Corey Andrew Powell (00:02):

I am joined today by Dr. Obari Cartman, who has served as professor of psychology at Georgia State University and the Caruthers Center for Innercity studies at Northeastern university. He's a writer, therapist, photographer, drummer, and passionate grass roots, mental health advocate. Dr. Cartman. Welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Dr. Obari Cartman (00:19):

Thank you very much.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:21):

Yes. Well, my pleasure to have you here. So what I wanted to do was begin with asking you one question that was not in the notes I sent over, but you're from Chicago?

Dr. Obari Cartman (00:31):

Yes, sir.

Corey Andrew Powell (00:32):

So what I wanna ask, because I'm a person from New Jersey, always seeing Chicago, like on the news and the media, all kinds of different tropes about the city itself. But let me ask you, tell me in your words, what is Chicago?

Dr. Obari Cartman (00:46):

Hmm, love that question. So, um, and I hear it. I travel and people are like, wait, are you ducking bullets? Is it like a war zone? Like, how are you alive right now? And the truth is Chicago is a very segregated city. And so there are versions of Chicago. So depending on where you are, some of that is true. There are neighborhoods that you wanna watch your back in. You wanna be careful, you are at risk because the carjackings are popular. Um, just random violence. And even in those neighborhoods though, that is the small percentage of the activity that's happening around there. There are arts and culture and urban gardens and churches and businesses in every neighborhood in Chicago. But there's something about the news story that shows the provocativeness of the violence that gets repeated and exported throughout the world. So some of that is true, but there's a lot of myth making around that. That is scandalous news. But the reality of the truth here in the city is that it's a vibrant city full of beautiful people that are trying their best against circumstances that are often unfair because their neighborhoods don't have the same advantages, same resources, same schools, same, um, business opportunities as other neighborhoods. And in those neighborhoods, you see the chaos and the disinvestment turning into violence. That is certainly a problem. Um, but not the only thing that happens.

Corey Andrew Powell (02:14):

I love that you said that because one of the main things I find myself talking about, although I've never gone to Chicago, is I understand, of course the socioeconomics that exist because of the disenfranchisement and the years of neglect and all those things that contribute. So very often I'll have a debate with someone and they'll be like about the gun control conversation. And they'll say, well, well look at gun laws. I mean, look at Chicago. That's like the default mm-hmm <affirmative> mm-hmm <affirmative>. And then I peel back the layers of why that happens in Chicago. It's not, you know, you can't just throw that out there without understanding socio economics. So, thank you for that portrait of Chicago. And it still is one of my places I would like to visit. So…

Dr. Obari Cartman (02:53):

No, you gotta get here and you guys see the whole city, so you can very much go downtown or go to Navy Pier. There's touristy spaces, but there's also a south side and the west side, that's not just violence. It's, you know, again, a vibrant arts culture kind of, you know, Bonanza, if you know where to go. And the really funny part about the way the crime is told is that if you go downtown, you're actually in the most crime-ridden neighborhood in the city, cuz that's where the corporations and the politicians are that create the conditions that perpetuate the crime in these other neighborhoods. And Illinois is notorious for having, you know, criminal politicians. And so the narrative is a part of the truth as we need. So we need visitors to come see the whole thing, particularly storytellers like you to help tell the story of what's really actually happening in all these cities, which is, you know, good, bad and. <affirmative> ugly.

Corey Andrew Powell (03:39):

That's wonderful. No, I'm happy to contribute to that. Cause I wanna set the story straight whenever I can about misrepresentation or just sort of, uh, one sided representation I should say. Yeah. So moving on though, about you, sir. So

you wrote a critically acclaimed book for young black men called MAN-ifest capital "A" in that title and it examines the manhood and relationships amid African American men within their communities and beyond. So what inspired you to write that book?

Dr. Obari Cartman (04:05):

Um, the book started, maybe 10 or so years ago. Every time I would go to a center, even as a student doing internships as a therapist in the field, that there weren't a lot of young black men in, that would always be my clientele. They would always send me that the boys, the teenage young men would be my caseloads. So day in, day out after, you know, days and days, I was having conversations with young black men about emotional intelligence and sort of just peeling back the layers and you know, you know, the real talk real talk. And so as that was happening, I started to see patterns and I would hear the same stories. I would hear the same challenges and I began to get frustrated with the amount of obstacles and pain, external and internal in the black male experience and felt like the one on one therapy model wasn't efficient enough to deal with the amount of, you know, trauma that we've experienced.

Dr. Obari Cartman (05:00):

And so a book came out of that. I was like, I'm, I'm having the same conversations and maybe there's different ways of sharing the information of, uh, giving a tool, a guide for fathers, coaches, uh, mothers, for anybody else that has young men in their stead to have something they can guide them through, uh, a very conversational, a very, you know, a wide ranging, just a bunch of facilitated topics that I believe would help young men see themselves more clearly see the world they're living in more clearly and have a tool where they can, um, engage in some internal interrogation without even having to deal with the, the public like vulnerability. I get why a lot of men sort of clam up. Like I understand that it's gonna be a while before we change the culture of masculinity? Um, but in the meantime, you know, you still better go cry in your closet.

Dr. Obari Cartman (05:48):

You still need to go write, express in your journal. Like you need to develop a relationship with yourself. And I think books are good for that. It's just you in your own mind, creating your own images and dealing with your own stuff without having to deal with things like the shame and the vulnerability stuff. And so I thought a book would be a good vehicle for that. And at the time, when I started writing a book, the things that I felt like men needed still very much seemed like women's space. Um, and when men got into the space, there was a book —I was in a book club, I was the only man in the book club. Right. Um, and we were reading a book, I think it was Hill Harper at the time, the conversation and it was on the tales of Steve Harvey.

Dr. Obari Cartman (06:25):

So even when men were writing books, they were writing books to women to give them the tricks of the trade, to give them guides to help develop, to be good partners in relationships or, you know, to be good individuals on, on their own. It was that combined frustration. Like who's developing the men. If we are gonna, if we wanna have strong families and good partnerships, and if you want people to have counterparts, then we gotta help. We have to have some parallel process where if the men don't start thinking about how to communicate well until they're 30 or be intimate and not harm people until their dying breath and think about being alone. If we encourage the men to play and the women that get serious right, then there's always gonna be a mismatch. And so I just wanted to put something together to help deal with both all of that, the development relationships, helping 'em think about valuing women, uh, to combat the stuff that I was seeing in the music and the TV around how men's visions and concepts of our women are shaped and do it in a way that was for them.

Dr. Obari Cartman (07:21):

Like, you know, obviously you are my audience, it's not a generic topic. I'm specifically thinking about young black men and the specific context that's created, the mental health challenges and the identity challenges that we are dealing with, that I dealt with and found a way to sort of dig myself out, to unlearn some things. And so I feel like it's my responsibility to share some of that. Just to give you another way of thinking about things, different perspectives.

Corey Andrew Powell (07:46):

Yes. Well, that's amazing. I have been learning so many new terms recently. The one I think I mentioned to you in the pre-interview questions I sent over was this idea of "ancestral trauma." Sure. Which I literally did. Not really. I had never heard the term. It was immediately obvious once I heard it like, oh wow. You know, I just literally heard it maybe two weeks ago when I interviewed this amazing educator and poet named Reelaviolette Botts-Ward, she's this amazing young woman, but she deals with it from the perspective of women handing down all this generational trauma. And then she, you talks about how to unlearn some of that, that we've learned from those ancestors because of what they sort of are projecting onto

us. And so in a way you're definitely saying that same thing happens in the men's space as well, but no, one's really addressed it before.

Dr. Obari Cartman (08:34):

Yeah. I mean, and the beginning of it was me just stopping for a moment and thinking about what my father taught me about women. Love my father. Brilliant man, beautiful man, was not an amazing husband to my mother. And so I had that conflict in my brain. It wasn't the world, you know, it wasn't society. It was in my house. I had to wrestle with how to honor my father while wrestling with the things that I wanna keep from him and the things I wanna discard from him. And every man has to start there, whether he was absent or present or whatever, you know, good or bad, there's a wrestling you have to do where evolution means I take the best of, and I, and I leave the worst of, and that's a very personal process. So I had to start there with what I inherited from my father, what he inherited from his father and do it with compassion and understanding.

Dr. Obari Cartman (09:22):

And, you know, we understand the historical traumas we experienced and we were in survival mode for so long. And it's been trying to get out of that and that has managed causing harm in ways amongst people that love us while having to deal with what does it mean to be in the system? That's, you know, also trying to harm you. So these layers of things, give me an understanding of it, but it does not remove the responsibility of the work we have to do to do both, to heal internally, to fight the external pressures, but to do it in a way that is very intimate. I think men need more of that. We just need to have that, those intimate, honest conversations, Oh, I'm gonna keep it a hundred, but don't keep it real. But, but they don't. We spend so much time pretending, posturing, uh, performing. So that, that space where men can really shed the bravado, the, you know, me, the chess puff and the concept of having to be hard and strong in a way that is masking, that it's a performance. Uh, we need more of those sort of safe, brave spaces to do that men's work in a way that is for us. It's for our children, it's for the community. Like everybody benefits from men being more aware of themselves. Um, and I think that begins with these kinds of relationships, kind of interrogations and investigations.

Corey Andrew Powell (10:35):

I think it definitely creates, as you mentioned, a more conscious human being who then stops behaviors such as perhaps abuse or womanizing or self harm or any of those sorts of behaviors. And I know a woman who I interviewed once, who she shared with me that she was raising two sons and she's raising them as feminists. And I asked her what that means. She's like, well, if I don't teach them at the age of four, that they don't put their hands on a woman. Yeah. Then by the time they're 14, it's a little bit too late. Right. So she's like, you gotta get in when the mind is young and pliable. And, and so your, your first book though, was actually man. Correct? Yeah. And how does that narrative of the, I guess, is that sort of, we just spoke about really that whole sort of ancestral trauma comes forward in how men are treating women. Is that the premise of the book?

Dr. Obari Cartman (11:23):

Yeah, absolutely. So the ladies man idea was to think about my own journey from being sort of the traditional ladies, man, the pimp, the player, that kind of thing to, uh, if you see the, the book cover, it's me with my five sisters, and if you don't know who —that their my sisters, you'd just think that I'm just collecting women.
Corey Andrew Powell (11:40):

Yes, I did think that! <Laugh>. Yeah.

Dr. Obari Cartman (11:42):

Um, but then, but so, but the, my transformation was thinking about, and I spell it different. I spell it L A D Y S - apostrophe S man. So what I explain to the book is that I, as a man, belong to these women, that they don't belong to me. I belong to them. I have a responsibility, obligation to my mother. Um, I'm, I'm here in the house with my mother right now. I'm a caretaker for my mother. She has dementia. It was, it was a no brainer for me once my mother needed help, that because I belong to her that I have to sacrifice for her. And I think a lot of men are taught in the opposite way and I have sons and, and I, and I see how easy it is for them to be in the world to just let these small moments that become big moments, become the building blocks for their ideas about relationships with women.

Dr. Obari Cartman (12:27):

And I gotta check people sometimes, you know, they'll come up to my boys and say, Hey, whatever, and say, "Hey waddup lil pimp?" or "Waddup lil playa," right? They're kids. They ain't thinking about number pop tarts, and Legos. But they're being indoctrinated at four or five, right. Just because of the way the world is structured, it plays on these hierarchical power

dynamics. And so black men find themselves in the middle of this where we're like, we don't really got no real power, but there's privileges that we have that we exercise to mimic the power structures as is inside of our homes and communities that cause harm that makes us terrorists in our own homes. And we've seen it happen more and more through COVID when, you know, uh, men are stuck in the house and unemployed and, you know, the substances that we're using, um, it's, it's causing domestic harm in ways that, you know, it's unprecedented, but that begins with those small moments like your other guest was talking about those, how you conceive of yourself, your relationship with women, what a woman is, uh, what other human beings are, and to see yourself as valuable and worthy.

Dr. Obari Cartman (13:28):

And, and then every other being you're intertwined with also deserving of value and worthiness. Like, what does that mean in terms of your actions, in terms of your so it's not even just like don't hit women, right? It's not even just cause it's not a very, it's not a superficial thing. It's a, it's a fundamental understanding of how you live on a planet that we have opposition for everything that the, the young men are listening to. And right now the, the corporations get direct access to the brains. They put EarPods in corporation, creating art and music and filled with ideas about the dynamics between men and women and violence and power that's being funneled directly into their brains. That's creating sort of these maniacal, right? Like these, uh, sociopathic ideas about who a person is. We gotta interrupt that. Like we, we, as men, we have to pause, we gotta help them digest it.

Dr. Obari Cartman (14:25):

We gotta help them line by line. Look at the lyrics getting, uh, funneled into their brain over and over again. It's constant work to uproot against a slew of bombardment of ideas about black, about gender, about Americanness, about money. Um, all these things are the role of men to have to pause, to reflect on, to interrogate, to see what's valuable. What do I need? Uh, what's what's for me, uh. What's a trick? Like these kind of things, are part of the mental health movement. As I see it, we're not just talking about anxiety, depression, and PTSD. We're also talking about conceptualization of self, of worthiness, of place and time in the world. Um, and I think that's men's work. That's, that's what men's work is at the core for me.

Corey Andrew Powell (15:09):

Well, When it comes to you, you just mentioned media, for example, media, like hip hop music, the perception in the media of what black males are supposed to have as an interest and what they're feeding them, you do speak about that in some of your work, the correlation between those worlds. And you do like, a deep analysis of that cross intersectionality, if you will. So in that regard, are you saying that well, we know that hip hop can be, for example, misogynistic, but are you saying that there is some accountability in what they're putting forth and the minds that they're influencing?

Dr. Obari Cartman (15:42):

I think so. I do. I believe that community, um, they are entertainers. They are professionals, they're trying to make money like everybody else. And I do believe that whatever your profession is, if it's engineering, if it's a lawyer, I think that we have a responsibility to think about the impact that my work has on the minds and hearts of the people that are influenced by it. And them in particular have a very unique place, more than athletes, right? More than actors, even, uh, hip hop rappers have a specific role to play because they live on the model of authenticity while performing over and over again, a version of a story that is very limited and narrow and has themes in it that are not healthy and productive for the community of their listeners. That has reverberating impacts that I think that they need to consider.

Dr. Obari Cartman (16:36):

And they're paid enough money to not. The trinkets that they are striving for the version of success at its core is unraveling communities that they came from. And so I think that they, in the back end, they feel like if they can give some turkeys away for Thanksgiving, then it makes up for the guilt of the harm that they cause. But they all, you know, they are responsible. We are all responsible. But I think that if you are an influencer and seek that, and if you want the attention, if you want people to play your music over and over again, you've got to consider the impact of what that story is being told. And at a certain point you know we always may compromise. So, you know, being hard on them in this moment, but everybody makes compromises. As we decide what success is, what I'm willing to do as a human being, as a man, as a person, the money at some point has got to have a limit. You can't do anything for money. You can't say anything for money, and they have made careers —some of them have made careers of lying, or even when they're telling the truth, telling only snippets of the truth, versions of the truth. They're not talking about, like, their child rearing or their grief or you know, their parents. They're just talking about the same four or five themes in a way that's very destructive to the community. I think they have a responsibility for the mental health, the well-being, their identity, and I think we need to push them on that.

Corey Andrew Powell (17:53):

Thank you for listening to Motivational Mondays presented by the national society of leadership and success and available wherever you listen to your favorite podcast. I'm Corey Andrew Powell, and I'll see you again here next week.