

## **In Proximity**

### **From the Archives: Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates (Black Panther)**

#### **Season 3 Episode 21**

#### **Final Transcript**

**Paola Mardo:** You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today, we're celebrating Black Panther.

[0:07 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** February is the anniversary of the release of Black Panther, the hit Marvel film co-written and directed by Ryan Coogler. We wanted to celebrate the film's anniversary by digging deep into the archives of In Proximity, and re-releasing an oldie but goodie episode with two Black Panther storytellers: Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Ryan needs no introduction on this podcast. But for those who need it, or want a refresher, Ta-Nehisi Coates is a journalist and author of the bestselling books *Between The World And Me*, *The Water Dancer*, *The Beautiful Struggle*, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, and *The Message*.

Ta-Nehisi had a successful run writing comics series for Marvel's Black Panther and Captain America. He was also the host and writer for *Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast*, which told the story of the making of the sequel, and his friendship with Chadwick Boseman. I had the pleasure of working with Ta-Nehisi on that podcast, and we'll link to the show in the show notes and the description below.

For the anniversary of the film Black Panther, we thought it'd be nice to revisit Ta-Nehisi and Ryan's conversation. They talk about Black Panther, but they also talk about writing, the writing process, and music. This episode was part of our first season, so it is audio-only. For those watching on YouTube, we'll have photos and images on the screen so you can watch along while you listen to the show.

Hope you enjoy this really beautiful and fun conversation between two artists and storytellers, connected with their love of writing and story, their work on Black Panther, and their friendship with the late great Chadwick Boseman. Enjoy.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[1:47 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** Hey, what's going on? My name is Ryan Coogler. I'm a writer, director and producer of film and television, and I'm also a founding member of Proximity Media. And I'm here with my good friend, Ta-Nehisi Coates.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I'm Ta-Nehisi Coates. I'm a writer, and I am here—well, I'm honored to be here with my great friend Ryan Coogler.

**Ryan Coogler:** Man, that's a little—I mean you do more than just write, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** No, not really, right? I mean, a little bit, but no, not really. No. That's—that's mostly. I teach. I mean, I do a little, you know—

**Ryan Coogler:** You got a business.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I do, I do, I do. I do.

**Ryan Coogler:** What's it—what's it called? For the people.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Wow. I don't think I've talked about this publicly. It's called Maceo-Lyn, and it is a production company.

**Ryan Coogler:** What do you guys make?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** TV and film, hopefully. TV and film, hopefully. Our first project was an adaptation of *Between the World and Me* for HBO by my good friend Kamilah Forbes, who is also one of the principals at Maceo-Lyn and who I've been collaborating with since I was in college. The principals are herself, my wife, Kenyatta Matthews, and it's the three of us. And we've been, at this point, working together for most of our lives, and we just decided to formalize it.

**Ryan Coogler:** That's amazing. And where'd—where'd the name come from?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** The name came from my son's middle name, Maceo, and—our son, me and Kenyatta's son,—son's middle name, Maceo, Samori Maceo Paul Coates and Kamilah's beautiful daughter. I'm laughing because I'm picturing her right now, Satya Lyn Fenton.

**Ryan Coogler:** That's amazing. So it's named after you guys' children.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** And you working with family and friends. That's beautiful. That's—I mean, it's a lot of parallels.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's really all family, man. I don't—like—like I said, I've known Kamilah the majority of my life at this point. Kenyatta and Kamilah have known each other since they was 12. So it—it really is a—it helps to think about it as a family business, you know what I mean? Like, actually, that helps the—the work, actually.

**Ryan Coogler:** How long have y'all been going with Maceo-Lyn formally? It sound like y'all been working together forever informally, but, like, how long has the company been a thing?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** So, formally, since—god, that would've been like 2020. We sold the rights to *The Water Dancer*, and when that book came out, I was, you know, fortunate enough and blessed enough to receive quite a bit of interest from Hollywood folks. But I didn't—I didn't—at that point, honestly, Coog, I knew you and like one other person or two other people, you know what I'm saying? And so it was like, I didn't know who was asking for it. And there—there are real horror stories about writers signing, you know, away their work.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Or signing away the right to their work to, you know, production companies and filmmakers who they really don't know. And I had worked on that book for 10 years. It was my pride and joy. It was my baby. And I just couldn't see myself giving it up. And the only person who was really, really close to me at that point, like I said, outside of you, who had, you know, some amount of show biz experience was Kamilah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know, who was, you know, artistic director up at the Apollo here in New York, in Harlem. And so I called her up, you know, and we decided to—to do this thing and, you know, ended up and got lucky and found some other folks to collaborate with, you know, in terms of on the producing side and, you know, was lucky enough to sell it. And we just kind of proceeded from there.

**Ryan Coogler:** So take me back to meeting Kamila. You—did you—did you both meet at Howard?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** We did, man. I mean, this is like, where, like, you know, it almost dips into me and you, you know what I'm saying? It's—it's wild.

[LAUGHTER]

You know, you get to a point, and it ain't too many of us, brother, you know? It's beautiful and also sad, but basically, in high school, I had really, really wanted to be a rapper. And I loved emceeing. I loved the literary aspect of it. You know, me and you was having that conversation earlier this week, and I was saying, like, I just had this realization, "I really need to accept that I'm a pop culture dude." And that's just what it is, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** A pop culture dude as opposed to what?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I guess, like, a kind of high literary person, like—like a—which I thought I was, you know—you know, and I always perceived myself as kind of being.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You and I always got this, you know, running debate about whether you're a artist or not.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And I still maintain that you are, you know what I mean? Very much so, you know what I mean? But I did get some perspective on what you were saying, you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But basically, I had—you know, I wanted to be a rapper. I came to Howard, and that first year I was at Howard, Nas's Illmatic came out. And I realized that I had no hope. It wasn't even like I couldn't, you know, do it that well. It was like, I couldn't do the bad version of

whatever that dude was doing, like lyrically. I mean, he was just—I mean, to this very day, I go back and listen to that album and ask myself: am I writing with the kind of impact, efficiency—not just Nas but that the best—you know the best of folks—I mean, today, like, even like, like that—or Kendrick does it.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right. Yeah, totally.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Are my sentences sticking in that way? You know, and they usually aren't, but it's nice to have that as a aspiration. So came to Howard, gave up on that, and I started then on poetry. And a mutual friend of me and Kamilah's, was actually Kamilah's man at the time, would do these, like, events, these open mics. And Kamilah would help him organize, and we got tight. And, you know—and the reason why I was saying that, you know, it's where me and you intersect, is because Kamilah was in the School of Fine Arts, and with her and running with her was, of course, you know, our great friend, Chad Boseman. And that was just the beginning of it. And I didn't realize what that meant. And in some ways, it's the beginning of me and you even sitting here talking, you know what I mean? Like—like we are.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And that—that is—it's crazy when you young and know, like, yo, this ain't practice anymore.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, the tale is being told right now, you know what I mean? We're in those opening scenes of Act I right now, right now.

**Ryan Coogler:** Totally, yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right now.

**Ryan Coogler:** No, looking back, yeah, like I understand—it puts it in perspective, man. Like, when I was young, I remember my parents would be so serious about, like, what I was doing and so adamant about, like, being conscious of, like, who I was hanging out with, where I was spending my time, you know? And then being an adult, looking back, it's like, oh, yeah, the game had kind of already started, you know what I mean?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It already started. Yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, like, and you don't realize it until you older. When you that young, you're just probably just in college just trying to find yourself, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I was. I was, and I knew the vaguest sense I had—I mean, to this extent, I was lucky because I did know I wanted to write. I knew that very clearly.

**Ryan Coogler:** How long did you know that? Can you remember not knowing that?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** If you consider rappers writers, no, I can't. No, I can't. I remember being like really, really, like, small, just really, really young and being at the local rec center skating and them playing, you know, Melle Mel's The Message. And me listening, I'm like, "Wow, wow."

What's this dude doing?" You know what I mean? And then—and the words—I mean, obviously I liked the music, but the words just hit me so hard.

**Ryan Coogler:** Bro, it was the same for me, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah, you talk about Tupac like that, right?

**Ryan Coogler:** It was Pac, but also, like, I've spoken a lot about the first time I saw a movie in the theaters that I remember. You know, and I was with my father. He took me to see *Boyz n the Hood*. The thing about that is that was Ice Cube on the screen for me. And I knew who Ice Cube was because I knew his music. You know, like, I knew him as a rapper. But my parents were—you know, they had me, like, early/mid-20s.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Oh, so they young. They young.

**Ryan Coogler:** And they were of the hip-hop generation. They listen—they still listen to, like, Black music in all forms and pop music in all forms, but, like, rap was them. Like, my pop knew Hammer. He worked in the hall in Alameda County, you know, like, when I was real young, in juvie. And—and, like, he would talk about Richie Rich coming through there and Too Short coming through there. And he came up with Hammer's brothers. And Hammer was, like, the biggest thing in the world when I was in kindergarten, and we knew he was from Oakland. Like, people would say they were his cousin, and, like, they were oftentimes telling the truth, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like—like, but I can remember my childhood marked by, like, what rap songs were coming out, what I was listening to, you know what I'm saying? Like, so it's interesting hearing you talk about that. It was the same for me, bro. Like, we used to write rhymes on the—but I was so young writing rhymes, bro. It was—it was on that paper. You know that paper where—where they used to call it the—the ground and the—like, the dirt, the ground, and the sky, you know, that—that it's got, like, the dot in the middle. The lines would be super big.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Oh, I know what you talking—is this, like, where you practice your handwriting on it? Yeah, yeah, I know what you talking about. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** They had a—they had a dotted line for, like, the height of the—the height of the lowercase.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Exactly. I know exactly what you talking about.

**Ryan Coogler:** Bro, we used to write rhymes on them, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Wow.

**Ryan Coogler:** Like, like, that's how young we was, like, you know?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's incredible. That's incredible.

**Ryan Coogler:** But, I mean, you got to get into it. Like, I think you got to get into it deeper, man, because, like, I remember you telling me a story, bro, that I haven't gotten out of my mind because you—you tall, right? For people who—who listening, like, this podcast, you can't look at Coates. And you probably seen him sitting down. You probably seen him, like, on the—on the back of a book in, like, an author profile shot or whatever. You see him sitting down on, like—a

late-night show or whatever, you know, and get interviewed on something. You know, how tall are you, bro?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** 6'4".

**Ryan Coogler:** All right. So—so—so he's—he's 6'4".

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's useless. I don't play ball. It's useless.

**Ryan Coogler:** But—but nah, what's funny is, bro, you—you was telling me you been tall your whole life. People would ask your mom if you played basketball, and what would your mom say?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** She said, "Nah, he reads." She got offended. She be pissed, you know what I'm saying? It's the '80s, you know what I mean, early '90s, and somebody's saying—you know what I mean? Like, with everything that's going on. And it's like, "Nah, he reads." You know, like, she would say it with that, "Nah, he reads," like with an attitude, you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. I just thought that was so great.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know, like, "How dare you look at him and think that?" you know? And—and I did. I mean, I read a ton, man.

[11:18 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, just going back to what we was talking about, the whole pop culture piece, I really didn't have in my mind that it was a separation between—I don't know, like I read the Odyssey in high school, and I read Shakespeare in high school. And I really liked Shakespeare. Like, I really—I really—like, I could feel the poetry in what he was doing, like, even at that young age. But I didn't really separate what I liked in that from what I liked in Eric B. & Rakim from what I liked in, like, Chris Claremont or—or whoever, you know what I mean, who was writing the comic books at that time that I was reading. Like, it didn't really click to me that these guys, with language like that, it's levels.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I'm saying? You know what I mean? Or Gil Scott-Heron, who my—my parents used to—used to play a lot, or even just, like, whatever R&B I was listening to that I thought was really—you know what I mean? Like, that was, like, really, really, you know, beautiful. Or you listen to some Isley Brothers songs, and, you know, Voyage to Atlantis, you know what I'm saying? Like, I didn't—like, there were a lot of books in my house, right?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But I didn't come up in a family where it was like, "Ta-Nehisi, cut off that, you know, hip-hop," you know what I'm saying? "Stop reading them comic books. Come read something serious. Read this"—like, I didn't really have that.

**Ryan Coogler:** It was no—it was no delineation.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** There was no delineation.

**Ryan Coogler:** Like, no forced, "This is serious. This is goofball stuff," you know what I'm saying? Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's right. That's right. And I think, aesthetically, like, that's kind of one of the places that we come together because what we recognize, I think, if I could speak, is that there are things that actually have very, very high artistic merit but manage to speak to large numbers of people nonetheless.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. I think so, man. Like, I always had this feeling, man, like, just coming up and liking things and being young and Black, like, coming up in the '90s, being from Oakland, that, like, segregation of genres, of topics, you know what I'm saying, like that is b.s., you know? Like, I always feel like it's somebody else's hand in there. It's a feeling I ain't been able to shake, even professionally, man, like, the suspicion of, like, man, who's saying that this is better than this or that this is more valuable than that? And as soon as that exercise happens, somehow Black people get the short end of that stick. So I don't want—like, I don't—I don't want that, you know what I'm saying? Like, I don't want to—you know, I don't want that around, you know, the idea that, oh, yeah, this type of movie is a real movie whereas this is not, or this type—this—you know, like me and—me and you talk about—we talk a lot about—about groups, right? You got, like, a Wu Tang shirt on. You know, we talk about, like, Bone Thugs and OutKast, right? I mean, we had that conversation, like, who the—who, like, the most impactful rap group, you know? Them three groups would come up. You know, NWA would come up, you know what I'm saying? I feel like the youngsters now, I got to imagine, like, Odd Future would come up, you know what I—you know what I mean? Like, like—but, like, with each one of them groups, even, like, within hip-hop, it was always like, "Oh, man, that's not real rap."

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Definitely.

**Ryan Coogler:** You know, Bone Thugs, "Oh, they from Cleveland, man? You know, they singing, and, like—when they talking, I can't understand what they saying."

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I was that dude. I was that dude. No, I mean, I would—real talk. I was that dude. And part of my maturation has been to recognize that, look, the point of art is an emotional response. And if you see all these people having an emotional response, but it's not sticking to what you delineate as the rules of the art, what the fuck are the rules for? Like, what are the—like, what are the rules there for? Like, are they—

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I'm saying? Like, they—I mean, I grew up in the thick of it, you know, because there was a whole—I mean, I think part of this was the—although, actually, to a lesser extent. I don't think it was so much that. But this is, you know, like, the whole East versus West, Pac/Big thing is going on.

**Ryan Coogler:** Totally. I remember, you know, the East Coast—the East Coast—East Coast/West Coast thing broke out or what have you. You know, Pac was murdered, and then, shortly after that, Big was murdered. And they were releasing this post—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I was so angry about that shit, man.

**Ryan Coogler:** I could never—because you—because you knew Pac, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I mean, I don't want to overstate that, you know what I mean? Because I'm sure a lot of people say, "I knew Pac." I'm sure a lot—

**Ryan Coogler:** No, but I'm saying but you knew him—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I did.

**Ryan Coogler:** You knew him in—in—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I did.

**Ryan Coogler:** In Baltimore before he came—before he moved west.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I think a better way to—yeah. Yeah, yeah. I mean, who I—who I really, really knew, like who I actually spent time around was his mom and—and his—and his sister, his little sister Sekyiwa. And my brother spent more time around him than I did.

**Ryan Coogler:** They—they—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, Damani did. He—he spent much more time. Like, I just remember him coming, going, "Hey, I'm Tupac," you know what I mean, sort of coming and going. And—but I remember when what-you-call-it came out, Same Song, and I was like, "Yo, it's Tupac."

**Ryan Coogler:** Oh—oh, when he—when he—on the—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** When they bring him out on the—on the throne, yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** They didn't change his name or anything, you know what I mean? Which is what people used to do. That wasn't, like, Trouble T anything like that. Like, it was—that was Tupac.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I'm saying? So, yeah. Yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. So he was such—he was such a—man, Pac was such a big deal for us, bro. Like—like, like, bro, he was such a—he was such a big deal for us, bro. Like—like, I can't put it into words. Like—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Hey, Coog, why? Why? Like, if you can—I mean, you know, it's obvious, you know, given how huge he is as an artist. But I just want—if you could just take it back and just say, like, why, at that particular point, being there in the Bay.

**Ryan Coogler:** Man, I think he was just us, bro. Like—like, in the Bay, like, you—we from the heart of where the Panthers was from. It was like every major Black city at that time, we were under assault from, like, every direction: politically, resource-strapped. And it was this feeling of conspiracy happening that you couldn't put your finger on, you know what I'm saying? Like—and what we were feeling was what eventually was going to happen. Like, in 2008, the city was

going to be taken from us, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? And it wasn't going to be a Black city anymore for too much longer, you know what I'm saying? But there was also this chip on our shoulders, this bravado of toughness that was required to survive, you know what I'm saying? And this complex, like—these complex gender relations, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, in the Bay area, it's a place that's like—we talk about this a lot, man. Like, we grew up on—we grew up on music, bro, I would never want my children listening to, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, like, in terms of, like, what the words is saying, you know what I mean? Like, and we listened to it, and it was a part of our culture, but at the same time, we knew better. We felt guilty about it, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, like—and he was all of that.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Is that, like, I Get Around and, like, it's—and what-you-call-it—

**Ryan Coogler:** He could make—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Keep Ya Head Up.

**Ryan Coogler:** I Get Around—he could make I Get Around. He could make—he could make Keep Ya Head Up. He could make Dear Mama, and you believe it all, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, you believe it's all coming from the same person because that was our cousins, you know what I'm saying? That was our uncles. That was the dudes that was running our streets. You would see them be manipulative, you know what—but you see them look after they—look after they mom, you know what I'm saying? Like, see them look after the neighborhood. So he represented—he represented us in a way that you couldn't put your finger on, and we felt like he was the best.

[18:20 - “Good Times” by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** So—so take me back, bro. So it was hip-hop. And at some point, did it become poetry?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. When I was in—when I got to—when I—really, actually, it started—it started happening my—my senior year of high school. My—my—my older brother, Damani, was a huge influence on me. He was a huge artistic influence on me, and he was the one that, like, when I was young, he was really into what was coming out of New York. And it was just—like, he would just—you know, we have different mothers. So, you know, he would—sometimes he would be living with us. Sometimes he would not be, or he would come over sometimes. But every time he came over, it felt like he had a different tape. Different tape.

**Ryan Coogler:** And this is in—this is in Baltimore.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** This is Baltimore. Yeah, this is in Baltimore. And—

**Ryan Coogler:** And, like, we talking like—like '90-what?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Nah, this is—well, yeah, we talking '92, '90s also. But I would say from—god, what is the first time I remember? So my earliest memory of, like, that influence is probably about—actually about '86. I'm 10, 11 years old. So you got to remember, like, I mean, this is, like, crazy to say, but, yo, they didn't use to play hip-hop on the radio, especially in Baltimore. Like, stations would advertise themselves as no rap, you know what I mean? Like, that was a thing you could do.

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That was a marketing device. But in Baltimore, there would be, like, a couple stations like V103 for us, and if you stayed up late, they would play whatever the hot New York shit was, right? Again, no internet. Shit is very, very regionalized.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** So I can remember just sitting outside, you know what I mean? On the porch in the summer, you know what I mean? With my—with Bill. That was his name back then, with Big Bill. And we got the boom box on, and he's waiting to hit record for when they going to play I Ain't No Joke, you know what I'm saying?

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, like I have that, you know what I mean? And then—

**Ryan Coogler:** That's Eric B. & Rakim, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Eric B. & Rakim, yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Again—and he was probably the first dude, but I was like, "Yo, this sound like a book." Like, I was like, "Yo, this sound like literature. Like, what is this man doing?"

**Ryan Coogler:** That's [hums sample of Pass the Peas from Ain't No Joke]?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's it, yeah, [hums sample of Pass the Peas from Ain't No Joke] Pass the Peas sample, yep. But I was just like—

**Ryan Coogler:** Bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:**—"What is this man," you know what I mean, "doing?" You know? You know, later, you know [quotes lines from Follow the Leader by Eric B. & Rakim] I was like, "Wait, what? What?" You know?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know [quotes line from Follow the Leader by Eric B. & Rakim] you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** That's alliteration, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, but you know what?

**Ryan Coogler:** Journey, journal, journalist?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, and that got me, Coog, right? But, you know, rappers do that all the time. But what really got me was, like, what does this metaphor mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** The picture he painted.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, yeah, exactly. Like, what—what is—what is metaphor, though, here? Like—

**Ryan Coogler:** He writing on you, yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's—exactly. Exactly. He's literally inscribing—but to say it that way was, like, what?

**Ryan Coogler:** It's like seven different poetic techniques in one line. Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's right. That's exactly it. Exactly it. And so, like, rappers were really, really the first and most influential people I heard do that. So, yeah, you know, he would—so my brother, he would come through. He'd be like, "Yo, you got to check out these—the Jungle Brothers. Yo, you got to check out De La Soul. You got to hear this. Yo, did you hear Dope-man? It's from the group, NWA. You ain't heard Dope-man? Yo, you got to hear Dope-man."

**Ryan Coogler:** That's crazy, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I mean? And, like, I'm in—

**Ryan Coogler:** Dope-man, yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I'm in middle school, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, I'm a—I'm a kid, you know what I mean? But I'm putting this on. I'm saying, "Oh, this is Ice Cube. Oh, okay. Who's that?" You know what I mean? So he had a huge influence on me. And then when—he went to Howard before me.

**Ryan Coogler:** Okay.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** He actually started writing poetry.

**Ryan Coogler:** Okay.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And so he would come home—because he used to rap, and I started rapping after him. And we would go record things together, you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** So you was just chasing you—chasing your brother.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Very much so. Very much so. That's my idol, you know what I mean? It was like—you know what I mean? That's my big brother.

[21:54 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But in the background of that, actually sub-below all of that, I think, more importantly, was that was the moment where hip-hop was really breaking out as pop music.

Below that were certainly people like me, you know what I'm saying, who felt like part of the reason why this was happening was a lessening of the artistry. And maybe some of that was true, but here's the trick of it. It's not clear to me now, looking back, that all of the shit I would've said was more artistic actually was.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I mean? Like, it's not clear to me that that's actually the case. And so I—I really have had to—it's funny, man. Like, even as somebody who said that, I wasn't raised with that delineation. Bro, I had to—I mean, it's funny just even talking about Nas, man, because it's like, yo, Illmatic hit me so hard and shaped my life so much that I would say, up until maybe five years ago, everything that man released, I compared to Illmatic. Now, how unfair is that? How fucking unfair is that? Here you are in a—like, and I think about you and Wakanda Forever. What if a motherfucker sees Wakanda Forever, right, and it's like, "This is the most incredible shit I have ever seen, changed"—I mean, we hope that that happens, right? Like, changes somebody's life, young artist coming up, you know what I mean? Filmmaker, or maybe not even a filmmaker, in something else, but that it totally changes their trajectory. And everything you do after that, they say, "Why is this not Wakanda Forever?" Given where Wakanda Forever came from and the specific circumstances that it came out of, and then you recognize, like, all art is kind of like that.

**Ryan Coogler:** It's like a foundational habit that we have. You know, it just so happens that, you know, it can become—it can become a bad thing when applied to art, you know what I'm saying? Like, people ask, like, me—and I had to learn this about myself, bro. Like, people ask me, "Hey, who's your favorite filmmaker?" And, for me, I had to say, you know, after, you know, studying the craft and actually, like, only—like, while I was—while I was in graduate school, only doing movies, you know what I'm saying? Making them, watching them, thinking about them, discussing them with other people who wanted to dedicate their life to it, and I realized, man, it's like, you know, it's better to not have a favorite filmmaker and better to have, like, favorite films, you know? Because I can remember—man, like, I can remember discovering Jacques Audiard, a French filmmaker. And I discovered him with a film called A Prophet, which is—which is, to this—to this day, you know, if I had to pick a favorite movie, it's probably that, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Here's where I pause you and say that for like six months, every day almost, you texted me saying, "But the real question is, why haven't you watched A Prophet?" We were talking about something totally different. "But the real question is, Coates, why you ain't watched the Prophet?"

**Ryan Coogler:** I was just—I was just—I was just balling. I'm doing my—I'm doing my duties as a little brother, bro, just being a pest, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Oh, you—no, you was right, too. That shit's incredible. It's incredible.

[24:58 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I don't think I'm disclosing too much, but, you know, I've been working on Superman. And at one point, I think I texted you, and I was saying, like—and we don't really—like, I don't really want to give this too much energy, but people who act like this superhero comic book shit is easy, especially when you trying to say something—I mean, and that's—that's the key point, right? Because you can point to all sorts of forms where people don't

say shit, you know what I mean? Like, just don't say nothing. But if you are in a form, and you're trying to use the form to say something, bro, that shit is hard.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That shit is fucking hard. And then it causes you to assess everything else that—like, I can't—I could never review—I used to pretty much make my bones as a music critic and as a book critic, right?

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I can't review anything again. I can never review art. I just—I just can't do it. I can't do it.

**Ryan Coogler:** I couldn't imagine, man. Like, I have a—I have a hard time judging anything, bro, you know what I'm saying? Like, specifically, like, publicly, and also there's this thing, like, where, like, people that—like, it's like this—this almost, like, academic/Yelp review style of thing where it's like, "Hey, this many stars out of this many stars," or—or—or, "I give this movie"—"I give this album a 7.8 out of 10," or, "I give this film a— a C-minus," you know what I'm saying? Like, it's all—it's all—I look at it—I look at it all as a person who makes things personally and now with a production company, I help others make things, you know what I'm saying? The more I do it, the more I, like, I—I question everything, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** No, no, it's—it's correct. And—and, look, I think definitely there's still a—you know, a role because everybody's not going to be that, you know what I mean? Folks are going to be, you know, fans, and they're going to be consumers, and we need them to consume, you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, totally.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** We need them to consume.

**Ryan Coogler:** I think, like, that—that, with me, as I'm getting into my late 30s, bro, like, I'm learning that with art, man. Like, I like to watch things and, like, check back in, like, in a couple weeks, a month. Am I still thinking about this thing? You know what I'm saying? If I find myself thinking about something, quoting it, still reliving it weeks later, months later, months later, that's when I'll say, "Man, this thing's good," you know what I'm saying? And every once in a while, you get those things where you listen to it or you watch it, and it's like this thing has always existed, you know what I'm saying? Like—like you find—like I find myself—if I was to think about, like, *Get Out* or *Moonlight*—these are two examples, right? If I think about like, like, when was *Moonlight* made? In my mind, it feel like it's always been made. It's the same with *Get Out*, you know what I'm saying? Like, if I—if I say, this dude in the *Sunken Place*, you know, it's strange to think, man, that movie only came out a few years ago.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And now it's in the vernacular. I would say, after the past 10 or 12 years because it's been about 10 or 12 years that I've had the opportunity to do, you know, the kind of larger things that I always dreamed of. It's been humbling. It's been really, really, really, really humbling, and it is, you know, made me look back on just some of the—you know what I mean? Some of how quick I was to judge, you know what I mean, about certain things. Here's

the other thing, Coog. We are not kind to artists who do the same thing again, you know what I'm saying? Like, they're not—then you—

**Ryan Coogler:** No, no.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Hey, why you do the same thing? Why don't you do something new? You know?

**Ryan Coogler:** Sometimes we are. Like, I could think of—it's just so many ways to do it, man. But it's—it's some filmmakers who come, like—well, I'm thinking film. I'm trying to think, in music, man, if there's anybody who kind of can give you the same thing but—but maybe it's cutting deeper each time, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I mean, I know rappers like that, who I felt like that about. I can definitely think of rappers I felt like that about. Like, again, this is a very early influence on me, like G Rap. I mean, G Rap was always G Rap.

**Ryan Coogler:** Oh, Kool G Rap.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And, I mean, he was another one, man. I heard that, and I was like, "Yo, what the fuck?" like I just was like—and it's so funny, like, to be hitting that way and to be here all these years later, and it's like, yo, I'm trying to get back to that.

**Ryan Coogler:** Totally, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** If I could make somebody feel like I felt when I heard that, you know what I mean, maybe I have actually done something, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** 100 percent, bro.

[29:20 - "In Proximity Theme Stinger" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** Just in terms of process, man, because you've been writing for—for—like, you've been a professional writer, bro, for how long?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Most of my life.

**Ryan Coogler:** Because I remember when I was—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Twenty-seven years.

**Ryan Coogler:** Twenty-seven years.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Twenty-seven years.

**Ryan Coogler:** I remember I met Chadwick for the first time—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I mean, in some sense, longer, but yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, I remember when I met Chadwick for the first time, and I mentioned you, and he was the first person to tell me how to say your name the right way because I—I think I wanted to pronounce it Ta-Nehisi. And he was like, "Yeah, I know Ta-Nehisi."

[LAUGHTER]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's the most Chad shit ever.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, he just fixed it for me.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right, right, right, right, right. Subtly.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, he fixed it real subtly but firmly, you know what I'm saying? And he mentioned, like, that people knew you were really good at writing. Like, and you kind of—he kind of said it like you went pro early. You, like, went to the pros early or whatever. You know, like, while everybody was kind of still in school, you kind of went pro. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I mean, to extend the metaphor, you know, it's like you failing out of school, right? You know what I'm saying? Like, that's what happened. You know, I wasn't a good student. I was a terrible student. And, yeah, I was just—I was a really bad student, Coog.

**Ryan Coogler:** What do you mean by that, bro?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I mean—I mean, if you want to get particularly deep with it, what I now realize is I was, like, ADHD.

**Ryan Coogler:** Ah, undiagnosed?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Definitely. I mean, it wasn't really a thing that was, like—

**Ryan Coogler:** And you've been—you've been diagnosed since.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah, I have. And I knew it. It was a point when I knew it, and then I was like, "All right, I'm just going to, you know, go on with my life." And then I—you know, actually relatively recently talked to somebody, and they was like, "Yeah, that's you right there." I could not sit in a classroom and listen to somebody talk for an hour and a half, which is—which were my Tuesdays and Thursdays in college, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** What would you find yourself doing?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Thinking about other things, mind's going all kinds of places, you know, and then I got to sit down to do a paper, and my mind is going like 50 different places. And, you know, the language we had for it back then was, "Oh, you lazy," you know what I mean? "Oh, you lazy," you know? And that was, like, the book on me when I was in school. You know, I was a terrible high school student and, you know, middle school student, you know what I mean? Really, elementary school student, probably. It's like, "Oh, Ta-Nehisi is really, really, really smart. He reads so much. But he's so lazy. He's not living up to his potential. He's not"—and that was, like, the constant—constant thing.

And so I got to college, and it was like—I was interested in everything that was—I was interested in the classroom sometimes, but I was interested in everything outside of the classroom. But not, like, normal. I mean, I would just as likely go in the library and read a book, you know, for myself, you know what I mean? Like, I was just as likely to do that. And so something—something just wasn't fitting. And it took a long time for me to, you know, realize I probably wasn't going to get my degree. You know, I was in and out, you know what I mean? I was back, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. So when Chad was talking about you going pro, was it—from your perspective, it was kind of out of necessity.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I was forced. I was forced.

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know what I mean? I grew up in a kind of household where you wasn't going to really come back. So, you know what I mean? You got to make a way. And so, probably the first thing was I got published really early. Like, I published poetry. Like, my—in, like, an actual book that somebody else put together, like an anthology, like, my freshman year.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, because—because that's how he phrased it. He didn't phrase it like you were, like, a bad student. He said you were so good, and you—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, he wouldn't have known that, though. He wasn't in class with me.

**Ryan Coogler:** That you—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** He was a fine arts so—

**Ryan Coogler:** That's what I'm saying. But he—but he said, like, the—like, the rap on you around campus was that you were really great, like this great writer.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's what they would've seen. That was the exterior.

**Ryan Coogler:** That's wild, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But, you know, the interior is, yo, I am fucking up. Like, I'm just—I'm just—I'm fucking up my life right now, you know what I mean? Like, my parents sent me to do one thing, and I'm really not doing it. And it's like—I always tell people, you really should not write unless you feel like you got no other choice, on some level. On some level, like, you know what I mean? Like, because it's just—and that's how I felt. I felt like I didn't have any other choice, so I started—you know, I published poetry.

I actually started in journalism at the student newspaper, which I loved. And then we had a kind of alternative paper in D.C. called Washington City Paper. I—I started—and you asked me, like, when I—so I was 20 years old when I—when I got my first, like, job there.

**Ryan Coogler:** Jesus.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That was 27 years ago.

**Ryan Coogler:** Jesus.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And—

**Ryan Coogler:** So—so you've worked—you've worked professionally as a writer for longer than you haven't at this point.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, definitely. And—and to be clear, like, as a writer, and I'm making this delineation, but very specifically, as a journalist. And the reason why I'm making that delineation is because when you're a journalist, you have to go out and talk to people, like interview people. And, like, dude, I can't even legally drink. But I would go and interview—

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow. You can't—yeah, you can't even meet somebody at a bar.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I can't meet somebody at a bar. But I would interview, like, people, like—you know what I mean? Like, literally twice, three times my age, you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And you—you got to formulate questions. You got to really, like, think about, like, why. Like, you can't just—because they won't respect you if you don't do that.

**Ryan Coogler:** And what was your process like? What would you prep before you went in?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I did. I did. I—at that point, you know—and at that point, like, internet is just beginning, but it can't really be depended upon. At the public library in Washington, where I was in school, they had something called Washingtonia, which was like, basically, an archive with everything written on local Washington, D.C., the city. I'm not talking about the Capitol. I'm talking about local Washington, D.C.

And I just would spend hours down there. I would spend hours reading whatever, you know, to make sure I was informed. And I didn't even perceive it as work. It was like, who wouldn't want to do this? Who wouldn't want to sit here and just, you know, be able to, "Hey, can you bring me that?" "Hey, I'd like to see that," "Hey, this was published. Can you bring this over here?" You know what I mean? And get to just sit there and absorb the information.

So, you know, it's funny, man. My wife, before we were even dating, you know, though we knew each other, she has a story about how she was, like, cutting on TV one day. And she looks, and it was this show that used to come on called Evening Exchange. And it would be, like, whatever, the debates that were going on in the city. And she cut on the TV, and she said, "Yo, that's Ta-Nehisi." And I was on TV because I had written this story, you know what I mean?

[LAUGHTER]

**Ryan Coogler:** Awesome, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, I had written this—and she had—you know, she popped the VHS in. She was like, "Oh, shit, I got to pop the VHS in." You know exactly what I'm saying.

**Ryan Coogler:** Taped it. Yeah, "I got to tape this." Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** "I got to tape this." Ain't no YouTube. "I got to tape this real quick." And she had it for years, you know what I mean? And I—I had written about why we couldn't get a—what we now have, but a museum of African American history at the Smithsonian. And I had done all this report, and I talked to all—

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Again, people, three times, people who were actually gone at this point, you know, three times older than me.

**Ryan Coogler:** And that—and what—and what you talking about exists now.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It exists now. And, in fact, one of the guys I interviewed for that story, Lonnie Bunch, was the first dude to run it.

[LAUGHTER]

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow. Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** That's how long I been writing.

**Ryan Coogler:** Man, that's incredible. That's incredible, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I was a child, Coog. I was a child, probably was younger than my son is right now. That's how young I was.

**Ryan Coogler:** Jesus.

[36:28 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** Let's talk about the transition in the—in the fiction, you know, because I don't want to call it creative writing because journalism is—is as creative as it gets, especially some of the—some of the things that you've done. And our—and our—an inflection point for me in our relationship I want to talk about is, like, you know, I was doing a lot of traveling for work when I first got started, made Fruitvale, and then got bought by a distributor. I'm going around to festivals and to promote, and spent a lot of time in airports, you know?

And I remember walking into one of the airport newsstands. I can't remember what airport I was in, but I saw—I saw A Case for Reparations. That was, like, my first intro to you as a writer, you know? And I remember how bold the cover was.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, all black.

**Ryan Coogler:** And it had your name on there. Yeah, all black cover, it had your name on there. And the way it was presented was, like, I feel like I should know who this guy is, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Because, like—because, like, it felt like your name was as big as the—as the—as the—you know, and it was—and it was like, hey, we got this thing from this guy. And it's like, "Damn, I don't—I got to get up on my stuff. I don't know who this guy is, but I want to read this special edition."

So I copped it, and I read it, and, man, it was so moving, you know? And it played back into, like, what I was talking a little bit about with Pac of this feeling that we had, like, in the—in the—in basically our whole lives that, like, something was afoot that we couldn't put our finger on.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah, that you can't name.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, like, you know, obviously we were made very aware of the transatlantic slave trade and—and the Great Migration, though we didn't—we weren't calling it that, you know what I'm saying? But we knew that, like, yeah, all our grandparents seem to be from the same place, and it ain't here, you know what I'm saying? But—but what had happened since, you know what I'm saying? It was like this thing happening, and we were smart, bro.

Like, I—like, I was a finance major in college. I couldn't put my finger on, like, the unfairness of what was happening in the housing crisis. I couldn't put my finger on it, man. Like—like, and I couldn't put my finger on how there were neighborhoods in Oakland that I had never been, you know what I'm saying? Even though it was like down the street. It's a neighborhood over there, man, that I think is still Oakland, but we don't go over there, you know what I'm saying?

Like, what—like, what's going on there? And it's nicer, and the houses are more valuable. You know, I had—bro, I hadn't understood what redlining was and how it was all a part of, like, the same thing, you know, happening and how it was this great violation, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? Like, in the country, where it's totally understood that, hey, if I do something to you, you know what I'm saying, and it's proven in a court of law, I have to compensate you for that. You know, that's normal fact. We operate on that idea, and nobody had laid it out like—like, with just beautiful prose, you know what I—you know what I mean? I was—I was really—I was really amazed.

And then you took the Panther job, you know? And I think *Between the World and Me* became in-between those things, but you taking that Panther job was really a big cause of our intersection. That was when I asked Jesse Williams to introduce us, you know, because I was getting ready to take that movie. But can you talk a little about like—like, the transition to writing fiction from being a journalist?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I mean, Coog, I think it go back to what we talked about and where we started at the beginning of this conversation. I think if you coming up don't recognize the lines between things, you know what I'm saying? Like, why would you as an artist recognize a line between things? You know what I mean? Like, why would you say, "Oh, I can't do that," you know? I mean, obviously, you got to master the form and learn it, you know what I mean?

But, you know, I had been a big comic book fan when I was a kid. When I was a kid, there was no ongoing Panther run at the time. So I didn't really know, at that point, a ton about Black Panther. I was a huge, like, Spider-Man, X-Men fan. And you know what's wild? It was something exciting about the fact that they had called me up. Like, on some level, you called a Black guy to do Black Panther, but actually, it was something exciting about the fact that they called me up to do something that I didn't have to exist as a fan. Now, I didn't have memories. I didn't have, like, these deep, you know what I mean, fan-based memories.

You know, I wrote Panther and Captain America for them, you know, so two totally different books. But I guess what I would say is it was no different than the story I just told you about being like 20 years old and sitting in the public library in Washingtonia. It's like, "Okay,

here you go. Go through everything on Black Panther and on T'Challa ever written, and then you come up with a take. Figure out who this guy is."

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** You know? And my take was this is a dude who spends a lot of time outside of Wakanda, like a lot. Like, he was in the Avengers. At that point in time, the way the canon worked, he had gone to school outside of Wakanda, you know what I mean? He had taken Daredevil's place for a while, all this time, married this woman that wasn't from Wakanda, you know what I mean, other love interests not from Wakanda. And I was like, "Does this man like being king? I don't think he does. I don't think he does. I think he may recognize it's the thing that he has to do, but I don't think he loves being king." And I was like, oh, okay, all right.

And I have to be honest. It's interesting. That also kind of, like you said, like, Case for Reparations had come out. Between the World and Me had come out. What was happening at that point, I was getting some things that I probably had not thought I was asking for but that came with the territory. And—

**Ryan Coogler:** What you talking about is, like—is you talking about fame.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** For lack of a better term, yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** But I think, also, more specifically, so when we were working on Between the World and Me, you know, my editor was like, "Look, we got to get—get some blurbs," you know what I mean? I was like, "I don't"—and blurbs are like, advertise—you know, people say, "This is great. This is incredible."

**Ryan Coogler:** Yup, yup.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's always a pain in the neck because you got to send shit to a bunch of other writers and ask them to tell the world about how great you are, right?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, blurb. Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's kind of—yeah, I was like, eh. You know? And he said, "Okay. All right. If you could get it from anybody, who would you get?" And I named two people. One of them was E.L. Doctorow, who was like, you know, one of my idols and is one of my idols even though he passed. And the other was Toni Morrison, you know, who also was a idol.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I said they was the only two who I, you know, could really think about who I really, really feel like—and I didn't think they was going to do it, you know? It turned out E.L. Doctorow was sick at the time, ended up passing away. He couldn't do it. But then we got back this incredible note from fucking Toni Morrison. I mean, you know, at that point, greatest living writer. At that point, you know what I mean? Like, really—you know what I mean?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It may have been like—you know, there's one other person who I'm thinking about who somebody might've made the case for. But, like, you know what I'm saying? You talking, like, like—

**Ryan Coogler:** Toni.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, you know, incredible, and she says this thing. And she says, "You know, look, you know, I think—you know, I've been searching for, you know, who was going to be James Baldwin, you know, who was going to be—have the place that James Baldwin had, right? And clearly, from this book, it's Ta-Nehisi Coates." And I was, like, being a dummy. I saw that, and I was like, wow, this is really humbling. This is incredible. This means I really, really got to work hard. I can't ever take no shortcuts because if Toni Morrison says this, I can't—but, see, what I didn't understand was how that would be received, like, outside—

**Ryan Coogler:** From the community.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** From the community, yeah. I didn't really—you know what I mean? And specifically, from other writers, you know what I mean, in my community.

**Ryan Coogler:** Become a—become a—it could—it could make you a target for—for some hate.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I just said it could make you a target, I just said it could make you a target, you know what I'm saying? And I'll just say, you know, it—it makes you—you know, it definitely makes you a target. And it did. And then the book blew up. And so, like, all of this is going into, like, me going into Panther, and it's like, well, I love to write. I really—god, I love to write. I really, really do. I love this book. I feel great about it. I'm glad a lot of people saw it.

But there was a thing going on in terms of how I was regarded, I think, in the community of Black writers, that I just didn't love at all, I didn't love at all. So I channeled all of that.

**Ryan Coogler:** And just clarification for the podcast, man. I'm from where—like, the home of player hating as a concept. And, like—and, like, it's a verb that comes out of jealousy. You know, it's really like—so, like, man—man, they hating. Where we from, it mean, like, man, you jealous of a person, so you saying things or doing things to disparage them out of jealousy because you want that position, or you feel like you should have what they have, you know? And that's what I mean by hate. I don't mean, like, you know, you're a target of people hating you. But, yeah, that's the thing that comes with—that's the thing that comes with success, right?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It does.

**Ryan Coogler:** The great Denzel Washington told me, he said, "When you pray for rain, you got to be prepared for the mud," which I translate as, like, when you wishing for a blessing, sometimes the blessing can have unintended consequences.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** One of the things I—I've begun to think about is: in what just world do you get something, you get a blessing, and it not come with challenges? Like, what kind of—what kind of—

**Ryan Coogler:** It's true.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** What kind of world do you want to live in? Like, what—like, what do you—what do you—

**Ryan Coogler:** That's so true.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** What are you asking for? You asking for just strawberry shortcake every day? Then you got to kind of accept what it is whether you ask for it or not. And—

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's kind of where I came up with T'Challa, too, you know? Like, really.

**Ryan Coogler:** Wow.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Like, it's kind of where I came out with him, you know?

**Ryan Coogler:** Right, right. Man, that's heavy, man. It's a character that I love so much, bro, the character. And in my world, like, I write, you know, whether it's by myself or with a cowriter, you know what I'm saying? On the Panther films, I wrote them with the great Joe Robert Cole. And then you get people to play these roles, you know what I'm saying? And so—so, yeah, I love the character. You know, I love the character that you wrote, the character that Priest wrote, you know, Reggie, McGregor, you know what I'm saying? Like, Stan, I think he's incredible—he's an incredible concept. And in that tapestry that—of all of the works that have been done around the character, I think yours stands up extremely tall, you know?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I appreciate that.

**Ryan Coogler:** It just feels so real in your run. But, for me, man, I think about that character, the impact that character's had on our lives, you know? And I'll be forever thankful for the opportunity to work with Chad, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, I mean, Coog, we're all thankful to you, though. And I'm just saying as comic book writers, you know, I just think, bro, it is not a easy thing to translate that to the screen. People don't remember this, but, like, let's say before—I don't know how you would date the current era of superhero movies. But if you take it—let's say we start with, what, maybe Blade. That's probably—that's probably the real thing, probably the first Blade, the Wesley Snipes Blade, maybe. It was a lot of bad superhero movies, dude, and a lot of bad superhero TV shows, and it was not all because they didn't have the special effects yet, you know?

It's actually a difficult thing to translate that into film given what film requires in terms of believability. And I just, like—not just the fact that you did it, but what I was talking about earlier, like this need to say something, you know what I mean? That you was able to say something through T'Challa, through N'Jadicka also, you know what I mean? It's just not—it's not—it's not a small thing, both you and Joe, man. It's a— it's a huge, huge, huge thing. And then to get people to come see it. Like, not in a corner where, you know, a few people saw it but, like, masses. I mean, that joint—

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Jesus, it was huge. Is huge, you know what I'm saying?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, no, for sure, man. But, you know, it was—you know, we approached it—like, I'm curious, like, when you sit down and write something, bro, like, whether it's—because you talked about you—you were raised in a household that didn't delineate between different forms of art. It was all treated the same in terms of how it was viewed.

And for you, you said, like, you know, as a result of that, you can go from journalism to fiction and back. Is your process the same for each one? Are you sitting down? Are you outlining? Are you asking yourself what you trying to say thematically before you get started? Like, what are you—is your process similar?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I think figuring out what I got to say is probably the most important part. I mean, it's extremely, extremely important. I think—you know what I mean? And then everything kind of flows from there. I was telling my wife the other day—you know, I was working, and I was telling her, like, the act of writing, by which I mean the act of me just sitting back with a pad and a pen and just trying to take notes, is like a act of discovery for me because things come that I didn't even know was there.

I usually—whatever I'm doing, I usually read a lot first. I just spend a ton of time reading, you know what I mean? And just think about what am I—you know, what am I feeling? How does this make me feel? What am I seeing here? I usually mark up whatever I'm reading, you know? And that—that goes across the board, journalism, fiction, whatever. I always start off reading.

**Ryan Coogler:** You start off reading, making notes. You looking for what you trying to say.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. What is—what is really, really, really striking me here? And if it's journalism, then that expands out to actually calling people and talking to people. I mean, in fiction, it might, too. Sometimes it does in fiction, also, as you know, you know? You might need to interview people to talk to them to get, you know, a better sense of things. That—that comes into the process.

I got to—I got to feel—you know how actors, like, feel like they got to, you know, really be in the person before they can start really acting. Like, they got to really, like, know the person. Yeah, I feel like that as a writer.

**Ryan Coogler:** Totally.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I feel like that as a writer.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I got to—I got to know it. I mean, even—and I think that's more important, actually, than structure and all of the other stuff that I do have to do. But, you know, all of that is like me, like, you know, getting that figured out. But can you actually be in this place and—and convince yourself that you're there? Forget other people. Do you believe it?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yes.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Do you believe this happened? You know what I mean? Like, that's kind of what you got to do.

[49:59 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. Yeah, it's similar for me, bro. Like, for Fruitvale, it was a real thing, so I was in, like, a journalist mode, you know, like talking to—talking to people who were involved. And then, with Creed, I had to—I had to—you know, I grew up playing sports, but I had never boxed before. So I had to take—you know, I went to—I took boxing lessons, like, went to work out at King's Boxing Gym in East Oakland.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Did you spar, Coog?

**Ryan Coogler:** What I did, I wouldn't call sparring, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Okay.

**Ryan Coogler:** So I'm going to say—I'm going to say no. Yeah, like, because I—because I—

[LAUGHTER]

I say that because I've taken martial arts before, and I've sparred before in other martial arts, like in Brazilian jiu-jitsu and Okinawa karate. I've sparred before, what I was doing, and boxing was not that, you know, because I didn't—I didn't—bro, boxing is such—bro, it's—it's such a degree of difficulty, bro. Like, I—I—it wouldn't been smart, bro, for me to—because it was nobody—it was nobody in that gym that was as much of a beginner as I was, bro, you know what I'm saying? And they knew that. Even when we was in there, it was never like we were really going, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Did they know you were working on Creed at that point? Did they know? Like, were they aware what you were doing?

**Ryan Coogler:** It was people in there who knew who I was. You know, a couple of my old football homies was in there—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Okay.

**Ryan Coogler:**—who had turned to boxing, like as a way to stay in shape. They knew I was a filmmaker. They didn't know I was making a Rocky movie, you know. But they—they knew that it had to have been something that brought me in there that wasn't like, "Oh, I'm just trying to learn how to fight now," you know what I mean? Like, the act of doing that is what gave me the real—really, like, what I was trying to say with the movie, I think. You know, I kind of knew it'd be father and son and this question of masculinity and, later on, identity, but, like, what we were saying with the fight scenes, you know what I'm saying? Like, what we were actually articulating is that in this sport, you are on your own, you know what I'm saying?

Like, like you got somebody in the corner talking to you or whatever that you can hear, but when you in that, it's no teammates, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying? It's no—you know, and you in there with the same four things that other person has, which is, like, two feet and two hands, you know what I mean? And, bro, when you in that ring with somebody who knows what they doing, that ring is a phone booth, you know what I—you know what I mean? Like, it's—because you could get—you could kind of get anywhere at any time, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

And them rounds, right, last forever, bro, you know what I'm saying? Like, just in terms—just in terms of endurance, man. So, like, it's so much than just fighting. The closest thing to it is chess, I would say. You know, like, the closest thing to it is chess on, like, the world's most relentless treadmill, you know what I mean?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Right, right.

**Ryan Coogler:** You know, that's why they call it the sweet science or whatever. But I had to get in there to learn it to understand it, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. I mean, I can actually see what you saying of how the camera moves in those scenes now. You know, like, you totally, totally see it in how it's shot. I mean—I mean, I—you know—

**Ryan Coogler:** But also, like, the—the one take fight that we did, that was directly as a result of—of my experience and realizing, like, I want the audience to feel, like, how long a round is, you know what I'm saying? Like, and if the other person has your number, like, what it's like to try to survive, like, until you—until you—you know what I'm saying, until you get back to the other side of the ring and also what it's like to, like, in the sound mix, to be, like, still be trying to hear your coach talking to you while you getting your ass beat, you know what I'm—you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Ryan Coogler:** Like, you can really only do that with, like, an unbroken take, you know what I'm saying?

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I love that movie, dude.

**Ryan Coogler:** Oh, right on.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I done told you like 100 times.

**Ryan Coogler:** Right on.

[53:33 - "Prox Recs Theme" with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

**Ryan Coogler:** We do our Prox Recs segment of the show, man. It's been a fun one, you know, hanging out with my big bro, Coates. And this is when we kind of recommend something for the audiences at home. I'm going to take a easy way out on this one, and I'm going to recommend Beautiful Struggle, which is—

[LAUGHTER]

— which is—which is a novel from—

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** Memoir.

**Ryan Coogler:**—from Ta-Nehisi. Memoir, yeah, use the right phrasing. But you'll—but you'll—you'll hear about—a lot about how he came up and the inflection points in his life that led

him to be one of our most celebrated writers today. You know, you laughing, bro. This is serious. Man, like, you know, that's a—that's a big recommendation for me.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** I really, really, really appreciate that. I'm laughing because—let me just say I'm humbled. I'm absolutely humbled. I'm absolutely humbled. I think because of the field we're in, when I first met Ryan Coogler, when we first—I guess when we started, you know, really, you know, speaking as friends, he said one time to me that he had this dream of Hollywood being like the NBA, which is to say the sheer number of Black filmmakers in it, you know, really doing it. And I got up from—I said—well, I won't say the language I said. He said—to sum it up in polite language, I said, "This man has lost his faculties."

[LAUGHTER]

But it stuck with me, right? Like, you saying that actually, actually stuck with me. And the fact is, we—we probably have more Black filmmakers active than at any point. You know, not to say the struggle is over, but we do. It stuck with me so hard. And, you know, as has been a theme in this conversation, whenever we start talking about stuff, it's never confined to, like, whatever art form you're talking about. Like, it becomes, like, a bigger conversation about the art itself.

And so I'm going to recommend the essays of a gentleman by the name of Alain Locke. Alain Locke was a philosopher. He was the articulator, really, of the philosophies of the literary movement, the Harlem Renaissance, taught at Howard University. I took my first English classes in Locke Hall, named for Alain Locke, where he taught for many years. And I found myself going back to read things that I read when I was a younger person. And what happens is, in the great ones, things that you now just take as religion, things that you just take as laws of the world, as just truth, you can hear folks saying it a century before.

And so, recently, you know, I read this essay from Alain Locke, and I just want to read this short quote, Coog. I think I sent this to you because it just made me think of you and what you told me. And Alain Locke writes, "All classes of people under social pressure are permeated with a common experience. They are emotionally welded as others cannot be. With them, even ordinary living has epic depth and lyric intensity, and this, their material handicap, is their spiritual advantage. So, in a day when art has run to classes, cliques, and coteries and life lacks more and more a vital common background, the Negro artist, out of the depths of his group and personal experience, has to his hand almost the conditions of a classical art."

And what that brother is saying is, because of how much we've been through, we got the material to do, like, really, really, really, really great things because you can't be Black in this world, or you can't be among any class that was outside of this world, and come to a art form and have nothing to say, you know what I'm saying?

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** And I just—I think—Coog, I think about your work, you know, all the time with that, you know what I mean? I think about what you told me, you know, all those—almost 10 years ago now, you know, with that.

[MUSIC FADES IN]

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah. Yeah. I appreciate that, Coates. That's—that's beautiful, man. Thanks for sharing that. And thanks for taking the time to be with us here on In Proximity. We appreciate you, bro.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** All good. All good. Thank you, bro.

[57:46 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music is by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza.

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

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