

# Ta-Nehisi Coates Revisits the Case for Reparations

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*“When I wrote ‘The Case for Reparations,’ my notion wasn’t that you could actually get reparations passed, even in my lifetime,” Coates says.* Photograph by Gabriella Demczuk / NYT / Redux

It’s not often that an article comes along that changes the world, but that’s exactly what happened with Ta-Nehisi Coates, five

years ago, when he wrote “The Case for Reparations,” in *The Atlantic*. Reparations have been discussed since the end of the Civil War—in fact, there is a bill about reparations that’s been sitting in Congress for thirty years—but now reparations for slavery and legalized discrimination are a subject of major discussion among the Democratic Presidential candidates. In a conversation recorded for The New Yorker Radio Hour, David Remnick spoke with Coates, who this month published “Conduction,” a story in *The New Yorker’s* Fiction Issue. Subjects of the conversation included what forms reparations might take, which Democratic candidates seem most serious about the topic, and how the issue looks in 2019, a political moment very different from when “The Case for Reparations” was written.

*This conversation has been edited and condensed.*

**Ta-Nehisi, for those who may not have read the article five years ago, what, exactly, is the case that you make for reparations—which is a word that’s been around for a long, long time?**

The case I make for reparations is, virtually every institution with some degree of history in America, be it public, be it private, has a history of extracting wealth and resources out of the African-American community. I think what has often been missing—this is what I was trying to make the point of in 2014—that behind all of that oppression was actually theft. In other words, this is not just mean. This is not just maltreatment. This is the theft of resources out of that community. That theft of resources continued well into the period of, I would make the argument, around the time of the Fair Housing Act.

**So what year is that?**

That's 1968. There are a lot of people who—

**But you're not saying that, between 1968 and 2019, everything is hunky-dory.**

I'm not saying everything was hunky-dory at all! But if you were speaking to the most intellectually honest dubious person— because, you have to remember, what I'm battling is this idea that it ended in 1865.

**With emancipation and the end of the war?**

With the emancipation, yes, yes, yes. And the case I'm trying to make is, within the lifetime of a large number of Americans in this country, there was theft.

**A lot of your article was about Chicago housing policy. It was a very technical analysis of housing policy. When people talked to me about the article—and I could tell they hadn't read it—“So, Ta-Nehisi's making a case for”—no, no, no, I said. First and foremost, it's a dissection of a particular policy that's emblematic of so many other policies.**

Right, right. So, out of all of those policies of theft, I had to pick one. And that was really my goal. And the one I picked was housing, was our housing policy. Again, we have this notion that housing as it exists today sort of sprung up from black people coming north, maybe not finding the jobs that they wanted, and thus forming, you know, some sort of pathological culture, and white people, just being concerned citizens, fled to the suburbs. But beneath that was policy! The reason why black people were confined to those neighborhoods in the first place, and white people had access to neighborhoods further away, was because of political decisions. The government underwrote that, through

F.H.A. loans, through the G.I. Bill. And that, in turn, caused the devaluing of black neighborhoods, and an inability to access credit, to even improve neighborhoods.

**Now, your article starts with someone who lived through these racist policies, a man named Clyde Ross. Tell us the story of Clyde Ross. How did he react to the article?**

So, Mr. Ross was living on the West Side of Chicago.

**He started out in Mississippi.**

Started out in Mississippi, in the nineteen-twenties, born in Mississippi under Jim Crow. His family lost their land, had their land basically stolen from them, had his horse stolen from him. He goes off, fights in World War II, comes back, like a lot of people, says, “I can’t live in Clarksdale[, Mississippi]—I just can’t be here. I’m gonna kill somebody or I’m gonna get killed.” Comes up to Chicago. In Chicago, all of the social conventions of Jim Crow are gone. You don’t have to move off the street because somebody white is walking by, doesn’t have to take his hat off or look down or anything like that, you know. Gets a job at Campbell’s Soup Company, and he wants the, you know, the last emblem of the American Dream—he wants homeownership. Couldn’t go to the bank and get a loan like everybody else.

**And he was making a decent wage.**

Making a decent wage—enough that he could save some money, enough for a down payment. And obviously he has no knowledge—none of us really did, at that point—of what was actually happening, of why this was. No concept of federal policy, really. And so what he ends up with is basically a contract lender, which is a private lender who says, Hey, you give me the down

payment, and you own the house. But what they actually did was they kept the deed for the house. And you had to pay off the house in its entirety in order to get the deed. Although you were effectively a renter, you had all of the lack of privilege that a renter has, and yet all the responsibilities that a buyer has. So, if something goes wrong in the house, you have to pay for that. And so these fees would just pile up on these people, and they would lose their houses, and you don't get your down payment back. Clyde Ross is one of the few people who was able to actually keep his home.

**There's such a moving moment in the piece where he's sitting with you and he admits, "We were ashamed. We did not want anyone to know that we were that ignorant," and felt that his ignorance had extended to his understanding of life in America, in Chicago, which had seemed, to use the phrase of the Great Migration, the Promised Land.**

Right, right. And he felt like a sucker. And he felt stupid, just as anybody would. And I don't think he knew, on the level, the extent to which the con actually went. And then living in a community of people—and this was somebody getting a piece—but living in a community of people who were being ripped off. And they couldn't talk about it to each other because they wanted to maintain this sort of façade, or this front, that they owned their homes, not that somebody else actually held the deed. And so for a long time there was a great period of silence about it.

**Did Mr. Ross react to your piece?**

Yeah, he did.

**What did he say?**

He said reparations will never happen.

**So, in the aftermath of the piece—piece comes out, fifteen thousand words in *The Atlantic*, tremendous interest in it. You said this about the piece, I think it was in the *Washington Post*. You said, “When I wrote ‘The Case for Reparations,’ my notion wasn’t that you could actually get reparations passed, even in my lifetime. My notion was that you could get people to stop laughing.” What did you mean?**

Well, I mean, it was a Dave Chappelle joke, you know? And what the joke was was, if black people got reparations, all the silly, dumb things that they would actually do.

### **Meaning?**

You know, buy cars, buy rims, fancy clothes, as though other people don’t do those things. And once I started researching not just the fact of plunder but actually the history of the reparations fight, which literally goes back to the American Revolution—George Washington, when he dies, in his will, he leaves things to those who were enslaved. It wasn’t a foreign notion that if you had stripped people of something you might actually owe them something. It really only became foreign after the Civil War and emancipation. And so this was quite a dignified idea, and actually an idea there was quite a bit of literature on. And the notion that it was somehow funnier, I thought, really, really diminished what was a serious, trenchant, and deeply, deeply perceptive idea.

**If you visited Israel between the fifties and a certain time, you would see Mercedes-Benz taxis all over the country, and you’d wonder. This is not a particularly rich country, at least not yet. This was reparations—this was part of the reparations payment from Germany to Israel in the immediate**

## **aftermath of the Holocaust, Second World War. What do reparations look like now?**

Right, because they gave them vouchers to buy German goods, right.

### **What's being asked for? The rewriting of textbooks, the public discussion—what? In terms of policy, how do you look at it?**

So first you need the actual crime documented. You need the official imprimatur of the state: they say this actually happened. I just think that's a crucial, crucial first step. And the second reason you have a commission is to figure out how we pay it back. I think it's crucial to tie reparations to specific acts—again, why you need a study. This is not 'I checked black on my census, therefore'—I'll give you an example of this. For instance, we have what I would almost call a pilot, less significant reparations program right now, actually running in Chicago. Jon Burge, who ran this terrible unit of police officers that tortured black people and sent a lot of innocent black people to jail over the course of I think twenty or so years. And then, once he was found out, in Chicago there was a reparations plan put together with victims, [who] were actually given reparations. But, in addition to that, crucial to that, they changed how they taught history. You had to actually teach Jon Burge. You had to actually teach people about what happened. So it wasn't just the money. There was some sort of—I hesitate to say educational, but I guess that's the word we'd use—the educational element to it. And I just think you can't win this argument by trying to hide the ball. Not in the long term. And so I think both of those things are crucial.

**As of this moment, in 2019, there are more than twenty Democratic Presidential candidates running. Eight of them**

**have said they'll support a bill to at least create a commission to study reparations. What do you make of that? Is it symbolic, or is it lip service, or is it just a way to secure the black vote? Or is it something much more serious than all that?**

Uh, it's probably in some measure all four of those things. It certainly is symbolic. Supporting a commission is not reparations in and of itself. It's certainly lip service, from at least some of the candidates. I'm actually less sure about [this], in terms of the black vote—it may ultimately be true that this is something that folks rally around, but that's never been my sense.

**Are there candidates that you take more seriously than others when they talk about reparations?**

Yeah, I think Elizabeth Warren is probably serious.

**In what way?**

I think she means it. I mean—I guess it will break a little news—after “The Case for Reparations” came out, she just asked me to come and talk one on one with her about it.

**This is five years ago, when your piece came out in *The Atlantic*?**

Yeah, maybe it was a little later than that, but it was about the time. It was well before she declared anything about running for President.

**And what was your conversation with Elizabeth Warren like?**

She had read it. She was deeply serious, and she had questions. And it wasn't, like, Will you do X, Y, and Z for me? It wasn't, like, I'm trying to demonstrate I'm serious. I have not heard from her since, either, by the way.

**Have you talked to any candidates about it?**

No.

**You published your article five years ago. Barack Obama was President. We are now in a different time and place. How would you place the reparations discussion in this moment?**

Yeah, I think people have stopped laughing, and that is really, really important. Does it mean reparations tomorrow? No, it doesn't. Does it mean end of the fight? No, it doesn't. But it's a step, and I think that's significant.

**Now, what would you like to see the outcome of a conversation, or the American equivalent of a South African study into American history, be?**

A policy for repair. I think what you need to do is you need to figure out what the exact axes of white supremacy are, and have been, and find out a policy to repair each of those. In other words, this is not just a mass payment. So take the area that I researched. The time I wrote the article—less every day—the time I wrote the article, there were living victims, and are living victims, who had been denied—

**Who were on the South Side and the West Side of Chicago.**

Yeah! All over this country. People who had been deprived, who had been discriminated against. Set up a claims office. Look at

the census tracts. Are those people actually still living there? You know, maybe you can design some sort of investment through resources. Maybe you can have something at the individual level, maybe you can have something at the neighborhood level, and then you would go down the line. You would look at education. You would look at our criminal-justice policy. You would go down the line and address these specifically and directly.

**Is your job to just break the glass on a subject, the way you did with reparations, or is it your job to then follow through the way a scholar would for years thereafter?**

That's a great question.

**Do you feel your work here is done, and now I'm moving on to the next thing, as you have with any number of subjects? Or do you have to sustain it? Is that on you?**

I don't know. I really don't know. I would like to be able to move on. But I recognize that's not entirely up to me.

**It's not.**

No. Not at all. I just feel like, if you write an article on reparations that has the effect that it actually does, which I didn't expect, it's very hard to say. I have to conclude that I clearly have something to say, and a way of saying it, that can affect things. So, if that's the case, what is your responsibility now? What right have you to say, "I'm done talking about this"? "Because I feel like it." I don't know that you get to do that. I'm actually, I feel myself to be very, very grounded in the African-American struggle, even though I'm not. I don't consider myself an activist. When I think about writing that article, I think about all the people before me who've been making the case for reparations from street corners—One

Twenty-fifth, in Harlem—and couldn't get access to an august publication like that. And I think about how I got access, and it strikes me that you owe folks something. You don't get to just do what you want.