

Carter G. Woodson Lecture
Sacramento State University

Good afternoon.

It's truly a pleasure to be here today. Thank you to Sacramento State University, faculty, and a dear friend and former instructor of mine, Dr. Andrea Moore, for having me.

Finally, thank you to these great students for lending me your ears today.

I'm here to speak on the concept of "double consciousness." I'm quite sure that you all are familiar with that term because you have such great faculty here at Sac State. And I'm sure you pay attention to every lesson.

But, first let me introduce myself:

I'm Micah. I was born and raised in South Central Los Angeles during the early 90s. You've probably seen a few movies about South Central, but let me tell you firsthand it was pretty crazy.

I was raised in Los Angeles during a time when the crime rate was at an all-time high. My immigrant parents—who are of Jamaican and British descent—came to America in hopes of a better life, but could only afford to buy a home in the hood. Gang and drug violence was everywhere – schools, parks, libraries, you couldn't escape it.

My four brothers and I shared a small house with our parents. And my parents did the best they could to provide for us.

I managed to earn a track scholarship to U.C. Davis and ended up running my way through school and finished with a degree in communications. After I graduated, I went on to work for the Schwarzenegger administration and in the State Assembly and Senate as a consultant, and now as a press secretary for the Vice Chair of the State Board of Equalization.

In 2016, I managed to get elected to Natomas Unified School Board as a first time candidate. And I'm one of the only elected Republicans within the city limits of Sacramento. In my spare time, I help run a successful non-profit organization.

Believe me when I say I wouldn't have been able to do all these things unless I embraced my double consciousness as gift rather than a curse.

For those of you are unfamiliar with the term "double consciousness," it refers to the experience of reconciling one's black heritage with an upbringing in a European-dominated society. We often hear of double consciousness as a negative thing.

I'm going to ask you to stay with me for a few moments and let me share with you how double consciousness has helped me in my life.

First, double consciousness can be a privilege.

Seeing my double consciousness negatively almost caused me to talk myself out of running for office.

I almost convinced myself that I wasn't tall or well educated enough to be an elected official—or that people would never vote for a then 29-year-old black kid from South L.A who had only lived in his district for five years.

And in deep blue California, I certainly didn't think these folks would elect a Republican.

But, I remembered that I had a special privilege; I could speak “two languages.”

When you're forced to code switch—as many of us have to do—you develop a special way of communicating that acts sort of like second language. Sometimes, many of us drop subtle hints of our second language in our profession and in our classwork. As a communications professional, I often laugh to myself when I drop certain phrases into a speech I've written for a Senator or candidate for governor.

I once had a white Senator from a farm town called Imperial Valley tell a church full of Black folks: “I ain't mad at ya.”

Because you've had to live with the pressure of being different, when you interact with someone who has similar life experience or none at all, you appear more genuine. And that is because it is genuine. It can't be faked or taught.

Code switching means you have a plethora of experiences to pull from ... experiences with which many of your peers aren't familiar. Believe it or not, these experiences make you highly valuable and attractive to prospective employers from the private and public sector.

Because of your unique circumstances you may even have more life experience than some of the most tenured professors at this institution.

As a professional, I draw on my experiences from the inner city and as a Black American. Some of life's most valuable lessons were taught to me in the most unique ways. I wouldn't exchange those experiences for anything in the world.

You'd be surprised to know that there are many people who work for the government or in the private sector who wish they had those experiences to pull from.

Those experiences are the same reasons why Black Panther will continue to crush at the box office this weekend. Those experiences are why we use the “Black Excellence” hash tag on Instagram and Twitter. Because even though our community is not a monolithic one, there are certain shared experiences many of us know intimately, and we express our appreciation for them in the most fascinating ways.

Being forced to constantly look through the lens of how other people see me helped me tremendously. Since, politics, and mostly anything else in life, justly or unjustly, has some ties to how people see you.

It also helped me relate more easily to many of America's forgotten constituents, such as our single black mothers, young black males, and students with disabilities.

I often wonder how society views these folks and realized how blessed I really am, and how hard I actually need to work for them to help provide them with better opportunities.

In my position as an elected official, I'm able to help more people than I have ever helped before ... because I embraced my gift.

Secondly, double consciousness has helped me be an ambassador for my community.

I used to work for the former Republican Leader of the Senate. His name is Bob Huff. He's a good man who is now running for Congress in Southern California. You should look him up when you have the time.

Senator Huff was Leader right around the time there was a spike in news coverage of the shootings of unarmed black men. I'd had a few conversations with Bob about how I thought there were huge misunderstandings on both sides, but something absolutely needed to be done.

In politics, there are a lot of tough, closed-door conversations that happen when there are tragedies like this. Some of those conversations would absolutely offend many of you here. Just imagine what it would be like to be a part of those offensive conversations as a black man behind those closed doors.

No matter your party affiliation the language can be very tough and disheartening. Democrats, Republicans, and Independents can all get tunnel vision.

Rather than being offended, however, I sought to use my "language skills" to bridge gaps. I shared with Bob how rogue police had roughed up conservative, old Micah in South Central. He couldn't believe some of the stories I told him—how I've had to drive straight for a mile past my destination so not to make a single mistake and be pulled over. Or how the police, for simply being in a more affluent neighborhood, had roughed me up.

Perhaps a few of you have some unbelievable stories as well.

After a few weeks, I convinced Bob to hold a town hall event in a black-owned barbershop in Natomas, where the focus would be police-community relations.

I spent weeks prepping him for the event. And, admittedly, I was kind of nervous. I wasn't really sure how he would handle the setting. But, let me tell you the event was a huge success and I think Dr. Moore would agree because she was there.

Bob had the opportunity to hear many different perspectives that day, since our community isn't a monolithic community, but there was a common thread: Everyone was hurting and wanted to do something about the problem. Bob did get beat up a little bit for being a lawmaker who hadn't ventured to our side of town, but he stood in the pocket like a boxer and gave a great exchange.

When he left the Barbershop, he told me he wanted to run legislation that would setup the framework for requiring police officers to wear body cameras in California. I'm sad to report his bill died in the Assembly, but Bob—a white guy from Imperial Valley—helped start the much-needed conversation about police accountability in California.

And he convinced his caucus to stop trumpeting the old party line on how police could do no wrong. We managed to change minds.

In your professional careers, you're going to come across many times when you're the only one at the table who comes from your unique circumstances. And you will be offended, because ignorance can be quite offensive.

But, can you really blame someone if they don't know something?

I know it might be unfair, and that you're not the representative for all Black Americans, but I'm asking you to step into that role and be an ambassador. Just do your best.

That's because the generation that's coming behind you needs you.

Finally, double consciousness makes you durable.

Have you ever noticed that things don't bother you as much as most people? That's durability.

W.E.B Dubois says it best:

"The black man's turning hither and thither in . . . doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like . . . weakness. And yet it is not weakness—it is the contradiction of double aims. Rather than becoming weak, the African-American becomes strong, and that strength alone is what keeps the African -American from being "torn asunder."

If you ever wondered why some of our past heroes were able to withstand the pressures they did, I'm willing to bet double consciousness had something to do with it.

Carter G. Woodson had to be durable when he was told black people hadn't made any significant contributions to American history.

Dr. Charles Drew had to be durable when fighting against the American Red Cross and their support for racial segregation in blood donation.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had to be durable when leading the Civil Rights movement.

And you'll have to be durable when you go out into the work force.

So, my final words to you today are this:

Don't be trapped by dogma — which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions and preconceived notions drown out your God-given

conscience. And don't let other people, especially those who do not mean well, place limits on you.

Push through ... and embrace your gift. Don't bury your talents.

Thank you.