

Chapter 2: We Stay Woke: Cultural Work and Black Femme Consciousness - an Epistemic Insurgency

This chapter explores the concept of "woke" as an epistemic insurgency, examining how Black femme consciousness and cultural work challenge dominant narratives. It investigates the misappropriation of "woke" by political forces while reclaiming its original meaning and value within Black communities.



The Woke Mind Virus

The American public education system has faced unprecedented attacks over the past few years, with claims of a "woke mob" of teachers in drag who have infiltrated schools with Das Kapital tucked in their satchels. The Twitter account, Libs of TikTok, posts videos of teachers showing support for their students who are not straight, white, or cisgender. Teachers' support and advocacy for their students lead to virulent accusations from opponents, fomenting more distrust of educational institutions. Companies like PragerU and the Heritage Foundation are also fueling the false panic around "woke capitalism" and "transgender activism" in schools. These false claims are leading to laws being introduced to combat the supposed "woke mind virus."

For example, Nebraska has introduced a bill that restricts the teaching of "divisive" concepts in classrooms, orientations, and workshops. It also prohibits mandatory training in such concepts and requires that any diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) employees have duties that include efforts to strengthen and increase intellectual diversity among students and faculty (Womack, 2023). However, the parameters of this bill are far too broad, and many are concerned that it will impede universities' ability to discuss any topics related to race, gender, or sex. Unfortunately, bills like these keep growing, and their advocates are attacking what they deem "woke."

Yet another anti-woke bill moved into Florida's house. Supported by Governor Ron Desantis, legislators proposed the "Stop WOKE Act" (WOKE, an acronym for "Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees"), which prohibits schools and businesses from teaching anything that could cause "psychological distress" based on race, color, sex, or national origin. The Act purports to stop these institutions from teaching that individuals are "inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously," or that a person "'bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress' over actions committed in the past by members of the same race, gender, or national origin." The legislation passed in February 2022 by a vote split along partisan lines and went into effect in July 2022 (Reilly, 2022).

The Spread of Anti-Woke Legislation

Desantis, supported by his right-wing acolytes, also barred university professors from discussing the state's voting laws and claimed that public college employees have no right to freedom of speech. The latter led to five academics of color not being granted tenure on April 26, 2023, due to DeSantis' newly appointed conservative New College of Florida trustees, who had also voted just months before to eliminate the college's DEI office (Moody, April 27, 2023). These laws suggest a concerning trend toward fascism, and they have nothing to do with protecting children from discomfort during lectures. Instead, they are about controlling and limiting what people can know about our present. Instead of focusing on real issues, politicians like Ron DeSantis are using these bills to control the narrative and limit what people can know about the diverse world around them.

The ACLU has tracked anti-woke legislation introduced throughout the country. Amy Turkel, interim executive director of the ACLU of Florida, responded with the following:

This dangerous law is part of a nationwide trend to whitewash history and chill free speech in classrooms and workplaces. It will infringe on teachers' and employers' First Amendment rights and chill their ability to use concepts like systemic racism and gender discrimination to teach about and discuss important American history. It prevents students from exercising their right to learn about the history and lived experiences of Black people and other marginalized people in our country. It tells Black and Brown communities that their histories and stories don't matter (ACLU, 2022).

The broadness of the act is intentional and designed to discourage discussion about topics related to gender and race. Even before a Florida judge blocked certain aspects of the law, schools and teachers were self-censoring their material. Some schools removed their anti-racist statements from their websites, and others canceled courses on race, afraid of breaching this new law. This trend is not unique to Florida; anti-woke bills are popping up across the country. For example, in Missouri, a bill is being considered that would prohibit state universities from requiring diversity statements, while in South Carolina, Republicans are investigating how much higher education institutions spend on programs related to race or sexual orientation.

The Political Misappropriation of "Woke"

Legislative actions such as StopWOKE codify Republican silencing efforts and exemplify the right's pejorative misappropriation of "woke." Akin to the anti-political correctness movement that took hold in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the anti-woke campaign results from a right-wing electoral strategy that seeks to attack any idea remotely associated with diversity and equity. Lamentations of being victimized by "cancel culture" and "critical race theory" and the "woke mob" or "social justice warriors" have allowed far-right groups to justify ignoring agitation for reparations, action against state-sanctioned violence, and activism to end the carceral state.

Illustratively, to discredit legislation that could improve the lives of everyday Americans, former president Donald Trump alleged that his predecessor, Joe Biden's administration, was "killing" the country with woke politics. Republican Representative Matt Gaetz deemed any leftist agitator or Joe Biden supporter a "waketopian." ("What Is the History of the Word 'Woke' and Its Modern Uses?", 2021). Meanwhile, centrist Democrats have been weaponizing wokeness against the more left-leaning members of their party; their neoliberal redefinition has obfuscated its original usage and minimized the role of systemic racism and structural inequality in hierarchies of control.

To offer another illustration, in the latest Black apologist text by linguist John McWhorter, the author argues that wokeism is little more than holier-than-thou posturing and self-victimizing. Without a doubt, by accusing every leftist politician of being involved in a woke conspiracy to kill American values, conservative forces have successfully poisoned the well against any progressive social justice-oriented conversations.

Woke as a Cultural Battleground

Although the left has been complicit, the right wing has zealously misappropriated woke, using it in a derogatory manner to describe any progression to equity and diversity, including in popular culture. For instance, when Disney cast Black singer and actress Halle Bailey as the lead in the live-action version of *The Little Mermaid*, some people claimed that Disney had gone woke (Di Placido, 2022). Similarly, when Disney created a new show called *Baymax!* and a scene depicted the titular robot character searching for menstrual products, a person wearing a transgender flag t-shirt assisted, and some conservative viewers, assuming the character was transgender, were outraged.

Recently, Lego announced that they would expand their character range to be more representative, including characters with Down syndrome, limb differences, and anxiety. However, some individuals found this announcement divisive, with one host claiming that Legos were causing a divide in the country by forcing identity politics. Candace Owens, the so-called Blexit founder, and right-wing pundit, also joined the pop-culture anti-woke craze and criticized an underwear company for including a person in a wheelchair in their ads, stating that representation is unimportant. However, the company was making an entire line of accessible underwear, and showing someone in a wheelchair was a natural choice.

These examples highlight how the term "woke" has become a dog whistle for those who are racist, transphobic, homophobic, and sexist. Such denunciations of all things progressive under the banner of woke in the whitestream zeitgeist give sympathizers a green light to criticize any progress toward inclusion and equity. Meanwhile, policymakers have used this false panic to lull their constituents into a proverbial sleep where they can ignore the underlying issues that truly affect them.

Go Woke: An Epistemological Insurgency

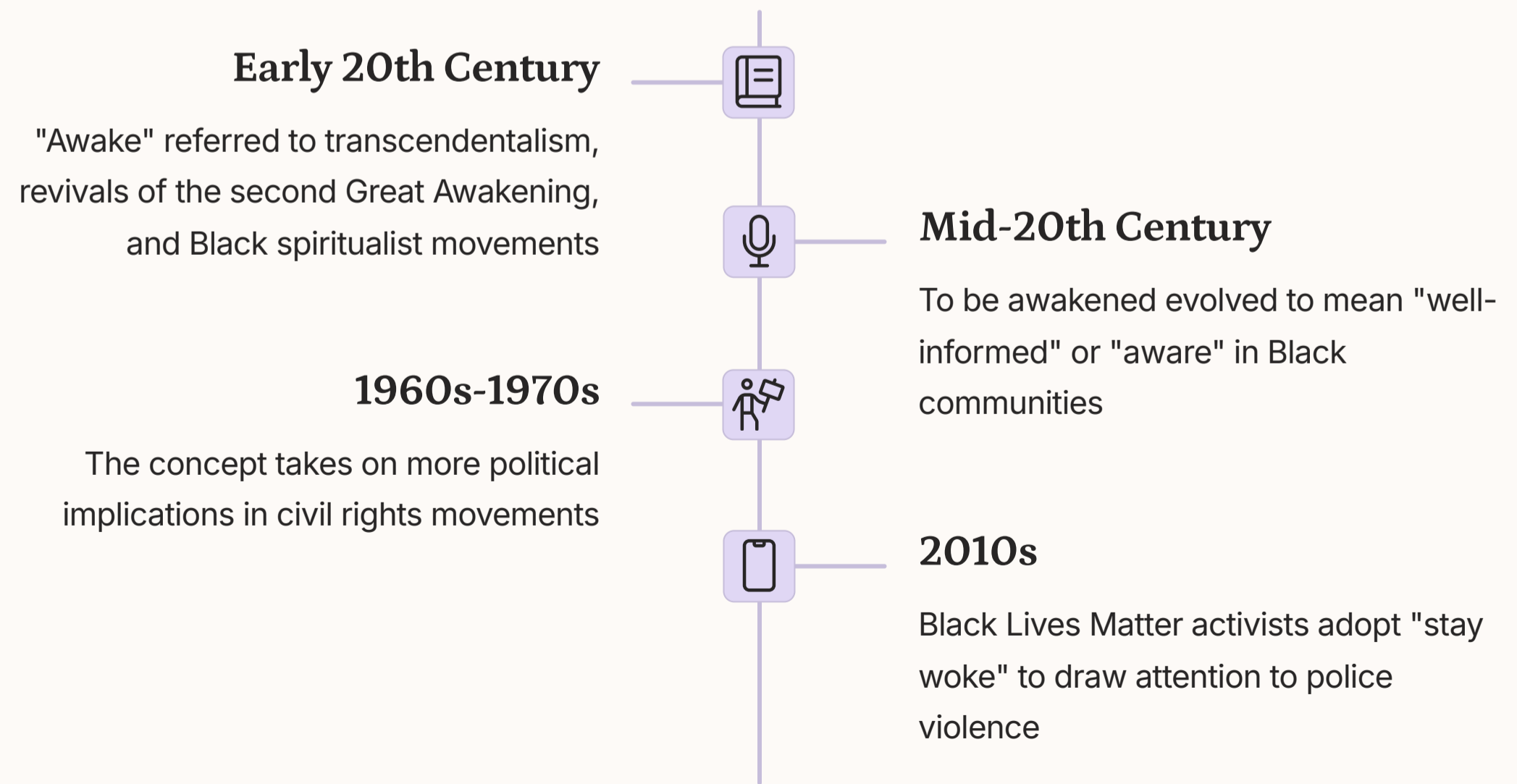
Because of this anti-woke moment, it is essential, therefore, that we call for an epistemological insurgency. At this cultural point, where there are apparent attacks on Black and equity-deserving communities, calls for us to diligently challenge and test the white supremacist capitalist hetero-sexist patriarchal regime's claim to be the fount of all valuable knowledge, history, morality, and civility have become necessary. The Last Poets (1971), in their spoken word piece "Wake Up Niggers!," identified, in the 1970's, this very epistemic emergency and the need for a new kind of Black consciousness or waking up that illumines the vibrant historical legacy of Africans: "Night, descends, as the sun's light ends. . ./Dreaming of bars, black civilizations that once flourished and grew/HEY! - WAKE UP, NIGGERS or ya all through!"

They tell us that white sensitivities over indisputable truths that are not always flatteringly cast their ancestors as heroes and begetters of gentility and civilization are more important than an accurate historical record. Through the implicit sentiments of our representatives around legislation like WOKE (Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees), they also tell us that the only "kids" and employees that matter do not look like us. For these reasons, I ask here: what empirically counts as "reality" concerning Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) oppression? Moreover, whose knowledge claim is justifiable by a set of observable facts? Who gets to tell the story, and from which standpoint?

Reclaiming Wokeness: Its Meaning and History

Although 'woke' is laughably dated, as it has officially fallen into the abyss of middle-aged dad whitestream parlance (see 'bling'), been virtually abandoned by Black folk and almost entirely neutered of its original utility, still, I reclaim woke. It has utility. To illustrate the term's epistemological value, I briefly link wokeness to the metaphysical concepts of light awakening seekers as a metaphor for consciousness and awareness. Next, I discuss conscious cultural workers and their "woke" educational projects from a Black womanist consciousness perspective. Then, I reflect on how conscious cultural workers establish their knowledge communities. Additionally, I discuss conscious cultural workers' efforts to reconcile the assumed incongruities between their public and private spaces. Finally, to conclude the chapter, I argue the importance of examining the work of Black women-conscious cultural workers and the study's significance to educational research.

From urbandictionary.com (2022) to the unending articles decrying wokeism, woke is defined as a slang term derived from American Black folk meaning "when an individual becomes more aware of social injustice." However, woke technically is not merely slang; it is an African American Vernacular English (AAVE) variant of the verb "awake," meaning to have attained awareness of oneself and one's surroundings. Woke has existed for some time in AAVE but gained more widespread use in the early 2000s. Woke has become a byword for social and political awareness, especially regarding racial injustice. However, this popular definition needs to include the subtle metaphysical nuances of the term.



The Historical Roots of Black Consciousness

A related conceptualization of awakened, meant to be mentally, spiritually, and physically aware, often, but not always in the context of anti-Black aggressions, has had a long history, particularly in Black nationalist circles. Early in the 20th century, "awake" referred to transcendentalism, revivals of the second Great Awakening, and Black spiritualist movements such as those of Noble Drew Ali, as well as sociological explorations of the consciousness of Black folks by scholars like W.E.B. Dubois and Carter G. Woodson. Pan-Africanist forefather Marcus Garvey exhorted his followers to "Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up, Africa! Let us work towards the one glorious end of a free, redeemed, and mighty nation!" (Garvey and Garvey, 1986, p. 5).

Black Americans continued to be vigilant against racially motivated aggressions even after Reconstruction (Beckham, 1972). During what historian Rayford Logan (1965) referred to as the nadir, a period from post-Reconstruction through the early 20th century, even up to the Post-World War II era (despite Black men's war contributions), Black folks continued to experience violence as well as schooling, employment, and housing discrimination at the hands of white America. By the middle of the 20th century, to be awakened had evolved to mean "well-informed" or "aware." The 1962 New York Times Magazine piece "If You're Woke You Dig It," which details how white beatniks appropriated Black lingo, is credited to African American novelist William Melvin Kelley (Rhodes, 2021).

The concept also refers to Martin Luther King Jr.'s admonition to stay attentive, adjust to new ideas, remain watchful, and confront the challenge of change. Another example is Barry Beckham's play *Garvey Lives!* Where he used the line, "I've been sleeping my entire life," indicating how the term "awake" had taken on more political implications by 1971. (Beckham, 1972). Additionally, Black servicemen incorporated military lingo, including idioms such as "keep your head on a swivel" into the vernacular. Much like the phrase "stay awake," this term warned Black folks to remain vigilant and alert (Rhodes, 2021). It is important to examine various aspects of the term "stay woke," including its origins, meanings, and usage within the context of Black activism and social media because they offer insights into the cultural significance of the term and its relevance to contemporary discussions of race, justice, and social change.

The Woke Ones: The Metaphor of Intuitive Awareness

Notions of illumination and being roused from a deep sleep or state of unconsciousness as a metaphor for self-awareness did not start in the early aughts with "woke's" foray into the mainstream. Emanating light or heat, as figuratively associated with awakening, is evinced in several metaphysical concepts, such as the Greek Neoplatonic nous, sometimes described as intuitive intellect. Twelfth-century Islamic Illuminationist (Ishraqi) philosopher Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi compared light shining on the unseen world to al-'ilm al-huduri, or knowledge-by-presence. A fully awakened self, whose luminescence is no longer dulled by societal conditioning, has also come to be associated with enlightenment.

The Buddhist reference to enlightenment or illuminance as a means to jar one out of metaphorical darkness is a translation of the word bodhi—the knowing or enlightened wisdom of a Buddha. Furthering the metaphor of illumination as a means to spiritual awakening, the Nag Hammadi codices of the first-century AD Gnostics, rediscovered in the mid-20th century, also figuratively echo other ideas of spiritual awakening as a divine spark. At the same time, human ignorance is analogized with blindness, sleeping, and dreaming in darkness. In the West, following several waves of "awakenings" or rising Christian religiosity between the early 18th and the late 19th centuries, the term "enlightenment" took on a similar transcendentalist motif of light waking one from a state of spiritual slumber.

<p>Philosophical Traditions</p> <p>From Greek Neoplatonic nous to Islamic Illuminationist concepts, the metaphor of light as awareness spans cultures and centuries</p>	<p>Religious Contexts</p> <p>Buddhist bodhi (enlightenment) and Gnostic concepts of divine spark represent awakening from spiritual darkness</p>	<p>Black Vernacular</p> <p>In Black culture, being "woke" refers to awareness of oppressive forces that control Black personhood and consciousness</p>
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Woke in Black Music and Media

As previously discussed, in Black vernacular culture, the idea that predates woke referred to someone who was figuratively awakened to the oppressive, sometimes hidden, forces that seek to control the very personhood of Black people. Musicians, the griots of our community, expounded on these early incarnations of woke through gospel, blues, and soul music. Iconic American blues and folk singer Huddie Ledbetter, or Lead Belly, advised his audience to "be a little careful when they go along through there; best stay woke, keep your eyes open" (Romano, 2020). Noted Black nationalist proto-rappers Last Poets' "Wake Up Niggers," from the soundtrack of the Mick Jagger film *Performance*, offer a similar entreaty for Black people to "wake up or ya all through!"

Neo-soul singer Erykah Badu sings "I stay woke" in her 2008 song "Master Teacher." Critical race scholar David Stovall "told the New York Times that Ms. Badu's use of the phrase [stay woke] meant "not being placated, not being anesthetized." ("What Is the History of the Word 'Woke' and Its Modern Uses?" 2021). Badu indicates she accepts Lead Belly's and The Last Poets' imploration through a seemingly faulty use of the verb awake's intransitive form. Donald Glover's or Childish Gambino's (2016) song "Redbone" uses a similar refrain.

Vox writer Aja Romano (2020) argues that "woke" is a polysemous word, and in Glover's hook, woke refers to being aware of a cheating partner. She also maintains that Grammy-nominated producer and artist Georgia Ann Muldrow's use of woke meant staying awake despite exhaustion (Romano, 2020). However, the Vox journalist incorrectly interprets Glover's and Muldrow's use of the term. These two are examples of tricksterism—the signifying and verbal irony used in the Black community that indicates an intentional sarcastic subversion of a word's meaning to in-group members. In Glover and Muldrow's case, both were well aware of the emic meaning of the word, as demonstrated in Muldrow's production of Badu's song and her longstanding presence as a mainstay in underground experimental hip-hop. Woke's reapplication in these contexts also serves to mock outsiders' understandings of in-group verbiage.

Woke in Contemporary Black Culture

Conceptually, wokeness as a kind of enlightenment bloomed in contemporary Black media even before it became Black radical cool in the 20-teens. A late 20th-century film, Spike Lee's 1988 *School Daze*, set in a fictitious Mission College, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU), exemplifies the contemporary application of woke I understood coming up at the tail end of the 20th century. The protagonist, Dap, is a campus activist pushing for the college to divest from Apartheid South Africa. However, the administration resists, and his primarily apathetic peers are more interested in parties and pledging.

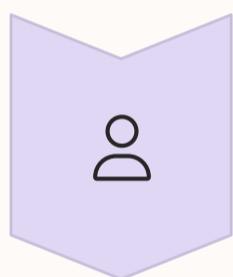
After several interactions between the woke Dap (perhaps performatively so; his girlfriend called him out for dating her only because she was one of the "darkest sistas on campus"—to virtue signal his pro-Blackness) and the not-so-woke colorist fraternities and sororities, Dap, in the end, stands on the campus quad ringing a large bell. Dap appears to glide angelically, due to Lee's signature dolly shot, as a melodramatic score plays to overexposed lighting, and he yells, "wake up!" A sleeping campus wipes their eyes, slowly congregates in the quad, and the main character and his foil Julian acknowledge it is time for a collective awakening. The film, described by some critics as "didactic" and "preachy" (*School Daze*, n.d.), represents Neal's Black aesthete call to create work that is didactic, art for the sake of instruction, that is rooted in a radical era of Black consciousness. Lee, Neal, and other BAM artists and hip-hoppers were woke before woke was a thing.

Although woke's Black linguistic roots are evident, woke currently does not have a single, widely agreed-upon definition. It has typically come to be associated with progressive ideas and being politically and socially aware (Rhodes, 2021). As the term has quickly been Columbused by the mainstream, woke is applied to any awareness of and agitation against exploitation, including queerphobia, nativism, and misogyny.

The Evolution and Co-option of Woke

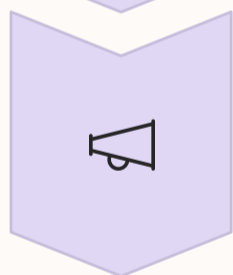
During the 2010s, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists began to use the phrase. For example, in the 2015 St. Paul protests against police violence by Black Lives Matter supporters after police killed Michael Brown in 2014, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists used "stay woke" to draw attention to police violence (Lopez Bunyasi & Smith, 2019). In addition, the word "woke" began to occur increasingly frequently among Black Twitter users. According to a republished article in the New European, journalist Harriet Marsden quotes Georgia Tech professor Andre Brock, who argues the term woke gained popularity as online slang on OkayPlayer, an online Black music community, in the early 2000s. In the wake of protests against state-sanctioned violence, the BET documentary Stay Woke made its debut in 2016. Other instances of woke embedded in a program's title include Marlon Wayans' Woke-ish and the Hulu series Woke. According to the media studies scholars, the old definition Black folks had for woke, vigilant, and paranoid, is losing its original meaning. (Brooks, 2017).

Sure, woke was employed in the first ten years of the twenty-first century to describe those sensitive to social and racial injustice. Sadly, as the term has gained widespread usage, woke has garnered denigration by politicians even as it has been co-opted by corporations hawking their wares to millennials. With the corporate assimilation of woke, the notion of wokeness has largely moved further from its original base in Black consciousness and become whitewashed.



Original Meaning

Black consciousness and awareness of systemic oppression



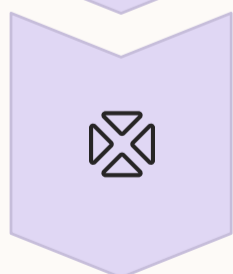
Activist Adoption

Used by Black Lives Matter and social justice movements



Corporate Co-option

"Woke capitalism" using progressive marketing without substance



Political Weaponization

Term becomes a pejorative used to attack progressive ideas

The Ontology of Woke Praxis

In terms of the artistic work rooted in wokeness, conscious cultural workers, like Badu, Lee, Gambino, Giovanni, and the Last Poets, have been motivated to action by looking at the world through a conscious and decidedly Black lens. Furthermore, Black Arts era, contemporary hip-hop feminists and womanists have taken corrective measures to rehistoricize the incomplete narrative by offering counternarratives that expose a politicized Black femme aesthetic that informs the ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, and pedagogies of Black consciousness. In the following chapter, I also lay out the relationship between artist-activist-educators' (conscious cultural workers') ontological positioning; in other words, I explore the nature of Black consciousness and how it functions in the social world. Next, I explore the conscious cultural worker's epistemological positioning, her experience coming into a kind of Black consciousness, and what that looks like for her. After that, I examine the participant's methodological positioning. In other words, what are her steps in becoming conscious? Finally, we explore her pedagogical positioning, or how she goes about scaffolding Black consciousness to others.

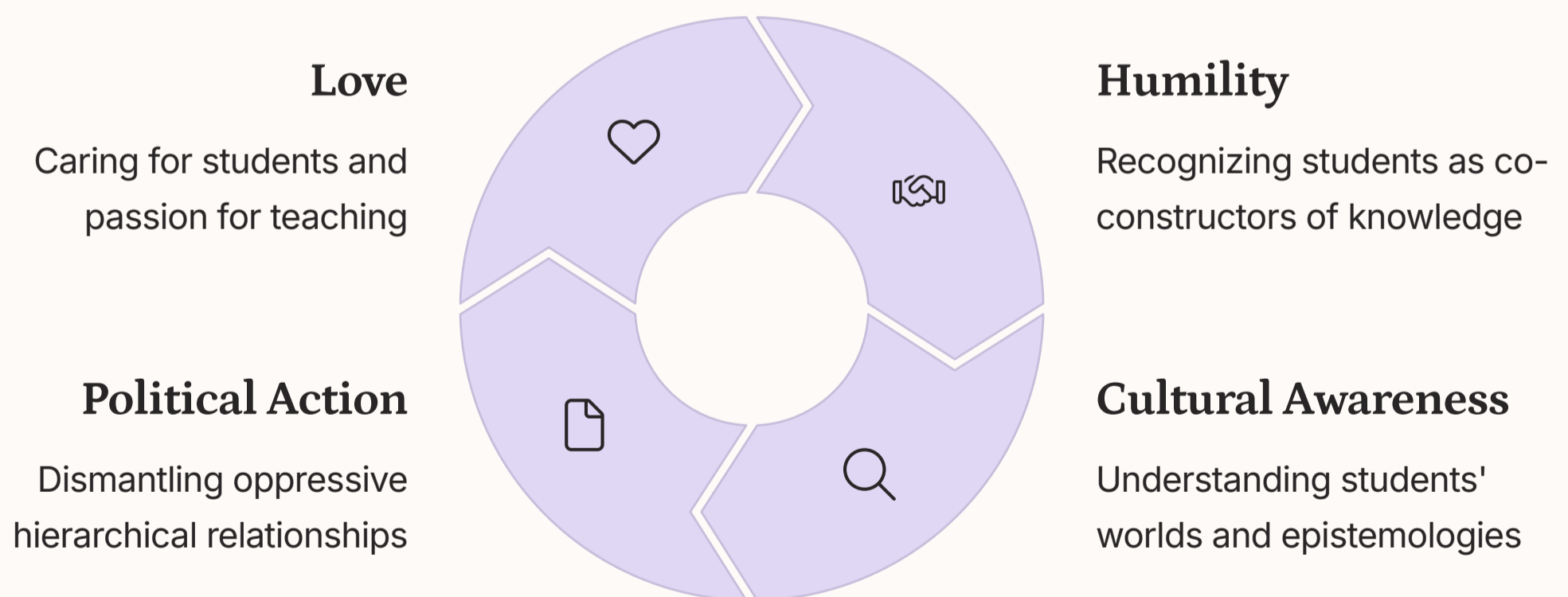
Cultural Worker, not a 'Creative'

According to the traditional definition, cultural workers work in creative professions such as film, television, theater, music, and social media. Besides the painters, actors, singers, vloggers, dramatists, and dancers, anyone who provides the administrative, organizational, or technical work to produce a creative project, i.e., gaffers, directors, site scouts, wardrobers, riggers, or art dealers, those Bourdieu (1984) deems "cultural intermediaries," are also cultural workers (Banks, 2007; Beck, 2005). However, others are also cultural workers. For example, individuals who engage in ritual work or whose labor preserves a group's traditions and practices are cultural workers. By this definition, an Ifa priestess who performs divination, a yogini who maintains an ashram, or an imam who performs the call to prayer could all be considered cultural workers. Because of the important cultural work these folks do, clients should compensate them for their labor, but they often do not.

Conscientization as Woke Praxis

In *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach* (Profesora Sim, Tia Nao [Teacher Yes, Auntie No]), Freire (1998) reflects on the popular paternalistic understanding of the teaching profession. In these situations, the devaluation of the teaching profession identifies teachers with caring aunts, mothers, or babysitters. Feminists problematize using the term "immaterial" to characterize the affective and caring labor of mothers and teachers. Freire also warns the field of education about the dangerous implications of negatively feminizing the profession. He argues pedagogy that only addresses caring can devalue and undermine the profession because patriarchy devalues work associated with the feminine. Paternalism has contributed to the reproduction and promotion of social inequalities in teaching, yet Freire still argues that even though care is often feminized, "it is not possible to be a teacher without loving one's students, even realizing that love is not enough, [but] it is not possible to be a teacher without loving teaching" (p. 15).

Freire's (1998) summation of teaching as cultural work begins with the assertion that education is a political process in all its forms. Schools can become institutions designed to impose majoritarian values and beliefs, and teachers must, with humility, love, and care, work with students and mentees to dismantle oppressive hierarchical relationships. Teachers who view students as co-constructors of knowledge and recognize the "absurdity of the authoritarianism that claims that all these spaces belong to the educational authorities, to teachers" (Freire 1998, 52) are cultural workers.



Crafting Counterhegemonic Communities of Practice

Lave & Wenger's (1991) seminal book on situated learning emphasizes the importance of social interaction during knowledge acquisition and progression into expertise through participation within a community setting. They argue that "legitimate peripheral participation," or learning by immersion in the new community and absorbing its modes of action and meaning as a part of becoming a community member, allows new initiates to become adept at a particular practice. To do so, learners require more than surface-level knowledge; they must also consider the corresponding community's norms. Over time, legitimate peripheral participation leads to mastery; eventually, the initiate can grow into a practitioner. Cultivating an identity within this community fosters strong ties between members.

As practitioners, and in this case, cultural workers as practitioners, in informal and nonformal spaces seek to grow into their teacher identity, teachers continuously refine their practice through reflection. According to the Communities of Practice Theory (CoP), more than just self-reflection is involved in shaping an educator's identity; it involves active participation in groups with other like-minded individuals who share knowledge and engage in collaborative learning. When a teacher engages with others with a similar mindset through these groups, new ideas can emerge for more effective methods of instruction. CoP holds that professional identities formed within communities of people sharing a similar interest or profession provide opportunities for skill development and knowledge sharing.

Communities of Practice (CoP) can consist primarily of colleagues who learn collaboratively from practitioners with more experience. Situated learning refers to social theories regarding the co-construction of knowledge within specific CoPs. Lave & Wenger (1991) contend that effective informal training is designed to improve practical expertise levels for learners beyond traditional educational settings. According to situated learning scholars, interaction with one's surroundings is critical because learners can best grow as practitioners when fully emerging in social contexts.