

## Masthead transcript of January 23, 2018 conference call with Ta-Nehisi Coates

Matt Peterson: We're gonna try to do this a little bit differently from a regular interview. You're listening to Matt Peterson, the editor of The Masthead talking. I've got Ta-Nehisi here. Ta-Nehisi, say hi.

Ta-Nehisi: Hello.

Matt Peterson: Good deal. We're gonna run through these questions that everybody has generated for us. As we go through them, Ta-Nehisi's gonna tell us what he is interested in, what he wants to answer live with us, and what kind of stuff that we should follow up on as a group. So without any further ado, I'm gonna get into this.

Oh, and one last thing, if you guys have questions during the call, send them into [themasthead@theatlantic.com](mailto:themasthead@theatlantic.com). Put them into our live chat at [social.maestroconference.com](https://social.maestroconference.com). We'll take 10 minutes at the end and go through them.

So, Ta-Nehisi, we got a lot of questions for you about this sort of #MeToo thing that's going on right now and how that relates to you. I wanted to begin by asking you a question from Bill about your book. About *Between the World and Me*. His question is, how would *Between the World and Me* be different if you had written it for a daughter instead of a son?

Ta-Nehisi: That's hard to answer. That's really hard to answer. It obviously would just not be the same book. It's not an insert slot A into ... or insert tab A into slot B sort of situation. So it's very tough for me to imagine. I don't have a daughter.

*Between the World and Me* comes out of a deeply personal black male space. It comes out of me as a young black male growing up in Baltimore. It comes out of the experience of Prince Jones as a black male. It comes out of me having a black male obviously as my son. My father's in there too. My father's somewhere in there too.

If I had a daughter, I might not have written *Between the World and Me*. I might've written something totally different. It's like stories are organic. They come out of the particular situation. If you change the situation, it's not that you get the same story in a different color. You might well get a whole different story entirely. So it's tough to imagine that. The experiences are so different and so specific to each other. It's hard for me to know what I would've done.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Having seen several months of focus on women and femininity and masculinity in the media, what can you teach a son, maybe not yours, but anybody's, about masculinity today? Would you teach the way that you raised a son now? Teaching the way the world is unfolding?

Ta-Nehisi:

I don't know, there are always things you would change. I was 24 when Samori was born. Again, I sort of assume answering questions and they're generic. Because of what I write about, obviously they have general principles and have general communities, but again, they come out of this specificity of my own life. I was 24 years old when my son was born. I was a very, very young man. So obviously it's probably quite a bit I would've done differently and said differently.

I don't know, this moment in particular. I think what's happening, my kid's about to go off to college. What I can say is in reaction to a lot of the stories that I've heard over the past three, four months. In the wake of Bill Cosby, in the wake of Harvey Weinstein. I have had very direct conversations with my son about what it means to go into the world as a young man.

To be conscious of your power and privilege. I don't mean that in a kind of signaling way. I don't mean that you go off to college and you say, "Well, I'm acknowledge ..." You do this whole preamble about how I know and I'm acknowledging my male privilege. I mean literally living it. I mean in how you treat people.

I like to think, perhaps correctly, perhaps not correctly, that that was always in his rearing. That he got it from me, that he got it from his mom. But I think that's probably been the biggest thing.

Matt Peterson:

Yeah. Let me ask you, you mentioned writing about your father. We have a question from Eric, who asks, if there's one position of power that has changed dramatically over his lifetime, it's the power that a father once had in his family. How have you seen fatherhood changing over your life?

Ta-Nehisi:

I don't know, I still got a ton of power. I mean, I just say speaking as an African American and coming from a community where there are longstanding issues about the presence of fathers. Again, it's probably tough for me to judge now. My son's 17, he'll be 18 next year. So maybe younger fathers would know better than me.

But I know in my time as a father of a much younger son, when my son was younger. Certainly in the time of my dad, when he was a father to me, there was almost a throne offered to men who were willing to do the work that obviously women do all the time. Certainly, to some extent, an undeserved throne. A throne that was given by default. So there was always great power in it.

The African American community is very, very different. We don't have this sort of tradition of women staying home and men going to work and thus being able to dominate through the purse strings. I'm not even sure that the majority of white people actually had that experience. I know that's the myth, but I'm not certain that that's the history.

But that stream, that experience, it's myth for the white community, it's legend for the black. It's something we don't really have access to, it's somebody else's myth. I don't know, I think the way we interact with that idea and the idea of fatherhood look different.

Matt Peterson: So you're talking about myth and you're talking about thrones, which makes me want to ask you about *Black Panther*. So I've been reading *Black Panther* and I'm really interested in what it's been like for you to write that story. So what has it been like?

Let me just set up *Black Panther* quickly for people who don't know it. T'Challa's the first black superhero historically. He's king of a mythical kingdom called Wakanda. The story that you write is about him going home to the kingdom and dealing with all the challenges of being a king in a society that has a lot of problems politically, there's a lot of violence going on. But it's from his perspective, it's from the perspective of this king.

I'm curious, what it's been like for you to switch your frame of reference from writing about people who are mostly suffering and oppressed, the victims of redlining in Chicago for instance, to writing from the perspective of the frame of reference of a king?

Ta-Nehisi: Oh, it's been a lot of fun. I don't know, I like seeing the world from different perspectives. It's probably one of those rare opportunities where creatively I was gonna get, as you said, to see from the perspective of somebody that was not on the bottom, but was on top.

Just to think about how privilege and power can in and of itself, somehow, sometimes, become a cage. That's a big thing. You have a guy who's king in *Black Panther*, who maybe doesn't necessarily want to be king, but he is. But that was a huge piece of it. That was a huge, huge gigantic piece of it. It's been a pleasure for me.

Matt Peterson: Let me borrow a question from our reader, Pamela. Have you learned anything about writing for this fictional world, about your own journalism? Has this changed the way that you think about your reporting projects?

Ta-Nehisi: Less so, not really. Not obviously. Maybe later I'll see something, but no, not yet.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Let me ask a couple practical questions about *Black Panther* because a lot of folks are really interested. What can your readers expect from the *Black Panther* movie? How close were you involved with that?

Ta-Nehisi: Not very. I think it's gonna be a great film though.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, I think it's gonna be a great film. I think Ryan is a tremendous filmmaker. So I think expectations are quite rightfully sky high.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. How far out have you planned the story?

Ta-Nehisi: Oh, for *Black Panther*?

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Pretty far, more than a year.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah.

Matt Peterson: Is that country gonna become a democracy? I mean that's my big question when I read this thing.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, I mean they kind of are in the throes of it right now. They're kind of trying to get a constitution straight and get it figured out. So it seems that way.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. When I read it, I was fascinated about this tension about the fact that you have written about people's problems out there in the real world, about dealing with government structures that keep them down. And you're suddenly, you're channeling this character who's on the other side of that.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah.

Matt Peterson: I wonder if creatively, how long you can live with that tension of acting out the world of this character, who is keeping some people down?

Ta-Nehisi: Oh, I could do it forever. I have no problem with that at all. I could do it forever.

Matt Peterson: This is a question from a reader named Meghan. Has working on a comic book, you said that it's made you think visually in different ways, has it made you interested in doing photo journalism or more visual work in your regular journalism?

Ta-Nehisi: Not yet. I mean, more comic books, that's what it's made me interested in doing. Because I really enjoy it and I enjoy the challenge of it. But no, not quite yet. Not quite yet.

That's a special skill and I don't know that my talents lie there. I can always feel myself stretching when I'm writing comics. That's a good thing, but it feels outside of my wheelhouse.

Matt Peterson: Fiction too, you said other places you're working on some fiction. Do you think that's gonna become a big part of your writing life going forward?

Ta-Nehisi: We'll see.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: We'll see. It could suck, you know? And then no. You know?

Matt Peterson: Are you planning any big reporting projects that you can tell folks about?

Ta-Nehisi: None that I can. I mean, I'm always working on something. But no, nothing I can tell folks about, sorry.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Let's jump back to the more political stuff that you've written about. Actually this is something maybe you haven't written about: education. A lot of our readers were asking questions about your views on education in general.

So the question is, here's a question from Damion who says, "I've written almost everything Ta-Nehisi Coates has written, but aside from a couple of pages in *Between the World and Me* and "The Case for Reparations," I don't remember any longer treatments of your perspective on education." He wants to know what you think, what role education plays in the those kind of big cycles of inequality? And entrenched in the differences that you've written so much about?

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, I don't know, I don't know. He's right. I mean I haven't done much work on that. People should understand those articles, not as a demonstration of knowledge, but as kind of the demonstration of the act of gathering knowledge. In other words, those pieces are not pieces I already had in my head and I just wrote. The process of writing was the process of learning about the thing.

So I haven't done the process of learning about the thing the way I did the process of learning about say, mass incarceration. When I did, I went through the process of learning about housing on the south side of, on the west side of Chicago. Or the Civil War. I just haven't lived there much.

That might be because of my own history. Wherein I've said before, I'm a college dropout, I hated school. I would've been a high school dropout if it was up to me. But I just didn't have a good relationship with school. So I had to find my own way around it. I guess in many ways, I wasn't particularly anxious to go back to it. I don't know.

Matt Peterson: But you've gone back and become a teacher a little bit, right?

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah.

Matt Peterson: You're at NYU now, right?

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, I'm at NYU.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: It's hard. I can teach about writing, I can talk to you about the importance of writing.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: But that feels like an extension of my job. I think education, the way I experienced it, was largely a process of certification and through hoops. I just wasn't particularly built for that.

Matt Peterson: Are there big things like redlining in Chicago that you want to learn more about? That you haven't yet? That have just been sort of sitting in the back of your mind?

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, time, I mean, my god. When I was in college, I always wanted to ... it was just a joke, if I were black, if I wasn't black, I would've been a medievalist. I love medieval Europe. I wish I better understood the workings of the economy, I don't. I wish my math skills were better. They're not particularly great.

I wish my French was better. It's okay, it's passable, I can get around in Paris. I wish my knowledge of French history was better, to go with that French. I wish I was a better cook. Trying to get better, but I wish I had time to be a better cook. I mean the world is vast. I wish I had a better understanding of Cold War history. I don't have a particularly good one. I wish I had a better grasp of or even a decent grasp of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I don't, I don't. There's so many things. There are so many things.

I think one of the ideas that I've really tried to get across and I've said this so much that I'm almost sick of hearing myself say it. My experience with writing is not the process of someone who has a vault of knowledge and understanding for the people and then dispensing it. It's a process of learning in public.

What that means is that I'm necessarily the ignorant of certain things. Right off the bat, I can't ... this comes from being a younger man and watching Sunday talk shows and watching people who clearly had no real knowledge of a specific topic or news event or world, holding forth and basically bullshitting as far as I was concerned.

I vowed, I said if I ever get any position of prominence, I would never do that. I would never stand up and present myself as a kind of finished product. I would never present whatever work I was doing as a product of some sort of innate

genius. You're supposed to attempt to learn something about the world. There's a ton, there's ton.

Matt Peterson: You're talking about yourself as a writer. You're also, of course, a journalist. I had an interesting kind of thought experiment here from one of our readers who wants to know, how would you spend a billion dollars on journalism? Imagine if Jeff Bezos or somebody like that came through.

Ta-Nehisi: If somebody gave me a billion dollars, I would not spend it on journalism. I would probably spend about one million out of that billion on journalism. That one million would seek to find the best and most efficient and the most amicable way to give the rest of that money away. I wouldn't spend a billion dollars on anything.

Matt Peterson: Jeff Bezos, if you're listening, there's your billion dollars. All right. Let's see. I want to jump back into some of your writing about race and about this great country that we live in. I have a question from Aditi, who asks, "What is it going to mean to be white in this country as minorities statistically make up a bigger part of the population?"

She mentions that she's Indian-American and feels herself categorized as essentially black. She's the Other when she's in a predominantly white space. Is that kind of thing just gonna continue as white people become a smaller part of the population? Or is this gonna force some kind of reckoning as it diminishes?

Ta-Nehisi: I doubt that it'll force any kind of reckoning. The change in America ethnically is not particularly new. I guess it's new that a larger percentage of that group will not hail immediately from Europe. But I don't know that that represents any degree of change. Whiteness throughout history has proven itself to be extremely malleable. It's not clear to me that it won't prove itself to be malleable once again. I just don't know that to be true.

There was a time in our history, not too long ago, like within my lifetime, that to be Middle Eastern or to be Arab in the census was to be white, effectively. These categories of race don't have any basis in any sort of science. They have a rough equivalency to a continent of origin for your ancestry. For I guess the majority of one DNA, even in trying to say that, I'm being sloppy. But that's the best I can do. But sometimes that's important and sometimes it's not.

In America, it's important when, I don't know, what 10%, 20% of your DNA is of direct African extraction. In other places of the world, it's not at all. In Brazil, it's considerably less important that it's only 20%. Whiteness has historically defined itself as the purity, the absence of blackness. Whatever that is taken to mean across history. It's been remarkably nimble at including people that, in previous generations, it claimed to exclude. It's not clear to me that that won't happen again. Maybe it won't. Maybe it won't. But it's not a certainty. We'll see.

Matt Peterson: This is a related question from Margaret, who wants to know if whiteness has lost its currency a little bit. She asked if white people are pissed because the commodity that they have of whiteness isn't as valuable today on the social and job market as it was? You can't trade on your whiteness as your dad once did.

So I guess, I take it from what you're saying that even if that thesis is true, and I don't know if it is, it may still change. Because the nature of whiteness in our culture is responding to the pressures that the rest of society is putting on it.

Ta-Nehisi: Well, there's considerable evidence that you can still trade on it. I would agree maybe not in the same way. I would agree, depending which African American community and in which white community you're in, it's not the kind of blanket sort of force for folks that it was before. It's not automatic like it was before. But it's still pretty damn strong.

So it's not clear to me, again, that this will diminish. I think there certainly was some reaction. There certainly has been some reaction to the kind of place that African Americans have seen, especially over the last 30 or 40 years, within the cultural identity. When you see them on TV, you see them in music, you see them in your movies.

Not enough, there's an argument, not quite enough. But you see them quite a bit. Even when you don't see them, you hear that music. They're all around you. That's a very different world than what the world was 50 or 100 years ago. So cultural power's a real thing too. So I think there's some response to that also.

Matt Peterson: We got a lot of questions in the vein of, just how do you talk about race? How do you do it well? I'll ask this one from Matt, who's a composition teacher. He says, I'll quote him, "I've come to think of the persistence of racism. I've come to think that the persistence of racism is the result of argumentative essentialism. Where somebody sees his or own opinions or judgements about race as being superior to other people's."

What makes that so hard to combat is that you want to respond in kind and suggest that your view is superior. This kind of response, saying my view is better than yours, perpetuates a divide between people on either side of this issue. If you want to frame it that way. So is there a way to talk about race that doesn't infringe people's essentialism?

Ta-Nehisi: I don't know, but I get by that by not really trying to convince people. I mean my view doesn't have to be superior to yours. I really, I really don't give a fuck. Excuse my language. I just, I don't though. I absolutely do not. I care about answering all of the questions that I have in my head. All the metaphor questions that I have in my head. I need the answer for myself. I don't think too much about whether that answer satisfies other people. Because I think I'm a pretty harsh critic. I think I ask pretty tough questions of myself.



I try to do that. I try to have an understanding that I feel confident in. Not just a bullshit understanding that can be performed. But one that I can wake up at four in the morning and articulate to you. Maybe after a cup of coffee, but that I feel pretty comfortable I can articulate to you off the top of my head.

And in a very specific way, not by falling back on phraseology or falling back on jargon or academic speak or that sort of thing. But that I can, in a very real sense, articulate for you. If I can do that, I feel pretty confident. What other people do is not really up to me.

Matt Peterson: We have a lot of educators in the audience who look up to you.

Ta-Nehisi: Sorry for cursing.

Matt Peterson: I don't think their students are on mostly, it's mostly the teachers. I think you're okay. All right. They're trying to read your work and try to understand how they take that back to their students. Have you thought about that question at all?

Ta-Nehisi: No, and I'm the wrong person to ask because a lot of that work comes indirectly out of the rejection of classrooms. How you take that back, I don't know. That work is a demonstration of my style of learning. My style of learning is, as I said, largely a rejection of classrooms, unfortunately.

Matt Peterson: Hmm.

Ta-Nehisi: That doesn't mean it's not possible, but I'm just not the one to do it.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Well, it sounds like that's something that we can work on here as a group to try and figure out somehow how to do that. Let me jump into here a little bit about religion, which is another big theme in people's responses to your writing.

So it's the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination. We're gonna spend a lot of this week talking about that, I imagine. I know *The Atlantic* is gonna write a lot about it. We're gonna write about it from that end. His religion was inseparable from his moral beliefs. Chad asked, "How does your atheism that you've written a lot about affect your understanding of Reverend King's Protestantism and its influence on the world?"

Ta-Nehisi: It's kind of distances it from it. If you don't have God and you don't have a Christian view of God, but certainly if you don't have God, it's not so much that it's hard to relate to the intellect and the wisdom. Because that's not really hard to do. But I don't, for instance, a phrase like, "Love your enemy." I don't get that at all. I've tried. I'm not saying I can't understand it. You know what I mean?

It's like you're asking me about things to study and maybe this is a thing I need to study more. Maybe if I understood the Bible more and I understood Christian philosophy more, I would get it. But the notion that I'm gonna have any sort of

love at all for Bull Connor, in my mind, mocks any understanding I have of love itself. This is just me, right? You know what I mean? This is just me.

I've had this from the time I was a child encountering King. If I love everyone, I love no one then. You know? I really do hate certain things in the world. I really do sometimes hate certain people. I'm sometimes really, really angry. I'm sometimes really, really afraid. I don't want to be all loving. I don't believe love is the answer to everything. I believe that I have to accept myself and try to find the proper place and the proper vent for all of those emotions. I never wanted to force myself emotionally to be my best self.

One of the hard things always about the Civil Rights Movement, which I salute for its courage, tenacity, is just the notion that these people had to be their best selves. They had to be their best version of a Christian. They had to be Christ-like to get the things that the most evil, hateful white person in this country could get. That to me is just, that's hard for me to accept. It's hard for me to take. I don't mean like Dr. King accepted it, like it should be that way. That's not what I mean.

It's hard for me to accept, as an atheist, suffering and the kinds of deliverance. As an atheist, I believe that when people die, they die. So I don't have the ability to think about Dr. King himself, who was shot in the head, and say he died for me. No, he was killed and it was horrible that he was killed. It was wrong that he was killed. This country is responsible for his death. I believe that. Nothing can make that okay. My presence at *The Atlantic*, all the pleasures that I enjoy, I should've had the ability to enjoy them anyway. It was always wrong. It was always wrong.

So it's hard for me to access the notion that black people, who have suffered so much in this country, and anyone really, who suffers under the yoke of oppression, can somehow be redeemed in any sort of grand narrative. I believe in the value of an individual life, I really believe that. I believe that every enslaved black person in this country who died enslaved, died that way, and that was the end of their story. That is the great tragedy.

It can't be redeemed by their children or their grandchildren or the idea of heaven or any sort of other notion of loving the people that put them in that condition. Or loving the political descendants, not genetic, political descendants of those people who continue to honor that system.

I don't have that. I don't have ... love is a resource for me and it's limited. You know? My mom used to tell me, man, she told me this about girls. But she used to tell me, I think it was the best thing she ever said. She said, "Honestly, you gotta love those who love you." And that's my basic philosophy. I don't have love to expend on way more. I'm sorry, I don't. So it's hard.

Matt Peterson:

Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: It's hard.

Matt Peterson: Have you ever wanted to study Christian philosophy?

Ta-Nehisi: Yes, very much so.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Very much so. Because I say all that and it doesn't mean I don't want to understand. I do. I'm just giving you my perspective. But yes, I would love to at least ... I mean it's plain that I understand it, I don't agree necessarily with the logic of it. But yes, very much so.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Frankly, I think it hinders my understanding of the black experience. Because the black experience is so rooted in the church and rooted in Christianity itself, that I necessarily must not be getting all of it. You know?

Matt Peterson: Yeah. A reader asked me about that, about you, who mentioned ... A reader named Josh said, "I'm curious that you haven't written much about Christianity in the black community." Given that you're kind of covering the same ground as them morally, in this sort of political liberalism way. But you've never, at least publicly, grappled with your —

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, because I don't know anything about it, really. I mean, I didn't grow up in the Church. I won't say all black people, but certainly a large number of black people did. I don't even have the kind of atheism that folks have when they grow up in the Church and then reject it. I don't have that. I just don't, I don't understand it. I don't have that. I'm not literate in the Bible, I'm not literate in the black Christian tradition.

I think I just come out of another space that is there, evident, but is not always in the popular narrative. That is a broader and more human black experience. Those black people are sometimes loving and sometimes they're sad and sometimes they're vengeful. Sometimes they're angry and sometimes they're mean. Sometimes they're self-sacrificing and sometimes they're cowardly. They're human. They're human. So I seek to represent that. I don't seek to represent something other worldly or magical or anything like that at all.

Matt Peterson: What kind of philosophy do you like to read? I know you've talked a little bit about sort of the Enlightenment greats. Do you read much —

Ta-Nehisi: Nope.

Matt Peterson: Hardcore philosophy?

Ta-Nehisi: Nope, nope, nope. I mean I ... no, it's not an area I'm particularly literate in.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Not at all. I wish.

Matt Peterson: Um ...

Ta-Nehisi: One of the detriments of being ... and this is gonna have to end one day. This will have to end one day, but one of the detriments I think, of being the kind of writer that I am right now, the level I am right now. I know that at some point I'm just gonna have to walk.

I was in a bookstore this weekend and I was doing what I used to do as a much, much younger man. I was just strolling through the bookstore looking at things that looked interesting. I can remember a time and my life where I used to pick up those books and read them. So much of my reading is focused on whatever I'm writing now that it actually limits the ability to read for pleasure.

I say I'm gonna have to walk away, not like walk away from writing forever, but it's clear to me at some point really soon, I'm gonna have to take a break. Because I'm gonna have to open my mind up again. And be young again. Allow myself to just sort of float and explore and understand and not just read in this directed and structured way.

Matt Peterson: But you read for pleasure, right? You must. You read, must read comic books, you read fiction.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, but not like I used to. It's all study because I write comic books. So I'm not just reading it, I'm trying to figure out why it's working. It's not just reading like, "Wow." I mean yeah, I have those 'wow' moments, but so much I'm doing for a piece. I'm doing all this reading right now on slavery in the north and a lot of it's 'wow' stuff, but it's also for my writing. So it's a different experience. You're studying it. You're not reading it like most readers read it.

Matt Peterson: Can you read comic books again now that you've written one?

Ta-Nehisi: I don't read them the same anymore.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: I just don't. I'm both harsher and easier. I'm easier because now I understand how hard it is. I understand why things go bad and how often they go bad for reasons that have nothing to do with the writer or the artist. I'm probably harsher because, also, I understand how things go bad. You know?

Matt Peterson: Last couple minutes here, let me jump into some of the questions that came in while we were talking here. So let me ask one about the Civil War from Jason. Have you ever read a book called *Confederates in the Attic*?

Ta-Nehisi: No, that's Tony Horwitz's book and I have not read it and I really, really want to.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Tony's a great guy.

Matt Peterson: Well, then let's move on. Who should play Ulysses S. Grant in the upcoming movie? You have a preference?

Ta-Nehisi: Is there an upcoming movie?

Matt Peterson: Yeah, there's a movie being made out of Ron Chernow's book about Grant.

Ta-Nehisi: Who's making it?

Matt Peterson: I don't know, I'll have to look it up.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah. Let's see if it's getting made first. Let's see if it's getting made. I did hear some talk about Leonardo DiCaprio doing something like that and maybe he will. I don't know. But Grant is well deserving of a movie.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. All right, well, we'll come back to that one. Janet wants to know, it's a big picture question, can we tell myth from legend while we're living in it? Or is that something you can only do in retrospect?

Ta-Nehisi: I have no idea.

Matt Peterson: David James Taylor is directing the Grant movie. It's real.

Ta-Nehisi: Oh, okay. So it is real. Okay.

Matt Peterson: As far as we can tell, yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: Okay, good, good, good.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: They have a star attached? They don't have a star attached yet?

Matt Peterson: I don't think so. We'll find out. Someone will send us this as we're talking.

Ta-Nehisi: I hope it's good.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: We don't need a bad Grant movie.

Matt Peterson: Do you have favorites of Civil War movies?

Ta-Nehisi: *Lincoln* is really good.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: *Lincoln* caught a lot of shit from historians for good reasons and I understand why. But on a scale of ... I tend to ... this is my pragmatic aspect. I tend to grade things within the context of what's possible and what exists. That was probably, definitely one of the best portraits of African American soldiers, the colored troops.

Daniel Day Lewis was phenomenal. Sally Field, whom people don't talk about, was great. I find that movie gripping. For Hollywood, which has done so much damage, apparently continues to do damage, in terms of people's understanding of the Civil War and what came out of it. With its sort of preoccupation with the armies of white supremacy. This was a huge step forward. It's not perfect, but it's a huge step forward.

Matt Peterson: How do you think about historical fiction? Does historical fiction, does it have to have a point? Can you read historical fiction that's not super, super accurate? Like Hilary Mantel writing about—

Ta-Nehisi: I mean, probably. I mean, I don't think you should go to fiction for those kind of facts. I loved Doctorow. I don't know how accurate Doctorow was, but I adored Doctorow's work.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Well you're talking about Lincoln, right? So *Lincoln* is not a documentary, it's a work of fiction.

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, it is a work of fiction. I guess I don't ... you can't violate the spirit of Lincoln. You know what I mean? So there has to be some amount of truth in that. I mean it's fiction from the perspective of, there's things coming out of Lincoln's mouth that surely you don't know that he definitely said.

You want the interpretation to have the spirit. You can't for instance say, I don't know, Lincoln really wanted the South to win. You can't, that would be a betrayal. You can't just lie.

Matt Peterson: Right.

Ta-Nehisi: I guess the historians, who if they were here—

Matt Peterson: You can kill Hitler, but you can't kill—

Ta-Nehisi: Well, I mean even that. I mean, I guess if the historians were here, they would say that there were things in that movie that violated the spirit of it. I mean maybe I should be open to that too.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. Let me ask you about France from a member named Patrice. Who asks, "During your time in France, did you feel more able to access your identity as an American, as opposed to as a black person?"

Ta-Nehisi: I'm always black, so it wasn't as opposed to. But certainly they saw me as an American first. When I say I'm always that, it's how I see myself, it's my ethnic and cultural identity. So I carry that wherever I go.

But yeah, they definitely saw me, I'm talking about me as an African American. I'm not talking about black people, black French people, who they saw very differently. But they saw me definitely as an American first.

Matt Peterson: Where else in the world do you want to go?

Ta-Nehisi: Everywhere. Yeah, everywhere. There's places I wouldn't go because they're dangerous. But everywhere. I'm a very late, late traveler. But no, I'd like to go everywhere.

Matt Peterson: Have time for maybe one or two more questions here. We have a question about reading journalism on the internet today. You're a longform writer. You write for magazines, *The Atlantic* magazine mostly. You've written a lot of blogging.

Do you read short-form stuff? So our readers are trying to figure out, how do they get information? How do they wade through this world of the internet? Do you read short-form stuff in your life?

Ta-Nehisi: I do. I do, I do. I think, from where I think of, that's probably the best right now. At least in terms of migrating it. I think *Deadspin* is just incredible. I'm not saying that because he just interviewed me. I did an interview largely because I thought they're incredible. I think *Deadspin* just does tremendous, tremendous work. It's probably the publication that's the best in the spirit of the alternative press where I came from. So yeah, there's good stuff out there, definitely.

Matt Peterson: Who's done the best interview of you recently?

Ta-Nehisi: Alex did one at—

Matt Peterson: Wagner for you—

Ta-Nehisi: Yeah, Alex Wagner did one at Sixth and I. Alex is a pro, so that was really good. Jenna Wortham did one when I was in Portland that was really good for the *New York Times*.

Matt Peterson: As somebody who sits through these, what makes those good?

Ta-Nehisi: People have their own original questions developed for themselves and not sort of ... they're not faking it.

Matt Peterson: Yeah.

Ta-Nehisi: They're not faking it.

Matt Peterson: Yeah. All right. Well, let's leave it there.

Ta-Nehisi: All right.

Matt Peterson: So that's good. Thank you very much for joining us.

Ta-Nehisi: Thanks for having me, guys.

Matt Peterson: All right. Take care, everybody. Bye.