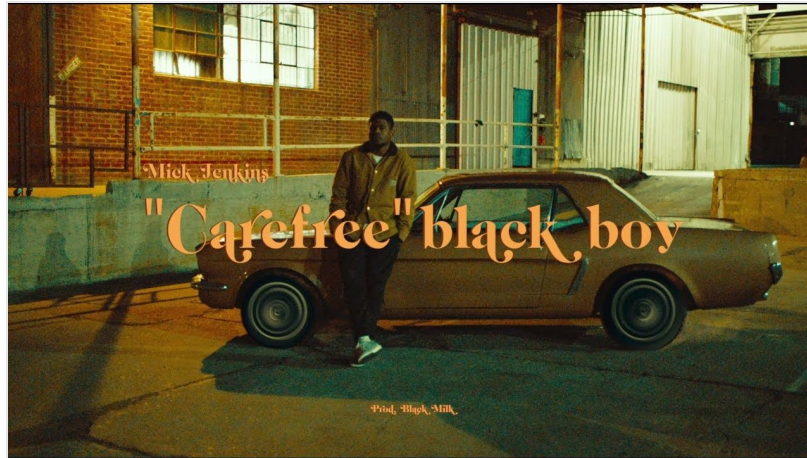


A Negro and an American



There's a line from the song *Carefree*, by Chicago rapper [Mick Jenkins](#) that says "If your living carefree then you probably don't look like us." There is an understanding among black folk that every day you leave your house requires you to examine, critique, judge, and observe yourself in the harshest way possible through the eyes of a country that looks back at you as a problem. Every morning you have to: comb out your nappy hair, hide your dreads, cover up your tattoos, make sure you're not wearing too much black, smile, make eye contact so the woman walking in front doesn't get uncomfortable, keep your hands out of your pockets, keep your hood off, and most importantly remain calm at all cost. W.E.B Du Bois described this feeling in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." Two often opposing ideals living inside one dark body, causing an imbalance between the two souls, leads to fragmented confidence and faith and, in extreme instances, being ashamed of oneself or one's own people. As a Black American, I too have learned to navigate the two worlds in which I live constantly. By default, as I tread the precarious path between these two worlds, my body language, vocabulary, mannerisms, and tone all change to suit my situation.

I grew up in a small, predominantly white private school. It was an intimate environment and my mother was already working there when she was pregnant with me. I was born into this community that loved and supported me. Through my experience of acting in our class play every year, I became a good public speaker. We spent a lot of time outside in the woods around my school so I never wore nice clothes, always something I could play in. When I would tear my shirt playing, I would take it to the handwork teacher to help me sew it back together. I had viola lessons every week and I practiced every day.

It wasn't until years later in high school, when I started playing travel baseball on a predominantly black team, that I realized most other kids who looked like me did not have those same experiences growing up.

"You must not be from Atlanta, where you grow up?"

"No, I was born here."

"Really? you don't talk like it"

"Yeah, my mom worked at a private school"

"Oh, that makes sense."

Like clockwork, I had this conversation with each new team I played on. There is a stigma among black people that you never want to be the whitest black person in the room, and I always was. It seemed like the way I spoke—my use or lack thereof of slang and tone—had excluded me from my own race. It wasn't that hiding these markers of whiteness became easier, but performing blackness became easier. I studied hip-hop and street culture; it was like an acting role for me. I was learning how to play a black man around his own kind. Eventually, it became second nature, switching between my two personalities for whatever the situation called for. After that, no one ever saw me as anything other than what I wanted them to. I thought I had finally mastered this double-consciousness that Du Bois speaks of.

Although grasping this part of myself made day-to-day life easier, it did not prepare me for the kind of in-depth soul searching and personal understanding required in the summer of 2020. It all began with a series of unfortunate events: a 911 call made by a white woman, the phrase "An African American man is threatening my life," and the known consequences of a statement like that. The story of Amy Cooper calling the police on Christian Cooper (no relation), has come to be known as the [Central Park bird watching incident](#) and paints a clear picture of the systemic racism and white privilege that play a role in most Americans' everyday lives. She made that call on the assumption that because she was a white woman and he a black man, the police would not only believe her but back her. This is a common assumption indoctrinated into our youth; that white lives do or should matter more than black lives.



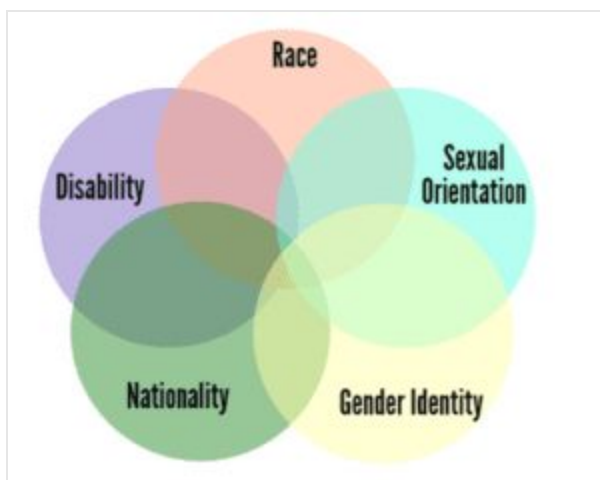
BLM protest outside of Governor Kemp's mansion.

This summer brought a unique opportunity. Through the perfect storm of atrocities—that was COVID – 19, the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and so many other innocent black people—there was a positive outcome. The anger and boiling emotions that emerged while being quarantined at home fostered resolve and rebellion within hundreds of thousands across the world. The [Black Lives Matter](#) movement has never seen support of this magnitude from such a diverse crowd. The day after George Floyd was murdered, I was protesting in front of Governor Kemp's mansion in Atlanta, Georgia where I live. Both sidewalks of the street were packed with people, those of us protesting on one side and those with badges on the other. For hours we chanted and yelled at the beefed-up, militarized action figures occupying the Governor's front lawn. **A few of us had been arrested already: a girl playing Djembe drum, a biker trying to protect her, and a man stepping into the street.** The National Guard had been called in to provide crowd control support; a veritable army stood before us. Tensions were high.

As another fight broke out between the protesters and police and an order was given and all of the police, all of the National Guard removed their helmets, put them down, and put on their gas masks. They charged out of the gate towards us, Rubber bullets hitting the trees behind us. By the time you hear a gun fire the bullet has already made contact; however, a [rubber bullet](#) is much larger and slower. It flies just slow enough for you to see a streak through the air; just slow enough for me to watch it hit the gentlemen in the front and knock him to the ground. Initially, we dispersed and ran, but our organizers gathered us back and we kneeled with our hands up, facing our adversaries. As the words "hands up, Don't shoot" left

my mouth, again and again, my mind wandered to how many out here for the first time were fearing the people intended to protect us, as so many of us did on a daily basis.

Now as I reflect on my recent experience I think back to growing up, how I defined, assumed, and put others into labeled boxes because I was afraid they'd do it to me first. I am ashamed of my thoughts and of how those thoughts influenced my actions. My ideas at that time were inherently racist. The idea that the way a person dresses or speaks in any way defines their character or humanity is a thought heavily indoctrinated into modern society. "The notion that black people can't be racist is tainted by racism itself," says Ibram X. Kendi in his book *How To Be An Anti-Racist*, "Like every other racist idea, the powerless defense underestimates black people and overestimates white people." I now understand that I was not learning how to be my culture, I was learning about and how to appreciate my culture. The stories of my people are harrowing and empowering; they teach love, compassion, and appreciation for the earth, and each other. My life and the way I look at other humans and the world have been changed, and I think it would be the same for a lot of people if these stories were told.



I have taken this new way of thinking to college with me; I intend to keep up my fight to be an anti-racist every day because being "not racist" isn't enough. I believe the future is built on intersectionality and as the most defiant, rebellious, unique, out-spoken, self-assured generation, we have the power to change the status quo. As a theatre major, I intend to promote community projects and organizations using acting and poetry as my medium. I've already begun projects such as [examining equitability rights of staff on the College of Charleston's campus](#) who

are more at risk to COVID-19 due to healthcare accessibility and increased exposure in underserved communities. I am working with student mentor [Jody Bell](#), putting a microscope to the janitorial and maintenance staff we have on campus (who are predominantly POC), and looking at how our [Back on the Bricks](#) plan protects those who are on the front line. I have also taken the position of Secretary of the Executive Board of Cofc's [Black Student Union](#), and am a member of the [Students4Ossoff](#) campaign to elect Jon Ossoff as Georgia's Senator. I am excited to explore the avenues of voter suppression and defunding the police moving forward in my academic career on the journey to be a scholarly, sustainable citizen.