Transcript for Dr. Ferentz LaFargue on the Study of Black Popular Culture Video

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Dr. LaFargue: So when I of Black Popular culture at least in an academic sense, I think of the volumes that Henry Louis Gates and Gina Dent edited in the early 90s titled Black Popular Culture. I remember reading it when I was an undergrad and continuing to flip back to it as a graduate student when I was doing my doctorate in African American studies which is odd, or not odd I should say, but important itself to note because I think I was in a part of the fourth cohort in the program so to not only the person researching black popular culture but who is doing it within African American studies which is something that a generation before was unheard of. It wasn’t until the 1960s that we had African American studies programs in the US. minors in them in the late 80s and early 90s we began to see masters and phd really coming to their own. As a writer, I take a very different approach than I do academically. Whereas academically I tend to focus a lot on literature. And so, some of the writer I continue to go back to are Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison. And today I find myself saying quite often what would Ellison think of this? When I see incidents happen in the news ranging from historical moments such as Barack Obama’s election to more humorous events such as the recent case in South Carolina with the election of Alvin Green this African American candidate who did no campaigning managed to win the state’s democratic primary for senator. It seems as something Ellison would draw up and create out of the Invisible Man. But as a journalist I tend to focus a lot about sports, pop culture, and it’s very much consumed on tv, radio, my memoir dealt heavily with music Songs in the Key of My Life, so spanning 30 years primarily of African American and American pop music artist such as Stevie Wonder, Jay-Z, LL Cool J, Billy Ocean, Michael Jackson as well as artist like Sheryl Crow and Bruce Springsteen. And thinking about how over the past 30 years we’ve seen the way the artist move from Motown to preeminent labeled black music in countries throughout the 80s and definitely in the 90s we see this proliferation of the number of sort of these hip hop kind of boutique labels whether it’s Bad Boy or Roc-A-Fella that was driving this literally driving this hop hop regime. And the way that changed in terms of where you had I think… well there was at least one importance in that the artists at these labels tend to talk to themselves as families, but a lot of music in the 90s that we see hip hop in the 90s didn’t have the same political that we say from Stevie Wonder, Curtis Mayfield, Nina Simone a number of these artists are from the 60s and 70s, and I think a lot of that in terms of that interaction and artists we’re listening to changes the way that not only scholarly writers we ourselves, see ourselves as critics, popular critics, but change the way that we engage with our audiences at large. So write now we’ve gone from this road where there were only about 10 to 15 magazines that were the go to resources to now where people are blogging, people are using message boards and those are the things that kind of determine who has political voice, where
opinion matters, so you have artist who not only just come out of nowhere, but come out of nowhere for reasons that we really don’t really understand in some ways. Drake is a great example. He’s you know he’s in some ways someone who is created by the machine. Young Money and Lil Wayne took him on as a protégé, but he’s also someone who really came out came out of nowhere. How to do bring in this young man from Canada and incorporate him into this what is at one a predominantly African American US based music industry model. (Definitely ) something that I think can happen in the Internet age where the borders and boundaries that were so important in the 90s when being from Compton, being from New York being from Chicago where it mattered now it’s not even where you’re from as much as it is where you’re at. And so when I think about things in that light it’s prompting me to ask a whole series of questions. So, is black popular culture being driven by artists or is it being driven by the masses? Is it being driven by you know is Jay-Z the tastemaker of is LeBron James the tastemaker? Is a You Tube Commercial creative art, or is it the music video, is it the song itself? All these things are coming together or existing in the same space artists, critics, consumers and fans are being asked to digest this all at once with is vexing at times overwhelming at times, but I still think it can be very risky and powerful.