

## IN PROXIMITY

### Episode 13: Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates Part 2 Final Transcript

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** You're listening to P-R-O-X.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** 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.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

**Paola Mardo:** You're listening to In Proximity.

This is the second part of a conversation between writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and Proximity founder Ryan Coogler. If you haven't listened to Part 1, you may want to press pause right here. Go back to the previous episode and check it out. Then come back here when you're done.

Last episode, Ta-Nehisi shared a little bit about his early writing experiences and the impact of hip-hop on his work as a writer.

On this episode, Ta-Nehisi and Ryan dive into Ta-Nehisi's writing process, their shared experiences in writing the character of T'Challa the Black Panther, pivotal moments in their life and work as artists, and of course, their Prox Recs.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

**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 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—well, 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.

[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 shorts 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:** 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.

[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, a 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.

[Prox Recs Theme with Caution to the Wind by Ludwig Göransson]

**Ryan Coogler:** We to 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.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

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The show is produced by me, Paola Mardo. Executive Producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, Sev Ohanian, and me. Our theme song and additional music is composed by Ludwig Göransson. Ken Nana is our Sound Designer and Mix Engineer. Polina Cherezova is our Production Assistant. Audio editing for this episode is by Cedric Wilson.

Special thanks to the whole Proximity Media team and to you for listening to In Proximity. Meet you back here next week.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[MUSIC STOPS]

**Ryan Coogler:** The owners of the gym knew, but, I mean, yeah, it was no real sparring happening, bro, like no real rounds with cats that was in there. Bro, I would've been knocked out.

**Ta-Nehisi Coates:** It's really hard. It's a really, really hard sport. People don't—they think you just fight.

**Ryan Coogler:** Yeah, I would've been knocked out.

[LAUGHTER]