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Johnetta Cole

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Johnetta Cole
"A Perspective on Black Culture Awareness"
June 15, 1970
Portland State University

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HOST: Sisters and brothers, we're gonna get started now with the presentations. First of all, we'll have our keynote speaker Dr. Johnetta Cole from Washington State University. She's director of the Black Studies program at Washington State. She is also the chairman of the Northwest Black Studies Council. And at this time, it's my great pleasure to introduce sister Cole.

[applause; background chatter until 00:01:26]]

COLE: Ready? [affirmative replies] Okay. I want to start towards the end of World War II with a scene in Philadelphia when a grade school organized a contest, and it went this way: they asked all the grade school children to write an essay on this topic: *What would you do with Hitler if you caught him?* [laughter] The person who won that contest was an 8-year-old Black girl, because this is what she said in twenty-five words or less: "If I caught Hitler, I'd turn him Black and make him live in this country." Today, in many areas of Philadelphia and in the rest of this country, 8-year-old Black children know how to raise their fists and say "Black Power." I want to talk about what's happened between those years that's created what I think is truly a revolution. In the short period of time, I think what's happened to many of us is that we have had a change of identity, and that's a revolution in a true sense. I want to go on to say what I think we've gotta do now that *that* revolution is over. It's not gonna surprise you if I begin this little tale back with slavery, but it might surprise you in terms of a few facts that I'm gonna throw into that narrative.

The whole crisis in our identity—and that's the only way to describe what happened for all of those years when we as Black people literally hated ourselves—the whole thing begins, obviously, when the Man sent some boats to pick us up. Now one little historical fact of note is that that first ship to pick us up was called *The Good Ship Jesus*. [laughter] And because that ship was called *The Good Ship Jesus*, we had the die cast. The whole notion of using the idea of Christianity and a religion to subjugate a people, the whole notion of justifying bondage in the name of some captain called Jesus.

When the ship came and when people left, you know by now that we left a beautiful land. We left kingdoms that were so glorious that at one point when the king of the Kingdom of Mali went to Mecca, he took so much gold that when the dude got to Mecca, he messed up the currency rate. [laughter] We're talking about areas of West Africa where men had learned to smelt iron before Europe really knew what iron was all about. We're talking about complexities of religion, complexities of kinship that indeed we can't find today in any area of the world. Well, when the Man came, it was crucial at that point not only in terms of sending *The Good Ship Jesus*, but in terms of the whole scene it was crucial that he make us somehow believe that that's what we deserved. It was a brainwashing process that took time, but in many ways it was completed.

Not only did white slave owners strip the great West African artists, the carvers, the men of all kinds of art—not only did they strip them of those skills, the Man started messing very early with our religion. One of the things that he did, of course, was to tell us that we came of a primitive people; to tell us, indeed, that we had a primitive religion. Louis Lomax is beautiful on this when he reminds us that what the Man did was to say, "Now listen. You people gotta give up all of this irrational religion you got. You stupid Africans running around saying there are gods in the trees, and gods in rocks, and gods in the water. You gotta give up that irrationality. You gotta grab ahold of a *rational* religion, like we white people have. A religion that says, so rationally, that a god was born from a virgin." [laughter] Now not only did the white man strip away from slaves all of the closeness and all of the beauty of African kinship, not only were husbands separated from wives and children from their mothers; to this kind of agony he added the brainwashing again.

The earliest accounts of slavery, and indeed of contact of whites with Africans, tell us about the Man's myth of Black sexuality. The ultimate power then, was when the Man separated husbands from their wives, children from their fathers, and then went on to say that this was because of the Black man's animal sexuality. The kinds of documents that I read about early Africa and the contact with Europeans sometimes presents very funny things. For example, the

first Europeans in contact with a glorious people called the Malenke, sometimes called the Mandingo, of Western Sudan, wrote these kinds of things: "And the men of this tribe have such members that they are burdensome unto them." That's the kind of stuff that the Man early, early, early began to promote; that somehow Black men had genitals that were so, so heavy and so big that these things were burdensome for them to carry. The early accounts tell in great details the unbelievable, indeed, almost impossible acts of gorillas fornicating with Black women in areas indeed, where there ain't no gorillas. [laughter]

Well, in the days of slavery and shortly following, not only was the Black man denied the right to vote, but added to this political process was the brainwashing again. We were carefully instructed by the Man to believe that should we ever, by some unfortunate act, gain the right to political power, should somehow the notion of voting fall into the hands of Black people, then we would somehow be like a bunch of monkeys sitting in suits in the halls of the legislature. Check out the history books—especially those that they haven't let you have for the last few years—and you'll see pictures indeed of what the Man predicted during Reconstruction. Black men and women were driven indeed in the heat of slave labor. Then somehow when the body just couldn't take it any longer, and the pace slowed down, you know what the Man said? He said, "Look at how lazy the niggers are." In other words, denying us the right to work for our own selves, and under conditions that were at best barbaric, the Man's myth of our own laziness began.

I think that one of the really fascinating parts of early history in this country, of the early sort of brainwashing of Black people by whites, indeed the brainwashing of whites in terms of Blacks, has to do with explanations of our behavior. Somehow, when we performed like human beings, the Black man was accused of having peculiar behavior. For example, during the many years of slavery, men and women rebelled. The whole notion of Black power you know by now began when that first dude said, on the shore somewhere of West Africa, "I don't wanna go." [laughter] But somehow when Black people began to rebel—and we've always had our means of revolt—there were explanations needed. When Black women poisoned the food in Miss Anne's kitchen; when Black women, for example, would lay on their own children in the middle of the night in an effort to kill them and therefore have them avoid slavery; when Black men cut off their arms and cut off their legs because they could no longer toil; the behavior was explained as the Black man's propensity for violence.

Many, many early accounts explain: how come we kept running away? They couldn't understand. Black people could somehow risk their very lives to get to what looked to be freedom. Read the early accounts and you'll hear the explanations. Often it goes: "Those are a peculiar people; they seem to be prone to wanderlust." When slavery ended officially in this

country, and the emancipation of Black folks was proclaimed, at that point the long, long struggle for positive identity really just began. At that point, we began singing, "We shall overcome," and unfortunately some Black folks still running around talking about "We shall overcome."

It doesn't take a super-trained psychologist to realize that the Black man's sense of himself received its second great shock when the Man said we were free and then denied that freedom. Psychologists tell us that what an individual thinks of himself—and that's all I mean by identity—that how an individual thinks of himself develops quite early in life, and it doesn't happen by any magical process. You begin to think of yourself in terms of the kinds of models, the kinds of forces that exist in the society. What happened in the case of Black children, until very recently, was that we gained our sense of identity in terms of viewing ourselves as bad, and in terms of viewing white as good. It's as simple, it's as distorted as them old Western flicks, where the good guys always got on them white hats, and the bad guys got on the black ones. It's as simple as little children eating pancake mix out of something called "Aunt Jemima," and I know damn well I don't look like Aunt Jemima. It's that sense, then, in which the image of Black folks was an image created that no one could look at and then dig. We as children then also said, "Eeny-meeny-miney-moe, catch a..." and you didn't say "white folks," you said "nigga by the toe." We too, looked at the peculiar shape of a Brazil nut and we too laughed and called it a "nigga toe." We too as Black people, we too, came to feel that somehow black magic and Black Monday and the black plague were somehow the bad things. You never saw anybody walking down the aisle to get married in a black dress. You never saw, for example, someone standing up and declaring, "Ain't it a beautiful black day." It means then that we somehow in that whole process of coming to view ourselves had some pretty unfortunate models.

Think about the things that you did when you grew up. I know you didn't escape all that religion, and it doesn't quite matter what the church was, but you sat somewhere and sang some songs. And one of those songs might have been something like, "May Jesus wash me, whiter than snow." You never saw any little kids sitting in the church singing, "Come on Jesus and make me black like coal." Somehow, when little children sat in church and looked up at stained glass windows, those cats never looked like us. And as Louis Lomax says again, "Unfortunately, those guys in those stained glass windows always looked like Governor Wallace." [laughter] Check the terminology. Until very recently, we walked around saying, "You know that girl, the one with the *good* hair." What does "the one with the *good* hair" mean? Check the folklore of this country. Listen to the old songs of men like Huey Leadbelly, and like John Hurt, and Sully Terian, and Brownie McGee, and you'll always hear the talk about how fine their high yellow gal is. We too, then bought the myth of Black man's inferiority, and this I tell

you is the real great accomplishment of the Man. He made *us* believe his own story. Black people came to view themselves as a people without value.

Now, if you can grab ahold of that—and some of it you're still experiencing—there's of course the delightful story that one so-called civil rights leader tells on himself, and I know what he's talking about, I experienced it this summer going to Africa. I got on a plane, and here comes a pilot for Ghana Airways—I don't know what I thought he was going to look like—but that was a brother. And I'm sitting on there wondering, if this brotha knows really how to drive this airplane. [laughter] Now this is the sense in which we have yet to get rid of all of this. That thought never should've crossed my mind. Why should I doubt that that plane would stay up in the air because somehow the hands of the captain pushin' on them buttons were Black? Despite those kinds of vestiges of the identity, we've made a revolution in this country.

Look at yourselves and look at your own thoughts. It's hard to date where this happened, and dating it isn't so crucial right now, it's just sort of wallowing in it and digging on it. But somewhere, I guess, when Martin Luther King and all that nonviolence didn't make it, Black people decided to try a new way. Somehow after all that [...] and all them combs, and no matter how much we looked like the Man, he said, "We don't dig ya"; somehow the message finally got through. Somewhere, I don't know, I guess about five or ten years ago, Black people said, "We ain't so bad." And the whole message then of the beauty of Blackness created a true revolution. You see it in all kinds of ways: you see it in how Black people look. You see it in Black people standing around saying, "My natural's up tight," instead of, "I got to get my do-rag on." [laughter]

You see it in terms of Black people designing fashions; sometimes in the real mode of Africa, sometimes only in the spirit of what we think Africa is. But you see it certainly in terms of a whole emphasis on physically being what we happen to be. We see it in terms of an emphasis on Africa now, where indeed we come to look at the land not as the home of Tarzan, but as the home of a people with 800 different languages, with complexities of human organization that have rarely been matched. We have a pride now, when we talk about Africa.

This summer I noticed a tremendous difference from the first time I ever went to Africa in 1960. There were a whole bunch of brothers and sisters, just walking around, doing their Africa thing. And there were, like, great scenes, like one of the better ones I had this summer was standing on a street corner, in Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania, in East Africa. And I'm just standing there, waiting to cross the street, and I don't really see who's coming up behind me, but pretty soon I hear, "Hey there sister, what's happening." That's a brother, over there doing his Africa thing. [laughter] We certainly see this new emphasis in identity in terms of all kinds of symbols. When

two Black people meet each other, there's a kind of handshake that says, "Ain't it great, just somehow being Black." When the Black Power sign went up at the Olympics, we had a political symbol, saying, "Yeah, we challenge another political symbol."

Listen to the soul songs. You listen—I should tell you to listen—you know 'em, you sing 'em, you create them. When The Temptations say "Message to a Black Man," that's the kind of thing that somehow could have never been created as a song 20 years ago. Finally, as an example of this new sense of identity, look at Black Studies. The only reason that Black Studies exists, obviously, is because there's always been white studies. What it means is that young Black people are saying, "No more of the brainwashing, even when it comes in the form of your fancy, fancy academic terms."

Well, I don't want to belittle all of this. I don't want to suggest that all of this tremendous revolution is pointless. But I do want to remind you that that ain't where it's at. That is, I don't think the goal is some brother standing on the corner, with his natural up tight, wearing a fine dashiki, talking about how the white man ain't shit and Black man is beautiful, and saying all that in Swahili. That's not where it's at. If that's where it's at, then what we've done is to turn a revolution of identity into a Black Power pimp. If that was the whole aim of all these years, then about all we've done is to create the liberation hustle. Regardless of how you feel about separatism, about cultural pluralism or whatever you want to call it, I think we just started in this particular struggle.

With the revolution in identity, what we've got now is the basis—the pure minimum—for a true revolution in the lifestyle of Black folks. Now obviously I don't have a plan. If I had some kind of master plan, I could sell it to my brothers and sisters and get the Man to pay me a whole bunch too. If I knew somehow how Black folks, how we could really get ourselves together in the sense of the movement, then I wouldn't be standing here. You know the kinds of things that I know. So the only reason you invite somebody to come and do this kind of scene is just because you wanna hear how I'm gonna say what you already know.

I thought I'd take the tack in the last few minutes of running down what we might call some basic commandments. And I'm gonna try to run these down in terms of what I think you can do because you happen to be both young and Black. Now you know as well as I do that the Man's got ten commandments, so whatever I did, I wasn't going to come up with ten. I decided that if I was going to try to do this in the Black idiom, I'd better use seven.

One: I think as Black people, and in particular as young ones, we've got to begin to police, to protect, and to promote our own communities. It's not gonna make it, regardless of the aim

again, if our communities are not our own. It means that we've got to begin, for example, to get the Man's business out of our own communities, and in particular those forms of the Man's business that have nothing to do with the health of Black people. We've got to begin to patronize our own businesses, even if that means paying a little bit more. You see, a brother's a Black Power pimp if he stands around and says he's for his own people, but he ain't gonna pay more for the same good. The brother has got his stuff together when he *will* pay more, when he *will* sacrifice because indeed he's doing something to promote his own community.

We've got secondly to begin to hound, to torment, to bug, to pester the institutions that are supposed to have something to do with Black people. We've got, for example, to begin to get on the Man's case that's got to do with our schools. To get on the Man's case that's got to do with the so-called police. To get on the Man's case that's supposed to be taking care of sanitation. Now that's easy to say, but suppose as young Black people, you started a campaign that had to do with something called "One Black rap a day." What would happen if every single young Black person in the Portland area just took one day, only one of a whole year, to pay a visit to each of these forces? If Black people have any power at all, it's in the power of words: we know how to rap. And we can take the Man's time. We can sit and rap on him about what's wrong with our schools, and rather than make a pest of ourselves so he can rip us off, we just do ours one day. Because tomorrow there'll be 43 more brothers and sisters with appointments to see the Man about what's not happening in our particular neighborhoods.

Two: As young people... or three: I think we can somehow tie ourselves to our own communities. Again, I'm talking about a commandment which demands sacrifice. LeRoi Jones has got a beautiful poem called "The Black Bourgeoisie." And one of the lines in that poem that is so terribly powerful describes how young Black brothers and sisters get all excited about these new jobs they get. Because here go the fine bougies integrating the Man's jobs. Now, if the whole aim is to work somewhere where the jobs can be integrated, then we've lost the whole point again. Where we've got to work is for and with and among our own people. And sometimes that doesn't mean in the physical presence of your own people, but it does mean that your commitment is there, and that being Black to you means a responsibility to Black people. That's gonna probably mean less money. It's sure gonna mean less prestige, because every college, every business, every organization in this country is currently looking for its spook to sit by the door. And if you want to be the spook to sit by the door, the Man will pay you handsomely. But if you want to talk about getting the revolution going to Black people, then you ain't gonna be the spook to sit by the door. This comes very genuinely to young brothers and sisters, and I'm looking at it this moment because you've got the heavy to be the spook to sit by the door. You've got the choice to make, like most young brothers and sisters

don't have the choice to make. And if you go and sit by that door, that means you're not taking care of business in your own community.

I think we've got to stop throwing away most of our personal income into stuff like the latest fashions, the gadgets, and last tape for the tape deck. You see, this really is the Man's business again. I'm not suggesting that Black people got to go nude, and I'm not suggesting that somehow Black people got to flip on the radio to listen to Johnny Cash instead of checking out what's happening with the soul music. But we've got excesses of the Man's stuff, and things that we buy as young people do not benefit Black people. Check out the record companies, who owns them? Check out most of the dashiki shops! Who owns them? Check out even most of the natural sprays. Who owns them? If you do nothing else, buy the ones that at least have to do with Black people, and most importantly, begin even now if you can, to take some of that money and put it into things that have to do with Black people. The choice is yours. I put some of mine... I put as much as I can for the Black Panther Party. I can't tell you where to put yours, but you oughta be putting it somewhere: somewhere that's got to do with the benefit of Black people.

Fifth: I think we've got to begin to tie our struggle in with the struggle of other oppressed peoples. Now this is a debatable point, and many Black people will stand and tell you that what goes on in Vietnam is not your business, that that's another way for the Man to try and divert you from what's really going on. Many will stand and tell you that what's going on with Native Americans is again not your business; you ain't no Native American. And yeah, you can eat as many grapes as you want to, because the Chicano struggle is not your struggle. That I see as one of the worst forms of oppression. If the Man ain't got it made now, he ain't never gonna have it made. When young Black people fail to have the empathy and the understanding of the struggle of other oppressed people, the Man ain't got nothing to worry about. Obviously Vietnam *is* your struggle. If it does no more, it diverts funds which can go to help your communities into a senseless, racist war. Them people ain't over there killing Italians. Them people ain't over there killing Germans. We're over there building them up again. We're over there killing the people of Vietnam. What goes on in the reservations of this country are your business, because the difference between what goes on when something called a reservation, and what goes on in many Black communities, believe me, puts Black people in the better position. Perhaps we don't have the funds or at this point even the technical skills to help our Third World brothers, but we can at least, *at least*, have a sense of identity. In many ways, they look to us. They look to young Black people as sort of the vanguard of the whole Third World movement, and I feel it's our obligation to at least have a sense of identification.

Six: I think young Black people have somehow gotta put minds and energies to model building. To model building that can affect Black people. We've gotta produce, you see, our own Karl Marx. We've gotta produce a Black man who is the counterpart of a Che Guevara. And I would say we even got to redo Franz Fanon. We need theoreticians of the Black movement. There is no way that we can take the struggle of other people and say that that is the formula of our own. As young Black people, you've gotta think about this system so much, so much that you come to understand it. And then you've gotta take the next and the crucial step: after you understand it—and you've gotta dig this—then you've got to think a whole bunch more and figure out some alternatives to it. Alternatives that will work for the particular situation of these United States. In one way we can agree with Eldridge and say a pig is a pig is a pig. But there all kinds of variations on pigs, and what we've got to do as young Black people is to understand—not dig, particularly—but understand the variation on piggism in this country, so that one, we learn how to avoid creating another form of piggism. Look at Haiti, look at Liberia, and know that Black people in power are not always kind Black people. We've got to learn how to avoid another form of piggism and create a genuine kind of human society.

The final thing that I would ask as a commandment is that as young Black people, you get in the habit of asking yourself a question every day. Every single day. Did you ask yourself by the end of that day, "What did I do today for Black people?" Now, if you can answer that in any passable form, then the movement is moving. The answer won't always be the same. Some days you might answer, "Well, the only thing I can say today that I did for the movement is that I read for the fourth time, but *this* time really understood what Marcus Garvey was saying," that's in the interest of the movement. Some days you'll say, "Well, what I did was, I had this long rap with this brother, and I righteously tried to have him see what he could do with me to help." Some days you'll really answer, "I don't know if I managed to do anything, but I sure tried." If we're gonna stop then, this kind of Black Power pimpism, and if we're gonna begin to work towards what must now be the second revolution, then we've got to somehow take off from the identity, and start talking about and working for a true Black destiny. Thank you.

[applause]

HOST: Thank you, sister Cole. Right now we want to present the certificates of accomplishment for what we consider to be, in Portland, the Afro-American high school achievers. In recognition of your contributions in distinguishing the Black race. David Alberti. [applause] I'm gonna have trouble with this: Michonne... is that right? Ali Blount. [applause] Robbie Bowles. [applause] Cheryl Brown. [applause] Michelle Burton? She had to leave? Henry Creel. [applause] Sharon Durrin. [applause] Michael Flowers. [applause] Timmy Graham. [applause] Karen Haynes [applause]. I know I'm going to have a problem with this. Adrian Howell. [applause] Nicholas

Hughley... he's not here? [comment in background; laughter] Dianne B. Johnson. [applause] Brenda Langston. [applause] Joe Lewis. [applause] Gerald Limbrick. [applause] Jonathan Maxie. [applause] Michael McCauley. [applause] Alfred Stuart Minors. [applause] William James Noble Jr. [applause; cheers]. DeMorris Pennington. [applause] I'm not gonna have any trouble with... Karen Smith. [laughter; applause] And I should know this one quite well too. Carolyn Stoudemire. [affirmatives from the audience; applause] James Thomas Jr. [applause] Carolyn Walker. [applause] Spurgeon Waters. [applause] [laughter] Sheryl Winters. [applause; cheers] Now if we've left anybody out, my secretary's gonna lose their raise. [laughter]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That they didn't have.

HOST: ...That they didn't have. [laughter] Well, we've worked hard today and I think we've gotten a lot of things accomplished, and I think it's time to play a little bit. [affirmatives and laughter]. You know, I'm against boogalooing and [...] during work time, but there should be play time too, and I think we're gonna have it now. But one thing I'd like to do, so that at 11 o'clock we'll be able to do this transportation thing home easily, is for you to go and get all your things together now, so that after the dance is over, you'll be able to just come back here, grab your things, jump in the transportation and be able to go home. Pardon? Now for the young men, you've got all your things together at the Jamaican anyway, don't you? Okay, then you're ready. And they'll come back here and get... Okay, and the chaperones... the counselors will take you to the next thing.

[voices in background; program ends]