

Sidedoor
Episode 7: You Do You

TC: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian. I'm Tony Cohn.

MD: And I'm Megan Detrie

TC: In this episode, we're talking about identities. Our identities help us understand ourselves and find our people. We build them through our life experiences. We create them through careers, and our geography and our community. We preserve them in family histories and religious beliefs. Dr. Johnetta Cole has spent her life exploring the meaning of identity, first as an anthropologist, and now as the director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art.

Visual art, she says, can help visitors understand the diversity of a place like Africa... But also the many ways an individual can self-identity as African. But our identity isn't just one thing. How we see ourselves has a huge role in how we see others around us. We sat with Johnetta in her office and chatted about just that. She's one of the most dynamic speakers at the Smithsonian, so I'm just going to let her lay it out for you uninterrupted.

JC: When we use the word 'identity,' I think the most thought about way that we are communicating an idea is this: identity is who I am. But I must say that as an anthropologist, certainly as a museum director here at the National Museum of African Art, and as a human, I have trouble with identity when it is used in singular terms. I think this world of ours would be so much better if we always thought about, interacted with others, in terms of our multiple identities. Think about what's going on now in our world. The kind of divisiveness, the insistence that some folk shouldn't be here or some folk aren't good enough to be there. And we then characterize someone in singular terms. That's a black person. That's a Muslim. While each of us, I think, may well have a primary identity, a way in which we sort of think of ourselves most often or perhaps most strongly, but we are many identities. I am an African American woman, in terms of class, properly would go to upper middle class. In terms of sexual orientation; heterosexual. In terms of ability or disability, well depends on if my knee is kicking up or not, I'm going to say I'm fully able. In terms of religion, in terms of age, in terms of

nationality—all of those specific identities come together. But you know, I have other identities: I'm a mom, I'm a grand-mom, I'm a wife, I'm a colleague, I'm a museum director, I'm an anthropologist. So, I can be victimized because I am African American or a woman or both. But when I claim all of my identities, including being heterosexual I could turn and victimize somebody else based on their sexual orientation. When we become more thoughtful about and understand the centrality of identity and how identities capture who we are, we can actually make a great contribution toward dealing with one of the greatest problems in our world. It's called: bigotry and discrimination.

TC: Today, we have two more stories of identity. One Identity that is being kept alive in the face of terror and one that was built to bring power to an invisible community.

Identity is more than just who you are—it's also who you aren't. In the late 1970s some lesbian feminists decided that instead of arguing about equality within marriage, childcare or lower pay, they'd remove themselves from the fight entirely. Rather than work to change a society that didn't represent them, several thousand women in North America decided to create their own, separate, society. My co-host Megan brings you the story of one of these women, and the world she set out to create.

MD: Joan Biren, sometimes called Jeb, spent her career as a photographer and filmmaker documenting lesbian communities and progressive movements, starting in the 1970s. We're interviewing Joan at her bungalow just outside of D.C. She's now in her 70s, but she's an absolute spark. Within minutes of our arrival, she's shushed the dogs barking in the yard, cracked jokes about her flannel shirt and ushered us inside. On her porch she's left out a plate of water with a sponge in it for bees. She says bees are dying out and with this; at least they have a safe place to drink. It's easy to see how she was able to shoot such intimate, vulnerable photographs of women. The truth is, when you meet her, you want her to like you, very badly.

JB: For lesbians in particular, we really were invisible at the time that I came out which is why I decided to become a visual artists and a visual activist. Because I needed to see myself and others like me.

MD: Joan created two groundbreaking collections of photography. Katharine Ott, a curator at Smithsonian's Museum of American History says the work had a huge impact on young lesbians. Kathrine is researching these overlooked moments in LGBTQ history, including times in history when lesbians forged societies and even religions.

KO: So many women who were questioning found her portraiture and books, "Portraits of Lesbians" was the first time you could see what gay women looked like really.

MD: As a documentary filmmaker, Joan knows how to create an opening scene, and we begin our chat with a quiet ritual—lighting a candle and imbuing a crystal with our intentions for the interview. It's akin to the sort of thing she would've done back in her coven. Yup, coven. Back in the 1970s, Joan was part of a group of women who created their own religion.

JB: So I'm picking up the big crystal and I'm putting good intention in it for the interview we're about to do for a new podcast. And my name is Joan Biren.

MD: Actually, religion was just one aspect of the movement Joan was a part of. The separatist movement was made up of feminists, many of them lesbians, who tried to create a new world where they could live entirely separate from men.

JB: Separatism gets a bad rap and primarily from people who have been centered in society and in theory and in conversations forever. So they don't understand why identity is important, because their identity is sort of the default identity.

MD: This was all happening as women were organizing and demanding new roles in society. But lesbians often found themselves silenced within the feminist movement.

JB: The most painful reaction was that many of us had been part of the Women's Liberation Movement in D.C. and when we came out as lesbians we were purged from that group. Particularly, Sharon and I again were purged from our consciousness-raising group. They felt we were a big threat to women's liberation both on a personal level and on a level that feminist's movement that was struggling to get credibility in the mainstream would be tainted by the lavender haring of having lesbians as part of their movement.

MD: So they started their own movement by starting their own society. And they weren't alone. Separatists formed, started collectives all across America, from farms to publishing houses, to women-only music festivals. They called the communes "womyn's lands." And even the word "women" got scrutiny. They'd spell women with a "y"... you know, keepin' the man out.

JB: When your identity is invisible or marginalized you have to figure out a way to both be yourself which helps to have other people with you who are like you. And make other people see that you are not like them. So, that's why we formed this lesbian-feminist-separatists collective.

MD: They called it, the Furies: made up of 12 women who lived and worked together in two houses in Washington D.C. They pooled incomes and split chores, published a separatist newspaper. The goal was complete autonomy.

JB: It seemed at the time, and I still believe this even though I am no longer a separatist, that it's important to have a period where you do figure out what your identity is. And figure out a way to convey that with like-identities and to people who are different than you.

MD: For two years the collective and its newspaper shaped the discussion of lesbians' place in society. They wanted to dismantle societal confines and change politics, capitalism, and yes, spirituality to fit them. The religion that Joan and other lesbians created was one that left behind what they saw as patriarchal traditions.

JB: I say Dianic Wiccan religion, because if I said we were witches and pagans it would freak you out a little more. But we were. At the time I became a witch, we were re-imagining and reinventing everything. And if you know anything about culture you know most cultures have some religion. To have a spiritual dimension was very important.

MD: This religion, Kathrine says, made Joan and her contemporaries feel seen at least amongst themselves.

KO: They made up songs and sang together. They borrowed from Native American concepts and practices from paeans from ancient goddess rituals and wisdom from

each other, from all over the place, to create a new world basically: A woman-identified world.

MD: Joan is donating some of the artifacts of her coven, including the crystal, to the Smithsonian's Museum of American history, as part of a collection on spirituality. Here's Katherine again.

KO: People know about Stonewall riots as being really important and often pointed to the beginning of the gay liberation movement. But I would say that what's happening in the 70s with queer women is just as important. There is history of people that is undocumented or hidden and invisible and there are populations that have never been given respect or recorded. When you don't have the evidence, people can say it never happened. As a museum, if we have archival materials—we have letters we have objects—that show 'no, it did happen these are things that real people used and this is how they used them and this is what they thought they were doing.' So it's not only important as evidence, but its people's lives we are collecting. We can't collect them, although, I'd like to.

MD: Through community, culture and religion, lesbians helped create new ways to talk about identity, particularly queer identity. And with her photographs, Joan built lesbians a visual identity—a photographic history that gives thick, powerful roots to a formerly hidden community. Some identities are one we can consciously choose. But in many ways, our cultural identity creates us. We're shaped by the art and architecture and music that make up our heritage. So what do you do when the cornerstones of your identity are destroyed? That's what Syrians and Iraqis are facing today as militants from the Islamic State, commonly known as ISIS and ISIL wipe out their heritage sites. Archeologist Mustafa Fadahli has come to Erbil, Iraq, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world from his home town of Nasiriyah. He's here to learn how to protect his country's heritage. That heritage, he says, is in crisis.

MF: The greatest threat to our cultural heritage and destruction that Iraq is currently suffering from—and has ever suffered from in its entire history—is ISIS.

MD: Thankfully, Mustafa isn't alone. Iraq opened its Institute for the Conservation of Heritage and Antiquities and has trained over 300 museum staff and archeologists like Mustafa. Alongside Jessica Johnson, who's the head of conservation at the Smithsonian's Museum Services Center. Jessica says we may think of heritage sites as crucial parts of art and history, but ISIS sees them as perfect targets.

JJ: Right now ISIL is a big threat because they are using heritage for political reasons. They're going in and destroying sites or museums because those represent something about the history and the people of the country.

MD: Islamic militants have attacked some of the best-preserved archeological sites in the region. They've bulldozed ancient capitals, dynamited ruins and rampaged through Iraq's second largest museum in Mosul. But they aren't being driven by ideology alone. Archeological looting has likely earned ISIS millions of dollars. But it's not just Iraq's history that's being destroyed. It's ours too.

JJ: History of Iraq is some of the oldest in the world. The first people who learned to write, how we write now, the earliest stories, some of which are still told now, come from that region. It's so important to the understanding of civilization across the world now.

MD: That's why Jessica is overseeing a course on emergency conservation. The goal is to help Iraqi archaeologists catch up on the tools and knowledge they couldn't access during the rule of Saddam Hussein and the war that followed it. The students are learning methods to restore heritage sites that are purposely damaged, but they're also being taught how also to protect those places and collections from natural disasters.

JJ: Emergency conservation is responding to crisis, really. So it might be an earthquake. Or the crisis might be looting in war and destruction.

MD: They're stabilizing buildings, using satellite mapping to learn the precise scales and locations of sites and documenting existing antiquities all to create recovery plans.

JJ: The work that goes on in that kind of conservation is just trying to minimize the damage that is happening.

MD: Hoshair Hassan is a student who works as a surveyor at archeology sites.

HH: Even if we aren't in danger of an attack from the Islamic State, or the economic crisis, we face looting. So it's very important for us to document everything. That way if things are taken in the future, we can identify everything that's been stolen. We have it already.

MD: Iraq is home to numerous languages and religions, and the students here represent almost all of them. The class lets them collaborate and create networks of support they can take back home. Jessica says those ties, and the tangible symbols of a shared heritage, can help unify their country.

JJ: Heritage brings us together so that we don't just see ourselves as isolated people or isolated families, we have a broader understanding of what is important in the world and the way we look at the world.

MD: Protecting heritage, even in conflict, is important; not only for the identity of Iraqis but for the knowledge that lives with them, and the preservation of our ancestor's legacies.