Transcript for Dr. William Jelani Cobb on the Study of Black Popular Culture Video

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**Dr. Cobb:** So, my interest in African American popular culture was like, personal level grew up for a long time. We grew up immersed in new heights into this hip hop. You know coming up to New York at the time you know culture was really developing and evolving. And it became a scholarly interest much later. But you know for my own kind of interest, I’ve had a career as a writer and historian, but the first thing that I ever wrote consciously were raps. You know I was 14, 15 years old. When I had first sat down and put pen to paper, I you know it was hip hop that inspired me to do that. And then kind of years later, I realized that this same skill set that was required to be a good rapper were the skills to be a good writer. If you were gonna write essays, uh if you wanted to write poetry, you want to be a journalist you want to avoid clichés you want to kind of have a certain rhythm to your prose. You know you want to convey images to people that resonate and so on. So that really where my, you know sense of myself was having something to say began. The book that I wrote which is kind of in close connection it’s called um *To the Break of Dawn: A freestyle on the hip hop aesthetic*. And different origins for that book but you know one of which was maybe in 2000 or so I went to the New Yorker Literary Festival. And August Wilson was there and he was being interviewed. And you know he was talking about you know his work and really this thing he had for the young generational people African American artist you know, specifically around hip hop. And you know afterward he and I got into like this really involved exchange of how the blues was you know everything that hip hop is you know in terms of it being a virtue in terms of it being problematic, difficult. And *To the Break of Dawn* was my attempt to kind of flush out those connections you know between blues and you know hip hop. And you know another thing happened in terms of inspiring me to write the book was in 2003 I was in Synagogue and you know I was on Gerry Island which was departure point for the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. But we were in the slave castles and we were attending a seminar on Pan African Aesthetics. And you know there were lots of houses you know there owned by the people who live on the island you know permanently. They were working doing construction on the houses. And you know I walked passed I saw, kind of wet cement on this wall. And etched into this wall was this huge elliptical “W”. And I realized that was the symbol for the Wootang Clan. And it was really amazing to me as being someone who was on this island you know thinking about what it meant for the people who left. So for me it kind of represented a boomerang. You know for centuries these people had been taken forcibly you know to another continent. And some aspect of their culture which were rooted in there you know in their central African culture musically speaking and boomeranged back. So it was almost as if it was there before I got there waiting for me to, to notice it. So, that’s what the, the
source of that book was. I was looking at you know those, those dynamics and I really wanted to
connect hip hop to that stream you know that aesthetic stream you now that had flowed through
the blues. You know like I’ve been saying in the discussion with August Wilson it flowed
through the blues and really prior to that had you know its roots you know that human channel
that was stolen from Africa centuries early on.