

In Proximity
Episode 12: Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates Part 1
Final Transcript

[PROMO]

Paola Mardo: Listen to Grown, a new podcast from The Moth, for true stories that deal with the challenges and the joys of growing up. Co-hosts Aleeza Kazmi and Alfonso “Fonzo” Lacayo are on the cusp of adulthood and bringing you Moth stories about first crushes, culture, identity, secrets, and more. Each episode they’ll dissect these stories, talk to the storytellers themselves, and feature on the street interviews, audio diaries from young voices, and more. Grown is a podcast that reminds us that no matter how old we are, we’re never fully grown. Listen now on Apple Podcasts.

[PROMO ENDS]

[Music/Old Radio Sounds by Ken Nana]

[VOICEOVER]

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

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: 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 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?

Ryan Coogler: It was no delineation.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: It 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, 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.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You’re listening to In Proximity.

Ta-Nehisi Coates is the author of the bestselling books *The Beautiful Struggle*, *We Were Eight Years in Power*, *The Water Dancer*, and *Between the World and Me*, which won the National Book Award in 2015. He was a recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship that same year.

Ta-Nehisi also enjoyed a successful run writing comics series for Marvel's Black Panther and Captain America. He is currently writing the screenplays for an upcoming Superman film and the film adaptation of his first fiction novel, *The Water Dancer*.

In September 2022, Ta-Nehisi returned to his alma-mater Howard University as the Writer-In-Residence and the Sterling Brown Chair in the Department of English. Around that same time, he worked with us at Proximity Media to host and write *Wakanda Forever: The Official Black Panther Podcast*, which told the story of the making of the film *Wakanda Forever*, co-written and directed by our founder Ryan Coogler.

With Ta-Nehisi in New York and Ryan in the Bay, they sat down to talk about Ta-Nehisi's writing process and influences. As you'll hear, these two know each other very well so the conversation took some unexpected and fun turns. We wanted to keep all the good stuff so we divided their conversation into two episodes.

The first episode is about Ta-Nehisi's early writing experiences and the impact of music—and specifically hip-hop—on his and Ryan's work. The second part, which you'll hear next week, is about Ta-Nehisi's writing process. Here's Part 1.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

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, of it.

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, a 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 a 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.

[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.

[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 Dopeman? It's from the group, NWA. You ain't heard Dopeman? Yo, you got to hear Dopeman."

Ryan Coogler: That's crazy, bro.

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

Ryan Coogler: Dopeman, 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.

[In Proximity 2 Stinger 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.

[In *Proximity 1* 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.

[In Proximity Theme Music by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: That's Part 1 of this conversation with Ryan Coogler and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Come back next week for Part 2, where they dive into writing and directing.

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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: I remember after—after Big died, when he was murdered, and they were playing Life After Death singles on the radio. And that Notorious Thugs came on, bro. Yeah, I went back and listened to it. I was like, bro, these dudes—these dudes are insane. Like, they used to—they used to cut the song off like—like on—on 106. They'll play it in mixes, and they'll—because it's a long song for—even for that time, you know what I'm saying? Because I feel like all of Bone rapped on it and Big. So you get to—so it's like—you know, that song might be like four minutes long, you know? And on the radio, they'll cut it short.

[Ta-Nehisi Coates sings Notorious Thugs]

But, bro, like—like Layzie—like Layzie Bone's verse, bro.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Coog, who's the one that's like [quotes lines from Notorious Thugs].

[LAUGHTER]

Ryan Coogler: [Quotes line from Notorious Thugs]? That's Bizzy. Bizzy, [quotes lines from Notorious Thugs]. Yeah.

[LAUGHTER]

Ta-Nehisi Coates: Nah, that's—that's incredible.

Ryan Coogler: That song is insane, bro. Yeah, Paola coming.

Ta-Nehisi Coates: She tell us we going on too long.

Ryan Coogler: She's like, "Yo, this is not—this is not"—

Ta-Nehisi Coates: "Y'all are way off topic. What happened to my topics?"

Ryan Coogler: "It's not a hip-hop podcast, guys."

[LAUGHTER]