

Audio Title: The Book Stoop Tina Strawn: “Are We Free Yet?” + Political Activation, Healing in Jamaica, and the Decision to Blaxit

Duration Transcribed: 0:37:06

Number of Speakers: 3

Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, friend! I heard you were looking for our spot. I got you.

So, you’re going to go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you’ll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That’s the stoop.

Amanda, Amanda Lytle, she will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop, that’s the name of the spot. We got the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers, the best kinds of folks.

Oh, me? I’m Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing, and this is our podcast. I am so glad you’re here.

Now, I’m going to let you get to Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks, Bex. Hey, friend. Let me be the second one to welcome you to our spot, The Book Stoop. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I’m so grateful to have you with us.

Today on The Book Stoop, I’m speaking with Tina Strawn. Tina is a Black Joy advocate, a liberation activist, a podcast host, and an author. Her upcoming book, *Are We Free Yet?*, takes us through 2020 through Tina’s eyes. It is both a personal reflection and a collective examination of the ways that we interact with the systems of oppression including patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism. In this conversation, we hear Tina share about healing, joy, peace, and pleasure. She tells us about her political activation in 2017 after having lost all faith in the system, the backstory behind Legacy Trips, the takeover of the Speaking of Racism podcast, about her experiences as a black woman in Jamaica, and her decision to Blaxit.

We start our conversations on The Book Stoop with a rather fitting question, so Tina, what are you reading these days?

Tina Strawn: I should have a good answer for this. There are a couple of answers. Number one, I’m reading my own book right now like I’m reading but I’m writing so that’s very important. That’s a big part of my process. And of course, a part of that, alongside that is I’m reading a lot of text that are going to be – that are supporting of my book, so *Pleasure Activism* by Adrienne Maree Brown. And that honestly is – she just came out with a long form fiction book called *Grievors*, so if I could be reading anything I wanted to right now, that’s what I would be reading. I’ll probably get to that soon because I need some fiction in my life.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. OK. I didn't realize that *Grievors* have come out.

Tina Strawn: It did. On her Instagram, she was talking about it so perhaps she just got the box of author's copies. Maybe that's all it is. But I saw that.

Amanda Lytle: Well, it's on the radar.

Tina Strawn: It's on the radar for sure. I need to get that in my life for sure, *Grievors*.

Amanda Lytle: Well, since you mentioned your book, tell me all about it. Tell me the backstory and where you're at and how that process is going.

Tina Strawn: For sure. So, I am writing a book called *Are We Free Yet?* And it is both a personal reflection and a collective examination of the ways that we interact with systems of oppression such as white supremacy, capitalism, and the patriarchy. And more importantly, what are the tools that we are going to use towards liberation to free ourselves from those systems? And those tools to liberation are healing and joy and peace and pleasure. So, it's a little bit part of – it's going to take us through all of 2090 through my eyes. I am a queer black woman who has been born and of course lived in the United States for the majority of my life up until 2020 when I became a nomad right before COVID hit.

So of course, none of us knew what to expect coming into 2020. We had so many wonderful hopes that this was going to be our year. And one of those – a part of that for me was I was going to be a full-time traveler. My wife and I at the time had planned to travel once the kids were grown and gone out of the house. And so, 2020 was that year. And so, we set out to become nomads and eventually moved to Durban, South Africa at the end of the year. And during the year also, had a lot of scheduled events and speaking engagements that I was going to be doing across the country. So, we all start the year out super hopeful, very excited to be the 2020 humans.

And then we all know what happened in March. COVID arrived and everything shut down and we were just fucked. From there, I went through a lot of – I mean the country went through a lot of changes, a lot of things were happening in particular with the black community that affected not just the black community, not just the United States, but it affected the whole world as we were just bombarded with this onslaught of black death and the visual around it, the viral videos that really served as what I and so many folks in social and racial justice call black trauma porn. We just had a lot that we were grieving, and in addition to living through a global pandemic.

So when – by the time the summer gets here, by the time George Floyd is killed and the country begins to just explode as it should due to all of the racial tensions that had been rising due to the racial terror and violence that is staple for the United States. So, while all of this is happening on a national level, of course, being queer and being black, I'm a mother, I'm an empty nester so I've got three adult children, all – everyone was going through their own personal shit at the time that George Floyd was killed. We were all going through this devastation of – that is COVID-19.

And for me personally where I locate myself at this part of the year, summer of 2020, is my wife unexpectedly left, walked out the door. My oldest daughter suffered from a mental breakdown and had to be hospitalized. And in addition to those personal things, as an antiracism educator and facilitator, with all of the attention and what is often referred to as the white urgency of the moment in response to George Floyd being killed, I began to get bombarded with this onslaught of white folks wanting things, asking questions.

And this is where – it really was a pivotal moment in the sense that antiracism and justice facilitators and leaders and speakers, that we were both holding the grief of the moment of all of the black death, which was unfortunately all too common for us, but we were also at the same time holding the fact that all of a sudden, white folks acted like they cared. All of a sudden, white folks arrived on the scene as though they just realized that racism was a thing, and that police brutality was a thing.

So that's where everything changed for me with regards to I had to make a decision how I'm going to show up in this moment where I recognize the need to respond to the righteous anger that was taking place across the country. While that wouldn't last very long from a white folk's standpoint with regards to all of the initial emotion that came up that wasn't followed up with action, it wasn't followed up with solidarity, it wasn't followed up with how can I actually get involved to dismantle and tear down white supremacy and racism and the structures that caused these types of things to happen, policing.

So, at the same time while all this is happening and I know that it is my calling to respond based on the way that I live and show up in the world and with y work, I made that decision, the decision to step away from my work, go on hiatus, and really take care of myself. I was being called to grieve, grieving so many things. I could list of course the names of the black folks that we lost that year, Breonna Taylor, Nate Woods, Nina Pop, there were just so many, too many to name, too many. Period.

And that was a part of my grieving, grieving my relationship, my seven and a half year relationship with my wife, grieving that, grieving the things that I know my daughter was going through with her mental challenges and the ways that I was both wanting to be there for her as well as not being able to be there for her because she is an adult and so there was so much of her care and her treatment, well, of all it, that I wasn't able to be a part of. Not only because she was an adult, but also, just due to the fact that we have our own – have had our own mother-daughter dynamics that made being present for her difficult because we trigger one another.

This is all things that go into the book. So just to kind of move through that, I found myself still having this desire, of course, I was – I'm a nomad at this point. I was in San Francisco, and I had been waiting. At that point, I was waiting for the borders of Vietnam to open up because that was where I was going to be headed next.

And while I was waiting for the borders of Vietnam to open, a friend said, "Hey, the borders of Jamaica are open. You want to go?" And I said, "Sure! Why not?" And so, bought tickets that hour and two days later, I arrived in Montego Bay. And Amanda, this is where everything changed for

me because I immediately felt like this was exactly where I needed to be to heal. And I would wind up staying for 6 months. And actually now, I'm back. So, I spent the rest of the year in Jamaica, grieving and healing and prioritizing my peace and my pleasure and what that looks like is a lot of amazing food, it looked like a lot of good sex, it looked like a lot of good reggae music, a lot of weed. There's so much about being here in Jamaica for me that has healed me in ways I didn't even know I needed to be healed.

While it's a poor country, it's a black country. And that has had a significant effect. And I think more so than I even realized. Being here, there's something about my nervous system that just relaxes when I'm here, and that really contributed tremendously to my ability to just really – just be with myself. It involved so much meditation, so much stillness and movement in my days. So, to be able to have the privilege to – my neighborhood is on the Caribbean Sea, so as I'm walking up and down the streets and up and down the hills, I've got the sea, the beautiful turquoise water on one side. So, this is what the book is about. It's about all of our, I'm not going to say all because this is in particular for folks who feel – who have feelings that they are not free. In order to get free, you've got to feel like you're already not free.

So, this actually originally was a project really about my decision to Blaxit. And the term Blaxit, it's B-L-A-X-I-T, it is a newer term that references the resurgence of Black Americans wanting to leave, exit, expatriate the United States due – in some part, due to the racism that we experienced living here. So that was something that I decided I wanted to do a couple of years ago on the heels of again, being affected so tremendously by all of the black death and not just being affected by the black death but by the lack of response and the lack of accountability for those who murdered these black individuals. So that was a huge part of it.

Another part of it was being very active during the 2018 midterm election. Myself like millions of other of folks consider ourselves to have been “activated” if nothing else, activated politically after Donald Trump became President. So, by the time 2018 midterms arrived, I had spent the previous year just getting ready, getting ready for the “blue wave” and just immersing myself in politics. And I was living in Georgia at the time, in the Atlanta area. I volunteered on a couple of campaigns of black women in Georgia, one was a local black woman in my house district but the other was Stacey Abrams. So having a chance to volunteer and go through and do phone banking and canvassing and phone calling and all of these things for Stacey Abrams for governor of Georgia. I also was a part of a team that chased ballots after the general election. There was so much corruption involved in that election that that was another reason that I actually lost faith in the system.

So there have been so many different points in my life, in particular, the past several years where I have realized this does not feel free. And the defining moment actually happened at late November 2019 when my wife and I were living in Little Elm, Texas. We went out the door. We were headed to go for a walk on the lake where we lived and there was an envelope in the door, and we opened it. It wasn't addressed to us. It was addressed to the owner of the house. But we opened it because we had a suspicion of what it was. And our suspicion was confirmed. It was papers for doing a short sale of the house. So, the house that we had been renting was about to go into foreclosure which we of course didn't know. We had been paying all of this money.

Anyway, it was in that moment where I just realized all of the things that we had been doing, all of the things that I had spent my life doing as a queer black woman to survive in this country and then even thinking back to my parents and their parents and how hard I know that my family and I as a black woman, my experience as a black family, always working so hard to get ahead and doing the things that we are told to do to still experience way too much struggle, to still be getting between paychecks, running out of money between paychecks, to still be dying without anything to show for it.

And so, it was just again, a combination of all these things and realizing this is not fucking free and I need to figure out how to get free. And for me, it looked like – I know what it feels like to be black in the United States, I do want to know what it feels like to be black outside of the United States because this is no longer free for me. This doesn't feel free. Nothing looks free if Breonna Taylor can be killed by officers, by the SWAT team and no one is held accountable like I could no longer wake up in the States feeling like a free woman. The more that I paid attention to what was happening around me, the more that I understood that my skin is already criminalized.

So, that's what the book is about. It's these coming to these realizations of what are the things that perhaps have prevented you from feeling free and can we begin to imagine and dream and create pathways of liberation for ourselves. And I think that – and this is something that Audre Lorde says, and I'm going to attempt to quote her, and it's not going to be perfect. But she talks about in the *Uses of the Erotic* how once we can feel joy, we demand that all parts of our lives feel that way basically. It's basically the overall idea of the *Uses of the Erotic*.

So, when I reference things like joy and I reference pleasure, I am speaking in literal terms that it is the ability to be able to identify those feelings of joy and pleasure and recognize that following that is how we are going to get free. That was a long explanation. But basically, that's *Are We Free Yet?*

Rebekah Borucki: Hey, friend, we are coming straight back to The Book Stoop after a quick break.

Amanda Lytle: What an experience, the writing process of that after your 2020 as well. And even thinking about February 1st, you're leading into this nomadic lifestyle to take the turns that 2020 did for you both as a black woman but also as a mom and as a wife, and, and, and, and. There are so many ands in this process.

So, I want to fast forward to – you're back in Jamaica.

Tina Strawn: Yes.

Amanda Lytle: So, when the word freedom and feeling free comes up, tell me about how you feel in Jamaica.

Tina Strawn: I feel light in Jamaica. The air quality not only feels different, it is different. There are both describable and indescribable ways and feelings, ways that I can explain how freedom feels here. I think about the land. I think about the people and the struggle to gain freedom here. I think about the ganja, the cannabis, the weed. I think about the food. I think about the people, the language of Patois. I think about just the blackness.

Again, kind of just to reiterate what I was saying earlier, I have been raised in predominantly white spaces in the US. I'm a preacher's daughter. I went through childhood in California, in what is now the Silicon Valley. It wasn't then. It was becoming then. This is in the '80s. And then moved to Texas. I'm a product of Christian private schools. So that has been my experience primarily for the majority of my life, even in fitness, right? Fitness is a predominantly white industry as most industries in the United States are, but in particular, fitness.

And so, that was another space that I spent a significant amount of time in as in my adult life around white folks. And while I am comfortable around white folks in the sense that it's normal, it is the norm in the places where I lived and spent my life, I did not realize all of the effect and how that affected me as a black person until I began to number on, do my own unpacking of my own internalized racism, when I started to recognize that not only am I oppressed in this black skin, but I also participate in upholding in so many of these oppressive systems. I participate. We all participate in white supremacy and upholding it. And when we get to that moment where we recognized that and start to say, "I want to now do everything in my power to dismantle this," there's a process that starts inside. That's where it should for lasting change. Before we start going out and trying to change the world, we start inside.

So, I didn't realize the effect of living in whiteness, living among whiteness, what that had on me. But I also – and so as a result of – until I began doing my own unpacking of my internalized racism, and also until I got to a black country, and this experience of being surrounded by black folks is something different even though there is a cultural difference still, I am Black American and that definitely has a different flavor than being black and Jamaican. But I have been embraced here and honestly for me, it feels very much like home which is odd because I am not aware of any ancestor that I have that comes from Jamaica even though I wouldn't be surprised. My mother's family is from New Orleans and so there is a lot about Jamaica that does remind me of New Orleans. So that also plays a role.

So, I think those are some of the things that make me feel free here is the lightness, the air, the weed, the people, the food.

Amanda Lytle: Ugh! I love it. I love it, Tina. And now, I'm now wondering about travel because you mentioned about the goal of being a nomad, February 1, 2020, you're going for it. Had travel been a part of your life prior? And I want you to lead this through Legacy Trips because I need to know all about this.

Tina Strawn: OK. So, I have always – we're raised in a middle – lower middle-class family. We always went on vacation. So, travel, yes, has been somewhat a part of my life. It wasn't until meeting my wife in 2012 where she at the time we met, she lived in Afghanistan. She was a

government contractor in Afghanistan. And she expressed her desire to travel the globe. And at the time, I had three teenagers. I was a single mom of three kids. They were 12, 14, and 16. And I said to her, “You know what? Let’s wait until the kids are out of the house and then I would love to travel with you and go anywhere.” And that’s what happened. The kids grew up and left home and that’s when we put our plan to become full-time travelers and nomads in motion.

And so, another why – and that was exciting at that point. So again, so kind of simultaneous with her desire to travel and also my desire to Blaxit and leave the country and become a nomad, it just all came together what we thought beautifully in 2020.

Amanda Lytle: And then with Legacy Trips, this is a huge movement. It’s like traveling with history and historical influences and education laced throughout it. So how did that start?

Tina Strawn: So, I have been – I’m a retired fitness professional of 15 years. And a big part of that was teaching yoga and managing yoga programs and yoga coordinators and that was a part of my roles when I was in the corporate fitness industry. So, as I mentioned, I got politically activated in 2017 and I had been doing my own racial awakening and unpacking since 2016. And so, that started to change me and change who I am.

My yoga practice actually is what I considered to have changed my life because though I have been teaching yoga since 2012, it wasn’t until July of 2016 when I accidentally saw the videos of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling being killed by police and I was broken and shattered and changed forever and began to look for what is going to – I just – I needed help. I needed something to heal me. And in the yoga studio is where I found that, meditation. And so, I developed a meditation practice.

And while I’m being changed by the social things that are going on, all of the black fight, the terror, and violence against the black community in my fitness roles in teaching yoga and teaching cycle classes and all these things, so what begins to happen is that my teaching begins to bleed into my activism and my activism begins to bleed into my teaching. That leads me to 2018. I read a book that really began the idea of Legacy Trips. And that book was *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. That book and the work of Bryan Stevenson and I began to learn about the Equal Justice Initiative, that really impacted me.

And April of 2018, the Equal Justice Initiative opened up the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. Those are both projects of the Equal Justice Initiative and they are both in Montgomery, Alabama. And so, I wanted to go because I felt like that’s an important place for me to – that was an important place for me to go and experience. And I felt like it’s important for everyone to go and experience the Memorial and the Museum. And so, I decided, well, what would it be like to actually bring people to this place to experience the Memorial and experience the Museum along with a yoga practice and with the philosophy of yoga and really turn inward as we are going through this experience? And that’s how the idea came to be.

I began to do my research on – and I already have a background of doing conferences and conventions and things like this, so it came together. It has always been something that I believe that my ancestors have given to me and something that I believe to be bigger than me. So, it has been – we’ve done 9 trips so far. And we even just completed our first two since the pandemic over the summer. So, it has been a really remarkable experience like you said having people, inviting people to come and walk through such an important city, an important place in Black history, in American history, walk through the Memorial and have a chance to honor the lives of the black folks that were lynched during the years of 1877 and 1950 and to today, right?

That’s the other part and that’s such a crucial piece to note about the name of the Legacy Museum. The full name of it is The Legacy Museum from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration. So, it helps us to draw the lines from the beginnings of the nation and the beginnings of racial violence and terror from enslavement and to the fact that slavery actually hasn’t been abolished. It evolved to what we now have as the present industrial complex and mass incarceration as well as lynching has evolved to police brutality and police shootings.

And so, to be able to go to these spaces and reflect on the history, reflect on the truth, reflect on our ability to be the change that we want to see in the world, and to do so alongside of spiritual practices. And what I will share with you is that since I started Legacy Trips, which actually is a different name than what I began with but since starting it, the spiritual practice has been yoga. And now, we are moving into having other facilitators and other folks lead the trips. So, it would not always be centered on yoga. It will be whatever spiritual practice that particular facilitator selects for the weekend.

Amanda Lytle: Wow! I also wanted to use this as a beautiful segue because of all of this education and activism, conversation, connection, disruption, I’d love that to segue into Speaking of Racism and tell me all about that because that is growing and exploding in the most beautiful way possible.

Tina Strawn: It really has been quite a project. I will share the beginning of it. Speaking of Racism is a podcast that was started in January 2019, and it was started by a friend of mine. She is a white woman whose name is Jen Kenny. And she began it as a way to – as a platform for black and brown voices and for folks to learn about what some folks are doing to use their voice to dismantle racism. She invited me to come on to the podcast in that summer of 2019 which of course I did to talk about my Legacy Trips. And then she and I became friends and continued to talk after those episodes were released.

Chelsea Handler did a documentary on Netflix called *Hello, Privilege. It's Me, Chelsea*. And she and I did – we watched it and she said, “Hey, Tina. You want to do a podcast episode and talk about it?” And I said, “Yeah, let’s do it.” So, we recorded a podcast episode about the documentary. That podcast got thousands of downloads very quickly. And with all of – this is when the platform started to get more exposure, started to grow a little bit. And with that, Jen was faced with some questions, valid questions in particular from black women challenging her role as a white woman owning a podcast about racism.

And so, while Jen was making the decision and doing her own soul-searching with regards to that, she came to the conclusion that this is not something that she wanted to continue to have. She asked if I wanted to be her co-host. And at first, I said yes. And then a couple of days after, I came back to her and I said, “So here’s the deal. I believe that black ownership and black leadership are pillars of antiracism works so I want to acquire this.” She said, “I agree with you. Absolutely, you’re right.” And so, the beginning of 2020 also started me as the new owner of the Speaking of Racism podcast.

So that year with the podcast, I’m really proud of the community that we have created. I’m proud of what it has become. We assembled an advisory board. We were able to pay and compensate all of the black and brown guests that came on and let us do interviews with them. We were able to raise money for a couple of justice organizations, black-led justice organizations. The National Bail Out for example, is one of them.

So, we were able to do a lot of really I think important work to uplift black and brown voices in particular and those folks that are working in a variety of ways, in creative ways, to disrupt and dismantle racism. So – and of course, with the exposure to antiracism work and to that term and what it means, I mean we experienced a great amount of growth especially sadly after George Floyd was killed. And the need for the podcast is just very, very clear for us. So, it has been like I said, very, very much quite the experience.

Amanda Lytle: And also knowing about how much of that growth and shifting took place in 2020 just adds to your journey through 2020 as being so monumental.

Tina Strawn: Absolutely. And that’s why I say I’m so grateful for the community that we built because that – especially at a time where I was going through so much personal tragedy and there are so many ways and so many times where I was not able to show up. And I was OK with that. I was allowing that.

Again, I went on hiatus so I could focus solely and exclusively on my healing. And in that process, that’s why having the advisory board was so incredible because so many other folks in the movement were able to step forward and take over. And it was just – it was really a community project. It is. It has been. And you’re right, to have accomplished and to have done what we did and to have made the impact that we made in 2020 is remarkable and it’s a testament and a tribute to the community that we built.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. It’s incredible. And actually, on that note and being super mindful and respectful of your time, I’d love to know about an account, a person, organization, disruptor, activist, change-agent that you would love to give a shout-out to.

Tina Strawn: The Blaxit Global Movement. I would encourage everyone to Google the term Blaxit. What is going to come up are probably a lot of articles about this new movement of black folks who are making the decision to become expats. And so, I think that the platforms that I think about, I think about Blaxit Global which is a Facebook page which has thousands of folks as a part of it. There’s actually a couple of – there are several.

And so when I go to social media, one of the things that brings me the most joy about social media and this is really hard to do because social media is not often a joyful place, it can be, I'm hoping at least for me to make it that way, but one of the most joyful things that I have experienced online has been being a part of Blaxit online groups where it's a bunch of black folks basically sharing our stories about how we are going to get free and those of us who have gotten free and what that looks like.

So, while these groups are exclusive for the black community, I do still encourage everyone to go and Google to learn about Blaxit because this is something that is happening right now. And there are just black folks – what you've heard, everyone has heard some black folk in their life, if you have black people in your life which hopefully you do, you hear us talk about being tired. You've heard this in particular over the past year and a half. And so, for many black folks, there is a desire to leave the United States and that's valid and that is – there isn't – under no circumstance that I'm suggesting that all black folks want the same thing. We are not a monolith, right? So, everyone doesn't want to leave.

However, there are a lot of folks that do want to leave. And so, to be able to be connected with other black folks who are having these same realizations about what black life in the United States looks like, what it has looked like, what it has looked for our ancestors, what it still looks like for us today, the way that we envision it looking for our children and our descendants, to be able to be a part of these groups and these communities where other black folks are helping one another with ideas and tips and suggestions and we are becoming friends all across the globe to the point where we are meeting up with people and building real in-life communities when we arrive on different places around the globe. There is just something incredibly powerful about that. So, I would say, check out Blaxit. Find out what – learn about what Blaxit is.

Amanda Lytle: Tina, thank you so much for being a part of The Book Stoop.

Tina Strawn: Absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. We hope you loved the conversation, and we will be back again soon. Please be sure to follow us on your podcast app and leave a rating where you're able to do so. Writing a written review helps reach more listeners too. Check out all of the show notes for the links and share The Book Stoop with your friends. Talk soon.

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