

English and Journalism Faculty, Students Select Their 2016 Words of the Year

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Earlier this month, the Augustana English and Journalism faculty chose *woke* as the 2016 Word of the Year. *Post-fact* and *snowflake* were our second and third choices, respectively. Also in the pool of nominations were *nasty*, *Latinx*, *cuck*, *alt-*, *belfie*, *normalize*, *whitelash*, and a few others. *Post-fact* was a compelling choice in the wake of the election, but we felt Colbert's *truthiness* from several years ago adequately encapsulates this relevant media concept (sorry, [Oxford Dictionaries](#)). We also considered the 2016 Word of the Year chosen by the Augustana Writing Center tutors, *lit*. But we ultimately decided that while the hip youngsters had a better perspective on hip, young words, we found **woke** to hold not only significant cultural and social import this year but also a rich and unique history in the African-American musical, filmic, and literary traditions, and we were glad to see it come to prominence this year.

Woke came to new prominence this year primarily through the Black Lives Matter protests occurring across the nation. It was most visible as a hashtag and attached to *stay*, as #staywoke was one of the most popular Twitter hashtags of the year, especially after [the photo](#) of BLM activist DeRay McKesson in handcuffs after being arrested protesting in Baton Rouge wearing a "#staywoke" t-shirt circulated. As such, it can be used both adjectivally and adverbially. Not without exception, we were unbothered by its ungrammaticality (*awakened* would be the Standard Written English (SWE) preference) and appreciated a word from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) entering the popular lexicon with such force. After all, past tense words, including past participles, have been quite malleable throughout history. Furthermore, as is often the case with words used in non-SWE dialects, **woke** doesn't exactly mean *awakened* or *awake*--it means much more. *Awake* has meant more than just the opposite of asleep for at least two centuries, as Jane Austen used it in *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 to mean alert or conscious. *Woke* today means something akin to being aware of and sensitive to the racial inequality in the U.S., and usually goes further to mean that one is willing to work against the injustice. The word also carries with it, especially when paired with *stay*, a sense of urgency and vigilance--of not being lulled into complacency--that this is a unique moment in time when we can't be silent bystanders to the status quo.

Erykah Badu is usually cited as the person who popularized the term *stay woke*, as her 2008 song "[Master Teacher](#)," a song whose refrain is "I stay woke" in response to situations where others around her lose focus. No doubt the current popularity of the word and the phrase is to be found in Badu's song. As [Oxford Dictionaries Blog](#) points out, however, Badu was not the first to use *woke* in this way and with this meaning, and it is fairly safe to say that *woke* has been in the AAVE lexicon for more than 50 years. **Woke** can be traced back to at least 1962, when African American novelist William Melvin Kelley, perhaps ironically from our perspective today, wrote a piece in the *New York Times* about how white culture--beatniks, specifically--were appropriating language from the black lexicon. The subtitle of his piece reads, "No Mickey Mouse can be expected to follow today's Negro idiom without a hip assist."

Offering a "hip assist" in our discussion, Jeffrey Miller pointed out that the concept of being woke, of waking up to the reality of social injustice, is deeply rooted in both film and literature. Spike Lee's brilliant *Do the Right Thing* rolls its opening credits in front of Rosie Perez dancing defiantly in boxing gear, and begins with Samuel Jackson's Mister Señor Love Daddy waking up the cast through his radio call "WAAAAAAAAAKE UP, WAKE UP, WAKE UP...UP YOU WAKE, UP YOU WAKE, UP YOU WAKE." Mookie and the others in Bed-Stuy wake up to sweltering heat and racial tensions reaching a fever pitch. By the end, Lee pleads with his audience to be

conscious of the impossible choice urban African Americans faced in 1989 as they watched one of their own, Radio Raheem, being choked to death by Brooklyn police. He frames this impossible choice with a Martin Luther King Jr. quote insisting on non-violence and a Malcolm X quote justifying violence if done in self defense. Lee reprises the phrase in *School Daze* when Laurence Fishburne's character Dap yells "[WAKE UP](#)" repeatedly while ringing a near replica of the Liberty Bell. Miller rightly connects the opening of *Do the Right Thing* to the first line in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), as protagonist Bigger Thomas is woken up by an alarm clock, an opening that Arnold Rampersad tells us is "Wright's urgent call in 1940 to America to awaken from its self-induced slumber about the reality of race-relations in the nation."

This plea for greater understanding of racial inequality is no doubt pervasive in African American literature from W.E.B. DuBois, who spoke of the double consciousness Black Americans are born with: "One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (7), to Langston Hughes, who responded to grand Whitmanesque lines about America's greatness and freedom with "[America never was America to me,](#)" to Wright and James Baldwin, who reminds how widely this inequality had already been written about by African American authors: "the bookshelves groan under the weight of information [about the 'Negro problem']" (6), to Malcolm X, who pinpointed Postwar racial strife on the lack of awareness or care or communication needed to ameliorate this injustice: "Raw, naked truth exchanged between the black man and the white man is what a whole lot more of is needed in this country--to clear the air of the racial mirages, cliches, and lies this country's very atmosphere has been filled with for four hundred years" (314), and up to the recent [Ta-Nehisi Coates piece](#) that as much as he admires President Obama, "the kinds of traumas that marked African Americans of his generation—beatings at the hands of racist police, being herded into poor schools, grinding out a life in a tenement building—were mostly abstract for him" and that Obama had "decided to enter this world" of blackness, the world that many Black Americans [would escape from if they too had the choice](#).

Nevertheless, as we begin this transition out of America's first black presidency, we are all aware that the idea of a post-racial America was absurd. Awareness of racial inequality is as important now as it was in the 60s, and as Baldwin writes, "the past is all that makes the present coherent." The language we use to describe both the present and the past is extraordinarily important, and we're glad to find a new way to express the need for a deeper understanding of the past and the experiences of our students, our friends, our neighbors. There has never been a greater need for empathy, solidarity, and insistence on equality than now.

We should note that we're not blind to the fact that there are limitations of age, race, and circumstance with most language, and most of us in mom jeans or with grandchildren would draw snickers from our students if we told one in class that their comment was **woke**. And the tutors had a good laugh when they heard what we'd chosen. They are soooo lit.

Given its limitations and the tendency for new forms to go out of style or lose relevance, it's certainly possible that *woke* won't have the lasting power we hope for it. After all, the American Dialect Society's 2012 Word of the Year was *because*, as it was then noticed being used without *of* after it ... because language changes. Still, even if **woke** is off limits to some of us in certain contexts or if we end up ruining it for the younger, more lit crowd, it will no doubt serve as a meaningful snapshot of 2016.