

## **I Am a Black First**

*from a Chapel (Assembly) Speech*

*by Thee Smith '69*

*Delivered in March 1968*

First of all, you should realize that you are white, and that I am Black. Unfortunately, this creates certain images in your mind which—if you allow them to (and you probably will)—will distort your sense of objectivity, and will render the rest of my talk incomprehensible to you. By and large, when I say that I am Black, you picture one of two types of Black men. But I refuse to be either; and if you listen as if I were one of them, you will never realize who and what I actually represent, and you will leave this place just as your fathers left it.

I am the New Black. I will neither babble about how much I love Jesus, nor entertain you with sparkling racial comedy. I will not eat with my fingers nor go out of my way to sit down at a dining hall table with you. I will not flunk out of this place, but neither will I participate in the childish fanaticism of raving with you about your math test, or your Phy Sci lab, or your grade in English. I want neither to be your enemy, nor your friend. I don't want your love, or your pity, or your guilt, or your fear. I demand only that you respect me...

In Mr. Plimpton's talk last Saturday, he made the point that an educational institution which prepares individuals to enter tomorrow's society—as society exists today—is dead. This type of institution merely perpetuates the morals and goals that are already dominant in the society, and offers no efficient leadership for change. If a significant change is to come from students who enter American business and politics, these leaders, as students, must be taught to fulfill roles more dynamic and more responsible than those held by individuals in establishments today.

I, the New Black, am not exactly sure why I am here. I have not been explicitly told what I am being prepared for, or what I shall be expected to do after I leave. Last year I did know, without being told. Last year I was to eventually become a responsible American citizen. I felt that an investment had been made in me—not merely by this school but by your whole society—to provide a "safe," well balanced and responsible leadership for the Black revolution. I was to become another Martin Luther King, a Senator Brooke, a Bill Cosby, or a Thurgood Marshall. I was to turn the revolution away from riots, and white-hate, and a deliberate separate-but-equal policy. And I agreed with your definition of me. I agreed that I should be a non-violent leader, an American first and a Black second, and that it was my duty to help assimilate my people into your society as lawfully and as non-violently as possible.

The fact that I once accepted your definition of my role as a Black nauseates me. I see in your definition, and in my agreement, a continuation of what Blacks in this country have been trying to do since the Civil War; a continuation of efforts to teach Blacks how to act "white," and at the same time teach them to deny the legitimacy of their own culture.

As the New Black, I shall not tolerate the teaching of other Blacks to be industrious, puritanical, and relatively unemotional—as you are; for I feel that we, as human beings, have much more to lose by becoming white than by remaining true to ourselves, true to our culture, and true to our Blackness. As an American, I would sacrifice all of Black culture in order that all Blacks might truly be Americans. I would view the "race problem" in America not as racial but as cultural; and my goal would be to get all Blacks working to be white, as quickly and as effectively as possible. This would be my sacrifice, not only for a united America, but more importantly for a liberated and truly unoppressed Black people.

But first I am not an American. And Blacks have already tried to become white, some with too obvious success. The problem, again, is you people. Our minority Black middle-class is willing and ready to prostitute itself before you, and you still cannot see your sickness inside them. The problem is racial. All men are not born equal. White is right. In a riot, all Blacks are suspected of theft, and rape, and murder. When a crisis has occurred—and at a time when America should reward its Black Children who have tried to do right by being white—at this time, you people reveal yourselves as the racists you truly are. Your National Guard enters not only our ghettos, to shoot and terrorize, but also our suburbs, where our middle class once thought of itself as loyal, white America. Your one repeated statement to us is that we are all Black, that you will accept us as whites up to a limit, but in the final analysis, what is outside our culture. During this process, we are all- middle class, upper class, lower class - all as culturally Black, as we are racially.

Okay, I accept your statement. After one hundred years of rhetoric, I the New Black, believe you. I realize that if your sister were equal to my standards, and if I decided to marry her, you would eventually rationalize in your mind your efforts to prevent me. I realize that when the Precisions performed in Chapel the other day, many of you saw Black boys singing, and dancing, and doing their typical thing in a white band; rather than a few whites in a Black group, playing Black music. I notice, sometimes when you sit with us and listen to our jokes, that more often you laugh at us, and rarely with us.

I, the New Black, acknowledge my Blackness, and the improbability of my ever becoming respected in your society by getting white. I, the New Black, not only accept but agree with your classification of all of us, regardless of class, as Blacks. We have our Blackness in common and we are united by your definition of what Blacks in America are. Our acknowledgement of our cultural bond and our demand that you respect us is called Black Power.

Under Black Power, all Blacks are united, because all Blacks are—in the final analysis—equally defined by your society. I am a Black first, and an American when I can afford to be.

I am at Exeter not to be like you, nor to prepare myself to enter your society as a Roy Wilkins, or a James Meredith. This school's efforts to prepare me for that type of role in tomorrow's world are futile. That role no longer offers effective leadership for change, because it is based on the theory that a Black leader should strive for assimilation of the Black masses. Assimilation is no longer the solution, though Civil Rights, as a movement, is dying. My most

effective role in tomorrow's society will be to lead the advancement of Black Power; and I, the New Black, dedicate my life to that role.

Blacks should not come to Exeter and stay away from each other, as they did last year. We no longer have to suck it up to you; or listen to your music. We hope that one day we won't have to dance with your girls. We are going to sit together in the dining halls, and say hello to each other across the quad (which we felt was wrong last year), and act our natural, Black selves everywhere. We hope that you will overcome your sickness, and view our behavior not as degenerate, but less inhibited than yours. We are not putting on the show for you; we are not trying to reveal to you how loud we can be or how sexy our dancing is, or how comical we are. The fact that you sometimes stare at us and view our behavior as "showing our color" or acting the typical nigger, is part of your sickness; which forces you to assume that white is right, and that Black behavior is wrong, or somehow too wild, or too free. We are at Exeter to obtain knowledge of and when we become leaders, we will derive our strength not from your friendship, or your brain, or your money; but from ourselves.

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*Edmund Perry '85 delivered this speech to an all school assembly in honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 1985. He delivered it in its entirety before revealing they were not his words, but those of Smith, written and delivered 18 years earlier during an assembly at the height of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.*