking about it-**

T.C. -Smiling at the right thing.

**Yes, smiling at the right thing is important as well. But there is a demeanor you have to have. So I started thinking about your perspective on this- there are tens of thousands of young black kids in this city going to school. People say this all the time- especially white people say this, why aren't they smiling? Why do they look like that? Well how come they can't- every time a photograph is taken, his mouth is down, he's not smiling. Well, why is that? Why is he walking like that? Why are his pants the way his pants are?**

T.C. Uh hum.

**And I kept thinking about that when I was reading your description about what the mask-like Franz Ferdinand's Mask- like what you had to put on-**

T.C. Right, right- yeah, you're completely right. One thing, a good friend of mine told me this very early on when she had read some chapters; she said look, the biggest thing in here is that people wonder why black kids are not doing- especially inner city black kids are not doing so well. If you have to think about

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your personal safety that much, it obviously detracts amongst other things from your ability to think about pre-algebra. And I think one of the more important and yet at the same time, tragic lessons, I think, is that what I learned about how you wear that mask and how you wear that armor, you know, what you have to do to sort of protect yourself. Because the truth of the matter is that after you turn about 18 or 19, for the most part, that stuff is no longer relevant. And in fact, it often gets in the way. And the truth is what you're doing is you're burying some of yourself. You're hiding some of yourself. You're hiding those feelings that you have that you no longer are able to express. It effects your ability to deal with women. It effects how you deal with other co-workers. Because, you know, you come from a particular environment that people who didn't come from that place don't even- they don't even think in that way. They're not even thinking that way. So it's important, you know, as a survival mechanism. But, to some extent I think it hampers folks. At the same time, the interesting thing, you know, to throw this in there, is that I think if you see this on anybody, it really is on black women. I mean you talk about wearing the mask. Well, my partner, Kenyata, she always talks about how men- the thing that men always say to black women is, why aren't you smiling, honey? But they don't understand this. If you knew what they had to deal with, you wouldn't be smiling, either. You're trying to get from point A to point B, and so for me, as a black boy, my dad is telling me you know, look up son, walk like you've got business. Walk straight ahead. Look up, make sure you're aware of what's going on around you. Those sorts of things you never leave. Just the idea of- even in the book the challenges are very physical and there is a very physical fear. I think that wherever you go there will always be things like this. This is not just like, you know, you may not like this about life, you may not like being afraid. You may not like the fact that you have to face up and deal with X, Y, and Z, but son, it will always be that way, even if it's not physical. There will always be moments in your job where people are trying to bully you, moments in your life where somebody says, I'm trying to maneuver you in a certain direction, and you're gonna have to stand up. That was a crucial lesson. It works all ways into my career- literally trying to be a writer, it's you know, something that I've had to repeatedly lean on.

P.C. And Marc, one of the things that you point out that Ta-Nehisi is commenting on is that mask. And Ta-Nehisi correctly points out that as you get older there's a danger of keeping it on and how it interferes with stuff. One of the problems that we of course experience with our children is that they really get so far into that mask that they really believe they are that mask.

T.C. Uh hum.

P.C. And so there's no ability to turn that mask off and they can't shut it off. The other side of that equation is that the adult who encounters them can't see through the mask.

**Right.**

P.C. They don't have the ability to step around the mask and see on the other side of that mask that like all children, they are really great children. So it gets in the way, it is a survival mechanism that certainly black children have perfected. And I agree with Ta-Nehisi about black women especially know how to do it. But I think it's something that you find that is a cultural presence, really in the black community because you get the same thing from black men in certain situations- who still carry the largest value they have as respect or disrespect.

**I keep thinking about how you wrote about knowing Tupac and Tupac's mother, cause she was a family friend.**

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T.C. Yes.

**He could never- once he put that mask on, and again it was placed on his face by other people, as well, he could never get it off again.**

T.C. Right, right.

P.C. Uh, hum.

**It was stuck and that was part of what killed him. It was stuck in him and couldn't get out. Anyway, there's some books and some words you use a lot-**

T.C. Haha.

**I want to talk about these things. You use the words conscious-**

T.C. Yes.

**And Consciousness.**

T.C. Right.

**For referring to yourself and other people's state of mind a lot in this book, the words wind their way through the book, conscious and consciousness.**

T.C. Right, you know one of the things that I really wanted to do in the book was- and it's funny, my dad was talking to me about this and I obviously don't remember this but I came to language in a very organic way. Some people come to language and, you know, their dad's are English professors at whatever university, so they come to Fitzgerald and they come to James Joyce. I came to that stuff later, and I'm certainly not denigrating any of that at all, but I came to language in a much more organic way. My dad was talking about this memory he has of me as a 2 year old, listening to the Last Votes, over and over again. Haha. So it was an organic thing to me. And after that it was sort of hip-hop, it was the language of comic books, it was the language of Dungeons and Dragons. And I thought that it was absolutely beautiful and the one value I took. Even as I moved onto what you might consider the mainstream cannon, I found beauty there, too. There was a line for me, even from the bottom to all the way up. And the idea that I took from that was that language belongs to the people, it belongs to the street. It belongs out here, it's an organic thing. You can't study and find great words. Great words come out of a particular experience, okay? So one of those- and there was like, all through the book I sort of elevate and I develop favorite words over the course of my life. Just ordinary, you know, slang words that I think, wow, those are just extremely expressive words. One of my favorite right now is the phrase to air someone out which means just to scream. But to air someone out, I think wow, that's so visual, it's a beautiful, beautiful word. And it wasn't thought up by some professor at Princeton, somewhere, it came from the people. Anyway, for all of my time, it was always you know- my dad would describe the community he was in as the conscious community, you know this thing about black consciousness and this thing about hip-hop with it's nationalistic orientation, or whatever you want to call it, conscious hip-hop. And when I got to writing a

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book, again, language was a big part of it. And I stopped for a second and thought, what does that mean? It's such a subtle thing to say, but what it really means is that if you are not aware of who you are, you quite literally, or I guess, metaphorically, you are not conscious; you are in a sense walking through worlds and are not actually awake. You are actually sleepwalking through the world. I thought that was such a beautiful way of expressing something. And then, of course, there's the ambiguity of people who are really conscious- I mean they can see themselves conscious, haha. Or how much is their ego- we talked about that, too. Oh you ain't really conscious, if you ain't doing such and such. Haha.

**Right, right.**

T.C. Haha, and to me it stood so counter to the idea that the African-American community is being so anti-intellectual and not being about thought and deliberation and that sort of thing. It may not be your kind of deliberation and it may not be my kind of deliberation, but it is thinking. It is a kind of intellectualism. It is a natural- oh I'm going past this idea. The point I'm trying to make is that the concept of it- once I unpacked this idea, I found it a beautiful expression. It's such an economic way of saying, this is what I'm about, as opposed to saying I read The Autobiography of Malcolm X and it changed my life, it was the greatest- no. No, it's about saying, I'm conscious and that's what people are supposed to do, that's exactly it. And when I came to that I said, God, that's gorgeous. And there are so many words and phrases you can take. See I'm very excited about this.

**You are very excited about this.**

T.C. That's the thing, I hear people talking all the time, and I think, wow. I'm struck by it.

P.C. Marc, you point out the conscious, and that was something that in the manuscript, as I read the book, I was struck by, too. But the part that I missed, and I have to have Ta-Nehisi explain, and I hope he will explain is here- is this great battle going on between the conscious and knowledge. And I didn't understand that and if you could speak on that, Ta-Nehisi-

T.C. Sure.

P.C. Yeah, and if you could share that and explain that relationship and their relationship to the hip-hop, as well-

T.C. Right, right. Again, this goes back to this idea of African-Americans as you know, their thought processes and the thinking that goes into any human experience, but I think people overlook it when it comes to African-Americans often. So there's this concept of knowledge in the book which is really just short hand for street knowledge. But I refer to it as the knowledge. Um, again for me it's just a beautiful way of saying, I know how to walk down a street without X,Y, and Z happening. I understand what it means when this guy is standing here is this particular way. I know why that particular girl isn't smiling. I know, you know, what block I should not be caught on at what particular time. It's a great short hand for understanding just a huge, huge, body of how to deal in the world, and I just thought it was a beautifully economical word. Parts of these two concepts, on consciousness and the other knowledge- my job, going through that book, and really, I guess Big Bill's job also was to gain some sort of access to both of [my parents]; to understand that both of them had things to offer. The one great thing about my parents, the one thing I will always remember is that- obviously school is important in my house. It was extremely

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important and we were pressed on it, constantly. But my parents never believed that school was the only source of understanding and knowledge out in the world. Again, we lived in an area where you might have wanted to cap your kid in the house. Nas has this great line, Mama should have chained me to the radiator. And he's talking about growing up in the projects. Now we weren't living in the projects, but in that time, it might have been that you were gonna keep your kids in the house and don't let them go outside and play. My father was like, go outside. You have to learn these kids, you have to know these kids, you have to know what they're about. You have got to know your people. And then you've gotta come home and you've got to read.

**And that was a balance that was very powerful- that's been created inside of you.**

T.C. Right.

**And part of it was that there's a piece of this that also struck me as- when you got into very serious trouble in Poly, now excuse me but-**

T.C. Hahaha!

**-haha, when you got in trouble in Poly, your dad and mother took you to D.C. and to Virginia, to Nation House. And part of that journey you describe through what happened to you at Nation House and how it kind of transformed you. And the interesting fact is that your dad and mom put you where, and what it says about where they come from, to put you in that place.**

T.C. Right.

**And part of the way you describe growth and your consciousness coming out of that is you learning how to be a Djembe player.**

T.C. Yes, yes. I was sent to Nation House for the Rights and Passage Program. I went for summer camp but then more permanently for the Rights and Passage Program. And Dad could probably speak on this from a parent's perspective, but I'll just speak on this from my perspective. From what I understood at the time, there was a gulf- in terms of transitioning our kids into manhood and there is the knowledge- and again this goes back to what I was saying about all different sources; there is a knowledge and a skill set and information that your father and mother can offer you. Then there's a broader community of people who can give you lessons and perspectives that you wouldn't have had, otherwise. So I think one of the things that happened was that going through my rights of passage program was supposed to be a transition from adolescence into manhood. I was exposed to a multitude of people who were concerned about children and were greatly, specifically concerned about the fate of black children and what was going on. It was tremendous. One of the things that I came out with was that I was exposed to the djembe, which I did for the last few years that I was here, in Baltimore. It was just a tremendous, tremendous experience for me, and I'll tell you why. As is clear in the book, I was never good at school. And that hung over my head probably until about two or three years ago, in fact. I saw that I had basically blown an opportunity. Another thing in the book is that we get this idea that somehow black boys want to fail. It's very easy, you know? Dad would say look at the math, you obviously don't care about this. When in fact, what you're usually doing is trying to insulate yourself against the pain of failure. Nobody likes to fail, I don't care whether you like school or not, nobody likes to fail. I've never met a kid like that, who went around saying I got an F, that's great. Playing the djembe was one of the things that allowed me to confidence.

P.C. For those folks who don't know the djembe-

**It's an African drum.**

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T.C. Oh. The djembe is a drum out of the Senegambia region. It's tough to describe. It has a beautiful, beautiful sharp sound, quite loud. I wish I brought one to describe it to you. It kind of looks like a vase and it has a goatskin pulled head.

**It's got a big head.**

T.C. Yes.

**It goes down at the bottom and you wear a strap around you. At the very bottom your legs hold it up-**

T.C. -right, exactly. And this goes back to how I wrote the book and why I wrote the book that way. When I started djembe I was just in love. It sounded beautiful to me, it sounded gorgeous to me. I think it hit me the way- you know a good E.L. Doctorow novel- the way Ragtime hit me! Haha. It just sounds absolutely incredible to me.

**Yep, yep that's a good apt description of it. I love the djembe and I love the novel, Ragtime.**

T.C. Oh Ragtime was a beautiful novel. Ragtime was a huge influence on this book.

**I can see that.**

T.C. It was an incredible influence on this book.

**I can really see that. Uh, hum.**

T.C. No, it was a gigantic influence on this book. And reading Ragtime, and the rhythm of that book and the rhythm of how he writes in there reflects some sort of deep expression of humanity. And I felt that when I heard the djembe and I desperately wanted to be apart of it.

**Humanity. It's the humanity in this book in this story of family and survival.**

P.C. Uh hum, it's there.

**All that is sort of wrapped up into this piece. It's not easy to write a memoir that goes until you're 18 years old. I mean that's a Hell of a statement. I'm writing a memoir- Ta-Nehisi Coates is writing a memoir from my childhood until I was 18.**

T.C. Uh, hum

**I mean that's no easy trick.**

T.C. No, not at all.

**Not at all. What do you know about at 18? I mean how could you write something like that?**

T.C. Right, right, right, right.

P.C. And you know, some people said that to me- how was he able to do it? But Marc, you hit the point when you talk about humanity. And it's one of the things that we keep saying and I keep saying when I emphasize black boys, black children. But the very best books, the very best literature- I don't care if it's in the Russian language, the German language, or you know, whatever language it's in- there will be

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lessons of the human experience that people can relate to, and I think that's what at the heart of this, that's why the book resonates with people. We're talking about a black family in Baltimore, but there are just so many universal experiences in there. And that really is the success of the book I think. It brings out the humanity of the writer and the humanity of the experience.

**I want to ask this question. Would you, Ta-Nehisi, like to find a part of this book that you'd like to leave us with?**

T.C. Oh, yes. This is at the end of my time-

**Explain what you mean by the end of your time.**

T.C. Oh, this is my 8<sup>th</sup> grade year, my final year at Lemmel Junior High School, where I had begun to understand the world a little more. We went on a graduation trip out to Patapsco State Park- a great day. But one of the things that had become clear to us- and it was funny because we were the gifted and talented kids, the smart kids in the class; but even that became sort of a gang. You gotta protect yourself. I mean these kids would always try to take you bad because you're smarter, and you know you have to stand with all of us. So we went on this trip with the whole 8<sup>th</sup> grade and one of the other classes with us was this class, 807, who we had had some problems with.

**Which was your mirror image, in some ways?**

T.C. It was my mirror image in many ways. And so this is about us being out in Patapsco State Park. It's just a short piece.

**It's a good piece.**

T.C. It's about us seeing some of these kids. We walked all across the state park that day, tossing the football, running outs, or and calling out Henry Elliot or Jerry Rice. That's when we saw them coming over the hill, running our way. We were not the only middle school seniors on the trip. 807, in all their deep glory were running down an asphalt path. We made them from a distance and not knowing what to expect we were ready and were cocked. We did not run as they closed. It became clear that we could never escape. The mentality of war must always be at the ready. If someone would have had a boom box, I would like to think Brotha's Gonna Work It Out would be playing on the deck. But that would be a year too soon. This was Spring 1989. I was still a reluctant warrior, heartless and a ghost. But I had the knowledge and pledged my unyielding act to upholding the code. They slowed down as they came to us, out of breath. Some of them putting hands on their knees. They began laughing and a few of us started to soften our stance. But I stood off to the side, confused and convinced that whatever respect was a quarter to the other brothers would never extend to me. One of them approached us, "Wassup, Nigga?" and extended his arm. I tightened in a mix of fear and frustration. I thought of how this would end, just as it began. But then he smiled. I looked down and saw his open hand, universal and at peace. I reached out and gave him a pound.

**That was a really good way to end this. Thank you both so much. The Beautiful Struggle-**

P.C. Marc, thank you.

T.C. Thank you.

**It's been an honor to have you both in the studio.**

T.C. Oh it's been great, thank you.

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**Ta-Nehisi Coates, his father, Paul Coates, the book, The Beautiful Struggle: A Father, Two Sons, and an Unlikely Road to Manhood. You're listening to a production from The Center for Emerging Media. Our producers are Justin Levy and Jessica Philips. And thanks to Clean Cuts Music and Sound Design for studio space. To hear more and learn more, visit us on the web at [www.centerforemergingmedia.com](http://www.centerforemergingmedia.com). And for The Center For Emerging Media, I'm Marc Steiner. Take Care.**

-transcript by Amy Hecht-Zizes