

FARMER: And you have started this revolution.

[announcer: James Farmer is currently Commonwealth Professor in History at Mary Washington College. Tonight he continues his thirteen part series of lectures on the Civil Rights Movement from his personal recollections]

FARMER: What I thought uh, tonight we might deal with a fascinating phase of the movement. The uh, struggle of um, the black activists for identity, in fact the struggle of the whole black community in America. uh, the search for identity. Who am I? James Baldwin asked that question over and over again and he uh, entitled one of his books, *Nobody Knows My Name*. The um, Nation of Islam, the black Muslims are answered the question by um naming themselves X, Malcolm X, X for the unknown. We did not know who we were they said. We took the names of our slave owners and that did not define us or describe us because we were not Brown or Smith or Jones for the owners of our ancestors were Brown, Smith or Jones. And uh, we did not know our family name and hence our family name became X until the honorable Elijah Muhammad gave them uh, a Muslim name with which they felt comfortable and that's the reason that uh, many black Americans uh, took uh African names during that period from 1966 on, just chose a name that was African and that they liked. And uh, hence they no longer were Joe Smith or Jack Jones, they became an exotic person and the exotic name meant something to them and uh, and the character changed somehow. Cassius Clay became uh, Muhammad Ali, believing that uh as a Muslim that uh, his ancestors, that their mythology had it that uh blacks were Muslims, were Islamic before they came over here, the fact is that very few were probably, some but not many. But their mythology had it that a most were and so he took the name Muhammad Ali, or was given the name Muhammad Ali and he showed no mercy in the ring to any opponent who insisted upon calling him Cassius Clay. And uh, the opponents who called him Cassius Clay were brutally beaten and as he whomped them, he would ask, what's my name, what's my name, who am I, what's my name. The name became all-important. Well this was the, a part of the search for identity and answers to the question what am I? Du Bois, W.E.B. Du Bois the great uh, black scholar, uh wrestled with that question too that uh every adult Negro has uh, wrestled with the problem of a duality; am I a black man who happens to live in America? Or am I an American who happens to be black? And he uh, spent a chapter of his classic book, *Souls of Black Folk* uh, dealing with uh that duality and that dilemma uh for the black American. Uh, Jesse Jackson was asked that question on Meet the Press or Face the Nation during the last presidential campaign and it was a le, legitimate question. He was asked, uh Reverend Jackson, um are you a black man, are you a black American or are you an Americ, are you a black man first who happens to live in America or are you an American first who happens to be black. Well Jesse apparently did not have an answer for it, though he got angry and verbally shot the question up. Uh [laughs] he said, that's the that's the kind of uh, of stupidity that, the kind of argument that put the Japanese Americans behind barbed wire during World War II and he didn't uh bother to try to answer the question at all. I think it's a question that deserves at least speaking to, if not answering because it has paved uh, black people uh, through their experience in this country. We were the only Americans, I guess who were not hyphenated Americans except uh, I suppose the, for the English Americans. Um, other Americans, the immigrants, um were hyphenated at least for the first generation or first two generations, they were Italian-Americans, they were Irish-Americans, Polish-Americans, German-Americans and so on. But um, the Negro-Americans were not hyphenated. They were Negroes and thought of themselves as Negroes, not as Negro-Americans. Uh, Tom Mboya, the um, young Kenya statesmen, East Africa who was uh assassinated a few years ago, commented on one of his visits to this country on that very point.

He said uh if he asks almost any American, any white American, what are you, the white American will tell him, I am an Italian-American, I am a Russian-American or a German-American. If he asks a Negro, that was the term for, that that we would use then, what are you, he said I am an American, we were the only ones, the only ones who did not have that hyphen. Why didn't we have the hyphen? Largely because we um, uh, had lost Africa. Africa had been taken from us. Our picture of Africa, the image we had of Africa was the Hollywood image, you know the Hollywood image of Africa. The Tarzan image, with the hoohoo half naked black savages dancing around a boiling pot with the missionary in it; that was the picture we had of Africa, the picture that uh, most Americans had of Africa. Um, I'd go to the uh movie as a boy in Texas; we'd watch the Tarzan serial, a half an hour serial every Saturday at noon and we would watch the missionary in the pot with the fire building up underneath and the Africans would be dancing around the pot with the tom-tom beat and uh, they would, uh flash on the screen a close up of the face of one of the Africans, face painted and fierce. I would elbow my buddy and say, Irving, that's you. And Irving's response was, uh, immediate. He said, no man, that's not me, I'm no African, don't call me any African, I'm an American. Well we rejected Africa because we didn't like the image we had of Africa um, it was not an acceptable image to us. So uh, we were not hyphenated, then who were we. We rejected ourselves, largely. We sought to become white. This was the period up to the middle 1960s. In fact, these, even the Civil Rights Movement asked blacks to become white. It asked blacks to forget that they were members of a group and think of themselves as individuals and if as individuals they could get uh, a little education and a little money, then they would be accepted as individuals and would become, in effect, white men with invisible black skins. So that was the ideal, the impossible dream that was held out to blacks to become white uh, black, blacks generally uh, accepted white standards of looks and beauty. One of the best selling cosmetics among blacks was of course hair straighteners. One of the uh, um, biggest uh black industries was uh the industry that sold the um cosmetics that uh straighten hair or make it appear to be straight and uh hot combs that use heat to take the kinks out of hair temporarily to make the hair look as nearly as possible like the hair of white folk and uh, blacks referred to straight hair as good hair and kinky hair as bad hair. You can imagine, a man whose skin was black and whose hair was kinky referring to kinky hair as bad hair and straight hair as good hair and he has good hair, his hair is uh straight, wavy like white people. But his hair is bad, it's kinky and people sought to make their hair good or like white and that was true of uh, skin color too. They sought to uh lighten the skin by bleaching it. Well the other side of the coin is that whites tried to make their skin dark by sitting under the sun [laughs] for many hours. Well, be that as it may uh, we tried to become white. We rejected self. Uh because everything in the culture told us that what was white was good and acceptable and what was black was bad. I looked at my father whom I admired and respected greatly as I've probably told you in previous presentations, he was a, in my judgment, a great scholar, uh, who could speak and read and write and think in many languages including Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, and Latin, French, German, and Spanish. Yet this great old scholar, Old Testament and Hebrew were his specialties, in his heart of hearts he believed that whites were superior and blacks were inferior and how could he believe otherwise because uh, he had been um conditioned. His childhood in South Carolina and Georgia and um, everything that poured into his head to determine how he thought and how he felt told him that uh blacks were inferior; preschool books and textbooks and everything else and that was the the uh conventional wisdom accepted by blacks as well as whites. Now this was true right up through the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. Blacks were rejecting themselves and seeking to become white uh, you still heard [break in audio—playback problems]

bad hair and good hair even in the early sixties. Well that began to change. There were those who didn't do that on, one group that didn't was the Muslims of course and Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam. But they were a small group really; they made a lot of noise but they were a small group. The search for identity was a positive force. The negative aspect of it was that along with it came a hatred of whites and a conflict between black and white. That conflict began to develop in the Civil Rights Movement and split the Civil Rights Movement down the middle; tore it apart. Even that great Freedom Summer which uh, we've spoken of 1964, when large numbers of loving, dedicated volunteers, white and black, largely white went to Mississippi to volunteer to live without a tomorrow, some of them gave up their tomorrows, like Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney, even that great summer uh, there was conflict between the white and the black uh Freedom Summer participants. The uh, white college students who went down there had come from the fancy schools up north, the Harvards, the Yales, the Bryn-Mawrs, the Haverford-Swarthmores, the Mary Washingtons and so on [laughs]. They were well educated. Knowledgeable, knew how to talk, knew how to write, they could write pamphlets and tracts and leaflets. They knew how to run organizations; they knew how to get things done. They knew how to conduct meetings. They knew how to do almost anything that needed to be done. Their black counterparts from the uh uh Southern Black Colleges or, I won't say names but who were not in college but from the black community and Mississippi towns, didn't have that kind of education. They didn't have that know how, that subtle air and uh, it was natural that these uh educated, sophisticated white youngsters would gravitate to leadership in the local organizations of voter registration or voter education in the various towns in Mississippi and uh many of the black youngsters uh resented that. They said hey these white kids coming down here and running our organizations for us. So there was conflict even then. Uh, we began to see that conflict developing in the CORE chapters. I got a call, 1965 from uh, an officer of one of my uh CORE chapters in California. We had about 25 or 26 chapters in that state. He told me that there was a black-white fight in the CORE chapters in that state. So I sent telegrams to them, uh to the officers of the chapters and asked that them to meet me in a hotel in San Francisco, where we'd all sit down in a ballroom and try to get to the bottom of it and uh, they met me there and we filled the ballroom. Officers of the chapters said alright, let's uh let our hair down and put our cards on the table. What's troubling you? I mixed a couple of metaphors there didn't I? Let your hair down and put your cards on the table. Well be that as it may, I went to a ghetto school you see [laughs]. But uh, at any rate, um, one uh chapter chairman who was black stood up and said Brother Farmer, we've gotta dig being black, we've gotta dig being black, we've got to dig being black, he repeated it over and over again and sat down. Another chapter chairman, black, stood up and said, Brother Farmer, there's no white person in the world that I completely trust. White fellow stood up from the other side of the room and said that's the most shocking statement I ever heard, I thought I was your best friend. He replied that's what you thought but I don't completely trust you. And they bantered words for a few moments and then both sat down. And that's the way the meeting went for a long time. I thought that the people talked more fr, talked frankly at that meeting and uh, perhaps they were stronger as a result of it because their feelings were not hidden, they brought them out and sometimes when you bring your feelings out into the open and examine them under the sunlight um, you're able to get at the root of them and deal with them. So I thought when we adjourned the meeting perhaps they were on a more realistic basis. I don't know; the conflict between white and black continued to exist. It was in 1966 however that the crisis came to a head in the Civil Rights Movement. That was when uh, the newly elected national chairman of SNCC made a speech in Mississippi. The young man's name

was Stokely Carmichael and the occasion was a march across Mississippi that had been a one man march of James Meredith who was the young black man who had uh finally been admitted to the University of Mississippi with the help of the United States Army. Meredith had uh tried to march across the state of Mississippi, in an historic march against fear; finally he was shot in that march, not uh, seriously wounded, but uh slightly wounded. Uh, hundreds of people then went down to that point to continue the Meredith march, uh many of those were SNCC members, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, others were CORE members, Congress of Racial Equality, some NAACP members. They would march by day and at night they would set up camp, have an outdoor rally and then they would uh sleep in tents or whatever. At one of those rallies, Stokely Carmichael made a speech. He had made that speech a number of times before and it had not created a ripple. This time it was different, the *New York Times* reporter was there and he took the speech down verbatim. What Stokely said, and I'm paraphrasing it, was the following: when anybody asks you what you want it's not freedom now. ([Farmer's sidenote] Freedom now had been the slogan of the movement.) What does freedom mean? What is freedom now? The thing that makes this country go round, the thing that makes this country move is power, so what you want is power. Black power. What do you want? And black power and then he asked the crowd, What do you want? And they answered him, black power, black power, black power, black power with the clenched fists raised, a new slogan was born. And the Civil Rights Movement then took a turn, it tended to become all black. Stokely Carmichael was, had become a black nationalist. Prior to that, Stokely had been an interracialist, an integrationist and a an advocate of nonviolence, working for SNCC in the Deep South. His head had been beaten too much, with billy clubs and chains, finally he'd said, that's enough. And he dropped integration, he dropped nonviolence and he began to preach violence, he began to preach separatism, he began to preach black exclusiveness, black identity and black pride. At that point the black youth around the country took up the cry, black power, black power. It began identifying more with Africa and uh the outward symbols of that identification were the wearing of uh dashikis, those colorful long shirts, which is occasionally worn in Africa but they're not the usual dress in Africa. But they became kind of a uniform of the movement. They're very colorful and uh, attractive. The dashikis were worn with um medallions, gold or silver medallions and chains um and rather than straightening the hair or using grease to make it appear straight or hot combs to straighten it for women, the young people began growing their hair long, in afros, they called them, afro hairdos or the bush so that they would celebrate each kink. Because their hair was not bad hair they insisted, they said black is beautiful and this is mine and so it is good not bad and rather than making it like white, I will honor and celebrate what is mine [music]